

Workers' struggles grow as Turkish government pursues "herd immunity" policy

Ula? Ate?çi
20 October 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to surge in Turkey due to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government decision to effectively embrace a "herd immunity" policy since early June. Though they deliberately downplay the extent of the pandemic by various means, including not reporting asymptomatic cases they detect, the authorities recorded more than 2,000 COVID-19 cases for the first time in five months on Monday. The daily death toll also continued to increase, with 75 deaths.

After the government admitted in early October that it deliberately downplayed the COVID-19 pandemic in order to impose a "herd immunity" policy, there is no longer any trust within the working population in coronavirus data released by the Health Ministry.

The government's back-to-work and back-to-school drive has been supported by the bourgeois opposition parties and their allies in the trade unions. However, this homicidal policy provokes growing anger and protests among workers and youth.

Turkish Medical Association (TTB) chairwoman Dr. ?ebnem Korur Fincanc? stated on Monday that "although there are no exact data," as of last month, a total of 900 health care workers had resigned from their jobs during the pandemic. At the same press conference, a doctor from the Psychiatric Association of Turkey, Kerem Laçiner, emphasized that health care workers worldwide suffer from COVID-19 disease 14 times more often than the general population.

The TTB announced Sunday that five health care workers have tragically lost their lives from COVID-19 in just the last 24 hours, increasing the death toll among them to more than 110. Nearly 40,000 health care workers have been infected in Turkey.

As the government hides the situation and refuses all demands for lockdowns amid a raging pandemic, the

class struggle is intensifying in Turkey amid a developing international movement in the working class against the global herd immunity strategy of the ruling class. Many signs confirm the prediction made by the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) in July: "The first half of the year has been dominated by the response of the ruling class to the pandemic. The response of the working class will come to the forefront in the second half."

Amid an international wave of unrest among health care workers who have launched protests recently in France and Spain, anger is rising among Turkish health care workers against not only the state's response to the pandemic, but also the trade unions' reactionary collaboration with this homicidal policy. A movement is developing among health workers to resign from these corrupt unions. There have been hundreds of resignations in recent weeks.

They are resigning in protest at the lack of measures to contain the pandemic, unbearable working conditions, poverty wages barely over the minimum wage, the lack of bonuses and the violence they suffered in health care facilities. They used the hashtags "Health workers can also be without a union," and "There is no trust in unions" on Twitter.

As another sign of a growing movement of health care workers to fight, on Monday, medicine students from Istanbul University Cerrahpa?a, Faculty of Medicine began to boycott the university cafeteria. They are demanding better quality food for students and the provision of food free of charge for intern physicians.

Growing working class militancy is not limited to health care workers. On October 12, hundreds of miners and their families from the districts of Ermenek and Soma tried to march to Ankara to demand their

detained wages, compensations and other benefits owed for years. They were blocked and attacked by police and gendarmerie forces. More than 30 miners in Soma were detained on Saturday after having been kept for seven hours.

Soma saw the worst mining disaster in Turkey's history, killing 301 miners in a May, 2014, mining massacre, which led to mass protests against the government, the company and their co-conspirators in unions across Turkey. The *World Socialist Web Site* stated at that time: "It was not an unexplainable 'accident' but the inevitable result of privatization, government neglect and the capitalist profit system, which sacrifices the lives and limbs of millions of industrial workers around the world every year."

Today, as hundreds of miners and their families struggle to demand unpaid compensation and are attacked by police forces, the criminals responsible for this disaster, including the mine's owners and their co-conspirators in the government, roam freely outside.

On the other hand, nearly 550 workers at ?i?ecam Soda Sanayi A.? factories in the city of Mersin stopped work in defiance of the government, which banned the legal strike action on October 9 for 60 days, claiming it harms general health and threatens national security. In the last 17 years, the Erdo?an government has banned 17 separate strike actions involving nearly 200,000 workers.

Contract negotiations failed in September, as workers rejected an offer including a pittance of a wage increase and a one-day cut in weekly vacations. A strike was scheduled for October 9, involving 550 workers. However, the company first forced all workers to take annual leave and then sent them home on unpaid leave. This unpaid leave, set up in a bipartisan law adopted after the pandemic, forces workers to survive on only 1,170 liras (€125) monthly.

Unpaid leave has increasingly become a weapon in the hands of the ruling class, as millions of workers have been forced to take it since the pandemic began. Forty-five workers at the Swedish-owned Systemair HSK Ventilation Industry factory in Kocaeli were forced on unpaid leave after they joined the Birle?ik Metal-?? union of the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions (D?SK). These workers began protesting this attack in front of the workplace on Monday.

Moreover, municipal workers of Kad?köy and Kartal

districts of Istanbul, which are controlled by the bourgeois opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), announced a strike next week after the contract talks between the local administration and a D?SK-affiliated trade union ended without agreement.

However, D?SK's record shows that workers cannot trust this pro-CHP bureaucracy to fight the pandemic and for their rights. In March, it declared that it might invoke the constitutional right to not work in unsafe conditions. However, to this day it has called no strikes on this basis. Today, it is isolating the Systemair and municipality workers and will do its best to continue this, paving the way for defeat.

The internationally-developing movement for rank-and-file safety committees organized independently of pro-capitalist trade unions to contain the pandemic and save lives, and defend social rights is the way forward for the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact