

Islamist thugs attack Tunisian unemployed workers' protest in Sidi Bouzid

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Police stood aside last week as hundreds of Salafist thugs attacked workers and youth in Sidi Bouzid in central Tunisia. The town, whose revolt began the revolution of 2011 that toppled Tunisian dictator President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and launched the “Arab Spring”, has again become a centre of opposition to the right-wing government of the Islamist Ennahda party.

The thugs attacked Sidi Bouzid on the night of August 23-24, wounding at least seven people. Witnesses told AFP that the assailants, radical Islamist militants, came in buses at night and attacked around 15 houses in the Aouled Belhedi district. Fighting continued until dawn. The police did not intervene to stop the clashes, “to avoid aggravating the situation.”

Undeterred, the next day youth mounted a sit-in outside the regional education authority to demand jobs.

AFP reports: “According to residents of the city, the confrontations erupted Monday night when a group of Salafists allegedly attempted to seize a drunken man to punish him for drinking alcohol in violation of Muslim laws. Young men retaliated on Wednesday by beating up three Salafists, thus triggering the overnight clashes.”

It is not an isolated event. On August 16, Islamist thugs armed with sticks and swords attacked a cultural festival in northern Tunisia wounding five people—the third such attack in Tunisia by Salafists in three days, for supposed lack of respect for the holy month of Ramadan.

Right-wing Islamist forces are being brought in as shock troops to attack rising protests and social opposition in the working class, amid deteriorating social and economic conditions.

The economy has been in recession for more than a

year, and the deepening economic crisis in Europe, which takes 75 percent of Tunisia’s exports, is set to worsen it. The unemployment rate is more than 18 percent, 709,000 out of an active workforce of 3.9 million, with much higher rates in the countryside and the impoverished interior, away from the coast.

Since May, there have been citywide general strikes in Tataouine, Monastir, Kasserine and Kairan.

The renewed offensive in the working class has been met with denunciations in the bourgeois press, which is demanding that Tunisian workers function as docile cheap labour like under Ben Ali. The Tunisian business paper *L’Economiste*, while uneasy with the fundamentalist positions of the Ennahda government, blames the youth and workers for having “contributed by their behaviour to the bad economic and social situation.... You can’t justifiably call for development and cause investors to flee by multiplying obstacles to production.”

The paper added another comment that reveals more fully the concerns of the bourgeoisie. It expressed its fears that that workers and youth in “Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Sfax...are trying to extend an unfinished revolution.”

In Sidi Bouzid itself, day workers protesting at a two-month delay in the payment of wages attacked Ennahda party headquarters on July 26. They broke down the door and threw a flaming tyre into Ennahda’s offices. As police fired warning shots and tear gas, the demonstrators shouted, “Ben Ali’s police is back.”

On August 9, police fired rubber bullets and tear gas at a crowd, injuring five who were admitted to hospital. They were calling for the settlement of the workers’ status, the resignation of the regional commander of the National Guard, the resignation of Governor Mohamed Najib Mansouri, and the dissolution of the Constituent

Assembly, in view of its failure to respond to the demands of Sidi Bouzid residents for a guaranteed supply of water, jobs, and economic development.

On August 14, a general strike in Sidi Bouzid demanded the release of protesters detained at demonstrations in previous weeks.

The complicity of police and state officials—including the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), which supported Ben Ali before the revolution—has left the Salafists free to attack the workers.

A UGTT official from Krassine, Mohamed Sghaier Saihi, told the press that, with unemployment at 20 percent, “These people are expressing their anger with roadblocks and unplanned sit-ins day after day.” In the true manner of a UGTT bureaucrat, he lamented this activity that he viewed as a threat to social order: “They are a real threat to social stability, and day after day they cause trouble as they organise sit-ins and block routes and roads.”

Localised UGTT-controlled protests before the revolution sought to let off steam and prevent any independent political challenge to the regime by the working class. They also provided an opportunity for various pseudo-left parties—such as the Maoist Workers Party (PT), formerly the Tunisian Communist Workers Party (PCOT)—to posture as allies of the working class.

They all played a role in preventing the fall of Ben Ali from opening the way for a genuine social revolution and the seizure of power by the working class. They have legitimised the formation of the Ennahda government, which now stands fully exposed as a bitter enemy of the working class.

Fears of the revolutionary movements throughout the Arab world have led US imperialism and its European allies to turn increasingly to Islamist parties to govern, and their more extremist allies as shock troops for violent action. The intervention of Al Qaeda-linked groups against regimes in Libya and Syria targeted for overthrow by Washington has become a significant tool of imperialist policy in the region.

Leading Ennahda MP Sadok Chourou attacked strikers as “enemies of God.” In an interview, he denied that Salafists have been responsible for the violence: “The truth of the matter is that some members of Salafist groups are not actual Salafists. They are remnants of the former regime, who have infiltrated Salafist groups to commit acts against the

government...true Salafists do not espouse the use of violence.”

Chourou is trying to cover up the government’s and police’s complicity in Salafist violence. If there is any truth to his comments, however—and Ben Ali police were involved in organising the attack against the Sidi Bouzid workers—this only underscores the fundamental continuity in the anti-worker policies of Ben Ali and of Ennahda. The working class revolution that began with the toppling of Ben Ali must continue in a struggle against the Ennahda government.



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