

Two wars, one victory

Levent Dölek

Social life in Turkey has undergone a fundamental transformation within days after March 11 when the first official Coronavirus (Covid-19) case was announced. As the epidemic has dictated its rules, the number of cases has amounted to 50.000 in one month. It has been preached since almost from the beginning that Coronavirus is a class-blind disease, exemplifying the celebrities, artists, sportspersons, and politicians diagnosed positive with Coronavirus, and featuring the wealthy classes who are under self-quarantine in their mansions. That is, however, a delusion being debunked every day by the reality itself that the epidemic further sharpens the class antagonism.

Class characteristics of the epidemic are two-folded. The first is that the epidemic inflicts more severe and devastating effects on the laboring and poor classes. The second is related to how to deal with the epidemic. The struggle led by the bourgeoisie against Coronavirus is crippled by the fact that the interests of the capitalist class prevail over the dire need of scientific measures required for the society to survive the epidemic.

The most common symptom: Unemployment

For an affluent minority, calls such as “Stay at home” and “Life fits home” may just sound as warnings. For those who have to work to afford their life, on the contrary, they are the harbinger of unemployment. Thousands of service workers have lost their jobs as a result of the contraction of the industry. Shopkeepers having closed down their businesses were left with no means to pay their debts back. Workers sent home for self-quarantine have been granted short-time working

payment, which is just 60 percent of their actual wages. Those allowed paid leave are unsure if they would receive their wages next month. Professionals whose jobs are suited for working from home may have not faced income losses, but the near future remains bleak for them, too. At the first glance, working from home may seem a privilege, however, we know very well that white-collar personnel is the first to be jettisoned to retrench costs as had it happened in the crisis of 2001 and of 2008-2009.

Turkey succumbed to the Coronavirus epidemic as it has been going through an economic crisis. A report released by the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey [TOBB in Turkish acronym] on April 6 stated that the seasonally-adjusted rate of unemployment has reached 15% by January 2020. That figure does not cover mass lay-offs induced by the epidemic. When considered that approximately 145.000 workplaces are shut down temporarily or permanently, it is not hard to foresee that millions of unemployed workers would join the ranks of the reserve army of labor. Under the current circumstances, commuting for work is as much a threat as staying jobless at home because, no matter how robust the precautions are, it risks contracting the virus, and thus infecting your family. That is why laborers still at work have raised the demand of being allowed paid leave alongside, when Coronavirus cases are detected at the workplaces, going on de facto strikes for more measures to be taken.

The cause betrayed!

A struggle, which is led by the bourgeoisie, and fought by the working class at the fronts, is going on against the epidemic. The cause is just, but the leadership is traitor! Judging from historical experience, it is not something surprising. That is not to say that the bourgeoisie has done nothing to cope with the epidemic. However, the measures it has taken never extend beyond prioritizing its own interests over humanity's survival. Boris Johnson's "herd immunity" proposal revealed that the bourgeoisie would never hesitate to be allied even with a virus against humanity. They had the nerve to try to deceive people into believing that that barbaric proposal, which was aimed in essence at reducing the costs of social benefits by letting the old die, was the best option, notwithstanding that they later about-faced when they realized that political burden would be too big to shoulder if their plan resulted in a slaughter. As we were penning this article, Boris Johnson, the self-proclaimed "Shepherd" of the UK, was still under intensive care due to Coronavirus symptoms. That is like an omen portending that a calamity is imminent if we let the bourgeoisie fool us!

An anti-Coronavirus vaccine or drug is yet to be discovered. It is told that it may take one and a half year. During that period, it is possible to minimize death toll and social destruction by implementing the rule of social distancing to decelerate the pace of the infection; procuring the treatment-required drugs and medical materials; providing health workers with the equipment they need; planning how to produce and distribute the basic and vital goods and services. There is, nonetheless, an obstacle we have to overcome to apply those measures: capitalism itself!

The coronavirus epidemic as a test for Turkish capitalism

Markets vs. planning, profit vs. needs, and private vs. public ownership, all those deep-rooted contradictions have surfaced in every country tackling the virus. In Turkey, the government's first move was to launch a stimulus and support package worth of 100 billion Turkish Liras to compensate for the losses of the capitalist class. Even the "short-time working payment" itself, which is the only tangible step taken in favor of the working class, prioritizes the interests of the bosses. That measure enables the businesses, which either terminate their operations or decrease their production levels, to retain their workers by paying them less than usual. The 60 percent of workers' gross wages are recompensed from the "unemployment insurance fund" in return for deductions to be made in their unemployment benefits when they are eligible to claim. The relevant law entitles the President to revoke the deductions, but, unsurprisingly, Erdogan has never attempted to enforce that power.

