

Turkish Trotskyists call for independent working class action against the pandemic

By Sosyalist E?itlik (in solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International)
5 June 2020

The coronavirus pandemic continues to exact a horrific toll in the Middle East, especially in Turkey and Iran. In Turkey, more than 165,000 people have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and the death toll is approaching 5,000. Iran, under crippling US-led sanctions, has seen a new outbreak with nearly 3,000 new cases and 80 deaths every day. Populations in countries like Syria and Yemen face a medical system that cannot properly diagnose and monitor the sick, let alone treat them, because their health care infrastructure has been virtually destroyed by decades of imperialist war.

Globally, the coronavirus has killed nearly 380,000 people and infected more than 6 million, according to official statistics that vastly understate the real impact. The contagion is accelerating rapidly in Eastern Europe, South Asia, Africa and Latin America, particularly in Brazil. Russia has the world's third-fastest growing case count after Brazil.

The coronavirus knows no national boundaries. The growth of infections in other parts of the world will inevitably impact Turkey as well. The emergence of a second outbreak in Iran after the easing of measures is a serious warning. Robert Redfield, the director of the Centers for Disease Control, told the *Financial Times* that the rapid spread in the southern hemisphere means there will likely be a flare-up again in the United States later this year. This also applies to other parts of the world.

"We've seen evidence that the concerns it would go south in the southern hemisphere like flu [are coming true]," Redfield said, "and you're seeing what's happening in Brazil now. And then when the southern hemisphere is over, I suspect it will regroup itself in the north."

These warnings, and the situation in Iran and similar countries, expose as lies claims of President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's government that the pandemic is under control. In Turkey itself, the pandemic is not under control. Official new cases have remained near 1,000 in recent weeks, and there are more than 30,000 active cases. Many scientists have predicted a "second wave" of infections due to the premature de-confinement policy pursued by the government.

According to a statement on May 28 made by Hans Kluge, the regional director of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Europe, one of the five European countries reporting the highest cumulative numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases over the past 14 days is Turkey.

The danger of a rapid acceleration in the contagion is increased by the premature and reckless "reopen the economy" and "normalization" campaign. The Erdo?an government began to lift some of its limited confinement measures at the beginning of May and virtually ended the rest on June 1, in the name of establishing a "new normal."

On June 1, intercity travel ban in Turkey was lifted. While domestic flights, intercity bus and train travel have begun, foreign flights are to resume in the second half of June. Enterprises like restaurants, patisseries, cafes and swimming pools as well as major gathering places in summer like beaches, parks, gardens, and camps have been opened. As workers return to work, daycare centers and kindergartens have reopened. Mass prayers in mosques have been allowed.

This policy has been implemented with the clear endorsement of the established opposition parties and trade unions. The establishment parties and media are creating an environment in which basic social distancing measures are being ignored.

Underlying this campaign is the concept of "herd immunity," first publicly declared by the British government but now followed by governments worldwide. This means, in practice, the abandonment of all efforts to stop the spread of the virus. Even in the country with the highest spread of the disease, Spain, only 5 percent of the people have antibodies, and there is no certainty they are safe from a second contamination. Even if that were true, "herd immunity" would require the sacrifice of at least 10 times more people. By allowing the disease to spread without constraint, the ruling class is ensuring that thousands more people will die.

The impulse for this campaign is the drive to restore the flow of corporate profits. Without a careful, scientific plan for a safe return to work, there will be an enormous increase in the rate of infection, resulting in serious illness and death.

The COVID-19 virus will spread rapidly through factories, warehouses, office buildings, shopping malls and all other places where large numbers of people congregate. There is an immense danger that workers, unknowingly infected on the job and not yet showing symptoms, will return to their homes and neighborhoods and transmit the disease to their families, loved ones and friends. Already, as a result of this malign neglect policy in Turkey, the rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases among workers is almost three times the average in the country. This policy has cost at least 103 workers' lives in April alone.

