

Oppose school reopenings in unsafe conditions in Turkey!

The Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Turkey
29 August 2021

The Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Turkey calls on educators, parents and students to oppose the full reopening of schools for in-person education from September 6, as the Delta variant of COVID-19 spreads rapidly and the pandemic is out of control.

All over the world, the ruling class and its political representatives are exploiting the concerns of parents and the working class as a whole about the education, psychology and future of children to enforce this policy. However, their decisions are not based on children's educational needs, but on the ruthless profit drive of the ruling class. They aim to use schools as nurseries so that parents can be forced to go to work.

We, together with rank-and-file safety committees in other countries with whom we stand in solidarity as part of a global fight against the pandemic, respond to this criminal policy: No child's or educator's life and well-being can be sacrificed for capitalist profit!

A policy of death versus a strategy of eradication

The COVID-19 pandemic rages on, having caused 4.5 million officially-recorded deaths worldwide and more than 10 million according to various studies as well as permanent health damage for masses of people. In Turkey, as in most of the world, the government is normalizing mass deaths and suffering, pursuing a "mitigation" strategy against the pandemic, not aiming to eradicate it.

This is a failed strategy that relies on supposedly combatting the pandemic with methods such as masks and vaccinations, while opening up economic and social life almost completely.

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. Action must be taken to stop school openings.

The reopening of schools in February-March 2021 undeniably contributed to Turkey becoming an epicentre of the pandemic earlier this year. While the number of infections recorded in Turkey on March 1 was under 9,800, it grew to 40,000 by April 1. By mid-April, Turkey led the world in infections, with 63,000 daily cases. Over the same period, the daily death toll jumped from 60 to nearly 400.

In six months since March, the total number of people infected with COVID-19 in Turkey has risen from 2.7 to 6.3 million. The death toll also doubled, from 28,000 to about 56,000. These figures, the product of the policy of "opening up" for the sake of capitalist profit and wealth, make clear that stopping the spread of the Delta variant and containing the pandemic, despite increased vaccination, requires more comprehensive measures.

Scientists have explained that the only way out is combining worldwide vaccination with large-scale public health measures to eradicate the

pandemic.

At an online event titled "For a Global Strategy to Stop the Pandemic and Save Lives!" sponsored by educators' rank-and-file safety committees in the US, UK and Australia, Dr Malgorzata Gasperowicz of the University of Calgary in Canada explained: "If we have transmission in the community, it's not safe to reopen schools, full stop. Unless we have no transmission, we shouldn't reopen in-person schools," before adding: "If we combine both vaccines and public health measures ... we can stomp it out."

She also noted that between 3 and 12 percent of children infected with COVID-19 develop "long COVID," with potentially debilitating effects on mental health and cognitive development. Dr Gasperowicz's studies make clear that had aggressive and coordinated measures been taken at the start of the pandemic, the virus could have been eradicated within weeks. Today, they show that this can be accomplished in two months while fighting the more transmissible Delta variant.

Schools are not safe

Like most governments, however, the policies of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government are guided not by these scientific facts, but by the interests of the ruling class, prioritising profit over life.

The government and the Education Ministry (MEB) have done nothing to create conditions for safe in-person education in schools since the beginning of the pandemic. No preparations were made in the recent months while there was no in-person education. This exposes claims that the ruling class is concerned about children's education as lies.

If education was the government's true concern, thousands of new schools could have been built during this period, hundreds of thousands of unassigned teachers could have been hired, and class sizes of at most 15 children created. However, hundreds of thousands of students have been deprived of remote education due to the state's failure to provide the necessary materials.

No additional budget has been allocated for education, no new schools opened, no new teachers and school personnel hired, and no steps taken to eliminate the threat of infection linked to the use of public transport. However, in the same period, millions of people lost their jobs, and millions of workers were forced to work in unsafe conditions, while billions were poured into the financial markets and the pocketbooks of the rich.

The Education Ministry has not taken any measures other than making masking mandatory in schools, closing its eyes to the inevitable outbreaks that will occur when children and teachers are packed into crowded classrooms. Precisely because outbreaks are inevitable in the schools in the current health conditions, it is critical to oppose the reopening of

schools and pursue a strategy of strict social distancing to eradicate the virus.

As for leaving vaccination as the personal choice of teachers and school staff and requiring the unvaccinated to be tested for COVID-19 twice a week, this makeshift solution is part of the government's bankrupt response to the pandemic. Vaccination is a mandatory requirement for all educators and eligible students to attend school, but only *under appropriate conditions*, when there is not a risk of mass infection. Attending school is not a question of "personal freedom." In fact, no one has the right to make others sick while risking their own lives.

