



## Early retirement recommended for denim workers in Turkey

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This file photo shows a protest by sandblasting workers. AA photo

A statement from the Labor Ministry's Labor Inspection Board to the Social Security Institution, or SGK, recommends denim sandblasting workers with silicosis be classified as retired by disability, even if they do not have any social security. The SGK does not currently follow this recommendation, and many workers still suffer from the disease without any social security rights.

Manual sandblasting was banned in Turkey one-and-a-half years ago following the deaths of 43 workers. Many of these workers had said previously they were not warned about the disease and would not have continued to work there if they had been.

"There is no obstacle for a worker who takes a report from the Professional Disease Hospital proving that they have this disease [silicosis] to be regarded as retired due to disability even if they do not have any social security," said the statement, which was sent to the SGK in March 2009.

"It is not possible to end the suffering of those who died and their relatives and those who are still struggling with this disease. But it will be a relief for the public if the retirement of these people is granted immediately," said the statement.

However, the Labor Ministry requires that denim sandblasting workers with silicosis have social security to receive disability retirement benefits. If they don't have social security, they must prove that they have worked in a registered workplace.

However, a majority of these workers were unregistered or worked in unregistered workplaces that



closed down soon after their diseases were diagnosed. Many of them returned to their hometowns, and their health conditions were not good enough to allow them to make the effort to prove that they were actually employed.

In order for a worker to prove that he worked in a certain workplace, he must open a declaratory lawsuit in a labor court and win the case. Abdulhalim Demir, a representative of a solidarity committee for denim sandblasting workers, said he could not get early retirement even though he had social security. "The cases take between five and 10 years. But because of this disease our life expectancy is not that long." He claimed that the number of denim workers with silicosis who have social security and have been granted retirement from disability is not more than 10.

Professor Zeki Kılıçarslan from Istanbul University Medical Faculty said after a worker is diagnosed with silicosis from the Professional Diseases Hospital, an inspector visits his workplace to verify its location. "But [often the workplace is] not there. It is not possible to prove that there was a workplace. Another case must be opened to prove that this worker developed this disease while working. But it is unnecessary, because silicosis is a disease that can only be contracted by working in this job," he added.

Recep Sönmez, 20, a former denim worker with silicosis, sent a written statement to the court in Istanbul because his condition made him unable to travel. He said he worked as an unregistered denim worker in a room measuring two square meters between 2000 and 2005. He said he worked in small factories located in Istanbul's industrial Esenyurt neighborhood for short periods of time, adding that he did not know the names of the firms he worked for. But the inspectors could not find any of these firms since they had closed down and many of them were never registered. The inspectors did not request that Sönmez be given disability retirement funds.