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Erdogan opposes lockdown as Turkey's COVID-19 pandemic overtakes China

Overtaking China and Iran in terms of the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases, at 90,000, Turkey has emerged as the country in Asia with the most cases. Workers are the hardest hit layer in society, as the government's priority, from the beginning, has been to keep workers in non-essential industries at work to keep production, exports and profits high.

The government is thrusting aside repeated warnings from the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), which has demanded once again a stop to all production in uncritical sectors with full payment to contain infections across the country. It is siding entirely with the banks' profit interests even as COVID-19 cases surge in the workplaces.

While President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government has begun only weekend curfews in the 30 largest cities and Zonguldak since April 11, also calling a four-day lockdown from April 23 to 26, these measures remain ineffective. Medical specialists have warned that limited lockdowns lead populations to go out more intensely immediately afterwards. Many factories and workplaces in uncritical sectors—metal, construction, shipyard and textile—remain open thanks to special dispensations.

On NTV, Erdoğan's spokesperson, İbrahim Kalın, explained the government's refusal of a longer lockdown: "Its cost to the economy would be much heavier." That is, countless thousands of lives of workers can be sacrificed to protect the interests of the capitalist ruling class amid an unprecedented pandemic crisis.

The Health and Safety Labour Watch (İSİG) published a report last Friday on COVID-19 infections in workplaces in Turkey from March 11 to April 10. It examined 855 COVID-19 positive cases in at least 159 different workplaces; of these, at least 52 have died. The report also stated that workers in at least 30 different workplaces across the country went on wildcat strikes during this period due to positive cases and lack of necessary safety measures in the workplaces—as is the case all over the world.

According to another report by the Istanbul Workers' Trade Unions Platform, as of April 17 there are over 2,200 positive cases among workers in Istanbul; at least 28 have died of COVID-19.

The Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions (DİSK) also published a report on the outbreak among its members. It found that by April 17, 2.8 per thousand DİSK members had fallen ill, compared to 0.9 per thousand in the Turkish population overall. At least 378 DİSK members are positive; four have died. Hasan Oğuz (33), a construction worker and workplace representative at Galataport site in Istanbul, was one of them.

Though it has approximately 135,000 members, DİSK has admitted that it stopped production in only 11 workplaces with over 1,200 workers across Turkey—though it declared on March 30 that in 48 hours it might invoke the constitutional right to not work in unsafe conditions, if the government acts to ensure safe conditions.

Whatever their posturing, DİSK and other union confederations are deeply implicated in the collaboration between the government, big business and trade unions. This is a trap for the working class. The critical question for workers in factories, workplaces and neighbourhoods is building independent rank-and-file committees to protect themselves and oppose not only the pandemic, but the government as well.

While the Turkish Health Ministry reported a first case on March 11, the total number of cases has surpassed 90,000 as of April 20, with more than 2,000 in the official death toll. Ten days before, as of April 10, the total number of cases was 45,000 with about 1,000 deaths.

Although state officials continue to boast of Turkey's relatively low COVID-19 death rate, it is widely believed that it is a serious underestimation. The TTB accused the Health Ministry of not using COVID-19 codes proposed by the World Health Organization to calculate the death toll.

The *World Socialist Web Site* had previously cited demographic research, showing that there are about 1,500 excess deaths for Istanbul between March 11 and April 7 compared

with the same period in previous years. The *New York Times* has also reported that the “true death toll may be much higher” in Turkey, as Istanbul “alone recorded about 2,100 more deaths than expected from March 9 to April 12, based on weekly averages from the last two years.”

Moreover, the situation among health care workers is getting worse. The Istanbul Medical Chamber (ITO) said on Monday, “the number of health care workers infected has approached 2,000,” adding that nine had died in Istanbul. It criticized the lack of face masks. Many people and health care workers still are unable to obtain masks. The Trade Union of Public Employees in Health and Social Services (SES) said on Tuesday, “We estimate that there are more than 8,000 positive-diagnosed health workers across the country.”

Dr. Mustafa Tamur, an official from The Family Physicians Association in Istanbul, said on Sunday: “To date, no single item or protective clothing or pair of glasses have been provided to any family physician in Istanbul,” adding that there are about 200 COVID-19 cases among family physicians in the city.

Though there are officially more than 4,000 new cases and at least 120 new deaths every day in Turkey, the government and media are trying to put a brave face on things, amid an escalating back-to-work campaign by governments internationally.

After Health Minister Fahrettin Koca claimed last Tuesday that they had brought the pandemic’s spread across Turkey under control, on Monday Erdoğan said he expects a return to normal at the end of May: “Our goal is to most meticulously implement measures and reduce the pandemic procession to levels that would allow for the normalisation of our country after the Ramadan holidays.”

Workers are the worst affected section of the population, not only in terms of infections and deaths but also due to immediate implications of the pandemic.

In *Al-Monitor* on April 9, economist Mustafa Sönmez calculated the number of unemployed workers in Turkey has risen to 7.5 million, with a nearly 3 million surge in this period. He predicted it could reach 10 million. About 270,000 mostly small companies employing more than 3 million workers have applied for unemployment benefits. Moreover, a new law allows employers to put workers on unpaid leave for up to six months on just 39 lira (\$6) daily.

While class divisions are increasingly being exposed and anger among workers to the government response is mounting, Erdoğan’s main priority is to contain not COVID-19,

but the threat from below. Erdoğan listed “public order” as one of his government’s key priorities during the pandemic. In fact, the pandemic has clearly shown that a revolutionary struggle by the working class to replace the existing order with socialism is the only way to protect millions and provide the most essential needs for all.

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