

Protests erupt across Turkey as death toll in Soma mine disaster tops 274

Alex Lantier
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Protests erupted across Turkey yesterday over the catastrophic mine disaster in the city of Soma as the government and the Soma Kumur company that operated the mine brazenly defended the profiteering and the absence of security precautions that produced the tragedy.

Rescue efforts are still ongoing at the Soma mine, where the death toll topped 274 yesterday. This makes the Soma disaster the most deadly industrial accident in the history of Turkey, surpassing the 1992 mine explosion in Zonguldak that killed 263. One of the dead was an underage 15-year-old miner who was apparently an unregistered worker at the mine.

The death toll in Soma is expected to rise even further. Officials have said that at least 120 miners are trapped inside the mine, and several reports indicate that the number may be over 200. Hope is rapidly dwindling that they could have survived until now.

Fires are still raging inside the mine. An electrical fault in one of the mine's power distributors triggered an explosion of built-up methane gas on Tuesday that cut power to ventilation systems and mine cages that would have brought miners back to the surface. Rescue teams returning to the surface said conditions inside the mine were dark and smoky, with large amounts of carbon monoxide gas. Most of the dead reportedly succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning.

Energy Minister Taner Yildiz said, "hopes are diminishing" of rescuing those still inside the mine, though some miners might have reached emergency chambers stocked with gas masks and air. Thousands of relatives and friends of miners trapped inside the mine gathered around the pit again yesterday, hoping for news of their loved ones.

Responsibility for this preventable catastrophe lies with the mine operator and the Turkish government,

which callously put profits over miners' lives.

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.

The company relied on the complicity of the unions and the government, which allowed the Soma mine to pass meaningless safety inspections with flying colors despite repeated accidents. (See: Corporate, government profiteering caused Soma mining catastrophe)

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) visited the mine yesterday, together with opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu.

Erdogan shamelessly dismissed the catastrophe as unavoidable and defended the record of his government and Soma Kumur. Calling deadly mine disasters "usual things," he pointed to mine disasters nearly two centuries ago in early 19th-century Britain, long before the invention of today's safety equipment that would have prevented the Soma blast.

"I went back in British history. Some 204 people died there after a mine collapsed in 1838. In 1866, 361 miners died in Britain. In an explosion in 1894, 290 people died there," he said.

"Take America with all of its technology and everything," he added. "In 1907, 361 miners died there."

As in 2010—when Erdogan called a deadly accident at the Karodan mine in Zonguldak an act of "fate"—officials are arrogantly insisting that mass carnage must be accepted as an inevitable fact of life. In reality, miners are driven by economic necessity to work for companies that treat them and their safety

with contempt, putting profits ahead of lives.

After his remarks, inhabitants of the city surrounded Erdogan, denouncing him as a murderer and demanding that he resign, while others attacked and ransacked the local AKP office. Protesters also booed the CHP's Kilicdaroglu, blocking him from entering the mine.

Erdogan's bodyguards removed his official car's 0002 license plate and tried to hide the prime minister in a supermarket, while detachments of riot police brought into the city assaulted the mourning families and townspeople.

One widely circulated photo from Soma showed Erdogan's advisor Yusuf Yerkel kicking a protester being held down by riot police. Asked about it later, Yerkel defended his actions, arguing that the man was a "leftist militant."

Protests spread to other cities in Turkey, including Istanbul and the capital, Ankara. In Ankara, riot police attacked students from the Middle East Technical University (ODTU) with tear gas and water cannon to prevent them from marching on the Energy Ministry. A standoff continued into the evening at the university, as police continued to block the exit.

Police also fired tear gas and deployed a water cannon to block a protest marching through downtown Ankara.

In Istanbul, police attacked thousands of protesters chanting "Government resign" on Taksim Square, the site of mass anti-government protests by urban youth last year. There were also protests outside the headquarters of Soma Holdings in Istanbul, where youth drew graffiti branding the building as a "murderers' nest."

The central fear of the Erdogan regime and of the entire political establishment in Turkey is that mass outrage over the Soma catastrophe could provoke an uprising of the working class, as occurred in Egypt in the revolutionary movement that toppled US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

The Erdogan regime is unpopular and increasingly discredited by its brutal response to the Taksim Square protests last year, allegations of high-level corruption, and, above all, its complicity in the US-led proxy war against neighboring Syria, which is overwhelmingly opposed by the Turkish people. After leaked recordings emerged of internal discussions of corrupt deals by Erdogan and his top associates, and a conspiracy by

Turkish intelligence officers to provoke a war with Syria, the regime blocked access to YouTube and social media sites in Turkey.

Sections of Turkey's union bureaucracy are trying to organize toothless protests to divert and suppress working class opposition to the Erdogan regime. The Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions (DISK), the Confederation of Public Sector Trade Unions (KESK), and the Chamber of Architects and Engineers (TMMOB) called for a work stoppage and three minutes of silence at 9am today. They also asked their members to wear black as a symbol of mourning.



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