

united students against sweatshops

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Coca-Cola Distorts the Truth on Union Busting and Violence in Turkey

Coca-Cola recently published a statement on its "Coke Facts" website regarding a grave situation in İstanbul Turkey. The situation involves the union busting and violent assault of workers who were responsible for trucking Coca-Cola products throughout İstanbul. The International Labor Rights Fund has recently filed a lawsuit on behalf of workers who were assaulted in the case.

(<http://www.laborrights.org/>)

Coca-Cola's statement on the Turkey situation is available online (http://www.cokefacts.org/facts/facts_aw_keyfacts.shtml). The statement repeatedly distorts the facts. We respond briefly below to each of these distortions. Following our response to Coca-Cola's statement, we have provided additional background information on the case.

Statement by Coca-Cola Company:

Although we have not reviewed the allegations in this particular lawsuit yet, we can provide the facts on the July 20th protest event.

First, the underlying labor dispute was between an independent third-party distribution and freight company that supplies services to the independent Coca-Cola bottler in Turkey (CCI), and the union DISK/Nakliyat. The labor dispute does not directly involve CCI.

This is a distortion of the truth. The "independent third-party" was created and is controlled by Coca-Cola. The drivers had worked as employees of Coke-Turkey for years, and had a union, until 2000, when Coke-Turkey decided to get rid of the union by creating the "independent third-party" company. The drivers continued to perform the same work, wearing the same Coca-Cola uniforms and driving the same Coca-Cola trucks, and they continued to be directed by the same "regional transportation manager", an employee of Coke-Turkey.

It is true that more than 100 protestors gathered at the offices of CCI on July 20 this last summer and illegally broke into the facility. No action to remove the protestors was taken for 10 hours after the protestors had broken into the facility, and several meetings were held between CCI management and the protestors to try to resolve the situation peacefully.

The "protestors" were the drivers fired by Coke-Turkey (by the "regional transportation manager" described above, who told them "if you want to continue working here you must resign from the union") and their family members, most of whom had been without income for two months.

As the day ended and it started becoming dark, police were under the order of the Public Prosecutor of Turkey to break up the crowd to maintain public order. Because the individuals repeatedly refused to leave the premises voluntarily, the police removed the protestors at the request of the Public Prosecutor. Police were required to use tear gas on a limited basis inside the building in order

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to facilitate the dispersal of the large crowd. In accordance with standard police protocol, the 20 women and children who were present were taken to a hospital for evaluation as a precautionary measure.

Coca-Cola's account glosses over the brutal violence to which workers were subjected. The workers and their family members, who were protesting peacefully, were surrounded by roughly 1,000 members of Turkey's notorious Çevik Kuvvet police. While the Coca-Cola managers watched safely behind glass windows from an office above, the Çevik Kuvvet fired a particularly dangerous form of tear gas into the crowd. With workers and their family members disabled by the poison gas, the Çevik Kuvvet moved in and savagely beat the group with clubs and shields. The workers and family members (including many woman and children) were then dragged from the scene by their hair, arms, and legs and placed in crowded vans. Then the Çevik Kuvvet threw gas canisters through the bars of the van into the crowd, where the helpless group was again exposed to the poison gas. The workers and family members were then placed in filthy jail cells with no bathrooms.

All were released. Ninety protestors were brought to police headquarters, where they received a health check and gave their testimonies, and then were released. The health evaluations indicated that none of the protestors were injured; none spent the night in jail. Ten were detained in police headquarters overnight.

Throughout this situation, CCI continued to try to resolve the situation peacefully, asking the police to delay action. After ten hours of negotiations, the Public Prosecutor made the decision that the situation could not be allowed to continue. The Coca-Cola system respects the rights of people to hold peaceful protests and regrets that a peaceful resolution to the illegal occupation of the CCI building could not be achieved.

What Coca-Cola should regret is their blatant violation of the workers' rights, and their brutal attempt to starve their workers into submission, which resulted in the workers' understandable anger and desperation.

The company could have prevented the violence against the workers by simply refraining from calling the police to remove them. Indeed, it is absurd for Coca-Cola to claim that it tried to resolve the situation peacefully when it was with Coca-Cola's approval that the police attacked the group. Minutes before the police began firing gas into the crowd, worker representative were meeting with Coca-Cola officials and believed they were close to a temporary settlement. When the police announced their plans to remove the group, the worker representatives pleaded for 10 minutes to finalize discussions. The Coca-Cola officials said nothing. Three minutes later, the Çevik Kuvvet began firing gas and beating workers and their spouses and children with clubs and shields.

