

The American middle class “left” and the Tunisian revolt

Jerry White
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The uprising in Tunisia is in its initial stages and efforts are quickly being made by remnants of the Ben Ali dictatorship, the bourgeois opposition parties and trade unions to stabilize the situation. They seek to put together a government capable of suppressing the mass movement and securing the interests of the Tunisian ruling elite and American and French imperialism.

If the initiative is left in the hands of these forces there is a real danger of military repression and the installation of another authoritarian regime.

The most critical task confronting the Tunisian masses is the development of a revolutionary leadership and program for the working class. None of the demands of this mass movement—for jobs and decent living standards, for basic democratic rights and ending the looting of the country by the IMF, multinational corporations and native capitalists—can be realized outside of a struggle by the working class to take political power and reorganize the economy along socialist lines.

In opposition to such a struggle, a host of middle class “left” organizations around the world have sought to tie the Tunisian working class to the official opposition parties and, above all, to the UGTT (Union Generale Tunisienne du Travail—General Union of Tunisian Workers). This includes the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) in France (See “Tunisian events expose pro-imperialist policy of France’s New Anti-Capitalist Party”).

In the US, the International Socialist Organization (ISO) has been one of the chief cheerleaders of the UGTT. An article earlier this week on its *Socialist Worker* web site declared, “In the past few weeks, the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) has proved to be a critical nucleus for organizing and uniting the employed and unemployed in protest.”

This is a lie. The first reaction of the UGTT was to denounce the protests. Even as demonstrators were being gunned down in the streets UGTT leader Abdesslem Jerad held a meeting with Ben Ali.

The UGTT has long supported the regime and been instrumental in implementing its IMF-backed structural reforms and austerity measures. It has publicly supported Ben Ali during bogus presidential elections, telling workers most recently that he would guarantee “an atmosphere of freedom and stability.”

Unable to completely conceal these facts, *Socialist Worker* writer Matt Swagler says, “Unfortunately, union leaders joined the movement somewhat belatedly. After initially condemning the protests and holding back from them, they were pushed by rank-and-file pressure to support and join the actions. But their weight was important in tipping the scales against Ben Ali.”

What was the UGTT’s actual role?

With tens of thousands marching in defiance of state violence, the National Commission of the UGTT called an emergency meeting on January 11. It issued a statement appealing for calm and urging the government not to blame the union “for the tragic events which have marked the country.” It did not call for the ouster of Ali, but instead “the creation of a committee of national dialogue to determine the economic and social reforms necessary to ensure national stability, security and prosperity.”

As strikes and protests escalated UGTT leaders called a token two-hour strike for January 14 in an effort to contain the rebellion and posture as an oppositional force. When Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia, the UGTT quickly threw its support behind the maneuvers of his henchmen to form a government of “national unity.”

Three officials of the UGTT took cabinet positions in

the government, which was dominated by members of Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party. With protests continuing and focusing on the role of the RCD, the three UGTT ministers were forced to resign.

In an effort to bolster the authority of the UGTT, Swagler writes, "The Tunisian labor movement has an important radical history—most notably, a 1978 general strike. But it has been severely weakened by a combination of repression, privatization of state jobs and accommodation by the union leadership. Whether Tunisian unions will regain some of their former strength in solidarity with the protest movement remains to be seen."

From its origins, the UGTT has been an instrument of the most reactionary forces, including, above all, French and American imperialism. As Nigel Disney notes in his 1978 article, "The Working Class Revolt in Tunisia," the UGTT "was formed in 1946 through the fusion of already existing unions, but it moved to the right during the period of the struggle for national independence. The UGTT left the communist-oriented World Federation of Trade Unions in 1951, only a year after joining it, and adhered instead to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. Through this body the UGTT leadership forged close links with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), links that continue to this day."

Irving Brown, who headed up the AFL's worldwide anti-communist activities in conjunction with the Central Intelligence Agency, forged the closest links with the UGTT and the predecessors of Ben Ali's RCD party. The AFL's operations in Tunis became a springboard for the crimes and intrigues of US imperialism not only in North Africa but throughout the continent.

The Tunisian general strike of 1978 was an explosive struggle sparked by labor and student unrest over decaying economic conditions and political repression. Hundreds were gunned down by the military and more than 200 union officials, including the head of the UGTT, were jailed. By 1981, however, after the union officials were released and pardoned, the UGTT backed the ruling Destourian Socialist Party, which had carried out the crackdown, claiming it had reformed. In 1987, Ben Ali, a leading member of the party, took power.

None of this is of any consequence to the ISO and the

other pseudo-left organizations. Rather than warning the working class about fatal illusions in the bourgeois opposition, they bolster such illusions, insisting mass pressure can move the UGTT and the bourgeois opposition parties to the left.

Swagler urges Tunisian workers and youth to hold "interim leaders accountable to their promises for reform and an end to oppression." Furthermore, he says, the "trade unions and opposition organizations on the Tunisian left could play a significant role in helping to coalesce a movement" for "radical social change."

Every one of the so-called opposition parties—from those sanctioned under the dictatorship, to the banned Stalinist Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (PCOT) and Islamist parties—defend the capitalist order.

Far from being a vehicle for "radical social change" they are working diligently to forge a government capable of putting down all popular resistance. In these efforts, the middle class "left" organizations function as a crucial prop and auxiliary of French and US imperialism.

This is certainly not the first or even the second time they have played this role. In 2009, the whole "left" fraternity backed the efforts of the US to destabilize the Iranian regime during the so-called Green Revolution, backing oppositionists seeking to install a regime more friendly to Washington.

The Tunisian masses confront great political challenges, which cannot be resolved outside of the struggle to build a revolutionary leadership steeled in the lessons of history, including the struggle against bourgeois nationalism, Stalinism and opportunism. The only party that embodies that struggle is the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement. We encourage Tunisian workers, youth and intellectuals to study the history and program of our movement and build sections of the ICFI in Tunisia and throughout North Africa.



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