

Tunisian uprising continues

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The Tunisian uprising is continuing, even if the street protests have subsided following the government reshuffle that removed some of the old faces from the Ben Ali regime. And it is taking on a more working class character.

Wildcat strikes are breaking out at government-controlled industries, ministries and hotels.

In the latest strike, which brought Tunis airport to a halt, airport workers are demanding better pay. The strike erupted suddenly, with no official preparation on the part of the unions. Company chairman Montassar Wali resigned this week for unspecified reasons.

Tunisie Telecom workers have also gone on strike. They are opposing plans to list the company on the Paris Bourse. Workers want the pay gap between ordinary workers and management reduced.

Staff from at least one large hotel are on strike. They are demanding the resignation of the manager. Employees at the Ministry of Higher Education have staged protest strikes.

The new cabinet met on Tuesday to discuss the security situation and decided to keep the curfew in place. A government spokesman said, "The situation is not yet stabilised."

A number of incidents have occurred recently, which may be the work of criminal gangs of looters or organised attempts by the old regime to terrorise the population and create the climate for the military suppression of the uprising.

On Tuesday, gangs of youths appeared in the wealthy Tunis suburb of Carthage where they attacked schools. The army fired over their heads to disperse them. This incident followed disturbances in Kasserine on Monday where public buildings were ransacked and looted. Local union officials of the UGTT identified those responsible as members of the RCD, the former ruling party.

On Monday night, arsonists set fire to a synagogue in

the city of Gabes. On Saturday, gangs of youths rampaged through Tunis and broke up a rally of feminists. Local shopkeepers armed with sticks and knives drove them off.

Any ability of the RCD supporters to carry out such provocations is made possible by the fact that the workers and the rural poor have yet to establish their independent leadership of the Tunisian uprising.

Aymen Ben Belgacem, aged 21, set himself on fire in El-Guettar in the Gafsa region of southern Tunisia on Saturday. He was driven to this desperate act by the conditions of poverty, unemployment and oppression that prevail in this phosphate mining area. He was taken to a hospital in Tunis, where his condition is critical. The fact that such an act of despair could be repeated after the so-called Jasmine Revolution points to a lack of any real political, economic or social progress. An interim government has been established under Mohammed Ghannouchi, who was prime minister under Ben Ali. He has been forced to dismiss some of those ministers who were most publicly associated with Ben Ali, such as the foreign minister, Kamel Morjane, but his reshuffled cabinet does not represent a break with the past.

It would not be surprising if some of the violent incidents that have taken place recently are the work of elements of the old regime, since all the security apparatus on which Ben Ali relied—the army, the police and the secret police—is still intact. No attempt has been made to dismantle it or to bring those responsible for the deaths of oppositionists to justice.

The United Nations estimates that at least 219 people were killed during the uprising and a further 510 injured. It is thought that 72 people died in the country's jails alone, 48 of them in Monastir prison. A UN investigation is ongoing, and the figure for those killed is likely to rise.

Internationally, some face-saving efforts have been

made to freeze or seize Ben Ali's assets. A plane belonging to one of his sons-in-law was seized at Le Bourget airport in France. The Swiss authorities have seized a plane, too. European ministers agreed to freeze the assets of Ben Ali and his wife, Leila Trabelsi. But the couple remain in luxurious exile, with 1.5 tonnes of gold from the Tunisian reserves worth \$56 million. In total, the family's assets are estimated at \$10 to \$12 billion and are spread across numerous countries. They include interests in hotel chains, pharmaceuticals, car plants, tuna fishing, telecommunication, banking and insurance. The family is thought to control 30 to 40 percent of the Tunisian economy.

Some 30 members of the family have been arrested and the valuables they were attempting to smuggle out the country recovered. But the whereabouts of most of the wealth, which Ben Ali and his extended family looted from Tunisia over his 23 years in power, are unknown.

The pronouncements from France, Switzerland and other countries have a token character. They reflect a belated attempt on the part of governments that have worked with Ben Ali for years to distance themselves from this fallen dictator.

The haste with which the world's major powers are attempting to distance themselves from their former ally and their eagerness to consolidate the interim government reflect their concern that the reverberations of the Tunisian uprising continue to spread—to Egypt, Jordan and elsewhere.

Reshuffling the figures in the cabinet and making empty promises of reform, while bringing repressive military and intelligence figures to the fore, is the universal response among the elite of North Africa and the Middle East to the uprising that has overtaken their ossified regimes. They are incapable of meeting the economic needs or the democratic demands of the mass of the population. The free market measures that they introduced served to enrich the members of the ruling elite and further impoverish the majority of the population.

Genuine democracy would inevitably threaten the wealth of the ruling elite in the Middle East and North Africa and the international capitalist class that has backed their privatisation plans and cheap labour investment opportunities. The banks in which the Tunisian dictator hoarded his wealth were not ignorant

of its source. The global financial aristocracy, not just the Ben Ali clan, have profited from the looting of Tunisia.

There is no purely national answer to the issues that confront the Tunisian working class and rural poor. Ben Ali, and the rest of the Tunisian capitalists that remain, represent international finance capital, and Western governments are working overtime to re-establish a regime that will maintain that mutually beneficial relationship. The UGTT, with its appeals to national unity, is playing an important role in this process. It has already succeeded in getting the teachers back to work and will attempt to wind down the strikes that have broken out in other areas of the economy as soon as it can. It is as much a part of the old regime as the army, which it constantly praises as the embodiment of national unity.

Workers need their own political perspective if the Tunisian uprising is to continue, and it must be an international one. They cannot rely on the army, or any of the existing political parties. Even the formerly illegal parties have rapidly made their peace with Ghannouchi's interim government. They are eager to take their place as an official opposition, propagating the appearance of democracy in a country that is still deeply divided between rich and poor and in which Ben Ali's successors continue to profit at the expense of the majority.



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