

# Strikes and protests sweep Tunisia

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On Tuesday, several thousand workers demonstrated in Sidi Bouzid. The city in the impoverished interior of Tunisia is where the vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set fire to himself on December 17, 2010, sparking the uprising against the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

The protest was directly opposed to the interim government led by the Islamist Ennahda (Renaissance) party, an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood that came to power following elections last October.

The Tunisian General Union of Labour (UGTT), the main trade union federation, had called for a general strike. It said that more than 90 percent of workers had joined the strike. Shops and offices in the city centre were closed for the day.

The demonstrators marched to the courthouse, demanding the release of dozens of political activists detained since July following demonstrations that were brutally put down by police firing tear gas and rubber bullets. Some but not all were later released, including 12 of the activists arrested at a protest last week in Sfax, 160 miles south of the capital.

The strikers and their supporters shouted slogans, including, “The people want the fall of the regime!” and “Justice, woe to you, Ennahda has power over you!”

Some protesters smashed the window of a car belonging to an Al Jazeera TV crew because of the Qatari satellite news channel’s championing of Ennahda and Islamism. Qatar heavily funds Ennahda.

The demonstrators also called for an end to the totally inadequate access to water and electricity that is making everyday life an intolerable burden.

Earlier, on Monday evening, National Women’s Day, tens of thousands of Tunisians, mainly women, took to the streets of the capital Tunis and other cities to demand that women’s equality and rights be protected under the constitution being drafted by the Islamist

government.

The demonstrations were by far the largest since the government violently broke up a march last April. Protesters fear that the constitution will downgrade the status of women. They carried banners saying, “Rise up women for your rights to be enshrined in the constitution” and “Ghannouchi [Ennahda’s leader Rachid Ghannouchi] clear off, Tunisian women are strong”.

They demanded that the government remove the proposed Article 27, which defines women as “complementary to men”, from the new national charter, in favour of the existing 1956 law that grants women full equality with men.

The 1956 Code of Personal Status outlawed polygamy, established civil law, and gave women the right to vote, open bank accounts and set up businesses without their husbands’ consent. It was later expanded to include, among other things, the right to work and abortion.

According to a translation by France 24, Article 27 in the new charter affirms that “The state guarantees to protect women’s rights, as they stand, under the principle of man’s complement within the family and man’s partner in developing the country”.

This has been widely interpreted as the first step on the part of the Islamists to roll back women’s position in Tunisia in line with Sharia law.

Demonstrators called for the government to address the economic deprivation in the interior regions and to end unemployment.

The Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, the Tunisian Human Rights League, the Republican Party, the Social and Democratic Path, and the Call for Tunisia party organised another rally at the Congress Palace in Tunis, calling for “effective and unconditional equality in rights and duties between men and women” and warning against “a new regression

and possible backsliding in women's gains”.

Protests to mark National Women's Day on Avenue Bourguiba in the capital were earlier banned by the government, ostensibly over traffic concerns,. Avenue Bourguiba was the focal point of the mass protests that led to the ouster of Ben Ali, the longtime ally of US and French imperialism, in January 2011, sparking mass movements all over the Middle East and North Africa.

Demonstrators also took to the streets of Monastir and Sfax.

The new national charter has engendered such opposition that Habib Kheder, the general rapporteur of the constitutional committee, was forced to concede that it was unlikely to be finalised and ratified by October as planned so that a general election could be held in March. It now seems that the charter will not be ready before February 2013, with ratification in April, making it unclear whether the March elections will now go ahead.

Both the strike in Sidi Bouzid and the women's protests testify to the growing social tensions and the hatred for the Islamist regime. Tunisia has witnessed bitter strikes, countless sit-ins and protests. The government's response has been to threaten dissenters and unleash the full force of the police, particularly against unemployed youth in the most deprived regions in the last few months.

Tunisia is wracked by unemployment. According to official statistics, more than 18 percent of workers—some 750,000—are out of work, with university graduates particularly hard hit. The situation is far worse in the interior or southern governorates, where 28 percent are unemployed. There is huge inequality between the regions. Corruption and smuggling are rampant with a proliferating black market economy. This has led to soaring prices, and general lawlessness, with clan-based violence claiming more than a dozen lives.

As the demonstrators' slogans made clear, the economic and social causes that sparked the uprising 18 months ago are not even being discussed—much less addressed or resolved. Millions went to the polls in October hoping for some relief from their hardships, only to get a government that is entirely hostile to the social, economic and democratic aspirations that animated the revolutionary movement of the working

class.

Ennahda, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, did not take part in the revolutionary movement in December 2010 to February 2011. Backed by the Persian Gulf monarchies, its real aim is to crush the working class on behalf of the financial elite. It covers for the crimes committed against the population by the Tunisian bourgeois state apparatus under Ben Ali, whose regime—despite his ouster—remains intact.

The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt led to the installation of regimes hostile to the revolution, because there was no revolutionary workers' party that fought for the creation of workers' states founded on a socialist policy in the Maghreb and beyond.

The UGTT is a long-time supporter of the Ben Ali regime and had endorsed his free-market reforms, only beginning to call strikes against the regime in the last few days before Ben Ali fled. It has no intention now of advancing the interests of the working class—only in letting off steam.

Ennahda, as with the Muslim Brotherhood, which has served as a front for Egypt's military junta, and the NATO-installed National Transitional Council in Libya, has benefited primarily from the bankruptcy of the petty bourgeois fake left. Through their hostility to a socialist perspective, the official “left” led the masses into a political dead end, epitomised by the support they lent to the Islamists and other bourgeois “opposition movements”.



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