

Mining disaster in Turkey: Anger with the government grows

Peter Schwarz
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Anger is growing in Turkey with the Erdogan government, as mass funerals commenced for victims of the mining disaster in the mining town of Soma. The accident, which is referred to by many as “murder” or “massacre”, has revealed the dirty secret behind the internationally acclaimed economic growth in Turkey: the ruthless exploitation of the working class.

In Soma there is virtually no hope left of finding surviving miners. The official number of deaths remains at 282, but could go up to 400.

Turkey’s biggest trade union confederation Türk -Is and the competing unions DISK (Confederation of Revolutionary Unions) and KESK (Confederation of Public Workers Unions) were forced to call protests and work stoppages on Thursday to prevent popular anger getting out of control. Turk-Is, which comprises 35 individual unions, described the disaster as the biggest “workplace murder” in the history of the Turkish Republic.

A joint statement from DISK and KESK, which was also signed by the chamber of engineers and architects TMMOB and the medical association TTB, states: “Hundreds of our brothers working in Soma mines have been forced to work in inhuman production process in order to make maximum profit since the matter of promoting workers’ health and security measures are considered in accordance with the pros and cons of expenditures. It means they have been left for dead since the beginning. Who has carried out the policies of privatization and been promoting subcontractors, who has intended to kill workers in order to reduce the costs and who has encouraged them are the perpetrators of the Soma massacre.”

The unions, however, have worked to keep the protests as low-key as possible. DISK and KESK merely called for the wearing of black dresses and

ribbons as a sign of mourning, a three-minute silence at work and a march to labor offices in the provinces.

In the city of Izmir, only 130 kilometers south of Soma, 20,000 workers demonstrated on Wednesday against those responsible for the disaster as part of a 24-hour strike. The demonstrators were attacked by police with water cannons and tear gas. DISK leader Kani Beko had to be hospitalized.

One day before, there were protests and violent clashes with security forces in Istanbul and Ankara. Demonstrations were also held in the southern cities of Mersin and Antalya.

In Istanbul, several thousand people staged a sit-down protest in front of police water cannon, holding banners with slogans including, “It is not accident, It is not fate, It is murder”, and “Our hearts are burning in Soma”. Police prevented the protesters from moving to Taksim Square, the site of repeated violent protests against Prime Minister Erdogan during the past year. On the Asian side of the Bosphorus, in the Kadikoy district, demonstrators chanted: “This is not working accident, it is murder” and “Miners did not die; they were killed.”

In Ankara, around a thousand people from various trade unions gathered to march on the labor ministry and chanted “The fires of Soma will burn the AKP” and “AKP murderers”.

In Soma itself, thousands of family members and co-workers gathered outside the hospital seeking information on their loved ones. When Erdogan visited the site of the disaster, residents denounced him as a “murderer” and “thief”, pelting his car with stones. The prime minister had to take temporary shelter in a supermarket.

Erdogan also infuriated victims’ families by denying any responsibility to the press and cynically declaring:

“Let’s please not pretend such incidents do not occur in mines. These are ordinary developments. There is something like labor accidents in literature. This is part of the nature of this business.”

One of his advisers, Yerkel Yusuf, was captured on video repeatedly kicking a demonstrator being held on the ground by police demonstrators.

The arrogance with which Erdogan and those around him react to the death of hundreds of miners is no coincidence. The government carries both the broad political responsibility as well as a large part of the direct responsibility for a catastrophe that could have been easily avoided.

To attract foreign investors and enrich its own political base, the AKP government has encouraged the exploitation of workers employed at starvation wages and with complete disregard of the most elementary safety regulations. The technical means to prevent such a fire disaster as the one in Soma have long been available but are regarded as too expensive by the private mine operators.

The head of the private enterprise Soma Coal, which took over the mine from the Turkish government in 2012, has publicly boasted that he had lowered the price of coal from \$140 to \$24. Many miners are employed through subcontractors and earn between 800-1,300 lira a month for backbreaking work underground. That is equivalent to €280-€460 and is barely enough to live on. Most miners are therefore heavily in debt.

Soma Holding, the parent company of the mine operator, maintains close relations with Erdogan’s AKP. Melike Dogru, the wife of its director general, is an AKP official in the local parliament. Soma Coal also delivered the free coal which the AKP distributed during the last municipal election to win poor electors’ votes.

Soma Holding invested its profits from the mining industry in Istanbul’s lucrative construction and real estate market. Since 2006, it has run the construction company Tilaga, which is behind two large construction projects in Istanbul: the Maslak Spine Tower in Sariyer and a shopping center in Kartal.

The AKP government has created the legal basis to ensure that private companies can take over state mines in exchange for an extremely lucrative fee paid in the form of a portion of the coal produced. And the

government protects the company against the state review of safety rules—to the extent that any such review exists at all.

Turkey has still not signed the ILO convention on safety and health in mines dating back to 1995, laying down minimum safety standards. With an average of 7.22 fatalities per million tons of coal conveyed, Turkish mining is one of the most dangerous in the world. In China the comparable rates are 1.27 miners and in the U.S. 0.02 fatalities per million tons of coal.

At the end of April, AKP deputies in the parliament in Ankara denied a request from opposition parties to check safety conditions in the Soma mine, where the disaster took place just two weeks later.

When questioned by the press in Soma, Erdogan claimed that opposition politicians had merely been concerned to change the country’s agenda, and Soma had not even been mentioned. A review of the protocol showed that Soma was mentioned 38 times. “We are requesting the formation of an investigation commission to look into the causes and reasons of the labor accidents and the deaths in the mine in Soma,” a CHP deputy explained.

Criticisms of the government by the Kemalist CHP and other opposition parties on this question are very subdued, however. They also advocate ruthless exploitation of the working class and fear a revolutionary uprising.

This is why CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu said: “We have to investigate the incident with restraint.”

The horrific loss of life at the Soma mine will do nothing to change the brutal working conditions and low wages for miners and other sections of workers. Erdogan Kaymakci from the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects commented on the web site Al Monitor: “Miners’ health and well-being are pushed to secondary importance when mines are privatized or subcontracted, as their primary concern is only about making more profit.”

They had repeatedly tried to convince the authorities to improve working standards—to no avail.



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