

Support the Socialist Equality group in Turkey!

Statement of the SE group, in sympathy with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), on the snap elections in Turkey

14 June 2018

On June 24, more than 59 million Turkish citizens will cast their ballots in parliamentary and presidential elections called by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Rival factions of the ruling class and their petty-bourgeois followers are participating in the elections in three main camps: the “People Alliance” led by Erdogan’s AKP; the “Nation Alliance” led by the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP); and the alliance of Kurdish nationalists and sections of the Turkish pseudo-left led by the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). None of these alliances offer a way forward for working people, the great majority of the Turkish population.

These elections take place under the shadow of war. Amid ongoing bloodshed in Iraq and Syria, Washington, working with its regional allies Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, is launching a diplomatic and economic offensive against Iran that could escalate into a regional war, or even a world war involving the largest nuclear powers, the United States and Russia. At the same time, Turkey is pursuing its war in Syria and threatening to invade the northeastern Iraqi region of Qandil, a stronghold of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), in cooperation with the Iraqi and Iranian governments.

US sanctions on Iran, the dislocation of the Middle Eastern economy through decades of war and Turkey’s rising military spending due to its invasion of Syria have all undermined Turkey’s internal equilibrium. Amid rising unemployment and a wave of factory closures, the Turkish lira has lost over one-quarter of its value against the US dollar. Erdogan called the snap elections for June 24, 17 months ahead of schedule, under a state of emergency and amid mounting social discontent and class struggle.

The Socialist Esitlik (SE—Socialist Equality) group, while it is not in a position to stand its own candidates, is intervening in these elections to build a political alternative for the working class. Standing in political solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world party of socialist revolution founded by Leon Trotsky, it fights to mobilize opposition among workers and youth to imperialist war and austerity and build a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Turkey, a section of the ICFI. It calls for the unification of workers struggles against imperialist war and social austerity in Turkey and across the Middle East.

The only social force that can successfully struggle against the imperialist-led war drive and the AKP’s dictatorial agenda at home is the working class in Turkey, fighting together with its class brothers and sisters across the Middle East and in the imperialist centres of America and Europe.

While Erdogan hopes to secure his government’s position by holding

snap elections before his support falls even further, the AKP’s bourgeois opponents are all committed to close relations with NATO and the European Union. All of them speak for one or another national faction of the Middle Eastern bourgeoisie, which itself plays a major role in the drive to war in the region. Terrified of growing opposition among workers, in the final analysis they all seek to cut a deal with imperialism.

These parties have nothing to offer the workers. While they criticize the mass arrests and the attacks on fundamental democratic rights under the AKP’s state of emergency, they would use the police-state apparatus against the workers just as ruthlessly as Erdogan if they came to power. Their nationalist policies only pave the way for escalating war in Syria, Iraq and across the region.

The turn now is to the working class in Turkey and internationally. Based on the ICFI’s unbroken record of struggle against imperialism and the Stalinist and Pabloite forces that have tied workers to a bankrupt, nationalist perspective, SE fights to unify the struggles of all workers—Turkish, Kurdish, Arab, Iranian, Jewish and beyond. The fundamental task facing workers is to halt the drive to war and the imperialist plunder of the Middle East, in a revolutionary struggle against imperialism and “their” own bourgeoisie.

The war drive and the working class in Turkey

The social crisis facing Turkish workers is the product of an international crisis of capitalism that has unfolded over decades. The Stalinist bureaucracy’s 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, which had objectively posed an obstacle to neo-colonialist NATO wars in the Middle East and a policy of unrestrained austerity against the European working class, had devastating consequences.

The US-led Gulf War of 1990-1991, waged with the collaboration of pro-capitalist forces in the Soviet bureaucracy, marked the beginning of three decades of horrific bloodshed. Imperialist wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria have inflamed ethnic tensions, claimed millions of lives and forced tens of millions of people to flee their homes. Thousands have drowned in the Mediterranean as the EU pursues its “Fortress Europe” policy of blocking refugees from access to the continent.

The 2008 Wall Street crash and the war on Syria and Iraq have shaped the political crisis that has forced Erdogan to call snap elections. Turkey’s economic growth has fallen drastically from 9.2 percent in 2010 to 2.2 percent, with no prospect for a strong recovery.

With Turkey’s export-driven economy suffering from the crippling effects of austerity in its main European export markets after 2008, Erdogan initially turned to trade with the Middle East and Africa.

