

France gives €1 billion aid to Tunisia in bid to halt mass protests over jobs

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After last week's mass protests against unemployment and poverty throughout Tunisia, the French government has announced €1 billion aid over the next five years to its former colony.

President François Hollande's Socialist Party government, which is imposing tens of billions of euros in social cuts against workers at home, did not take this measure to address the basic social needs of Tunisian workers and unemployed. Rather, it feared that—as in 2011, when the uprising in Tunisia sparked revolution in Egypt—this was the only way to prevent an uncontrollable social explosion internationally.

Last week, Tunisia saw a wave of mass protests over unemployment, which broke out in Kasserine province after a youth, Ridha Yahyaoui, was electrocuted on January 16. He was protesting the removal of his name from the list of people to be recruited by a local education committee. Protests erupted and rapidly spread across the country as the workers and unemployed joined the movement demanding jobs.

The Tunisian government has sent army and riot police against protesters, firing tear gas and water cannon as the unemployed gathered outside government offices to demand jobs. On Saturday, the interior ministry announced that 423 people had been arrested across the country for alleged acts of violence. The government also slandered the protests as the work of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terror group in nearby Libya.

The mass protests underscored that none of the issues driving the revolutionary uprisings of 2011 have been solved. Imperialism avoided the coming to power of the working class, working with the Tunisian bourgeoisie, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), and various pseudo-left parties, which insisted that the uprising

should end so they could set up “democracy.” The ruling party, Nidaa Tounes, is a thinly disguised rebranding of Ben Ali's old party.

As the Tunisian government deployed armed forces and imposed a curfew to clamp down on protests on Friday, Hollande and other French officials met with Tunisian Prime Minister Habib Essid in Paris.

After meeting with Essid, Hollande announced, “France will set up a plan to support Tunisia with one billion euros over the next five years. ... A major axis of this plan aims to assist underprivileged regions and youth, with an emphasis on jobs.”

An Elysée Presidential Palace statement declared, “Five years after the revolution, Tunisia has succeeded in its democratic transition but still faces important economic, social, and security challenges.” It insisted that the regime in Tunis can count on “France's support.”

France has broad economic ties with Tunisia. In particular, French and European transnationals seek to use high unemployment to exploit workers in France's former colonies at rock-bottom wages, effectively using the Tunisian capitalist class and union bureaucracy as cheap-labour contractors.

During his visit, Essid spoke to Prime Minister Manuel Valls and French Senate President Gérard Larcher, as well as with representatives of the French employers' organisation, the Movement of the French Enterprises (Medef), to examine how to boost French investment in Tunisia.

Essid and Valls signed an agreement to convert a part of Tunisia's debt to France in investment. Larcher announced that the Senate would also seek to boost investment in Tunisia in the coming period. He said, “Essid informed me of Tunisia's strategy aimed to develop several economic sectors, such as auto, which

will help create jobs for youths.”

What is emerging is not prosperity for Tunisia, however, but a vast expansion of imperialist influence in the former French colony. While seeking to extract more profits from Tunisia, the imperialist powers are also developing their military influence there under cover of the “war on terror.”

According to the Elysée statement, “Tunisia, like France, is threatened and has been grievously hit by terrorism, because it chose democracy. Our two countries confront the same threat, and it is together that we must win the struggle against this scourge, respecting the rule of law.”

The Elysée’s talk of “democracy” and the respect of “rule of law” reek of hypocrisy. Indeed, the most important recent development is that the French government is moving to treat metropolitan France in ways it had previously reserved for its colonies.

After the November 13 terror attack in Paris, the Hollande administration has placed France in a state of emergency—under legislation created and first used during the failed attempt to crush the Algerian independence struggle—and plans to extend it indefinitely. This amounts to a repudiation of the rule of law, scrapping basic democratic rights, banning protests, controlling the press, and giving police broad extrajudicial powers to detain people without charge.

The common fear of the Tunisian proletariat and of social anger in the working class in Europe and America, particularly in French urban estates with large North African immigrant populations, is prompting a joint political response of the capitalist classes.

Already, during the initial uprising in Tunisia in 2011, then-French Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie proposed to reinforce the Ben Ali dictatorship with French riot police units.

Now, during a visit to Tunis in October, French Defence minister Jean-Yves Le Drian signalled a broad escalation of Franco-Tunisian ties. Declaring that “Tunisia’s security is also that of France,” Le Drian announced that France would provide €20 million in military aid to Tunisia in the 2016-2017 period. This is a quadrupling of French military spending in Tunisia from its current level of €2.5 million per year.

Washington is also more than doubling its military aid to Tunisia, from \$40 million a year to \$99 million, largely spent on equipment, whereas the French

concentrate on training.

These measures underscore growing concern among imperialist powers over the intensification of social opposition in the working class.

The imperialist powers and their Tunisian bourgeois allies have proven incapable of resolving any of the basic social and democratic questions that led to the 2011 uprising. Since the 2011 uprising, unemployment has increased from 12 to 15 percent among adults, whereas among youth the figure is 32 percent, rising to 40 percent in rural areas. These problems will intensify as Tunisia’s economy is set to contract amidst the worsening global slump.



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