

100,000 Turkish doctors strike amid growing global movement of health care workers

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Eleven organizations representing a majority of physicians and other health care workers in Turkey are striking nationwide Wednesday after their demands for better wages and benefits were rejected by President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's government.

In addition to the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), which has around 110,000 members, doctors' organizations such as Hekimsen, Hekim Birli?i Union and Tabip Sen, as well as nurses and other health workers, are participating in the strike. At least 100,000 physicians are expected to participate in this work stoppage.

Health care workers in Turkey have been the most combative section of the working class since December last year, organizing numerous strikes and protests for their demands. Following strikes in January, February and March, Hekimsen went on strike for six days.

The decision to strike came after the Erdo?an government submitted a bill to parliament that rejects all the basic demands of doctors and health care workers. Holding a "Great Physician Workshop" last Saturday, they decided on a joint nationwide strike today.

In a joint statement yesterday, they declared, "We do not accept this proposed law, which was passed by the [parliamentary] commission and will be brought to the Parliament today, which does not include any improvements for us, our demands and our rights. We say 'withdraw this law.'" They added that "Tomorrow we will be on strike for our social rights, and tomorrow we will not provide services except for emergency cases, intensive care and oncology cases."

The statement drew attention to the link between the increasing subordination of the health system to capitalist profit and the deterioration of the working and living conditions of health care workers and public

health services: "Turkey's health system, which has been privatized with the Health Transformation Program and which sees patients as customers, hospitals as businesses and us as slaves, is increasingly collapsing due to pandemics and crises."

The doctors are demanding that COVID-19 be counted as an "occupational disease," as health care workers have fallen ill with COVID-19 ten 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.

They also said, "Instead of reviewing and changing the system to solve the failure of the health system; violence, poverty, resignations, migration, lack of merit, unqualified education, performance-based work, mobbing, pressures" were imposed on them. The population, they stated, "is subjected to virtual queues at home, appointments that can be made months later, ever-increasing out-of-pocket expenses, incentives for private hospitals with regulations that devastate public health services, and inequality in health."

The statement said that this year alone, 938 Turkish physicians have gone abroad due to these conditions, and suicides among health workers have increased. Speaking on March 8 on the growing emigration of physicians, Erdo?an 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."

However, Erdo?an changed his tone in the first day of a two-day strike on March 14-15, stating, "This country owes a debt of gratitude to its doctors and needs them." He claimed his government would implement legal

regulations to meet some health care workers' demands. The bill that was then submitted to parliament completely ignored health workers' demands, however.

Doctors and health care workers have also warned of wider and longer strikes if their demands are not met: "This is neither our first nor our last action. This is a protest against the proposed hollow law. Let no one doubt that we are in a crisis that will not refrain from longer work stoppages." The statement concluded by calling on the public to support the strike.

Inflation, triggered by the massive printing of money by central banks to be handed over to the super-rich during the COVID-19 pandemic, has surged with NATO sanctions against Russia during the war in Ukraine. In Turkey, annual official inflation rose to 73.5 percent in May and food inflation to 91.6 percent. According to a more reliable report by the independent Inflation Research Group (ENAG), however, real annual inflation already exceeds 160 percent.

Moreover, the poverty line for a family of four in Turkey reached 19,600 Turkish lira (currently \$1,135) in May, according to the pro-government Türk-İş union confederation. The "hunger limit" (monthly food expenditures required for a family of four to have a healthy, balanced and adequate diet) rose to 6,017 Turkish lira (\$350), 1,750 lira more than the minimum wage (4,250 TL, or currently \$245).

The Erdoğan government is sitting on a social powder keg that is about to explode. According to a survey conducted by the Turkish Consumer Rights Association in March, nearly 90 percent of Turkey's population of about 85 million, or 76.5 million people, live below the poverty line. The survey also showed that 25.5 million of these 76.5 million people have an income below the hunger limit.

On the other hand, the share of corporations in national income increased from 42.9 to 47 percent in the last two years of pandemic profiteering, while the total wealth of millionaires reached 3.9 trillion Turkish lira.

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 a recent report by HekimSen. Doctors and health care workers are demanding a significant increase in their salaries and pensions as well as

improved benefits.

Doctors are demanding that "malpractice" decisions be stopped against them and oppose working over 36 hours non-stop. They pointed out that the number of physicians in Turkey is one-third the average in OECD countries. Physicians also oppose reducing the time to examine a patient to five minutes.

They 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 growing strike movement of health care workers in Turkey expresses the rising anger of broad sections of the working class against the skyrocketing cost of living and social inequality. This year witnessed an explosion of strikes in Turkey, with at least 106 wildcat strikes in January and February alone.

Moreover, it is part of a global movement of strikes and protests by health care workers against understaffing, exhausting workloads and the erosion of their living standards, from Germany, the UK, and France to India, New Zealand and the United States and beyond.

The demands of health care workers in all these countries, and in fact, of the working class as a whole—an end to the subordination of health care to profit, a policy based on science and the protection of public health against the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, decent wages and living conditions—require a frontal attack on the wealth and power of the financial oligarchy. It is enriching itself at the expense of the health and well-being of the overwhelming majority of the world's population.

Workers need their own organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, to prosecute this international struggle. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) provides the basis for health care workers and other sections of the working class to unite in such a struggle.



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