

Public health specialists demand action as COVID-19 surges in Turkey

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In Turkey, where President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s government recently declared that “the pandemic is over,” the grossly underestimated official numbers of cases and deaths are rapidly rising. The complicity of the bourgeois opposition and trade unions with the government’s policy of mass infection and death underlines the need for working people to take matters into their own hands to save lives and end the pandemic.

The official number of cases in the week of July 25 to August 1 reached 406,332, while 337 people died of COVID-19. According to the World Health Organization, Turkey ranked first in Europe and fifth in the world in terms of COVID-19 infections that week.

Tevfik Özlü, a member of the official Coronavirus Scientific Committee, spoke to the ?hlas News Agency (?HA). In a devastating comment on the policies of his own committee, Özlü said: “The saddest part is that the number of deaths, the number of cases, is not very important to me anymore. Since most people do not get tested, they do not reflect the real numbers.”

In February, despite warnings from public health specialists, Özlü had said that COVID-19 “will eventually turn into a common respiratory infection, like the flu or the common cold.”

“We are experiencing the highest number of cases since the beginning of the pandemic,” Prof. Dr. Mehmet Ceyhan, Head of the Department of Pediatric Infectious Diseases at Hacettepe University Faculty of Medicine in Ankara, said on Thursday. He added: “We had to reopen the COVID-19 pediatric ward due to the increasing number of cases.”

Speaking to *Cumhuriyet* on July 25, Prof. Dr. Bekir Kocazeybek, a member of the Department of Clinical Microbiology at Cerrahpa?a Medical Faculty in Istanbul, explained why the number of cases is

increasing: “Cases are increasing due to the Health Ministry’s abolition of masks in indoor areas, and the fact that tests are almost never performed—infected people are sent back without being tested. The government is driven by economic concerns.”

Kocazeybek noted that Omicron is the dominant variant in Turkey, with 70-80 percent of cases, warning that vaccines are losing effectiveness and calling for public health measures: “Turkey should act with an approach that prioritizes human health instead of tourism and economic concerns. Otherwise, we may spend the fall and winter more seriously with a 6th wave ... My biggest concern is that we will encounter more resistant and more contagious mutations. We must reduce the infection chain by disciplining human movements.”

Health care workers’ organizations in Ankara recently issued a statement on the pandemic, calling for various precautions against the spread of the virus. They demanded that “COVID services and polyclinics should be reopened in hospitals. The use of masks should continue in indoor places and crowded open areas. ... Effective contact tracing and isolation should be implemented.”

They added, “Vaccination should be accelerated through campaigns and booster doses should be administered with effective vaccines. The 5-11 age group should be included in the vaccination program. Urgent precaution plans should be put into practice.”

Continuing, they warned: “While a new variant in the COVID-19 pandemic spreads very rapidly, every six months, faster and more easily transmitted than the previous one, all measures have been lifted in our country since May. The Health Ministry started releasing daily data on a weekly basis after May 30, and although the number of tests is currently very low,

the number of weekly deaths is very high.”

It concluded with a call for public health measures against the government’s “profits before health” policy: “We once again state that the government, which determines the criteria in the fight against the pandemic according to the hospital occupancy rate, the production level of factories and tourism revenues, should give priority to public health.”

As a result of this policy of death, hospitals’ intensive care units are filling up again. Prof. Dr. Oktay Demirköran, President of the Turkish Intensive Care Association, told NTV television: “80-90 percent occupancy rates have been reached in some places” and that there is no more room at Cerrahpaşa Medical Faculty Hospital, one of the major hospitals in Istanbul.

Demirköran also stated Tuesday that “The case density in Istanbul continues. Last week, some of our patients had to stay in the emergency service for a week due to the intensity and could not be admitted to intensive care units.”

In an interview with Mesopotamia Agency on August 7, Güçlü Yaman, a member of the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) Pandemic Working Group, summarized the horrifying situation in the pandemic: “Last year, during the Delta surge, excess deaths were around twice the official COVID-19 deaths, while this rate has increased up to ten times this year.”

He continued: “There is also an increase in official deaths, but this is far below the actual deaths. In a sense, we are back to the summer of 2020. ... If you remember, the Minister of Health declared in his statement after the summer of 2020 that he hid data in order to ‘protect national interests.’” According to Yaman’s calculations, as of August 2, the number of excess deaths in Turkey has risen to 294,000, though the official death toll is still below 100,000.

Under these conditions, threats against scientists by pandemic deniers and anti-vaxxers are on the rise. Indeed, the suicide of Dr. Lisa-Maria Kellermayr in Austria, after she was targeted by anti-vaxxers and the Austrian government ignored the threats, reveals that this is an international campaign backed by the ruling class.

In Turkey, Prof. Dr. Esin Davutoglu Şenol and other scientists who have criticized the government’s unscientific policies and called for public health measures since the beginning of the pandemic are

increasingly targeted by anti-vaxxers. The government’s indifference to these threats reflects the fact that in Turkey, as in Austria and in most countries, authorities have adopted the far-right policies of pandemic deniers and anti-vaxxers.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has consistently explained, it is clear what global public health measures are needed to stop the pandemic and save lives. The Zero-COVID strategy implemented in China is the only way to end the pandemic worldwide. Only a mass mobilization of the international working class, based on a scientific program, can change the death policy of the ruling class adopted by the entire political establishment and trade union apparatus.

Workers must demand and fight for nonessential workplaces and schools to be closed until zero cases are reached, together with mass vaccination, widespread testing, contact tracing and isolation of infected persons and other public health measures. There must be full income support for all workers and small businesses affected by these measures.



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