

Tunisian UGTT union calls one-day national strike

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The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) has called a one-day national strike for December 13, amid rising working class protests against Tunisia's provisional Islamist Ennahda Party government and clashes last Tuesday with Islamist thugs.

The UGTT called the strike to protest an attack on the UGTT central offices in Tunis by thugs of the Islamist Leagues to Protect the Revolution, which wounded 10 people. UGTT General Secretary Hassine Abbassi has also demanded official apologies from Ennahda to the Tunisian people for the attacks on the UGTT's premises.

Ennahda president Rached Ghannouchi replied to the UGTT's strike call with a demand that all party and trade union premises be searched, "to clear out militias and weapons."

The strike call came after five days of mass anti-poverty protests centered in the working class town of Siliana, which were brutally attacked by police. Some 300 protesters were wounded by police firing birdshot.

The UGTT, a long-standing prop of the dictatorship of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who was overthrown last year amid revolutionary working class struggles, called the strike in an attempt to prevent the struggles from escalating into a revolutionary struggle against the government and against capitalism. Its call for a strike referred only to the assault on the UGTT offices and made no reference to the events in Siliana. Besides the one-day national strike, it called a one-day regional strike around Siliana for last Thursday.

The one-day strike call on Thursday, in the region that is the heart of Tunisian industry—Sfax, the country's economic capital; Gafsa, the centre of phosphate production; and in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, the original centers where the revolution broke out last year—was massively supported. Virtually all public and private sector workplaces were shut down, and tens of thousands of workers demonstrated.

Slogans included: "Buck shot won't scare Tunisians", "Resign government in league with foreigners", "Government of colonialism, you've sold Tunisia".

The limited strike call for Thursday and the timing of the national strike were chosen to slow the tempo of the protests and prevent them from escalating into an uncontrollable revolt of the entire working class.

To this end, the UGTT "provisionally" called off one-day strikes in the Siliana region last Sunday, as workers throughout Tunisia began demonstrating in solidarity with Siliana. Hundreds of inhabitants of Siliana also held a sit-down strike at the UGTT offices in Siliana.

Tunisie.tn reported that, when regional UGTT boss Ahmed Cheffai announced the end of the strike pending the implementation of a common agreement between the government and the union, "protesters condemned the negotiations of the two sides 'as political horse trading', accusing the trade union side of having given way to the government".

In this the UGTT is acting for the entire Tunisian bourgeoisie, which fears renewed revolutionary struggles. On Friday, November 30, Tunisian President

Moncef Marzouki stated: “We don’t just have one Siliana. I fear that this can spread to several regions, and this threatens the future of the revolution”.

The arch-reactionary Salafist leader Bechir Ben Hassen declared the strike “a sin”, claiming he would organise million-strong marches to “protect the revolution”. Referring to the escalating mass protests in Egypt against Islamist President Mohamed Mursi, he added, “It is wrong to copy the Egyptians before seeing where what they are doing is going to lead”.

The UGTT claims 500,000 members, has offices throughout the country and purports to be the main representative of the Tunisian working class. However, throughout the 22 years of Ben Ali’s corrupt rule, which maintained the mass of the workers and peasants in great poverty, the UGTT has prospered and consistently supported Ben Ali’s presidential campaigns in Tunisia’s sham elections. The UGTT never called a national strike but served to maintain Ben Ali in power, only calling a 2-hour strike when the dictator was on the verge of fleeing on January 14, 2011.

While masquerading as defenders of the working class, the UGTT and the entire Tunisian petty-bourgeois “left” advances political conceptions designed to block a revolutionary struggle of the working class aiming at the seizure of power by the working class and an international struggle for socialism. It makes no reference to the rising working class struggles in Egypt, where the working class is fighting the attempt of Islamist President Mohamed Mursi to establish a dictatorship.

It argues that Ennahda, a pro-imperialist and Islamist party, can be pressured to defend democratic rights and advance the social interests of the working class. Abbassi has been in continual negotiations with the Tunisian government as protests mounted over the unmet social and democratic aspirations of the working class.

The UGTT’s main concern is to maintain the unity of all Tunisia’s political parties. It convened a Congress of National Dialogue in mid-October, which all Tunisia’s main political parties attended except

Ennahda, which boycotted it. The UGTT continues to call for “a national dialogue”.

Its main political ally, which serves as its “left” cover, is the Maoist Workers Party (PT, formerly the Communist Party of Tunisian Workers, PCOT) led by Hama Hammami.

When President Marzouki called for a restricted technocratic government in response to the political crisis provoked by outrage against the police brutality in Siliana, the PT immediately responded positively.

In a statement last Monday, Hama Hammami appealed for the constitution of “a crisis government, limited, made up of national experts and working on the lines of a clear programme of action”. He stressed the willingness of the Popular Front—a coalition of bourgeois nationalist and pro-capitalist parties, which he heads—to participate in it, “as soon as a programme of action has been agreed”.

In this the PT resembles the petty-bourgeois Left Party in France, Die Linke in Germany and SYRIZA in Greece, all of which seek government office in order to prevent social revolution and maintain capitalist rule.



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