Ten days since the Turkey mining massacre: Government and unions try to evade responsibility

Halil Celik
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Ten days after the Soma mining massacre, in which 301 miners were killed, the Turkish government continues its brutal crackdown on protesters.

On Thursday, police used live ammunition against demonstrators in Istanbul, killing one. The dead man, identified as 30 year-old U?ur Kurt, was part of a group attending a funeral procession.

In an effort to contain social unrest throughout the country, Turkish officials have arrested Can Gürkan, the CEO of Soma Coal Enterprises Inc., and General Manager Ramazan Do?ru. The arrests came after Do?ru's statement that the company's CEO forged Do?ru's signature on a document laying responsibility for the disaster on himself.

The arrest of two high-ranking executives after they blamed one another during their testimony to prosecutors brings the total number of arrests to eight. Other arrested include the company's operations manager, two mining engineers, two shift chiefs and a technician. There are also rumours that an arrest warrant has been issued for company owner Alp Gürkan.

In the first few days of the investigation, it became clear that the amount of carbon monoxide in the mine during the days prior to the accident far exceeded recommended safety levels. The mine continued to operate, however, despite complaints by workers about the increasing heat levels. The prosecutor also said that the cause of the fire at the Soma mine was not an explosion in a power distribution unit, as had initially been announced, but rather the explosion of smolder coal. It is clear that a disaster was in the offing, but no preventive measures had been taken by company officials.

The Soma disaster was a clearly a case of manslaughter. However, the mine owners and managers have not been accused of manslaughter through conscious negligence, which could lead to a prison sentence of up to 22.5 years, or premeditated murder, entailing a prison sentence of up to 28 years. Instead, all of the arrested have been charged with "causing multiple cases of death by negligence"—i.e., involuntary manslaughter—which entails a prison sentence of 2 to 15 years, and usually applies in deadly traffic accidents. According to Akin Atalay, the lawyer for the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, most of the accused could expect to serve just 8 years in prison.

Cafer Yildirim, a veteran miner who works at the pit in Soma, told the media that the company had refrained from using cement and proper filling material to support used parts of the pit and used wood instead. "The aim was only to reduce the costs," said Yildirim. "And yet", he said, "the deaths were inevitable. It was inescapable when wood, coal and air came together." He also affirmed that there was no rescue shaft in the mine and that Soma Coal Enterprises Inc. had removed the rescue chamber made by the former mining company. "Everyone was aware of the deficiencies, " he said. "However, in order to mine coal more cheaply, they postponed taking necessary measures."

Mustafa Gülenç, another surviving miner in Soma, echoed his co-worker: "For three weeks, the coal in the mine was hot coal and had overheated under our feet. The security officer ordered us to evacuate the pit but the production manager said we should continue to work."

CNN Turkey reported on Monday the comments of Nihat Çelik, another miner in Soma, who explained the huge pressure bearing down on the miners. "There, down in the mine, they pressure us to work. In the case of overproduction in the pit, they give the chiefs a bonus."

In short, the disaster in the Soma mine was a massacre motivated by greed for profit on the part of the company, knowingly and willfully supervised by the government.

Company-government partnership

There is little doubt that Soma Coal Enterprises' owners and executives are directly responsible for the crime of killing 301 workers. However, any assessment limited to the mine in Soma would only lead to covering up the real reasons and those mainly responsible for the massacre. The AKP (Justice and Development Party) government, which has aided and abetted the Soma Coal Enterprises, has 301 miners' blood on its hands.

Almost all senior government officials, first and foremost Prime Minister Erdogan, spoke of the "wonderful work" of the private sector in the mining industry, as the boss of the company was boasting about its huge cost reduction, to US$23.80 from US$140.00. The Soma massacre is the price paid for this "success".

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The bourgeois media's detailed reports on the disaster are aimed at whitewashing the intimate collaboration between the government and the company.

All the statements by the government in defence of the mining firm following the disaster make clear that the arrests were solely the result of growing mass protests of workers and youth. The arrests are the government's attempt to stave off even greater crisis, as it found itself with its back against the wall in the face of mass protests.

The wife of General Manager Ramazan Do?ru is a board member of the mining company and also a city council member for the AKP. This is merely one expression of the close relationship between the bosses and government. Under the AKP, the Turkish economy has undergone an unusual subcontracting process, which is part of global development.

According to official figures, the number of workers employed by subcontractor firms rose from 387,000 in 2003 to 1,700,000 in 2013. Some 10 percent of these workers are employed in enterprises affiliated to the Ministry of Health. The number of subcontractor firms operating in almost all sectors is now some 34,000. Another main governmental body that largely outsources is the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources.

Subcontracting is not only one of the main factors in the cost-reduction programmes of large companies. It has also been used to create a new bourgeois social base for the AKP through the plundering of public resources, a form of "crony capitalism".

Together with the profits arising from privatisation, the subcontracting process is a golden opportunity for bourgeois politicians and top bureaucrats with access to public funds to make a fortune.

The guardians: trade unions

The trade unions are of course well aware of these facts. However, they have done nothing to interfere with the huge wave of privatisation and subcontracting policies carried out by all governments since the mid-1980s. Instead, starting with the "Spring protests" of the late 1980s against privatisations, the union bureaucrats have come to the rescue of successive regimes, dividing, defusing and defeating all of the mass mobilisations of the working class.

The most infamous of these guardians was Semsi Denizer, the boss of the General Mine Workers Union. He played the leading role in the defeat of the "Great Miners' Strike" of November 30, 1990, in Zonguldak, and the subsequent "Great Miners' March" to Ankara on January 4-8, 1991, which involved tens of thousands of miners and their families. After bargaining behind closed doors with the prime minister, Denizer sold out the movement, which had rocked the country and the government.

Almost all miners working in Soma and those killed a week ago were members of a similar trade union, the Mine Workers' Union of Turkey. This union was well aware that miners were being employed under terrible conditions without occupational health and safety measures. It is the main accomplice of the mining company in the slaughter. The Soma massacre confirmed that the function of the union is not to defend the rights of the workers and improve their conditions, but to suppress the miners on behalf of the bosses.

The miners, however, are well aware of this fact. All miners interviewed by the media last week expressed their anger with the union. They accused the union bureaucrats of being "lackeys of the boss". In contrast to the phony protests organised by some trade unions with the participation of pseudo-left organisations, thousands of miners in Soma were mainly chanting slogans against the union bureaucracy.

When the Soma miners angrily turned on the union leaders, the latter were forced to flee the mining town after a few hours. They are still not safe in Soma. In the middle of the week, Turkish Mine Workers' Union's regional representative Tamer Küçükgencay held a press conference in front of the Soma courthouse. Within a few minutes, however, he had to cancel it, and he was forced to hide inside the courthouse building when miners and their family members attacked him.

The petty-bourgeois left

There are also other accomplices of the Soma massacre—the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left who praise the unions as genuine "working class organisations" and "defenders of workers".

They thereby seek to mask the organic connection between the unions on the one hand and the banks and companies and their government on the other. These forces have nothing to offer the working class, other than a further deterioration of living and working conditions.

Under the slogan of "getting rid of the AKP government at all costs", they are now trying to subordinate workers to bourgeois factions in conflict with the AKP.

To end the unceasing social counter-revolution and growing war danger, the working class must conduct a genuine struggle against the banks and corporations and their political representatives in the unions and pseudo-left. Workers must build their own internationalist socialist party. Otherwise, further massacres such as that in Soma are inevitable.

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