

Form independent rank-and-file safety committees to oppose the deadly reopening of schools!

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On Monday, September 21, children in pre-school education and primary school first grade students will start in-person education once a week. All classes are planned to open in the coming weeks in Turkey, where there are nearly 18 million students and 1 million teachers in K-12 schools. Sosyalist E?itlik (the Socialist Equality Group, SE), in political solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), calls on teachers, parents, young people and workers to oppose this reopening of schools.

Despite the resurgence of the coronavirus pandemic, President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's government is overseeing the resumption of in-person teaching with support of bourgeois opposition parties and trade unions. Only the independent mobilisation of all workers and youth will stop this murderous policy.

The drive to reopen schools amid the expanding coronavirus pandemic threatens the health and lives of millions of children, educators, parents, grandparents and community members.

If schools are fully opened, millions of youth and teachers will be exposed to the risk of infection in overcrowded classrooms, run-down toilet facilities and public transportation. The official number of cases is over 1,500 every day and the number of deaths exceeds 60. Only a few days before reopening of schools, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca himself admitted that "Compared to the first period, the burden of our healthcare workers has increased four or five times." The fact that schools were completely closed in this "first period," in March, underscores that the reopening of schools today is politically criminal.

Health Minister Koca all but admitted that "herd immunity" is his government's strategy against the pandemic. He said, "In the upcoming period, the main focus should be on this: The number of people who have no symptoms and who are only vectors does not matter, as long as they do not infect someone else."

Yet scientific studies have established that children transmit the virus and can hold up to one hundred times more viral load in their respiratory tracts than adults. School re-openings in the United States and Brazil have already caused thousands of new infections, many teachers' deaths and school closures in many regions. In August, positive cases were reportedly detected in hundreds of schools during the one-week teachers' "seminar" period in Turkey.

A catastrophe is being prepared, with millions more students slated to return to classrooms in coming days and weeks. According to an August poll, 93 percent of teachers believe it is impossible to maintain necessary social distancing between students in classrooms. Nonetheless, the political establishment backs this school reopening, despite warnings from scientists and public health experts.

This is not because capitalist politicians who have spent their entire careers slashing school funding and privatizing public education have

suddenly become concerned with the academic, social and emotional needs of children.

On the contrary, they have only one purpose: to get children out of their homes so their parents can be sent back to work to produce profits for the corporate and financial elites. The hundreds of billions of liras handed out to the corporations and banks since the beginning of the pandemic are now to be recovered from the population—no matter the cost.

International resistance to the reopening of schools is already emerging. Hundreds of thousands of teachers, pupils and parents have joined groups hostile to school re-openings on social media in the US, Brazil, UK and elsewhere. Health and safety committees are being formed in factories, schools and universities in the US, Britain and Germany, independently of the trade unions, which are the bribed allies of the corporations and state.

In the same survey of teachers in Turkey, the vast majority (96.4 percent) said that if face-to-face education is initiated during the pandemic, their health and the health of their families will be in danger. According to another survey, 64 percent of parents stated that they did not find it safe to reopen schools.

Sosyalist E?itlik aims to mobilize this opposition and unite educators with youth, parents and the entire working class to fight the dangerous reopening of schools and the ruling class interests driving this murderous policy.

Teachers, students and workers need scientific facts to counter misinformation and lies peddled by politicians and the corporate media.

The campaign to reopen schools is based on three fundamental lies.

Lie #1: Children are less susceptible to infection and don't develop serious symptoms from COVID-19.

Nearly 180,000 cases of COVID-19 were reported in children from July 9 to August 6. This is a 90 percent increase in total cases among children in just four weeks. According to official figures of the Robert Koch Institute, the number of cases among children and adolescents has risen rapidly since the opening of schools. By September 6, 6,756 COVID-19 cases among children and adolescents in care had been reported to the authorities from facilities such as day nurseries and schools.

International figures show that one in three children in hospital has to go to intensive care, just as often as adults. Six percent need respirators.

Lie #2: Children rarely transmit COVID-19.

Recent, comprehensive studies with large sample sizes conducted in the US, Italy and South Korea each concluded that children transmit COVID-19 more readily than adults. One of the studies, from Chicago, found that babies and young children infected with the virus can carry viral loads in their throats and airways up to 100 times greater than adults. The spread of the deadly disease in Israel has been largely attributed to the reopening of schools.

Lie #3: Schools can be reopened "safely."

