

Turkish doctors mount nationwide strike as prices explode

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Hekimsen, a Turkish doctors union with nearly 20,000 members, went on nationwide strike on Thursday and Friday, demanding better wages and benefits. This strike, held in all departments “except for Emergency Services and Polyclinics, Delivery Room, COVID, Oncology, Hematology Polyclinics and all inpatient services,” will be followed by strikes on May 17-18 and May 26-27.

Largely ignored in the mainstream media, even in the pseudo-left press, this important strike is part of a larger international movement emerging in the working class and especially among health care workers.

The wave of strikes against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s failure to meet the demands of doctors and health care workers in Turkey continues to grow. National strikes had previously been held in December, January, February and March. The doctors strike also comes after a wave of wildcat strikes by various sections of workers in January and February 2022. There were at least 106 wildcat strikes in these two months alone.

The rise in the cost of living from the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and sanctions against Russia is increasingly driving workers into struggle in Turkey and internationally. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, official annual inflation in Turkey reached 70 percent as of April, while the rate was 105 percent in transportation and 89 percent in food and non-alcoholic beverages. However, the real inflation rate has risen to 156 percent, according to a report by the Inflation Research Group, made up of independent economists and academics.

According to the pro-government Türk-?? union confederation, the poverty line for a family of four in Turkey reached 17,340 Turkish lira (currently \$1,165) in April. The “hunger limit” (monthly food

expenditures required for a family of four to have a healthy, balanced and adequate diet) rose to 5,323 Turkish lira (\$360), 1,070 lira more than the minimum wage (4,250 TL, or \$285).

Nonetheless, “specialist physicians receive a salary of 12,000-13,000 TL and other physicians 9,500-10,000 TL with a fixed additional payment,” according to Hekimsen. Doctors are protesting the government’s failure to keep its promise to pay them bonuses during the pandemic.

The doctors are demanding that COVID-19 be counted as an “occupational disease,” as health care workers have fallen ill with COVID-19 10 times more often than the broader population, and doctors have lost their lives four times more than the average. To date, over 500 health care workers in Turkey have died of COVID-19.

However, the Erdoğan government has lifted the latest measures to mitigate the spread of the pandemic. At the end of April, the obligation to wear masks in all indoor areas, except public transportation vehicles and health institutions, was removed.

The government, which has reduced the number of daily tests to 100,000, cites the official daily number of cases falling below 2,000 as proof that the “pandemic is over.” However, the rise of the pandemic in the US and European countries, which are lifting restrictions like the Turkish government, shows that a similar rise is virtually inevitable in Turkey.

Doctors are also demanding that “malpractice” decisions be stopped against them, stating: “Remove compensation penalties from physicians’ concerns. In the committee to be formed for malpractice decisions, there should be a sufficient number of physicians who have medical knowledge to make decisions in the relevant field and who are competent in health law.”

Also, doctors are against working over 36 hours non-stop. Hekimsen pointed out that the number of physicians in Turkey is one-third the average in OECD countries. The physicians are also opposed to reducing the time to examine a patient to five minutes.

Besides better benefits, pensions and working conditions, the doctors are demanding legal measures to deter assaults against them in the health care facilities. Each day there are 40 acts of violence against health care workers in Turkey.

The physicians who went on strike are calling for public support, stating: “Support us for your health. Say, ‘The perpetrators [of violence] are interfering with my health care, punish them.’ Say, ‘I do not want to get an operation from a doctor who has worked for hours and has not slept until the morning.’ Say, ‘Give the most distinguished people of the country, who have decades of labor, experience and knowledge, the wages they deserve.’ Say, ‘Increase our examination time.’”

The doctors’ struggle is part of the growing unrest among all workers due to increasingly unbearable living conditions amid rising inflation. According to the daily *Karar*, an Ipsos poll found that 82 percent of Turkish people say the Turkish economy is “bad.”

A total of 19,000 people in 27 countries were interviewed from March 25 to April 3, and 78 percent of the participants from Turkey said “the country is going in the wrong direction.” Moreover, 58 percent of the participants in Turkey said the biggest problem was inflation.

Growing discontent among broad sections of the population and the growing strike movement increasingly worry business leaders, who have amassed vast wealth in the past decades, especially during the pandemic. This is fueling tensions within the ruling elite itself.

Orhan Turan, president of the Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSİAD), representing the dominant sections of the Turkish bourgeoisie, criticized the government for “not struggling with inflation” at the end of April. “There is inflation in the world, but it is around 9-10 percent. Consumer inflation in Turkey has exceeded 60 percent,” he said.

Turan also gave a green light to raising the minimum wage again this year, to prevent the growth of a working class movement against ever-increasing inflation. Reflecting the bourgeoisie’s fear of a social

explosion in the working class, he said: “We need to think about this [wage increase] for labor peace, and if possible, to pass this process without crushing them [workers] with inflation.”

President Erdogan reacted sharply to this. He declared: “TÜSİAD does not care about ‘How can we contribute to the future of the country?’ On the contrary, it cares about ‘How can we remove the current government? And how can we bring a government that we can use comfortably?’” Erdoğan also effectively admitted to having been in the service of the bourgeoisie for nearly 20 years, saying: “In the last 20 years in Turkey, they [TÜSİAD] earned money with us, they earned growth with us.”

The Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency (BDDK) testified to what Erdoğan said about the enrichment of the corporate and financial elite. It announced that the banking sector’s net profit increased by 295.1 percent over the previous year, reaching 63.25 billion TL as of the end of March. In 2021, the profit for the same period was 16.01 billion TL.

These enormous profits are a product of the “profit before lives” policy jointly implemented by the government, bourgeois opposition parties and the unions during the pandemic. As hundreds of thousands died in Turkey of a disease that could have been prevented by scientific public health measures, tens of millions were infected and now face long-term effects from the disease. This criminal policy has led to close to 20 million deaths worldwide.

Defending the health, lives and social interests of health care workers and the entire working class requires a frontal onslaught on the wealth and power of the financial oligarchy, which is enriching itself at the expense of the overwhelming majority of the world’s population. This means developing a movement within the international working class against capitalism and for socialism.



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