

Protests erupt in Morocco after two die working in abandoned mine

Alex Lantier**30 December 2017**

A general strike brought the eastern Moroccan city of Jerada to a standstill yesterday after two men died in an accident in an abandoned coal mine there. Houcine and Jedouane Daioui, aged 30 and 23, were two of thousands of unemployed workers in Jerada who are forced by poverty and the lack of jobs to risk their lives every day, independently mining coal in unsafe conditions for a pittance. Both were married; Houcine leaves behind two children and Jedouane one.

In 2011, protests erupted in the former phosphate mining basin of southern Tunisia that ultimately led to revolutionary struggles that brought down President Zine El Abidine Bin Ali. Six years later, the ruling elite in North Africa and its imperialist allies in America and Europe have proved unable to resolve any of the problems that provoked the Tunisian uprising and the subsequent revolutionary mobilization of the working class in Egypt.

Houcine, Jedaouine and their surviving brother Abderrazak, age 22, all went on December 22 to gather coal to sell to local traders. Abderrazak, who was with his two brothers when they were killed, recounted the story of their deaths.

"We went down to 85 meters underground," he told AFP. "Houcine and Jedouane were just under me. One of them was digging horizontally and hit a well of water. We were totally flooded. I held on very tight to the rope and I managed to come back up to the surface." Tragically, his two brothers did not.

Abderrazak added that after the deaths of his two brothers, he will be alone in facing the financial burden of supporting his 80-year-old father, a former miner, together with his six brothers, his wife and his daughter. Abderrazak said that poverty and the lack of jobs and a future in Jerada, which force thousands to scrounge for coal in abandoned mines, were to blame

for the deaths of his two brothers.

"There is no alternative, there is no work. That is why I risk my life. I earn between 100 and 150 dirhams [US\$10.70-13.90] per day." He added that he had been going down into abandoned mines to look for coal "for three or four years."

During the deregulation of Moroccan electricity markets in the 1990s, authorities shut down the Jerada coal mine, the economic lifeline of the town, employing 9,000 of its 60,000 inhabitants. Jerada's population has since fallen to 43,000, as thousands left to find work elsewhere. Moroccan authorities claimed that the mine was too expensive to operate. Effectively, they washed their hands of any attempt to ensure workers' safety in the mine, which continued to operate unofficially, at prices set by private traders linked to multinational energy firms operating in the area.

"So the money from coal goes into the pockets of foreign corporations, leaving the youth to risk their lives in unofficial mines," one inhabitant of Jerada told Morocco's *La Dépêche*. These corporations include French firms GDF-Suez and Lafarge, JLEC, the electricity operator of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates whose Moroccan operations are linked to France's Société Générale bank, and several Chinese firms including Sepco III.

The unofficial mines in Jerada are known as the "mines of death," because of the steady flow of preventable accidents that kill those forced to work there. "Fatal accidents are frequent," Abderrazak said, adding that he has now seen his "uncle and two young men of the family die."

After the accident, Moroccan authorities acted with unconcealed contempt for the working population of Jerada. Civil protection units who arrived on the scene refused to help find the bodies, saying that the mine is

too dangerous and that they refused even to enter it.

Jerada residents had to organize the search for the bodies inside the mine themselves. Once they found them, they demanded that the authorities guarantee pensions for the wives and children of Houcine and Jedouane before the burial of the two men. This demand was refused.

Instead, the authorities tried to secretly bury the two bodies on the night of December 23, without notifying the Daioui family. “Someone from the neighborhood alerted the family after seeing that two graves were being dug in the cemetery, right across from the morgue,” said Ahmed Bousmaha, of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH).

On December 24, most of the town mobilized in a protest march attended by tens of thousands of people. Protesters shouted slogans not only over the miners’ deaths, but unaffordable prices for electricity and water that have led authorities to carry out a wave of utility shut-offs in the region, and demanding jobs and industrial development in the region.

That night, heavily reinforced police detachments assaulted youth who were guarding the Jerada cemetery against any new attempt by authorities to illicitly bury the two Dairoui brothers.

The Moroccan central government has turned a cold shoulder to protesters’ demands. Asked about Jerada on December 25, Prime Minister Saâd Eddine El Othmani said that a judicial investigation was underway and that he refused to comment until it had produced a ruling. He added that he would “meet with parliamentarians of the Eastern region to discuss this tragedy that cost the lives of some of our citizens.”

Energy and Mines Minister Aziz Rebbah raised hopes of building a coal-fired power station near Jerada that could employ 500 people; in partnership with China’s Qingdao Huafengweiye Electric Power Technology Engineering Co. This would only be a drop in the bucket, however: official statistics in Morocco show that in rural areas, fully half the population 15 years or older who have previously worked are now unemployed.

The tragedy in Jerada underscores the bankrupt and criminal character not only of Morocco’s monarchy, a long-time stooge of the imperialist powers, but of the entire international capitalist order. The combined efforts of European, Chinese, and Arab capital are

incapable of providing decent jobs to North African workers. They are rather left to rot in unemployment or perish in unregulated workplaces like Jerada’s “mines of death.”

The central lesson of these events, as of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings of 2011, is that the only way forward is an international revolutionary struggle of the working class that consciously sets out to expropriate the capitalist class, take state power, and run economic life on the basis of social need. In this, the construction of an international revolutionary leadership in the working class is the main strategic question. Without this, the old Ben Ali regime and the Egyptian military regime were able to take back power and help impose redoubled exploitation on the region’s workers.

With none of the issues that provoked the Tunisian uprising resolved, however, class tensions across the Maghreb have reached explosive levels. Last year, mass protests against unemployment exploded again in Tunisia.

Moroccan authorities are already facing recurring waves of protests in the nearby Rif region, after police crushed fish salesman Mouhcine Fikri to death last year in the compactor of a garbage truck, where they had dumped a catch of swordfish they claimed he had illegally purchased. Protests over the police murder of Fikri spread to the country’s major cities including Casablanca, Rabat, Agadir, and Marrakesh. Now, protests are set to continue in Jerada and the surrounding region.



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