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Turkey's coronavirus measures: billions for business, crumbs for workers

On Wednesday, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared an “Economic Stability Shield” package for business totaling 100 billion Turkish liras (US\$15 billion). Named after Turkey’s latest invasion of northern Syria, Operation Spring Shield, it focuses above all on forcing workers to continue production despite the coronavirus pandemic.

Before this program was announced, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Turkey was 97. It reached 191 and four deaths on Wednesday, and then 670 cases and 9 deaths on Friday, according to Health Minister Fahrettin Koca’s report. The exponential increase in cases has created enormous anxiety among scientists and doctors, as neighboring Iran is an epicenter of the pandemic, with nearly 20,000 cases and at least 1,433 dead—a crisis vastly exacerbated by US and European sanctions.

Just before a special meeting with ministers, business leaders and trade-union executives in Ankara, Erdoğan advised workers to rely on “patience and prayers.” Though the virus threatens millions, Erdoğan stressed he was not overly concerned: “If we can manage these few weeks well and inform the nation well and keep the virus under control, we anticipate a good outlook, better than we had hoped.”

The focus of the measures Erdoğan unveiled after the meeting is not to contain the pandemic, but bolster business against any fallout from the pandemic on Turkey’s crisis-ridden economy. While he said nothing about providing adequate testing and medical care, Erdoğan pledged to distribute protective masks and cologne for people older over 65—

even though many medical workers complain this equipment is lacking in hospitals. Already, two doctors have reportedly contracted the disease.

Erdoğan's proposals were hopelessly self-contradictory. "None of our citizens must leave their homes or get into contact with anyone, unless absolutely necessary, until the threat disappears," he said, while adding: "Our top priority is that production and employment are not interrupted." He did not attempt to explain how production in industrial sectors not critical to fighting the virus could be maintained without workers leaving their homes, however.

The government also plans to postpone debt payments and slash tax bills for corporations. It also is postponing for six months the April, May and June value added tax and social security payments of retail, iron-steel, automotive, logistics-transportation, cinema-theatre, housing, food-beverage, textile-garment and event-organization sectors.

Ankara will grant financing assistance to exporters to guard against a potential fall in exports and so they can maintain capacity. Moreover, the state-owned Halk Bank will postpone credit, interest and debt payments for 3 months of businesses and small businessmen impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Businesses can delay credit and interest payments to the banks at least three months, and can receive additional financial liquidity if needed. Tax breaks and credit assistance are available to the tourism, airlines, and construction industries.

The 20 measures include just two miserly ones for working people. While the minimum pension will be raised to just 1,500 Turkish liras (\$230, compared to a minimum wage of 2,300 Turkish liras), just 2 billion lira (\$308 million) from 100 billion lira package will be provided as financial aid to poor families.

Business leaders welcomed the bailout. The opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) criticized the handouts to business only as inadequate, as Istanbul deputy Gürsel Tekin said: "To support the economy, Germany allocated 600 billion dollars, Britain 400 billion, and the EU Commission 480 billion dollars. Erdoğan's package is 15 billion [dollars]. Insufficient."

With most workers still on the job, there are no measures to improve Turkey's health infrastructure to deal with an emerging coronavirus outbreak. In fact, it does not include any of the measures necessary to stop the spread of the disease, paving the way for a rapid spread as in Europe.

A key element in this malign neglect policy is the refusal until last Sunday to test or quarantines of at least 15,000 people returned from pilgrimages or visits abroad.

Official statements on the pandemic provoke broad popular distrust. While the health ministry still refuses to give details on the locations of the cases, individuals shared information via social media. According to a video released last Tuesday on Twitter, the first case in Turkey was from the Grand Bazaar, a historical and crowded tourist area in İstanbul. This information was hidden from the public and the area kept open without notifying other shop owners for several days.

Scientists and doctors all warn that there has been no large-scale testing to prevent a rapid spread of the disease. As of Thursday, only 10,000 people have been tested in Turkey, a country more than 83 million people.

Gaye Usluer, a clinical microbiologist and infectious disease expert at Eskişehir Osmangazi University, said on Monday: “According to the official statements, the number of the cases is 18. The biggest factor in the low number of cases is that the diagnostic test is being applied to a very limited extent.”

That same day, Turkish Medical Association Chairman Prof. Dr. Sinan Adıyaman declared, “The number of patients is greater than stated,” criticizing the government for delaying measures against the pandemic, in particular on the pilgrimage issue. On Wednesday, he again pointed to inadequate testing: “For example, 20,000 tests were carried out daily in South Korea. Eight thousand is very low. We repeat, the number of tests, the centers where they are conducted should be increased and be free.”

Health Minister Fahrettin Koca, who owns a private hospital, only declared on Thursday that they would launch daily tests on 10,000 to 15,000 people beginning from Saturday.

Professor Dr. Alpay Azap, a member of the health ministry’s Coronavirus Science Council, warned Wednesday on Twitter: “Considering that we are able to run [coronavirus] tests for very few patients and only 20 percent of them come to hospitals for diagnosis, it is possible that we reached the critical level for rapid spread of the virus many days ago. ... We should make all our efforts to not become Italy, where the virus has spread so fast due to the insufficient measures to prevent it.”

The day before, Azap had warned on television that there could be 5,000 to 30,000 cases in three or four weeks. Yesterday, Muhammet Emin Akkoyunlu, a doctor from Koca’s hospital, declared on television that Turkey already has over 140,000 undiagnosed cases.

On Wednesday, a video spread on social media showing a doctor from a university hospital in Ankara explaining, at a meeting of medical workers, that the situation in Turkey is very bad, and that there are thousands and not hundreds of cases, as officials claim.

Tukey's public health system has been systematically gutted and privatized over the past two decades. While Turkey has 25,466 adult beds—almost half in private hospitals—in its intensive care units, it has just 187 doctors per 100,000 people. This figure is 399 in Italy, the worst-affected country in Europe, and 607 in Greece, which has more than 400 cases now.

Clearly anticipating a worsening situation, the Health Ministry issued orders Friday declaring all private hospitals “pandemic hospitals” to support public hospitals against COVID-19.

The situation facing workers in Turkey is not different from that in Europe and beyond. While coronavirus spreads in the population, companies increase layoffs and forced unpaid leaves, or seek to maintain profits by forcing workers to stay on the job under unsafe conditions.

Against this reckless policy, workers should raise critical demands to fight the further spread of the virus and to save millions of lives. Amid wildcat strikes in Italy, France, Canada and the United States, a demand that all non-essential workplaces be shut down immediately, with full pay for all workers, is critical. Necessary measures must be taken to protect refugees and prisoners. The pandemic requires full testing, free and equal health care for all, and a massive reallocation of resources internationally to fight the virus.

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