

Tunisian UGTT union calls off one-day national strike against Islamists

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On December 12 the General Union of Tunisian Labor (UGTT) called off a one-day national strike called for the next day against the beating and assault of UGTT members by thugs of the Islamist Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution (LPR).

The LPR are supported by the ruling Islamist Ennadha party of Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali. Jebali formed a government last December—after mass protests in the Tunisian working class toppled US-backed dictator President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011—and has worked closely with European and American officials, pursuing free-market policies.

The December 13 national strike was to be the high point of the UGTT's intervention after the outbreak of mass anti-poverty protests on November 27 in the town of Siliana. Police brutally repressed the protests, wounding 300. On December 2, the UGTT called off protests in Siliana as they became the focus of nationwide protests against the government. The UGTT claimed that it had negotiated an agreement with the government to satisfy their demands.

After a December 4 attack by LPR thugs on UGTT premises and members, the UGTT moved rapidly to focus attention on this event. It called a one-day strike for December 6 in four regions, including Sidi Bouzid, which was massively followed. It also called a national one-day strike for December 13.

On December 12, however, the UGTT suddenly signed an agreement with the Ennadha government to cancel the strike. The agreement stressed the UGTT's and Ennadha's common "attachment to calm," created a joint UGTT-government commission to investigate the December 4 attack and pledged to expeditiously try anyone the commission found to be implicated in the assault.

The UGTT's National Administrative Commission simultaneously issued a craven pledge of its loyalty to the right-wing Islamist government. It wrote that the UGTT had cancelled the strike "based on its intense spirit of responsibility, its great conviction of the necessity to arrive at solutions negotiated on the basis of the responsibility of the Government, and its responsibility to respect negotiated accords and apply the law to preserve the superior interests of the Nation."

Some members outside the UGTT offices in Tunis were furious when they heard that the strike was called off. The Tunisie Libre blog reported that "the people most resentful, often the younger ones, exploded in anger: 'See the treachery!,' '[UGTT general secretary] Hassine Abassi has sold the union out.'... An old wood varnisher wept openly: 'I've been in the union since 1970. I lived through the repression in 1978 and in 1984, but this is too hard to bear'."

Workers Party (PT) leader Hamma Hammami, a leading petty-bourgeois "left" politician in Tunisia, tacitly backed the UGTT's decision, commenting: "The coming days will prove whether this decision [i.e., to cancel the strike] was good, or not."

While Prime Minister Jebali praised the UGTT climb-down as a "victory for Tunisia," UGTT General Secretary Hassine Abassi justified it as follows: "The difficult situation facing the country, the climate of tension, security problems, and the threats on our borders are all factors which pushed the UGTT to put the interests of the people first."

Abassi's comments underscore the reactionary character of the entire political establishment that emerged from the toppling of Ben Ali last year. The UGTT is committed to defending the "calm" of the Ennadha regime—that is, to disorienting and suppressing opposition in the working class to the Islamists who

replaced Ben Ali at the head of the Tunisian bourgeois state. What unites these forces is the fear of a renewed revolutionary upsurge and deep opposition in the UGTT bureaucracy and the petty-bourgeois “left” to a seizure of power by the working class.

Absent a revolutionary seizure of power by the working class and the building of a workers state, however, power remains in the hands of reactionary pro-capitalist politicians and the UGTT, a long-standing tool of Tunisian capitalism and of its corrupt relations with imperialism.

The December 13 strike would have been the first national strike called by the UGTT since 1978. Under the 22-year dictatorship of Ben Ali, the union servilely supported his free-market policies and his re-election in 2004 and 2009. It called no national strike during the revolution in 2011. Only on the very day that Ben Ali fled did the UGTT belatedly call a two-hour work stoppage, in a cynical attempt to avoid being totally discredited in the eyes of the working class in revolt.

The UGTT’s decision to call off the strike was applauded in the bourgeois press, which made clear it was terrified that it could provoke renewed mass struggles. Before the national strike was called off, *L’Economiste* warned that a general strike would create “fear of investing” in Tunisia. It said: “A general strike, should it be confirmed, will leave deep scars and will provoke an enormous trauma, both social and political as well as economic. ... It is not capitulation for the UGTT to abandon it: it is only affirming its sense of responsibility.”

Afterwards, *La Presse* praised the cancellation of the strike, referring to the Sacred Union called between the unions, social-democratic parties, and the government to suppress working class opposition in France during World War I, when Tunisia was a French colony. *La Presse* wrote, “Cancelling the general strike to create a Sacred Union honors the UGTT. ... The superior interest of the country demands that one get beyond a partisan mindset.”

The UGTT called off the strike despite the deep, continuing opposition in the working class to the Islamist government that rules over the remains of the Ben Ali regime. This was made clear on December 17, when government officials tried to address the commemoration of the second anniversary of the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, which launched the

mass uprising against Ben Ali.

Despite the presence of a Salafist contingent of government supporters and a heavy police guard, Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki and the speaker of the parliament, Ennahda deputy Mustapha Ben Jaafar, were driven from their platform by 5,000 protesters. Hurling stones and tomatoes, and chanting “*Dégage !*” (Get out!) and “We want the downfall of the government!” the people of Sidi Bouzid forced them to retreat under police guard into the governor’s building.



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