

PUTTING PROFITS OVER PEOPLE: **TURKEY'S TREACHEROUS MINING INDUSTRY**



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feature

Country: **Turkey**

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One year ago, the industrial homicide at Soma claimed the lives of 301 Turkish coal miners.

The explosion and fire were only the visible, immediate causes of their deaths. What really killed them were greed, apathy, incompetence and corruption – ingredients that trigger most mine disasters.



Mining coal remains one of the world's most dangerous jobs. Besides explosions or fires, miners daily face the possibility of tunnel collapse and entrapment, burial under loose coal or rock, poisonous or asphyxiating gas release, hazardous chemicals, or mutilation by heavy equipment, to name a few.

Private mining companies obsess over production and profits. This was extremely evident at Soma, where the private mining operator Soma Holdings took over the mine from the Turkish government in 2009.

With the state a guaranteed buyer for its output, it had every incentive to maximize production at any cost. Soma Holdings tripled production to what had originally deemed possible. By May 2014, the company had been able to extract a massive 15 million tonnes of coal, three years ahead of schedule.

However, while Soma Holdings enforced rapid expansion of the mine underground, it failed to increase and maintain the mine's ventilation systems, vital to provide clean air to miners.

In complete contempt for worker safety, managers at the mine continued production for two hours after heat and smoke began emerging at the main entrance on 13 May 2014, attempting to tackle the problem without evacuating the mine.

After a massive explosion ensued, the inadequate ventilation system failed to pump the poisonous carbon monoxide out of the mine creating a death chamber for the miners.

A damning independent report into the disaster cited this as a "very negative" factor in rescue efforts.

The 126-page expert report also found that safety readings were routinely fabricated and many of the carbon monoxide sensors were broken. **The report clearly states that the Soma disaster was "preventable".**

A further study by the Turkish association of chambers of engineers and architects TMMOB, stated: "The reason for the carnage (at Soma) is privatization, marketization and the outsourcing policies over the past 12 years in the mining sector and also in the area of health and safety."

Soma

- Turkey's worst-ever mining disaster
- 301 miners killed
- 432 children left without fathers
- Main cause of death: carbon monoxide poisoning
- Independent report said tragedy was 'preventable'
- Ventilation system created death trap
- Safety readings at mine fabricated
- Carbon monoxide sensors faulty
- Gas masks broken
- Soma Holdings, company management and supervisors, safety inspectors and government all to blame

In fact, the victory for Turkish miners in approving ratification of C176 came after years of campaigning led by IndustriALL with its Turkish mining affiliate Maden-Is, and with support from CFMEU in Australia, NUM in South Africa, USW in the USA, ROSUGLEPROF in Russia, and IG BCE in Germany.

IndustriALL was determined that 301 lives would not be lost in vain. In the immediate aftermath of Soma, IndustriALL's assistant general secretary, Kemal Özkan, and mine sector chair, Andrew Vickers from CFMEU, led a solidarity mission to the scene of the disaster with mining affiliates from around the world.

Once again, IndustriALL lobbied the ILO, calling on the organization to step up pressure on Turkey to ratify C176.

After 18 miners were killed in another preventable mining accident at the Has Sekerler coalmine near Ermenek on 28 October 2014, IndustriALL immediately wrote to all 535 members of the Turkish Parliament demanding ratification of C176.

Global union victory – Turkey ratifies C176

It took the tragedy at Soma, Turkey's worst-ever mining disaster, one of many, for the country to finally approve ratification of Convention no.176, the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention on Health and Safety in Mining.

C176, which sets international guidelines for the mining industry, was adopted by the ILO in 1995 and initiated by an IndustriALL Global Union predecessor.

- 1 Mock coffins and helmets placed by protesters are pictured during a demonstration in Istanbul, 25 May 2014, blaming the ruling AK Party (AKP) government for the mining disaster that happened in western Turkey. *Reuters/Can Erok*
- 2 A body of a miner is carried to an ambulance in Soma, 16 May 2014. *Reuters/Osman Orsal*
- 3 Trade unions from around the world joined IndustriALL Global Union and IndustriALL Europe in a solidarity mission to the Soma mine one month after the accident. *IndustriALL*





Less than six weeks later, on 4 December 2014, the Turkish parliament finally approved ratification of the ILO's Convention on Health and Safety in Mines Convention number 176. **"It never would have happened without the unions,"** says Özkan.

After the Soma disaster, 60 mines closed down for economic and safety reasons after the government hastily increased the number and diligence of its inspections.

Around 6,000 miners were laid off but many of the mines that were closed down have reopened and the workers have got their jobs back.

For Soma survivors, the situation is worse. On 1 December last year, some 2,800 miners at the ill fated mine were laid off. They are still waiting severance payments with no guaranteed job to secure their future.

