Occupy Taksim Gezi Park

written by Özlem İlyas Tolunay | June 5, 2013

The on-going resistance to the remodeling of Taksim Square in Central Istanbul, Turkey took on a new more militant form on Monday evening when bulldozers arrived at the park and began demolishing some parts of the Gezi Park's wall and removed nearby trees. Taksim Solidarity, the resistance movement whose members were at a regular meeting at the park during the demolition, succeeded in stopping the demolition when they moved into the area where the bulldozers were removing the trees. A group of 20 to 30 people stayed on guard duty throughout the night.

Police forces entered the park around 12:30 p.m. on Tuesday to continue the demolition and resorted to tear gas to disperse the group that stood in the way of the excavators. When that occurred, thousands of people rushed into the park volunteering to help stop the demolition. Police attacked the resisters with tear gas again early Wednesday morning and burnt the tents of the resisters on night watch at the park. There were more than 10.000 people at Gezi Park on Wednesday evening. Slogans resounded all over the park: "Shoulder to shoulder against fascism," "AKP will pay the price before the people," "Taksim is Ours, Istanbul is Ours," "Police Out Istanbul In."

Police raided Gezi Park brutally early Friday morning with tear gas again, dispersed the crowd together with the MPs, evacuated the park, and and completely closed it off with the barriers. There were many injured in the hospitals. All the streets leading to Taksim Square have been under tear gas clouds since the morning. Ahmet ŞŞık, a journalist for the newspaper Birgun (http://www.birgun.net/) suffered a head injury during the police attack on the park occupiers. Witnesses said that the police targeted his head while he was taking photos. Sırrı Süreyya Önder, a Member of Parliament of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), was also injured. Both have been hospitalized. There were many people (nearly 5000) in the Taksim Square protesting the police attack at the moment. Taksim Solidarity made a press declaration in the Square. TV channels are still silent.

One demonstrator, who preferred to remain anonymous, said, "We know that, what they are trying to do to Gezi Park is not independent from the other ongoing projects of the government in Istanbul. The urban transformation projects in Tarlabaşı, Sulukule and Ayazma or the demolition of Emek Movie Theater–they are all related. On one hand the poor and the lower classes are displaced and dragged outside of the center towards the outskirts of the city; on the other hand, a cultural place like the Emek Movie Theater, which is committed to the collective memory, shares the same fate with these people. Personally, I believe that the issue of urban transformation is another form of class struggle. Therefore, Taksim Gezi Park is not only a park like Emek Movie Theater which is also not only a place where people watches movies."

The Justice and Development (AKP) government aims to demolish Taksim Gezi Park, one of the last green areas in the city center at Istanbul Taksim Square, and plans to build a complex that would include a redesigned Topçu Kışlası –the artillery Barracks which was demolished in the 1940's due to being used as torture center by the occupation forces during 1910s—a shopping mall, and a residence, all of which is a part of a bigger plan of redesigning the Taksim Square. This government project has been on the agenda for nearly a year and a movement called Taksim Solidarity is resisting this. Taksim Solidarity is an organization founded with the support of over 70 groups and, in conjunction with Taksim Platform it is putting up a strong and growing opposition to the controversial Taksim Project – the impending municipal initiative to remodel Turkey's most symbolic

square. The Taksim Solidarity activists are organizing festivals at Gezi Park, gathering signatures against the plan, and trying to inform people about this project.

Since the events of Monday evening, people have been trying to share information from the park through social media, but internet access is blocked in the park, no live broadcasting is allowed, and all kinds of communication are obstructed by jammers. Members of the Turkish Parliament from the Republican People's Party (CHP), the main oppositon party, and from the BDP are regularly visiting the Park. Political parties, unions, activists, actors, artists, students, academicians, music groups are all there. A forum has established and all the components of the solidarity are visible at the forum.

Meanwhile, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan dismissed the protests saying: "Whatever you do, we have made a decision and we will do it."

Another protester at the park, who also declined to give his name, said, "We are under the threat of many projects which increase the exchange value of the urban space, produce use value for the sake of the privileged people of the city, and ignore the planning principles and the public welfare with a single decision. Therefore, we can't isolate these projects which are transforming the city in parts and consuming the common values that make up a city. Today the foundation of the third bridge over the Bosphorus was laid and the bulldozers started the demolition of Gezi Park. Today, we should gather as all the citizens and protect our city which is indeed an arena of struggle."

One woman at the demonstration told us, "It is all of our responsibility to raise our voices for the protection of an area that is integral to our culture and history. If these plans go ahead, the history associated with Maksem [the historical water depot at the square], the Atatürk Cultural Center, the Taksim monument and Gezi Park will be destroyed."

"If the municipality's project goes ahead," said one Taksim Solidarity activist, "the annual rally attended by tens of thousands of Turkish citizens at Taksim Square on May 1, Turkey's Labor Day, will become impossible. This is a day of huge significance to our people, yet it will become impossible and even dangerous if the Taksim Project is realized. With the limited access to the square that the project proposes, the slightest panic among the crowd could escalate into a disaster."