

No to school reopenings in Turkey before the pandemic is contained!

**The Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Turkey
25 February 2021**

The following statement was unanimously adopted by the newly-formed Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Turkey.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has begun to gradually open schools as of February 15. It is intensifying this policy as of March 1, endangering the health of children, teachers and of society as a whole as the pandemic rages.

We, as teachers, students and parents from various cities across Turkey, have created a Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education to unite and mobilise widespread social opposition to school reopenings, in-person education, and face-to-face exams before the pandemic is brought under control.

This deadly policy, implemented by the government without any serious objections from opposition parties or trade unions, can only be stopped by the independent intervention of the working class and youth before it causes another disaster as before. This means taking action to stop the school openings.

The gradual reopening of schools for in-person education last September undeniably contributed to the spread of COVID-19 and the resulting disaster in November-December in Turkey, which has nearly 18 million students and about 1 million teachers in K-12 schools.

Turkey saw over 30,000 cases and more than 250 deaths per day in the November-December period. Due to limited restrictions, including suspending face-to-face education, implemented at the end of November, the number of daily cases fell to around 5,000. The official daily death toll also fell to around 70.

However, the government is now lifting even these limited measures and re-opening schools to face-to-face education. Moreover, these steps are taken as the daily official number of cases again exceeds 9,000, virus variants thought to be more contagious and more resistant to vaccines spread across Turkey, and scientists warn of a "third wave" in March. But in March of last year, after the Health Ministry announced that the first COVID-19 case was detected in Turkey, schools were closed to in-person education and continued remotely.

It is now indisputable that the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed more than 2.5 million people globally, including 28,000 in Turkey, can only be brought under control with full lockdown measures and widespread vaccination internationally. This means closing all non-essential workplaces and schools, with widespread testing and contact tracing, and full compensation to all affected workers and small businesses.

The unprecedented catastrophe of the pandemic is fundamentally a social and political, not simply a medical, question. The necessary technology and medical expertise to contain the virus and ensure workers' safety exists. However, under capitalism everything is subordinated to the profit interests of the corporate and financial elite.

The science is clear: school closures are critical to containing COVID-19. The overwhelming preponderance of scientific evidence shows that closing schools, together with other vital social distancing

measures, reduces the spread of COVID-19. Reopening schools means performing a medical experiment on children.

However, despite a year of painful experiences and scientific facts, schools are reopening not only in Turkey, but internationally. Behind the opening of schools stand not the educational, social and emotional needs of children, but the interests of the ruling class. It is absurd to suggest that politicians who have spent their entire careers in slashing school funding and privatizing education care about children's basic needs.

In Turkey, and internationally, they have but one purpose in reopening schools for in-person education: to get children out of their homes so their parents can be sent back to work to produce profits for the corporations.

This is clearly seen from the decision of the Higher Education Council (YÖK) not to reopen most of the university branches to face-to-face education.

YÖK has conveyed to universities the decision that only "applied sciences" such as medicine can be done face-to-face and that theoretical training should be done remotely. In its decision, the YÖK referred to advice given by the Health Ministry, which declared: "The increase in the number of cases in our country in the last 3 weeks requires more careful attention. It should not be forgotten that face-to-face education in higher education institutions may cause significant mobility, apart from the current conditions."

Nonetheless, the diametrically opposed decisions taken for university and pre-university students reveals that schools are to be used as nurseries for young children so their parents can be forced to go to work.

The government's concern is not education: it has not allocated additional resources for safe education since the pandemic began a year ago. If education was the government's true concern, thousands of new schools could be built in a year, hundreds of thousands of unassigned teachers could be employed, and classroom environments for up to 15 children could be created. However, hundreds of thousands of students have been deprived of remote education due to the state's failure to provide the necessary materials for it.

In this process, social resources have been transferred to a handful of rich people. The largest conglomerates in Turkey increased their profits by more than 100 percent, and banks made huge profits in one year of the pandemic. In the same period, large sections of the population were forced to work in dangerous conditions. Millions were forced to take "unpaid leave" or unemployment. In small businesses, many have lost all their incomes.

While the ruling class seized the pandemic as an opportunity to escalate its social attack on the working class, teachers working in private schools were particularly heavily affected. Throughout the pandemic, a significant portion of private school teachers who continued to work either remotely or face-to-face full-time were forced to live on short-time work allowances equal to two-thirds of their salary.

Large sections of the public are aware that school reopenings under these conditions will cause hundreds of thousands of people to become

infected and thousands to die. The fact that 90 percent of 251 people who participated in our one-day survey on Twitter said, “Do not open schools to face-to-face education before the pandemic is brought under control” reflected the widespread opposition among the public. Again on Twitter, teachers have been campaigning for weeks with the hashtags “Don’t open schools” and “Schools are dangerous” and they have received the support of many scientists.

Moreover, the campaign of high school students against holding exams face-to-face in schools in March is particularly striking. High school students and their supporters, who have recently opposed this deadly policy on Twitter using various hashtags, have posted more than almost 1 million tweets every day.

