

Tunisian events expose pro-imperialist policy of France's New Anti-Capitalist Party

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Events in Tunisia—where mass workers protests against unemployment and dictatorship forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from office on January 14—have exposed the class character of the pseudo-left groups like France's New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA). They are complicit in efforts by the Western imperialist governments to isolate and suppress working class struggle in Tunisia.

Mass protests began on December 17 after 26-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi, a university graduate working as a street vendor, set himself on fire to protest economic conditions and police mistreatment. He died from his injuries on January 4. The protest began in Tunisia's poorer eastern and southern regions, and then it spread to the entire country. The regime of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali first used brutal police repression against protesting workers, killing hundreds, but ultimately fled to Saudi Arabia on January 14.

The response of the NPA to the social and political turmoil in Tunisia was in alignment with that of the major imperialist powers—the US, France and other European Union countries. They all encouraged a deal between official “opposition” parties, the General Union of Tunisian Labor (UGTT) bureaucracy, and remaining members of the Ben Ali regime. While promoted under the cover of “democracy” or even “democratic revolution,” its aim was the formation of a national unity government based on the former Ben Ali dictatorship.

Echoing US President Barack Obama's call for “free and fair elections in the near future,” the Elysée presidential palace in France called for a “lasting democratic solution to the current crisis.” These cynical positions were also advanced on the bourgeois “left.” Socialist Party (PS) leader Martine Aubry cynically called on the French foreign ministry—one of the most stalwart supporters of Ben Ali's regime—to “engage itself unambiguously in favor of democracy in Tunisia.”

In line with the ruling class, the NPA has sought to present the Tunisian developments not as a revolutionary class struggle against dictatorship and imperialism, but a

“democratic,” trade-union struggle.

Its January 5 statement described the Tunisian struggle as an “Intifada”—that is, evoking the national struggle of the Palestinian people for democratic rights inside the Israeli state. This is not, however, the character of the recent Tunisian uprising. It was an uprising by the working class against unemployment and dictatorship, attempting to overthrow the Ben Ali regime.

After the protests broke out, the NPA supported Tunisia's trade union, Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), a long-time supporter of the Ben Ali regime that participated in implementing its free-market reform policies. Its January 5 statement said: “The only force that is present throughout the country, given that there is no opposition that can do it, is the UGTT, the country's only trade union.”

The statement applauds individual UGTT members who have declared themselves to be in solidarity with the protests. It wrote: “Numerous local and regional [UGTT] offices support the population, but they do not organize it.”

This is a lie. Not only did the national UGTT leadership “not organize” the protests, they called no strike action in support of it. They did not “support” the population, but the Ben Ali regime.

While it lies and sows confusion about the role of the trade unions, the NPA is quite aware of the UGTT's pro-government role. Indeed, it acknowledges in passing that the national UGTT office initially issued a statement denouncing the protests: “One has to deplore the attitude of the UGTT leadership, which officially desolidarized itself from the protests organized by some of its offices, and from the anti-regime slogans which were shouted there.”

In fact, though the NPA did not acknowledge it, the UGTT has been a fixture of the Ben Ali regime. It publicly endorsed Ben Ali in the last two presidential elections and supported his social cuts. In an interview given to the Tunisian journal *Achourouk* before Ben Ali fell and then reposted to the UGTT web site, UGTT Secretary Abdesslem Jerad declared: “The reform movement led by President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali is a qualitative change in

the process of building modern Tunisia.”

In supporting Ben Ali’s reform program, UGTT has supported the dictates of financial elite and the IMF in instituting “structural adjustment programs” in privatizing much of its economy and allowing for an unprecedented level of “free trade.” These policies have made it impossible for thousands of young Tunisians like Bouazizi to find jobs, while enriching Tunisia’s top elites.

Jerad welcomed the president’s relations with the UGTT, and said he looked forward to working with the government and groveled before Ben Ali: “Our pride is even greater, as our programs were in line with the objectives defined by President Ben Ali. We have not hesitated to support him, because at the UGTT we do not give allegiance to persons, nor try to make them happy. Rather, we support political programs and reforms.”

In promoting the UGTT as an oppositional force in Tunisia, the NPA shows its profound disinterest and hostility to the social demands of the working class. This is not an accident, moreover, but organically reflects the positions of the NPA. In France and throughout Europe, it has insisted that working class opposition to social austerity policies had to be subordinated to right-wing trade unions intent on negotiating social cuts with bourgeois governments. This led infamously to NPA members’ declaration that there should be only “symbolic” opposition to police strike-breaking against the French refinery strike.

On Friday, as Ben Ali fled Tunisia, the NPA published a communiqué, saying: “The flight of the dictator is a great victory for the Tunisian people.” It said, “The NPA renews its support for the Tunisian people, for the democratic revolution to which it aspires.”

The NPA did not explain how it would help the Tunisian working class carry out a revolution against the Ben Ali regime while giving public support to Ben Ali’s minions. This question has emerged even more sharply after the new interim government was announced in Tunis.

Its composition makes clear that the new government represents an attempt by the old government to hang on to power by bringing in a few elements of the official opposition. Eight of Ben Ali’s ministers kept their posts—including in the top positions Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi, Foreign Minister Kamel Morjane, and Interior Minister Ahmed Kriaâ. Ex-Stalinist or pro-capitalist “opposition” figures took over various second-rank ministries, such as Regional Development or Higher Education.

This is a matter of immense significance for US and European imperialism. The ruling elite in Tunisia is working with the imperialist powers to form a government that would carry out the policies dictated by the Pentagon, the Quai

d’Orsay, and the International Monetary Fund: social cuts, support for the US-NATO “war on terror” and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and for the Israeli state’s continued oppression of the Palestinian people.

The same day that Ben Ali fled Tunis, the NPA signed a joint communiqué with France’s official bourgeois “left” parties, including the Socialist Party (PS), the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Greens. The communiqué states: “We demand that the French government and the European Union cease their explicit or implicit support to the Tunisian regime and support a true democratic transition.”

In issuing this communiqué, the PS and PCF were continuing their long and sordid history as architects of French imperialist crimes. These included the PCF’s support for Socialist Premier Guy Mollet’s pursuit of the war against Algerian independence in 1956; PS President François Mitterrand’s participation in the US-led 1991 Gulf War against Iraq; and the PS-PCF-Green coalition government’s participation in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

Marie-George Buffet, former secretary of the PCF, explained the thinking behind the joint communiqué in an interview with the Stalinist daily, *L’Humanité*. She noted the long support given by the French government to the Ben Ali regime but—after mass protests had shaken the Ben Ali regime to its foundations—said it was time for a change in course.

Noting the commercial leverage that the French and European governments have over Tunisia, she said: “We have the means to exert pressure on the Tunisian regime. There is a privileged accord between the EU and Tunisia, which is subject to various conditions.”

This leverage was no doubt actively used to try to give the Tunisian dictatorship a new lease on life by slightly reshuffling its personnel at the top. The NPA only helped provide a somewhat more “left” face for these imperialist, anti-working class machinations.



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