

A postal worker forced to work in extreme heat had a cerebral hemorrhage in Turkey

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Correction: We have learned that Berran Özen K?rm?z?g?l, a PTT worker who was reported by the Haber-Sen union, of which she is a member, to have suffered a cerebral hemorrhage during a distribution in extreme heat, is fighting for her life in intensive care. We wish her a rapid recovery. The article was updated on 30.07.2023.

Record high temperatures since early July are threatening the health and lives of workers, especially those forced to work in unsafe conditions.

Berran Özen K?rm?z?g?l (42), a postal worker from the state-owned Turkish Post (PTT), was hospitalized on Monday after she collapsed due to sunstroke while delivering mail in the western city of Izmir, one of the hottest provinces in Turkey. K?rm?z?g?l, who reportedly suffered a brain hemorrhage, is fighting for her life in an intensive care unit.

The air temperature in Izmir on Monday was as high as 38 degrees Celsius (100.4 Fahrenheit). Experts say working outdoors in this heat, especially between 11 am and 3 pm, is dangerous for health. In particular, workers in agriculture, construction, municipalities, mail delivery, shipyards, ports and cleaning can face the danger of sunstroke.

Occupational safety expert Cafer Fidan, chairman of the Asbestos and Hazardous Waste Association (ASTA), said that body temperature regulating systems are severely undermined for workers laboring in extremely hot weather. He warned that this poses deadly risks.

Fidan said that working and resting hours should be planned according to these conditions, stating, “Work should be stopped when the sensed temperature exceeds 41 Celsius degrees. Work between 37-41 Celsius degrees should be organized accordingly, working hours should be shortened and rest periods should be increased.”

An article by public health expert Dr. Hazal Cansu Çulpan published on T24 pointed out that extreme heat

affects vulnerable groups such as the elderly and those with comorbidities, as well as the workers more. Çulpan wrote:

People with low socioeconomic status are more vulnerable to the adverse effects of heat for a number of reasons. The higher prevalence of chronic diseases among these people, the fact that their jobs require more physical activity, poorer housing conditions, and difficulties in accessing treatment are some of the reasons why they are in the risk group.

In an interview with the Health and Safety Labour Watch (İSİG) organization in Turkey, Doctor Zeki Gül said, “Those who work under the sun in extreme heat or those who work in industry with high temperature ovens, especially industrial ovens, are at higher risk. It is not only a matter of sunstroke, but the high heat and humidity raise sugar levels and blood pressure. Those who die in extreme heat are usually from this group whose disease is not diagnosed.”

After K?rm?z?g?l was taken to intensive care, the Haber-Sen union, of which she was a member, organized a protest in front of the Izmir Post Office Directorate. The union demanded the resignation of the PTT General Director and the Izmir Chief Director and filed a criminal complaint against them for violating the Occupational Safety Law. The Haber-Sen is part of the Public Laborer’s Unions Confederation or KESK, which is aligned to capitalist parties opposing President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government.

However, the union bureaucracy has a long and criminal record of accepting unsafe working conditions. After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pro-opposition

D?SK announced it would use the “right to refrain from work” based on the law if coronavirus infections were seen in the workplaces. According to the law, “Workers exposed to serious and imminent danger may refrain from work until the necessary measures are taken.”

But this did not stop the unions from allowing millions of workers to be infected and thousands to die in the last three-and-a-half years. The unions kept workers on the job and prevented them from exercising their right to refuse unsafe conditions. In the schools, KESK herded educators and students into overcrowded classrooms, a key center for the spread of the pandemic.

The General Directorate of Meteorology has warned of record high temperatures in Turkey this week, urging people to “stay indoors.” However, stopping work in extreme heat conditions or adjusting working hours accordingly to protect workers’ health is not on the agenda of President Erdo?an’s government, nor of the companies or the unions in collaboration with them.

This only makes it clear that K?rm?z?g?l’s cerebral hemorrhage and the potential health problems and deaths of countless workers are a product of the “profit before lives” policy of the capitalist establishment.

It also underscores the need for workers to unite across workplaces, industries and countries, forming rank-and-file committees independent of the union apparatus as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to coordinate these life-and-death struggles around the world.

K?rm?z?g?l’s fate is a tragic example of the dire situation countless workers around the world confront. Last month, USPS letter carrier Eugene Gates Jr. died on the job in Dallas, on a day when the temperature reached 45 degrees Celsius (113 Fahrenheit).

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently wrote about the rise in temperatures and the deaths of workers:

Thousands of migrant workers in Qatar, many of whom were construction workers building stadiums and other facilities for last year’s world cup, have died from heatstroke and other related illnesses such as kidney failure from dehydration, according to separate research by the journal *Cardiology* and the *Guardian*. A 2021 study by the *Los Angeles Times* found that nearly 400 people die from heat in California each year, the majority of them among the elderly, the homeless and construction, agricultural and warehouse workers.

At the same time, social discontent among workers is growing globally over the explosion of social inequality and the ever-worsening working conditions and impact of inflation. This is compounded by the deadly heat wave that has gripped much of the northern hemisphere. As a powerful global strike movement develops, involving tens of thousands of workers from many sectors, the ruling elites and corporate media fear a global “hot labor summer.”

Turkey is also witnessing an upsurge in the class struggle under conditions of the government’s intensification of social attacks on the working population amid an unprecedented rise in the cost of living.

Last week, around 3,000 Dicle Electricity (DEDA?) distribution workers in the largely Kurdish cities of Diyarbak?r, Urfa, Mardin, Batman, Siirt and ??rnak conducted wildcat strikes to demand wage increases and improvements in the working conditions.

Over 600 subway workers at Izmir Metro A.?, a subsidiary of the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality run by the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), plan to strike July 31 over wages.

A strike action notice was also issued on July 17 at the Eti Maden Band?rma factory after contract negotiations failed to reach an agreement. If the union does not force a sell-out at the eleventh hour, workers will go on strike on August 17.

In addition, thousands of physicians, nurses and other healthcare workers affiliated to the Health and Social Services Unity and Struggle Platform (SAB?M), which brings together many trade unions and professional organizations, are preparing for a two-day strike on August 1 and 2.



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