While the government has refused to publish statistical data on infected people such as location, profession, age or gender, health associations report that thousands of health workers have been infected and dozens have lost their lives due to a lack of adequate personal protective equipment.

And in an ominous sign of things to come, within days of opening auto factories, there were several reported cases of COVID-19 among workers at major production and parts plants such as Ford.

Moreover, the desperate situation facing the nearly 5 million refugees in Turkey creates the danger of a devastating outbreak among them. The Erdo?an government has left them to their fate in the face of COVID-19. Fully 63 percent of refugees had difficulty accessing food during the pandemic, and more than 88 percent reportedly had no employment, compared to 18 percent before the outbreak.

The Sosyalist E?itlik (Socialist Equality Group, SEG), in solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), opposes this reckless back-to-work campaign and the reopening of non-essential workplaces as the pandemic continues to spread. If infection, sickness and death are to be prevented, it is necessary to create new forms of workplace organization to oversee and enforce safe working conditions.

Therefore, the SEG calls on workers to form rank-and-file safety

committees in every factory, office and workplace. These committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, can formulate, implement, and oversee measures necessary to safeguard the health and lives of workers, their families and the broader community.

We cannot “return to normal” amid the pandemic! The pandemic exposes the urgent necessity of a complete restructuring of the processes of production, distribution and of economic activity in general. The lives of working people and their families must not be sacrificed in the interests of corporate profits and the private wealth of billionaire oligarchs.

In response to the demands of Erdoğan, the politicians of the major bourgeois parties and the media for the “reopening of the economy,” the question should be asked: “Whose economy?” The economy of the TÜSİAD or MÜSİAD business federations and of the richest 5 percent of the population? Or the economy of the working class, which produces all the wealth of society but lives from paycheck to paycheck—if they happen to have a job?

The Erdoğan government’s response to the pandemic

The dangerous situation confronting workers is the product of the class policy of herd immunity, that is, of deliberately allowing the virus to run unchecked throughout the population, with no vaccine available and no proof that surviving the disease grants immunity. Epidemiologists have warned for decades that a pandemic was not only possible, but inevitable. These warnings were ignored. Instead of investing in viral and bacterial research and building public hospitals, Turkish capitalists and international investors demanded the dismantling and privatization of public health infrastructure.

As the pandemic began its global spread in January and February, the concentration of the Erdoğan government and the Turkish ruling class was not on protecting lives but protecting profits. Its initial response was to try to downplay the danger and keep businesses operating as usual. In March, while Health Minister Fahrettin Koca was claiming that “Our country is prepared for this, all necessary measures to prevent the spread [of the virus] have been taken,” President Erdoğan boasted that “no virus is stronger than our measures.” But in fact, the government failed to put in place a system of mass testing, contact tracing and isolation, wasting critical time and resulting in thousands of deaths.

While it rapidly became an epicenter in the Middle East, the Turkish government never stopped non-essential industries during the pandemic, making clear that its priority is maintaining production, exports and high profits. Only cafés, restaurants, gyms, hairdressers and places of entertainment closed. Automakers had to shut their factories in March or early April, largely due to supply chain problems and a collapse in demand. Wildcat strikes by autoworkers in America and Europe intensified supply problems.

From the standpoint of the ruling class, by late March the most important action had been taken: Erdoğan announced an “Economic Stability Shield” package for business totaling 100 billion Turkish liras (US\$15 billion), later raising it to over 250 billion liras, a measure hailed by big business that must be repaid through stepped-up exploitation of the working class.

From the beginning, the Turkish bourgeoisie and government have used the pandemic as an opportunity to intensify social attacks on the working class, while forcing workers to maintain production despite a surge of COVID-19 cases in the country. In April, a new law was implemented to allow employers to put workers on unpaid leave for up to six months on just 39 lira (\$6) daily.

