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Turkey: Leftist musician dies after 288-day hunger strike against repression

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Helin Bölek
*a musician who died just to freely
sing her songs.*

**We will never forget!
We will never forgive!**

By New Solution editor in chief

On Friday, April 3, Helin Bölek, a member of the famous leftist music band Grup Yorum, died on the 288th day of the hunger strike till death (Death Fast) which she was conducting in order to protest against the repressions of the fascist oligarchy in Turkey.

What happened from June 2019 until now

Helin Bölek, along with four other members of Grup Yorum, went on a hunger strike in June 2019, while all five musicians who participated in the action were still in prison, to protest several years of ongoing repression against their band. After more than two years in prison, Helin Bölek and Bahar Kurt, another musician from the band who also took part in the hunger strike, were released at the end of November 2019, which was one of the small victories won by the hunger strike. The two continued their hunger strike at the House of Resistance, located in Istanbul's Küçük Armutlu neighborhood.

Here we would like to remind you once again of the demands of Grup Yorum that were declared at the beginning of the hunger strike:

- Stop raiding the Idil Cultural Centre.
- Remove the concert bans.
- Release our imprisoned members.
- Remove the arrest warrants.
- Drop the lawsuits filed against Grup Yorum members.

At the beginning of January 2020, Ibrahim Gökçek, another member of the group, announced that he was turning his indefinite hunger strike into a hunger strike till death (Death Fast), saying he would continue his hunger strike until the demands of Grup Yorum were accepted by the government. At the end of the same month, in a

video published on Twitter, Helin Bölek stated that she was also turning her indefinite hunger strike into a hunger strike till death.

In the middle of February, after another hearing in one of the court cases against Grup Yorum, the band's guitarist Ibrahim Gökçek was released from prison. At the same hearing the court decided to release the group's drummer Barış Yüksel, who is also an engineer, who was developing various projects for the benefit of the poor people in the neighborhoods of Istanbul and other parts of Turkey, under house arrest. This was interpreted as a step towards victory of the hunger strike.

Almost a month later, on the night of March 11, the House of Resistance, where Helin and Ibrahim continued their hunger strike, was raided by heavily armed SWAT teams and agents of the political police, who forcibly took the two members of the Grup Yorum to the state hospital located in Istanbul's Umraniye district in the eastern part of the city. For six hours they were missing, and were found only after their parents and lawyers searched for them at all the hospitals in Istanbul.

At the hospital in Umraniye, the two were held against their will for a week after the Istanbul Civil Court issued a ruling on a complaint filed by the Turkish Interior Ministry for the musicians to be forcibly "treated" at the hospital. This court decision, in fact, opened the way for Helin and Ibrahim to be subjected to forced medical intervention — forced feeding, an act that put their health and lives in serious danger, with the real risk of being mutilated or even killed during the intervention.

After a week of multiple attempts by the lawyers of the two musicians to appeal against the civil court's decision and bring them back to the House of Resistance, this happened in the late afternoon of March 16, when the court of appeal in Istanbul issued a decision overturning the district civil court's decision for forced detention of the two musicians at the hospital. So late in the evening, after hours of disputes between the lawyers and the police and intense waiting, Helin and Ibrahim

were released from the hospital and returned together with their relatives to the House of Resistance, where they continued the hunger strike.

The stress and strain they were subjected to at the hospital affected their already poor health in an extremely bad way, given the advanced phase of the hunger strike. We can say that this stress is also one of the direct causes that led to Helin's untimely death.

The fascist oligarchy in Turkey is responsible for Helin's death

The government has refused to accept the demands of the hunger strike until the last possible moment before Helin's death. Just a week before the death of Helin, a delegation of intellectuals, human rights defenders and relatives of members of Grup Yorum, political prisoner Mustafa Koçak, who is also on hunger strike till death (Death Fast) against the injustices he faces, and lawyers from the Association of Progressive Lawyers and People's Law Bureau, who began a hunger strike earlier this year against Turkey's completely degraded justice system, met with representatives of the Turkish Interior Ministry. At the meeting, the demands of both Helin and Ibrahim and the other hunger strikers were discussed. Ministry officials said, "First, they must end the hunger strikes, and then we'll see if we can discuss their demands."

