

The Turkish Catastrophe and the Global Mining Slaughterhouse

By [Jerry White](#)

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The horrific mine explosion in Turkey, with a death toll of nearly 300 and rising, is the worst mining disaster in the history of the country. The devastation wrought on family members and friends was entirely preventable. It was not an unexplainable “accident” but the inevitable result of privatization, government neglect and the capitalist profit system, which sacrifices the lives and limbs of millions of industrial workers around the world every year.

Claims by the company owner and government officials, including the energy minister, that the Soma mine had passed recent safety inspections have been denounced as lies by surviving miners and relatives. The brother of one mine worker told local media outlets that safety inspections were mere formalities—“on paper” only. Another miner, Oktay Berrin, told the AFP, “There is no security in this mine. The unions are just puppets and our management only cares about money.”

Safety problems were well known. Weeks ago local opposition legislators, inundated by miners’ complaints over dangerous working conditions, called for an investigation but were rebuffed by Prime Minister Erdogan’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). On April 29, a local AKP deputy declared that the mines in the Soma district were the safest in the country, saying any accidents were solely due to the “nature of the profession.”

Erdogan repeated this contemptuous lie in a public statement at the disaster site earlier this week. “This is what happens in coal mining. There is no such thing as accident-free work,” he declared. The prime minister went on to note that similar mining disasters had occurred in England and the United States in the 1860s, 1890s and early 1900s. “These things happen. We do have something called an accident at work.”

Erdogan’s callous comments revealed more than the prime minister intended. The “new normal” of the global mining industry in the 21st Century is a return to conditions of Victorian England and those that prevailed in the US under robber barons like Rockefeller, when the death rate for coal miners was higher than that of American soldiers in World War I.

Since Erdogan’s IMF-backed economic “reforms” in 2005 and 2010—which gave the rights to the country’s coal resources to private companies—more than a third of coal extraction previously carried out by state-owned companies has been taken over by private subcontractors. Under the demand of global commodity markets and stock exchanges, the new owners have slashed spending, including for safety, in order to boost profits and investor returns.

In an interview with *Hurriyet Daily* two years ago, Alp Gurkan, the chief executive of Soma Komur Isletmeleri, which owns the Soma mine, boasted that his company had reduced the costs of coal extraction from \$130 per ton to just \$23.80 per ton since leasing the mine from the state-owned Turkish Coal Enterprises in 2005.

Soma miners who earn \$19 a day told media outlets that safety conditions had worsened since privatization and that they are subject to immediate dismissal if they complain about working conditions or are injured on the job. In a further indication of the brutal conditions that prevail, a 15-year-old boy—one of an unknown number of child laborers—was among the fatalities at the mine.

The free-market policies of the AKP were initiated as Turkey sought to meet the demands of the IMF and gain entry into the European Union. The measures earned the praise of the US President Barack Obama, speaking on behalf of American finance capital, whose administration has pointed to Turkey as an economic model for the Middle East and other developing countries.

In a comment to the industry web site, *Engineering & Mining Journal*, Kerim Sener, managing director of London-based Ariana Resources, which has gold-mining interests in western Turkey gushed, “The prospectivity in Turkey is incredible. The country has an advantage over various countries on its periphery as it’s a good deal more stable and has a much more western/capitalist orientated framework.... This has kindled further interest from the global mining sector and the country has been opened up and things have generally got much easier here.”

These conditions have produced the worst mining safety record in the world, with an estimated 1,308 fatal mining accidents since 2000, not including the Soma disaster. On average, more than seven miners die in Turkey per million tons of excavated coal, according to a report by the Economic Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV).

The transformations in Turkey are part of a global process, affecting “developing” and the advanced capitalist countries alike. The same day as the Soma explosion, two miners in the US state of West Virginia were killed in a roof and wall collapse at a mine, which had a long record of safety violations and was supposed to be under tighter scrutiny from federal mine safety officials. The site of the tragedy was only a short distance from the Upper Big Branch Mine, where 29 miners were killed in a coal dust explosion in April 2010.

Worldwide, an estimated 12,000 miners are killed every year from roof falls, explosions, fires, flooding and other underground and surface accidents. Countless others succumb to slow, suffocating death of black lung disease or coal workers’ pneumoconiosis (CWP). In China, 1,049 people died in mine accidents last year, according to the government reports.

The brutal competition to lower labor costs is also what lay behind the August 16, 2012 Marikana Massacre in South Africa. The African National Congress government, aided and abetted by the National Union of Mineworkers, murdered 34 striking platinum miners in order to maintain South Africa’s reputation as a low-cost platform for global mining companies.

The Soma disaster is an indictment of the capitalist system. In its insatiable drive for profit and personal fortune, intensified following the 2008 global economic crisis, the ruling classes around the world are determined to turn the clock backwards and return to the

conditions of brutal exploitation, child labor and industrial carnage that prevailed in the industrialized countries more than a century ago.

The only answer to this is the industrial and political mobilization of the working class to end the subordination of the lives of working people to the profit system. If the safety and wellbeing of miners and other industrial workers is to take precedence over the profit drive of the global corporations, mining, banking and other major industries must be taken out of the hands of the capitalist owners and put under control of the world's producers, that is the working class.

The global mining industry must be transformed into a publicly owned utility as part of the establishment of a planned socialist world economy. This is the only means in which the interests of society as a whole, including safety of the working class, can be ensured.

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