The government further leveraged the epidemic to help the capitalist class tighten its grip on workers by introducing "obligatory unpaid leave", which has so far been prohibited by law. The amendment touted under the guise of forbidding lay-offs confers on the bourgeoisie the advantages, respectively, of forcing workers to take leaves with no payment, and only with a benefit recompensed at the lowest level from the unemployment insurance fund, and of dodging from paying seniority indemnity and in lieu of notice in the case of dismissal.

The working class, which has had to commute for work via shuttles and public transportation vehicles, and who has had to work risking their lives because their workplaces, except some, has not been rearranged in accordance with the rule of social distancing, remains a "colossal exception" to the call "stay at home". Although a curfew was imposed for citizens aged 18-20 alongside the old over 65, the workers in the first category were exempted for the sake of profit from it the day after. That the former lives mostly with their grandparents, the most riskiest group, has aggravated the viral hazard and thus paving the way for Coronavirus to rampage through Turkey, which has for a while been ranked first among other countries by the pace of the infection.

Capitalism puts up barricades before health workers, patients, and clients who need hospitals equipped well enough to fight the virus. Our health workers suffer the lack of personal protective tools, which has caused the number of Coronavirus-diagnosed nurses and doctors to swiftly increase (it is difficult to estimate the actual figure because health workers have been tested sporadically and non-comprehensively). The government boasting about being one of the leading countries in the textile industry resorted desperately to the vocational high schools to produce protective masks. Production of ventilators and intensive-care equipment is left completely at the mercy of the private sector. The Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca, who owns a chain of private hospitals, and whose appointment was a manifestation of Erdogan's desire to form a cabinet consisting of the private sector representatives who would govern the country like a corporation, let alone not mobilizing his facilities to deal with the pandemic although it is a statutory obligation, leveraged the disease to attract those patients who have not received proper treatment at the public hospitals because they have been focused thoroughly

on Coronavirus. Erdogan preferred converting two airports into hospitals instead of forcing the private hospitals, which have half of the total intensive-care beds, to deploy their unutilized capacity.

The first month of the epidemic in Turkey clearly showed that markets and profits being prevalent over planning and needs has undermined our capabilities to struggle against the epidemic.

Class politics against coronavirus

Then it is fair to say that the anti-epidemic fight has gained a political dimension, meaning that it has been intertwined with the one against capitalism. The working class, who has perseveringly straddled both fronts, that is, the provision of and the production and distribution of goods and services, should take the lead of that struggle. That undeniable truth poses the question of taking power. To become triumphant over the epidemic without allowing it to wreak societal havoc, the proletariat needs to seize the state power to smash the shackles of private property and markets so that productive forces can be employed in full capacity in favor of the society.

The most striking manifestation of that need is unemployment. Although it is now perceived as a natural fact stemming from the epidemic, the moments of crisis indeed require that all labor power socially available be mobilized. In a society where labor power is no longer a commodity sold and bought in the market, mass lockdowns caused by epidemics do not lead to unemployment, but an excessive demand for labor power. This is because the rule of social distancing entails production to be carried on by scheduling more shifts, in which lesser workers will be employed for lesser hours. New investments to be made to retain the level of production, the need to produce some goods and services more than usual due to the epidemic, the inevitable changes in the consumption habits, and the requirement of a wider distribution network will also increase the demand for labor. It is only the socialist alternative that can fulfill those tasks properly.

Preaching that the socialist alternative is the only solution is in itself not enough, though. To make masses recognize that alternative necessitates taking concrete actions beyond reading the piles of books and articles or following training courses. We should formulate such demands corresponding to workers' daily needs that they spark a mass workers' mobilization aimed at transcending the capitalist system. The extraordinary circumstances engendered by the epidemic dictate us to advance the class struggle to the end because it is the only way to defeat Coronavirus, keeping masses safe from a physical and economic catastrophe. Whoever seeks reconciliation with the bourgeoisie and calls on it for bestowing compassion upon workers, laborers, and the poor trails a regressive utopia.

