

Coronavirus cases surge in Turkey as anger grows among workers at government response

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According to the Ministry of Health, Turkey's death toll from the coronavirus increased by 23 to 131 yesterday, as the number of confirmed cases rose 1,815 to 9,217. Anonymous health care professionals told the press media that the number of deaths and cases is much higher than the official figures due to insufficient testing. The government still refuses to give details about cases and deaths, such as their age and location. As a result, suspicion of official government statements is growing among workers.

The government had to take new measures recently but it maintains its class-based response to pandemic, in line with other governments around the world: a policy of malign neglect, forcing the working class to stay at work to produce profit despite the surge of infections and deaths.

On the evening of March 27, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced additional measures to curb the coronavirus outbreak. Travel between cities is now possible only with authorization from local authorities. Flights to foreign countries, already reduced, are to be suspended. There are also new restrictions on public transport, as passengers are to be seated separately in public service vehicles.

However, workers continue to be exempted from these measures in the interests of big business. According to an Interior Ministry statement, shuttles carrying factory workers to work are exempted from restrictions on inter-city travel.

In the name of halting the pandemic, the government spuriously calls for “stay at home” or “self-isolation.” While the big companies hypocritically praise workers' sacrifices, celebrities share the government's official “stay at home” postings on social media. Many

companies in banking, insurance, technology, and R&D have switched to working from home, and many small businesses like cafés, restaurants, restaurants, gyms, hairdressers are temporarily suspended. Layoffs are mounting.

In many key sectors such as metal, textile, construction, however, millions of workers who cannot work from home are still forced to go work. Supporters of the government's “stay at home” policy maintain a two-faced silence on the fact that such workers are forced to risk illness and death in non-essential jobs.

For his part, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said, “Everyone can declare their own state of emergency, the state does not necessarily have to declare it.” That is, workers are forced to make an individual choice between endangering the lives of themselves and their families and staying at home in poverty.

Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) did not criticize this ultra-reactionary policy, but instead asked for “limited” measures to slow the spread in Istanbul, Turkey's largest city and economic capital. Noting that Istanbul's public transport system still had around 1 million daily users last week, he said, “if it is not possible throughout Turkey, at least in İstanbul we urgently need to a limited and controlled curfew.”

Journalist Murat Yetkin in an article last week reported that Erdoğan opposed a confinement policy recommended by the Coronavirus Scientific Committee and the Ministry of Health.

Yetkin wrote, “Here are the things we can deduce by reading between the lines of what has been said, also considering the experiences of other countries and the information we've gathered thus far: The Coronavirus

Scientific Committee and the Ministry of Health were both unable to convince President Tayyip Erdoğan that the best way to slow the spread of Covid-19 could be through a policy of generalized isolation, not only for those over 65.”

He ends his article by asking “Why be so timid in taking the necessary steps? This is the biggest unknown.”

In fact, the answer is clear: throughout the world, the ruling class focuses on measures not to contain the pandemic, but to bolster business against any fallout in a crisis-ridden economy by ensuring workers keep producing billions in profits for the super-rich. Capitalism is at war with the most urgent health needs of working people.

In his latest statement, Erdoğan again underscored that “continuing production and exports are our top priorities.” Last week, President Erdoğan had declared an “Economic Stability Shield” package for business totaling 100 billion Turkish liras (US\$15 billion). The 19 measures include just two miserly offerings for working people.

In addition, while many people cannot get COVID-19 tests, a video showing pro-government businessmen getting tested in their private homes angered many workers. The daily *Cumhuriyet* has revealed that COVID-19 care in private hospitals is not free, though all private hospitals were declared by the ministry as “pandemic hospitals” to support public hospitals against the pandemic. Three patients had to pay about 4,000 Turkish liras.

Meanwhile, the anger among workers is erupting. While wildcat strikes erupted across Europe and America to demand the idling of plants during the pandemic, demands are growing in Turkey for paid leave for all workers, rejecting employers’ demands that workers continue to work despite the risk to their health and their lives. Against the official “stay at home” campaign, many artists and intellectuals are posting videos on their social media accounts to demand state-funded paid leave for all workers.

After some wildcat strikes by Istanbul construction workers, workers stopped production for three hours in a filter factory in the southern border city of Hatay against management’s offer of unpaid leave. After this work stoppage, the firm had to accept workers’ demand for paid leave until April 30.

The main trade union confederations are collaborating with the government, isolating such strikes and playing a criminal role to keep workers on the job.

Fearing that strikes and protests will spread among workers, the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services reported that contract negotiations and strikes were temporarily halted across the country in a circular sent to address coronavirus measures.

The government has also launched a witch hunt against critics of its response to the pandemic. Hundreds of people have been detained since March 11 on charges of sharing “provocative posts” about coronavirus on social media.

As a clear sign of fear in the government about growing anger among workers, a truck driver named Malik Baran Yılmaz was detained yesterday for his social media post exposing the class character of the government response to coronavirus crisis.

In a video that was widely shared and watched tens of thousands of times, he said: “You say stay at home Turkey! But how can we stay? I am not retired, public officer or rich. I am a worker. I’m a truck driver. If I do not work, there is no bread. I can’t pay my electricity, water, rent... I will either starve to death by staying at home or die from the virus. But if this virus does not kill me, your system will kill us.”



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