However, the Syrian war has largely cut off trade with these areas, compelled Turkey to house 3.5 million refugees who were left in appalling conditions and driven Erdogan to increase military spending from \$14 billion to \$19.5 billion.

The recent re-imposition of punishing US sanctions on Iran, and Washington's plans to force other countries to follow suit have triggered a vast capital outflow and a collapse of the Turkish lira that is slashing workers' purchasing power and driving growing demands for wage increases. Turkey's internal class equilibrium has been undermined by the broader disintegration of the Middle East after decades of war and global economic crisis. As we explained in our statement on the April 16, 2017 referendum for constitutional amendments:

"The world is witnessing a terminal crisis of the state system that emerged in the Middle East in the aftermath of World War I a century ago—in the 1916 Sykes-Picot accords dividing the Levant between Britain and France, and in the 1923 Lausanne Treaty that fixed Turkey's present-day borders. Every ruling class in the Middle East fears ethnic and sectarian separatism and insurrections of the working class and oppressed masses.

"All the political and historical issues left unresolved in the founding of the Turkish Republic, created in 1923 after a three-year war of independence against imperialist occupation, acquire explosive force today. The Turkish nationalists trampled the cultural and political rights of Turkey's largest minority, the Kurds, who constituted about 20 percent of the population—even refusing to acknowledge their existence as a nationality with its own language and culture. They also bloodily suppressed the workers' movement. Nearly a century later, Turkey is beset by the same insoluble ethnic and class tensions."

This year has seen initial outbreaks of class struggle and growing anger among workers in Turkey with the war policies of Washington and its allies. However, workers cannot fight austerity and war by aligning themselves with the militarist and nationalist policies of the different factions of the bourgeoisie in Turkey. The way forward is to unify the growing struggles of the Middle Eastern workers with those of their class brothers and sisters internationally by showing workers in these struggles what they are fighting for: the building of a revolutionary, socialist anti-war movement of the working class.

The AKP's turn to militarism and dictatorship

During this election campaign, Erdogan has postured as an anti-imperialist fighter, claiming that an AKP vote is a vote against imperialism and Zionist oppression of the Palestinians. This is a political fraud. Erdogan's conflict with the imperialist powers—which emerged over the course of the many twists and turns of the imperialist war in Syria, in which the AKP fully participated—is not a struggle against imperialism, but a falling out among thieves.

After the revolutionary struggles of the working class in Tunisia and Egypt that toppled two pro-imperialist dictators in 2011, Erdogan backed the imperialist war drive. He tried to parlay his status as an Islamist strongman into securing a central role in the US-led war, backing Islamist militias to topple the Syrian regime, thus establishing Turkey as the dominant regional power. Abandoning the "zero problems with neighbours" policy he used to penetrate regional markets, he began denouncing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a "murderer" and demanding his overthrow.

At the same time, the AKP government opened peace talks with the Kurdish-nationalist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), hoping to use the

PKK as a military proxy to strengthen Ankara's hand in Iraq and Syria, and a tool to divide and disorient working class opposition at home.

All Erdogan's calculations were upended by the intensification of the war and of the class struggle in the Middle East. In 2013, amid growing working class anger against Egypt's Islamist President Mohammad Mursi and social protests in Turkey centred in Gezi Park, the imperialist powers backed an army coup that toppled Mursi. As the Islamic State (IS) militia grew in Syria and invaded Iraq, moreover, they turned to the use of Kurdish nationalist groups as their proxies against IS.

Erdogan could not adapt himself to these sudden, violent shifts in imperialist war policy, and Ankara's imperialist allies rapidly came to see him not as a "strategic partner," but as an unreliable one.

US imperialism and its European allies settled on using Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish nationalist groups friendly to the PKK—the Democratic Union Party (YPG) and its People's Protection Units (PYD) militia—as their main proxies in Syria, instead of the Ankara-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA). The AKP saw in the NATO support to the PYD/YPG a vital threat to Turkey's territorial integrity. It stepped up its offensive against the Kurdish nationalists and waged an undeclared war on Turkey's Kurdish population, at the risk of alienating Washington.

At the same time, Turkey tacked back towards Russia and away from the NATO powers after Turkish jets shot down a Russian jet over Syria in November 2015, nearly provoking armed conflict and leading to a broad cut-off of Russian economic relations with Turkey.

The response of the imperialist powers came in the abortive coup of July 15, 2016 launched out of NATO's Incirlik air base and encouraged by Washington and Berlin. It was defeated because, alerted by Moscow, Erdogan was able to appeal to his voters to stop the coup. Masses of people, including broad layers of workers, mobilized to fight off pro-coup military units, suffering hundreds of casualties.