It's important to note that the underlying dispute between the distribution company Trakya Nakliyat ve Dagitim and the DISK/Nakliyat has been resolved and DISK/Nakliyat has signed a Settlement Agreement with TN.

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It is important to understand that Coke starved the workers into submission, coercing them into signing a settlement agreement so they could receive a severance payment and feed their families. A significant group of drivers are now plaintiffs in the ILRF lawsuit against Coke. Coca-Cola's success in starving the workers into submission in no way means that the situation has been "resolved".

The Coca-Cola Company and its bottling partners comply with all applicable labor and employment laws in the countries in which we do business. We recognize international labor standards and are committed to respecting the workplace human rights of our employees and the parties with whom we do business. We respect our employees' right to join or not join labor unions, and ensure that those rights are exercised without fear of retaliation, repression or any other form of discrimination.

Coke-Turkey clearly violated the labor laws of Turkey by firing the workers because they refused to resign from their union. Coke USA did nothing to remedy this blatant violation, and instead is now gloating over the success of the Coke-Turkey policy of starving the workers into submission.

Background on Turkey Case

Coca-Cola workers in İstanbul, Turkey have been fired en masse and violently attacked by Turkey's notorious Çevik Kuvvet riot police acting at Coca-Cola's behest in retaliation for their effort to organize a union.

The workers are responsible for trucking Coca-Cola products from two distribution centers in the towns of Dudullu and Yenibosna to points of sale throughout İstanbul. They are technically employed by a Coca-Cola subcontractor known as Trakya Nakliyat, though all of their work is performed for Coca-Cola, they drive Coca-Cola trucks, and wear Coca-Cola uniforms. The workers have performed these jobs for as many as 15 years.

The facts make it obvious that Coca-Cola fired these workers in retaliation for their organizing efforts. Between May 19 and May 25 of this year, Coca-Cola announced the termination of 105 workers. Each of these workers had signed union cards. The day before the workers at the Dudullu plant were fired, officials of Coca-Cola – including the regional manager – told workers explicitly that “if you don't quit the union, I will end your contract.” Workers at the Yenibosna plant were also explicitly told by Coca-Cola officials to cease their unionization effort or be fired.

The workers have faced violent assault in response to their unionization effort. On July 20, 2005, roughly 150 workers and their family members were attacked by riot police during a protest against the firings inside the Coca-Cola compound. The assault took place at roughly 6:00 pm, while worker representatives were meeting with Coca-Cola officials, with whom they believed they were close to reaching a temporary resolution to the situation. Workers recall a brutal and chaotic scene. The riot police beat workers with clubs and repeatedly fired gas into the crowd. Many workers were dragged from the scene by their hair, arms, and legs. In recalling the event, a number of workers described helplessly losing their children and spouses amid the cloud of thick poison gas. A pregnant woman, the wife of a worker, inhaled the gas and, based on consultations with doctors,

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believes that her unborn child was affected. Given that the police attack took place within the company compound, and that the police notified Coca-Cola representatives minutes before the

workers were attacked, it is clear that these assaults took place with Coca-Cola's clear authorization. Since this incident, a battalion of riot police has been stationed inside the Coca-Cola facility.

This is not the first time that Coca-Cola has busted a union among this group of workers. Until 2000, the workers were directly employed by Coca-Cola and were represented by a different Turkish union, Öz-Gıda. When Coca-Cola decided to contract out the workers' jobs to Trakya Nakliyat ve Ticaret Ltd, Coke effectively eliminated the union. Before being subcontracted, the workers earned roughly 1 billion Turkish lira per month. As subcontractors, they are now paid only 3.6 – 3.8 billion lira per month. Thus, since Coca-Cola busted their union and contracted out their jobs, the workers have been earning *only one third* of their former salaries.

After their firings, workers Dudullu and Yenibosna erected protest camps outside of the Coca-Cola facilities. The workers stayed in these camps – which they had to rebuild repeatedly after riot police removed them – day-to-night demanding that Coca-Cola reinstate them as regular employees and respect their rights to establish a trade union. However, Coke-Turkey and Coca-Cola USA refused to reinstate them. After well over 100 days with no income, in late October, Coca-Cola coerced the workers into signing a severance agreement. But this fight is still far from over. Many of the workers who were attacked are now suing Coca-Cola in U.S. Courts for the violent assault and torture they experienced.

