

Explosion at Turkish coal mine kills at least 238

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14 May 2014

At least 238 miners are dead and 80 more hospitalized, including four in a serious condition, after an explosion yesterday at a coal mine in the town of Soma in western Turkey. Desperate rescue attempts are still ongoing to save more than 100 miners trapped underground by the explosion, which was reportedly caused by an electrical fault in one of the mine's power distributors.

Speaking early this morning, Energy Minister Taner Yildiz said 787 people were working inside the mine at the time of the explosion. Some 100 rescuers and dozens of ambulances and hospitals were rushed to the scene after the explosion, and thousands of family members gathered around the mine.

With smoke continuing to rise from the scene of the disaster, state security forces are streaming into the town of Soma and have erected barricades, apparently in preparation for crowd-control operations.

As of this writing, rescue teams were still pumping oxygen into the mine and working to extract the miners trapped inside, perhaps as deep as 6,500 feet below ground. Those trapped underground are at risk of death from carbon monoxide poisoning if they are not brought to the surface within hours.

Officials warned that the death toll could still mount substantially. Energy Minister Yidiz said hopes for a successful rescue were "dimming." He added, "We fear that the numbers could rise further."

Miners blamed the disaster on the absence of safety procedures and the drive for profit at the massive mine. It has reserves of over 125 million tons and yields some 2 million tons annually, making it one of the largest lignite sources on the planet.

One miner at Soma, Oktay Berrin, told AFP: "There is no security in this mine. The unions are just puppets and our management only cares about money."

A member of parliament from the region, Özgür Özel of the Kemalist opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), said that 10 safety inspections had discovered 66 safety infractions at the Soma mine in recent years. However, no fines were issued.

The accident in Soma is the worst mining disaster in Turkey in at least two decades, since a firedamp explosion in a mine near Turkey's port city of Zonguldak in 1992 killed 263—the worst such disaster in the country's history.

It is an indictment of the terrible safety conditions in the Turkish mining industry. Turkey suffers from the highest rate of mining accidents in Europe, at four times the continental average.

Yesterday, the Turkish government and the mining companies tried to deny responsibility for the explosion in Soma. The mine operator, SOMA Komur Isletmeleri AS, claimed that the accident took place in spite of its implementation of the "highest safety measures and constant controls." It called the explosion a "tragic accident."

Turkey's Islamist Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan gave his "heartfelt condolences" to the families of the dead.

In a statement published Tuesday, Turkey's Labor and Social Security Ministry claimed that SOMA Komur has successfully passed four safety inspections in the past two years, including one inspection just two months prior to the explosion.

Responsibility for the drumbeat of deadly accidents in Turkish mines lies with the policies of successive Turkish governments and of Turkey's mine operators, who have a long and terrible record of putting profits over miners' lives.

Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has sought to attract foreign investment in Turkey's mines

through privatization, deregulation and wage cutting, as part of the Turkish bourgeoisie's broader strategy of functioning as a cheap labor source for Western capital. In its efforts to boost profitability, Turkey's mining sector implemented "flexible work conditions," including loosened safety procedures and lower standards for training new miners.

A March 2010 report by the General Miners Union concluded that 98 percent of mining accidents in Turkey were "preventable," pointing to insufficient safety inspections and training as the main causes.

The result has been a series of preventable but deadly accidents claiming hundreds of lives. In 2010, an explosion at a mine run by the Turkish Hard Coal Enterprises (TTK), also in Zonguldak, trapped 32 miners underground. In January of 2013, yet another disaster killed eight miners in the same region, when a methane leak set off an explosion.

Including these accidents, the number of Turkish miners killed since 1955 has risen to over 2,700, with a staggering 326,321 injured over the same period.

The indifference of the mining companies and the callous reactions of state officials have repeatedly provoked explosions of outrage in the working class. In the wake of the 2010 incident at Zonguldak, fighting broke out between police and protesters during a visit to the area by Prime Minister Erdogan.

Miners and residents of the area reacted angrily to Erdogan's comment that death in accidents were an unsurprising fate for miners. He had said, "The people of the region are quite used to events like these. This profession has this in its destiny. The workers get into the profession knowing that these kinds of incidents may occur."

In the fall of 2013, miners in Zonguldak staged a strike action against unsafe conditions, barricading themselves inside a coal mine.

Western media pointed to the possibility that anger over the disaster at Soma could undermine Erdogan's AKP government, already weakened by last summer's Taksim Square protests and the unpopularity of Erdogan's participation in the US-led proxy war in Syria.

"While mass anti-government protests in Istanbul last summer by mainly middle-class urban Turks attracted little sympathy from the conservative voters who form the bedrock of his support, anger among blue collar

miners may prove damaging," the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote. "In 2010, mass strikes by state tobacco company workers generated widespread public sympathy."

In the wake of yesterday's explosion, rival bourgeois parties criticized the AKP's negligent attitude towards mine safety. The CHP's Özel told media that the AKP had blocked a proposal for an inquiry into Soma's coal mines only three weeks ago.

"Once in every three months there are accidents with deaths and injuries" at Soma, Özel said.



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