

“The unions were like ghosts throughout the pandemic”

Istanbul municipal workers speak out against trade unions, herd immunity policy

Our correspondents
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As President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government admitted that they were manipulating the figures of COVID-19 cases from the beginning, there is a growing mood of militancy among workers in Turkey against the government’s homicidal response to the pandemic.

This opposition targets not only the government, but also its co-conspirators in bourgeois opposition parties and trade unions. Workers increasingly sense that the entire political establishment, including the trade unions, only defend the profit interests of the ruling class at the expense of the workers’ health and lives.

The Erdoğan government implemented a herd immunity policy backed by the bourgeois opposition led by the Republican People’s Party (CHP). With CHP votes, the Erdoğan government extended the forced “unpaid leave” process until July 2021 for hundreds of thousands of workers. It means receiving only 1,170 Turkish liras (about US\$150), or half the minimum wage. The government’s collaboration with the CHP against the working class reached a new low when they forced healthy workers of the Dardanel canned fish company in the western city of Çanakkale back to work for 14 days alongside their COVID-positive workmates.

The trade unions were also complicit in this reactionary policy. As COVID-19 cases surged in workplaces in March, the pro-opposition Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions (DİSK) declared that it might invoke the constitutional right to not work in unsafe conditions. However, it has never called strikes up to this day. Similarly, the pro-opposition Education and Science Workers’ Union (Eğitim-Sen) supported the official back-to-school campaign, stating: “Eğitim-Sen thinks that face-to-face education should start in schools as soon as possible.” Three teachers in Ankara have already lost their lives due to coronavirus last week.

Amid mounting anger among workers at these actions, the *World Socialist Web Site* recently discussed the pandemic with seven workers from four separate CHP-held district municipalities in Istanbul. Their names have been withheld to protect them from retaliation.

One worker from Beşiktaş municipality said: “Municipalities began lock-downs after March 15 and then many workers (nearly 800 workers in Beşiktaş) were sent to their homes with a short-time working allowance,” that amounts to just 60 percent of their wages.

He stated: “In early July, the return to work began and almost no measures were taken in any municipality. In this way, just like the government’s policies, positive cases were hidden from workers and work continued. The unions had no demands on this matter.”

Though a new presidential decree allowed remote working for municipality workers, many local administrations did not send workers home. The worker explained that municipalities have just begun short-time or remote working again on October 1, after a resurgence of the coronavirus among workers and executives: “One executive recently died from COVID-19.”

Another worker in Beşiktaş said: “I think the government did not take adequate measures during the pandemic. And it is the same for municipalities. Measures taken for the workers are insufficient.”

Asked about the role of trade unions in the process and the formation of rank-and-file safety committees among workers in the United States and Europe, she replied: “I have not seen a positive role of trade unions in the pandemic. I think this [formation of committees] is due to the dysfunction of the unions. And I find these attempts very positive.”

Referring to the recent exposure of the Turkish government deliberately lying and downplaying the

number of cases and deaths from COVID-19, she added: “Especially in the number of positive cases in the pandemic, we can see that [the government] is not acting honestly, as stated by the Turkish Medical Association.” She went on to denounce the municipality administration: “Employees in the municipality are not tested [for COVID-19]. There are only minimal precautions. For example, units that can work remotely are brought to the municipality. This means more working people and an increased risk of contamination.”

She was very angry against unions, stating, “The unions were like ghosts throughout the pandemic. We could not see them in any way, and workers were not informed about the process.”

“Workers must unite,” she responded about the initiative for rank-and-file committees internationally, adding: “The fact that they act together independently of some corrupt institutions means that the workers whom the boss unions want to keep under control are now awakening.”

Another worker from ?i?li also said: “Commercial concerns are overriding public health,” adding, “Simple safety measures are not taken. The health care sector is about to collapse, and health care workers and public workers suffer the most [from the pandemic] among working people.” She also supported building rank-and-file safety committees against herd immunity policies of governments around the world, stating: “Workers of the world unite, but maintain social distancing.”

One worker from Kad?köy municipality said, “I think the implementation of ‘herd immunity’ explicitly or implicitly stems from the fact that those countries maintain the economy is more important than human health.”

Another worker from Büyükçekmece municipality denounced the ruling elite’s calls for “normalization” in the pandemic: “Masses were encouraged to go out on the streets by making normalization propaganda. Harder, more precise and solution-oriented measures should be advanced.”

A worker from Maltepe municipality expressed the widespread suspicion among workers about the official statements on the pandemic, stating: “It is known that, from the beginning, the government did not manage the process transparently and constantly manipulated data. We are living in a period where only the employers are supported, the workers are not supported and they are forced to work without safety. They are the first to be sacrificed, and the policy of ‘herd immunity’ is pursued

in the background.”

He also denounced municipal administration, saying: “it has only implemented the decision taken by the governorship and government. They did not take serious measures; did not make widespread tests among workers, and hid information from us.”

He also criticized the reactionary policies of the trade unions: “Unions across the country have once again proved that they are collaborators of the government and business, arguing that the ‘normalization process’ should be started as soon as possible.” He declared his support for independent initiatives of workers such as rank-and-file safety committees, emphasizing that they must be organized internationally.

Amid a developing movement among auto workers, educators, bus drivers and other layers of workers, the powerful response to the rank-and-file committees among municipal workers in Istanbul is an important sign of a growing international trend with revolutionary implications. Workers increasingly want to and seek to organize independently from the political establishment and the trade unions against the homicidal policy of the ruling class.

Sosyalist E?itlik calls on municipal workers and other sections of the working class who support this initiative, to join our Facebook group to establish rank-and-file safety committees in your workplaces independently of the political establishment and the trade unions in a fight to save lives and oppose the death policy of the ruling class.



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