Death of 15-year-old in Turkey underscores widespread child labor exploitation

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Muhammed Kendirci, a 15-year-old student who was working at a carpentry workshop in the Bozova district of ?anl?urfa within the scope of Vocational Training Centers (MESEM), was seriously injured on November 14 when the 20-year-old foreman, Habip A., inflated his rectum with compressed air.

The young apprentice, who reportedly sustained serious internal organ damage as a result of this torture, lost his life after five days in intensive care. This raised the number of children who have become victims of work-related homicides to at least 16 since the establishment of MESEM.?

Information obtained from the family revealed that the investigation was handled carelessly from the very beginning. The perpetrator was first released and then apprehended in another city while trying to flee abroad. Muhammed's trousers, one of the most critical pieces of evidence, were thrown away by hospital staff.

Hundreds of people, including Muhammed's friends from the neighborhood, staged a protest march on November 24 in the district of Bozova where he lived.

Muhammed's death has brought to sharp relief the fact that children are subjected to uncontrolled exploitation, with the cooperation of the government and companies, and the complicity of the trade union apparatus.?

Vocational Training Centers were included in formal and compulsory education in 2016. Through MESEM, high school-aged students between 14 and 18, who are separated from academic education, are made to work four days a week in a workplace for four years and receive theoretical training at school for only one day. Children officially receive a salary equal to just 30 percent of the minimum wage (6,631 TL/160 USD) for the first three years and 50 percent of the minimum wage (11,052 TL/260 USD) as a foreman in the fourth year.?

In Turkey, which has accepted international conventions on children's rights, the employment of children under 16 years of age is officially prohibited. Children over 15 years old who have completed compulsory primary education may be employed in "light work" that does not interfere with their physical, mental, social, and moral development or their continued schooling. But child labor, which the state denies on paper, has gained legal status through MESEM.?

The approximately 500,000 child workers within the scope of MESEM in Turkey mainly come from poor families. Educator Nurcan Korkmaz, speaking to *soL Haber*, stated that in their field studies, 58 percent of the children directly cited "economic difficulties" as the reason for attending MESEM.

In conditions where inspection mechanisms are systematically eliminated and occupational safety measures are non-existent, child workers are employed in "heavy work" despite the prohibition, and are exposed to insults, pressure, and violence. In its current form, MESEM is an application aimed at providing cheap labor to capital rather than an educational model. Moreover, this is the tip of the iceberg.?

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) Household Labor Force Survey, the labor force participation rate of children in the 15-17 age group rose from 16.2 percent in 2020 to 24.9 percent in 2024. In 2024, there were 3,894,000 children in the 15-17 age group, 970,000 of whom were working as registered workers. Children working in MESEM are not included in this number. Thus, the total number of child workers reaches 1,474,000. These are only registered child workers. The official rate of "unregistered employment" in Turkey is over 25 percent.

The Education and Science Workers' Union (E?itim-Sen), in its statement on November 20—World Children's Day—explains that there are approximately 2.3 million child workers in Turkey. A significant portion of these children, coming from families who are refugees mainly

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due to imperialist wars in the Middle East, particularly Syria, are employed very cheaply in high-risk sectors.?

According to the recent Education Monitoring Report by the Education Reform Initiative, approximately 804,000 children of compulsory education age are not attending school. Including foreign nationals, open education students, and those who have dropped out of formal education in MESEM, the total number exceeds 1,470,000. Most poor children in this situation are forced to become child laborers.?

The working hours of child workers, which can be up to 12 hours a day, not only keep them from education but also exhaust them physically and mentally. This situation, combined with a lack of supervision and inadequate occupational safety measures, leads to fatal “work accidents”. According to the data of the Worker Health and Work Safety Council (?S?G), at least 82 child workers have lost their lives this year. This represents an increase of about 10 percent compared to the previous year’s data. Since 2013, at least 770 child workers have died at their workplaces.

Capital is fed with the blood of children.? One of the last tragic examples of this was the explosion at an illegal perfume filling depot belonging to a cosmetics company in the Dilovas? district of Kocaeli on November 8. As a result of the explosion, seven workers burned to death, three of whom were children. This facility had been operating for years without any safety inspections, unlicensed, and without protective measures, with the knowledge of state institutions.?

The proliferation of child labor exploitation is part of the attack by the ruling class internationally on the conditions and living standards of the working class. According to last estimates published by the International Labour Organization and UNICEF on June 11, 2025, there were approximately 138 million child laborers worldwide in 2024. About 54 million of them are engaged in hazardous work that could endanger their health, safety, or development.?

Child labor plays a significant role in pushing wages down. In recent years, the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an in Turkey has accelerated its policy of reducing workers’ real wages under the pretext of curbing high inflation and closing the budget deficit. The minimum wage for 2025 was increased below the official inflation rate. A similar scenario is planned for 2026, in line with the demands of foreign and domestic financial capital.?

In 1818, the utopian socialist Robert Owen wrote in his letter “To the British Master Employer Manufacturers”:?

> Children are permitted to be employed, almost from infancy, in our manufactures, all of which are more or less unhealthy. They are condemned to a routine of long-protracted and unvarying toil within doors, at an age when their time should be exclusively divided between healthful exercises in the open air, and their school education. The utmost violence is thus offered to nature at their very outset in life.

Owen fought for reforms such as the prohibition of child labor and the provision of health and education services for working children. However, his well-intentioned efforts were doomed to fail within the developing capitalist system.

Karl Marx, who put socialism on scientific foundations, explains that child labor is not an individual or moral issue but an inevitable product of the development of capitalist production relations. As capitalist industry develops, labor becomes deskilled, and capital tends to constantly cheapen the price of labor. This deskilling facilitates the proliferation of child labor; the child is now suitable for “running errands” and undertaking dangerous jobs for low wages. At the same time, the labor market expands, and average wages are pushed down.?

In the twentieth century, due to the impact of the 1917 October Revolution and major industrial and political struggles, significant progress was made in the conditions of the international working class and in children’s rights. These are now being sacrificed worldwide for the profit and wealth accumulation of capitalist oligarchy.

The way forward lies in combining the demands for the immediate implementation of measures aimed at protecting children, and improving the social conditions of workers, with the struggle for the revolutionary mobilization of the working class against the capitalist profit system, for socialism.?

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