

Turkish workers strike as bosses keep them at work despite COVID-19

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With over 1 million coronavirus cases detected worldwide, Turkey is emerging as an epicenter of the pandemic in the Middle East after Iran, which has reached more than 50,000 cases and at least 3,300 dead as its health care system is devastated by punishing US and European sanctions.

As of Friday night, Turkey had passed 20,000 cases and 400 deaths. Amid the rapid spread of the disease, opposition is rapidly growing in the working class to the government's policy of keeping them at work despite a growing number of COVID-19 cases in the factories. There is deep anger at the Turkish ruling elite's willingness to sacrifice thousands of workers to boost profits during the pandemic.

After wildcat strikes erupted across America and Italy to demand the idling of plants during the pandemic, workers in Turkey in non-critical industries like metal or construction, are increasingly looking to wage a militant struggle against the pandemic.

Among others, in a metal factory, more than 600 workers walked out on Wednesday in Gebze, an industrial town close to Istanbul, after they had been forced to work despite some positive coronavirus cases among workers. Fearing a potential spread of wildcat strikes after this walkout, the governorship of Kocaeli declared that it had banned work stoppages and other protests for 15 days. It comes after wildcat strikes by Istanbul construction workers at some sites and a work stoppage in a filter factory in the southern border city of Hatay.

Workers' determination to work in safe conditions and to fight to stop the spread of the disease is bringing them into direct collision with the Turkish government.

Yesterday, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that the government would impose a curfew for citizens under age 20. Last month, it imposed a

curfew for people over age 65. Vehicles are barred from entering and exiting 31 provinces, including Turkey's larger cities, but workers still have to work in non-critical sectors.

On Wednesday, during a press conference, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca declared, "We did not know that the virus spread so quickly." In fact, the Turkish government confirmed its first case on March 11 and had an opportunity to monitor the response of other countries such as China, Italy and the United States. However, instead of taking extensive measures, it wasted critical time, focusing on the needs of big business.

The health minister only unveiled the case figures by provinces on Wednesday, after the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) had begun to publish its own data. According to the official figures, Istanbul, Turkey's largest city and economic capital with more than 16 million, has 60 percent of all cases. However, hospitals in Istanbul had only 7,280 intensive care beds, according to the official 2018 report of the Health Ministry.

While Turkey has 25,466 adult beds—almost half in private hospitals—it has just 187 doctors per 100,000 people in its intensive care units. Ebru K?raner, the head of the Intensive Care Nurses Association, warned that there are about 15,000 intensive care nurses. Koca admitted that there is already a 63 percent occupancy rate in intensive care units. For weeks, TTB and health care workers have also complained about the lack of necessary medical equipment.

He also stated that 601 health care workers already contracted coronavirus in Turkey, after Prof. Dr. Cemil Ta?ç?o?lu, a well-loved doctor among his patients and students, who had decades of experience, died on Wednesday of coronavirus.

While the government refuses to take necessary measures such as stopping production and providing all workers with full income during the pandemic to prevent the spread of the virus across the country, other measures only serve to spread the disease. Masses of people gathered in front of post offices across the country to take 1,000 Turkish liras of financial aid given by the government to 2 million poor families. This insufficient amount is part of a package for business totaling 100 billion Turkish liras.

While making clear that maintaining production and exports has top priority, the Erdoğan government aims to suppress growing opposition among workers to its response to the coronavirus crisis.

After a truck driver named Malik Baran Yılmaz was detained last week for his social media post attacking the class character of the government response to the coronavirus crisis, officials were forced to release him due to growing protests on social media. His video, in which he said, “But if this virus does not kill me, your system will kill us,” was watched millions of times.

Fearing this growing sentiment among workers, Erdoğan launched a “National Solidarity Campaign” on Monday, calling on big business to make donations to “provide additional support to low-income people.” This campaign’s main purpose is to promote nationalism and the lies that capitalists and workers are waging a common fight against the pandemic.

Indeed, Fahrettin Altun, Erdoğan’s communications director, called on the Turkish people to support each other “without separation based on class, ideology and politics.”

While the Erdoğan government claims that “there is no money” to provide full income to all workers idled during the pandemic, in fact, the main obstacles to a struggle against the disease are the privileges of the corporate and financial elite. In Turkey, there were 27 dollar-billionaires in 2019, owning more than \$US50 billion in total. Net profits in the Turkish banking sector in 2019 were about 50 billion liras (approximately \$US7.43 billion). Moreover, the Turkish government has spent \$US19 billion on its military.

As COVID-19 spreads in the factories, the trade union confederations are collaborating with the state’s efforts to suppress working class opposition so as to protect the profits of big business and their

collaboration with it.

After waiting three weeks, the pro-opposition Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (DİSK) declared on Monday that in 48 hours it would begin to invoke the constitutional right to not to work in unsafe conditions, if the government failed to take necessary measures. It did not, however, ultimately call on workers to strike.

To channel growing opposition among workers and limit the danger of wildcat strikes, the DİSK and Türk-İş union confederations issued a joint statement on Tuesday, demanding a halt to all production for at least 15 days and banning all layoffs during the pandemic.

Against this reactionary collaboration between the government, big business and trade unions at the expense of workers’ health and lives, the working class must build its own, independent rank-and-file committees in workplaces and neighborhoods. It faces a political fight to protect the lives and health of millions of people.

All non-essential workplaces must be shut down immediately, with full pay for all workers, and necessary measures must be taken to protect refugees, prisoners, and others in the most vulnerable sections of society. Refugees must be able to get testing and free health care equal in quality to that enjoyed by Turkish citizens. Political prisoners and imprisoned journalists should be granted a planned release of prisoners to prevent the pandemic from spreading in the prisons.

This global crisis has clearly exposed that there is no other way to fight for such critical demands without transferring political power to the working class all over the world and expropriating the wealth of the super-rich to protect billions of people.



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