A recent study from the University of Florida confirmed that minute, aerosolized COVID-19 particles can become airborne and travel 16 feet or more, well beyond the recommended six feet for social distancing, and remain infectious. These aerosols can also remain suspended in the air for hours in poorly ventilated spaces.

As a result, every school bus and classroom will become a dangerous confined setting even with temperature screenings, masks and efforts to ensure social distancing.

Schools thus inevitably turn into breeding grounds for the pandemic. Governments of all stripes do not care about the thousands of deaths that this policy will cause. They are only interested in the profits of the banks and corporations, no matter how many must die.

It is up to workers to take urgent action. Socialist E?itlik calls for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to prepare for the immense struggles that lie ahead. These committees must fight to unite all workers—teachers, school bus drivers, caretakers and workers in manufacturing, health care, logistics, retail and food processing—to stop schools' regular operation and save lives.

In this struggle, we advance the following demands which we urge all workers to fight for:

- **For the immediate closure of all public and private schools!** It is impossible to “safely” open schools during a raging pandemic. The loss of life and permanent physical and emotional damage to children who spread the disease to teachers, parents and grandparents dwarfs any disruption caused by online learning.

- **Resources for teachers, schools and online learning!** To ensure safe conditions, new education facilities must be opened and teachers must be hired. Until these measures are taken, all teachers and students must be provided with good computers and high-speed Internet access free of charge to ensure quality online teaching. Families need comprehensive financial and social support during the pandemic.

- **Full income protection to all parents and caregivers who stay home with their children!** The money handed over to the rich must be used to provide full income to those who cannot work because they must stay home with their children. At the same time, the policy of imposing unpaid leave of 1.170 lira (US\$150) per month on hundreds of thousands of workers should end. All unemployed people should be provided with a full unemployment allowance.

- **No loss of income for educators who choose to stay home!** Teachers and education workers who refuse to work in unsafe conditions must be provided with full income and benefits for the duration of the pandemic, not fined and penalized.

- **For free speech and the protection of whistleblowers!** Those who speak out against unsafe working conditions—whether in schools, factories, warehouses, hospitals or offices—must be defended against victimization by employers or state officials. All workers who have been victimized must be rehired with back pay.

- **For regular and comprehensive tests of pupils and teachers!** Central to the safety of daycare centers and schools is the regular testing of children, youth and staff. The same applies to all factories and workplaces where a risk arises. Only in this way can immediate quarantine measures be taken and the spread of the virus limited.

- **Halt all nonessential production!** Until the pandemic is contained, only key industries such as food production, medical care and logistics should remain open. Workers in those industries must be provided with the most advanced safety measures to prevent infection. All nonessential workers and laid-off workers must be provided with full unemployment benefits and access to free health care.

The schools must remain closed until the threat to public health is over and rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with trusted scientists and public health experts, can ensure the safety of children, teachers and school employees. This will only happen after a massive

program of testing and contact tracing. Before any school reopens, all ventilation systems must be modernized, janitorial and nursing staff must be hired, and class sizes must be permanently reduced to no more than 15 students.

The unprecedented catastrophe of the pandemic is fundamentally a social and political, not simply a medical, question. The necessary technology and medical expertise to contain the virus and ensure workers' safety exists, but under capitalism everything is subordinated to the profit interests of the corporate and financial elite.

This merciless policy in the interests of the ruling class is essentially supported by all parties in the parliament. Confessing that schools cannot be opened safely under these conditions, the bourgeois opposition parties make nothing but token statements to keep widespread social opposition under control.

Moreover, not only pro-government unions, but also pro-Republican People's Party (CHP) and pro-Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) unions support the reopening of schools. The Education and Science Workers' Union (E?itim-Sen), which carried out the above-mentioned survey among teachers, declared its support for government, stating: “E?itim-Sen thinks 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.

Rank-and-file safety committees must be established completely independently of the parliamentary parties and the trade unions. They must be oriented towards the whole working class in Turkey and internationally, fighting for the unification of educators with all workers, in the automobile industry, health care, logistics, meat processing and beyond, exposed to these deadly conditions.

Our demands are based not on what the corporations and the politicians claim is affordable, but what is necessary to protect the lives and well-being of children, educators and the entire working class. Our aim is to mobilise the working class as an independent social force against the insecure reopening of schools and for the defence of public education.

All educators, school workers, parents and students who support this initiative should contact us today to establish local rank-and-file committees in your school and neighborhood. Send us any pertinent information, including significant developments in your district or state, and we will share this widely with a global audience.



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