Turkey's killing coalfields

The success of C176 lies in its implementation and enforcement in a country where even the President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has publically stated that coalmining accidents are inevitable and that is a miner's 'destiny' to die at work.

Every day, some 50,000 miners risk their lives working underground. There have been 1,500 deaths in Turkish mines since 2000. A staggering 13,000 miners were involved in accidents in 2013 alone.

Statistically, Turkey's miners are among the most likely to be killed on the job, according to the ILO.

Mining accidents accounted for 10.4 per cent of all work-related accidents in Turkey last year.

ILO 'Safety and Health in Mines' Convention 176

- Adopted by the ILO in 1995 at the insistence of the Miners' International Federation.
- The best international standard for making mines safer.
- Ratified by 29 countries.
- Approved by Turkey for ratification on 4 December 2014.
- Turkey is the 30th country to ratify the Convention.
- Under C176, mining employers have primary responsibility to make mines safe.
- Requires a coherent national policy on mine safety.
- Demands a joint labour-management culture of prevention.
- Emphasis on eliminating hazards and minimizing risks. Personal protective equipment should be a last resort.
- Employers must provide adequate training so that workers have the skills to do their jobs safely.
- Workers have the right, and the duty, to report accidents and dangerous occurrences, request inspections, remove themselves from serious danger, and participate in matters affecting their health and safety through elected safety and health representatives and/or Joint Health and Safety Committees.
- Despite continuous campaigning, many countries have not yet ratified of ILO C176.





Only two things stand between a coal miner and early death: the government and the union.



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- 4 IndustriALL mining sector chair Andrew Vickers endorses ExCo resolution on mine safety in Turkey in June 2014. *IndustriALL*
- 5 Miners from Soma protest outside Turkish parliament in Ankara on 10 February 2015. *Maden-Is*
- 6 Leaders from Turkish miners union demand that government pay severance to sacked Soma miners. *Maden-Is*
- 7 Miners work in a coal mine in the Black Sea city of Zonguldak, northern Turkey, 5 December 2013. *Reuters*



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Major mining accidents in Turkey

07 Mar 1983	Gas explosion in Zonguldak, Ereğli Armutçuk	103 dead
10 Apr 1983	Collapse in Kozlu, Zonguldak	10 dead
31 Jan 1987	Collapse in Kozlu, Zonguldak	8 dead
31 Jan 1990	Gas explosion in Bartın, Amasra	5 dead
07 Feb 1990	Gas explosion in Amasya, Yeni Çeltası	68 dead
03 Mar 1992	Gas explosion in Kozlu, Zonguldak	263 dead
26 Mar 1995	Gas explosion in Sorgun, Yozgat	37 dead
08 Aug 2003	Gas explosion in Aşkale, Erzurum	8 dead
22 Nov 2003	Gas explosion in Ermenek, Karaman	10 dead
08 Sep 2004	Fire in Küre, Kastamonu	19 dead
21 Apr 2005	Gas explosion Gediz, Kütahya	18 dead
02 Jun 2006	Gas explosion in Dursunbey, Balıkesir	17 dead
10 Dec 2009	Gas explosion in Mustafakemalpaşa, Bursa	19 dead
23 Feb 2010	Gas explosion in Dursunbey, Balıkesir	13 dead
17 May 2010	Gas explosion in Karadon, Zonguldak	30 dead
10 Feb 2011	Land Slide in Çöllolar, Afşin Elbistan	11 dead
08 Jan 2013	Gas explosion in Kozlu, Zonguldak	8 dead
13 May 2014	Blast and fire in Soma, Manisa	301 dead
28 Oct 2014	Flooding due to faulty pipe at Has Sekerler mine, Ermenek	18 dead

Privatization at their peril

Turkey's privatization drive that began in the 1980s has been a catastrophe for the health and safety of miners in the country.

"Every privatized mine is another Soma waiting to happen," says Kenan Dikbiyik, a mining engineer and technical adviser to Maden-İs. "Underground mines should not be rented out to private operators."

"The private mining companies are there for ten years, forcing the mines to produce more, knowing that the government will buy all their output," adds Dikbiyik.

"They don't even implement the minimum of health and safety requirements because it all costs. They want to maximize production in the quickest time possible."

Ninety per cent of all miners in Turkey are now working for private employers, compared to 15 per cent in 1981.

"Private companies are ignoring engineering principles and safety measures to decrease costs and increase production. They don't understand old coal producing areas like Soma and Ermenek and underestimate the possible dangers," says Dikbiyik.

While many countries are trying to cut their consumption of fossil fuels, Turkey is turning to coal to reduce its reliance on external energy suppliers.

Coal made up for 53 per cent of the country's total energy source in 2012 and accounts for 28.3 per cent of total electricity generation. However, at present, Turkey has to import 95 per cent of its hard coal.

