

Schools reopen in Turkey amid COVID-19 deaths

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In Turkey, the country with the fifth-highest number of COVID-19 cases in the world, restrictions are being lifted and schools are reopening although the pandemic has not been brought under control. President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an announced the decisions after a May 31 cabinet meeting.

Curfews, which previously lasted from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. on weekdays and throughout the weekend, are to be applied between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. on weekdays and Saturday and all day on Sunday. Places such as cafes, tea gardens, football field carpets, sports halls, and amusement parks will be open between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m., except on Sunday.

Outdoor and indoor weddings and wedding ceremonies started from June 1. Restaurants will be open between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m. Sports clubs will be able to hold their general assemblies from June 1, and other organizations from the second half of June.

Education Minister Ziya Sel?uk announced that schools will reopen. On June 1, in-person education restarted in primary schools, two days a week. Face-to-face education will be held five days a week in villages and sparsely-populated settlements.

On June 7, in-person education was also started in all secondary and high schools two days a week. The semester will end on June 21, but “remedial education” will continue until July 2, despite widespread opposition among educators.

Despite the so-called remedial education attempt, 4 million out of 18 million students could not attend online education at all, due to the lack of resources for distance education during the closure of schools in Turkey.

As these reopening measures come into effect the coronavirus continues to spread in Turkey. The Health Ministry announced 6,408 new cases and 96 deaths on

Thursday. According to Worldometer data, Turkey ranks fifth in the world with more than 5.3 million cases.

Despite this high number of cases, the official death toll, which is around 48,000, including at least 436 health care workers, does not reflect the real losses. According to calculations by investigative filmmaker G?çlü Yaman, who examined excess deaths during the pandemic, the number of excess deaths in Turkey since the pandemic began is around 146,000.

Official counts on the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths are widely discredited, like the entire Erdo?an government. Thus, during a live broadcast with BioNTech CEO U?ur ?ahin, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca announced that they had received 120 million doses of BioNTech vaccines, and said: “They [the people] don’t believe us, you tell them.” This was an admission that the government has lost all credibility during the pandemic with its herd immunity strategy boosting the profits of the investors and corporations.

The reopening of schools and the abolition of even inadequate restrictions is a policy of social murder. This was all but admitted in the previous government statements.

In early May, Koca said, “In the pre-school education, I think we should have fully vaccinated our citizens aged 18 and over. We have to see cases drop below 1,000 before schools reopen.”

Now, although the daily number of cases is over 5,000, schools are opening. Moreover, nearly 1 million students were forced to take the national High School Entrance Exam held in person in schools across Turkey on June 6.

Previous experience has amply demonstrated that the reopening of schools accelerates the pandemic. The previous opening of schools both in Turkey and in

other countries caused the number of infections and of deaths to surge.

As a result of this deadly policy, implemented without any serious opposition from the unions, the pandemic in Turkey erupted out of control starting in March; 8,000 people died in April alone. At the peak, Turkey recorded 63,000 daily cases in the middle of April. Dozens of teachers have died since March 2021 after school reopenings. Again, there is no opposition from the four education unions in Turkey to the latest decision to reopen schools.

On the other hand, Koca said in May that “We don’t have a vaccine problem anymore,” claiming that in June, everyone over age 20 will be vaccinated. These unfounded allegations of the government, repeated over and over, aim to calm social anger and normalize death. A so-called vaccination campaign after the openings mean thousands more will die before the vaccines are administered and take effect.

Esin Davutoğlu, a Professor of Medicine and Infectious Diseases Specialist of Gazi University, said she did not agree with the views that the pandemic would be brought under control by the end of summer. Davutoğlu added that she was not very hopeful with the vaccination rate of around 130,000 per day, and that a large-scale vaccination campaign was needed.

Boston College Biology Professor Emrah Altın also tweeted: “The fully vaccinated population in Turkey is currently less than 15 percent and 85 percent are the open target of the virus. Also, there is no vaccine, but a lot of empty talk. Only 30 million doses of vaccine have been administered in 5 months since February. To normalize, 80 percent of the population should be vaccinated, 140 million doses are needed. We must be realists.”

One and a half years of painful pandemic experience shows that, both in Turkey and around the world, the reopening of the economy in opposition to calls by scientists and health experts, when the circulation of the virus is not under control, leads to preventable mass deaths.

This social murder policy of the government is directed by the profit interests of the Turkish and international ruling class. The Erdoğan government is calling for tourism revenues to revive the struggling economy. For this reason, it implemented a so-called “full lockdown” in May to reduce the number of cases

but not to contain the pandemic, and announced that people working in tourism would be given priority in vaccination.

However, the social conditions of the working class are worsening as the government, with the complicity of the bourgeois opposition and the trade unions, continues to prioritize capitalist profits over lives during the pandemic.

According to a recent DİSK trade union confederation report, the broad unemployment rate reached 27.4 percent or 9,837,000 people in April 2021. It was 9,187,000 in April 2020. The report states, “Only 18.8 million of the 63.5 million people of working age are registered full-time workers.” This includes only 16 percent for female workers.

Nonetheless, the compulsory “unpaid leave” subsidy that the government introduced at the beginning of the pandemic is set to end this month, unless it is extended again. The end of this programme, in which hundreds of thousands of workers receive only 1,500 Turkish lira (US\$180) per month in social aid, could lead to mass layoffs.

Against the bourgeoisie’s policy of death and starvation, workers must organize to fight for a halt to all non-essential production and reopening of schools until the pandemic is contained, with full compensation to all affected workers, unemployed and small businesses. This and other scientific social distancing and contact tracing measures must be combined with a rapid, scientifically-guided international vaccination campaign.



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