

As public health organizations call for lockdown, Turkish government removes COVID-19 restrictions

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an announced on Monday that his government had begun a “gradual normalization” process in the pandemic on March 2. In fact, it means removing almost all restrictions limiting the spread of COVID-19 as part of a “herd immunity” policy.

On the basis of an unscientific four-risk categorization (low, medium, high and very high) for cities, the government has removed restrictions without imposing an inter-city travel ban. Weekend curfews were fully lifted in low- and medium-risk cities, while restrictions on Sunday will continue in cities classified as “high risk” or “very high risk.”

After Erdo?an declared, “Face-to-face education will start in low- and medium-risk provinces, including in middle and high schools,” millions of students began returning to schools across Turkey. Predictably, there are already reports of positive cases detected in schools all over the country. While the government claimed it would vaccinate teachers, no vaccination campaign for teachers has begun yet.

While state employees have resumed normal working hours, restaurants and cafés are open at 50 percent capacity from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., except in very high-risk provinces. Erdo?an also announced that general assemblies of organizations can be held in low-, medium- and high-risk cities with the participation of up to 300 people. However, many scientists have clearly showed that outbreaks in some cities came just after congresses or meetings organized by Erdo?an’s Justice and Development Party (AKP).

These moves are part of a universal back-to-work and back-to-school drive in the interests of the ruling elites at the expense of workers’ health and lives. From the beginning, the Erdo?an government’s priority has been to maintain the flow of profits to the financial oligarchy not to save public health.

While he claims that his government produced financial aid packages for “all affected sections” of the public, 89 percent of these bailouts in 2020 went to big businesses,

according to a report published early February by the D?SK trade union confederation. The 11 percent, or 42 billion Turkish Liras (US\$ 7.6 billion), spent on workers went to unemployment insurance. In fact, even these “social aids” are in support of the capitalist class, which in this period did not pay workers who were forced to take short-time work or “unpaid leave” allowances.

As a result of this “herd immunity” strategy, Turkey ranks ninth in the world in terms of total number of cases, with more than 2.7 million. According to the highly unreliable numbers of the Health Ministry, which admitted that it has lied about the real figures for a while, the death toll has reached 29,000, including at least 385 health care workers. Even then, these figures severely underestimate the true losses.

According to calculations by investigative filmmaker Güçlü Yaman, there have been 98,000 excess deaths in Turkey since the pandemic began. The highly unreliable nature of official figures was shown in the graphic below produced by researcher Zeki Berk.

Commenting on this chart, Yaman criticized the reactionary collaboration of the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) with the government’s response to the pandemic, “Let’s not forget the contribution of the CHP municipalities, which hid the real data of the pandemic from the public for a long time, like the government, to keep the red line below [above] this level.”

However, Turkey reported 11,837 new cases in a day on Tuesday, the most since January 7, 2021. The daily official death toll is still above 60. Berk noted that total coronavirus cases in Istanbul rose by nearly 50 percent in a week.

Prof. Dr. Fatih Tank pointed out that half of the total official COVID-19 deaths in the country took place in the last three months, adding that the test positivity rate reached 8.75 percent on March 2, its highest level since December 24. The reproduction rate (R_0) is 1.11, according to his calculations, indicating an exponential growth in infections.

Prof. Dr. Tu?rul Erbaydar, a public health specialist from Ankara University, denounced the bourgeoisie's policy of the malign neglect. "The first wave was a surge that was difficult due to uncertainty over what to do against a new virus. The second wave came as cases got out of control, as necessary precautions were not taken adequately and numbers were hidden. The third wave is due to the blatant abandoning of existing precautions."

An international homicidal policy based only on the interests of the financial oligarchy is emerging. Governments are 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, under conditions where social aid is largely denied to parents or children.

Moreover, despite enormous opposition among high school students against holding face-to-face exams in schools, Erdo?an ordered that they return to in-person education and exams in so-called "low-" and "medium-risk" cities, making clear his government's contempt for youth. Throughout February, hundreds of thousands of students campaigned on social media against plans to hold face-to-face exams in schools.

These criminal, unscientific policies have faced no serious objections from bourgeois opposition parties or the trade unions. The Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality led by CHP Mayor Ekrem ?mamo?lu joined the campaign, opening restaurants and cafes starting on March 5, after students had to begin using subways and public transport in Istanbul, with its population of more than 16 million, packed like sardines.

Moreover, as the government eases limited restrictions, variants of the coronavirus are spreading. Health Minister Fahrettin Koca himself admitted this on Wednesday, stating, "variants of the virus may be observed more commonly. As such, measures will be in effect for variants as well," before adding, "High numbers of cases still pose a threat to our hope of having back our natural flow of life, and normalization will be possible only by abiding by the coronavirus measures."

Scientists and public health specialists have strongly opposed state policy, warning that ending the current limited restrictions will cause a public health disaster overshadowing even the massacre in November-December. Shortly after the government reopened schools for in-person education, Turkey saw over 30,000 infections and more than 250 deaths per day in the November-December period.

Calls by scientists and public health specialists denouncing a "herd immunity" policy and demanding full lockdown and vaccination policies, powerfully vindicate the response to the pandemic of the International Committee of the Fourth International's (ICFI) and its Turkish sympathizing group,

Sosyalist E?itlik.

A coalition of health organizations, including the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), Health and Social Service Laborers Union (SES), Progressive Health Workers Union, Turkish Nurses Association (THD), All Radiology Technicians Association (Tüm Rad-Der) and Social Service Specialists Association (SHU-Der), issued a joint statement on Thursday denouncing the premature reopening policies of the government.

It stated: "This [opening] decision was taken too early. Vaccinations and precautions are mandatory for these controlled steps," adding that "we need to spread the vaccination by supplying 120-150 million doses of vaccine rapidly, to ensure social immunity with fair access to vaccines, while providing financial aid to our citizens with the principles of the social state so that social mobility is reduced for 14-28 days."

However, vaccination is progressing slowly in Turkey and internationally. Moreover, within Turkey, serious regional inequalities are emerging. According to the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), as of March 1, only five percent of the population was vaccinated in 14 eastern and southeastern Kurdish-majority cities, while this figure was between 10 percent and 14.4 percent in 34 other cities.

The TTB has explained this difference by "distrust in government policy" and difficulties due to lack of access to health care services in the inhabitants' mother tongue, Kurdish. The situation facing more than five million refugees and immigrants in Turkey is horrific. They are not even listed in the official vaccination schedule.

Against this global death policy by the ruling elites, there is no way forward besides the independent political intervention of the international working class and the launching of political general strikes. Workers must demand and struggle for a halt to all non-essential production and schools until the pandemic is contained, with full compensation to all affected workers and small businesses. This and other scientific social distancing and contact tracing measures must be combined with a rapid and broad international vaccination campaign, focusing on the most vulnerable sections of society.



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