

Protests erupt in Tunisia after self-immolation of journalist Abderrazak Zorgui

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Workers and youth have clashed with police for three days in cities across Tunisia following the self-immolation of journalist Abderrazak Zorgui. The 32-year-old cameraman burned himself to death in his hometown of Kasserine after posting a video on social media calling for an uprising and saying he hoped his act would help start a new revolution.

His suicide came eight years after revolutionary uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt triggered by the December 2010 self-immolation of Tunisian vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi. Absent a revolutionary leadership capable of leading the working class to take power, the old Tunisian regime was able to restabilize itself and impose the financial diktat of the European and American banks. Tunisia's current president, Beji Caïd Essebsi, served under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the dictator toppled by the working class on 14 January 2011.

In his video, Zorgui denounced the Tunisian regime and the "war on terror," saying, "To all unemployed youth of Kasserine, hungry and without resources: When we protest, they throw terrorism back at us. We go into the street to demand the right to work and they go on about terrorism, which means 'shut up and go home to starve.' I tell the people and the unemployed of Kasserine, today I will make a revolution alone. Those who want to join me are welcome. If someone finds a job afterwards, my self-immolation will not be in vain."

He added, "We are sick and tired, they have been giving us promises for eight years and these are just lies. For my part, I belong to no party. They forget the unemployed and speak for the wealthy, while the unemployed and entire regions do not have a cent."

Since Zorgui's self-immolation, protests have erupted every night in Kasserine as well as in Jbeniana,

Tebourba and working class districts of the capital, Tunis. Youth in Kasserine burned tires and responded to volleys of tear gas from riot police with stones.

With unemployment nationally at 15.5 percent, and double that around Kasserine, while inflation is running at 7.5 percent and the Tunisian dinar collapsing, anger is mounting among workers. Nebil Gassoumi, a schoolteacher in Kasserine who joined the protests, told *France Info*: "Nothing is going well here. The dinar is low and so our living standards are low, even for those who have work. Everyone here is suffering." He added, "There is no investment, there are no jobs for job seekers." Gassoumi said he hoped the protests would continue.

Also this week, protests erupted against the murder of Falikou Coulibaly, the president of the Association of Ivoirians in Tunisia. This led to an outpouring of criticism by sub-Saharan African workers and students of working conditions and racist behavior in Tunisia. "Why do you suppress us? You strangle us sub-Saharanans. To be honest, you are mean. Morally and psychologically, we feel terrible," a worker, Alexandre Diaoré, said of Tunisia on RFI.

"It is quite fashionable for a certain bourgeois layer to go shop at Carrefour, the retail outlet in the north suburbs, with two black maids," AFP reports. At the same time, it notes, "Young maids from the Ivory Coast or nearby countries work seven days per week, paid little and with their passports confiscated." The wire service also noted complaints of "a Senegalese student who was asked whether he sleeps in the trees and feeds himself with bananas."

The Tunisian government is responding to the growing protests with police violence and high-level plans for a crackdown. In Kasserine's Ennour and Ezzouhour districts, police arrested 16 people in house-

to-house searches, charging them with rioting. Five stand accused of destroying surveillance cameras installed by the Tunisian Interior Ministry.

Yesterday, the Tunisian Council of Ministers met. While it affirmed the “need to respect the right to protest peacefully,” it acted to integrate all internal security operations under the president’s control. The Defense and Interior ministries are coordinating army and police operations during protests to commemorate Ben Ali’s overthrow, and in media and police circles a concerted, hysterical campaign is underway to threaten protesters or slander them as terrorists and criminals.

In a *La Presse* editorial titled “Beware excesses and the unknown,” Abdelkrim Dermech wrote:

“Those who make parallels between the spark lit by Bouazizi on 17 December 2010 and that of Abderrazak Zorgui on Monday in Kasserine forget for whatever reason that such a comparison can no longer be made. While there is a real divorce between the current political establishment and youth in the so-called less-favored regions, violence, senseless aggression and damage to public or private property can no longer be accepted, tolerated or seen as democratic.”

On Thursday, the Council of Ministers absurdly declared that the circumstances of Zorgui’s death were “obscure,” and police gave an initial report on interrogations of detained protesters. The web site *Kapitalis* endorsed the police findings as follows: “Extremists, including adolescents arrested on December 25 and 26, 2018, affirmed during their interrogation that they had been paid off by smugglers to infiltrate the demonstrators and attack police and National Guard stations with stones and Molotov cocktails.”

Insofar as Tunisian security authorities are still investigating themselves on charges of torture and other crimes they committed under Ben Ali, these “confessions”—which read as if they were scripted by Essebsi’s Council of Ministers—have no credibility whatsoever.

Eight years after the fall of Ben Ali in the first revolutionary uprising of the working class in the 21st century, none of the demands that drove workers into struggle have been resolved. Capitalism is economically and socially bankrupt. As for Tunisia’s democratic reforms, they were just a facelift for the old regime and the old police state, which now proceeds

under the threadbare cover of the “war on terror.”

This vindicates the perspective advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) immediately after Ben Ali’s ouster. The ICFI recognized that the revolutionary uprising in Tunisia, and then Egypt, marked a new era in the international class struggle and the struggle for world socialist revolution.

Its 17 January 2011 statement, “The mass uprising in Tunisia and the perspective of permanent revolution,” warned:

The Tunisian masses, however, are at only the initial stages of their struggle. As is already clear from the continuation of military violence under the new interim president, the working class faces immense dangers. The crucial question of revolutionary program and leadership remains unresolved. Without the development of a revolutionary leadership, another authoritarian regime will inevitably be installed to replace that of Ben Ali.

After nearly a decade of war and economic crisis, a new eruption of the class struggle is underway in Tunisia and beyond. As bread riots break out in Sudan, political protests and strikes are staggering France, Portugal and Spain after a year that saw international strikes by Amazon and Ryanair workers, protests by Iranian workers and mass strikes by US teachers.

Zorgui’s decision to commit suicide as he called for revolution is a particularly tragic illustration of the ICFI’s analysis that in this situation the critical question is the building of a revolutionary leadership in the working class. The turn now is to building sections of the ICFI in Tunisia, across the Mediterranean and around the world.



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