



Belgium's Turkish miners, the last of the line

Turkey provided the last great wave of immigrant labour for Belgium's coal mines, at a time when the industry had already reached the stage of terminal decline. The proportion of underground workers who were Turks rose from 10% to 20% between 1964 and 1974, peaking at a quarter during the 1980s. But what were their working conditions, and how did these impact on their health?

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Recruitment of Turkish labour

During the early 1960s, the coalmining industry was faced with a paradox. It had been obliged to close 40% of its collieries since 1958, cutting the workforce from 140 000 to 85 000, but once again it was experiencing a shortage of manpower. The reason for this was essentially that employment in the mines had long ceased to have any appeal for most Belgian families, and mine owners had adopted a strategy during the interwar period of systematically bringing in foreign labour to offset this social disaffection. The tactic was especially favoured by the coal industry because it produced an additional low-cost workforce that could be offloaded at any time; the residence status of these foreigners was precarious, and they were subject to police surveillance which made them keep their heads down and avoid trouble.

The coal industry thus recruited nearly 17 000 Turkish workers between 1963 and 1965. Most of them were peasants, and barely 5% of them had previously worked as miners in Turkey. But the problems facing the industry were only partly resolved by this wave of recruitment. The turnover

of labour in mining continued to be huge, and it intensified further during the “Golden Sixties”, thanks to competition from neighbouring countries which were keen to lure away foreign workers recently arrived in Belgium. Peaking at 9 082 by the end of 1964, the number of Turkish mineworkers had fallen sharply to a mere 5 985 by August 1965. In December 1967, there were just 4 322 Turkish miners left, a quarter of the numbers recruited at the start. Up until the last pit closed in 1992, the recruitment of sons and grandsons of miners hired in the 1960s, and new employment permits granted by the Belgian authorities for specific locations, broadly made up for the numbers lost to other areas of employment or other countries (including Turks returning home to Turkey), and for workers invalidated out of the industry.

Fewer deaths thanks to mechanisation, but more injuries

The mechanisation of some dangerous jobs, for example work at the coalface and in roadway drivage, together with technical improvements in roof support, led to a virtual halving of fatalities, which fell from 91 to 54 per 1 000 workers between 1960 and 1970 compared to 130 during the 1950s. Even so, the death toll was high: between 1963 and 1966, 218 underground workers died as a result of an accident at work, 33 of them Turks.

The increase in occupational accidents in 1963 was attributed mainly to the new Turkish recruits – the process of training them and adapting them to work underground was perceived to be slow and difficult. Many of these accidents leave

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little doubt that trainee miners were not equipped to perform the tasks they were given. Despite the intrinsic hazards of work underground, considerations of cost and profit tended to outweigh safety rules. A wage policy that rewarded productivity induced miners to prioritise output over safety, with the result that half to two thirds of all underground miners fell victim to an accident at work each year; 3% of these led to varying degrees of permanent invalidity. Roof falls (40% of all cases) were an almost irreducible cause of accidents. The noise from mining machinery and the fact that wooden pit props had been replaced by metal supports meant that miners could no longer hear the cracking sounds that warned of an imminent collapse. Colliery modernisation may have reduced the fatality rates, but it increased the number of serious accidents.

All accidents that could not be put down to sheer bad luck were routinely blamed by the bosses and their subordinates (engineer, supervisor, overman/deputy/shotfirer) on carelessness by the workers, in an effort to absolve themselves of all responsibility and the need to review their methods and structures. Whilst the proportion of accidents resulting in one to three days off work was reduced up to the 1960s thanks to shorter working hours, improved safety and health and more rigorous medical criteria, it began to climb again during the 1970s. The bosses argued that the social benefits that miners could claim for minor injuries encouraged them to provoke such injuries deliberately. Underground workers blamed the rise on frequent changes in shifts and teams and on pressure from their superiors, who were more interested in production targets (and the bonuses that went with them) than in observing safety regulations.

What about occupational safety and health?

Occupational physicians, who were supposed to prevent illness by carrying out medical checks on workers' health and monitoring the health of the workplace, primarily played a role of legitimising the work conditions

already in place. It is no coincidence that they answered solely to the employer. Their lack of consideration for miners' health and their habit of sending convalescent workers back to work too soon, with the result that miners who had received poor treatment sometimes died, led to a series of strikes. The Belgian Administration des Mines, which was responsible for ensuring compliance with the safety rules, was similarly uncaring – productivity was paramount, and a blind eye was often turned to irregularities. And it could be uncompromising towards workers who protested too loudly. It dragged 10 Turkish workers before the courts for insubordination and endangering the safety of the mine.

Miners' health: from denial to recognition

Over time, technical measures of dust control helped to reduce the incidence of silicosis¹ in the workforce, but more than 450 Turkish miners suffered from it and received compensation for it during the 1990s. Well before then, the rate of absenteeism on health grounds rose from 10% to 15% of all miners between 1967 and 1973. Because Turkish workers had difficulties explaining their health problems, they waited for their annual holidays and then sought treatment in Turkey. The matching rise in the number of sick notes issued suggested that these were bogus certificates, unwarranted and issued as a favour to the individuals concerned. By the late 1970s, checks were more rigorous, and the number of sick notes declined accordingly, lending weight to this theory, but the simultaneous rise in the number of Turkish miners granted a disability pension (from 1 190 in 1978 to 3 536 in 1988) provides a more accurate picture of the price paid by these last workers in Belgium's mines. ●



↑ Barely 5% of the Turkish workers recruited between 1963 and 1965 had previously worked as miners in Turkey.
Photo: © Belga

1. Lung disease causing serious breathing difficulties.



FURTHER READING

Khojini M. (2018) *Les Turcs à la mine: L'immigration turque dans l'industrie charbonnière belge (1956-1970)*, Brussels, EME Éditions, 404 pp.