

The mass uprising in Tunisia and the perspective of permanent revolution

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The events in Tunisia mark a turning point in world affairs. After decades of triumphant reaction and suppression of the class struggle, the eruption of mass protests and the end to 23 years of repressive rule by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali signal the emergence of a new era of revolutionary upheavals.

The Tunisian masses, however, are at only the initial stages of their struggle. As is already clear from the continuation of military violence under the new interim president, the working class faces immense dangers. The crucial question of revolutionary program and leadership remains unresolved. Without the development of a revolutionary leadership, another authoritarian regime will inevitably be installed to replace that of Ben Ali.

Of great objective significance is the sudden and rapid unfolding of the mass movement that brought down Ben Ali. What the West routinely hailed as among the most stable of Arab regimes, a bulwark in Northern Africa and the Middle East of capitalism and the interests of US and European imperialism, was revealed within a matter of weeks to be isolated, weak and rotten to the core.

The match that ignited the social tinderbox long building beneath the surface of political life was the self-immolation of a college graduate who could not find a regular job and was deprived by the authorities of his meager livelihood selling vegetables. This tragic event focused the anger of millions of youth and workers over pervasive unemployment, poverty, social inequality and the despotism and corruption of the ruling elite.

The social conditions that led to the eruption in Tunisia predominate throughout the Maghreb and the Middle East, and are increasingly confronting the working class in the advanced capitalist countries under conditions of a global economic crisis and a brutal offensive by the banks and corporations.

It is significant that Islamist forces played virtually no role in the mass protests. What is coming to the fore all over the world are the basic social and class issues that dominate economic and political life, superseding secondary and tertiary questions of religion, race and nationality.

The fall of Ben Ali came as a shock to the bourgeoisie of Tunisia and the rest of the Arab world, as well as to American and world imperialism. All the more worrying for them was the eruption of mass protests in neighboring Algeria and further to the east in Jordan.

No doubt the scenes of tens of thousands of workers and youth defying the military and police to pack downtown Tunis and demand an end to the dictatorship sent shivers down the spines of

the bankers and speculators in New York, Paris, Frankfurt and the other centers of imperialist finance. When it comes to corruption and the contemptuous flaunting of wealth, no ruling elite takes a back seat to that of the United States.

The response of both the United States and Europe to the events in Tunisia has been utterly cynical and hypocritical. All of the imperialist capitals were well aware of the gross corruption of the Ben Ali regime.

One of the factors that contributed to the spread of the protests was the publication by WikiLeaks of cables from the US embassy in Tunis describing the Tunisian regime in scathing terms as a kleptocracy and dictatorship. The role of these cables in the eruption of social protest in Tunisia helps explain the hysterical response of the American ruling class to WikiLeaks' exposures.

Both the US and Europe chose to subordinate the predations of the Tunisian regime to their economic and geo-strategic interests. The European Union, and particularly the former colonial power France, have established extensive economic ties to Tunisia. The US has stepped up military and political aid to the dictatorship in return for its lining up behind Washington's "war on terror."

These political and military relations expose the hollowness of American and European pretensions to defending human rights and promoting democracy.

As late as last week, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was telling an Arab satellite television audience that the United States was "not taking sides" in the Tunisian crisis. Only when it was clear that Washington's decades-long ally was on his way out did the US government change its tune, claiming to support the demonstrators and chastising the regime for excessive violence.

The real attitude of the American ruling class to the mass movement in Tunisia is one of implacable hostility, as indicated in a commentary by Jackson Diehl, a member of the editorial board of the *Washington Post*. Diehl wrote on Friday, "The most imminent threat to US interests in the Middle East, however, is not war; it is revolution."

He added: "The violence has already migrated to Algeria, and Arab media are full of speculation of where the 'Tunisia scenario' will appear next: Egypt? Jordan? Libya? All those countries are threatened by rapidly rising global prices for food and fuel; the United Nations warned last week of a 'food price shock.'"

