**Leather and footwear manufacturing in Turkey: report published by the Change Your Shoes campaign denounces industry abuses**

**[Berlin, 18 July 2017] – Today INKOTA is publishing a study that reveals the extent of widespread labour law violations being committed within the Turkish footwear and leather industry. EU member states, most notably Germany, are the main consumers of footwear produced in Turkey. Together with its partners at Change Your Shoes, INKOTA is thus calling upon European footwear companies to ensure that human rights are upheld in countries producing their products, such as Turkey, and to publicly report on workers’ rights.**

The study ‘Giving Labour Rights the Boot– Working Conditions in the Turkish Footwear and Leather Industry’ investigates the situation facing workers at the country’s shoe and leather production sites. As part of the Change Your Shoes campaign, a number of interviews were conducted with individuals employed at Turkish tanneries, leather-processing plants and footwear manufacturers. Their testimonies paint a picture of a footwear and leather industry where structurally caused labour law violations are commonplace. Workers reported earnings that fell short of a living wage, inadequate protection against occupational health and safety risks and an alarming rise in informal employment. There were also reports of excessively long workdays and discrimination against trade unionists.

One of the biggest issues in leather manufacturing is the intensive use of chemicals, which can have devastating consequences on the health of employees. Workers in tanneries and processing facilities face acute risk in three different areas. Firstly, micro-organisms might be present on the rawhide that can cause infections such as anthrax or typhus. Secondly, employees working with chemicals, such as solvents, tanning agents or substances used to conserve leather (including the extremely hazardous chromium trioxide), without adequate protection may suffer respiratory, eye or skin problems. There is even a risk of developing cancer. Thirdly, working intensively in constantly humid, dusty or loud conditions can lead to rheumatoid arthritis, respiratory illnesses and hearing loss. The manufacturing of leather is therefore often a toxic and hazardous business.

Meryem\*, a worker in a shoe factory in the Istanbul province, said the following: “We feel the effects of the chemicals, especially in summer when it’s hot. We begin to cough and feel sick, and sometimes we can’t even maintain our balance.” Tarek\*, who also works at a shoe factory in Istanbul, added, “There are no health and safety measures at work. I don’t think even the state cares about us. We would be fired if we all joined together and protested.”

The largest importer of shoes manufactured in Turkey is the European Union, with Germany topping the list. In 2015 EU member states imported footwear from Turkey worth a total of USD 162 million. In future, shoe manufacturers based in Turkey, who are also able to benefit from a Customs Union agreement with the EU, hope to substantially increase their export volumes to Europe.

One of the criticisms levelled by the Change Your Shoes campaign against the EU is that the union’s politicians and business leaders are quick to bemoan Turkey’s political developments, but simultaneously wish to boost trade relations with the country. This would enable European footwear companies to directly benefit from the resulting low costs, making them partially responsible for the labour law violations taking place within Turkey’s borders. INKOTA’s Berndt Hinzmann says, “This cannot continue. Now is the time for change. Businesses and politicians need to act and put a stop to these abuses. Companies must use disclosure and their reporting obligations to clearly demonstrate that they are creating safe working conditions and that human rights are being respected in the workplace.”

To add weight to these demands, INKOTA has launched a petition titled ‘No more hiding: transparency now!’ [Transparenz statt Versteckspiel], which is addressed to six internationally recognised footwear companies, including German-based businesses Deichmann and Birkenstock.

*\* The names of interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.*

**More information**
[**Change Your Shoes website**](https://www.inkota.de/themen-kampagnen/soziale-verpflichtung-fuer-unternehmen/change-your-shoes/kampagne/)
[**Report: Giving Labour Rights the Boot– Working Conditions in the Turkish Footwear and Leather Industry**](https://webshop.inkota.de/node/1499) [**Link to petition**](https://www.inkota.de/themen-kampagnen/soziale-verpflichtung-fuer-unternehmen/change-your-shoes/petition-transparenz-statt-versteckspiel/)

[**Press release as PDF file (230 KB)**](https://www.inkota.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/20170606_PM_Leder-_und_Schuhproduktion_in_der_T%C3%BCrkei.pdf)

**Contact**
Berndt Hinzmann, INKOTA, e-mail: **hinzmann[at]inkota.de**, tel.: +49 (0) 160-94 69 87 70