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 Erdo?an’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, Erdo?an’s spokesperson, ?brahim Kal?n, 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 (?S?G) 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 (D?SK) also published a report on the outbreak among its members. It found that by April 17, 2.8 per thousand D?SK members had fallen ill, compared to 0.9 per thousand in the Turkish population overall. At least 378 D?SK members are positive; four have died. Hasan O?uz (33), a construction worker and workplace representative at Galataport site in Istanbul, was one of them.

Though it has approximately 135,000 members, D?SK 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, D?SK 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 have brought under control the
pandemic’s spread across Turkey, yesterday Erdo?an
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, Erdo?an’s main priority is to contain not
COVID-19, but the threat from below. Erdo?an 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.