The divergence between the petty-bourgeois left and proletarian socialism

The epidemic brought with it a cleavage between the petty-bourgeois left and proletarian socialism, the former of which has been inclined to treat the epidemic-induced social problems as ones rooted primarily in the unequal distribution of

wealth that they proposed would be solved by a solidarity network. However, once the naked truth of being incompetent quantitatively to organize such a large network emerged, they hastened to align behind the CHP and began to demand that the Party-run municipalities undertake more responsibilities. That political line has also restricted its opposition only with criticizing the AKP's attempts to monopolize the social benefit instruments. While it was the quickest to adjust itself to the call for "stay at home", and transferred all its publications and political activities, even the protests and press releases having been organized just for the sake of appearances, into digital sphere accordingly, it has become more and more distanced from the struggles waged by the working class in the hospitals, factories, and warehouses.

For the proletarian socialism, confining its political activities into four walls is no option because even if a comprehensive lockdown is to be imposed, an overwhelming majority of the proletariat still has to leave their homes to work.

So the proletarian socialists should stand shoulder by shoulder with the working class in their vehement struggle against the epidemic and for earning a livelihood, as how naïve and futile it is to strive to persuade the bosses to treat workers benevolently is understood better each day. They have turned a deaf ear to the workers' demands both for being allowed paid leave with full wage and for more measures to be taken, except handing some sops intended to appease their indignation. The task of the proletarian socialists is to convince the proletariat of using the only instrument it is left with, that is, de facto strikes. If workers do not resort to that means, they will keep working until their turn to be infected by the virus.

If production has decreased at a certain workplace, due to the conditions created by the epidemic, workers' power that comes from production certainly decreases. At this point, the workers' demand for living comes to the fore. The state helps the bosses with the application of "short-time working allowance". It pays 60 percent of the workers' wages from the unemployment insurance fund, which is also formed by deductions from workers' wages. The bosses both get rid of the wage burden and have the opportunity to manage the process in a manner that will more easily adapt to the normal production structure after the epidemic. The workers' response to this situation is to fight again to make the remaining 40 percent of the wage to be paid by the boss.

From de facto strikes to workers' control

However, since bosses do and will retaliate to de facto strikes by refusing to pay wages, and de facto strikes will lose their viability after a while, workers have to advance their struggles into taking the workplaces under their control to be able both to keep themselves safe from the epidemic and to afford their life. Workers' control will assume a specific form under viral circumstances. Production will be rearranged to meet urgent needs such as health materials, ventilators, protective equipment, etc. The process of workplaces being taken under control by workers will result in nationalization. The former will entail a well-planned division of labor among factories and workplaces that will be applied through the coordination of the chambers of engineers, and of medicine, trade unions of health workers, and hospital-based committees. The workers' control will also bring in question the

issue of what class should and can lead the anti-viral struggle.

From committees to workers' power

That is what is placed at the center of the political orientation adopted by the Revolutionary Workers' Party since the beginning of the epidemic. Hospitals are at the forefront of the class struggle. Hospital committees will show that workers' control is the only way to save the healthcare system, which is collapsing into chaos. When those committees seize the steering wheel of the anti-epidemic fight, the private hospitals will be confiscated immediately to be put at the service of public health. Factories are where the permanent solution lies because production is at the heart of the crisis. Revolutionary workers should organize the walk-outs, mobilize other workers, and put pressure on the bosses to produce healthcare materials. If the madness of stocking we have witnessed at the beginning of the epidemic recurs in a more chaotic form due to the deepening of the crisis, the workers' control will be the only solution to the problem of distribution of goods and services. Neither municipalities nor political parties and solidarity networks can intervene in as effectively as the workers themselves. Especially the workers' committees to be formed at the warehouses run by the giant monopoly retailers will play a crucial role in overcoming the crisis.

The most revolutionary militants of the youth have refused to stay at home and to confine the struggle into social media. Instead of joining the distant-learning sessions, they have preferred preparing projects intended to redesign the production process in line with the crucial need for health-related tools and materials, with the help of the chambers of mechanical, electrical, industrial, and textile engineers. 5 thousand biologists declare that they volunteer to join the teams applying the tests. Those initiatives may not in themselves be meaningful. However, if they are organized in a manner that would correlate individual spheres based on the requirements of the class struggle, they could serve as an example of what a social mobilization under the leadership of the proletariat will look like.

The working class, which has combated tirelessly to vanquish the epidemic at the expense of their life, needs to unite the nation under its leadership to defeat the malicious and failed bourgeoisie. When we achieve that goal, we will have one win for two wars!

18 April 2020