

Turkish government prepares to reopen schools as pandemic surges

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Amid a global homicidal back-to-school drive, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government is planning to begin in-person teaching starting February 15 in Turkey, where there are nearly 18 million students and 1 million teachers in K-12 schools.

Last week, after a cabinet meeting, Erdoğan said, "Considering limited internet access, we have decided to open village schools on February 15." He added, "Preparations will begin for the 8th and 12th grades, primary and special education schools to start education from March 1." The 8th through 12th grades already partially began in-person teaching on January 22.

Education Minister Ziya Selçuk's announced Thursday that Monday through Friday, in-person education will begin at villages and similar schools on February 15.

The ministry also declared: "As of March 1, face-to-face education will be held in all public and private primary schools, as well as nursery classes and special education classes within these primary schools as two days a week; face-to-face education will begin in the 8th grade of all public and private secondary schools and Islamic divinity secondary schools."

Previously, Selçuk announced that the government had reached "a principled decision on the February 15 opening of schools," emphasizing its determination against widespread concerns and opposition among teachers, parents and students.

With the lack of widespread vaccination, the spread of very transmissible COVID-19 variants and medical experts' warnings of another surge, this decision continues the "herd immunity" policy at the expense of thousands of workers lives.

The purpose of the reopening drive is 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 to be recovered from the population, whatever the cost.

As of February 7, only 2,612,000 of Turkey's population of over 83 million people had been vaccinated. Most have only received the first dose of a two-dose vaccine and so lack adequate protection.

Boston College Biology Professor Emrah Altındı criticized the slow pace of vaccination. He wrote: "It is a dream to control the pandemic at this speed! If we think that an average of 100,000 people are vaccinated a day, 68 million people (2 doses per person), who constitute 80 percent of the population, will be vaccinated in nearly four years. Meanwhile, the protection of those who were vaccinated in the first year will probably be overdue! A vaccination mobilization is necessary!"

Moreover, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca recently announced that COVID-19 variants were found in 17 cities in the country. The campaign to reopen schools is all the more criminal as new strains of COVID-19, including potentially vaccine-resistant forms, are spreading.

Since the government gradually began face-to-face teaching in September, the number of daily cases rose rapidly up to 30,000 daily. With more than 30,000 daily cases in November and December, Turkey was in third place worldwide after the US and Brazil and became the first in Europe. Over the same period, the daily official death toll exceeded 250.

As the health care system neared collapse and public anger rose, the government had to suspend face-to-face education and take temporary lockdown measures in November. Due to these restrictions, however inadequate, the number of daily cases fell to around 5,000 in late January but only very briefly.

Even the Health Ministry's discredited figures show that school closures and limited lockdown measures have slowed the spread of COVID-19, although the

government has always called for keeping non-essential businesses open, making it impossible to contain the pandemic. The link between the return to face-to-face education and COVID-19 contagion is now a widely acknowledged scientific fact.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported, after UK children were noted to have higher infection rates than adults in December, Prime Minister Boris Johnson had to concede, “The problem is schools may nonetheless act as vectors for transmission, causing the virus to spread between households.”

With the reopening of US schools in the summer and fall as the pandemic raged, cases surged massively, driving the death toll to over 450,000.

Despite a considerable decrease in daily infections, the official number of daily cases in Turkey on February 3 increased again to above 8,000, with the trend rising particularly after the new strains were detected.

Moreover, medical experts and scientists continue to warn that it is too early to begin face-to-face teaching at schools and that a new surge might emerge as a result of the variant virus.

Professor Dr. Mustafa Necmi ?lhan, a Health Ministry’s Social Sciences Board member, stated last Sunday, “We have 7,000 [daily] cases now [in an upward trend]. Because there is a mutated virus right now, I frankly think that it is too early to talk about lifting or loosening restrictions. ... For now, I think it will be a bit early to consider decisions about opening schools or other restrictions.”

Prof. Dr. Elif Da?l?, a pediatric chest specialist, warned, “We have received information that health institutions treating the pandemic in Istanbul are being asked to prepare plans and programs for a new surge in March and April.”

Stressing that COVID-19 restrictions should continue, Infectious Diseases and Clinical Microbiology Specialist Professor Dr. B?lent Ertu?rul said, “We are now heading towards the third wave of the pandemic. The measures should be continued much more tightly. If we do not do this, we cannot overcome a third wave. If we do not be careful, we may also experience the troubles Europe is experiencing today.”

He added that there are two ways to prevent the disease. “We will either prevent it with a vaccine or by stopping the transmission of the virus in the society. This means restrictions, and we will prevent it this way.”

However, there are no widespread vaccination programs, full lockdown with contact tracing or other

effective measures in Turkey. Bourgeois opposition parties and their allies in the pseudo-left groups and trade unions have tacitly backed the reopening drive. The pro-opposition Education and Science Workers’ Union (E?itim-Sen) has not opposed the reopening drive since September and has worked to sow confusion among teachers, students and parents.

It demanded, “If you are going to open schools, education workers should be vaccinated right now.” Firstly, with current supplies, it is impossible to vaccinate all the hundreds of thousands of teachers and school staff before schools reopen.

Moreover, although the COVID-19 mortality rate in children is still low, they are not immune. It was also internationally confirmed that the virus, which children caught in schools, helped massively spread the disease when they carried it home to their parents. Limited vaccination of only a certain group without vaccination of the majority of the population will not control the pandemic.

An independent political intervention by the international working class is required to contain the global pandemic and save lives.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is alone in launching a global campaign against this homicidal back-to-school drive and fighting to organize emerging opposition within teachers, other sections of workers and students into rank-and-file safety committees, which currently exist in America, Europe, Asia and Australia.

Educators, parents and students in Turkey should build rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the trade unions that are complicit as “herd immunity” police. Working with trusted scientists and public health professionals, these committees can act to ensure that schools remain closed and guarantee the safety of children, teachers and staff. We call on all who support this initiative to contact us today to establish rank-and-file committees in their schools and neighborhoods.



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