

Protests spread across Morocco after general strike called in Rif region

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Tens of thousands of people marched yesterday in Rabat, the capital of Morocco, in solidarity with strikes and clashes in the Rif region that have led to protests in cities across the country. The protesters are demanding the freeing of members of Hirak Rif, the movement protesting the killing last year of fisherman Mouhcine Fikri by the security forces. Its leaders have been targeted for mass round-ups by the police.

The protestors in Rabat were so numerous that, though tightly packed, they spread for over a kilometer. Protesters, among which were trade union bureaucrats as well as various opposition political parties, denounced not only the repression but also the deep social inequality of Morocco's monarchic regime. They shouted slogans including "Free the prisoners" and "Liberty, dignity and social justice."

The latest protest is the outcome of several months of demonstrations concentrated in the cities and towns around Al Hoceïma, in Morocco's mountainous north, a region known as the Rif. Protests have spread at various times across the country in opposition to the brutality of the monarchy and also to advance social demands, including for more hospitals and jobs.

Fikri died last November during a confrontation with police and state officials who wanted to confiscate a load of swordfish he had caught. He tried to negotiate for several hours to prevent the destruction of the fish, but ultimately the police ordered the confiscation and destruction of the fish in the compactor of a garbage truck. Fikri and his friends went into the garbage truck to try to get back his merchandise, but police coldly gave the order to turn on the compactor, and Fikri was killed, crushed in the truck.

Tens of thousands of people marched in protest in Al Hoceïma and in the principal cities of Morocco, including Casablanca, Rabat, Fes, Marrakech, and

Agadir on the occasion of his funeral. His death has repeatedly been compared to the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, the young street merchant who immolated himself to protest the confiscation of his fruits and vegetables by police in Tunisia in 2010. This was the catalyst for the mass revolutionary uprisings of workers that toppled Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in 2011.

The Rif is one of Morocco's poorest regions, and historically a center of opposition to French and Spanish colonization of the country. It has been heavily monitored by the army since the 1958 insurrection against the closure of the border with neighboring Algeria during that country's war for independence against France. The Rif uprising was crushed by 30,000 men led by crown prince Moulay Hassan, the future King Mohammed V, leading to the lasting isolation of the Rif. Al-Hoceïma was also a center of the 1984 bread riots.

Pierre Vermeren, a researcher who studies Morocco at the University of Paris, warned in *Libération*: "Any incident (death of a protester, police violence) can escalate the situation. The monarchy has always watched the Rif region extremely closely. The province is hyper-militarized. For the time being, the protests are mainly located in Al Hoceïma, which is essentially a small provincial city, but if it were to spread to the larger cities in the North, like Nador, which is three times larger and poorly controlled by police, the authorities would start panicking."

The arrest last month on charges of "threatening internal security" of the main leader of the Hirak Rif, Nasser Zefzafi, as well as forty other members, provoked broad anger in the population. Najib Ahmajik, the organization's second-in-command, launched an appeal for a general strike on social media.

Nearly 2,000 people responded rapidly, marching with a banner inscribed with a picture of Zefzafi to demand the liberation of the prisoners.

Virtually all of the shops in the Al Hoceïma's downtown observed a general strike call to demand the liberation of the Hirak Rif leaders. For at least a week, protesters have been regularly gathering in the Sidi Abed neighborhood, close to the center of the city.

Sit-ins and solidarity protests have been organized across the country, several of which were violently dispersed by police, including in Rabat, Casablanca, and Meknès. In Nador, according to press reports, the authorities arrested a journalist working for Algeria's *El Watan* newspaper. After night-time clashes with police on the week-end the protesters were arrested, protests have continued without violence.

Demonstrations have also spread to Europe, including France, Belgium and the Netherlands, where people of Moroccan origins have gathered to protest in front of Moroccan consulates to show their solidarity.

The explosive class conflicts in North Africa and its revolutionary implications are once again coming to the fore. The revolutionary struggles of the working class in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011 are well remembered by millions of people, and the Moroccan monarchy is desperately trying to control the situation and limit the eruption of popular anger.

The coming to power of representatives of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia under the presidency of Caïd Essebsi and the bloody coup of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt have resolved none of the problems which drove the working class to revolutionary struggles six years ago.

The enormous fragility of the Moroccan monarchy and of the Tunisian regime under Essebsi—which could emerge only due to the lack of revolutionary leadership, and the counter-revolutionary role of the trade union bureaucracy, a pillar of the old Ben Ali regime, and of the parties of the Popular Front in Tunisia—is again exposed by the mobilization of the masses.

The protests in Morocco are developing in parallel with a protest movement in Tunisia that began in March in the region of Tataouine, in the south of the country, from which the revolutionary struggles started six years ago.

The situation there has been extremely tense since May: violent clashes have taken place, pitting the

national guard and the army against the Tunisian masses, who are demanding an oil subsidy in order to make it to the end of the month. Solidarity protests have taken place in other cities in the country, including Tunis.



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