Thus, the fascist government in Turkey is responsible through its actions for the death of Helin Bolek. If the demands had been accepted at this meeting held on March 28, perhaps today Helin would be among us, and we would not have to mourn her loss.

Who is Helin Bölek?

When Helin Bölek was martyred, she was 28 years old. In this relatively short period of time she has managed to fill her life with many events. She initially participated in

the youth struggle for free and accessible education in her hometown of Çanakkale, in western Turkey. Later, she joined the popular choir of Grup Yorum, which educates new musicians for the band. In the summer of 2014, she, along with other group members and revolutionaries from Turkey, participated in the "Human Shield" campaign to support the struggle of the Palestinian people against the Zionist regime in Israel. In this way, she and her comrades expressed their solidarity with the Palestinian people's struggle against the attacks of imperialism and its collaborators. In 2016, she joined the Grup Yorum and participated in the band's concerts.

For all these years, while she was part of the struggle for art for the benefit of the people, she has been imprisoned several times for various periods of time. Her youth passed in the struggle for the people in the name of independence, democracy and socialism. She gave her life for this cause, did not surrender her honor, did not betray her ideals. Now, whatever we write would not be enough to tell her story.

She was not alone in her struggle

Of course, it should be noted here that during all these months of fighting the famine, death and repression of the fascist oligarchy, the members of Grup Yorum were not alone. Both their parents and their comrades were side by side with them and supported them with numerous protest actions in Turkey and across Europe. Almost every day since last summer, despite the repression, numerous protest actions and various events have been held to draw public attention to the hunger strike of Grup Yorum and its demands. This is precisely the purpose of the hunger strike, to draw the public's attention to a problem, to injustice, and it is also the last possible means by which people in the position of members of Grup Yorum, and not only them, can resist fascism and imperialism.

An interesting fact is that Grup Yorum's struggle was supported by almost all leftist organizations in Turkey, as well as the Kurdish nationalist movement, whose

relations had previously been particularly strained with Grup Yorum because of its stance on events in Syria and the Middle East. Many progressive journalists, writers, musicians and intellectuals have also expressed their support for the demands of Grup Yorum.

It is still not too late. We can still do something for Grup Yorum. It is up to all of us now whether Ibrahim Gökçek, who is on the verge of death, and political prisoner Mustafa Koçak, who is on hunger strike against his life sentence, will live or die like Helin. Their lives are in our hands, let their blood not be on our hands. ...

People of Küçük Armutlu and her comrades paid tribute to Helin

Shortly after the death of Helin Bölek, her comrades from Grup Yorum and her relatives began preparations for the funeral ceremony in Küçük Armutlu, where the House of Resistance is located, in which she and Ibrahim Gökçek continued their hunger strike. In the afternoon, Helin's body was wrapped in red fabric and covered with carnations. The choice of colors and flowers is not accidental. Red carnations are a symbol of the Resistance and often, in case of martyrdom of a revolutionary during a hunger strike, they are laid on his/her body.

Throughout the afternoon, Helin's body was left in the House of Resistance for those who wanted to pay tribute to her for the last time. In the late afternoon, her body was moved to a coffin, with which she was carried by her comrades in the streets of Küçük Armutlu, as tradition in the lands of Anatolia dictates. When a person dies, the relatives are obliged to carry the body from the home where the person died and with the ark to walk on the streets of the neighborhood or the settlement where the person died. Of course this ritual is done when it is possible.

After walking on the streets of Küçük Armutlu with Helin's coffin, her comrades put her in the place for ritual ceremonies, in the courtyard of the local Alevite house of worship (Cemevi). Here, her comrade Ibrahim Gökçek made a short speech in which

he said:

"Dear friends, dear friends of Grup Yorum ... Dear Helin ... Today a musician, today a singer of the people, was killed so she could make her art. They killed a singer. Either I would die or she. There is no other way in the situation in which we are now. She is dead now and I will die. What will happen? Murderers! Are you satisfied? Whatever you do, sooner or later victory will be ours. The victory will sooner or later be with Grup Yorum. We will win!"

After Ibrahim Gökçek, a speech was also delivered by Bahar Kurt, who also took part in the hunger strike for a long time. She said the following about the meeting at the Interior Ministry that took place at the end of March:

"The delegation who met with ministry representatives made a statement. Ministry officials have stepped up to discuss demands (of the hunger strike). Even this is a sign that the demands are legitimate and completely legal. If they can discuss the acceptance of the demands, then why have they done nothing to this day? We are being told to end the Death Fast (hunger strike), but this cannot be bargained for."

