

Tunisia delays forming government amid a new wave of strikes

Kumaran Ira

15 November 2011

After October 23 elections to the Tunisian Constituent Assembly, strikes have broken out in numerous sectors, including airport, postal and oil workers, against poor wages and working conditions. These strikes underscore popular opposition to the entire political establishment, which has still not succeeded in assembling a government based on the elections.

The October 23 poll gave the right-wing Islamist party Ennahda the most seats in the 217-member Constituent Assembly. The Constituent Assembly is tasked with drafting a new constitution and appoint an interim government.

According to final election results released yesterday, Ennahda won 89 seats; the so-called center-left parties such as Congress for the Republic (CPR) and Ettakatol won 29 and 20 seats respectively. The Popular Petition party won 26, the Progressive Democratic Party 17, and the Modern Democratic Pole won 5 seats. It is widely expected that Ennahda, which was banned under the deposed Ben Ali regime, will form a coalition government along with CPR and Ettakatol, as it does not have a majority in the assembly.

The poll provoked relatively little enthusiasm and at times open hostility from the masses; turnout was just half of a total of 7.5 million eligible voters. Ahead of the poll, many workers expressed their distrust of the political parties—saying that none of them address their social demands and acknowledging that the January 14 revolution, that ousted Western-backed dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, had not yet resolved any of their basic social problems.

After the elections, moreover, workers responded with a wave of strikes. Post Office employees went on strike on October 27-31, demanding promotions, pay increases, and the hiring of additional staff.

Workers at Italian oil company ENI's Tunisian plant went on strike for three days on October 31. They protested the company's refusal to award permanent contracts and its insistence on imposing temp contracts, lasting from 2 days to 14 years, regardless of workers' commitment and seniority. Workers at Brewery and Refrigeration of Tunis (SFBT) also went on strike to protest poor working

conditions.

The victory of Ennahda, which played no significant role in the revolutionary struggles in January, did not reflect deep popular support, but the absence of any organization speaking for the interests of the working class.

"Center-left" bourgeois parties such as Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and the Stalinist Ettajdid movement, as well as petty bourgeois parties like the Maoist Tunisian Communist Workers Party (PCOT) of Hamma Hammami, are deeply discredited. Together with the union bureaucracy, these parties promoted the reform commission launched by the remnants of the Ben Ali regime that set up the elections for the Constituent Assembly. The goal of this maneuver was to halt continuing mass protests after Ben Ali's fall, and thus to stabilize capitalist rule.

The interim government and the commission immediately became unpopular as the regime used brutal crackdown against protesters and threatened striking workers in many sectors of the Tunisian industry aftermath of revolution. (See "Tunisian Reform Commission defends capitalist regime")

After the elections results were released, a communiqué by Ennahda said: "We stress once again that we wish to co-operate with all parties without any exclusion. We are open to all political parties inside the assembly and outside it, as well as civil society bodies such as the great Tunisian trade union and other unions."

This is a signal to the union bureaucracy and the "left" parties that their services are still required in suppressing working class opposition. Tunisia's main UGTT (*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*) trade union, a long-time prop of the Ben Ali regime that participated in implementing its free-market reform policies, declared its support for an Ennahda-led government. The UGTT also refused to organize strikes when mass protests emerged against the Ben Ali regime in December 2010.

UGTT spokesman Abid Briki declared he was "ready to

cooperate with any government formed by the Constituent Assembly.” He also downplayed the current strike wave, claiming it was “nothing at all compared to what happened even under Ben Ali.”

The delay in forming a government reflects fears in the political establishment of working class struggles, and broader concerns of Western imperialist governments over whether Ennahda will be a reliable guardian of their interests in the region.

Western imperialism has often tolerated Islamist groups as loyal right-wing opposition forces—including Iranian clerics under the US-backed Shah of Iran in the 1950s and 1960s, or more recently the Muslim Brotherhood under the Mubarak regime in Egypt. Particularly under conditions where the US claims to be fighting a “war on terror” against Islamist groups, however, there is concern in imperialist circles about the advisability of letting an Islamist regime come to power.

As section of center-left parties like CPR and Ettakatol are joining the interim government, the opposition represented by the PDP, Ettajdid and the PCOT is not based on a principled rejection of Ennahda’s reactionary policies, let alone the interests of the working class. In fact, during the Ben Ali era, the PDP, PCOT and Islamist forces worked together inside the 18th of October Coalition.

These so-called “opposition” parties’ main concern is maintaining the support of imperialism. Should Ennahda fail to maintain the support of the imperialist powers, they would be ready to take power and help implement policies demanded by imperialism.

Ennahda and its coalition allies have made clear that they will continue the free-market policies of Ben Ali against the working class, for the benefit of Tunisian businessmen and international capital.

On November 1 Ennahda’s secretary-general, Hamadi Jebeli, who is likely to become the prime minister in the next transitional government, met with Tunisian business federation UTICA. He tried to reassure businessmen and investors, saying: “Ennahdha views businessmen as partners in the decision-making process and in all economic and social files.”

The imperialist powers are pushing for coalition government including Ennahda and the “center-left” parties such as the CPR and Ettakatol. US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland called “coalition-building.”

Asked whether the US is concerned by the rise of Islamist parties in the Middle East after Ennahda’s victory, Nuland said Washington would not judge Tunisia’s political parties “by what they’re called. We’re going to judge them by what

they do. ... What they need to do is support universal human rights, support democratic principles, support equal opportunity for all citizens—including women—support tolerance, diversity, unity. So that’s the basis on which we are going to judge all these groups going forward.”

In fact, Washington and the European powers are no more concerned about democracy or human rights now than they were when they backed the Ben Ali dictatorship. Their main concern is whether Ennahda will adhere to the policies dictated by US imperialism and other Western powers.

Ramzy Baroud, the editor of PalestineChronicle.com, noted: “To quell fears of Islamic resurgence, leading party members seemed to direct their message to outsiders (the US and Western powers), rather than the Tunisian people themselves.”

He continued: “Jebali, like the party leader Rachid Ghannouchi, understands well the danger of having Ennahda blacklisted by disgruntled Western allies, whose past conduct in the region is predicated on ostracizing any political entity that dared to challenge their interests. The European Union welcomed the results of the elections, but, of course, the subtle line was one of ‘let’s wait and see.’ Ennahda’s own performance is likely to determine its ability to overcome the difficult, albeit implicit probationary period designated by Western allies in these situations.”

Though Ennahda tries to guarantee imperialist powers, he added, “The Western assessment of Tunisia’s future under a Islamists-led government actually has little to do with bikinis or alcohol. The question is entirely political ... Now that Ennahda has won Tunisia’s elections, and the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt is expected to secure substantial gains in Egypt’s first post-revolution elections in November, a debate is raging around the new political map of the region.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact