

Turkish government normalizes mass deaths as COVID-19 pandemic rages

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As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to intensify in Turkey, with all necessary public health measures lifted and workplaces and schools fully reopened, President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’s government is normalizing mass infections and deaths.

On Saturday, Erdo?an declared, “As was the case with the times of the pandemic, Turkey possesses the necessary capacity, infrastructure, administrative capability and the political will to successfully manage the post-pandemic era as well.” He then added, “As I always say, Turkey will emerge stronger from this period.”

Despite Erdo?an’s claim to “success” against the virus, 7.4 million people have contracted COVID-19 and more than 66,000 people have lost their lives in the country, according to official figures. Moreover, the number of “excess deaths” during the pandemic period is 189,000, as filmmaker Güçlü Yaman, who conducts research on extra deaths in Turkey, stated on September 23. For weeks, Turkey has led the world in reported daily new cases, surpassing 30,000 last week for the first time since April.

Assistant Professor Emrah Alt?ndi? of Boston College warned that if no measures are taken, the number of daily deaths in the winter could double. “Turkey has been among the first 3-5 countries with the most daily cases for a long time. I would like to warn you again, we are entering the winter with 30,000 cases per day. Even today, 200-250 people die every day—and in my opinion, the official numbers [that] are underestimates. These deaths can be in the range of 500-1,000 in winter.”

The government has pursued a policy of “social murder” based on keeping workers at work without interruption, placing profit before human life. With the opening of all workplaces and schools, it has

abandoned any social distancing measure. As for vaccination, virtually the only tool still used in the so-called fight against the pandemic, only 54 percent of Turkey’s population is fully vaccinated.

According to the weekly incidence data for September 25-October 1 announced by Health Minister Fahrettin Koca on Saturday, the northwestern city of Zonguldak leads with 557 cases per 100,000 people; in only 8 of Turkey’s 81 major cities is it less than 100 per 100,000. It is 252 in Istanbul (population 16 million) and 363 in the Turkish capital, Ankara.

The reopening of schools and then universities in September, as expected, caused many youth to contract the disease and aggravated the pandemic. According to data collected by the education union E?itim Sen, more than 1,500 classrooms are quarantined each week, while more than 5,000 students and teachers have tested positive for COVID-19.

According to a statement of the Student-Parents Association last week, at least 153,000 students have been quarantined since schools reopened in September. A 17-year-old high school student in Kütahya reportedly died of COVID-19 last week; government ministries refuse to disclose the infection and death rates among teachers and students.

Moreover, there is no free and mass testing in schools. Stating that the cases among children doubled after schools re-opened, Prof. Dr. Mehmet Ceyhan made clear the gravity of the pandemic. “We can see only one-tenth of [cases] because we only test those who have symptoms, but since 85 percent of all cases and 90 percent of the infected children are asymptomatic, those groups are not tested anyway. Therefore, I estimate that the number of active cases of 460,000-470,000 at the moment is in fact at least around 4.5 million.”

The Health Ministry has taken the government's de facto herd immunity policy one step further, slashing the mandatory quarantine period of students from 10 days to 5 days. Children who are asymptomatic will be able to return to school if they have a COVID-19 test after the fifth day of isolation and the test is negative.

The government's attempt to get parents back to work by reopening schools in line with the profit interests of the ruling class has caused an explosion of cases among youth, as in other countries that have followed the same path all over the world. Health Minister Koca admitted this last month, stating, "With schools staying open for the last three weeks, the number of cases between the ages of 0-17 has doubled. Our average [number of] active cases is currently 400,000. A quarter of them are in the 0-17 age group. Previously it was 10-11 percent."

Trying to normalize preventable deaths and diseases, Koca added, "The increase in cases was not reflected in the number of [patients in] intensive care units and intubations. Therefore, there is nothing to be worried about in this sense." Since the end of August, the daily death toll has hardly fallen below 200. The number of new cases, at around 20,000 per day before schools reopened, is now around 30,000. On Wednesday, Koca announced that more than 50 percent of active cases are young people under the age of 30.

Nonetheless, President Erdoğan declared that his government insists on keeping schools open. "For the last month, education and training activities have been carried out successfully in schools affiliated to the National Education Ministry without any serious problems. Our aim is to continue in-person education at all levels by pushing the conditions to the end."

The government is implementing this policy with the support of the bourgeois opposition parties, pseudo-left groups and the trade unions. While admitting that it was not possible to reopen schools safely under pandemic conditions, Ertuğrul Kurum nonetheless supported the government and advocated the reopening of schools. Now, it is again declaring, "We will not be silent about the risk of [terminating] in-person education!"

However, there is growing opposition to this criminal policy, which allows the virus to spread among children and the entire population causing mass death, infections and unknown long-term damage. Almost every day on

social media, students, parents and teachers are demanding the transition to remote education, emphasizing that schools are not safe.

A parent whose 7-year-old child recently caught COVID-19 at school tweeted: "This tweet should be highlighted by mothers and fathers the most. Schools are the most dangerous place for our children. Look how your children are playing hand in hand at break times. I told the principal that I will not send my child to school. He/she fails the class, the principal said. #UrgentOnlineEducation. [Health Minister] @drfahrettinkoca you didn't protect my child better than me. Nothing happened [to] my child for 2 years."

The widespread anger and opposition among workers, parents and students must be given a conscious expression. There is only one way forward in the fight against the pandemic: a global eradication strategy. It is imperative that nonessential workplaces and schools be closed until zero cases are reached, together with mass vaccination, widespread testing, contact tracing and isolation of infected persons and other public health measures. There must be full income support for all workers affected by these measures.

The only social force that can implement this science-based policy is the international working class. The online webinar, hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site*, on October 24, with the participation of representatives from the rank-and-file committees established by educators, parents and students as well as scientists advocating the strategy of eradication, constitutes a critical step in moving this struggle forward.



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