Bahar Kurt went on to say: "Helin increased our anger. We have to break the chains now. No one lives peacefully and happily in this country."

Bahar Kurt also spoke of the days when Helin and Ibrahim were held forcibly in the hospital in the middle of March.

"An artist of the people, a musician, died for the right to perform concerts. This is a precedent in the history of the world and Turkey. The government must be called to account for the death of Helin. While in the hospital, both Helin and Ibrahim lost much of their energy. They were taken away from here in ambulances, it was a big shock for them. During the time they were in the hospital, they did not allow them to have companions. At a time when we were afraid to touch them so as not to hurt

them, when we dared not touch our comrades, when even her mother dared not kiss her daughter, they (police agents and doctors), touched the bodies of our comrades multiple times. There were doctors and nurses who did not respect the will of Helin and Ibrahim about how they should be taken care of, what liquids they should take.

"They were exhausted psychologically, they were very angry. Yes, we took and brought our friends back to the House of Resistance, but this week at the hospital caused permanent damage to their health, which accelerated the death of Helin. If she hadn't been taken to the hospital in this one week, maybe Hellin would have been alive now."

After the end of the speeches, in accordance with Helin's testament, her comrades danced the traditional folk dance, halay, around her coffin.

After paying tribute to her, the coffin with Helin's body was left in the morgue of the House of Worship in Küçük Armutlu, where she remained until the next morning. In the evening and throughout the night, members of Grup Yorum, local people, and fans of the band stood vigil in the courtyard of the House of Worship, in order to be ready to respond and prevent a possible attack of the fascist police against the House of Worship to abduct Helin's body. Something that has become a common practice of fascist oligarchy in Turkey for the funerals of revolutionaries is for their bodies to be abducted to be buried in secret locations without any rituals, without their relatives being informed. Therefore, when it is possible to do so, the comrades of the fallen revolutionaries remain on duty in the place where their coffins are until the funeral period is completed.

The fascist oligarchy fears even Helin's body.



Hunger striker Ibrahim Gökçek (seated) honors his comrade Helin Bölek at her funeral. Photo: Grup Yorum

Police attacked Helin Bölek's funeral

On Saturday, April 4, the funeral of Helin Bolek took place in Istanbul. Around 11 a.m. local time, a column of vehicles accompanying the hearse transporting her body to the Alevite House of Worship in Istanbul's Okmeydani neighborhood was stopped by police. Fascist police forced Helin's relatives to carry her body to Ferikoy Cemetery, not far from Okmeydani, blocking the road to the neighborhood. After disputes with police, threats, insults and swearing, the drivers of the hearse and the van in which Helin's relatives were riding were detained by police. Officers threatened Helin's relatives with abducting her body and burying her in a secret location. Again, after disputes between lawyers, relatives and police officers, the two drivers were released and the convoy continued on its way to Ferikoy Cemetery. Police prevented the convoy from entering the Okmeydani neighborhood.

In the early morning hours, the streets of the Okmeydani neighborhood, as well as the roads leading to it, were blocked by armored police vehicles. The blockade around the House of Worship in the neighborhood and the area around the Ferikoy Cemetery was most intense. Multiple armored police vehicles also blocked the area around the Ayçe Idil Erkmen Cultural Center, which is operated by Grup Yorum. In the morning, police tried to close down the café which is part of the cultural center. During an attempt to prevent this attack, Grup Yorum musician Meral Hur was detained by police and taken in an armored vehicle in an unknown direction. She was released late in the evening. Police deployed a dozen water cannons, and dozens of armored vehicles, buses and vans, while thousands of riot police squads and agents of the political police were deployed into the area.

At the same time, people gathered at the local House of Worship to attend Helin's funeral were threatened by police and ordered to disperse. A little later, when the crowds headed for Ferikoy Cemetery, the police blocked their way, and in turn, people began a protest to open the road, but the police attacked them by arresting people, dragging them on the ground, kicking and striking them with sticks.

