

Tunisian interim government faces widespread opposition

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Anti-government protests took place across Tunisia on August 15. Thousands of Tunisians participated, denouncing the interim government. They demanded the resignation of interim Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi and his government because they have failed to prosecute officials of the toppled regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who fled the country in January, or improve conditions for the mass of the population.

Hundreds of protesters gathered for a rally in front of the cathedral in Tunis. The state deployed armored vehicles sealing off Habib Bourguiba Avenue, a major thoroughfare, to prevent protesters from marching on the interior ministry building.

They called for the independence of the justice system and the resignation of the interim government. The crowd chanted slogans demanding a “new revolution” and declaring “the people want the system to fall,” as well as accusing the interior ministry of “terrorism.”

One protester told Reuters: “We need a new revolution ... Nothing has changed. This government should leave right now.”

Tunisian security forces, who were gathered in large numbers in front of the interior ministry, attacked the protesters. They used tear gas and beat protesters with truncheons to break up the protest. Some demonstrators were also arrested. The security forces claimed that the protest had not been given official approval. The interior ministry blamed the protesters for provoking the violence. Its spokesman, without offering any proof, claimed that “police only advanced when one of the demonstrators threw a tear gas bomb at them.”

Anti-government protests also took place in other Tunisian cities, including Sfax, Sidi Bouzid, Bizerte, Monastir and Djerba.

Protesters expressed particular anger about the failure of the interim regime to prosecute officials of the ousted Ben Ali regime. They are quite aware that the new regime is in sympathy with those officials. According to Reuters, “There was an outpouring of anger after the justice minister under

Ben Ali was released from jail and a high-profile friend of the ex-president’s wife fled to Paris without facing trial.”

The August 15 protests reflect the popular opposition developing against the interim government. Wide layers of the population see the current regime as a continuation of the hated Ben Ali government, which brazenly and brutally protected the interests of the Tunisian elite and its US and European imperialist backers. There is a widespread understanding as well that the new government, desperate to maintain the old political order, is incapable of resolving any of the pressing problems facing the Tunisian people.

On the same day, the UGTT (General Union of Tunisian Labor) trade union called a peaceful protest in Tunis, which was authorized by the state. The UGTT, a longstanding prop of the former regime, claimed that it called the protest to demand that the interim government carry out “the aims of revolution.” Members of the right-wing Islamist party Ennahda and other political parties, as well as former ministers of the interim government, also participated in the UGTT rally.

In the face of growing popular disillusionment and dissatisfaction, the UGTT, along with the right-wing and Islamist forces, are promoting the illusion that the government will carry out policies in favor of the Tunisian masses if pressure is applied. The union called the protest to provide a veneer of pseudo-democratic legitimacy to the state and to try to keep the developing protests and strikes under control.

The number of strikes and anti-government protests has surged over the past weeks. The *Financial Times* reported: “In July, there were in total 184 protest roadblocks across Tunisia, up from 103 in June, officials say. There were 156 protests blocking access to industrial sites, including oil company operations, up from 78 in June.”

It added that common grievances expressed in the protests were “lack of jobs; lack of transport, roads, or running water; dilapidated housing; poor healthcare and pollution from nearby industrial plants.”

Last month, the Tunisian daily *Achourouk* reported that

“the social climate in Tunisia remains tense compared to the same period of 2010, in the sense that the number of strikes increased by 130 percent, while the number of companies hit by strikes rose to 92 percent.” It added, “During the same period of 2011, the number of days lost [to strike activity] increased by 347 percent, due to the length of the stoppages in companies and sectors with high employment intensity.”

Faced with growing social opposition, the interim government has been able to maintain its corrupt rule due to the treachery of the UGTT bureaucracy and its pseudo-left defenders—for example, the Tunisian Communist Workers Party (PCOT). Such organizations help suppress emerging social struggles, while falsely claiming the interim government is a democratic regime.

The call for a “new revolution” against the entire Tunisian political establishment—similar to the appeal for a “second revolution” in Egypt against the military junta—will undoubtedly find a popular response, but the UGTT and the entire official opposition are implacably opposed to such a struggle.

For decades the UGTT has played a crucial role in Tunisian political life. The union helped implement Ben Ali’s free-market policies, demanded by the Western powers and International Monetary Fund. The resulting social crisis—due to the low wages and unemployment produced in large measure by these policies—ultimately provoked a mass uprising against Ben Ali, ignited by the self-immolation of a street vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi.

The UGTT exposed its class character by initially refusing to endorse these protests; in fact, the national UGTT office issued a statement denouncing them. The union only began calling solidarity actions on January 12, two days before Ben Ali’s departure, no doubt fearful that public opposition would develop against the UGTT as well as to the state and the president himself.

Soon after Ben Ali’s ouster, UGTT members joined the provisional government of Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, who was subsequently forced to resign amid mass protests in February. Although the UGTT ministers quit the provisional government cabinet, the organization collaborates with the state and its policies. In particular, the UGTT participates in the so-called Commission for the Achievement of the Objectives of the Revolution and the Democratic Transition, set up by the interim government to oversee elections to the Constituent Assembly.

This latter body amounts to a smokescreen for the Tunisian state and its corrupt ties to imperialism. The political establishment hides behind the commission and falsely promises that it intends to build democracy. In fact, the government continues to repress political opposition and oppress workers.

A central role in perpetrating this political fraud falls to the pseudo-left parties that participate in the commission and provide it a semblance of legitimacy. The commission includes political parties such as the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and the ex-Stalinist Ettajdid movement, union officials, and the business organization, UTICA (Modernization Movement of the Tunisian Union for Industry, Commerce and Artisans). (See, “Tunisian Reform Commission defends capitalist regime”)

Workers entering into struggle in Tunisia can place no confidence in the UGTT or any other organization participating in the reform commission. They now play a leading role in defending the state, as was noted by interim Prime Minister Béji Caïd Essebsi.

On Thursday, Essebsi delivered a speech at a meeting held at the Congress Palace, in the presence of representatives of various political parties, national authorities and “civil society” groups. Warning that Tunisia faced “a dangerous turning point,” he added, “The election of the constituent assembly is vital and its failure means the failure of the Interim Government and also of the Revolution.” He insisted, “The point is to join the efforts of all sides [government and political parties] to reach this goal by strengthening the action of the Higher Independent Authority for Elections.”

Tunisian workers and young people waged a determined struggle to oust Ben Ali. However, the lack of a leadership that could orient the masses toward a revolutionary struggle against the whole political establishment enables the Tunisian ruling elite, along with the UGTT and its hangers-on, to carry out reactionary measures against the working class.

Under condition of developing mass opposition to the interim regime, the basic dilemma confronting the Tunisian masses is that it cannot wage such a struggle under the leadership of the UGTT and the pseudo-left organizations. The burning question is a political break from these organizations and a fight for the political independence of the working class, mobilizing behind it all the oppressed masses in a struggle for political power. This requires the building of a new, internationalist and socialist party.



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