



Much done but still much to do for sandblasting victims

06 March 2011, Sunday / ŞULE KULU YILMAZ, İSTANBUL



There were mild coughs in the beginning. Then, the coughs became unbearable. I was unable to sleep at nights. Doctors diagnosed me with tuberculosis. I received tuberculosis treatment for nine months.

In October of 2006, I was hospitalized at the Yedikule Hospital for Chest Diseases. After bronchoscopy tests there, doctors diagnosed me with silicosis. A doctor once told me upon seeing the X-ray image of my lungs that this disease would normally come to such a point only after 30 years and asked me how it did so in my case in three years. ‘I worked as a denim sandblaster,’ I said.”

These remarks are from one of the last interviews of Mehmet Şah Yalçın, who was the last worker who fell victim to the deadly lung disease silicosis, which he contracted in an illegal workshop where he was hired to manually sandblast denim fabric for clothing. Yalçın, who had been living with an oxygen tank since 2008, died last week at the age of 31, becoming the 49th denim sandblasting worker to die of silicosis since 2008.

It is estimated that some 3,000 to 5,000 people have contracted silicosis in Turkey, though just over 500 patients have actually been diagnosed with the disease so far.

Silicosis is an occupational illness, a disease of the lungs caused by the inhalation and retention of crystalline silica. It is a classic miners’ disease, seen in employees who work in tunnel and road



construction as well as the foundry business, but the first instances of the ailment in the textiles industry has now been seen in Turkey.

Amid growing calls from the public and the increasing number of silicosis-caused deaths, the Health Ministry banned manual denim sandblasting in 2009, but this has not prevented illegal workshops from employing laborers to do precisely that.

“Never mind the illegal workshops, we know that a certain big denim company is still doing manual denim sandblasting. We know that. But when inspectors go there they cannot report it. The company finds a way of circumventing the ban,” says Abulhalim Demir, a former sandblasting worker and a member of the Denim Sandblasting Workers Solidarity Committee.

Denim sandblasting is the process of spraying sand using air compressors on denim to soften the fabric and give it a more worn look. Particles inhaled during this process cause the development of silicosis, a disease of the lungs caused by the inhalation and retention of crystalline silica common among miners. When manually sandblasted jeans and denim became popular among young people in recent years, illegal and unregistered workshops popped up all over Turkey to exploit the increasing demand, with medical experts estimating that at least 3,000 to 5,000 people have contracted silicosis.

Denim sandblasters say denim companies tend to force such workers to labor in closed and unventilated environments -- and even prohibit them from opening the windows -- since the sand used in the process is expensive and they do not want to waste it.

Some good news in the ‘sack law’

In line with requests for the Health Ministry to provide a monthly disability stipend for workers without health insurance who contract the disease at illegal workshops, the government has recently taken an initiative to address the issue. The “sack law” -- a term commonly used in Parliament to describe a package of unrelated revisions to laws that are lumped together for the purpose of fast-tracking legislative change -- approved in Parliament last month included an article on providing monthly stipends for sandblasting workers, offering a glimmer of hope for sick workers with no other recourse. The law also offers a monthly stipend to provide for their families after these patients’ eventual deaths.

Sandblasting workers were not happy with the sack law at the beginning since the first draft of the law planned to give a “poor disabled person’s” salary, which is TL 100 a month, to these workers. Workers held mass protests and demanded that former denim sandblasters who have contracted silicosis be paid another kind of salary, that which is given to those who can no longer work due to occupational diseases. In line with these demands, the article was reviewed and stipends between TL 434 to TL 557 will be paid to these workers in accordance with how serious their illness is.

“This means a lot to us. But this is not what we deserve. We demand to be treated as any other worker who can no longer work due to occupational diseases,” Demir, who also suffers from silicosis, told Sunday’s Zaman. Another shortcoming in the law, according to him, is the requirement that workers should apply to the Labor Ministry within three months of the law’s approval. “But, you cannot know when this disease will emerge. I quit working as a denim sandblaster. Symptoms emerged in 2004 and I was diagnosed with silicosis in 2007,” he complains.

Speaking to Sunday’s Zaman, Semiramis Karaarslan, an activist who devoted her life to advocating for treatment for thousands of silicosis and cancer patients, also expressed pleasure over the new amendment included in the sack law. Karaarslan, who launched a petition last year to garner support for granting social security benefits to former sandblasting workers with silicosis, says they reached their



aim with the sack law. “The support for the campaign grew with media exposure and thousands of signatures were filed both online [via silikozis.com] website and in person. These signatures were forwarded to the Labor Ministry. We also informed the deputies and ministers about the situation of these patients and many of them supported the campaign. They learned about this illness and these patients thanks to this campaign,” she said. Noting that they asked the opposition and the government to join forces to provide better social security benefits for silicosis patients, she says she is happy that they did so.

“But, we had a demand from our esteemed [Labor] Minister Ömer Dinçer. We wanted the government also to provide a monthly stipend for families of the silicosis patients who died earlier. But this was not added to the law, maybe it was forgotten. We hope this amendment is also made soon. We want the media to continue to support us,” she said.