Explosion at Turkish steel plant kills at least 18 workers

Bar?? Demir
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At least 18 workers were killed and 12 others injured, one of them seriously, in an explosion and the fire that followed at around 11:45 a.m. on Monday, November 9, at the HABA? iron and steel plant in the Alia?a district of ?zmir. Some 2,000 workers are employed at the plant.

According to ?zmir Governor Süleyman Elban, an overhead crane fell while a vessel was being replaced in the steel melting shop, and the materials struck the arc furnace. Minister of Labour and Social Security Vedat I??khan said that, according to initial findings, the falling load severed natural gas and oxygen lines. The governor said that because of maintenance work, only about 20 of a normal shift of more than 300 workers at the facility were on site at the time.

An eyewitness told the state-run Anadolu Agency: “It was as if the ground slid out from under us. I thought it was an earthquake.”

At the request of the chief prosecutor’s office, the Alia?a Criminal Judgeship of Peace banned all news reports, interviews, criticism and commentary on the incident until the investigation is completed.

The state moved far more swiftly against those protesting the massacre than against those responsible for it. Riot police surrounded Alia?a State Hospital, where the injured were taken. Yücel Memi? and Sonay Tezcan, spokespersons for the Aegean Workers’ Unity (Ege ??çi Birli?i), were detained when they attempted to make a statement outside the hospital. As of Tuesday, prosecutors assigned to the case by the Menemen Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office issued detention orders for 11 people in connection with the HABA? disaster. Most have not had their identities and positions disclosed. Among those detained is company chairman Mehmet Rü?tü Ba?aran.

This was not an accident. It was what Friedrich Engels, examining the condition of the English working class in 1845, called “social murder.” Responsibility lies with the authorities, with the HABA? company and with the Türk Metal union, which turned a blind eye to the dangerous conditions at the plant.

The chain of disasters stretching from Soma to Amasra, and from Dilovas? to Alia?a, demonstrates a basic truth. As long as production is carried out for private profit and the accumulation of wealth and is not subject to the democratic control of the working class, the capitalist oligarchy and the state it controls will continue to treat workers’ lives as a cost item. Workplace homicides will not end.

The explosion is the final link in a long chain of negligence. Occupational safety expert Deniz ?pek told the daily Evrensel that, according to initial information from the plant, the crane lowering the ladle struck a natural gas pipe. But as ?pek stressed, the issue cannot be reduced to the error of a crane operator. In a melting shop where heavy loads are constantly being moved, the real questions are these: Why were the gas lines routed as they were, and why were they not protected against impact? Were there emergency shut-off systems? If so, why did they fail to activate? The attempt to shift the blame onto the workers at the very bottom has already begun.

HABA? is one of Türkiye’s largest iron and steel producers. For years, its workers have said that maintenance and overhauls were postponed so as not to disrupt production, that breakdowns were patched up with temporary fixes, and that new lines were set up with worn-out equipment. Management was aware of the danger.

HABA?’s 2025 sustainability report, examined by Evrensel, records that lost-time accidents rose from 147 to 229 in a single year, an increase of about 56 percent. Among subcontracted workers, they rose from 38 to 83, an increase of 118 percent. The report lists crushing, extreme heat and falls among the risks of serious injury and refers to pressure scenarios in the melting shop. Despite all this, Minister I??khan claimed that no “serious problem” had previously been identified at the facility. This is an admission that inspections either never took place or existed only on paper.

According to the same report, at least 11 workers had died at HABA? in the decade before November 9. Five of them were subcontracted workers, and two were interns. With the latest explosion, the death toll has risen to 28. Just four days earlier, on November 5, 20-year-old subcontracted worker Eyüp E?inli was killed when a heavy machinery tire he was inflating burst. On October 21, 55-year-old subcontracted worker Hakan Do?an died after falling eight metres. In 2019, a ladle tipped over and spilled some 80 tons of molten steel across the work area. In September 2025, seven workers were injured in an explosion at the melting shop furnace.

