

The mining disaster in Turkey and the case for socialism

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On Friday, at least 41 workers died in a firedamp explosion at the state-owned Turkish Hard Coal Enterprises' (TTK) Amasra Plant Directorate mine in Bartın on the Black Sea coast. This preventable tragedy is an indictment of the capitalist system, the ruling class and the government led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The stark contrast between the response of miners who made it out after the explosion 300 meters underground and that of government officials reflects the position of the two major and irreconcilable classes in society at a moment of life and death.

While the miners risked death to go down and rescue their comrades who were trapped below—one miner died during the rescue effort—government officials led by President Erdoğan focused on suppressing public anger by portraying the preventable disaster as “fate.”

Data compiled by the Health and Safety Labour Watch (OHS) in Turkey shows that at least 2,000 miners have died in mines in Turkey in the last 20 years. This can only be characterized as “social murder.”

While the current level of scientific and technical development allows for mining under the democratic control of the international working class without risk to the safety of any worker, under capitalism workers are wantonly sacrificed on the altar of profit.

Miners occupy a critical position in the global capitalist economy, but they work in one of the most dangerous industries. According to “The World Counts” website, at least 15,000 miners are killed every year worldwide, a figure based only on official data.

In Turkey, more than 90 miners have lost their lives so far this year, while in China, 129 miners died in the first seven months of 2022. In 2021, 37 miners died in the US. The increasing demand for coal due to the gas crisis resulting from NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine means the death toll is likely to increase.

While tens of thousands of people on social media blamed government negligence for the deaths at the Amasra mine, Erdoğan’s first reaction on Twitter was to tell the public to ignore “provocative posts and disinformation” spread by people “with snide motives.” The Interior Ministry attempted to intimidate mass anger by initiating judicial proceedings against 12 social media users for “publicly inciting hatred and enmity and making posts with provocative content.”

Erdoğan went to Amasra on Saturday and managed to find something to rejoice about in connection with the scores of deaths

at a state-owned coal mine for which his government is responsible. He said, “I praise my Lord. The fact that we have reached a conclusion [i.e., all deaths] since yesterday evening, less than 24 hours ago, has relieved us... Because in Soma, you know, it took too long.”

In 2014, the failure to take the necessary precautions at a private mine owned by Soma Holding, which is close to the Erdoğan government, and the connivance of state authorities and the corporatist trade union resulted in a massacre in which 301 miners died.

Mass protests erupted across the country after this, the worst mining disaster in Turkey’s history. However, the company’s chairman, Can Gürkan, was released from prison in 2019 and no one is currently serving time for the disaster. Moreover, no high-ranking state official has been held responsible.

After the Soma disaster, Erdoğan tried to normalize the deaths by saying, “These are normal things. It is in the nature of this business.”

Reflecting the indifference of the capitalist ruling class as a whole to workers’ lives and well-being, Erdoğan said essentially the same thing after the disaster in Amasra. “We are people who believe in the plan of destiny,” he declared. “These [deaths] will always happen, and we need to know that.”

But despite government officials’ attempts to evade responsibility by talking about “destiny,” the limited data available shows that at Amasra, as at Soma and many other mining disasters, workers were sacrificed to the profit motive. Necessary and well-known precautions were dispensed with.

In a Court of Accounts report issued in 2019, a sharp warning was made. The report stated:

In 2019, the plant’s stabilized production depth was 300 meters. This deepening leads to increased risks of serious accidents, such as a sudden eruption of gas and coal or a firedamp explosion.

Ayhan Yüksel, chairman of the Chamber of Mining Engineers, said in a statement:

There is an accident here due to negligence... We know

that there are two issues involving negligence: 1) the gas rising, and 2) the fire exploding the gas. Without these forms of negligence, there would not have been such an accident.

At the funeral of Rahman Özçelik, one of the miners who lost his life, Özçelik's sister asked Erdoğan: "Ten-fifteen days ago my brother told me that there was a gas leak here [in the mine]. 'They will blow us up soon,' he said. How was this neglected?"

