

New data expose catastrophe of Turkey's ‘herd immunity’ policy

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14 December 2020

The record COVID-19 case numbers in Turkey reflect the results of the murderous “herd immunity” policy of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government, supported by the parliamentary opposition parties and trade unions. It shows that government “restrictions” on movement during the pandemic only aim to control the anger of the working class, not to halt the spread of the disease.

With nearly 30,000 daily cases, Turkey is in third place in the world after the United States and Brazil and now has risen to first place in Europe. The number of daily deaths—over 200 in recent days—is the highest since March 11, when the first case was detected in Turkey.

Until recently, the Turkish government has refused to announce real data over the pandemic so as to force workers back to work and contain public anger, making an arbitrary, unscientific distinction between “cases” and “patients.”

However, growing popular outrage against inadequate restrictions and figures announced by the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) and other institutions have forced the government to announce daily and total cases. On November 25, the Health Ministry announced 28,351 daily cases. The day before, it had announced only 7,381 “patients.”

On December 10, the Health Ministry also announced that there had been 1,748,567 total cases since the pandemic began. Case and death figures are still not reliable, however, and are likely underestimates.

One of the world’s biggest cover-ups over the pandemic has taken place in Turkey as part of the criminal “herd immunity” policy implemented by governments all over the world in the interests of the financial aristocracy.

Turkish Medical Association (TTB) Chair Prof. Dr. ?ebnem Korur Fincanc? stated that the Health Ministry’s latest figures are not completely transparent: “The table mentions 20 million tests. We know that the positivity

rates, which were around 10 percent in March and April, have increased to 30 percent since mid-November. ... [I]f there is a 15 percent average test positivity, the number of cases should be 3 million.” Experts also pointed out that it is unrealistic to record one-third of all cases in the last few weeks.

The Science Academy’s web site Sarkac.org reported that from March 12 to December 2 a total of 13,857 excess deaths occurred in Istanbul, compared to the 2015–19 average, based on Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality data. This number was almost equal to the number of total COVID-19 deaths (14,129) across Turkey announced by the Health Ministry. The number of deaths from COVID-19 in Istanbul has not been reported by the Health Ministry since October 25.

Head of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Cemeteries Department Dr. Ayhan Koç asked the following about rising deaths: “While there is an average of 200 funerals as daily every year, how did the number of funerals reach 400 in November this year, how will we explain this?” He added, “11,500 people lost their lives per month; the average of November of the previous years was 6,000. The excess 5,500 deaths compared to the previous years in November 2020 should also explain the doubling of funerals as well.”

Moreover, according to data from 20 municipalities accounting for 48 percent of Turkey’s population (nearly 41 million of 83 million people), the total death toll from infectious diseases was 21,084 as of November 23. However, Health Ministry figures on the same day gave only 12,511 official COVID-19 deaths for all of Turkey.

Last month, the Erdoğan government announced a nationwide curfew only for weekend nights; then the curfews were extended to weekdays, running from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. Education is continuing online until the end of the year. Working hours for shopping centers, markets, barbers and hairdressers are limited to between 10 a.m.

and 8 p.m. And restaurants and cafés are open only for takeaway and deliveries.

These measures, however, do not, aim to contain the pandemic and save lives. On the contrary, they aim to contain growing opposition in the working class to the government's response and lies over the pandemic. The government's priority was summed up by Erdoğan. He said the curfew had to be implemented "so as not to disrupt supply and production chains in the country."

That is, the government is prioritizing capitalist profits over human lives. As a result of these token restrictions, there has been no serious decrease in the pandemic in Turkey.

The same reactionary calculations are apparent in the government's vaccine policy. Turkey has a population of more than 83 million, but Health Minister Fahrettin Koca recently said that the first batch of 20 million doses from the Chinese-developed CoronaVac vaccine will be received in December and January. The second batch of 10 million doses will arrive in February. Since two doses will be used per person, sufficient vaccination will not take place in a short time.

Millions of people will be denied a vaccine for months, but Koca could not deny that the vaccine brought from China was privately purchased by wealthy people.

All over the world, experts warn that COVID-19 will continue to be a danger for a long time and it is necessary to take full lockdown measures to avert hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths before the vaccinations can take effect.

Moreover, Turkey's health care system is on the verge of collapse. In a recent statement, the TTB's Central Council stated: "In many metropolitan cities, information from hospital administrators, local administrators, medical chambers, health and labor-occupational organizations are shared with the public. They say that public hospitals are full and that there is no space in intensive care units due to the increasing number of patients."

The total number of health care workers testing positive exceeds 120,000, and 249 health workers have lost their lives as of Monday. Every day four or five of them die. While there was no improvement in working conditions for health workers, the government ignored their demands for COVID-19 to be considered an occupational disease.

The danger of a social explosion is so great that even the bourgeois opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) recently called for at least a 14-day lockdown. In fact, the CHP and its allies have only raised tactical criticisms against the government and did not oppose the

financial aristocracy's "herd immunity" policy. Moreover, in the face of increasing public anger, especially among health care workers over the collapse of the health system, trade union confederations including Türk-İş, Hak-İş, DİSK and KESK, and professionals' unions were forced call on December 6 for a "full lockdown" against COVID-19.

They proposed to "stop the production in all workplaces and businesses except health, municipality, cleaning, energy, food production and sales for 21 days; implementation of a full lockdown; free COVID-19 tests; forming of pandemic committees at the workplaces; the uninterrupted payment of the wages of all the workers; and humane living wages for the unemployed people."

This "demand" is empty, however: they made no call for protests or strikes to force the government to immediately implement these measures. In fact, all the union bureaucracies have been complicit in the government response to the pandemic. Their main concern is the same as that of the ruling class: to contain and suppress the growing anger among workers.

The pro-opposition DİSK declared on March 30 that in 48 hours it might invoke the constitutional right to not work in unsafe conditions. Ultimately, however, it did not call strikes. The KESK, also controlled by bourgeois opposition parties and their pseudo-left accomplices, openly supported the government's back-to-school campaign in September.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its sections and sympathizing groups all over the world call on all workers to organize rank-and-file safety committees and politically prepare an international general strike. This is the only way to compel the closure of schools and all nonessential workplaces, with full income for workers and small businesses affected. The way forward against the pandemic and to save lives is the independent political intervention of the international working class against the homicidal policy of the ruling class and for socialism.



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