

## Factory Explosions and COVID: Telling Us What We Already Know

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On the 3rd of July, a firework factory in the Sakarya province of Turkey exploded, killing 7 people. A few days later, another explosion happened while the Turkish Gendarmerie was emptying the factory of unexploded fireworks, killing 3 officers. The factory in which the first explosion occurred had 7 previous explosions, the latest in 2019. The Interior Affairs Ministry last inspected the factory three months before the event and concluded it was okay to continue production.

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic left workers in an extremely vulnerable position. According to the Health and Safety Labour Watch of Turkey (İSİG), 47% of 220 worker deaths it reported in April 2020 were due to COVID.(1) Thousand of more workers caught the coronavirus and millions of more workers were exposed to it, the workers in healthcare bearing the brunt of the outbreak during the lockdown phase, service workers in the normalization phase; and agriculture, construction, and retail workers throughout the pandemic.

These two events bring to daylight the need for change felt so badly by workers all around the country across all areas of the workforce. So what is the workplace safety situation overall? And how can we improve it?

188 workers died in June 2020. This is part of 934 worker murders that happened in the first half of 2020. 1,736 workers died in 2019. A quarter of them was working in agriculture, 19% were working in construction, and 13% were working in transportation. 22% of work-related murders in 2020 were due to traffic accidents. A further 16% were due to collapses and crashes and 15% were due to falls.

It is crystal clear that we need to take action immediately to stop work-related murders. So what can we do? İSİG has published 13 “urgent demands” to stop worker deaths in its 2019 work-related murders report. Some worth mentioning here are:

- Unionization: İSİG said more than 98% of workers killed in 2019 were non-union workers. It believed stronger unions created more bargaining power for workers, also creating safer workplaces.
- Better job descriptions and working conditions: İSİG stated that employees were forced to perform tasks that were not on their job descriptions and were working for longer hours than they should be working.
- Job security and living wages: İSİG argued that these two are the pillars of the protection of labor rights. Not being afraid of losing their jobs and their living gives workers more courage to speak up and object to conditions that are not acceptable to them.
- Retirement: İSİG stated that “retirement in the grave” should be abolished and when workers retire should be determined by years worked depending on gender and occupation.

(1)<http://isigmeclisi.org/20383-carklar-donuyor-isciler-oluyor-nisan-ayinda-en-az-220-isci-yasami>