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 Bart?n 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 Erdo?an.

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 Erdo?an 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.

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, Öncelik’s sister asked Erdoğan: “Ten-fifteen days ago my brother told me that 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 Dişri?i iron miners in January to demand better wages and benefits.