

COVID-19 spreads among Ford workers in Turkey

Ulas Atesci
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Shortly after the re-opening of the Ford Otosan factory in Gölcük, Kocaeli on May 4, several COVID-19 cases were reported among the workers. However, production continues at the plant. As US autoworkers also have also begun returning to work amid widespread anger at the auto companies, this demonstrates that unsafe and even deadly conditions during the pandemic are an international issue facing workers of every country.

The first report came last Monday, when autoworkers at the factory told the daily *Evrinsel* that a worker in the assembly department was infected. Mehmet ?ener, a Türk Metal trade union official, denied this, stating that the worker is just under quarantine because someone in his family was infected: “We are currently waiting for the test result.”

While management and the union initially tried to hide the situation from workers, Ford management had to admit last Thursday that there are at least 10 cases among workers in the factory. This is a grave danger not only for Ford workers but also for their families and neighbors. The union is playing a reactionary role against the workers.

Previously it signed an agreement with Metal Industry Employers’ Association (MESS), stating that if any COVID-19 cases emerged in the factories, it would invoke workers’ legal “right to withdraw,” that is to strike, against unsafe working conditions. But of course this was another lie. Workers cannot leave their fate in the hands of these corrupt, pro-company unions.

The only way to guarantee workplace safety is for workers to take independent action, building their own rank-and-file safety committees independent of the unions to monitor conditions and, if necessary, stop production in non-essential sectors. Workers who exercise their right to withdraw must have full pay

during the pandemic, so that the struggle to ensure safe working conditions does not come at the expense of living standards.

The situation facing autoworkers and other sections of the working class raises the necessity for organizing independently of the trade unions to defend human needs and lives, not profits.

The reopening of auto factories in Turkey, which employ about 50,000 workers directly, but hundreds of thousands along the entire supply chain, has gone parallel with a “normalization” campaign launched by the government and media at the end of April. Ford, Renault, Tofa?-Fiat, Mercedes Benz, Toyota, Hyundai, Honda and other automakers shut their factories in March or early April, largely due to supply chain problems and a collapse in demand. Wildcat strikes by autoworkers in America and Europe intensified supply problems.

Especially after April 20, however, a peak point in the outbreak in Turkey, with over 4,500 new cases and 123 deaths, auto companies began to reopen, forcing workers back to work in unsafe conditions. After production resumed in Toyota and at Tofa?-Fiat plants on May 11, the Turkish auto industry has reopened completely. Starting with the auto industry, all the major industrial sectors are now resuming production.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Erdoğan government suspended only small businesses’ operations, seeking to save the profits of the capitalist class. When it announced limited weekend lockdowns, many factories and workplaces in non-essential sectors remained open thanks to special dispensations. This policy has cost at least 103 workers’ lives in April alone. The rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases among workers is almost three times the average in Turkey.

Moreover, the Turkish ruling class has seized upon

the pandemic as an opportunity to restructure class relations via a massive onslaught against the working class. The Erdoğan government calls it the “new normal.” Spokesperson İbrahim Kalın said on Sunday, “Let's not forget that the post-coronavirus process is the new normal. The conditions, dynamics and parameters of the new normal are being built right now ... Nothing will be the same.”

On this basis, the Turkish bourgeoisie is taking class-war measures in line with such attacks on the working class internationally amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, the government passed a new law last month letting employers put workers on unpaid leave for up to six months on just 39 lira (\$6) daily, while handing over billions to the ruling elites and forcing workers to choose between working in unsafe conditions or starvation.

Moreover, millions of workers have been condemned to live on a pittance. According to a recent Labor Ministry report, while one group of nearly 3 million workers has received on average just 1,590 liras as short-time working allowance, another group of nearly 800,000 workers got only 500 liras on average as unpaid leave assistance thus far.

On May 7, the Social Security Institution issued a circular stating that workers' deaths and illnesses due to COVID-19 cannot be considered an occupational illness or accident. This lets employers avoid paying compensation to workers or their families if they get COVID-19.

On the other hand, the Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency (BDDK) has forced banking and call center workers, who are working from home, to open their web cameras. In its formal letter, the BDDK declared: “The personnel of the call centers will be monitored by the Bank's teams, with cameras open during calls.”

Another sinister system to monitor workers' movements has been developed by MESS, a device named “MESS-SAFE,” under the pretext of enforcing social distancing at work. This device is an electronic fetter that follows, records and reports all of a worker's movements. Worn around workers' necks, it measures the distance from other devices around it, and provides a warning when the social distancing rules are not followed.

Moreover, the Independent Industrialists' and

Businessmen's Association (MÜSAD) announced a project last Tuesday to build “isolated production bases” to avoid stopping production amid this pandemic and continue exploitation of the working class. Developed seven years ago as “Medium-Scaled Industrial Areas,” the project was immediately changed after the pandemic and received the necessary legal permissions to proceed.

Designed to accommodate 1,000 families and approximately 4,500 people, these areas in fact are modern-day labor camps. Planned as isolated living spaces, complete with educational institutions, according to the official statement, the bases “will be able to continue their production inside by closing their doors in an outbreak or possible natural disaster. They will manage all bonded warehouses, storage and sanitation processes.”

The first “isolated production base” will open on June 15 in the northwestern city of Tekirdağ. Three more bases will be built in different provinces, including İstanbul. According to a MÜSAD official, they plan to build similar bases across Turkey. In another example of the reactionary collaboration between the capitalist class and the unions, the Hak-İş trade union confederation enthusiastically hailed this labor camp project.

The working class can defend human life and fight a “new normal” of working under threats of death, mass unemployment, wage cuts, labor camps and the decimation of social rights only on the basis of an independent political struggle against the capitalist system and for socialism.



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