

The “friends” of the Tunisian masses: the example of the French Independent Workers Party

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While revolutionary struggles forced Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to flee, the former president’s regime, led by the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), has continued to stay in power. Thanks to its collaboration with official “opposition” groups, the trade unions and magistrates’ organisations, Ben Ali’s prime minister, Mohamed Ghannouchi, still controls the government.

A multitude of “left” organizations in Tunisia and other countries are trying to restore the credibility of this so-called “opposition”, in particular the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT). The official trade union, which campaigned for Ben Ali in the last elections, continues to play a counter-revolutionary role in the country, serving as one of the forces securing the domination of the RCD.

In France, the former colonial power in Tunisia, the Independent Workers Party (POI), a coalition led by the former International Communist Organization (OCI), an ex-Trotskyist group, is playing a central role in the efforts to rehabilitate the UGTT. The POI has considerable influence in the trade union bureaucracy and claims mayors in several rural districts.

The POI combines hypocritical praise of the spontaneous action of the masses and denunciations of representatives of the Ben Ali regime with illusions as to the nature of other “left” organizations in Tunisia. It is, however, precisely these organizations which are helping keep Prime Minister Ghannouchi in office.

In recent statements, the POI points out that the UGTT is calling for “the resignation of the present government, for the calling into question of all the dictatorial and anti-democratic institutions of the

former regime and for a constituent Assembly”. It adds approvingly that “this is a position that corresponds to democracy”.

Nothing is said about the contents of this new constitution, apart from asserting that it should “break” with the former regime. The constituent assembly proposed by the “January 14th” opposition movement is conceived as an institution that would only be keeping an eye on the interim government. The army and the police, pillars of the former regime, would continue to exist, under the control of Ghannouchi.

This call for a new bourgeois “democratic” constitution is a leitmotif of the POI and the Communist Party of Tunisian Workers (PCOT). The PCOT was legalized by the interim government, that is to say by Ghannouchi, on January 20. It is a Maoist group that still glorifies dictators such as Enver Hoxha (ex-leader of Albania), Mao and Stalin. It is closely linked to the ex-Stalinists of the Ettahjid Party (See: The anti-socialist politics of Tunisia’s official “opposition”).

The PCOT’s current statements are an attempt to dull the consciousness of the masses. They present the UGTT, and even the army, as popular forces that the masses should trust. They dress up in completely empty “left” verbiage the plans for “democratic transition” proposed by the imperialist strategists in Washington and Paris.

Similarly, all of the POI statements amount to declaring their full support for the UGTT. However, given that the rotten record of this organization is well known, they argue that it is possible to change the organization’s policies by “putting pressure” on the leadership.

In a January 26 press release following attacks on the UGTT premises by Ben Ali supporters, the POI declared its “solidarity with the UGTT, with its leaders and with its activists.” This statement fails to point out that it is the wait-and-see attitude of the UGTT that fuels the audaciousness of the supporters of the deposed dictator.

A recent editorial in the POI’s newspaper, *Informations Ouvrières*, that was written at the time of the resignation of three UGTT ministers from the post-Ben Ali government on January 18 praises “the role which, in spite of its leadership, the UGTT came to play in this, called upon at all levels by the workers to support their demands and to accommodate the defense committees in their premises”.

In fact, by leaving the government the UGTT was merely trying to prevent the discrediting of all that remained of the old regime’s institutions. Indeed, ten days later, the UGTT cancelled a strike against Ghannouchi that it had called and dropped its opposition to the prime minister remaining in power.

On January 26, a UGTT leader, Hacine El Abassi, declared, “If it is apparent that there is not other means to make the Ghannouchi government see reason and go, then we shall call a general strike”. But the very next day, another UGTT leader, Abid Briki, told the AFP, “We agree on the principle of maintaining three names, Ghannouchi, Jouini and Chelbi”.

These three ministers supervised the imposition of IMF policies that impoverished the population during Ben Ali’s rule. Jouini, today the minister of planning, was on the Board of Directors of the country’s central bank from 1996 to 2001. After this, he served as secretary of state for privatizations for two years, then assuming the post of minister of development. Chelbi, former manager of the Maghreb International Merchant Bank, has been minister of industry since 2004. The uprising that overthrew Ben Ali was directed against the policies implemented by these officials.

The entire Tunisian “official opposition” is ready to collaborate with these allies of high international finance and the country’s overthrown president. For these people, the “revolution” comes down to transferring the Ben Ali-Trabelsi family’s right to pillage the population to a somewhat broader circle of looters. Contrary to what the POI and other parties of its ilk want to have people believe, there is a vast gulf

that separates these organizations from the workers and the impoverished rural masses.



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