

Tenth anniversary of the death of 301 miners in the Soma disaster in Turkey

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Today marks the 10th anniversary of the Soma massacre, the worst mining disaster in Turkey's history. On May 13, 2014, 301 miners lost their lives in a fire caused by a methane gas explosion at a coal mine in Soma, Manisa, Turkey.

The last decade has witnessed a deepening of the ruling elite's disregard for the safety of workers for the sake of capitalist profit, let alone the necessary occupational safety measures, in Turkey and around the world.

This disaster could have been prevented. As the World Socialist Web Site explained, the catastrophe in Soma “was not an unexplainable ‘accident’ but the inevitable result of privatization, government neglect and the capitalist profit system, which sacrifices the lives and limbs of millions of industrial workers around the world every year.”

As it slashed coal-mining costs from \$140 to \$23.80 per ton over the decade since the privatization of the mine, Soma Kumur refused to buy standard security equipment to monitor methane gas levels. That equipment would have prevented the blast.

It was only with the complicity of the trade union apparatus and the government of then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that the Soma mine easily passed the sloppy safety inspections, despite a series of accidents.

At the end of 2013, miners widely protested against the dangerous working conditions in the country. Despite this the Turkish parliament had rejected a proposal to investigate the safety of the mine just twenty days before the disaster.

In the aftermath of the disaster, statements by the authorities at the highest level made clear that those responsible would not be punished and that more accidents at work—in reality, murders at work—awaited workers.

Amid the mass protests that erupted across the country, Erdoğan clung to the discourse of “fate”, as he does after

every major workplace killing, saying after Soma: “These are normal things. There is an event in literature that is called an industrial accident. It is in the nature of this business. There is no such thing as never having an accident”.

Show trials

The workers' families and lawyers have been fighting for justice for years. At the end of the trial, those responsible went unpunished or received symbolic sentences. The trial of 51 people, five of whom were arrested, ended in July 2018. 37 people were acquitted, while 14 defendants were convicted of “recklessly causing death and injury”.

Can Gürkan, chairman of the board of directors of Soma Coal Enterprises, was released on 18 April 2019; executives Ramazan Do?ru, Ak?n Çelik and ?smail Adal? were released in February 2021 after their sentences were deemed sufficient, leaving no defendants in prison in the Soma case.

In 2016, an expert report stated that the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources and the Ministry of Labor and Social Security were negligent and at fault. But no one from the responsible authorities has been sentenced.

As a result of long efforts, almost 10 years after the disaster, 28 officials, mostly labour inspectors from the then Ministry of Labour and Social Security, were charged with negligence in the incident.

The families' lawyers say this will be a show trial of public officials. In a statement outside the Soma courthouse after the hearing, Ümit Rona, president of the Manisa Bar Association said: “Unfortunately, justice, which should have come running, is trying to inch along...

after 9 years and 360 days with this first hearing.”

Increase in preventable disasters in the mining sector

According to the 2010 report of the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV), Turkey ranked first in the world in terms of deaths from mining accidents. In China, one of the world's largest coal producers, the number of deaths per 100 million tonnes of production in 2008 was 127, while in Turkey it was 722. In the United States, between one and six people died per 100 million tonnes of production.

Since 1941, more than three thousand people have been killed and more than 100 thousand injured in mining accidents in Turkey. After the Soma mine disaster, the number of accidents continued to rise. To list the most important ones:

- On October 28, 2014, 18 workers died due to flooding in a coal mine in Ermenek district of Karaman

- On November 17, 2016, 16 workers died because of an accident in a copper mine in the Sivrihisar district of Siirt

- On October 14, 2022, 42 workers died due to a gas explosion in a mine in Amasra district of Bartın

- On February 13, 2024, 9 workers lost their lives due to a massive landslide in the gold mine of the Anadoluhisari company owned by the US-based Canadian SRR Mining in the Kizilirmak district of Erzincan province

According to “The World Counts” website, at least 15,000 miners are killed every year worldwide, based on official data.

That this massive slaughter of workers continues despite the current level of scientific and technical progress is the result of decades of social counter-revolution. While the bourgeoisie, under the leadership of President Ronald Reagan in the US and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Britain, imposed class-war measures against workers all over the world, the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991 marked a turning point in the degradation of the social conditions of the international working class.

Measures that began to be implemented in Turkey in the aftermath of the NATO-backed military coup in 1980 have escalated, especially in the period of Erdoğan's governments.

Since Erdoğan's International Monetary Fund-backed

economic “reforms” throughout the 2000s have given the rights to the country's coal resources to private companies. This means more than a third of coal extraction previously carried out by state-owned companies have been taken over by private subcontractors. Under the demand of global commodity markets and stock exchanges, the new owners have slashed spending, including for safety, to boost profits and investor returns. This entire process was only possible with the complicity of the trade unions.

Lives before profits

Disasters like Soma and other industrial accidents are an indictment of the capitalist system. The current level of scientific and technical development makes it possible to mine under the democratic control of the working class without compromising the safety of any worker.

In its insatiable drive for profit and personal fortune, the ruling classes around the world return to the conditions of brutal exploitation, child labour and industrial carnage that prevailed in the industrialized countries more than a century ago. Occupational safety measures are seen as a cost factor. Their indifference to human lives was strikingly evident in their “profits before lives” response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which killed more than 27 million people.

The normalisation of death by the ruling classes worldwide finds another striking expression in their support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza and the reckless escalation of the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, which risks a nuclear apocalypse.

The only way to end the slaughter of workers in workplaces around the world, imperialist war and genocide, is through the international political mobilisation of the working class, to end the subordination of life to the capitalist profit system and the nation state and to build socialism.



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