She did not receive an answer.

According to press reports, in the last three years about half of the money allocated to state-owned Turkish Hard Coal Enterprises (TTK) has not been paid out, and there is a shortage of workers in the mines. The number of miners in the Amasra plant, which employed 5,000 workers in the late 1970s, is now down to 720. The number of miners employed at TTK as a whole has fallen from over 40,000 to 8,600.

This results in pressure to speed up production and get more output from far fewer workers. On September 20, Energy Minister Fatih Dönmez visited Amasra along with bureaucrats from the miners' union, which functions as an arm of the government, and announced a "production increase target."

The increased exploitation of workers in both the private and public sectors through large-scale privatization and deregulation policies, carried out with the complicity of the unions, is the centerpiece of a social counterrevolution that has been underway for decades.

While the bourgeoisie, under the leadership of President Ronald Reagan in the US and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Britain, imposed class-war measures against workers all over the world, the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991 marked a turning point in the degradation of the social conditions of the international working class. These measures, which began to be implemented in Turkey in the aftermath of the NATO-backed military coup in 1980, have gained increasing momentum, especially in the last 20 years.

Erdoğan's "Let us never lose our unity and solidarity" call after appealing to religious sentiments at a miner's funeral reflects the main concern of his government and the ruling class it represents.

The Erdoğan government has overseen a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to finance capital since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is sitting on a social powderkeg that is getting ready to explode.

Turkey is one of the epicenters of the global inflationary surge, with official inflation exceeding an annual rate of 80 percent. A recent survey estimates that 90 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

In 2022, Turkey has witnessed numerous strikes as part of the growing international movement of the working class against the soaring cost of living and intolerable working and living conditions under capitalism. Doctors and other health care workers have carried out several national strikes, and there has been a huge increase in wildcat strike activity. This includes the work stoppage by Divriği iron miners in January to demand better wages and benefits.

Miners have a long tradition of struggle in Turkey, as they do all over the world. The western Black Sea basin, including Amasra, has been the epicenter of these struggles. In 1965, a wildcat strike against harsh working conditions and low wages in Zonguldak spread to mines across the region. The government was able to suppress this mass movement only by sending thousands of soldiers to the region and killing two miners.

The Great Miners' March of 1990–91 is one of the milestones in the struggles of the Turkish working class. The strike, which began in November 1990, turned into a mass march to the capital, Ankara, in the first days of 1991, with the participation of more than 80,000 miners and family members.

Terrified that the miners, chanting slogans against the Gulf War and against the brutal attacks on their social conditions, could mobilize broader sections of the working class, the government deployed Army and police units to block the entrances to the capital.

The defeat of the miners' struggle, as a result of the betrayal carried out by the bureaucracy of the GMİS and the Türk-İş union confederation, which continue to "represent" the miners in Amasra, paved the way for the succeeding attacks on miners and the entire working class.

The mining disaster in Amasra underscores the fact that capitalism is inimical to the safety and well-being of the working class, especially miners. The same objective impulse of capitalism—for profit, private wealth and the geopolitical interests of the ruling classes—has dictated the avoidable deaths of more than 20 million people worldwide and permanent health impairment for countless others in the COVID-19 pandemic. Known and necessary public health measures have not been implemented because they cut across definite economic and financial interests bound up with the financial markets and the exploitation of workers on the job.

This wanton sacrifice of workers' lives and health is ongoing. It finds its most extreme expression in the reckless escalation of the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, which, in the words of warmonger-in-chief Joe Biden, risks "nuclear Armageddon."

The same systemic crisis that drives capitalism toward a nuclear holocaust creates the conditions for the revolutionary mobilization of the international working class to end war, industrial murder and despotism through world socialist revolution. This means establishing workers' governments to nationalize the mines and all major industries under the democratic control of the working class, coordinated on a global basis.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International and supported by the Sosyalist Eşitlik Grubu (Socialist Equality Group, Turkey), is being built to unite the struggles of workers all over the world to carry out this urgent task. Join this fight! There is no time to lose!



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