

Mass opposition to Tunisian repression of anti-poverty protests

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After four days of police repression of protests against the abandonment of programmes against poverty and unemployment in Siliana, Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki emerged from his silence on Friday. While he called on Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali of the Islamist Ennahda party to form a new government, his government is working closely with the unions and petty-bourgeois “left” parties, threatening to send the army against the protesters.

In his TV statement Friday, Marzouki called for the formation of a government of “technocrats,” admitting that “expectations are very great faced with insufficient results from the government despite the efforts made.” He added, “We don’t just have one Siliana. I fear that this can spread to several regions and this threatens the future of the revolution.”

These events took place only days from the second anniversary of Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Sidi Bouzid on December 18, 2010. This suicide sparked the mass revolt of workers and youth that led to the overthrow of President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali, on January 14, 2011. These protests spread to Egypt and less than a month later, on February 11, forced the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak, another faithful ally of Western imperialism.

Marzouki clearly fears that the current protests could escalate out of control and develop into a renewed revolutionary struggle against his government. On the night of Friday-Saturday, demonstrators protesting in solidarity with Siliana in the nearby cities of Kef and Sbeitla clashed with police. On Saturday, further solidarity demonstrations took place in Tunis, Bazerte and Gabès.

Protests continued over the weekend in Siliana, despite a toll of some 300 wounded by the police, many from buckshot, causing serious eye injuries and a probable loss of sight for several victims. Workers and youth attacked police stations and government buildings in retaliation. Protesters also demanded the liberation of prisoners detained since April 2011.

The Tunisian interior suffers from chronic underdevelopment and has seen rising discontent over the government’s failure to raise living standards. The economy has been in recession for over 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.

On Friday evening, the government sent the army into Siliana, situated 120 kilometers to the south-west of the capital Tunis, to take over from the police. This policy is being worked out in close coordination with the UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union) bureaucracy. UGTT Regional Secretary Néjib Sebti told the press, “An agreement was made between the trade unions and the military officials for the withdrawal of the police and the taking charge of security by the army.”

In its current collaboration with Ennahda to send the army against Siliana, the UGTT is aided by the Maoist PCOT (Communist Party of Tunisian Workers, now renamed the PT, or Workers Party) of Hamma Hammami, which promotes the military as a people’s army.

In fact, the Tunisian military works closely with

Washington, as does the Egyptian army. Total US military assistance to Tunisia since the revolution has been roughly \$32 million, almost double the amount immediately before the revolution. US-origin equipment comprises roughly 70 percent of the Tunisian military's inventory; the police are largely supplied with French equipment.

The UGTT is a long-standing instrument of capitalist rule in Tunisia. It played a key role in maintaining Ben Ali in power for over 20 years, supporting his electoral campaigns and blocking working class opposition to the regime. Last year it channeled mass struggles into the dead end of establishing a new bourgeois constitution, which produced the election of Ennahda. A fixture of the Tunisian state apparatus, it was entirely hostile to the building of a state based on the working class aiming to overthrow the Tunisian bourgeoisie and pursue socialist policies.

The Ennahda government, like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood government of President Mohamed Morsi, works closely with the US and European imperialist powers to stifle and crush revolutionary uprisings in the working class. It supported the NATO war in Libya, thus assisting the imperialist grab for strategic energy and mineral resources of North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia.

UGTT officials now work closely with Ennahda to police the working class. In his press conference on Friday, Prime Minister Hammadi Jebali said that he had met with UGTT General Secretary Hassine Abbassi on the previous day. He stressed, "both sides have clearly expressed their will to develop dialogue and appeasement. The real solutions consist in imagining together plans for development which will meet the expectations of the citizens of Siliana."

In Soliana the UGTT demanded the resignation of Regional Governor Ahmed Ezzine Mahjoubi, and that the government "invite the unions to a dialogue."

On Sunday Mahjoubi indeed stepped down, and the UGTT sought to wind down the protests by calling a "provisional suspension" of strike action.

While its police brutalised the people of Siliana, the Ennahda government was organising a trade fair on November 28-30, promising foreign capital juicy "investment opportunities" and promoting the "industrial competitiveness of Tunisian enterprises."

A meeting between Tunisian and EU officials in Brussels on November 19 established an economic partnership under the "obligation to respect the principles of the free market economy" and "the globalised economy." Such agreements amount quite simply to accepting the diktat of finance capital, particularly the enforcement of poverty wages on Tunisian workers to compete with even worse-paid workers in more impoverished Third World countries.

This policy has broad support in the Tunisian bourgeoisie. On November 29 the Tunisian business paper, *L'Economiste* commented, "We cannot hope to entertain a greater ambition to be part of the world economy and maintain... this protective barrier which atrophies those sectors handicapped by a lack of competitiveness because of excessive protection."

On this basis, on November 27 the World Bank approved a \$500 million loan to Tunisia to finance economic reforms.



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