Protests in Tunisia greet one-year anniversary of Ben Ali's overthrow

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Saturday marked the one-year anniversary of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's ignominious flight from Tunisia to exile in Saudi Arabia. Ben Ali fled after a month of protests that had spread throughout Tunisia following the self-immolation of vegetable vendor Mohammed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, near Gafsa.

Bouazizi's self-immolation on December 17, 2010 and his death on January 4, 2011 struck a chord among broad layers of the working class in Tunisia. Strikes, protests and confrontations between workers and murderous police gangs spread from the depressed mining region around Gafsa—which had seen a bitter strike over joblessness in 2008—to the north and the coast. When the Tunisian army refused to fire on protesters in Tunis, Ben Ali made his departure.

The sudden collapse of the Ben Ali regime, a long-time ally of US and French imperialism, stunned the ruling classes internationally. The initial wave of mass enthusiasm this event provoked internationally led to a cascade of protests in Bahrain, Yemen, Iraq and beyond, culminating in the overthrow of Egyptian dictator President Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011.

The gulf separating the demands and aspirations of the Middle Eastern working class from the results of these struggles so far was tragically symbolized by the recent self-immolation of Ammar Gharsallah, a 42-year old father of three, in Gafsa. After staging a sit-in to protest unemployment outside government offices in Gafsa, he set himself on fire on January 5. He died three days later.

The number of unemployed Tunisians has surged from 600,000 to 850,000. The economy is stagnant, with tourism collapsing and—in one of the clearest indications of the sharpness of class antagonisms in an epoch of globalized capitalism—some 120 international firms in Tunisia responded to strikes and calls for wage increases by simply closing down their operations in the country.

While Tunisia has witnessed repeated waves of strikes and protests over the last year, the social and political problems facing the working class are posed even more sharply than at the beginning of the revolution. In neighboring Libya, the US and NATO have installed a puppet Islamist regime through a war that cost at least 50,000 lives, while Washington and its allies are stoking confrontations with Syria and Iran that threaten a regional or global war. In Tunisia itself, the bourgeois "left" is supporting a right-wing regime based on the Islamist Ennadha party and funded by Persian Gulf sheikhdoms.

Under these conditions, despite overwhelming popular support for the revolution, official celebrations organized by government agencies, companies and associations in cities across the country rang hollow. A march in Tunis gathered delegations of members of the Ennadha party, the Salafist (far-right Islamist) Hizb al-Tahrir, and the Maoist Tunisian Communist Workers Party (PCOT).

One demonstrator in Tunis commented: "When I walked by Bourguiba Avenue and I saw all the flags and posters announcing that this ministry, office or bank was celebrating January 14, I thought of the former regime's festivals celebrating the 'change' [i.e., Ben Ali's coming to power in November 1987]."

Police broke up a protest in Tunis directed against visiting Qatari emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. At another march called for "work and dignity," protesters shouted slogans such as "You hypocrites, a job is a social right," "Tunisians, remain standing" and "We are true to the blood of the martyrs."

In Gafsa, unemployment stands at 24 percent. The Gafsa Phosphate Company (CPG) has slashed its work force from 14,000 to 4,800 over the last 20 years, though the company made over 200 million dinars in profits last year. One unemployed worker in Gafsa told visiting journalists: "Not only the state wants us, Gafsa youth, to deal with illnesses tied to phosphate extraction to get foreign exchange, though the CPG no longer gives everyone a job, but they want us to repay Ben Ali's debts. It's crazy."

The central problem facing the working class in Tunisia is one of political perspective and leadership. The petty-bourgeois "left" organizations are playing a treacherous

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role, backing the alliance between the Islamists and surviving elements of the Ben Ali regime. This includes the Tunisian General Union of Labor (UGTT) bureaucracy, a long-time supporter of the Ben Ali regime that began to call strikes against the regime only in the last few days before Ben Ali fled.

From the beginning, the petty-bourgeois "left" parties were hostile to socialism. Thus, shortly after the fall of Ben Ali, a speaker from Ettajdid (the former Stalinist Tunisian Communist Party) said at a meeting in Paris: "In Tunisia we are not dealing with a proletarian revolution. We cannot demand the nationalization of banks and of industries. But it is a transition for democracy."

In fact, the past year has shown in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere that none of the problems of social inequality, repression and imperialist war can be resolved, nor real democracy created, without an international struggle by the working class to take power and carry out socialist policies. Through their hostility to a socialist perspective, the official "left" has led the masses into a political dead end, paving the way for the Islamist victory in last October's elections—even though the Islamists played no role in the struggles against Ben Ali.

These forces promoted illusions in a Political Reform Commission created in March by former Ben Ali regime officials. It included prominent business leaders, state officials, UGTT bureaucrats and middle-class professionals—subsequently joined by members of "left" parties, such as Ettajdid and the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), supported by the PCOT. The goal of this commission was to organize elections and strangle working class struggles by promoting a fruitless perspective of pressuring the bourgeoisie for democratic change.

After briefly forming a common committee, the PDP, Ettajdid, and allied forces quickly folded this organization into the Political Reform Commission headed by law professor Yadh Ben Achour. Ben Achour's comments to *Le Monde* last April make clear that their concern, in joining his commission, was to prevent the emergence of an alternate center of political power. They feared such a center of power might become the focus of popular opposition, and potentially of demands for the overthrow of the bourgeois state, to which they were totally hostile.

Ben Achour said, "A council to protect the revolution, with political parties and civil society groups, was created and conceived of as a sort of tutor for the government—which could have led to a crisis and parallelism between two power centers, one of them institutional, the other revolutionary. The body over which I preside is the synthesis of these two orientations."

In fact, the reality was that no political party—not the PCOT, PDP or Ettajdid—had any interest in forming a revolutionary center of power and fighting for the overthrow of the post-Ben Ali regime. Among the political parties, there were no revolutionaries to be found. The commission became highly unpopular before the elections, and the voters punished the PDP and Ettajdid for participating in it by denying them any representation in the new legislature.

The *World Socialist Web Site* offered a revolutionary alternative to the bankrupt line of the Tunisian "left" establishment. In a column published shortly after Ben Ali's overthrow (see: "The mass uprising in Tunisia and the perspective of permanent revolution"), the WSWS wrote: "Calls for a so-called "democratic revolution"—advanced in various forms by European pseudo-left groups—are a dead end. They want workers to press the regime to give more influence to official opposition parties and trade unions. However, none of these organizations have sought to mount a struggle against the regime or its right-wing policies. The General Union of Tunisian Labor (UGTT), which supported Ben Ali in the last two presidential elections, officially endorsed his free-market 'reforms.'

"The only viable program for the working class and oppressed masses of Tunisia and the entire Maghreb and Middle East is the program advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International of socialist revolution. Only through the independent struggle of the working class, leading all of the oppressed sections of society against both the native bourgeoisie and imperialism, can democratic and social rights be won and social equality established as the foundation of political life."

The continuing struggles of the working class in Tunisia one year after the overthrow of Ben Ali invest these remarks with even greater political urgency.

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