

Risking COVID-19 spread, the state makes Turkish students take mass exams

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Despite Turkey's ongoing coronavirus pandemic, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government has put millions of students in danger, demanding they take High Schools Entrance Examinations (LGS) and Higher Education Institutions Examinations (YKS) this and next weekend.

While the government initially postponed these exams to the end of July, it moved them back to the normal date as part of "re-opening of economy" in early May. This reckless decision provoked enormous opposition among millions of students and their families. Nearly 1.6 million students will take the high school exam this weekend, followed by nearly 2.4 million students taking university examination on June 27-28.

The government insisted exams would proceed as part of its "new normal" policy, launched on June 1, ending all confinement measures. As a predictable result of this reactionary policy in the interests of the ruling class, which risks the health of millions of working people and youth amid a deadly pandemic, the number of daily new cases has begun to rise again in recent weeks from 700 to 1,500.

The government's drive to organize exams as soon as possible is also related to its concerns over the deepening crisis in Turkey's tourism sector after the pandemic. To "re-open the economy", the Erdoğan government wants to boost domestic tourism, as virtually no foreign tourists have come to Turkey this year.

In its June 12 press conference, the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) officials stated: "Turkey is the 17th most populous country in the world. When the third month of pandemic is over, it is ranked 12th in terms of the total number of confirmed cases and 17th in terms of death toll." The TTB officials pointed to

"similarities with Iran", which has witnessed a new outbreak with more than 2,500 new cases and over 120 deaths daily.

The TTB has also issued a statement on June 5 titled "LGS and YKS must be postponed," declaring: "As the Turkish Medical Association, we demand that these exams be delayed until the pandemic is fully controlled."

Since the government moved the exams forward again to June, hundreds of thousands of students and their supporters have organized protests on social media, demanding the postponement of all mass examinations until the pandemic is under control, as scientists and medical experts advise. On June 15, they posted hundreds of thousands of posts on Twitter with a #TurkishStudentsLivesMatter hashtag, in solidarity with mass protests in the United States and all over the world.

In a June 15 Star TV interview, Turkish Education Minister Ziya Selçuk, who owns a private school, laid out the government's token measures for national student exams, like distributing face masks and disinfectant, or enforcing "social distancing" between students during exams. However, his promises that there is nothing to fear were starkly refuted by a media report that same day.

According to a local media outlet from Kocaeli, an important event took place during another national exam for the war academy that must be seen as a serious warning. While more than 400,000 students have taken this examination, one student in Kocaeli felt faint during the exam. His COVID-19 test was positive, and 16 other people in the same room were quarantined for two weeks.

Moreover, these students had reportedly not had their temperature taken before the exam. Many students and

their families reported on social media that there was no check of body temperature in many exam sites places. This by itself clearly shows that it is not safe to organize national exams under these conditions, and that these exams risk spreading the virus among large sections of population.

Dr. Serdar Sava?, a community health care and genomics specialist and an ex-official from the World Health Organization’s European branch in the 1990s, accused the government of implementing a “herd immunity” policy, saying: “We have YKS and LGS exams ahead of us. They [the authorities] endanger the lives of our millions of children. These attempts aim to spread the disease more. Nearly 10 million people will be mobilized.”

Millions of youth are being forced to endanger not only their own lives but also those of their families and loved ones. Moreover, many students have chronic diseases or a weak immune system, making them more vulnerable to COVID-19. They are being forced to choose between risking their health or even their lives by taking the exam or risking their future by refusing to take it under unsafe conditions.

Education Minister Selçuk made clear the government’s conscious neglect and indifference against the lives of youth and their working families. “If we have children with COVID-19, we created separate schools for these children to take the exam,” said Selçuk, adding ghoulishly that “if they want, exams can be provided in the hospitals” to infected students.

The bourgeois opposition parties’ reaction on this homicidal policy shows they have no serious differences with Erdoğan. Indeed, they share his indifference to the fate of millions and his party’s base in the capitalist class. Republican People’s Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu urged youth to “work better, work more decided,” and ordered his officials to distribute face masks to students before the exams.

However, the current situation and future facing youth in Turkey is not bright in terms of either education or job prospects. While the government has largely privatized and gutted higher education over the past two decades, millions of young people have been forced to prepare national exams. But even if they are able to enter a university, this does not mean that the risk of unemployment has been overcome.

According to a recent report prepared by the Young Unemployed Platform based on official figures, officially the number of unemployed aged 15-34 is about 2.3 million, including 707,000 university graduates. But in fact, there are another 1.3 million university graduates not officially considered unemployed.

The devastating situation created by the pandemic for working class youth is not special to Turkey but is also faced by youth and students internationally. A recent report by the International Labour Organization stated: “More than one in six young people have stopped working since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic while those who remain employed have seen their working hours cut by 23 per cent.”

This policy based on the interests of the capitalist ruling class is pursued at the cost of thousands of deaths and potentially thousands more. The pandemic has revealed once again that the only way forward for youth all over the world is to turn to the international working class and take up the fight for socialism.



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