In foreign policy, Erdogan continued to move closer to Russia and Iran while escalating his war in Syria. On August 24, 2016, just five weeks after the coup attempt, he ordered the first Turkish invasion of Syria, Operation Euphrates Shield, targeting the PYD/YPG. This was followed by the "Operation Olive Branch" in January 2018. His central goal, reflected in demands that Washington remove the YPG from Manbij in northern Syria, is to convince Washington that Turkey is still vital to US policy in Syria, and that its territorial demands in northern Syria are legitimate.

At home, the AKP imposed a state of emergency and a massive crackdown on political opposition. It sacked 150,000 civil servants, including thousands of army officers, judges and prosecutors, as well as teachers and academics, and arrested tens of thousands of people. It shut down at least 1,500 associations, hundreds of universities and private schools, numerous media outlets and several trade unions over their alleged links to coup supporters. Industrial action by the working class was technically outlawed, under the pretext of preserving "national security."

Last year, the AKP also won a constitutional referendum granting unchecked dictatorial powers to the president.

Workers cannot fight the reactionary, militarist and anti-democratic policies of Erdogan simply by replacing him with a new president. The source of the turn to dictatorship lies in an international crisis of the capitalist system. As Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the October Revolution and founder of the Fourth International wrote in 1929 while in exile in Turkey, commenting on the emergence of dictatorial regimes in Europe:

"By analogy with electrical engineering, democracy might be defined as a system of safety switches and circuit breakers for protection against currents overloaded by the national or social

struggle. No period of human history has been—even remotely—so overcharged with antagonisms as ours. The overloading of lines occurs more and more frequently at different points in the European power grid. Under the impact of class and international contradictions that are too highly charged, the safety switches of democracy either burn out or explode. That is essentially what the short circuiting of dictatorship represents.”

While the bourgeoisie turns to war and dictatorship, workers are increasingly turning to class struggle. In May 2015, just before the June 7 elections in which the AKP lost its majority, tens of thousands of metalworkers went out on a wildcat strike in a rebellion against the Turk Metal union. In January 2018, the employers and the AKP government only narrowly prevented some 130,000 metalworkers from going on strike in defiance of strike bans and the collusion of their trade unions. They did this by granting metalworkers a 24.6 percent average wage increase.

Such retreats and concessions by the capitalists are only made to better prepare an onslaught against the working class that must come following the elections under conditions of soaring inflation, capital flight, layoffs and factory closures. This crisis, as the SE has explained, urgently poses the task of building a new political leadership of the working class. The nominally “opposition” parties will defend not the workers, but the capitalists, should a serious class struggle erupt.

The bankruptcy of the bourgeois opposition

Escalating geostrategic tensions in the Middle East have provoked sharp conflicts in the Turkish ruling class, but these conflicts are of a tactical character. Struggling for a redivision of the spoils in the Middle East, and fearing growing anger in the working class, the ruling class is unanimous in supporting dictatorship and war. The CHP and HDP speak for Turkish and Kurdish sections of the ruling class, respectively, that fear that Erdogan’s policies cut across their ties to Washington or NATO.

They would use the same police-state methods against workers and youth as Erdogan, in close coordination with NATO and the EU, if they were to come to power.

After the June 7, 2015 elections, the CHP carried out 32 days of unsuccessful talks with the AKP to form a coalition government, amid a brutal crackdown on Kurdish towns in which 4,000 people were killed, more than 10,000 jailed and 200,000 people forced to flee their homes. In May 2016, the CHP voted for an AKP-backed constitutional amendment lifting parliamentary immunity. This stripped one CHP and 11 HDP lawmakers of their deputy status, resulting in their imprisonment.

The HDP was a key supporter of the AKP in its anti-working class, pro-imperialist policies during the “peace process” with the PKK. It came into conflict with Erdogan only after he fell out with Ankara’s NATO partners and cracked down on the Kurdish nationalists. During the Gezi Park protests of June-July 2013, as more than 2.5 million people took the streets against the AKP, the HDP (then Peace and Democracy Party – BDP) discouraged Kurdish workers and youth from protesting, echoing the line of the CHP and the unions.

In August 2015, during the bloody army operations in Kurdish towns, the HDP participated in an AKP-led “electoral government” that remained in office until the snap election of November 1 that year.

