

Thousands march in France to support the Tunisian people

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Thousands of people demonstrated on Saturday in France's urban centres, in support of the popular uprising which forced the Tunisian dictator Ben Ali to flee two days before. There were 8,000 marchers in Paris and some 2,000 in Marseille.

Six hundred thousand Tunisian nationals live in France; there are perhaps as many naturalised French citizens of Tunisian origin. They formed the bulk of the demonstrators.

In the demonstration, pride at having chased Ben Ali from power after 23 years of rule—during which his family and particularly that of his wife, Leila Trabelsi, seized large swathes of the country's wealth—was mixed with anxiety about the future.

Demonstrators in Marseille defiantly held aloft a banner asserting: “No stealing of our revolution.” One placard attacked former Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, who was officially Tunisia's president on Saturday, before being replaced by Fouad Mebazza. It read: “Ben Ali – Trabelsi = Ghannouchi = Mafia.”

Mohamed Amami, a primary school teacher and political refugee demonstrating in Nîmes, reflected the thoughts of many. He told the press: “I'm afraid the government will manoeuvre and bring back the Ben Ali regime without Ben Ali.”

Support for the demonstrations by parties of the French bourgeois and petty-bourgeois left—such as the Socialist Party (PS), the Stalinist French Communist Party, the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and the Left Party—is utterly fraudulent. Fearful that the revolutionary contagion of the Tunisian masses might spread to the rest of the Arab world and the Middle East, they all seek, along with the French and American governments and the European Union, to halt the

movement with calls for “democracy.”

These governments are giving full backing to the interim regime led by his long-serving Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi and House Speaker Foued Mabazza, who are administering the state of emergency which Ben Ali decreed only an hour before he fled. In a position echoed by France's petty-bourgeois “left” parties, European governments are trying to package negotiations with official “opposition” parties, the General Union of Tunisian Labour (UGTT), and other mainstays of the Ben Ali dictatorship as “democracy.”

The calls for “democracy” and a government of national unity in no way challenge the control of the economy by national, French and international capitalism, nor of the state by the police and the army which maintained Ben Ali in power by a rule of terror. These forces, further unleashed by the state of emergency, have continued and even accelerated their killing spree since the departure of Ben Ali. Within hours of his flight, 42 deaths occurred when police refused to release prisoners from their prison which was on fire.

WSWS supporters distributed the statement Social conflict in Maghreb has international implications at the Marseille and Paris demonstrations. It asked how it was possible to achieve a democratic agenda while the army and the police were in control and asserted: “The only governments that can genuinely represent the interests of the mass of the population are workers' governments, which must be formed by the bringing down of all the dictatorial regimes of the Magreb.”

In Paris, Fidé told the WSWS: “I think the departure of Ben Ali is a great advance. The demonstration and the political parties are not well organised. The slogans are not clear. We need social reforms for the most

deprived. I'd like it if some real socialists could represent the need of the population. I'm not sure if the revolt will continue. I would agree with a government of national unity but not with the RCP [Ben Ali's party]. There's a big gap between rich and poor."

Noting the impact of religion on the population, she added: "There's a great lack of political education in the population. I know it's so for me, I am politically ignorant." She pointed out that the movement could spread and that some Arab governments have reduced food prices because of it. She was angry about the Foreign Minister's offer to send French police to help Ben Ali deal with the popular movement.

On the Marseille demonstration Houssamani, a Franco-Tunisian, said: "We have to get rid of Ghannouchi and Tunisia must start on a new basis, especially democracy."

Houssamani said he believed the protests would spread internationally from Tunisia: "I think we are going to be something of a model for Algeria and Morocco. It's up to them to find their way and to follow the Tunisians."

He added, "I don't agree with the NPA presenting the movement as an Intifada. I came back from the country a month ago. I often go there during the holidays and the young Tunisians have got no work, it's poverty, they get up in the morning and they have got no goal. They are unemployed and they see other people taking advantage of the situation with their pockets full of money which comes from the country."

Nejmedine who is doing a masters in economics, said: "We want a government for the people, a democratic government. We want a free government, no more repression and social equality for everybody."

He added: "The movement may spread elsewhere. The Tunisians managed to get rid of a corrupt government, so why not the others? Of course an independent movement of the working class is necessary, and I hope that the government is thinking of the working class primarily and social equality. Poverty, unemployment and freedom are the main problems in Tunisia. There has been economic growth but it has been badly distributed. In other countries, it is worse, and I hope that they will do as Tunisia has done,

and that the people will take their destiny into their hands."

Sophien, a businessman of Tunisian origin, said: "We can see from the attitude of the French head of state [President Nicolas Sarkozy], who has not opened his mouth, that they are all displeased that Ben Ali has gone. Ben Ali gave financial support to France.... Of course France will be getting involved for its nationals and for the big multinational companies. Apart from that France could not give a damn about Tunisia. It is a revolution. You could never imagine that a Tunisian would ransack a police station. It's a wonderful thing. Western people attack this movement, but you will see that in the coming years they will be democracy in Tunisia."

Another demonstrator told the WSWs he wanted an end to the conditions of the Ben Ali régime: "It's a social catastrophe. There were massive jailings and differences of wealth, the very rich and the very poor. We don't want some temporary solution. Many organisations do not want to continue till the final victory. This is just the start, we will not give up. There are the same problems in Algeria and Morocco."



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