

Turkish doctors, health workers on nationwide strike for wages, safety

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As tens of thousands of physicians and other health care workers went on a two-day national strike on Monday, public hospitals were almost completely empty except for emergency rooms, intensive care units, maternity wards and COVID-19 polyclinics. Mass demonstrations were held in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Adana, Mersin, Diyarbakir and other cities.

The Turkish Medical Association (TTB), a professional organization of physicians with over 100,000 members, described the two-day strike as its largest work stoppage to date. The Hekimsen union also organized a three-day strike starting Monday. It has recently reached nearly 20,000 members after starting with a few thousand, as anger grows at rapid declines in real wages, poor benefits, and increasing violence in health facilities.

The strike, which started on March 14, “Doctor’s Day” in Turkey, comes after strikes of physicians and health care workers last December, January and February. In previous strikes, health care workers had warned that they would expand their actions if President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’s government did not meet their demands.

According to the pro-government Türk-?? union confederation, the poverty line for a family of four in Turkey reached 15,140 Turkish lira (currently \$1,030) in February. Physicians are demanding a significant increase in their salaries and pensions, which are now well below the poverty line. Besides better benefits and working conditions, physicians are demanding legal measures to deter assaults against them in health facilities, as 40 acts of violence against health care workers take place in Turkey each day.

The TTB replied to an official letter sent by the Health Ministry, which threatened physicians for repeatedly striking. It declared, “Especially those who

have caused preventable deaths during the pandemic cannot tell us about the requirements of the right to health. Our strike actions are for a healthier society, and for health policies that prioritize public health.”

Doctors protested that patients had only five minutes for physical examination in hospitals due to the privatization of the health system and the cutting of its resources. Another demand was that COVID-19 be officially recognized as an occupational disease.

Physicians and other health care workers in Turkey, as well as around the world, have fought the pandemic on the front lines and have been deeply impacted by the government’s policy of mass infection and death.

The TTB held a protest in front of the Health Ministry in Ankara on March 11, the second anniversary of the first official announcement of a COVID-19 case in Turkey. While “hundreds of thousands of health care workers who had to work without day offs, in conditions of drudgery, without adequate and appropriate protective equipment” were infected, it noted, “553 health care workers, 504 of whom were active,” died of COVID-19.

The TTB stressed that the government is responsible for this health disaster, which has occurred after it lifted mitigation measures against the pandemic. “Even according to official figures, the death toll is more than 95,000, and the real figures are over 250,000,” it said, before adding, “The pandemic has continued due to [the government’s] insistence that ‘The wheels will turn, production will continue,’ notwithstanding calls to stop non-essential production. It supported business as working people starved and died.”

President Erdo?an’s increasing attacks against physicians have provoked anger among health care workers. Speaking on March 8 on the growing emigration of physicians abroad, he said, “Let them go,

if they go. Then we will employ our newly graduated doctors.” According to the Hekimsen union, “approximately 9,000 doctors have resigned from the public service in the last 20 months, nearly 2,000 of them have gone abroad or are about to leave.”

As tens of thousands of physicians and their supporters protested Erdoğan’s statement on social media, the growing social opposition found expression in the wide participation in the strike and popular support for it.

A chemotherapy patient told the daily Evrensel: “Doctors are right. Who will look after us without them? We have to make much of doctors at all times,” before adding that “Every hospital is full. You can’t get a doctor appointment. The government says, ‘The hospitals are better now,’ which is not true. They say you should come one month later to get an appointment. When can I get an appointment? When I died?”

The determination of the health care workers and the public support they have received led Erdoğan to take a step back. Speaking on Monday, he said, “This country owes a debt of gratitude to its doctors and needs them,” declaring that his government will make legal regulations to meet some demands of the health care workers.

Erdoğan’s very partial retreat reflects the worsening position of his government amid an escalating economic, social and political crisis. Criminal policies that have infected millions and killed hundreds of thousands during the pandemic have gone hand-in-hand with an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the working class to the capitalist ruling elites.

In the same period, the collapse of the Turkish lira was followed by a surge in the prices of basic necessities. Official annual inflation reached 54 percent in February, while the real inflation rate was 123 percent, according to the independent Inflation Research Group (ENAGroup). The prices, which have increased worldwide due to the effect of the pandemic, have skyrocketed even more during the war in Ukraine.

Under these conditions, Erdoğan’s popular support has fallen to the lowest rate in 20 years, according to polls. Intensifying this crisis and worrying the entire political establishment, there is also a growing strikes wave in 2022.

From metal to healthcare, textiles to cargo, mines to

warehouses and ship-breaking yards, thousands of workers have gone on strike against the rising cost of living and the devastating consequences of pandemic policies. According to data compiled by the Labor Studies Group, at least 106 wildcat strikes occurred in just the first two months of 2022. The average annual number of wildcat strikes in the previous five years was only 97.

The strike movement in Turkey is only a part of an emerging international movement within the working class. The only force that can put an end to poverty and social inequality, deadly pandemic policies and the growing danger of a nuclear world war is the international working class, mobilized on the basis of a socialist program.



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