

Turkish government rejects lockdown as pandemic spirals out of control

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As the COVID-19 pandemic explodes across Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’s government is insisting on a back-to-work and back-to-school policy, rejecting calls for lockdown measures. As the official death toll surpassed 10,000 last week, the Health Ministry recorded more than 2,300 patients with COVID-19 and around 75 deaths each day.

The Erdo?an government is effectively imposing a “herd immunity” policy in the interests of the Turkish ruling class, making an arbitrary, unscientific distinction between “cases” and “patients,” with patients including only those who are hospitalized. It is hiding the real data so as to force workers back to work to produce profits, and students back to school—a homicidal policy supported by the bourgeois opposition parties and the trade unions.

The back-to-school campaign intensified this week, with fifth and ninth grade students forced back into in-person learning. More than 10 million students have begun in-person learning since September, predictably spreading the virus massively among children.

Prof. Dr. Elif Da?l? has explained the increasingly dangerous situation among children: “In the week of September 14-20, the number of patients in the 5-14 age group was 2.9 per 100,000, but it increased to 4.3 per 100,000 in the same age group by the week of October 19-25. On October 29, the last time a daily report was available, this rate was 6.7 per 100,000.” This constitutes an indictment against the trade unions, such as the pro-opposition E?itim-Sen, which have supported reopening schools.

The disastrous situation with the pandemic in Turkey can only be understood by interpreting official data and statements. An unnamed Turkish senior official recently told Reuters: “It appears the number of cases is around five times the number of patients.”

In addition, statistics show that the actual number of deaths from COVID-19 could be almost twice the commonly-cited figure. According to official data from the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, from 11 March to 13 October, 7,024 excess deaths occurred in Istanbul compared to the 2015-2019 average. However, according to Health Ministry data, as of September 27, 2020, the total number of deaths due to COVID-19 in Istanbul was only 3,135.

Moreover, Turkey is in fourth place in Europe in terms of the number of severely ill patients with 2,341. However, Emrah Alt?ndi? from Boston College’s department of biology has raised a question about the official number of severely ill patients: “The minister [of Health, Fahrettin Koca] says ‘66 percent of nearly 9,000 intensive care beds in Istanbul are full.’ This makes 6,000 intensive care patients in Istanbul alone.”

However, the government is not even considering the inadequate, token restrictions various countries in Europe are now applying in the face of growing popular anger, even as the pandemic is exploding out of control in Turkey—particularly in Istanbul with a population of more than 16 million. The Istanbul Medical Chamber has recently underscored that Istanbul will face a chaotic situation if effective and appropriate measures are not taken.

Koca announced on October 28 that the rate of increase in cases in Istanbul in the last week was 62 percent, adding, “the number of cases in Istanbul has reached 40 percent of all cases in Turkey. Four out of 10 people who tested positive for COVID-19 are in Istanbul.”

Dr. Osman Elbek from the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) criticized the lack of public measures to contain the pandemic: “The pandemic cannot be left to individual initiatives ... I have not heard

anything other than ‘No one should leave their house, pay attention to the mask and hygiene.’ It is seen from the increase in the pandemic that these are not enough. People should be careful, of course. But no public measures are taken.”

Dr. Cavit I?k Yavuz, another TTB official, said: “39 percent [of new patients] were determined in the last week [19-25 October]. Looking at the chart, the trend is clear. Why are we still waiting to take new measures?”

The government’s only “measure” has been to ban resignations and vacations by health care workers. In fact, it has put the burden of the pandemic entirely on these workers’ shoulders, hiding the true extent of the situation and not taking adequate measures. This fuels anger against government policies among health workers.

Health workers are employed for excessive periods of time, and many who test positive but do not show symptoms reportedly are forced to continue working. More than 40,000 health workers have been infected, and nearly 120 have died.

Although the health minister has admitted that “If we do not control the situation in Istanbul, the pandemic will cease to be manageable,” he insisted the government would not take any new measures, continuing what is effectively a “herd immunity” policy.

When Koca admitted that “public transportation” used by the working class to get to work is “one of the major sources of risk,” his statement revealed the capitalist profit drive behind state policy. He added, “I appeal to employers: do your best to switch to a flexible working system, work in shifts if your conditions are suitable.”

Istanbul Governor Ali Yerlikaya has openly acknowledged that the national government and local municipalities pursued a “herd immunity” policy, prioritizing profits over lives. Stating that there are 400,000 public employees and 5 million private sector workers in Istanbul, he said: “Istanbul residents go to work even though they are infected. They are afraid of COVID-19, but more afraid of being fired. There is a problem at this point.”

Underlining his collaboration with Istanbul Mayor Ekrem ?mamo?lu from the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), Yerlikaya’s proposed solution for this ongoing outbreak among workers in Istanbul is

flexible working. He said all the trade union confederations reacted positively to this proposal, exposing the reactionary collaboration between the political establishment and the unions at the expense of workers’ lives.

The Erdo?an government has transferred hundreds of billions of Turkish liras to the bourgeoisie during the pandemic. In October, the parliament doubled the Treasury’s borrowing limit for 2020. According to Treasury data, borrowing on financial markets for the first eight months this year was over 250 billion liras. As around the world, with billions being pumped into the coffers of the ruling class with low-interest loans and stimulus packages, this debt has to be paid by the working class with increased exploitation and elimination of its social rights.

The government recently proposed a law to expand flexible and temporary work, especially among workers aged under 25 and over 50, effectively eliminating their right to severance pay. This is a massive attack on the social rights of the working class, long demanded by the ruling class.

Three main union confederations issued a statement on this bill, calling on the government to use “social dialogue mechanisms.” In fact, the main concern of these pro-capitalist organizations is to keep growing anger in the working class under control and to block any independent struggle against this reactionary law.

Their open collaboration with the ruling class on its “herd immunity” policy and back-to-work campaign has made clear that the only way forward for the working class against the pandemic and in defending social rights is to organize and mobilize internationally, independently of the unions.

This is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) that has called for the building of independent rank-and-file safety committees in work places and schools to prepare an international general strike.



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