

Turkish government prepares to reopen schools as pandemic escalates

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As in countries around the world, the coronavirus pandemic is out of control in Turkey after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government reopened the economy with support of the political establishment and trade unions in the interests of the ruling class. The total official number of cases in Turkey reached 286,455 yesterday, with 6,895 deaths. The number of daily cases was 1,761 on September 8, the highest since May 15.

The actual figures are undoubtedly much higher. While health care 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.

Under these deadly conditions, the government is preparing to reopen schools across Turkey on September 21, supported by the official opposition parties and their allied trade unions. There are nearly 18 million students and 1 million teachers in K-12 schools in Turkey. The Education and Science Workers' Union (E?itim-Sen) declared that it had already detected positive cases at schools among teachers preparing for the new year at the end of August.

However, the very same pro-opposition union declared its support for government on Monday, stating, "E?itim-Sen thinks that face-to-face education should be started in schools as soon as possible." This is yet another example of the reactionary collaboration between the government, so-called opposition parties and trade unions against workers and their families.

Turkish Medical Association (TTB) President Sinan Ad?yaman drew attention last week to the growing coronavirus crisis, stressing the contradiction between the statements by local governors and figures announced by the government.

Speaking to RS FM, he said: "Tests are done in 214 centers now. But doctors cannot learn the test results of their patients. The results go to a center in the ministry and only two or three people know them. If you talk about 'transparency,' why this privacy? Why do you sign a confidentiality agreement with these centers? What are you hiding? It turned out that these numbers do not reflect the truth ..."

He pointed out the disastrous situation in the capital, denouncing the government: "I have dentist friends working in the public hospitals in Ankara. They do contact tracing and these tests. According to their information, there are around 2,000 daily cases in Ankara. What are you hiding? People are dying. Physicians and health care professionals are dying. Tell the facts so that people take precautions accordingly." Within just one week, the TTB's Ankara office claimed Wednesday that new cases in Ankara had reached 4,000 daily.

At the end of August, the TTB also declared: "The proportion of infected and dying health workers is in first place among the world's countries," calling for immediate implementation of security measures. According to Ad?yaman's latest statement, at least 80 health care workers, including 32 doctors, have lost their lives.

Last week, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said 29,865 health care workers have been infected and 52 of them have died.

The government's deadly response to the pandemic is provoking anger among all sections of the working class. After another doctor died on August 31, a doctor took to Twitter to stress the growing willingness to fight among health care workers: "My classmates are in anger, not sadness. These deaths are not destiny. I hear calls from health care workers to stop working

collectively.”

With the reopened economy, the increasing numbers of cases and deaths are particularly concentrated among workers sent to work in factories and plants to produce super-profits for the banks. The pandemic is affecting too many factories and workplaces around Turkey to report on each one. However, appliance maker Vestel, Turkey’s largest factory and one of the largest in Europe, exemplifies the criminal policy of the ruling class. While it increased its profit 17-fold in the first half of the year, there are nearly 1,000 cases, and at least 8 workers have lost their lives in the factory.

The TTB prepared a report on the pandemic in the factory, located in the Manisa Organized Industrial Zone, where 16,000 workers work in total. Vestel management asked and received a court order banning news coverage of the report. The report stated that workers who showed symptoms were prevented from going to the hospital, that measures were insufficient and that workers worked 12 hours daily. Moreover, it declared that a workplace doctor at the Vestel factory was fired on charges of “leaking information about the workplace.”

According to Dr. ?ahut Duran, chair of the TTB’s Manisa branch, workers in the Vestel factory formed “platforms to speak up and reached them via these platforms.” This points to increasing militancy and willingness to struggle among the workers and vindicates the calls by the *World Socialist Web Site* for workers to build independent the rank-and-file safety committees internationally.

On the other hand, the coronavirus crisis further exposes the collaboration between the government, big business and trade unions at workers’ expense.

The wage arrangement protocol signed by Turkish Airlines (THY) and the Turkish Civil Aviation Trade Union (Hava-??) reveals the massive assault on the rights of workers, and the role of trade unions in these attacks amid a raging pandemic. Vast attacks are underway against airline workers internationally, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the protocol, by the end of 2021, 50 percent of the wages of cockpit personnel, 35 percent of the wages of cabin personnel and 30 percent of the wages of others will be cut. Workers will feel the impact of these huge cuts much more due to depreciation of the Turkish lira, causing high inflation.

The trade union states that the protection of employment is its top priority and that it agrees with the employer on this issue. This is a lie, however. The protocol does not state that there will be no dismissal or that unpaid leave cannot be imposed.

Moreover, in an email to the workers, the THY reportedly declared that those who do not accept the terms of the protocol would be forced to leave, supposedly of “their own consent.” Those who do not accept or do not make any choice will be forced to take unpaid leave, receiving only 1,170 Turkish liras (about US\$160) per month from the state unemployment fund.

With the votes of the bourgeois opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), President Erdo?an’s government extended the forced “unpaid leave” process, meaning hunger conditions until July 2021 for hundreds of thousands or millions of workers. While minimum wage in Turkey is about 2,300 liras, a family of four goes hungry if it earns less than 2,400 liras per month.

The trade unions are not only collaborating with the ruling class in attacks on the working class, but also to ensure that the deadly back-to-work campaign is implemented without any social opposition from workers. Indeed, they are complicit in the death of workers and their families from COVID-19 in the workplaces.

The pro-opposition Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions (D?SK) declared at the end of March that in 48 hours it might invoke the constitutional right to not work in unsafe conditions. However, it has never called strikes up to this day.



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