

Victims' relatives reveal: Turkish mining disaster was social murder

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Miners' relatives make clear that the firedamp explosion that killed 41 workers and seriously injured six others at the state-owned Turkish Hard Coal Enterprises' (TTK) Amasra Plant Directorate mine in Bartın on Friday was a preventable disaster.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who traveled to Amasra after the disaster, tried to normalize the deaths, stating: "We are people who believe in the plan of destiny. These [deaths] will always happen, and we need to know that."

A 2019 Court of Accounts report, however, warned that reducing production depth to 300 meters seriously increased the risk of a firedamp explosion; it called for safety measures. Despite the Erdoğan government's attempts to portray this massacre as inevitable by calling it "fate," interviews with relatives of miners reveal that 41 workers were needlessly sent to their deaths because necessary precautions were not taken.

Buse Bulut, the wife of Mehmet Bulut, a 30-year-old miner who lost his life, told *Medyascope* this disaster was not an accident but murder: "They killed them [miners]. Look, this is murder, not an accident. They will censor my words, but you don't censor it ... They killed them."

Bulut said the miners had been talking of rising methane gas levels for some time. She said: "They have been saying for a week, 'There is gas, there is gas.' They sent [workers] without measuring [the gas level]. My husband has been saying for three months: 'The ventilation will be done.' But they [the officials] kept postponing it. [After the explosion in the mine] my husband suffered, he was out of breath, and he was burned."

Bulut stated that the authorities did not inform them after the explosion: "I waited for his body for 17 hours, and we rummaged through the body bags to find him. I waited for the body, but they didn't inform me. Today humanity can send people into space, but they couldn't get my husband out of the ground for 17 hours ... In the evening ambulances passed by. It turns out he's dead, but I didn't know. He's dead. They killed miners. [Because of] negligence... They [officials] lined their own pockets, and they killed him. And they will cover it up."

In another interview, Bulut drew attention to the willful negligence that led to the miners' deaths: "My husband was telling me, 'There are problems in the chimneys. They need to be cleaned.' ... He was saying 'the chimneys will be cleaned in three months.' The [Court of Accounts] report came out 3 years ago, but what did you do about this?"

Speaking to the ANKA News Agency, Sena Y?ld?r?m, the wife

of ?aban Y?ld?r?m, who lost his life in the blast, said her husband had told her about problems at the mine in early October. She said:

There is negligence, 100 percent negligence. On October 3 we went to Ankara for our babies. Two days before that, he was telling me that the ventilation system was bad. He said, "It would take 20 days or maybe more to fix it. All the workers would take a leave during this period." They even said, "This might be an unpaid leave." Five days before he died, he already talked about the gas. "It looks like there is methane gas," he said.

?aban Y?ld?r?m's mother-in-law, Nesrin Akku?, also said that the miners were killed as a result of willful negligence: "He said all the workers would take leave. Maybe a week or so before my child passed away, it was discussed in our house. He said, 'Sena, maybe they will give us a leave, they will give all the workers a leave and clean the place.' But they did a total cleanup, but they killed our children. ... We understand that our children died in vain."

Mehmet Bulut's brother, Muhammed Bulut, said that the lack of proper maintenance at the mine was what cost the lives of 41 workers:

They [workers] said there would be 40-day maintenance at the mine. They've been talking about it for three months. But nothing happened until now. They were supposed to take leave after this month. But they [officials] didn't do this, and they cost the lives of children. Forty-one lives! Miners said there was gas. They [miners] were inexperienced. They were hired in 2019. There has been no one with experience.

Özge Ak, the wife of Soner Ak, a miner who lost his life, told ANKA news agency that managers were aware of the methane gas increase but forced workers to work anyway: "He was saying, 'There is a lot of gas smell.' The chief told miners that 'we need coal, not your pleasure.' Let justice be done upon them! Forty-one lives lost, all of them have children."