In their conflict with the AKP, the CHP and HDP rest on the support of the imperialist powers and are implacably hostile to the working class. Both parties, together with all the pro-NATO, pro-EU opponents of Erdogan, stood by during the July 15 coup, making empty statements of condemnation only when the coup’s failure became evident.

After Erdogan’s very narrow victory in the April 16, 2017 constitutional referendum, where they led a “no” campaign, the CHP and

the HDP worked to calm popular anger over widespread allegations of voting fraud. The CHP lodged an appeal with the Turkish Constitutional Court, Erdogan’s rubber-stamp, and the European Court of Human Rights, citing breaches of voting laws.

Above all, no party among the AKP’s bourgeois opponents stands against imperialist wars and regime-change operations in the Middle East. The CHP and its nationalist and Islamist partners in the “Nation Alliance” are the most ardent supporters of the ongoing Turkish invasion of northern Syria. In the parliament, the CHP has repeatedly voted for resolutions authorizing the AKP government to launch cross-border operations in Syria and Iraq.

The claims by presidential candidate Muharrem Ince that the CHP will uphold the basic democratic rights of the Kurds if it comes to power are a fraud. The SE group warns Kurdish workers and youth of the deeply hypocritical character of these empty words: the CHP has been identified with the brutal oppression of the Kurdish people since the foundation of the Turkish Republic.

The SE group uncompromisingly defends the democratic and cultural rights of the Kurdish people and all ethnic and religious minorities in Turkey and across the Middle East. Our defence of these rights does not, however, imply support for bourgeois nationalist parties. It is only through the unification of Turkish and Kurdish workers in struggle against imperialist war and capitalism, together with their class brothers and sisters of other ethnicities, that these democratic rights can be defended.

The collaboration of the Kurdish nationalists with US imperialist interventions in Iraq and Syria is a sharp warning that their separatist and communalist program, which divides the working class along ethnic, cultural and religious lines, is devoid of any genuinely democratic or progressive content.

Indeed, the HDP’s opposition is a mirror image of the Turkish nationalists’ position. It strongly condemns the Turkish invasion and military operations in Syria and Iraq, while supporting the US and European military interventions, claiming that the imperialists are trying to defend “human rights”, “democracy” and “the right of self-determination.”

The aim of the CHP-led “Nation Alliance” is to supplant the AKP only to shape a militarist agenda that will better secure Turkey’s share of the spoils in the imperialist carve-up of the Middle East in close cooperation with Washington, Berlin, London and Paris. To do this, they will need to repress working class discontent just as surely as Erdogan. Their election promises to improve social conditions, restore democratic rights and return to a parliamentary system are worthless.

The Socialist Equality group warns workers that there can be no solution to any of the social problems facing the masses or to the bloodshed of the wars in the region under the leadership of any faction of the capitalist class. Whoever wins the June 24 elections will preside over escalating militarism, brutal austerity and repression of working class opposition by the same police forces now used by the AKP.

The reactionary role of the pseudo-left

The June 24 election has again exposed the pro-imperialist and anti-working class character of the pseudo-left groups, which work to channel opposition behind the CHP and HDP. They are campaigning “against the one-man, one party regime,” lining up behind the CHP-led “Nation Alliance” and the HDP.

The election slogan of the United June Movement (Birle?ik Haziran Hareketi, BHH), Turkey’s largest pseudo-left alliance led by the Freedom and Solidarity Party (ODP), and the Labour Party (EMEP), is the same: “No to the AKP-MHP alliance.” They spread illusions that Turkey will become a democratic Garden of Eden if Erdogan loses the coming elections.

These petty-bourgeois forces are divided along national lines. The BHH, led by the ODP, which is traditionally close to the CHP, tacitly promotes a vote for the “Nation Alliance”, though it has not spelled out the name of the party it supports for fear of an open split in its ranks, which contain supporters of both Turkish and Kurdish nationalism. The EMEP, on the other hand, has followed its traditional attitude and declared its support for the pro-Kurdish, HDP-led alliance.

In an interview with his party’s daily, *Birgün*, on May 8, leading ODP member Alper Tas justified his support for the CHP, the traditional party of the Turkish bourgeoisie by saying: “This law [the new electoral law] has made the alliance almost an obligation.... We had to form an arithmetical alliance even with those we do not trust.” According to Tas, “When the AKP and Erdogan are gone, there will be, of course, no revolution in Turkey. But the country would be freed from the most important source of instability and unrest. And this is not something insignificant.”