Violations of Worker Rights in Turkey By the Coca-Cola Company

TIMELINE

Within the past several months, workers engaged in the distribution of Coca-Cola products have been fired en masse in a transparent effort to end a unionization effort. Workers and family members were then subjected to violence by riot police acting at the behest of the company and placed under arrest. The violations of worker rights concern workers who perform distribution operations for Coca-Cola in Turkey with the contractor Trakya Nakliyat ve Ticaret Ltd. They are members of the union DISK/Nakliyat-İs. The following timeline provides background on these incidents:

Mass termination of union members at Dudullu plant

Earlier this year, Trakya Nakliyat terminated 5 workers who has been leaders in a unionization effort at Coca-Cola's Dudullu facility. The workers are Fahrettin Takıcı, Erol Türedi, Hasan Şirinyurt, Fatih Dilbaz and Mustafa Akın. While management claimed the lay-offs were to do poor work performance, management provided no evidence of this claim; the workers have long, positive records of employment ranging from five to nine years. Several had recently received diligence awards for their work.

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- On May 19, 2005, shortly after the terminations were carried out, a group of workers visited management at Coca-Cola's Dudullu plant to inquire about the reasons for the termination of

their colleagues. A meeting ensued among the managers of Coca-Cola's Marmara operations and Asia distribution program and the concerned workers. During this meeting, the Coca-Cola representatives told the workers that they should resign from the union, stating that "the Coca-Cola Company shall let no members of the union work with us".

- On the following day, May 20, 2005, facility management announced the termination of 50 additional workers who were members of the union. The workers were dismissed without severance pay. Since the terminations occurred, the 55 terminated workers have been campaigning to return to work, protesting day-to-night in a cardboard hut in front of the facility.

Mass termination of workers at Yenibosna plant

- On May 25, 2005, one day after the president of the DİSK union federation met with the chairman of Anadolu Endüstri Holding A.Ş – Coca-Cola's Turkish partner – and received an assurance that problems with labor violations would be resolved, Trakya Nakliyat ve Ticaret Ltd. announced the termination of 50 workers from the its Yenibosna plant, who are members of the DISK union. The terminations were effective July 2, 2005. Trakya Nakliyat claimed that the firings were made necessary by a decision by Coca-Cola Turkey to cancel business with Trakya Nakliyat.
- During and prior to this period, employees of the Yenibosna plant were pressured to resign from the union by both the authorities of Coca-Cola and Trakya Nakliyat. The union has asserted that the individuals who pressured workers to resign were representatives of Coca-Cola, Oğuz Aldemir and Sinan Oktay, and the manager of Trakya Nakliyat ve Ticaret Ltd. Şti, Yaşar Erdoğan.
- On June 17, 2005, the workers who were to be dismissed on July 2, 2005 erected a tent in front of the Yenibosna plant and have protested since to be reinstated.
- The business relations of Coca-Cola with Trakya Nakliyat ve Ticaret Ltd. Şti, as well as with the plants in Çerkezköy-Çorlu and Bursa, which are not organized, are still in force.

It is clear based upon the information available – the timing of the firings, the individuals fired, and the fact that only workers at unionized plants have been dismissed in such numbers, and the fact that management of Coca-Cola specifically warned the workers that they would be fired if they did not abandon their effort to join a union – that workers at both the Dudullu plant and the Yenibosna plant were singled out and terminated because of their membership in the union. This is a clear violation of Turkish law, internationally recognized labor standards, and Coca-Cola's own stated commitment to respect basic worker rights.

Violence against workers family members at Dudullu plant

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Following the events described above, workers were subjected to violence during a protest regarding their dismissals.

- On July 20, 2005, sixty two days since their terminations were announced, the workers from Dudullu organized a demonstration with their families in front of the factory. The workers were protesting what they firmly believed were illegal firings and demanded that they be reinstated. They were subjected to brutal violence by riot police acting at the behest of Coca-Cola.
- At 10:00 am on this day, workers and their family members, totaling roughly 150 people, entered the facility. Late in the afternoon, the head of the DISK and several other union officials had come to the factory and believed they were in the final process of negotiating a temporary settlement with management when the police violently attacked the workers and family members. Police sprayed gas and beat those present with clubs and shields, causing serious injury to a number of workers' spouses and children.
- Following this incident, 92 people – including the president, an executive committee member of DİSK/Nakliyat-İş union, and the union's lawyer – were placed under arrest. These individuals were subsequently released from detention, but the cases of a number of workers and representatives are still pending.

Given that the workers and their families were physically present in the Coca-Cola factory when they were attacked, and that the police announced to Coca-Cola officials its plans before they were attacked, it is clear that the police could not have carried out the violent actions described above without the authorization of Coca-Cola officials. Coca-Cola is therefore responsible for the violence against workers and for the arrest of union members and officials.