

Turkish doctors strike as government policies spread Omicron variant

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Turkey’s Physicians and Other Healthcare Professionals, Public Health and Social Services Union (Hekimsen) is holding a one-day strike today, as President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’s government—following its American and European allies—abandons even the pretense that it is trying to contain the pandemic.

As teachers and students in the US, Canada, France, Italy, Greece and Austria have begun to take action against the unsafe reopening of schools, strikes and social opposition to deadly pandemic policies are mounting in Turkey too. This strike follows a broader work stoppage of health care workers in mid-December. It takes place as Çimsata? metal workers, Divri?i iron mine workers and most recently Farplas automotive part workers in Gebze went on wildcat strikes over wage disputes.

Doctors and other health workers at the forefront of the fight against the COVID-19 have been hit hard by the government’s “herd immunity” policy, while also suffering a collapse in living standards during the pandemic.

According to a Hekimsen statement, total salary including benefits for most dentists is only 6,500 Turkish lira (\$485), general practitioners 7,000 TL, and specialist physicians 9,500 TL. Doctors are demanding a decent salary and benefits as the poverty line surpassed 13,000 TL (\$970) in December 2021. Their other demands include abolishing 36-hour nonstop watches, time off after watches, and taking measures against violence in health facilities.

Doctors who are members of Hekimsen are striking in “all health institutions except Emergency Service and Polyclinics; Covid, Delivery Room, Oncology, Hematology Polyclinics; and all inpatient services.” Hekimsen warned that if their demands are not met, they might stop working again in February.

The Turkish Medical Association (TTB), the main physicians’ organization not participating in today’s

work stoppage, together with various health care workers’ organizations, issued an action program yesterday as none of its demands of the 16 December strike were met. They will go on one-day national strike on February 8 with demands similar to those of Hekimsen. In following weeks, they will organize “Great Health Rallies” in Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir and Diyarbakir.

Opposition and determination to struggle among health care workers and other sections of the working class are growing as the pandemic explodes due to the uncontrolled spread of the Omicron variant in Turkey and internationally.

The number of daily cases is over 70,000 in Turkey, where only around 400,000 COVID-19 tests are performed each day, which is not enough to find all the cases. According to the latest official incidence data for January 1-7, the number of cases per 100,000 people in Istanbul increased from 663.69 to 1222.37 in a week.

After January 12, which broke a daily record with 77,000 cases, the Health Ministry largely ended PCR testing for unvaccinated people. Rapid antigen screening tests are not used in Turkey. According to new regulations, PCR testing will still be carried out only for “employees of rest homes, nursing homes, and prisons and detention houses as well as detainees and convicts in prisons who are unvaccinated or have not had the disease in the last 180 days, and people who will travel abroad.”

Moreover, PCR testing will reportedly continue for “unvaccinated people who will travel intercity by plane or who have not completed the vaccination process and have not had the disease in the last 180 days.” TTB denounced these decisions, stating, “The SARS-CoV-2 virus does not have the feature of being transmitted on planes but not on trains or buses. We once again call on those who condemn the society to disease to resign.”

At the same time, the quarantine obligations were removed for people who have taken the booster doses or

who have had COVID-19 in the last three months. At the beginning of January, the Erdoğan government had reduced the isolation period of infected people to 7 days, following its US and European allies. Those who test negative on the fifth day can end the isolation.

Professor Dr. Mehmet Ceyhan from Hacettepe University in Ankara summarized the capitalist impulse behind these criminal decisions as follows: “The reason for reducing the isolation period to 7 days is not that the risk of contamination disappears at the end of this period, but to take the risk of contamination and make things work.”

Ceyhan added, “While the number of Omicron cases is increasing rapidly in all countries, it is 60,000-70,000 per day in Turkey... This [not testing] is not a decision that should be discussed scientifically. This literally means ‘Let Omicron spread, so many people die every day’... If we perform [widespread] tests, the [daily case] number will definitely rise to over 200,000.”

Speaking after a cabinet meeting on Wednesday evening, President Erdoğan emphasized that his government will continue the policy of completely eliminating measures against the rapid spread of the Omicron variant. He said, “The spread of the pandemic has not caused a significant problem, interruption on the employment and production side so far,” adding, “We have not and will not allow any disruptions or unnecessary restrictions that will cause our people to suffer in any field, especially in education.”

Public health restrictions that Erdoğan calls “unnecessary” have saved millions of lives since the pandemic began. In China with a population of 1.4 billion, which is still implementing a scientific Zero COVID policy, total deaths have been kept below 5,000 and the total number of cases so far has reached only 105,000 despite widespread screenings involving millions of people.

Erdoğan also repeated the false, baseless claim of the international ruling elite and the media that the Omicron variant will end the pandemic, declaring, “We hope this latest wave will remove the coronavirus from being a threat and reduce it to the level of routine epidemics.”

On January 15, the TTB openly stated that “the government has not cared about public health during the entire pandemic, does not act in accordance with scientific data, and a herd immunity policy has been adopted with the latest decisions.” It also warned: “There will be more serious disruptions in health care services in the coming weeks, and the Omicron variant will be more severe. It is

necessary to remove from society the misconception that it is mild.”

Speaking to the daily Sözcü on Monday, Istanbul Medical Chamber Chair Pınar Saip warned, “There is no longer a policy to deal with the pandemic in Turkey. Unfortunately, cases are increasing. This increase is reflected in both hospitals and intensive care units. Intensive care units reached an 80 percent occupancy rate.”

Saip added, “New intensive care beds are constantly being opened, but there is no point in opening an intensive care bed if there is no nurse or no doctor to work there. Now, intensive care units are operated with general practitioners, not with specialists,” due to staff shortages.

In the interests of the ruling class, the Turkish government is determined to return workers to work whatever the consequences, to ensure that production and supply chains are not disrupted and to boost private profits and stock values. This criminal policy has officially led to 85,000 deaths and more than 10 million infections in Turkey. According to calculations by Güçlü Yaman of the TTB Pandemic Working Group, however, excess deaths during the pandemic reached 242,000 as of January 11.

As the first term in schools ends this week, the government is demanding to reopen unsafe schools to in-person education in February. Yesterday, Education Minister Mahmut Özer said, “We will continue with in-person education in the second term, as in the first term, with determination.”

This policy of mass infection and death is implemented with support from all the establishment parties and unions. The masses of workers and youth need to mobilize and join the emerging international movement, demanding that the necessary public health measures be taken to end the pandemic and save lives, based on a scientific Zero COVID strategy.



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