

No to another school year of mass infections, and deaths! For a unified struggle of educators!

Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Turkey
15 September 2022

Nearly 20 million students and educators returned to school this week in Turkey amid an unprecedented crisis in public education.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage, all mitigating measures, including mask mandates at indoor areas, have been removed. Despite unscientific claims by the entire capitalist establishment that “the pandemic is over” or “it has turned into the flu,” the risk posed to the lives and health of millions will go unchallenged.

With banks and big business making historic profits, there is no reason workers should accept their children being sacrificed any more than they should accept communities being subjected to a mass disabling event.

Both President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government and opposition parties and unions agree that schools should stay open to keep workers on the job and corporate returns climbing. The same abandonment of all mitigation measures is taking place across Europe and internationally.

Health Minister Fahrettin Koca stated that after the massive surge that infected millions of people in the summer, a new surge may come in November-December. She added: “We have learned to live with COVID. The flu of the new era is now COVID.” This means that tens of millions of people, including children, will be infected again and again, with ever-increasing risks, and countless thousands more will lose their lives.

None of this is inevitable! This school year, educators must combine the developing struggle for wages and benefits with the fight for the necessary public health measures to stop the pandemic and save lives.

What is the situation in schools?

In the two-and-a-half years of the pandemic, nothing has

been done to make schools safer, with modern ventilation systems, or to supply the well-paid staff to meet the social, learning and mental health needs of young people. None of the public health measures needed to stop the pandemic were ever taken. There was no provision of high-quality remote learning, and social support where this is necessary.

According to official figures, which are no longer reliable, 16.8 million people have been infected and 101,000 people have died in Turkey since the pandemic began. According to the work of Güçlü Yaman, a member of the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) Pandemic Working Group, the real number of deaths from the pandemic has exceeded 300,000.

While there is no official data on children in Turkey, the fact is that at least 1,750 children have died of COVID in the US population of 335 million, where the same “let it spread” policy is followed as in Turkey. This gives an idea of the magnitude of the crime in question.

Children who have contracted COVID-19 are at substantially higher risk of blood clots of the lungs, heart inflammation, kidney failure and Type 1 diabetes. A recent study in *Pediatrics* also found that 8 percent of children hospitalized with COVID-19 experienced neurological complications, including seizures and encephalopathy. Although Minister Koca said it is “important that children with co-morbidities get vaccinated,” COVID-19 vaccines are still not authorized for children under the age of 12 in Turkey.

Most Turkish schools have inadequate heating, cooling and ventilation systems, overcrowded classrooms and inadequate or non-existent cleaning staff. In these conditions, the authorities’ crocodile tears over “learning loss” are a sham.

Now, in addition to COVID-19, there is the uncontrolled spread of monkeypox. A horrific disease among adults, it has historically been even more severe in children. Having abandoned even inadequate measures against the COVID-19 pandemic, the government is taking no measures against the

monkeypox outbreak.

The teachers unions refused to mobilize educators and students and backed the government's murderous response to the pandemic, defending in-person education in all circumstances, despite the devastating consequences of the contagion.

Public education's existential crisis

The pandemic has vastly accelerated the decades-long bipartisan assault on public education. While 85,000 "paid teachers" are working for minimum wage, an estimated 500,000 teachers are waiting to be appointed to the public schools.

The same politicians who demand the reopening of schools are doing nothing to meet the needs of millions of children for quality education and nutrition. Students' lives and education have indeed been upended throughout the pandemic, but this is due to the wholesale subordination of public education to the capitalist profit system, not because of remote learning.

The Teaching Profession Law, which imposes public sector teachers to take exams and be subject to "career ladders," is part of the ongoing onslaught on the personal benefits of educators and public education.

The public school teachers' struggle against the Teaching Profession Law and for job security and better wages needs to be combined with the emerging mass struggle of private school teachers, who work for minimum wage and without job security, and who are demanding "base pay" equal to that in the public schools.

The need for rank-and-file committees

Teachers must harness their collective strength, unify across Turkey and internationally, and prepare for a nationwide educators' strike to stop both pandemics and to demand massive investment in public education. The first step is the expansion of the Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education, in solidarity with the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), building local committees in every school and neighborhood, independent of the establishment parties and trade unions that support them.

The Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education calls on

educators, parents and students to build these committees to fight for:

- **The elimination of COVID-19 and monkeypox!** From a scientific standpoint, it is both possible and necessary to eliminate these diseases. The only thing standing in the way is capitalism and the subordination of public health to private profit. All schools must temporarily switch to fully-remote learning, as part of a broader strategy to stop infections, including mass testing, contact tracing, universal mask mandates, and all public health measures needed to stop viral transmission. The past two years have proven it is impossible to "safely" reopen schools during a raging pandemic. Half-way mitigation measures are not enough to stop the spread of COVID-19 and unnecessarily place the burden of public health onto individual teachers.

- **The expropriation of the billionaires and pandemic profiteers!** The billions handed to the rich during the pandemic must be redistributed to provide all workers and parents with money to stay home while both pandemics are contained, and to provide universal high-speed Internet, remote learning infrastructure, health care, and mental health and special education support to all students. These resources must also be used to modernize all public school buildings, including their HVAC, water and waste systems, and to close any staff shortages.

- **Massive pay increases to hire and retain educators!** Teachers cannot teach properly if their classrooms are overcrowded or they are forced to cover multiple lessons at once. Real wages and benefits have been cut or frozen for years. The subordination of education to capitalist profit must end and all private schools must be nationalized. Private school teachers and other teachers employed on contract should be hired as permanent staff, and all teachers' basic wages increased, including automatic cost-of-living provisions to keep up with inflation.

The fight for such a program requires the independent mobilization of educators, in Turkey and around the world, in unity with all sections of the working class.



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