

Protesters demand answers after young temp worker dies at Thyssenkrupp steel mill in Duisburg

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Well over 1,000 people marched in protest outside the Thyssenkrupp plant in northern Duisburg, Germany on Sunday to demand justice and an investigation into the death of 26-year-old Refat Süleyman. The Bulgarian worker was found dead Monday last week in a slag pond at Germany's largest steel company.

Süleyman was in the first days of his temp job as a site cleaner when he was sent on break on Friday morning, October 14, which he spent in a company vehicle. That was the last time he was seen alive. According to Thyssenkrupp and police, the search for Süleyman began that morning, the plant fire department employing thermal imaging cameras. Several hours later, police reported they had covered the huge steel mill site with search dogs, a helicopter and drones. Süleyman remained missing.

It was only by chance that he was found four days later, the following Monday. His body had been washed up during a filling of the slag pond. The autopsy result states that the 26-year-old had suffocated in the several-meters-deep slag basin on the day of his disappearance.

The pool is located in a covered safety area, secured by several fences, about 100 meters from the blast furnaces. According to the Duisburg criminal police, Süleyman had been carrying out cleaning work directly by the basin that day, so the young worker had authorization to enter.

It remains unclear why and how he ended up in a deep basin filled with slag, sludge and wastewater. A colleague of Süleyman's told the *World Socialist Web Site* that as temporary workers they are required to always move around the plant site in pairs. Whether Refat was working alone at the slag pond, and if so, why, also remains unclear.

The police have given their assurances. They are following all leads, they say, but have found no indications of foul play.

Refat's friends and relatives are refusing to be put off and are demanding an immediate investigation into the circumstances of his death. On social media, the open urgent

questions and corresponding assumptions are spreading quickly, there is talk of murder and a possible cover-up.

The Bulgarian news portal *Filibeliler* compiled some of the open questions:

- Why, on only the second day of his contract, was Refat assigned to clean a pool of industrial slag—a highly dangerous activity?
- Why did he perform this task alone and without the supervision of his immediate supervisor?
- Did Refat receive the necessary instruction on working in a hazardous environment before he was assigned cleaning duties?
- Why did local authorities and the employer initially claim that Refat was hired to clean and install traffic signs at the plant site?
- Is there a discrepancy between the tasks described in the contract and the actual work he performed?

Due to these inconsistencies, there were initial spontaneous protests soon after Süleyman's body was found on Monday as friends and family gathered in front of the Thyssenkrupp plant to demand more information. They were told by Turkish-speaking police officers to be calm and wait for the police investigation.

However, the Bulgarian worker's family's experience with the local officers and authorities makes them doubt that the police are at all interested in solving the death of young Refat.

Refat's relatives and friends therefore rallied at a demonstration the following Sunday. More than 1,000 people from Duisburg and the surrounding area came to support Refat's family in their grief and at the same time to demand answers. Hundreds more gathered in his Bulgarian hometown of Plovdiv to commemorate the deceased.

In Duisburg, they demanded clarification of the circumstances of Refat's death on banners and in chants: "We want the truth to go forward," read one banner, "Not hidden and not concealed" on another.

The demonstrators are also loudly demanding justice, “Adalet,” as it is called in Turkish, which Plovdiv residents speak fluently. They are angry about the unequal treatment and the disastrous living and working conditions of which they are all victims and which may now have killed Refat.

The demands of Sunday’s demonstration therefore go far beyond the immediate resolution of the death of their friend and relative. Rather, they call attention to a larger social background. They are not only demanding “safety for Thyssenkrupp employees and justice for the dead Bulgarian boy.” The entire temporary employment system should be dissolved, they say. All temporary workers and their colleagues employed by subcontractors should be hired or taken over by Thyssenkrupp. In this way, the two-class society in the plant between regular and subcontracted workers is to be dismantled.

People marched from the late Refat’s home in the Bruckhausen district to the nearby Thyssenkrupp plant gate. Here, the call for “Adalet” was particularly strong. Speakers from the Bulgarian community and Refat’s relatives spoke in front of the factory gate. They announced that this would not be the last protest.

Even if the exact circumstances of the death have not yet been clarified, one thing is certain: The system of temporary work in Germany is deadly for many workers. The massive expansion of temporary work into a modern slave labor system was initiated in 2003 by then-Federal Minister of Economics and Labor of the coalition government of Social Democrats (SPD) and the Green Party, Wolfgang Clement (SPD). As part of the “Agenda 2010” economic plan, he struck several legal framework conditions for temporary work without providing alternative legislation. Clement subsequently offered his services directly to large temporary employment agencies and accepted his payment.

Since then, the corporations have used subcontractors and sub-subcontractors to undermine the improvements in wages and occupational health and safety that had been won in the struggles of previous generations. The unions and their works councils in the large corporations are two-faced. In public, they denounce this brutal system of exploitation. In reality, however, they organize the miserable wages and working conditions, for example through collective agreements on temporary work.

For example, Refat was hired out by the temporary employment agency Eleman to the temporary employment agency Buchen Umweltservice. This company carries out cleaning work at the Thyssenkrupp steelworks in Duisburg under a contract for work.

Refat was one of around 12,000 Bulgarian immigrants in Duisburg. Most of them come from one or two regions where Turkish is spoken. In the north of Duisburg they can

get by without knowing German. But at the same time they are at the mercy of unscrupulous profiteers who control everything from apartments to jobs to social benefits for them and take a cut accordingly. The already low wages of the Bulgarian workers end up to a large extent in the pockets of these profiteers.

On the labor market, temporary employment providers to the large industrial companies put Bulgarian workers in particular into the most dangerous and physically demanding jobs. They are sold to the corporations like modern slaves. The workers are usually paid off with the minimum wage—in the best case, this is not the rule. Often the workers are deprived of their wages due to their lack of knowledge of the language and labor laws. The temporary employment agencies, on the other hand, collect many times the wage paid to the worker. Thus, the companies and corporations profit at the expense of the temporary workers. Serious injuries and deaths are accepted.

Every year, 400 to 500 people die in workplace accidents. Last year, there were 510, with the most deaths in North Rhine-Westphalia and Bavaria, each with about 100. These dead on the labor front are the victims of the enrichment of the Group’s shareholders and their associates in the temporary employment industry.

Clarification of these deaths therefore cannot be expected from the corporation itself, the temporary employment agencies or the trade unions. An independent rank-and-file committee of colleagues and friends must reconstruct the events surrounding Refat’s death and shed light on the legal and contractual agreements between the corporations. The disclosure of all contracts of Refat Süleyman’s employment is a central demands in order to identify those responsible for his death and to initiate the beginning of the end of the modern system of slavery called “employee leasing.”



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