

At least 25 miners killed in a blast in Turkish coal mine after lack of precautions

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At least 25 miners were killed and dozens injured in yesterday's firedamp explosion at the state-owned Turkish Hard Coal Enterprises' (TTK) Amasra Plant Directorate mine in Bartın on the Black Sea coast. At the time of writing, several miners were still underground.

"An explosion occurred at the Amasra Hard Coal Plant Directorate at minus 300 [meters] level around 6:15 p.m., with no cause yet," the Bartın Governor's Office said in a statement yesterday, adding that a large number of rescue teams were sent to the scene. "There are 44 workers at minus 300 level and 5 workers at minus 350 level," Bartın Governor Nurtaç Arslan announced.

The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) of the Interior Ministry later deleted a tweet claiming that the explosion was "caused by a transformer." However, Hakan Yeşil, the chair of the General Mine Workers Union (GMİS) affiliated to the pro-government Türk-İş confederation, to which the miners in Amasra belong, also said that it was a "transformer-induced firedamp explosion."

A worker who came out of the mine after the explosion said, "We don't know anything. There was dust and smoke, we don't know what happened. We couldn't see it. I got out by my own means. It was probably an explosion. Since we were a little behind, there was only pressure. Because of the pressure, there was a mass of dust, you couldn't see anything."

"According to the information we have, there was a firedamp explosion," said Fatih Dönmez, Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, who arrived at the scene in the following hours. Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu also announced that there were 110 workers in the shift; 61 workers were unharmed, but 49 miners were in the risk zone. At midnight, the Bartın Governor's Office announced that 36 of these 49 miners had been extracted from underground and the death toll had risen to 25.

Justice Minister Bekir Bozdağ claimed that "Amasra Public Prosecutor's Office has started an investigation into the explosion. The incident will be investigated in all its

dimensions." This statement was made to appease the anger of millions of working people who were waiting for the miners to be brought out unharmed. This anger was based on previous experiences, notably the Soma mine disaster in 2014, in which miners were sacrificed to the profit motive through the lack of precautions.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* then explained, the catastrophe in Soma "was not an unexplainable 'accident' but the inevitable result of privatization, government neglect and the capitalist profit system, which sacrifices the lives and limbs of millions of industrial workers around the world every year." Failure to take precautions by a private mining company close to the Erdoğan government and the connivance of state officials and the union cost the lives of 301 miners. Following the massacre, mass protests erupted across the country and the government was forced to introduce new legislation on mines. However, the mining company's chairman Can Gürkan was released from prison in 2019, and no one is currently imprisoned due to Soma mining disaster.

It soon became clear that a similar situation existed in Amasra. Deniz Yavuzçulmaz, Zonguldak deputy of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), posted the 2019 Court of Accounts report on Twitter, stating that "The Court of Accounts warned! The Court of Accounts says that the production depth in Bartın, Amasra has reached 300 meters; that the gas content is high in the mineral veins worked and the risk of sudden eruption of gas and coal, and firedamp explosion is increasing!"

The official report stated: "In 2019, the plant's stabilized production depth was 300 meters. This deepening leads to increased risks of serious accidents such as sudden eruption of gas and coal, and firedamp explosion. It is known that the gas content is high in all of the mineral veins worked, therefore the degassing capacities are also high, and the risk increases even more in failure zones. For this reason, in addition to the provisions of the relevant legislation, the provisions of the 'Institution Degassing Directive' must be meticulously implemented in the mines of the plant."

The daily *Evrensel* reported that “According to the first step of the Court of Accounts on the Amasra Hard Coal Plant, while 190 work accidents occurred in 2019, 164 workers were injured in 164 work accidents in 2020, 157 of which occurred underground and 7 above ground.”

It quoted the Court of Accounts’ report for the General Directorate of TTK and five plants in 2021, which revealed that in 2019 and 2020, inspectors from the Labor Inspection Board of the Labor and Social Security Ministry did not visit the plants and did not conduct audits and inspections.

In the first hours after the explosion, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said, “We will do our best to reduce the painful news and give good news to all of Turkey.” What nonsense! A government minister announces that they are “trying to reduce the painful news” after an explosion that had been warned of by state officials.

Shortly before this tragedy, on September 20, Energy and Natural Resources Minister Fatih Dönmez had visited the Amasra mine with a large delegation. It included TTK General Director Kazım Eroğlu, Türk-İş Confederation President Ergün Atalay, GMİS Union President Hakan Yeşil, GMİS executives and the governor and mayor of Bartın.

The statements made during this visit, in the face of official warnings of such a mining disaster, and the concealment of the facts from the workers instead of taking immediate measures, are an indictment of the state and union bureaucrats.

In his speech, GMİS President Yeşil said in a wheedling fashion, “Mr. Minister [Dönmez] took time out of his busy schedule to visit you [miners] where you work. He is here with us today. I thank him on behalf of all of you.”

Türk-İş President Atalay also thanked the government, stating: “The two ministries I knock on the door of when our miners have a problem are the Labor Ministry and the Energy Ministry. A short while ago, there was a problem with a site in Soma. Mr. Minister solved that issue immediately.” He added that, “We also had the opportunity to talk about this place [Amasra].”

What the union bureaucrats, who function as an extension of the state and the companies, told the ministers had, of course, nothing to do with defending the vital interests of the miners, including their safety. The only demand of the union bureaucracy, as they stated during this visit, was to hire more workers to increase production.

During the visit, Minister Dönmez also confirmed that they have the same goal as the union bureaucracy, saying, “We have a target to increase production.” Dönmez’s remarks to the miners who will be sent to their deaths in a few weeks are particularly staggering in terms of their level of hypocrisy. He claimed: “First of all, let me say this: safety

We would not trade the safety of your lives for the entire plant. When we appoint managers, the first instruction is that production may be slightly disrupted, we will compensate it, but not a single hair or nail of one of our workers should be harmed.”

Dönmez also said, “Following the Soma accident, special measures were taken for those working in the mining sector, especially underground. Working conditions were improved, working hours were shortened. Weekend vacation was provided. At least two minimum wage requirements were imposed on miners working underground,” before adding: “After these measures, work accidents have quickly decreased. Yes, we did not achieve zero [accidents]. We would like our goal to be zero fatal work accidents. But unfortunately, the mining sector is one of the most risky industries in the world.”

The minister’s attempt, with his last sentence, to persuade miners to accept fatal work accidents as inevitable, brings to mind the notorious statement of then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan after the massacre of miners in Soma: “These are normal things. It is in the nature of this business.”

However, Dönmez’s claim that “work accidents have quickly decreased” since 2014 is also untrue. According to data from the Health and Safety Labour Watch (İSG) in Turkey, a total of 386 miners in Turkey fell victim to “industrial accidents” in 2014, after 301 miners lost their lives in the Soma disaster. In 2013, this figure was 93. 67 miners died in 2015, 74 in 2016, 93 in 2017, 66 in 2018, 63 in 2019, 61 in 2020 and 70 in 2021. As of October this year, the number of miners killed at work is 53. Moreover, in the last five years, an average of 2,052 workers have been killed at workplaces in Turkey.

The mining disaster in Amasra underscores the need for workers to organize independently of the union bureaucracies that serve the state and corporations, to fight against capitalism in defense of their basic rights, including their safety. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees responds to this common need of workers all over the world.



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