

Amid COVID-19 pandemic, Turkish government steps up attacks on workers

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Turkey has one of the world's fastest-spreading coronavirus epidemics, with over 45,000 new cases per month, but President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government is using this pandemic as an opportunity to intensify social attacks on the working class. It has made clear that its priority is keeping workers at work to maintain production, exports and profits high, despite a surge of COVID-19 cases in the factories.

It suspended operations only of small businesses (cafés, restaurants, hairdressers), but industrial production continues despite rising disease and death among the workers. Only automakers—Ford, Renault, Tofaş-Fiat, Mercedes Benz, Toyota, Hyundai and Honda—shut down their factories in March. This was largely because of problems in the supply chain and the collapse in the demand. Wildcat strikes by autoworkers in America and Europe also forced several to stop production.

Against the government's deadly policy, workers in noncritical industries like metal, construction and textiles went on wildcat strikes in recent weeks. After wildcat strikes by Istanbul construction workers, a work stoppage in a filter factory in the southern border city of Hatay and a walkout by metal workers in Gebze, an industrial city near Istanbul, textile workers in Izmir and Gaziantep went on wildcat strikes last week. In Izmir, company thugs physically attacked workers during the walkout.

Focusing the interests of financial elite, the government announced last month a package for business totaling 100 billion Turkish liras while launching a "National Solidarity Campaign" calling on big businesses to donate to "provide additional support to low-income people." The main purpose of the campaign was to promote nationalism amid growing anger among workers at its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many big companies and banks boasted of their donations, while forcing workers sick with COVID-19 to stay at work.

The government has collected only about 1.5 billion Turkish liras (\$US225 million), though Turkey had 27 billionaires in 2019. They collectively owned more than \$US50 billion, enough to provide full income to all workers idled in uncritical sectors during the pandemic and massively develop Turkey's health care system.

In addition, the government has prepared a proposed law supposedly to ban layoffs for three to six months. The progovernment *Anews* cited one official, "The proposed law would guarantee employment and try to protect employees ineligible for parttime work who are put on unpaid leave."

But this is a blatant lie. In fact, this would let employers put workers on unpaid leave for up to six months on just 39 lira (\$6) daily. The minimum wage in Turkey is about 2,300 liras a month, which is only half of it, meaning a starvation wage. Moreover, this amount would not come from the employers but from Turkey's official unemployment insurance fund. Today, according to the law, employers must receive approval from workers for unpaid leave, but this bill would make unpaid leave permanent.

Opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu called this payment "important" while adding hypocritical criticisms. The pseudoleft groups that support the CHP and the trade unions play a reactionary role. Ozan Gündoğdu, a columnist for the Left Party's (formerly Freedom and Solidarity Party, ÖDP) daily *BirGün*, hailed the bill as "positive," only complaining that "these should be made a month later." The ÖDP ran its leader as a CHP candidate in last year's local elections.

In a sign of its class hostility to workers, the pro-CHP Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (DİSK) leader Arzu Çerkezoğlu initially hailed this bill, calling it a "confirmation of our proposals." Özkan Atar, another DİSK official from the Birleşik Metal-İş metalworkers

union, called the bill a “consequence of our struggle.” The DİSK declared on March 30 that in 48 hours it might invoke the constitutional right to not work in unsafe conditions, if the government acts to ensure safe conditions. Ultimately, however, it did not call strikes.

The coronavirus crisis further exposes the collaboration between the government, big business and trade unions at the workers’ expense. This did not, however, start with the pandemic.

Last October, Çerkezoğlu participated in a joint forum with progovernment union federations and the Confederation of Employers’ Unions of Turkey (TİSK), one of the main progovernment business groups. At that time, the WSWS warned: “Gathering together bitter enemies of the working class, this forum was organized to discuss how to suppress growing opposition within the working class.” On Thursday, the TİSK held a video conference involving the vice chairwoman of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

While the unions covered up for the AKP’s policy of malign neglect of the pandemic’s toll, COVID-19 is rapidly spreading across Turkey, especially in working class cities like Istanbul and Kocaeli. While the Turkish Health Ministry reported a first case on March 11, the total number of cases had surpassed 45,000 by April 10. This has led to widespread suspicion among workers that the official death toll of 1,000 is an underestimation.

On Wednesday, the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) accused the Health Ministry of not using COVID-19 codes proposed by the World Health Organization to calculate the death toll. “Not using these codes as recommended by international organizations like the WHO leads to undercounting of deaths in the COVID-19 pandemic,” the TTB said.

Research by Avrasya Kamuoyu Araştırmalar Merkezi confirms this. Comparing official death tolls for Istanbul between March 11 and April 7, with the same period in previous years, the research firm found the death toll was 7,417 this year compared to 5,886 in 2019 and 5,814 in 2018. This is 1,500 excess deaths for Istanbul alone.

Moreover, the Istanbul Medical Chamber (ITO) said on Wednesday “the number of doctors and health care workers infected with COVID-19 has already exceeded 1,000 in Istanbul, alone,” blaming the government for the lack of protective equipment. Though the TTB is Turkey’s main physicians organization, its representatives do not sit in the AKP’s Science Council for Coronavirus. In 2018, 11 top TTB members were detained because they issued a statement, entitled “War is

a Matter of Public Health,” opposing Turkey’s war policies in Syria.

Moreover, while President Erdoğan and Health Minister Fahrettin Koca repeatedly claim that there is no problem with hospitals and health care infrastructure, Prof. Dr. İsmail Cinel, president of the Intensive Care Association, told daily *Cumhuriyet*, “Gradually, hospitals and therefore intensive care are filling.” Facing an urgent need for new hospitals, the government said last week it would build two hospitals in Istanbul within 45 days. However, doctors say it would be too late and the government must reopen hospitals closed in the recent period.

The government’s main concern is not to contain the COVID-19 outbreak as soon as possible but to suppress any opposition to its malign neglect policy. Erdoğan has repeatedly accused the US and European governments of failing to take necessary measures in time.

In fact, the Erdoğan government itself did not take critical measures, like testing and quarantining hundreds of thousands of people arriving from abroad, until mid-March. Today, it still endangers countless thousands of lives by forcing millions of workers to stay at work to produce profits for big business.

As a clear sign of the class character of the official “stay at home” campaign, Nail Noşay, an official from Istanbul Provincial Directorate of Family and Social Policies, wrote “Die!” on his Twitter account on Wednesday against a working class woman from Roma community who told Euronews, “We have children, and we are hungry. ... I have to go out. What happens when there is no income? Right now I was just begging. Who knows that?”

Health Minister Koca claimed, “There are two sides in the struggle: One is the virus and the other is us.” In fact, the two opposing sides are the ruling class and the working class. The main obstacle to fight the disease is the privileges of the corporate and financial elite. To protect millions of lives and provide health care and other needs for all, political power must be taken by the working class and the wealth of the capitalists expropriated.



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