

# Herd immunity policy in Turkey risks thousands of new deaths

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President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has launched its "normalization" policy, despite opposition from medical experts, as the coronavirus pandemic rages on across Turkey. The number of new cases is already growing again in at least nine provinces across the country.

According to this plan, shopping malls, barber shops and beauty salons as well as retail shops opened up on May 11. Domestic and some international flights are to resume in late May or early June. Travel restrictions were lifted on May 4 for Turkey's major tourist cities like Antalya, Ayd?n and Mu?la.

Professor Mehmet Ceyhan, a member of the government's Science Council, warned, "We are not even in the middle of the epidemic yet," adding: "In countries such as Japan and Singapore, which reached this point and began to ease measures, cases increased again."

Emergency Medicine Specialist Dr. Ba?ar Beyo?lu, a member of the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), also warned against opening shopping malls: "Given their ventilation systems and difficulties in ensuring social distancing and preventing contact, shopping malls in their present conditions are more dangerous than pandemic hospitals in service today." With parks and walking areas still closed, the opening of malls is widely seen as reflecting close relations between the government and their multi-millionaire owners.

Described by Health Minister Fahrettin Koca as "controlled social life," in fact it is a controlled herd immunity policy in the interests of the Turkish bourgeoisie. While millions of workers must go to work to produce profits for big business, the state and media propaganda for "normalization" also encourages masses of people to go into the streets and markets.

As of Thursday, the COVID-19 death toll has passed 4,000; the total number of cases is around 150,000. Turkey has seen over 1,000 new cases and more than 50

deaths each day. Despite these tragic facts, the Erdo?an government has hailed its "success story" against COVID-19, and claimed "the outbreak is under control." The aim of these lies is to habituate people to thousands of deaths and force workers back to work under unsafe conditions.

However, the Health Minister himself admitted that the outbreak is out of control and is set to worsen, due to the government's criminal response, as in the United States, Germany, and many other countries. Asked about the current reproduction rate ( $R_0$ , the number of people that each person infected with COVID-19 goes on to infect) of the disease in Turkey at a press conference on Wednesday, he replied: "I can say that Turkey's  $R_0$  value is 1.56 at the moment."

On Thursday, Prof. Dr. Kay?han Pala presented a TTB report on the COVID-19 pandemic and warned: "If this value is 1.56, we need to urgently close tightly ... If you cannot lower the  $R_0$  value below 1, you cannot control the outbreak." The TTB warned that the Health Ministry does not use the mortality codes recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO).

If there is a victory against the pandemic, it will be thanks to efforts by health care workers, not the government. Only 17,915 tests have been done for every million inhabitants in Turkey. This figure is about 32,166 in the United States, whose government has pursued a criminal policy leading to a death toll of more than 86,000. It must also be noted that Turkey's relatively low death rate so far is largely due to the fact that only a small part (8.8 percent) of its population is elderly, ranking 40th of 41 European countries.

Erdo?an is trying to divert attention from his government's responsibility for the pandemic. In a press conference Monday, he effectively accused the population, saying: "Those who go out without a really essential job, those who create unnecessary crowds in

open and closed spaces on the street or in transportation vehicles feed the virus with their own hands.” This is entirely cynical, as Erdogan has already said his priority is saving production and exports, not lives.

The Turkish government never stopped non-essential industries during the pandemic. Only cafés, restaurants, gyms, hairdressers and places of entertainment closed. According to the official figures, about 150,000 businesses, employing 3.2 million workers, stopped operations during the outbreak. This is but a fraction of the total number of employed workers in Turkey, which is over 26 million.

In the same press conference, Erdoğan once again made clear his government’s class-based policy, stating: “We strive to open a space in which our industrialists, exporters and business world can turn their wheels... We aim to bring our country to a more advantageous position in the global system that will be reshaped politically and economically after the pandemic.”

On this basis, the Turkish government announced a corporate bailout totaling 100 billion Turkish liras (US\$15 billion) at the end of March, later raising it to 200 billion liras. As elsewhere around the world, the overwhelming bulk of this sum has been handed over to the financial and corporate elites.

As a result of this policy of malign neglect, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases among workers is almost three times the average in Turkey. According to a report from the Health and Safety Labour Watch (İSG), at least 103 workers lost their lives from COVID-19 in April. More than 200 miners and at least 120 postal workers were infected.

This has taken place only due to the complicity of bourgeois opposition parties and trade union confederations. The pro-opposition Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (DİSK) declared on March 30 that in 48 hours it might invoke the constitutional right to not work in unsafe conditions, but it did not call strikes.

On Thursday, the pro-government Türk-İş and Hak-İş union confederations issued a joint statement with the Confederation of Employers’ Unions of Turkey (TİSK) endorsing the government’s pro-business response to the pandemic. Calling for new financial stimulus packages for companies, they demanded more short-term payment allowances until at the end of the year.

The big-business Republican People’s Party (CHP) is only concerned about long-term effects of the “normalization” policies for the ruling class. Earlier this week, CHP spokesperson Fahir Öztrak said: “We think a

second wave [in the outbreak] would not only risk all the sacrifices incurred, it will further delay the functioning of the economy, and we will miss opportunities. We see this can lead to loss of income as well as loss of life.”

Despite the agreement of both the government and bourgeois opposition on a policy targeting the working class, the Erdoğan government has sought to divert growing social anger among workers with increasing attacks on the CHP-led opposition. Trying to rally popular support after the Turkish army’s failed 2016 coup against Erdoğan, it has accused the opposition, without evidence, of preparing a coup.

After Erdoğan’s statements, a pro-government writer declared in a television interview that she has a kill list and her family has weapons to “enough to kill 50 people.” Another reactionary asked, “If we go out to the streets, how will you protect your wife and child?”

The principal target in this campaign is not the CHP, other bankrupt capitalist opposition parties, or the imperialist forces in Washington and Berlin who planned the 2016 coup, but the mounting anger among workers against the capitalist system.

These threats are serious warnings. The ruling class in Turkey and worldwide is preparing for violent class war against the working class.

Workers have to organize to defend themselves against the government’s deadly response to the pandemic. It is necessary to form rank-and-file committees in factories, workplaces and neighborhoods, independent of the trade unions and bourgeois parties, to stop production in non-essential sectors during the pandemic, ensure safe working conditions for workers still on the job, and prepare workers to oppose attacks from the ruling class and its thugs.



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