

Turkish trade union leader murdered

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On the night of the August 6, Turkish trade union leader Semsî Denizer was shot dead in front of his house in the mountain province of Zonguldak. Denizer was hit with 14 gun shots. He was the leader of the Turkish miners union, *Genel Maden-İs*, and general secretary of the biggest and most influential of the Turkish trade union umbrella organisations, *Türk-İs*.

Thousands of workers marched through the town on the occasion of his burial, calling for a general strike. Politicians and most of the major newspapers called for an investigation into the background of the case. The conservative interior minister, Tantan, convened a committee of inquiry.

At the same time, it was said the murder was a criminal act without any political motive. The confessed culprit gave himself up to the police immediately after the crime. He made a number of contradictory statements, saying first he “wanted to be famous”, then declaring he had blackmailed Denizer without success, and adding the union official owed him \$150. The gunman had been previously convicted of murder, but had served just four and a half years of his sentence.

Union leaders implied there were other factors at work. At the end of the 80s the mines in the mountain area of Zonguldak were privatised despite widespread protests by the workforce. Mumtaz Soysal, the former parliamentary deputy from Zonguldak and presently the columnist for the conservative newspaper *Hürriyet*, indicated there were irregularities in the sale of the mines.

Dubious businessmen with close links to the mafia had enriched themselves acquiring mines at rock bottom prices and then employing non-union labour at low wages. The unions did virtually nothing to prevent the privatisation. Under the leadership of Denizer they organised a number of protest spectacles, including in 1991 a march by miners from Zonguldak to the Turkish

capital of Ankara.

A Turkish correspondent of the *Jungen Welt* newspaper reported on August 10: “Since 1989 and the privatisation of the pits, dubious employers accused of links to the Turkish underworld and the fascist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) have acquired increasing influence. In the recent period MHP thugs, better known as the Grey Wolves, have remained in the town, presumably receiving their instructions from the private mine owners.

“When one considers that opponents of privatisation who are calling for re-nationalisation have been threatened and intimidated by MHP members, one cannot merely dismiss as speculation the claim that there were political and economic motives behind the murder. For some years the trade union led by Denizer, *Genel Maden-İs*, has organised campaigns against the privatisation of the pits and relations between the mine owners and trade union representatives can hardly be described as friendly.”

In recent weeks the working population of Turkey has evinced mounting discontent over the economic and social policies of Social Democratic Prime Minister Ecevit, who heads a coalition government with the conservative ANAP party and the fascist MHP. Particularly unpopular are measures to slash wages for public service workers, constitutional changes to facilitate privatisation and foreign investment, and moves to raise the age of retirement by 10 years. These measures coincide with a proposed reform of the tax laws that will benefit the employers.

The International Monetary Fund and Western banks have insisted on such steps as a prerequisite for new credits. Another factor impelling the government to press ahead with its pro-business programme is Turkey's effort to achieve membership in the European Union. In light of the country's low levels of investment combined with high indebtedness and inflation, the

Turkish bourgeoisie considers implementation of the “free market” policies demanded by the West to be essential.

Members of the ANAP and the MHP-Grey Wolves occupy various ministries involved in the “reform” of the economic and social system (e.g., Economy, Labour and Social Insurance, Finance, Health, Agriculture, etc.). The Grey Wolves are notorious for their decades-long history of terror attacks against the workers movement. Since Ecevit took office, MHP members have participated in an Economic and Social Council (ESC), together with representatives of the employers and the trade unions, to provide advice on the design and implementation of various “reforms”.

For their part, the unions have not rejected the “reforms” in principle. They merely call for a few concessions, the better to sell the package as a whole to the workers. Under conditions where the government is not prepared to concede an inch and the impoverished population is openly hostile to further “market economy reforms”, the unions have felt impelled to organise a few protests.

On a number of occasions the unions have threatened to withdraw from the ESC and call a one-day general strike. At the same time they seek to encourage moods of nationalism, accusing the government of “betraying the principles of Kemal Ataturk” (the founder of the Turkish state), “surrender[ing] Turkey's national sovereignty” and “selling out the country”. The government counters by invoking its “national responsibility” at a time of economic crisis.

The one-time left-wing and militant alternative to *Türk-İs*, the umbrella organisation DISK, allowed the leader of the *Virtue Party* (VP), Recai Kutan, to announce his opposition to the reforms from the union's headquarters. The VP has the biggest opposition fraction in parliament, but as an Islamic organisation it is confronted with restrictions and threats to its legality. However the government, in order to implement the changes it desires in the constitution, is obliged to secure votes from VP legislators.

Last Friday Ecevit announced a decree allowing public service employees to organise in a trade union. In practice they have had this right for years, although they are denied the legal right to strike.

Representatives of the “Platform for Labour” were able to bring together the most important trade union

and professional groups in a show of good will toward the government. The unions postponed the planned general strike and continued talks with the government.

Denizer was murdered shortly after this decision. At the same time the VP departed from their traditional position and agreed to support the government's “reform” programme. Turkish newspapers presume that the price for the party's agreement is permission for the party's spiritual leader, Necmettin Erbakan—up to now banned from serving as a deputy—to enter parliament as an “independent”. The reform package is to be decided on in the course of the week.

Under the circumstances, it is quite possible, if not likely, that the government coalition party MHP and the mafia were involved in the murder. The killing would have served to intimidate the unions in the midst of the current talks and settle old scores.

It is hardly to be expected that the real background to the assassination will ever be made public. In recent years the intermeshing of the Turkish state with mafia bands and fascists was to some extent visible. But as his first measure in office, the interior minister Tantan changed the leadership of the police in Ankara, which had been taken over by a number of regular mafia gangsters. The new police chief is known above all for allegedly severely torturing several youth. No one should be surprised, therefore, when Tantan says he can see no political or mafia background to the killing of Denizer.

As far as the unions are concerned, this is not sufficient reason to step up their protests or attack the government. They will continue to sit together with the employers and fascist ministers in the ESC. They hope to extract from the death of Denizer a few concessions which can be of help in undermining and selling out the protests before they get out of control.



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