

Turkish health workers strike as COVID-19 pandemic, living costs surge

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Turkish physicians and other health workers are on a nationwide one-day strike today as President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's government dismantles all public health measures against the COVID-19 pandemic and inflation soars to levels not seen in a long time.

The strike by the over 100,000-strong Turkish Medical Association (TTB), as well as the Turkish Dental Association (TDB), nurses and several other health workers' organizations, takes place after the government repeatedly rejected their wage and benefit demands. Having initially called a strike on February 17-18, the Hekimsen physicians union also announced that its members, who are members of TTB and TDB too, will join today's strike.

Today's work stoppage comes after strikes organized by the TTB on December 14 and Hekimsen on January 21. Moreover, the health care workers' strike takes place as a wave of wildcat strikes and mass protests spread across Turkey.

Since 2022 began, metalworkers, miners, cargo couriers, textile workers, dockers, food workers and construction workers have stopped work one after another, demanding wage increases and better living conditions. Workers have drawn inspiration from each other as ever-broader layers of workers defied the diktat of the union bureaucracy and the state over strike action. The movement erupted independently of pro-capitalist unions and used social media to discuss and coordinate methods of struggle.

In recent days, mass protests against electricity price hikes of up to 125 percent have erupted atop this wave of strikes. While thousands took to the streets in mostly Kurdish towns of A?r?, Do?ubayaz?t with a population of only 130,000, protests were also held in Hakkari, ?anl?urfa, Mardin, Diyarbak?r, Mu?la and Bursa.

Beyond electricity price hikes, a 50 percent hike in gas prices and the doubling of prices for basic necessities is

fueling anger and opposition of millions of workers who cannot make ends meet. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), official annual inflation reached 48 percent in January (the highest rate since the 2001 crisis). The independent Inflation Research Group (ENAG) announced that the actual rate was 114 percent.

Health care workers, who are at the forefront of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, and the suffering caused by official policies of mass infection, are also hit hard by the rising cost of living.

According to a TTB statement, "Today, the salary of retired physicians is between 2,300-4,000 Turkish lira; a general practitioner's basic salary is approximately 4,900 TL. The net salary of a 30-year specialist physician is 5,800 TL." According to the pro-government Türk-?? union confederation, as of January 2022 the poverty line for a family of four in Turkey reached 13,843 liras.

TTB stated that it "represents the physicians who receive some of the lowest salaries and suffer the most violence in any country of the world." It also added, "Turkey ranks sixth from the last among OECD member countries in terms of specialist physician salaries according to 2020 data. As for general practitioner salaries, it ranks 14th of 17 countries." Moreover, "Turkey ranks 34th of 37 among OECD countries in terms of number of physicians per patient in 2020."

TTB started actions called "White Vigils" on January 26, "against the withdrawal of the draft law regulating economic and personal benefits of physicians and that it is still not discussed despite the fact that it was supposed to be discussed in January." It also announced a strike on February 8 if their demands were not met.

TTB emphasized that health workers will make "special efforts to ensure that the care of emergency patients, dialysis patients, emergency or risky pregnant women, pediatric emergencies, cancer patients, intensive care patients will not be interrupted, and that the intensive care

and inpatients will not suffer any medical harm” during the strike.

Underlining the dysfunction of the health care system, doctors said, “Patients cannot get an appointment for months; our emergency application numbers are at rates that can be seen in a country experiencing extraordinary situations. Medical examination in 5 minutes imposed on physicians/patients does not solve this problem.”

As rates of infection and death from COVID-19 among physicians in Turkey are among the top in the world, the TTB also demands a “COVID-19 Occupational Disease Law.”

Health workers especially appealed to the public to support the strike: “We are also calling out to the society; this strike is not only for physicians and health workers, but for all of us. This strike is so we can say that enough is enough to a health care system where you are forced to wait for a doctor appointment for months and are confined to private hospitals... Come to the hospitals to be with us in the strike.”

In its statement, the TTB said that today’s strike is to last just one day, signaling longer work stoppages could be held in the coming period.

Criticizing the response of the government and Health Ministry to the COVID-19 pandemic, TTB added: “The government and the Health Ministry, which took almost no scientific measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, so that neither the society nor us would get sick or die, have now completely ignored scientific knowledge and historical experiences by removing all the precautions.”

Doctors and public health specialists have previously denounced the government’s campaign to downplay the pandemic and its consequences. In its February 3 statement, the TTB said: “In many hospitals, clinics are closing and health services are disrupted. The health minister’s ‘don’t worry’ rhetoric against this growing crisis is unscientific and ignores public health.”

“With its successive statements, the government did not take any precautions against the current situation. They clearly intend to cover up the truth,” said the TTB, adding: “It is not scientific for Health Minister to compare a disease where the number of daily cases exceeds 100,000 and the number of deaths exceeds 200 to the flu. The pandemic continues in its most burning form.”

Indeed, in late January, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca declared: “Do not worry, the disease [COVID-19] is not as strong as it used to be... If we explain the number of our citizens lost from the flu on a daily basis, we will see that it is no different from the pandemic... The worst days are

over.” He also boasted: “We have lifted all restrictions, except for basic personal protection measures and vaccinations... The pandemic is leaving for good.”

However, according to data reported to the World Health Organization (WHO), a total of 7,931 people died from flu and pneumonia in Turkey in 2018. On the other hand, while the official death toll in the two-year pandemic period in Turkey was approaching 90,000, the excess deaths from the pandemic exceeded 251,000 as of February 1, according to the latest calculations of Güçlü Yaman, a member of the TTB Pandemic Working Group.

According to Worldometer data, the 7-day moving average number of COVID-19 cases in Turkey, where the government declared the pandemic is ending, exceeded 100,000, while the 7-day average number of deaths was 214.

President Erdoğan, one of the individuals in Turkey who is most strictly protected from the virus, announced that he infected with COVID-19 on Saturday. This underscores that the virus has spread everywhere as the government lifts remaining public health measures.

The Erdoğan government, with its unscientific campaign to normalize mass infection and deaths, is following the steps of ruling elites from the US to Canada to European countries to end reporting and media coverage of pandemic data.

The strike and mass protest movement that is developing in Turkey and internationally shows the social force to end this death policy implemented with the support of all establishment parties and unions for the sake of capitalist profit and wealth, and to establish a global society based on social equality, i.e., socialism: the international working class.



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