According to Health Minister Fahrettin Koca, speaking on August 27, 72.5 percent of teachers are fully vaccinated. The vaccination rate of the entire Turkish population is only 58 percent. Contrary to the government's claims, both rates represent a failure, not success.

Today in Turkey, where more than 90 percent of all cases originate from the Delta variant, the daily number of cases is around 20,000, and deaths are close to 250 people per day. Scientists state that after the Delta variant, along with other social distancing measures, about 85 percent of the population should be fully vaccinated.

Nonetheless, the unions support the government's policy, advocating school reopenings for in-person education, while admitting that no necessary measures have been taken. The E?itim-Sen union's slogan is "Precautions should be taken, schools should be opened in September!" but it also admits that no action has been taken for it. Nevertheless, it continues to support this policy and refuses to mobilise its tens of thousands of members and parents against school reopenings in unsafe conditions. However, the same E?itim-Sen had criticised the Education Ministry, announcing that at least 45 educators died of COVID-19 between March 5 and April 26, 2021.

Moreover, this policy has received statements of support from the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), which has played a significant role in scientifically opposing the government's "social murder" policy throughout the pandemic.

The TTB's School Health Working Group, together with many education unions, issued a statement on August 13, declaring: "Fully in-person education is necessary." The statement admitted that no official preparations have been made for the return of students and educators to schools in safe conditions. Nonetheless, it insists that "schools should be opened and kept open in any case."

However, the section titled "Criteria that will form the basis for the decision to open and close schools based on provinces and districts and the measures to be taken at schools" makes clear that schools should not be reopened, according to the TTB's own standards.

The most important of these criteria is whether the number of new cases per 100,000 people in the last seven days is over 100. If it is higher than 100, it means there is a high and dangerous spread of the disease. Overall in Turkey, the number of cases per 100,000 people is nearly 165 today. In only 11 of its major 81 cities (less than 14 percent of the total population live in these 11 cities) is this rate below 100, but the rate is increasing in these areas as well.

In this case, the TTB recommends that secondary schools and high schools switch to online learning, while pre-schools and primary schools remain open with class sizes of no more than 30 (which is still a very high number). However, most schools cannot meet the 30 student limit. According to a survey by E?itim-Sen, only 15 percent of schools in Turkey have class sizes of fewer than 20. Fully 93 percent of the teachers participating in the survey said that it is impossible to provide the necessary social distancing in their classrooms.

Those who advocate school reopening under these conditions claim that the probability of children catching COVID-19, transmitting it and being harmed by the disease is "very low" compared to adults. However, this claim is false and has been scientifically refuted.

Data from the United States, where more than 60 percent of schools have started in-person education, reveal the magnitude of the danger. More than 4.5 million children in the US have been infected to date.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the US reported 180,000 child COVID-19 cases in the week ending August 19, a 50 percent increase in just one week. There were less than 10,000 child cases just two months ago. Even worse, more than 1,900 children are currently hospitalised, and 24 children died from COVID-19 in one week. Clearly, this policy means that children will die or suffer long-term harm from COVID-19.

For a safe reopening of schools

The Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education recognises the need to reopen schools safely and advocates the only viable scientific policy for doing so: To stop the pandemic and save lives, measures to eradicate COVID-19 in Turkey and worldwide should be implemented in a coordinated manner. Schools and non-essential workplaces should be closed, full income protection provided to affected workers and small business owners, and a global vaccination campaign initiated together with other social distancing and public health measures.

Implementing this strategy depends on the intervention of the working class and youth, including educators, independent from all establishment parties and trade unions. Instead of transferring billions to the corporations, the super-rich must be expropriated and the following demands implemented:

- * For the immediate closure of all public and private schools! All teachers and students must be provided with good computers and high-speed internet access free of charge, to ensure quality online teaching.

- * 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.

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

- * 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 increased.

- * 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.

- * 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.

- * The imposition of "flexible" working conditions on remote education should end, teachers' working hours should be strictly followed, and overtime worked on a voluntary basis and paid. Attempts to put cameras in classrooms permanently under the pretext of the pandemic violates democratic rights and must be withdrawn immediately.

- * 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.

* Resources should be used to promptly make millions of vaccines available, and private hospitals nationalised amid this public health emergency. Hundreds of thousands of health workers should also be employed immediately.

* Defend refugees and immigrants! The over 5 million refugees and immigrants in Turkey constitute the most vulnerable section of society. They should be promptly included in the vaccination campaign and benefit from all health services free of charge. Official data on refugees' situations should be released regularly.

* No in-person school examinations during the pandemic!

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

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 dangerous 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 vital struggle for public health.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact