

Workers anger grows as Turkish government downplays COVID-19 crisis

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The coronavirus continues to spread in Turkey after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government re-opened the economy on June 1, backed by bourgeois opposition parties and trade unions.

As in countries all over the world, the coronavirus pandemic is out of control in Turkey after a deadly back-to-work campaign in the interests of the ruling class. The government only responds with unreliable statements and data. As the total official number of cases in Turkey reached 261,000, with more than 6,150 deaths, the number of daily cases on Tuesday was 1,502, the most since June 15.

As the pandemic spreads through workplaces, companies and authorities are forcing even the infected to work, provoking growing opposition among workers.

After an increasing number of COVID-19 cases, the Artvin governorate decided to keep the nearly 4,000 workers at the Yusufeli Dam and hydroelectric power plant construction sites. Workers responded with a walk-out on August 25.

One worker told sendika.org: "Many workers who wanted to leave work in this process. However, they did not give permission, and we heard that there were those who received threats like, 'You cannot get your notice compensation and you cannot get your unemployment pay.' Today, they force us to stay on the construction site with the agreement of the governor's office."

Last month, 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. This decision was approved not only by the governor's office, but also by city's Republican People's Party (CHP) mayor—exposing the reactionary collaboration between the government and so-called opposition parties at workers' expense.

Reports of workplace outbreaks in provinces across Turkey are rising. They include:

- In factories in the Adana Organized Industrial Zone, COVID-19 cases have surged over the last week. Dozens of positive cases were found in Atlas Denim, Erbey ?plik Dokuma and Kastamonu Entegre factories, and the virus has been also seen in many factories throughout the industrial zone. Workers reported more than 40 cases in Erbey ?plik Dokuma and nearly 10 cases in Kastamonu Entegre.

- In a textile factory in Zonguldak, where 155 workers are employed, 43 workers tested positive and the other workers were quarantined. Production at the factory was stopped.

- Coronavirus tests of 36 workers at the Söke Flour Factory in Aydın were positive.

- Reportedly, despite the increase in the COVID-19 outbreak in the Manisa Organized Industrial Zone, no measures have been taken. In the Vestel factory alone, there are nearly 1,000 cases, and at least 8 workers have lost their lives.

- The virus is spreading rapidly among postal workers, considered among the most at-risk workers during the pandemic. Reportedly, 241 workers in the state-owned PTT mail distribution company have caught the virus.

Anger towards the government's response is also increasing among health care workers, the most affected by the pandemic. Last week, the Diyarbakır Health Platform shared the latest data of COVID-19 Diagnosis Healthcare Professionals in the city. According to the report, while in total 476 healthcare workers were infected in Diyarbakır, 130 of them only got sick in the last two weeks.

Health care workers held a one-hour work stoppage and sit-in in Diyarbakır on August 20 to draw attention to difficult working conditions. They issued a statement declaring that the government's measures are insufficient: "Unfortunately, just within last week, we have lost two physician friends, one health technician and one

subcontracted worker in this period in Diyarbakır and Urfa.”

The Trade Union of Public Employees in Health and Social Services (SES) Batman branch co-chair Deniz Topkan recently stated that of 3,500 health workers in Batman city, 700 tested positive. As the health system was insufficient in the face of the intense increase in cases, he added, seven people died last week while waiting for intensive care—even though the 350-bed hospital’s capacity was increased to 450.

Workers spread reports about deadly workplace situations only via social media. While corporate media do not report them and line up behind the political establishment, unions cooperate with state officials and companies, especially to hide the number of cases in the workplace. Workers are falling ill and even dying, but management and the union refuse to tell workers how many have COVID-19.

In the BMC auto factory in İzmir, where nearly 3,000 workers are employed, workers said the number of positive cases has risen from 12 last week to 70, and production has stopped. Mürsel Öcal, the Türk-Metal union’s İzmir branch head, denied that there were infected workers in BMC. His statement about the situation expresses the utter contempt of the entire ruling class and all its servants for workers’ lives: “Factories are the most reliable places in İzmir.”

According to the scientists and medical experts, Health Ministry figures are well below the actual number of cases and deaths, which are no longer reliable at all. Even the sum of the figures for a few cities announced by branches of the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) exceeds the total daily national number provided by the Health Ministry.

Many doctors, health care workers and patients’ relatives report that many infected people have lost their lives during treatment for COVID-19, but hospitals list other causes of death. While the number of intensive care and intubated patients is rising, the Health Ministry has claimed the daily death toll is just between 18 and 24 for more than two months. While health workers from various provinces state on social media that the situation in hospitals is the worst it has been since the pandemic began, official figures are well below the worst period recorded in Turkey.

In an August 25 interview, TTB Central Council Member Dr. Halis Yerlikaya said: “Almost half of the figures by the Ministry are from Diyarbakır... On the day the Ministry announced the number of cases as

1,200-1,300, the Diyarbakır Medical Association announced that 601 people in Diyarbakır tested positive. If it was transparent and the actual figures were revealed, perhaps the reflexes and behavior of society would develop accordingly.”

Despite the growth in the number of cases, expert warnings that the pandemic will increase in the coming months, as well as the destructive examples of America and Europe, the government is also preparing to re-open schools in September 21. In October, football matches are to be played with thousands of fans attending.

Private schools which the government has highly promoted in past decades already opened on August 17, and public school teachers returned to school on Monday for the so-called “seminar” process. The government is set to open all schools as part of its opening of the economy.

The government has had to postpone the opening of public schools from September 1 to September 21 due to mounting social opposition. At the beginning of this month, the Education and Science Workers’ Union (Eğitim-Sen) published a survey titled “Education in Pandemic Conditions” with 2,239 teachers nationwide. The vast majority of the participants (96.4 percent) said that if face-to-face education is initiated during the pandemic, their health and the health of their family will be in danger.

As COVID-19 spreads due to the ruling class’ deadly response to the pandemic, leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths, the only way forward for the working class is to take action. To save lives, workers including teachers and health care workers in should build rank-and-file safety committees in their workplaces, independent of pro-capitalist trade-unions, in Turkey and internationally.



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