In line with class-war measures against the working class internationally amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the government decided that workers’ deaths and illnesses due to COVID-19 cannot be considered an occupational illness or accident. This lets employers avoid paying compensation to workers or their families if they get COVID-19 on the

job. During the pandemic, companies developed electronic fletters to monitor workers’ movements under the pretext of enforcing social distancing at work. And MÜSİAD announced a project to build “isolated production bases” to avoid stopping production amid this pandemic and continue exploiting the working class.

Moreover, millions of workers have been condemned to live on a pittance and lost their jobs. According to a Labor Ministry report at the end of May, while one group of nearly 3 million workers has received on average just 1,590 liras as short-time working allowance, another group of nearly 800,000 workers got only 500 liras on average as unpaid leave assistance thus far.

This massive social distress caused by this starving of the workers is being used to force growing number of workers to work under unsafe conditions. While billions were allocated to the rich, millions of workers have received a pittance or nothing.

While the Erdoğan government is spearheading this campaign, it has the support of the entire political establishment. The so-called opposition parties have no serious objections against the “normalization” policy and they have implemented the same policies in the local administrations, including the largest cities in Turkey such as İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir. All trade union confederations including DİSK are open accomplices of these anti-worker policies and have been exposed as tools of the capitalist class and government.

The nature of the coronavirus

The interests of two classes stand in direct opposition to each other. The aim of corporate executives and managers, acting in the interests of Turkish capitalists and international finance capital, is to increase profit and extract the largest quantity of work in the shortest amount of time. For workers, it is a question of maintaining a safe environment that ensures their health and safety.

Rank-and-file safety committees must be organized to demand and implement measures to protect workers’ lives. These measures must be based upon a scientific understanding of the nature of the disease.

The coronavirus is highly contagious and spreads through liquid droplets when people talk, breathe, cough or sneeze. People are infected when virus particles enter their mouths, noses or eyes through direct transmission or after touching a surface where the particles have fallen.

Scientists have shown that the pathogen is also present in tiny airborne particles, known as aerosols, which can be suspended in the air for longer periods and travel much farther than the recommended six feet of social distancing. The distance that the virus can travel is also affected by how loud someone is speaking.

Large factories where thousands of workers labor close to one another on an assembly line are particularly vulnerable to becoming vectors for the rapid spread of the disease. “The plant is an environment where it’s loud and people have to shout at each other to be heard; there could be a lot of virus being transmitted through the air,” Julia Heck, an epidemiologist and Adjunct Associate Professor and researcher at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Studies show that an infected person can be contagious for two or more days before showing any symptoms. Therefore, the measures being implemented in many workplaces, like daily temperature taking and handing out substandard facemasks, are inadequate. By the time someone has a high temperature, they could have spread the disease throughout the plant.

After attending a choir practice in Washington state in early March, 52 out of 61 people were diagnosed with COVID-19 and at least two died, even though they had not shaken hands or stood close to one another. In the meatpacking plants, it is widely suspected that the virus, which has infected more than 12,000 workers and killed more than 50, is spread

through high-pressure air conditioners that shoot airborne particles through an enclosed area.

In addition to the danger workers face when they congregate to enter and leave plants, or during meal and bathroom breaks, workers on an assembly line, in a warehouse or in a retail business are handling the same tools and moving products. The virus can remain on surfaces for varied times: metal (five days), glass (up to five days), plastics (two-three days), stainless steel (two-three days), cardboard (24 hours) and aluminum (two-eight hours).

The tasks of rank-and-file safety committees

What will be the function of rank-and-file safety committees?

They will represent and fight for the safety of workers, in opposition to the demands of management and the profit principle. They will draw up detailed regulations and standards that must be monitored and enforced. Where conditions are violated, there must be a stoppage of work.

Core objectives of these committees should be:

1. Controlling work hours and line speeds. In every factory, business, office and workplace, rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with a panel of trusted scientists and health experts, must determine working conditions and production rates and schedules. Working hours and line speeds must be reduced to allow for sufficient rest, health care monitoring and regular deep cleaning.