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None of this led to serious consequences for the bosses. In a compensation case brought by the family of Kadir Özdemir, who fell to his death in 2020, the court found HABA? 70 percent at fault. Not a single manager went to prison. In the case of subcontracted worker Raif Çatan, who died after falling into the sea at the company's port that same year, the defendants got off with prison sentences of two years and six months each.

Over the same period, the company's wealth multiplied. According to company figures, HABA? recorded net sales of 145 billion lira in 2025. Only 2 percent of this went to labour costs. That same year, the company received 18.2 billion lira in state incentives and tax breaks and raised its exports to $1.2 billion. The fortune of its owner, Mehmet Rü?tü Ba?aran, is estimated at around $1 billion.

HABA? is a concentrated expression of the general situation in Türkiye. According to the Health and Safety Labour Watch (?S?G), at least 1,736 workers were killed on the job in the first nine months of 2026, an average of more than six deaths a day. For the first time since it began keeping records in 2013, the group documented more than 200 deaths in five consecutive months.

Türk Metal, which is affiliated with the Türk-?? confederation, responded to the massacre by wishing God's mercy on the dead. The country's largest union, Türk Metal, is a bureaucratic apparatus that signs contracts with meagre wage increases behind workers' backs, suppresses their anger and is intertwined with the state. In a plant where three deadly work accidents have occurred within three weeks it has not called a single protest, let alone a halt to production. Such an apparatus exists to defend the interests of the companies, not the workers.

President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an opened his statement on the HABA? explosion by saying whoever was negligent would be exposed. Speaking after a cabinet meeting, he immediately turned to the fund scandal that has shaken the government since September 17, urging citizens to continue trusting the government. Last week, Fatma Betül Sayan Kaya, a former family minister in the government, was arrested over her alleged role in the fund fraud.

Erdo?an's speech reveals the ruling class's real concern. It fears that the social anger accumulated through financial speculation, impoverishment and social inequality could—through triggering events such as the HABA? massacre—give rise to a mass movement of the working class. Erdo?an has not forgotten the mass anger that erupted across the country in 2014, when he declared in Soma, where 301 miners had been killed, that such incidents were "ordinary" and "in the nature" of the work.

Despite its claim that "those responsible will be held to account", the government's record is clear. In such investigations, those who stand trial are mostly mid-level managers, supervisors and technical staff. The bosses and the officials whose responsibility reaches up to the government almost always escape virtually unpunished.

Alp Gürkan, the owner of Soma Holding, was never arrested and was acquitted. His son Can Gürkan, the chairman of the board, was sentenced to 20 years in prison, but sentence-enforcement rules reduced it to about seven years. That amounted to just eight days for each miner killed. None of those responsible for the Soma disaster is in prison today. The detentions, and any arrests, following the latest massacre at HABA? are a means of defusing social anger and ensuring that the wheels of exploitation keep turning.

HABA? workers, their families, and workers across Türkiye and around the world who share their grief and anger must oppose the cover-up of this massacre. This requires workers build rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union bureaucracy and led by workers they elect and trust. Together with supportive occupational safety experts, engineers, doctors and lawyers, these committees must launch an independent workers' inquiry. They must demand access to all the company's risk assessments, maintenance records and official inspection reports.

Until safe working conditions are secured under workers' control, production in hazardous departments must be halted with no loss of pay. The subcontracting system must be abolished, and all workers given permanent contracts.

This struggle must not remain confined to a single plant. Alia?a is a major industrial hub, centred above all on the petrochemical, metal, and shipbuilding and ship repair sectors. In recent years, it has been the scene of important struggles by workers at Türkiye Petroleum Refineries (Tüpra?), the country's largest industrial company, and by ship-breaking workers. The struggle of workers at the Smart Solar factory in Alia?a is ongoing. Organisation across Alia?a would inspire and guide workers throughout the country and beyond.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) provides the framework for organising this unity. Workers' lives and well-being can be secured only through the struggle for a global socialist society, in which production is organised to meet social needs, not private profit. Contact us to build rank-and-file committees as the instruments of this struggle.

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