



Denim workers in Ankara protest sandblasting practices



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Denim-industry employees demonstrated Monday outside the Petrol-İş Trade Union office in Ankara, protesting a proposed law they say would represent a step back in their fight to gain justice for workers suffering from silicosis.

The most common occupational lung disease in the world, silicosis is often contracted by workers engaged in sandblasting jeans without proper ventilation or protection. It is non-curable and can be fatal. According to medical reports from Turkey, sandblasting operators can develop an acute form of silicosis in just six to 24 months of work.

The proposed law on the table during meetings this week of Parliament's Planning and Budget Commission would put silicosis patients in the same category as the disabled, thus giving them a monthly salary of 100 to 300 Turkish Liras. Workers see this as a loss in terms of the social security rights for which they have been fighting for the past three years.

"Instead of giving new rights, [the proposed law] destroys the workers' hopes, and takes away existing rights. We do not want your charity. We want our rights," the denim workers said in a press release issued during the protest Monday.

Members of the group of 30 workers, who held up posters of colleagues who have died due to silicosis and decried the international clothing companies benefiting from illegal sandblasting practices, said they would stay outside the Petrol-İş Trade Union office until their demands are heard and met.

As most sandblasting workers are employed under the table, and without insurance, the protesters are demanding that afflicted workers gain the basic right to receive the necessary treatment regardless of whether or not they have insurance. They are also demanding an end to the requirement that silicosis patients prove through documents that they had worked as denim sandblasters in order to benefit from their rights, saying the occupational illness is unlikely to be contracted any other way.

Denim workers previously published a manifesto demanding an end to sandblasting in worldwide denim production at a press conference, "Stop Sandblasting of Jeans," held Nov. 27 in Istanbul.

An increasingly popular practice over the past 20 years, sandblasting is used in many different denim-producing countries as a finishing method to produce a faded look for jeans and other clothing products.

“In order to follow the latest fashion trends and maximize profits, companies and factory owners have put workers – knowingly or unknowingly – at deadly risk by using sandblasting techniques that are unsafe,” the workers said in their manifesto.

Workers called on major brands to immediately stop the use of sandblasting throughout their supply chains; on national governments to not allow sandblasting in denim production; on the International Labor Organization and World Health Organization to include denim-production chains in their global programs to eradicate silicosis; on the multi-stakeholder-initiatives and business initiatives dealing with labor standards in the garment industry to use their influence to convince their members to ban sandblasting; on consumers to refrain from buying sandblasted jeans; and on designers to stop proposing fashion trends that lead to the application of unsafe and potentially fatal techniques such as sandblasting.