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## **Turkish health workers on two-day nationwide strike after murder of Dr Ekrem Karakaya**

Yesterday, Ekrem Karakaya, a cardiologist at Konya City Hospital, was killed while on duty in an armed attack by Hacı Mehmet Akçay, a relative of a patient. The assailant committed suicide after the murder.



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

After the murder, hospital staff stopped work. Physicians and health workers organizations such as the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), Hekimsen and SES unions are stopping work today and tomorrow in protest. They blame the government, which they correctly

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hold responsible for increasing attacks on health care workers and are demanding that necessary measures be taken.

The *World Socialist Web Site* condemns this attack and calls for the preparation of a mass political movement in the working class in defence of health workers. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government, and governments across Europe and the Middle East, have contempt for the needs of health care workers and the working class as a whole. Amid a new upsurge of COVID-19, it is essential for all workers and youth to mobilize in solidarity with health workers in this critical fight.

Hekimsen, which has approximately 20,000 members, said in a statement: "Our union has decided to take action for 2 days (July 7 - July 8, 2022) all over Turkey. We will discuss with our stakeholders about what to do after the Eid al-Adha."

The TTB, which has around 110,000 members, held a press conference, announcing its support for the two-day strike. In a statement titled "We are sorry, we are furious! We will hold those responsible to account," TTB officials stated: "As the Turkish Medical Association, we have repeatedly warned the government against the widening spiral of violence. We have repeatedly explained that violence in health care sector is not an isolated issue, but a social and political problem."

Stressing that they had demanded action be taken and the law be amended to address increased armed or physical attacks on health care institutions, the TTB accused the government of ignoring its warnings. It said: "The source of violence was detached from its social context, and the problem was reduced to individuals."

It continued: "The entire responsibility of the health system, which is collapsing in every sense, is placed on the shoulders of physicians and health care workers. This situation causes us to become targets, and the policies carried out in the field of health come back to us in the form of violence, death, helplessness and hopelessness."

The TTB emphasized the responsibility of President Erdoğan himself, who has increasingly targeted physicians and health care workers recently: "We call out to those who told us to let them go, today a colleague of ours has died. You are also responsible!"

The brutal murder of Dr. Karakaya outraged hundreds of thousands of health care workers and broader layers of working people. After the murder became known, the social media topics were almost entirely devoted to this issue. Both health care workers and many of their supporters criticized the decision of health care unions and TTB to strike for only two days and called for an “indefinite strike.”

The government’s initial reactions to the murder only deepened public anger. Health Minister Fahrettin Koca, who is thoroughly discredited for his policy of mass infection and death in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, was widely criticized for his vague statement on Twitter. Demands are mounting for his resignation.

Koca wrote: “A security guard from Konya Yunak District State Hospital shot a fellow physician at Konya City Hospital and took his life. He also died in the incident. Judicial authorities are continuing their investigations into this horrifying criminal act.”

Concerned that the political and social causes of the murder are being discussed by millions, the government imposed a gag order on reporting on the murder in a Konya court. Thousands of people nevertheless discussed the issue on social media.

Since December last year, physicians and health workers have gone on strike across Turkey almost every month to demand better wages and benefits, making them one of the most combative sections of the working class. One of their main demands was the adoption of deterrent legal measures against dozens of daily incidents of violence in health institutions.

Recent press reports reveal how the government’s targeting and impunity for physical attacks encourage new attacks on health care workers. On Monday, Prof. Koray Başar, a former President of the Psychiatric Association of Turkey, was physically attacked by an organized group.

Yesterday, before the murder, the SES union in Bursa issued a press release on another act of violence, stating: “Unfortunately, our physician friend working at Duaçınarı Oral and Dental Hospital has been subjected to constant threats and verbal violence by a patient and has no security of life.”

On April 15, which was declared “Day of Struggle against Violence in Health Care Sector” by the TTB, Süleyman Kaynak, an official of the Izmir Medical Chamber, shared the latest data on the situation. “Dr. Ersin Arslan and 10 other colleagues killed in the last 20 years were taken from us not only by angry patients and relatives, but also by the severe problems of the current health care system,” he said.

According to Kaynak, the number of acts of violence against health care workers “increased from 11,942 in 2020 to 29,826 in 2021. According to a survey conducted by the TTB, 84 percent of physicians have been subjected to physical or verbal violence at least once in their professional lives.” This means an average of 81 violent incidents per day.

The statement continued: “The government’s policies in the field of health care service have returned to physicians in the form of violence, death, despair and hopelessness, and working conditions have become unbearable” and that physicians have resigned, retired or left the country in response.

This year alone, around 1,000 Turkish physicians have gone abroad. According to the Hekimsen union, “approximately 9,000 doctors have resigned from the public service in the last 20 months; nearly 2,000 of them have gone abroad or are about to leave.”

Kaynak concluded his statement, stating: “Without acknowledging the root causes of violence in health care system, that is, without improving the living conditions of citizens, the working conditions of physicians, without changing the health care system that does not prioritize public health, a mere violence law cannot permanently solve violence in health.”

The murder of Dr. Karakaya and the increasing attacks on health care workers in Turkey can only be understood in the context of the deepening crisis of the capitalist system as a whole.

For nearly two decades, the Erdoğan government and capitalist governments internationally have subordinated health care to the profit interests of corporations, gutting public health while also massively impoverishing the working class amid deepening social

inequality. Militarism is relentlessly glorified, police violence against social protests commonplace, and basic democratic rights completely disregarded.

All this took place as entire societies were destroyed, millions were killed and tens of millions were made refugees by imperialist wars across the Middle East in the last three decades. The struggle of doctors and health care workers to ensure their safety and decent living conditions is an integral part of the struggle of the international working class against the existing capitalist social system and for socialism.