

As COVID-19 surges, infected Turkish workers forced back to work

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5 August 2020

As coronavirus spreads again in Turkey after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government re-opened the economy on June 1, backed by bourgeois opposition parties like the Republican People's Party (CHP), businesses are forcing even infected workers to work.

Last week, a canned fish company, Dardanel, in the western city of Çanakkale, forced all workers into its factory for 14 days after more than 40 workers tested positive for coronavirus. According to a *Bianet* report, "All workers of the factory, including those who were in quarantine in their homes and those on annual leave, were placed in student dormitories. Also, workers diagnosed with Covid-19 were brought to the factory with shuttles and worked."

"Our psychology deteriorates in the workplace, we cannot breathe in the bands, even going to and from the toilets is a problem. Managers, supervisors always keep an eye on us," one worker told the daily *Evrensel*, adding: "Our life is almost hostage. The final decision is already a concrete example of this. They throw us all into the fire so that the boss's job is not interrupted."

The company's move came after the Çanakkale Governorate Provincial Public Hygiene Committee declared: "The personnel of enterprises that operate in a closed system shall be taken to the factory and then to the place they will be isolated." This decision was approved not only by the office of the governor, but also by city's CHP mayor.

This reactionary collaboration shows how workers are forced to remain at work under deadly conditions and exposes the anti-working-class character of the middle-class parties and trade unions that lined up behind the CHP as an alternative to Erdoğan. Their focus is not to contain the pandemic and save lives, but to restrain growing anger and opposition within the

working class and divert it into safe channels—even as the pandemic spreads and living conditions plummet.

News of forced labour in Çanakkale came just a few weeks after the CHP supported a massive attack on the working class in parliament. With CHP votes, the Erdoğan government extended the forced "unpaid leave" process until July 2021 for hundreds of thousands or millions of workers. They have been forced to take unpaid leave, receiving only 1,170 Turkish liras (about US\$170) per month from the state unemployment fund. After the pandemic, the number of unemployed rose to over 17 million in Turkey, an all-time record.

The criminal practice in Çanakkale follows a stated project by the Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (MÜSAD). In May, MÜSAD announced a project to build "isolated production bases" to avoid stopping production amid this pandemic and continue exploitation of the working class.

Coronavirus reports continue to increase from other factories. In the Vestel factory in Manisa, workers report that there are hundreds of infected employees; seven have already died. This white goods factory employs more than 16,000 workers. It is the largest factory in Turkey and one of the largest in Europe. "Workers continue to work. Everyone is very nervous. Cases are coming out, but there is no quarantine application," one worker told daily *BirGun*.

At U?ur Konfeksiyon, a factory in the Istanbul ?itelli organised industrial zone, 96 workers have been reportedly infected within two weeks.

Companies are running rampant, imposing criminal policies on their employees. At the end of June, though 40 workers working in railway construction in the southeastern city of Mardin had been infected in one

week, Cengiz Holding threatened workers if they refused to keep working. In May, in the same workplace, 118 workers were fired after they protested against working under unsafe conditions.

Growing reports on positive cases and factory deaths come amid an escalation in the pandemic across Turkey amid the international back-to-work campaign.

As the total number of cases in Turkey reaches 232,000, with more than 5,700 deaths, the proportion of COVID-19 patients in intensive care in Turkey rose from 2 percent on June 1 to nearly 12 percent at the end of July. In this period, the number of active cases fell from around 30,000 to less than 12,000, but the number of patients in intensive care nearly doubled.

Despite these signs of serious spread of COVID-19 disease, the Health Ministry's official figures remained almost the same. The total daily new cases were between 900 and 1,000 since July 14, and death toll was 15-20.

On July 29, the Turkish Health Ministry stopped announcing figures on intensive care and intubated patients, amid growing suspicion and anger among workers that the government is hiding the true scope of the coronavirus crisis in Turkey so as to keep promoting tourism and extracting profits from workers. As of July 28, there were 1,280 patients in intensive care. This amounts to 11.8 percent of active cases, with 403 patients on ventilators.

There are growing warnings from scientists that the COVID-19 pandemic is spiraling out of control due to a "herd immunity" policy implemented by the government with tacit support from local governments led by so-called opposition parties.

Turkish Medical Association (TTB) official Prof. Sinan Adıyaman said, "They do not want to give the number of patients in intensive care. Because we could make inferences by looking at them. We were dividing the number of active patients into the number of patients in intensive care. We have explained that this proportion is over 10 percent in Turkey but it is around 1.5 percent in the world."

Prof. Dr. Bengi Başer also attacked the government's deliberate neglect in a tweet on Monday, stating: "We only use PCR tests for those who show symptoms; so we do it to only 30 percent. ... The diagnostic value of the test is 60 percent. ... We do not apply tests to those who come from abroad. We also no longer make a test

for close contacts of positive cases." She warned, "Focus on reality, not on numbers."

In an interview on Monday, Halis Yerlikaya, a TTB official, also declared that the official figures are not true: "On the day of death of 8 patients in one night in Diyarbakır, the number of deaths announced throughout the country was 17." Warning of a serious spread in many cities, Yerlikaya claimed intensive care units in Diyarbakır, Mardin and Şanlıurfa—the Kurdish-majority cities in the southeast—are already full. The daily number of cases in Diyarbakır or Urfa alone is somewhat more than 300, though the official figure across all of Turkey is barely over 900.

As coronavirus spreads unrestrainedly in Turkey and internationally due to the ruling class's deadly response to the pandemic, leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths, the only way forward for the working class is to intervene independently. Autoworkers in the US, who built rank-and-file safety committees in their factories independent of pro-capitalist trade-unions, show what is can be done to save millions of lives by workers around over the world.



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