The events of the past week in Tunisia have once again revealed the immense social power and revolutionary potential of the working class. But the central weakness of the mass movement is

the absence of a clear revolutionary perspective, program and leadership.

This enables the native bourgeoisie and its imperialist backers to regroup and forge new means for crushing popular opposition and defending Tunisian capitalism. With Ben Ali's departure having removed the most direct target of popular hatred, the Tunisian regime is already waging a counteroffensive. Under the cover of a "unity government" and promised elections, the state of emergency and curfew remain in place and police and soldiers continue to shoot down and arrest opponents of the regime.

The emergence of revolutionary struggle makes all the more critical the question of political consciousness, perspective and program. The history of Tunisia and the entire Middle East provides an emphatic confirmation of the world revolutionary strategy elaborated by Trotsky and the Fourth International on the basis of the perspective of permanent revolution.

As Trotsky explained, in opposition to Stalinism, social democracy and bourgeois nationalism, in the epoch of imperialism, the bourgeoisie in countries with a belated capitalist development are incapable of carrying out any of the basic tasks of the democratic revolution. Weak and dependent, tied by innumerable threads to foreign imperialism and native feudalist forces, the bourgeoisie of countries such as Tunisia is a thousand times more fearful of and hostile to the revolutionary force of the working class than it is to imperialism.

The history of Tunisia since independence in 1957 is a textbook example of the correctness of this historical prognosis. The national bourgeoisie has ruled with an iron hand, imposing poverty on the masses while opening up the Tunisian economy to the unfettered exploitation of the imperialist banks and corporations. The same is true in Algeria, where the National Liberation Front, which led the anti-colonial struggle in the 1960s, today attacks protesting workers and imposes "free market" policies for the benefit of the corrupt ruling elite and foreign banks and corporations.

All of the various nationalist movements, including those that formerly presented themselves as quasi-socialist, today collaborate with imperialism in the oppression of their own people. Neither Ba'athism, Nasserism, the Palestine Liberation Organization nor the Libyan variant has been able to address the issues of genuine independence from imperialism, unemployment, poverty and economic backwardness.

The response of the Arab League to the events in Tunisia has been to urge "calm" and "stability"—i.e., the suppression of the mass movement. Libya's Gaddafi openly defended Ben Ali against the demonstrators and warned of a new Bolshevik revolution.

Calls for a so-called "democratic revolution"—advanced in various forms by European pseudo-left groups—are a dead end. They want workers to press the regime to give more influence to official opposition parties and trade unions. However, none of these organizations have sought to mount a struggle against the regime or its right-wing policies. The General Union of Tunisian Labor (UGTT), which supported Ben Ali in the last two presidential elections, officially endorsed his free-market "reforms."

The only viable program for the working class and oppressed masses of Tunisia and the entire Maghreb and Middle East is the program advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International of socialist revolution. Only through the independent struggle of the working class, leading all of the oppressed sections of society against both the native bourgeoisie and imperialism, can democratic and social rights be won and social equality established as the foundation of political life.

This struggle cannot be conducted simply on a national scale. Trotskyist parties must be built throughout Northern Africa and the Middle East to unite the working masses under the banner of the United Socialist States of the Middle East and the Maghreb, as part of the world socialist revolution.

This struggle must be consciously linked up with the mounting struggles of workers in the advanced capitalist countries, many of which have large populations of Arab workers from Northern Africa and the Middle East.

Only on this internationalist basis can the divisions of religion, nationality and race—ceaselessly stoked up by imperialism and the bourgeoisie—be overcome and the social power of the working class mobilized to put an end to imperialist domination.

The ICFI has created the *World Socialist Web Site* as its daily organ to report and analyze political developments all over the world and provide the necessary perspective for the struggles of the working class internationally. We call on readers of the WSWS in Tunisia and throughout the Middle East to contact our web site. We call on all those who seek to put an end to dictatorship and exploitation in Tunisia and the entire region to take up the fight to build sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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