2. Guaranteeing personal protective equipment. Each worker should be properly fitted with the *highest quality* facemasks (including N-95, N-100 or P-100, according to conditions) as well as gloves, face shields and other necessary PPE. These must be regularly changed out, to make sure they continue to provide maximum protection. Workers should also undergo training for donning and removing PPE.

3. Ensuring safe and comfortable working conditions. Of concern is not only the amount of protective equipment. To be safe, workers must be able to wear protective equipment for extended periods of time. All plants must have adequate air conditioning and ventilation, particularly with the beginning of summer, that is organized in such a way that it does not contribute to the spread of the virus.

4. Enforcing regular testing. All workers must have access to regular testing for the coronavirus. Production schedules must be organized to accommodate testing and contact tracing. If a worker tests positive, the facility must be closed for at least 48 hours for deep cleaning.

5. Demanding universal health care and guaranteed income. Any worker who tests positive must be isolated and provided immediate medical treatment, while his or her full income is guaranteed. All workers who came in contact with the infected workers must be quarantined and regularly tested, while receiving their full income. In addition, if anyone's family members report symptoms, the worker should be tested and isolated until cleared by a medical professional—with no loss of pay.

6. Ensuring the distribution of information. To preserve their safety, workers must have access to all information about infected workers so that appropriate measures can be taken, including halting production if necessary. Management at Amazon and other corporations have deliberately concealed information about coworkers testing positive and terminated workers who have exposed unsafe conditions.

7. Ensuring job security. No worker should be victimized for calling attention to unsafe working conditions or refusing to work. Any worker who has been fired for speaking out against unsafe conditions must be rehired with full back pay.

What will be the cost of implementing this program? Who will pay for it?

The working class cannot be made to pay for ensuring its safety. The costs necessary to ensure safe working conditions, as well as to provide health care and full income for all workers, must be borne by the

corporations and the capitalist ruling elite.

The maintenance of a safe working environment is an immensely complex task that can only be achieved through a scientific and rational plan, in active consultation with health care experts in every workplace.

No confidence can be placed in corporate management to secure workers' safety. Nor can workers rely on the trade unions. Only a small minority of workers is unionized, and the unions that do exist function as little more than arms of corporate management. They support the return to work and are collaborating with the companies to enforce it.

This is why workers require their own organizations. In every factory, workplace, and office, workers should organize and elect trusted and respected workers who will represent them. They should utilize all available tools, including social media, to reach out to workers throughout their industry and in other sectors to coordinate their activities and share information.

A critical task of these committees is to organize workers internationally. In every country, there are a growing number of strikes and job actions by nurses, meatpacking, transit, auto and other workers demanding safe conditions.

The fight for socialism

The mobilization of the resources of society against the pandemic requires scientific planning, which at every point comes into conflict with the pursuit of private profit and individual wealth.

The SEG insists that the fight against the pandemic is inseparably linked to a struggle of workers against the ruling class—the corporate and financial oligarchy—and its dictatorship over economic and political life. It is, therefore, a fight against capitalism and for socialism, the restructuring of society on the basis of social need, not private profit.

This is by its very nature a global struggle. The pandemic is a world problem and can only be fought through the international collaboration of workers and all those committed to defending human life. In the fight against the pandemic, workers must reject all efforts to divide them along racial, ethnic and national lines.

The pandemic has exposed the reality and bankruptcy of the capitalist system, which is a barrier to human progress and the very survival of the human species. The response of the ruling class to the pandemic will produce enormous social opposition and resistance.

A socialist political leadership in the working class must be built! The Socialist Equality Group in Turkey is fighting to build that leadership as part of an international movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The Socialist Equality Group and the *World Socialist Web Site* will provide all the assistance it can to workers who want to establish rank-and-file safety committees. We urge all workers to study the program of the International Committee and make the decision to join us.

Please contact us and receive updates on the pandemic and working class struggles. We also ask workers to submit reports on conditions in their workplaces. All requests for anonymity will be honored.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>