While the hashtag #TurkishStudentsLivesMatter was used over 3 million times in the latest campaign, Egyptian students responded with the hashtag #EgyptianStudentsLivesMatter. Students’ messages of mutual support and solidarity are of great importance. This is a striking example of the joint struggle of the workers and youth of the two countries against the deadly response to the pandemic, defying the mutual hostility of the Turkish and Egyptian governments, rooted in the conflicting interests of their ruling classes.

We are in solidarity with school strikes and protests that have erupted in Poland, Greece, France, Germany and the US against the school reopenings in unsafe conditions. These struggles show the way forward for educators and students in Turkey. What we need is a school strike as part of an international general strike to defend the public health and needs of the people.

The pandemic is global, and its solution can only be global. In this context, we emphasize our solidarity with rank-and-file safety committees in the US, Germany, Britain, Sri Lanka and Australia, which fight against the reopening of schools to face-to-face education during the pandemic. Our struggles are the same.

The unions will not organise and mobilise this widespread social opposition today, as they have done since the pandemic began. While some unions openly support the school reopenings, some do nothing to stop it.

Taking urgent measures to prevent further death and suffering depends on the independent intervention of the working class and youth, including educators, from all establishment parties and trade unions. Instead of transferring billions to the corporations, their large fortunes must be expropriated and the following demands must be implemented:

- For the immediate closure of all public and private schools! This is non-negotiable. It is impossible to “safely” open schools during a raging pandemic. The loss of life and permanent physical and emotional damage to children who spread the disease to teachers, parents and grandparents dwarfs any disruption caused by online learning.

- Resources for teachers, schools and online learning! New schools and day-care centres should be opened in each neighbourhood to ensure safe conditions, without the use of buses or public transportation, and all unassigned education workers should be immediately employed as permanent staff. Until these measures are taken, all teachers and students must be provided with good computers and high-speed internet access free of charge, to ensure quality online teaching. Households need comprehensive financial and social support during the pandemic.

- Everyone has the right to access public and scientific education. The subordination of education to capitalist profit must be stopped and all private schools nationalised. Private school teachers and other teachers employed on contract should be hired as permanent staff, and all teachers’ basic wages should be increased.

- The imposition of “flexible” working conditions on remote education should end, teachers’ working hours should be strictly followed, and overtime should be worked on a voluntary basis and paid. The attempt to put cameras in classrooms permanently under the pretext of the pandemic

is a violation of basic democratic rights. They must be withdrawn immediately.

- In order to combat the psychological damage the pandemic causes in children and all of society, psychological counsellors should be employed and easily accessible by everyone, free of charge.

- Full income protection to all parents and caregivers who stay home with their children! The money handed over to the rich must be used to provide full income to those who cannot work because they must stay home with their children. At the same time, the policy of imposing unpaid leave of about 1.400 lira (US\$200) per month on hundreds of thousands of workers should end. All unemployed people should be provided with full income support.

- No loss of income for educators who choose to stay home! Teachers and education workers who refuse to work in unsafe conditions must be provided with full income and benefits for the duration of the pandemic, not fined or penalised.

- For free speech and the protection of whistle-blowers! Those who speak out against unsafe working conditions—whether in schools, factories, warehouses, hospitals or offices—must be defended against victimisation by employers or state officials. All workers who have been victimised must be rehired with back pay.

- For a vaccination campaign! Currently, the number of people vaccinated with two doses in Turkey is only 1.5 million (less than 2 percent). However, it is not possible to contain the pandemic without vaccinating the majority of the population. Resources should be used to promptly make millions of vaccines available, and private hospitals nationalised due to this public health emergency. Hundreds of thousands of health workers should also be employed immediately.

- For regular, comprehensive tests of pupils and teachers! Regular testing of children, youth and staff is vital for public health. This also applies to all factories and workplaces where a risk arises. Only in this way can immediate quarantine measures be taken and the spread of the virus limited.

- Halt all non-essential production! Until the pandemic is contained, only key industries such as food production, medical care and logistics should remain open. Workers in those industries must be provided with the most advanced safety measures to prevent infection. All non-essential workers and laid-off workers as well as affected small business owners must be provided with full compensation and access to free health care.

- The schools must remain closed until the threat to public health is over and rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with trusted scientists and public health experts, can certify the safety of children, teachers and school employees.

- Before any school reopens, all ventilation systems must be modernised, janitorial and nursing staff must be hired, and class sizes must be permanently reduced to no more than 15 students.

- No exam pressure and learning stress during the pandemic! While the pandemic rages, regular exams are not possible. The decision on alternative grading and exams must be made by the students as a whole.

Our demands are based not on what the corporations and the politicians claim is affordable, but what is necessary to protect the lives and well-being of children, educators and the entire working class. Our aim is to mobilise the working class as an independent social force against the insecure reopening of schools and for the defence of public education.

We call on all educators, parents and students who support this initiative to contact us, to establish rank-and-file committees for safe education and to expand this struggle, which is vital for public health.





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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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