

Mass protests against unemployment erupt across Tunisia

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Five years after the self-immolation of graduate and vegetable seller Mohamed Bouazizi triggered mass protests against unemployment that escalated into revolutionary struggles that brought down Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, mass protests against unemployment by workers and students have again erupted across Tunisia.

After the death at a protest last Saturday of Ridha Yahyaoui, a young man seeking a teaching job in the city of Kasserine in southern Tunisia, protests spread across southern and western Tunisia, to the capital, Tunis, and, by Thursday, across the entire country. A policeman died when his vehicle overturned, and unspecified numbers of protesters were hurt Thursday during clashes in Kasserine, where Tunisian security forces killed dozens of protesters during the 2011 uprising.

"I have been out of work for 13 years, and I am a qualified technician. We are not looking for handouts, just our right to work," electrician Mohamed Mдини told Reuters at a protest in Kasserine.

After a rally by unemployed university graduates on Thursday in Tunis, calling for jobs and the fall of the Tunisian regime, the state declared an 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew yesterday across all of Tunisia. The Tunisian interior ministry warned that protests were causing "damage to public and private property." It threatened to prosecute anyone who defied the curfew, though protesters in Kasserine have already defied a local curfew declared in their region earlier in the week.

The eruption of mass protests in Tunisia shows that none of the grievances that drove the working class into revolutionary struggle five years ago against first the Ben Ali dictatorship in Tunisia, then the Mubarak dictatorship in Egypt, have been resolved. The United States and the major European powers spent billions of dollars on wars that devastated the region, from Libya to Mali. At the same time, the NATO powers and the Tunisian capitalist

class have failed to meet fundamental social needs of working people or to respect basic democratic rights.

After an interlude where the Islamist Ennahda party held power, Ben Ali's party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), freshly renamed Nidaa Tounes, returned to power in 2014, with support from Tunisia's corrupt union bureaucracy and middle class "left" groups.

Protests began a week ago, when Ridha Yahyaoui died, electrocuted after climbing on a pole to address a rally of unemployed workers whom the Education Ministry had turned away for jobs. Yahyaoui was one of seven unemployed graduates who were denied employment after organising a sit-in last year and meeting with local authorities to present demands at the beginning of this year.

Salem Ayari, the secretary-general of the Union of Unemployed Graduates, told the Huffington Post-Maghreb that Yahyaoui "had recently discovered that his name had been pulled from the list of files to be handed to the prime minister to regularise their situation. ... The list was modified and manipulated without consultation with the mayor or the deputy who were taking care of the matter."

Yahyaoui's tragic death, like that of Bouazizi, triggered protests across the depressed industrial and mining heartlands of southern Tunisia where Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid are located.

Construction workers and day laborers in Béja joined the protests, demanding papers and regular working conditions, and protesters marched, blocked roads and tried to occupy municipal buildings in cities across southern and central Tunisia, including Meknassi and Sousse. When the government tried to end the movement on Wednesday by offering concessions to Kasserine and promising to create a few thousand jobs, workers in other cities across Tunisia joined the movement. Sidi Bouzid, Béja, Kébili, Meknassi, Mazouna, Gabès, Sfax, and

Sousse were all hit by protests.

Several government buildings, including in Jendouba and Tozeur, were occupied by students and unemployed workers demanding jobs. Protests also hit working class districts of Tunis, where protesters reportedly blocked roads and set a police station aflame.

President Béji Caïd Essebsi, a former Ben Ali regime official, spoke to the Tunisian people in a televised address last night, as the government became alarmed over the spread of protests at the end of the week. Briefly posturing as sympathetic to the masses, admitting that “the unemployed cannot wait forever,” Essebsi attacked unidentified people active in the protests for “having helped fan the flames and ordered acts of sabotage and pillage.”

Essebsi cynically said he would create jobs without spending any extra money, saying he felt sure the state “can find the necessary funds, at need by taking them away from other projects.” He pledged, however, that whatever his government did, it would respect “all its engagements, financial and otherwise, to its foreign partners,” that is, the major banks and governments in the imperialist countries in Europe and America.

Essebsi’s rhetorical promises notwithstanding, the last five years have shown conclusively that the working masses’ demands for basic social and democratic rights are incompatible with capitalist rule in North Africa, and in particular the escalating military interventions of the imperialist powers. Tunisia has been starved of investment and jobs, and hit by bloodshed spreading from neighboring Libya after NATO and its Islamist allies toppled Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in a bloody war.

In Tunisia, unemployment is over 15 percent (including over a third of the youth), the informal economy is equivalent to 54 percent of gross domestic product, and purchasing power has fallen 40 percent since the beginning of the revolution, *Tuniscopes* reported.

Above all, the five years since Ben Ali’s collapse have illustrated that no social protest, however powerful, can produce a victory for the working class without having at its head a revolutionary party. The uprisings of 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt were powerful revolutionary struggles mobilising masses of workers that rapidly smashed the resistance of security forces of feared dictatorships that had previously seemed invincible.

In the absence of a revolutionary party fighting to lead the working class in Tunisia, Egypt, and beyond to seize state power and create a socialist society, however, both

regimes ultimately were able to stabilise themselves. After power briefly shifted into the hands of the Islamists, figures in the entourage of the former autocrats—Essebsi in Tunisia, and General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt—ultimately succeeded in returning to power with the backing of various petty-bourgeois “left” organisations.

The bourgeoisie internationally is quite conscious of the role played by these forces and has rewarded them handsomely. The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) and the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) shared the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize with various business and professional groups. The Nobel committee hailed their “decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia.”

As the Tunisian protests are now showing, the UGTT and LTDH did not build a democracy, but a new façade for the return of the old dictatorship, built on intense economic oppression and the suppression of mass opposition in the working class. Their democratic pretensions notwithstanding, they are now trying to strangle the protests and help justify police repression by spreading lurid tales that the protests are infiltrated by terrorists from Libya.

The UGTT, a pillar of the Ben Ali regime, issued a statement that briefly called demonstrators’ demands “legitimate,” then proposed deploying UGTT members around state buildings to protect them from protesters. In a statement, it said it “denounces the looting and theft committed by criminal gangs that try to manipulate social protest ... and appeals for a general mobilisation of its members to protect the facilities of public and private institutions.”

Hamma Hammami, the leader of the Workers party that is a key element of the Popular Front, a middle class “left” grouping that allied with Nidaa Tounes before the 2014 elections, is also making clear that his party again wants to block a revolution in Tunisia. Speaking to Mosaïque FM, he said that while Popular Front members “admittedly join the protests,” this is “with the objective of giving structure to them, so that they preserve a pacific character and are nothing else.”



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