About one hour later, groups of people started heading to Ferikoy Cemetery to attend Helin Bölek's funeral. The area was blocked by police and initially the convoy with Helin's body was not allowed to enter the cemetery. Following disputes with police officers, Helin's lawyers and her relatives were allowed to enter the cemetery. Since there was no room here for the ritual washing of the body, which is part of the funeral rituals, Helin's relatives had to call a mobile facility on site to perform the ritual.

While Helin's relatives were waiting for a mobile facility to arrive, police in the area were attacking all those who were attempting to enter the cemetery. With water cannons, tear gas grenades, rubber cartridges and batons, the police tried to disperse the groups of people who wanted to honor Helin one last time. During these

intensive attacks, more than 20 people were detained and were taken in armored buses to the Istanbul police department's headquarters. They were kept there for hours and subjected to various tortures.

Despite attacks by the fascist police, several groups of people managed to enter the cemetery and attend the funeral.

Following the rituals, at about 2:20 p.m. local time, the next part of Helin's funeral began. She was laid in the grave, after which her relatives poured water on the soil of the grave. They left behind a bridal gown and numerous carnations. After Helin's death, some people called her "The Bride of Our People" because Helin was martyred in a hunger strike till death, just like Ayşe İdil Erkmen, a theater actress, writer, journalist and musician who was martyred in 1996 in a hunger strike till death (Death Fast) against isolation prisons and the repressions of the fascist oligarchy. This is probably the reason for the laying of the bridal gown on Helin's grave.

Shortly after the end of the funeral, fascist police attacked the participants with tear gas grenades. Yes, you have read correctly, the mourners for Helin's death were attacked with tear gas grenades at the cemetery. Fascism has no respect even for the sorrow of the people.

Those arrested in police attacks before Helin's funeral were released late at night, many of whom said they had been subjected to various tortures by the fascist police. Among the detainees were members of the People's Front-Turkey (Halk Cephesi), the Maoist magazine Partizan (Partizan dergisi), and the Socialist Party of the Oppressed (Ezilenlerin Sosyalist Partisi).

Her voice went beyond the seas, oceans and mountains...

The news about Helin's death has been widespread in Turkey and around the world.

On Friday, the hashtag #HelinBölek topped the trends for Turkey on Twitter. So far, over 50,000 posts have been made with this hashtag. Internationally, even mainstream media such as the New York Times, the Guardian, the Washington Post and the Associated Press have covered the news of the death of Helin Bölek. Media (both websites and newspapers) in Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and many other countries have also covered the news about her death. Leftist organizations, as well as many people, from Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, Netherlands, France, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, England, Ireland, India, Malaysia, the U.S., Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Syria, Morocco, Bangladesh and many other countries have expressed their condolences to Helin Bölek's relatives and comrades and have expressed their support for the demands of Grup Yorum.

We have a question for all critics

As the hunger strike continued, “opinions” and “comments” appeared that it was a “wrong tactic,” that “it made no sense,” and some even went further, stating that they were “dying in vain.” We would like to ask a few questions to all these people who wrote their “opinions” and “comments.” What did they do during all these 10 months while Helin was slowly melting before their eyes? What did you ladies and gentlemen do? At least once, while Helin was still alive, did you express your support for the demands for which she sacrificed her life? Did you pay attention to her protest? Did you at least try to find out what she was fighting for?

And the lack of information in no way justifies you. Because this time there was enough information in English, German, Russian, Italian. You cannot justify yourself by not being informed. Yes, we are aware that there are numerous topics on the agenda that affect each country and everyone in the world, but we just want a few minutes of your time, or a maximum of 10-15 minutes, to do something to express your support for the demands of Grup Yorum and Mustafa Koçak. We do not expect

you to understand them, because many of you would never do this, you can do nothing but justify yourself with words like: "I do not support this political movement," "I am against hunger strikes," "this is pointless action!"

You will never understand Helin and people like her, because for you "human life is priceless," "it's not worth dying for anything in this world!" Perhaps some of you will ask, "And would you, who wrote this, sacrifice in the name of something?" I most responsibly state that I would have taken that step. Yes, I know, and Helin knew, it is better to live, to enjoy life, but when your life is turned into a prison, when you are faced with the choice of bowing your head to a tyrant you are fighting or continuing to fight, sacrificing your life, then resistance by all means and resources is a must. Therefore, you ladies and gentlemen, you'd better be silent now; be silent because this is the best thing that you can do.

Source: [New Solution](#)