Soner Ak's mother, Fatma Ak, said that her son said, "Mom, there is a smell in the mine, but they are making us work." She continued:

He was telling us, "Mom, the mine will be closed, because there is a smell of gas." A week, 10 days ago it was on the news, "There is a smell," I heard it on the news. I was already asking him, "Son, they are saying something on the news, if there is any truth to it, don't go to work. Don't go, son, something will happen." He said, "Mom, then shouldn't I go? Will you give me money [to maintain his family]?" If I had the money, I would give it to him, but I did not have it.

Speaking to BBC Turkish, Şaban Yıldırım's relative, coffee house owner Rıfat Akgül, recounted a conversation he had with Yıldırım two weeks before the explosion: "Şaban came to the coffee house and said, 'Brother, there are problems [in the mine], things are very difficult, we can't work comfortably ... Our lives are in danger.'"

Akgül continued as follows: "The guys had already told their chiefs that there was a gas problem in the mine, but they were told to 'go ahead and work.' Şaban said to me, 'We told the chiefs [about the gas problem]. They were going to close the two adits in November, they were going to take them for maintenance, and they were going to give us 15 days' leave.' Akgül stated, "I said, 'they should solve this problem as soon as possible.' But it didn't take long, on Friday this incident exploded."

The General Mine Workers' Union (GMŞ) affiliated to the pro-government Türk-İş confederation, which supposedly represents the miners, told BBC Turkish: "We have not heard anything you mentioned, and no problems have been communicated to our union by our fellow workers, either verbally or in writing." The GMŞ bureaucracy is either blatantly lying or admitting that they have not had the slightest communication with the miners. Either way, the union apparatus turned a blind eye to the looming disaster that befell the miners.

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The TTK did not respond to questions about these allegations. It last issued a statement on Saturday claiming, "Production is carried out in strict compliance with mining occupational health and safety rules in all of our establishments."

Kazım Eroğlu, who was appointed head of the TTK in 2017, was tried as the main figure responsible for an industrial accident that killed eight workers at the TTK Kozlu Plant Directorate mine in Zonguldak in 2013. In 2019, Eroğlu and his deputy Nurettin Yılmaz were sentenced to four years in prison due to "collateral negligence," though this was converted into a fine.

With the TTK headed by a convicted felon, Independent Mine Workers Union lawyer Mürsel Ünder told the daily *Cumhuriyet* that the mine in Amasra is still managed by the director of the plant, who is a suspect, and that this creates a risk of spoliation of evidence. "Whether or not to go there [to the mine],

who will go there, what will be done inside; all these issues are still handled by the plant managers," Ünder said.

The maintenance of production despite the miners' warnings shows that the Erdoğan government, the TTK and the union bureaucracy have disregarded the lives of workers in favor of set production targets. All of them bear responsibility for this preventable disaster.

On September 20, Energy Minister Fatih Dönmez, TTK General Director Kazım Eroğlu, Türk-İş President Ergün Atalay, GMŞ President Hakan Yeşil, GMŞ executives, and the governor and mayor of Bartın visited the mine where the explosion occurred. In his speech, Dönmez said: "We have a target to increase production ... Last year we broke a record of \$6 billion in mining exports. This year we will exceed \$6 billion."

The union bureaucrats, who were there like ministry officials, did nothing but praise the government. GMŞ leader Hakan Yeşil's first act after the explosion in the mine was to try to quell the anger of the workers. "No one should engage in provocative actions," Yeşil declared.

In another statement after the explosion, Yeşil made it clear that this corporatist union's main concern, besides policing the workers, was to restart production as soon as possible. "As soon as all risks have been eliminated, our mines will resume production," he said.

The fact that those responsible in the government and company management for the 2014 disaster in Soma, which claimed the lives of 301 miners, remain at large, and the first official reactions to the disaster in Amasra point to the risk that this massacre will also be covered up. However, both the Türk-İş and DİŞK confederation bureaucracies are doing nothing more than trying to appease the widespread anger among millions of workers.

It is only through mass mobilization of the working class that those responsible for the preventable disaster in Amasra can be subjected to a fair trial following an independent investigation. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Group in Turkey call on miners and other sections of the working class to mobilize to demand such an investigation and trial by forming rank-and-file committees independent of the trade union apparatus which serves the state and corporations.



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