In a May 26 statement, “No pasaran to the one man/party regime,” the EMEP called for a vote for the HDP and its jailed presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtas, to “prevent or weaken the one man regime.” The EMEP also indicated that it would support the CHP’s candidate against Erdogan in the second round of the presidential elections, as the HDP and its petty-bourgeois followers also imply. *Birgün* and *Evrensel*, the ODP and EMEP dailies, have largely emerged as propaganda outlets for the CHP. They are petty bourgeois parties aligned with factions of the bourgeoisie and above all with imperialism, who work primarily to block an independent struggle of the working class. Their international affiliates, like France’s New Anti-capitalist Party or Britain’s Socialist Workers Party, are middle-class parties with a long record of supporting imperialist wars in Libya, Syria and beyond, and endorsing the coming to power of the pro-austerity Syriza government in Greece.

In all these countries, these petty-bourgeois and pro-imperialist forces, obsessed with lifestyle issues and identity politics, have supported wars and austerity policies directed against the workers. The only way forward for the working class in struggle against war and for a rise in living standards is to build a revolutionary and internationalist political alternative to these corrupt representatives of the affluent middle class. The Socialist Equality group seeks to establish the political independence of the working class by demonstrating the political and class gulf separating the ICFI’s struggle for Trotskyism in the Middle Eastern working class from these petty bourgeois pseudo-left groups.

Support the Socialist Equality group!

As Turkey is engulfed in the imperialist-led war drive and the economic crisis in the Middle East, the decisive question is the political perspective for the working class. The bloodshed in Iraq and Syria and war threats to Iran, the AKP’s threats to “eradicate” the PKK leadership that fuel the civil war in Kurdish areas of Turkey and the capital outflow driving the collapse of the lira rule out a stable and peaceful development. Enormous shocks and crises lie ahead, in which the working class will intervene.

The SE group fights to build a Trotskyist party in Turkey, to bring into the working class the programme of international socialist revolution that is now placed on the order of the day. It bases itself on the decades of struggle by the ICFI against imperialism and its petty bourgeois nationalist and pseudo-left allies. It opposes the Turkish Stalinist and Pabloite forces that for decades have worked to tie workers to various ethnic and religious factions of the propertied classes, and through them to imperialism.

The 21st century has seen many heroic uprisings and class struggles in the Middle East. The masses resisted US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the 2016 NATO-backed attempted coup in Turkey. In 2011, revolutionary uprisings of the working class toppled pro-imperialist dictators in Tunisia and Egypt. However, even there, the old regimes were

able to hang on to power. This was not because the working class failed to struggle, but because it did not have a programme and a political vanguard capable of unifying these anti-imperialist struggles and leading it in the seizure of power.

The SE group aims to build the Socialist Equality Party of Turkey, a Trotskyist political vanguard that will offer this revolutionary leadership in Turkey and fight for the spread of the ICFI’s influence across the Middle East. It appeals to workers, youth and socialist-minded intellectuals for their support. The turn now is to building the ICFI as the political vanguard of the working class in Turkey and across the Middle East.

The neo-colonial and civil wars of the last quarter century have vindicated Leon Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution. He explained that in countries with a belated capitalist development, the capitalist class cannot establish a democratic regime or overcome the irrational ethnic and sectarian divisions that are the legacy of imperialist oppression in the ex-colonial countries. These tasks fell to the working class, mobilised in an international struggle for proletarian socialist revolution.

As Leon Trotsky wrote in *The Permanent Revolution*,

The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable. One of the basic reasons for the crisis in bourgeois society is the fact that the productive forces created by it can no longer be reconciled with the framework of the national state. From this follows on the one hand, imperialist wars, on the other, the utopia of a bourgeois United States of Europe. The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word; it attains completion, only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.

Like a century ago, when the Bolshevik Party led the working class to power in October 1917 in Russia based on this perspective, so again today, this is the only viable perspective facing workers in Turkey and around the world to fight austerity, imperialist war and ethnic civil wars.

The SE group appeals to workers and youth in Turkey and across the region to support its work, read and widely circulate the *World Socialist Web Site*, and to make contact with it. It encourages the broadest discussion of its perspectives and the revolutionary tasks facing the working class in the struggles to come. We appeal to workers and young people to support and join us in building a Turkish section of the ICFI, the Socialist Equality Party of Turkey, as part of the broader struggle to build the ICFI as the revolutionary leadership of the working class across the Middle East.

For a socialist, working-class movement against war and social counterrevolution!

For the United Socialist States of the Middle East and Europe!

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>