

# Pandemic intensifies unemployment and poverty among Turkish workers

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Amid a deepening social and economic crisis after the pandemic, Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) has announced its March 2020 Household Labor Force Survey. According to the report, the unemployment rate has dropped to 13.2 percent with a 0.9 point decrease in March. The total number of unemployed among over 15-year-olds has reached 3,971,000, a 573,000 decrease compared to the same period of last year.

However, examining the TurkStat data in detail, it becomes clear that the real figures are exactly the opposite. The government manipulated the report in an effort to hide the pandemic's impact on the economy as social opposition grows in the working class to the government's response.

In March 2019, the number of employees was officially calculated as 27,795,000. But one year later, TurkStat claims that the number of employees fell to 26,133,000 in March 2020. Although 1,039,000 more people were added to the working age population in this one-year period, unemployment has decreased by 573,000, according to the report. In other words, officials declare that nearly 2.1 million people have withdrawn from the workforce this year.

Indeed, the staggering fall in the labor force and employment participation rate exposes the report's claim that unemployment is decreasing. According to TurkStat data, the employment participation rate (the ratio of employees and job seekers to the active population of working age) has fallen to 48.4 percent—a 4.5 point decrease.

The institution's definition of unemployment also helps hide the rapid growth of joblessness. To count a person as an unemployed, TurkStat requires that he or she has to have looked for a job without finding one in the previous month. If an unemployed worker did not apply for work in the last month, he or she is not

considered unemployed. Those who have lost hope of finding a job are not considered unemployed.

On June 10, after the research of TurkStat, the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey Research Center (DİSK-AR) released a report based on International Labor Organization (ILO) methods, refuting TurkStat's figures.

The "June 2020 Unemployment and Employment Report: The COVID-19 Earthquake in Employment" stressed that TurkStat's unemployment data does not reflect the truth. It also states that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to at least 6 million job losses in Turkey and that the number of unemployed using a broader definition exceeds 13 million. The revised broadly defined Turkish unemployment rate has become 39 percent.

Unemployment is surging after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's decision to "ban layoffs" during the pandemic. During the coronavirus pandemic, the government has provided several opportunities for companies such as short-time working allowances or unpaid leave allowances instead of layoffs, to limit growing social anger among workers. With these payments made from the unemployment fund collected from the workers' premiums, companies' layoff costs were slashed. At this time, up to 3.5 million workers have applied for short-time working allowance and almost 1 million workers have been sent on unpaid leave.

Hundreds of thousands of workers who have been forced to take unpaid leave receive only 1,170 Turkish liras (about US\$172) per month from the state unemployment fund. This corresponds to less than half of Turkey's minimum wage of 2,325 TL (about US\$343). According to the research conducted each month by the pro-government Türk-İş union, the

starvation line for a family of four was 2,438.24 TL in May, while the poverty line is 7,942 liras. These figures show the unpaid leave allowance is even below starvation line.

Thus, millions of workers and their families are struggling to live with a pittance while the 100 richest people in Turkey have more than US\$100 billion.

The Turkish ruling class continues to force workers to work at the expense of their health and lives during the pandemic. With a relative fall in the number of cases, the Erdoğan government has rapidly begun to remove its limited measures since May, accelerated its “normalization” process and reopened almost the entire economy to boost the profits of the banks and major companies.

The impact of this criminal policy has soon emerged as a sharp increase in the number of new daily infections. The number of new cases, which had fallen to around 700, rose to around 1,500 again last week. While state officials accuse people of not taking personal precautions in order to hide the criminality of their policies, public anger is mounting over the government’s response to the pandemic in the interests of ruling class. The class character of the government response has been clearly demonstrated in the rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases among workers, which is more than three times the average in Turkey.

A poll by the Metropoll Research Company in early June found that while 53.5 percent of people said that their living conditions have worsened in the last year, those who said “Turkey’s biggest problem is the economy and unemployment” reached almost 50 percent. The increase was 12 percent. The research found that 39 percent of AKP voters stated that their living conditions have deteriorated.

On the economic effects of the pandemic, 31.8 percent said they became unemployed after the pandemic, 8 percent said they had gone on non-paid leave, and 20.3 percent said they couldn’t meet their basic needs. Fifty-eight percent were only able to meet their shelter and food needs; 20.4 percent could not pay their credit card debt; 17.8 percent said they could not afford their debts to other people. While 17.7 percent could not pay their monthly bills, the proportion of those who could not afford their rents or bank debts was 17.2 percent.

While all recent studies reveal that masses of workers

have been condemned to growing unemployment, hunger and poverty during the pandemic, the Erdoğan government continues to transfer billions to the Turkish bourgeoisie. The Treasury borrowed 67.2 billion lira on financial markets in April, after announcing that it would borrow 28.2 billion lira. This amount rose to 76.5 billion lira in May. As around the world, as billions are pumped into the coffers of the ruling class with low-interest rate loans and stimulus packages, this debt will be paid by the working class with increased exploitation.

The ruling class is using the pandemic as an opportunity to transfer massive amounts to their coffers and intensify its social attacks on the working class, leading to an inevitable intensification in the class struggle in the next period in Turkey and around the world.



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