General strike of 700,000 public sector workers shakes Tunisia

Johannes Stern
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Eight years after the ouster of Tunisian dictator President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011, renewed mass struggles are shaking the country's government.

Yesterday a one-day general strike involving close to 700,000 public service workers brought the country to a standstill. According to media reports, all flights in and out of Tunisia's main airport were canceled. Schools were closed and ports, hospitals, public transport and other public services disrupted.

Called by the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), the strike was the largest since the mass demonstrations following the assassination of prominent opposition leader Chokri Belaid in February 2013.

In the capital Tunis, tens of thousands of protesters rallied at the national union headquarters and marched through the city's main thoroughfare with signs reading "Get Out!" and "The People Want the Fall of the Regime." Demonstrations also took place in other important cities, including Sidi Bouzid, where the first mass protests broke out in December 2010 after the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi.

The general strike follows nationwide protests and clashes with police after another self-immolation, by 32-year-old journalist Abderrazak Zorgui, in the industrial city of Kasserine at the end of December.

The renewed mass protests and strikes demonstrate, once again, that none of the grievances that sparked the mass revolutionary uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and throughout the Middle East have been resolved. "The core demands of the 2011 revolution were employment, the betterment of the Tunisian economy and an end to corruption. However, none of these demands have been met. This is why today we are here," one protester, Lassad Hamdi, told the *National*.

The government of Prime Minister Youssef Chahed and President Beji Caid Essebsi, who served under Ben Ali, is continuing the anti-working class, pro-imperialist policies of the old regime. In December 2016, Tunisia struck a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), pledging to impose drastic austerity measures and cut the public sector wage bill to 12.5 percent of gross domestic product in 2020 from the current 15.5 percent.

Chahed warned that the strike would result in a "considerable cost" for the Tunisian economy and might force the government to seek further foreign loans with even tougher conditions. Speaking on public television Wataniya 1 on Wednesday night, Chahed said: "We did everything possible to avoid the strike in presenting proposals that improve purchasing power while at the same time taking into account the country's capabilities." He invited the trade unions back to the "negotiating table" after the end of the strike.

The UGTT, long a central pillar of the Ben Ali dictatorship and now a key ally of the ruling Nidaa Tounes party of Essebsi and Chahed, called the strike to control the explosive anger in the working class, while continuing to work hand-in-glove with the regime. In an interview with *Jeune Afrique*, UGTT secretary general Noureddine Tabboubi complained that the government had "no respect for the agreements ... and decisions made." However, he stressed, "a solution will be found."

Tabboubi announced that the UGTT's administrative commission would convene on Saturday to "make decisions up to the expectations of Tunisian workers who have campaigned for their rights."

This is a transparent fraud. The UGTT is essentially in agreement with the IMF "reform agenda" and seeks

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to find a modus operandi with the government to implement it without provoking another revolution. In his speech on the 8th anniversary of Ben Ali's ouster, Tabboubi warned: "We hope that the government will realize, before it is too late, its reluctance ... to initiate the necessary reforms in the fields of education, health care and take bold measures to resist tax evasion."

The UGTT is being assisted by the Popular Front (PF), a petty-bourgeois "left" alliance that does everything in its power to subordinate the working class to the unions and their nationalist and pro-capitalist agenda. In a January 16 statement, the PF complained that the government "bears full responsibility for the failure of the negotiations" and pledged its support for the UGTT "in all the steps to be taken in defense of its perspectives … and the independence and sovereignty of the country."

This confirms the perspective advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) immediately after Ben Ali's ouster. In its statement, "The mass uprising in Tunisia and the perspective of permanent revolution," the ICFI insisted that "the only viable program for the working class and oppressed masses of Tunisia and the entire Maghreb and Middle East is the program […] of socialist revolution. Only through the independent struggle of the working class, leading all of the oppressed sections of society against both the native bourgeoisie and imperialism, can democratic and social rights be won and social equality established as the foundation of political life."

As a new powerful eruption of the class struggle is underway in Tunisia and throughout the region and internationally, the lessons of the 2011 uprising are decisive. The struggle for social equality and democratic rights requires a clear revolutionary perspective, program and leadership. Trotskyist parties must be built throughout northern Africa and the Middle East to unite the working masses under the banner of the United Socialist States of the Middle East and the Maghreb, as part of the fight for world socialist revolution.

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