

Infections surge after Turkey's "gradual normalization" in pandemic

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25 March 2021

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's "gradual normalization" or unrestrained "herd immunity" policy implemented since the beginning of March has led to a health disaster. New cases have again reached 30,000, the highest level since December.

The government removed restrictions without imposing an intercity travel ban, based on an unscientific four-risk categorization (low, medium, high and very high) for cities. As more contagious and lethal variants spread across the country, weekend curfews were largely lifted, and restaurants and cafés opened at 50 percent capacity in daytime. The opening up of pre-university schools to in-person education and exams worsened the disaster.

Scientists and public health specialists are warning that ending the current limited restrictions will cause a disaster overshadowing even the November-December massacre.

After the government reopened schools for in-person education last autumn, the country saw over 30,000 infections and more than 250 deaths per day during the last two months of 2020. Limited measures, including the closure of schools, reduced the daily number of cases to 5,000 in early February.

In early March, the government made this "opening," while scientists and public health organizations called for 14-28 days of full lockdown and a vaccination campaign.

Opposing this homicidal "opening" policy, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that it would create another disaster. "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." It called on workers to "struggle for a halt to all nonessential production and schools until the pandemic is contained, with full compensation to all affected

workers and small businesses."

As a result of the government's herd immunity policy, however, the Health Ministry reported 29,762 new cases and 146 deaths due to COVID-19 on Wednesday. On March 1, there were nearly 9,000 new cases and 69 deaths. Official data shows 3.1 million cases and 30,462 deaths, including at least 391 health care workers.

These figures underestimate the true losses. According to investigative filmmaker Güçlü Yaman's calculations, there have been 98,000 excess deaths in Turkey until early March.

The country now stands fifth in the world in terms of new daily cases. Moreover, the test positivity rate surpassed 13 percent—compared to only four percent in the United States, where its ruling elite's herd immunity policy has led to nearly 560,000 deaths. The reproduction rate (R_0) in Turkey rose to 1.22, according to Prof. Dr. Fatih Tank's calculations, indicating exponential growth in infections.

According to Health Ministry data, the number of serious cases rose to 1,720, with adult intensive care occupancy at 65 percent. Prof. Dr. Bengi Ba?er pointed out that the mortality rate among serious patients reached its highest level (7.68 percent) to date on March 24 and warned, "The situation is serious; the UK variant is wreaking havoc."

On March 10, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca stated, "Until today, a total of 41,488 B.1.1.7 (UK) mutants in 76 provinces, 61 B.1.351 (South Africa) mutants in 9 provinces, 2 B.1.427 (California-New York) mutants in 1 province and 1 P.1 (Brazil) mutant detected" in Turkey.

According to official data, 87 percent of the population, or nearly 72 million people, live in cities categorized as "high risk" or "very high risk." This

means that they live in areas where the incidence rate is over 50 or over 100, respectively, per 100,000. This number is 251 in Istanbul and 508, the highest figure, in Samsun.

Erdo?an announced the “opening” policy, that restrictions would be reestablished if risks grew, but no measures have been taken in this direction. In fact, his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) ignores even the limited restrictions that do exist.

More than 1,000 delegates were bused in to Ankara to attend the AKP’s party congress on Sunday. Erdo?an held a rally outside the congress hall, and the presence of 1,500 delegates in the hall greatly angered the population. He said, “I greet you at a meeting where snowfall destroys all germs.”

Responsibility of the ruling class’ criminal policy, which has caused tens of thousands of deaths and millions of infections, lies first and foremost with the Erdo?an government. But the bourgeois opposition parties led by the Republican People’s Party (CHP) have been complicit in this policy since the pandemic began. They have raised no serious objection in parliament, and they pursue the very same policy in the cities under their control.

The trade unions and pseudo-left groups have totally adapted to the government’s herd immunity policy. Education unions make only suggestions to the government as mass anger builds among workers at the reopening of schools. Moreover, the pseudo-left parties that line up behind the CHP remain completely silent and complicit in the face of this murderous policy.

The Turkish health care system faces collapse, as Izmir Medical Chamber chair Lutfi Camli? told the daily *BirGün*, “Hospitals in Izmir are now at full capacity. Especially since the beginning of the week, almost all pandemic services and intensive care beds are full.”

Referring to the impact of opening schools, Camli? warned, “If urgent measures are not taken to stop the increase in cases and the number of cases cannot be reduced, it does not seem possible for the health care system to meet this demand.”

The Istanbul Medical Chamber published a report on March 23, emphasizing that COVID-19 has become a “disease of the working class,” due to the government’s “Wheels should turn, production should continue” policy. The pandemic, it added, shows “how

harmful it is for public health to leave health care to the anarchy of the market via privatization policies.”

Moreover, vaccination is progressing slowly in Turkey and internationally. Only 7.2 percent of Turkey’s population, or 6.1 million people, have been fully vaccinated as of Thursday, when the distribution of first doses of the vaccine was paused.

Last week, less than 20,000 people daily received the first dose. Amid uncertainty on new vaccine supplies, health care workers went to social media and asked, “Where are the vaccines?” Moreover, despite the government’s promise to vaccinate teachers, the Education Ministry said only 10 percent of teachers have been vaccinated so far.

The pandemic is also aggravating the social catastrophe facing the working class. The short-time work allowance to 1.3 million unemployed workers will expire at the end of this month. According to a recent D?SK trade union confederation report, the number of broadly defined unemployed has risen to 9,638,000, or 27.4 percent. In 2020, the number of “gig” workers employed for less than 40 hours a week rose by 900,000 to 1,251,000.

After President Erdo?an sacked the head of the Central Bank last Friday, the Turkish lira lost nearly 10 percent of its value against the US dollar, further raising the cost of living for workers.

Amid this growing economic, social and political crisis, the government, fearing a social explosion in the working class, has been increasingly using anti-democratic measures to divide the working class along national lines and deflect social opposition. Last week, it filed a case to ban the Kurdish nationalist People’s Democratic Party (HDP).

As the *World Socialist Web Site* recently underlined, the defense of democratic rights, health care and lives requires the international mobilisation of the working class, based on a socialist program against the herd immunity policies of the ruling class.



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