Hence the government is offering incentives to private mining companies to capitalize on the country's vast coal reserves.

Turkey has an estimated 1.3 billion tonnes of hard coal reserves and 11.5 billion tonnes of lignite (brown coal) of which 500 million tonnes and 9.8 billion tonnes respectively are proven.

And although the quality of Turkey's coal is poor, it is still cheaper to burn than imports.

The stronger the union, the safer the mine

"Only two things stand between a coal miner and early death: the government and the union," says Brian Kohler, IndustriALL's director of Health and Safety.

Enshrined in C176 is the right of workers to collectively select safety and health representatives. Workers must be involved in reporting accidents and taking an active role in the health and safety of the mines where they work.

"Freedom of Association must be in force for C176 to function," says Özkan. "Turkey has to be more open to union rights and freedoms."

Unions in Turkey face a constant struggle. Turkish metalworkers have recently been banned from striking and union busting is common practice.

Last year, Human Rights Watch criticized the Turkish government for being "increasingly autocratic". A report by

the rights organization said: "In office for three terms since 2002, and enjoying a strong parliamentary majority, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has demonstrated a growing intolerance of political opposition, public protest, and critical media."

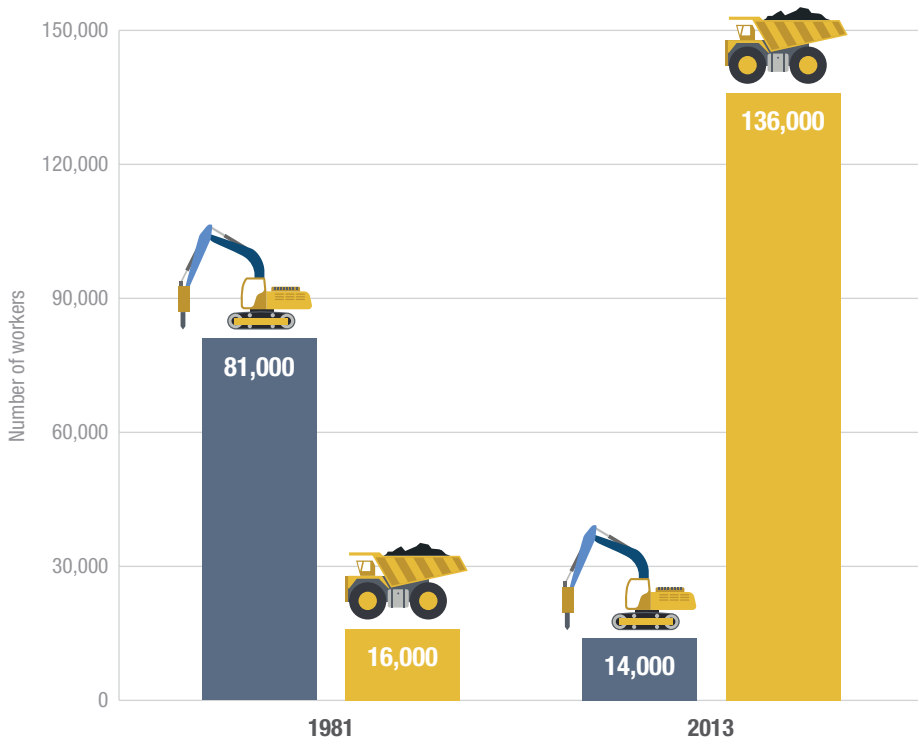


There have been 1,500 deaths in Turkish mines since 2000.

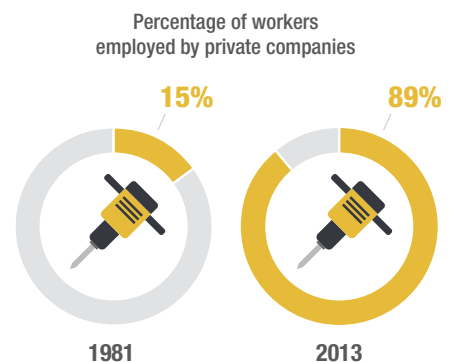
However, the industrial homicides at Soma and Ermenek have propelled the government into making improvements to legislation. In January this year, a Parliamentary Commission passed a new draft mining law that will result in changes to the transfer of mining licences and establish a permanent supervision system to improve health and safety in mines.

The government has admitted that technical inspections in the past were carried out too quickly without examining safety conditions properly. With the new act, the government has agreed to provide qualified mining engineers as permanent monitors for all mines.

"It all looks good on paper," says Dikbiyik who was on the special commission tasked with drawing up the new mining act. "The challenge will be implementing it."



■ State-owned companies (number of workers)
■ Private companies (number of workers)



Source: the Mining Industry and Policies Report of Chamber of Mining Engineers and the Turkish Social Security Institution.