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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Ulaş Ateşçi
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Support the Turkish health care workers' strike movement!

The Turkish Medical Association (TTB) and four other health workers' organizations are calling a nationwide one-day strike tomorrow, after the government refused their demands for wage increases and improved working conditions. The Hekimsen Union of physicians also announced work stoppages for a half day on Tuesday and Wednesday, and all day Thursday.

On Saturday, a proposed bill in the parliament affecting physicians and dentists was withdrawn, triggering the TTB's strike call. The TTB and other organizations also criticized it because it did not cover all health care workers. Outraged nurses and other health care workers organized work stoppages last week to protest the bill in hospitals across Turkey.

Already last month, the TTB organized a "White March" from Istanbul to Ankara to protest declining wages and working conditions as well as the criminal response to the pandemic. As opposition grows among workers, the DiSK union confederation felt compelled to hold a rally that then attracted over 7,000 people in Istanbul on Sunday.



Healthcare workers march during a strike action on December 6 in İzmir, bearing a banner saying ‘Health care is teamwork. We want wages to live decently, above the poverty line!’ [Credit: @sesgenelmerkezi on Twitter]

This movement is internationally significant and deserves support from the entire working class. The broadest layers of workers in Turkey and internationally must be mobilized, fighting to end the pandemic and stop the impoverishment of the working class.

Health care workers, who are at the forefront of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, have been struggling to save lives for nearly two years in Turkey and internationally. This struggle, undermined by the “herd immunity” policy pursued by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government, has already cost the lives of over 500 health care workers.

These preventable losses are part of the vast COVID-19 death toll, which is officially close to 80,000, but in reality, as Health Minister Fahrettin Koca recently admitted, is around 200,000. With more than 9 million people infected, the government’s priority has not been to save lives and protect public health, but to ensure workers continue to generate profits for the corporate and financial elite. Nonessential workplaces have hardly been closed since the beginning of the pandemic. This policy was implemented with the approval of all the bourgeois opposition parties and the trade unions.

The state is not changing policy despite the emergence and spread of the Omicron variant, which has been detected in Turkey, Turkish officials admitted on Saturday. Health Minister Koca has said “not to worry” about this variant, which is more contagious and,

according to the first studies, escapes a two-dose vaccine regimen. Meanwhile, as the Delta variant surges, approximately 20,000 cases are detected and 180 people die of COVID-19 every day.

As Koca declared, with stunning indifference, that “We must take the pandemic off our agenda,” the bourgeoisie is on a collision course with the workers. Anger at the homicidal official response to the pandemic and the surging cost of living, which has become unbearable for millions, is growing among broad sections of the working class in Turkey and worldwide.

The health care workers’ organizations issued a statement Monday, titled “Now is the Time to Strike! We will be on strike on Wednesday, December 15th!” demanding improved salaries, working conditions and legal regulations covering all health care workers.

“The coronavirus pandemic has made clear in a very painful way that the current health system, far from protecting the public, puts public health at risk,” they announced, demanding “a decent living wage and safe working conditions” for physicians and all health care workers. The salaries of many health workers are below the poverty line in Turkey.

Demanding that care continue for emergency patients, dialysis patients, pregnant women, pediatric emergencies, cancer patients, intensive care patients and COVID-19 clinics, the health care workers called for support from broader sections of the population: “This struggle is not only for physicians and health care workers, but it is for the whole society, for all of us. ... Let’s be together for our right to health in our actions and activities.”

The health workers listed their demands as follows: “To defend protective health services; a livable basic wage, also to be reflected in pensions; ending working conditions that impose slavery; job security; a holistic law against occupational diseases, especially COVID-19; and counting every five years worked as six years towards retirement for all health sector workers, whose work would be recognized as strenuous and dangerous.”

The statement warns that if these demands are not met, protests will continue: “The government should know that, unless our demands are accepted and regulations to

improve the working and living conditions of health care workers is not quickly brought to the Parliament, our actions will continue.”

The strike movement of health care workers in Turkey takes place as social anger against mass infections and deaths created by the official response to the pandemic is combined with an unprecedented rise in the cost of living. This movement forms part of a growing strike movement and determination to struggle within the working class.

While annual official inflation reached 21.31 percent in November, the independent Inflation Research Group (ENAgrouP) announced that real annual inflation reached 58.65 percent. The Turkish lira (TL) continues to fall against foreign currencies. The US dollar has risen from 7TL to nearly 15TL today. The monthly minimum wage, at 2,825 TL (less than US\$200), is currently the lowest in Europe on a US dollar or euro basis.

This is increasing demands for a substantial increase in minimum wage negotiations directly interesting millions of workers and their families. In addition, hundreds of thousands of educators, nearly 150,000 metal and autoworkers and other sections of the working class are demanding improvements in wages and working conditions.

The failure to take necessary scientific public health measures to end the COVID-19 pandemic and the intensifying exploitation of the working class stem from the same root cause: the unhindered drive of the capitalist ruling class to accumulate private wealth. The fact that billionaires increased their wealth by US\$3.6 trillion as millions died from the global pandemic epitomizes the criminal character of the capitalist system.

Measures necessary to stop the pandemic—temporary closure of schools and nonessential workplaces with social supports for all affected workers, combined with mass testing, contact tracing, the safe isolation of infected patients, the provision of high-quality masks, the rapid vaccination of the world population and other public health measures—and the steps to be taken to protect and improve the lives and conditions of the working class, require a frontal assault on the wealth of the bourgeoisie.

This struggle, which is an integral part of the fight for socialism and workers’ power, can only succeed by developing a workers’ movement internationally, independent of all pro-capitalist parties and trade unions.

On May 1, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) called for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). It recently launched the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic to develop such a movement globally, calling upon all scientists, health care workers, working people and youth to support and join the IWA-RFC and the Inquest.

The burgeoning strike movement among health care workers shows that a counteroffensive by the international working class is emerging. This strike movement must be unified and take the active support of broad sections of the working population internationally, forming independent rank-and-file committees in hospitals, factories and other workplaces in a struggle for socialism.

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