

Back-to-work policy accelerates spread of COVID-19 in Turkey

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As the direct result of the back-to-work policy dictated by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, new COVID-19 cases and deaths are both on the rise in Turkey, as in countries around the world. The number of daily cases, which fell to 786 on June 2, the lowest level since the outbreak began, is again at 1,500.

As of Thursday, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca reported 1,458 new cases and 21 deaths, with a total of 193,000 cases and more than 5,000 deaths, which is undoubtedly an underestimation. There are 941 intensive care patients, 369 intubated patients and more than 22,000 active cases in Turkey. The ratio of intensive care patients to active cases rose again to 4 percent, which was its level in April. At the beginning of the June, as "normalization" began, it was just 2 percent.

On June 18, the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) warned, "The consequences of early reopening are alarming," adding that official figures released by Koca are suspicious. The Turkish Health Ministry has refused to make public the full coronavirus data, including on the situation of frontline health care workers. As a result, no one except state authorities has clear information on the distribution of cases by regions, provinces, occupations, age groups and genders.

The government's concealment of data is aimed to defuse growing popular opposition as workers are forced back to workplaces and factories amid a raging pandemic. On June 23, an event revealed some of the underlying political issues.

According to the Mezopatamya Agency, while the total number of deaths from COVID-19 in the Cizre district of southeastern Şırnak province was 8, nearly 200 houses in 10 neighborhoods have been

quarantined. Cizre has a population of nearly 150,000 people, and the government dismissed its elected Kurdish-nationalist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) mayor last year.

While Cizre is shown in almost totally in red on the official online pandemic map, tens of thousands of people campaigned with a "Look at Cizre" hashtag on social media to call for immediate measures to contain the outbreak in the district. According to attorney Nuşirevan Elçi, bar president of Şırnak, patients there have been sent to other cities because Cizre's public hospital has been overwhelmed.

In another statement on Tuesday, TTB officials blamed the growing numbers of cases on the government, stating: "We are concerned about the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic." The TTB criticized the government for only reporting "positive" numbers about the disease to encourage the population to let down its guard, as it never closed non-essential production and has moreover re-opened shopping malls and entertainment venues. The government also forced millions of youth to take national exams amid the pandemic.

President Erdoğan declared on June 20 that "Recovery signals in economy are coming strong," and the government has continued its preparations to attack workers' right to severance pay, a major social attack to attract transnational and multinational companies into Turkey. At the same time, there were growing reports about new cases and deaths among workers, who have been forced to work in factories and workplaces.

The class character of the government response is clearly demonstrated in the rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases among workers, which is more than three times the average in Turkey.

According to June 6 report from the Health and Safety Labour Watch (İSİG), titled “COVID-19 has become a working class disease,” the number of workers who died of COVID-19 had reached 146. As a result of the government’s full “opening” policy since June 1, it is almost certain this number will increase further.

Adnan Serdaroğlu, the general secretary of the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions (İİSK) and Birleşik Metal-İİ Chairman, told the daily *BirGün* that 20 workers were infected in a factory in the Tuzla Free Zone, Istanbul. Another İİSK official, Seyit Aslan, reported 15 coronavirus cases in a meatpacking plant in the western city of Balıkesir, adding that other factories also have cases. He complained, “There are no measures left at the factories.”

Mehmet Türkmen, a İİSK official in the textile sector, said, “There are [COVID-19] positive cases at 35 factories” in Gaziantep, adding: “We think that there are cases at more than 100 [factories].”

However, union officials have called no action to protect workers’ lives and health under unsafe conditions. This exposes their reactionary collaboration with the government and ruling class at workers’ expense amid the pandemic.

A worker told the daily *Evrensel* that more than 300 workers at the Namet meat processing plant in Çayirova, Kocaeli, are infected or under quarantine. Despite this dangerous outbreak, the company has not stopped the production at the factory. After the “normalization” began at the Otokar plant in Sakarya, an auto factory owned by Koç Holding, workers have reported at least 37 positive cases at the factory.

This is the direct result of the Erdoğan government’s “herd immunity” policy, which enjoys the open or tacit support of the established opposition parties, the media and trade unions. Bourgeois opposition parties like the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the HDP, and their pseudo-left supporters have almost completely abandoned talk of the pandemic; they have no serious objection to the AKP’s response. Moreover, all the trade union confederations including the pro-opposition İİSK collaborate with this criminal policy, continuing their longtime ties to management and the state.

İİSK declared at the end of March that it might invoke the constitutional right to not work in unsafe

conditions, but it has never called any strikes. Instead, it played a significant role to contain growing anger among workers, even as many İİSK members were infected.

Echoing the Trump administration’s attack on COVID-19 testing, the Turkish Health Ministry ordered hospitals to decrease testing in order to present the current situation as less dangerous. Objecting to this change, Prof. Dr. Güner Sönmez tweeted on June 20, “The criteria for performing PCR tests have been changed. Testing will no longer be done if there are no symptoms or contact with infected people. However, we know that a significant number of positive cases pass without symptoms and infect,” asking: “Does closing our eyes change the truth?”

The only way forward for the working class in Turkey and internationally is to intervene independently against the ruling class’ deadly response to the pandemic. To save millions of lives, it is necessary to form rank-and-file safety committees in factories, workplaces and neighborhoods, independent of the trade unions and bourgeois parties. It is critical for workers to stop production in nonessential sectors during the pandemic while staying on full pay and ensure safe working conditions for workers still on the job.



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