Production restarts at HABA? steel plant after 19 workers killed

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Eight days after the explosion and fire that killed 19 workers at the HABA? Iron and Steel plant in Alia?a, ?zmir, on November 9, management restarted production without taking any serious safety measures.

A statement issued on November 18 by the Chamber of Metallurgical and Materials Engineers, part of the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB), fundamentally undermines the "accident" narrative of the company and the government.

According to the Chamber, the runways of the crane carrying the steel shell of the electric arc furnace collapsed while the shell was being replaced during maintenance. The falling crane and shell damaged the gas pressure regulation valve system and high-current cables. In the Chamber's assessment, gas escaping from the ruptured natural gas and oxygen lines was ignited by electrical arcing from the damaged cables.

Nineteen workers were burned to death in the gas explosion and the heat wave that followed. Dozens more were injured.

"This disaster did not originate from one or more metallurgical processes," the Chamber states. According to the statement, there was no molten metal and no water leak in the area, because production had been stopped and the work was being carried out in a cold environment.

Yet the preliminary findings of the expert panel appointed by the Alia?a Public Prosecutor's Office, as reported by the daily *Evrensel*, had attributed the explosion to water leaking from the arc furnace's water-cooled panels and coming into contact with molten steel. Responding to this, the Chamber stated: "As a matter of our professional and social responsibility, we are obliged to correct the inaccurate reports in the media that we have followed with astonishment in recent days."

The Chamber's statement raises a number of questions. Why did the structure supporting the crane collapse? When were the crane runways last inspected? What do the maintenance records show? Were there emergency shut-off systems, and if so, why were they not activated? Why were so many workers in the danger zone?

These questions, which directly concern the company's management, remain unanswered. The refusal to allow a TMMOB delegation into the plant is bound up with this. According to a worker who spoke to *soL*, the debris was hastily cleared by workers kept on compulsory overtime, and concrete is now being poured at the blast site.

According to a worker who spoke to *Evrensel*, systems were started up on the morning of November 17, and production resumed at 2 p.m. The steel melt shop where the explosion occurred is not yet operating. However, coil production continues in the sheet rolling mill, subcontracted workers are working at full strength in the cold rolling mill, and some workers are being kept on overtime.

Another worker recalled that shipments did not stop even on the day of the explosion. He said that if management had its way, it would not have halted production even on that day. According to workers, the only visible change has been an increase in the number of private security guards in orange vests at the factory gates. The company's management is protecting not the workers, but itself against the workers' anger.

The account of a crane operator shows that production continued despite known risks and repeated warnings. Speaking to *Evrensel* on November 22, the operator said he had reported faults in the cranes in the crane crew's messaging group. But the engineer in charge told him to "keep feeding the lines." Electrical maintenance workers came two or three times, but the fault was never fixed. Meanwhile, workers continue to work beneath coils weighing 15 to 20 tonnes. The operator says he quit on the 28th day of his probationary period as a result.

According to Health and Safety Labour Watch (?S?G), at least 45 workers have lost their lives at HABA? facilities since 1999. Across Türkiye, at least 1,930 workers were killed on the job in the first 10 months of 2026.

In 2025, HABA? recorded 145 billion lira (about $2.9 billion) in net sales. It spent only 2 percent of this on labour costs, while receiving 18.2 billion lira (about $360 million)

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in state incentives and tax breaks the same year. According to the company's own sustainability report, lost-time accidents among subcontracted workers rose by 118 percent in a single year.

Nevertheless, the British certification body CARES awarded HABA? ISO 45001 occupational health and safety certification in November 2025. According to *Evrensel*, the certificate was still valid at the time of the November 9 massacre of workers.

The state's response to this preventable disaster shows that HABA? will not be the last unless workers intervene as an independent social and political force. The Alia?a Criminal Judgeship of Peace imposed a publication ban. Deputies of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its fascist ally, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), voted down a motion for a parliamentary inquiry. Workers and supporters protesting the massacre were detained.

The Türk Metal union, which organises the plant, never once demanded that production be halted. According to workers, the return to production was presented as a decision taken with the union's approval.

An interview given to *Evrensel* by academic Erhan Öz?eker shows that impunity was systematic in 20 cases between 2003 and 2024, in each of which at least seven workers were killed. According to Öz?eker, indictments are drawn up under the lightest category of offence, and expert reports shift the blame onto lower-level staff rather than company owners and executives.

Occupational safety expert Deniz ?pek, speaking to *Yeni Ya?am*, stressed that the problem is not that the risks are unknown, but that production continues in spite of them. The existing pro-company Occupational Health and Safety Law also allows fatal workplace accidents to continue.

After the 2014 Soma mine disaster, in which 301 miners were killed, holding company owner Alp Gürkan was acquitted. Company chairman Can Gürkan was released after serving about five years of a 20-year sentence, while the public officials involved escaped with token sentences.

At HABA?, too, nine mid-level managers have been jailed pending trial, while the company's owner, Mehmet Rü?tü Ba?aran, was released after his detention under judicial control in the form of "house arrest." According to reports, Ba?aran is serving his house arrest in his historic waterfront mansion in ?stanbul's Yeniköy district, reportedly worth 2 billion lira (about $40 million).

On average, 2,000 workers are killed on the job every year in Türkiye, and 330,000 worldwide according to International Labour Organization (ILO) figures. Workers' lives cannot be entrusted to laws that protect companies, nor to occupational safety experts and inspectors who depend on those companies. The struggle to end workplace killings requires the independent organisation and mobilisation of the working class.

The demands raised in the statement issued on November 13 by the HABA? Workers Rank-and-File Committee Initiative remain fully valid. The Initiative called for building rank-and-file committees in every workplace to fight for these demands:

- An independent workers' investigation must be carried out by elected workers, together with engineers, doctors and lawyers they trust.
- All production must be halted until the independent committee approves it as safe, and all workers must be placed on paid leave. Until the serious and imminent danger has been eliminated, workers must exercise their right to refuse work under Article 13 of Law No. 6331.
- The pro-company Occupational Health and Safety Law must be changed, and oversight by elected safety committees must be established in every workplace.
- Iron and steel and other key industries must be put into public ownership under the democratic control of the workers.

As the HABA? Workers Rank-and-File Committee Initiative stated, workers must fight in the knowledge that these demands can be realised only if they "unite as a class through rank-and-file committees across workplaces, industries and borders, and take power." This requires workers to unite their struggles internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Workers' safety and well-being can be guaranteed only when production is reorganised on the basis of social need rather than private profit—that is, on a world socialist basis.



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