

Strike wave shakes North Africa

Kumaran Ira
2 March 2019

The escalating mass protests against the Bouteflika government in Algeria over the past week have erupted in the context of a growing wave of workers' strikes and demonstrations spanning Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco since the beginning of the year. The upsurge in the Maghreb is part of a rise of workers' struggles around the world.

For several weeks, there have been strikes by educators in all three countries, as well as walkouts by workers in transport and the civil service. In Algeria, the education unions (Unpef-Cnapeste-SNTE-Snapest-Cela-Satef) announced a strike on February 26-27, followed by regional sit-ins in Relizane, Blida, Batna and Laghouat, according to a union source. The unions called the two-day strike after holding negotiations with the Ministry of Education several times after a strike on January 21.

After four days of bilateral meetings ending February 23, the unions accused the Ministry of Education of "sabotaging the negotiations by dragging them out and by having a negotiating position that is still so vague." The unions' demands concern "the special status, the maintenance of proportional retirement and retirement without age conditions, the definitive repeal of Article 87a of the 2015 Finance Act and the creation of a specific bonus for common bodies and skilled workers."

The unions' calling of the strikes was aimed at diffusing immense anger among teachers. The unions' concerns are that the government recognize their role, provide them with more benefits, integrate them further into the state and use them to stop workers mobilizing against the Bouteflika regime.

Meziane Meriane, leader of the Union of Secondary and Technical Education Teachers (Snapeste), said: "Every time we go back to square one, and it is not the fault of the social partners who are willing to participate and propose solutions to the crisis..."

"If they (the authorities) have the will to definitively resolve the problems, what prevents them from including in the negotiations, a representative of the Department of Finance and a representative of the Public Service, as we have proposed; and then we will emerge with solutions that will put an end to these conflicts."

The strike occurred against the backdrop of a strike movement of educators across the United States, protests by "red pens" in France, and strikes by teachers in Mexico and Argentina. In every case, teachers are coming into conflict with the unions.

In Algeria, workers have also struck in the airline and port sectors, where the unions are also working to suppress opposition. On February 25, Air Algérie had to cancel several international flights following a surprise strike by flight crews calling for a revision of the salary scale. Two weeks earlier, workers at the port of Algiers had unexpectedly gone on strike, causing loading and unloading operations to stop.

In Morocco, thousands of teachers demonstrated on February 20 after the unions announced a one-day strike. Police intervened against the teachers' demonstration and injured several strikers.

Since the beginning of the year, teachers have been holding demonstrations to demand a review of the precarious status of contract teachers, including their integration into the civil service. They also denounced the deductions from strikers' wages and demanded wage and other compensation increases that have been frozen since 2011. In January, several thousand municipal employees participated in a 24-hour strike to protest against catastrophic working conditions.

There is enormous social anger against the Moroccan monarchy, as it announced new spending to impose military service despite the dilapidated state of public services.

In Tunisia, secondary school teachers have been on

strike since October 2018 to demand their integration into the civil service, as well as that of their primary school colleagues, and to denounce their working conditions. The education union of secondary teachers has ended the strike following an agreement with the government.

The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), a long-standing ally of the government, is working to block a workers' mobilization against the regime. They cancelled a general public service strike scheduled for the end of February and a transportation strike scheduled for February 5. In the public sector, the government is committed to imposing drastic austerity measures and cutting wages following an agreement reached with the International Monetary Fund in 2016.

The role of the trade union apparatuses and their pseudo-left political allies is similar in every country: they cut off the workers from their struggling class brothers and sisters in other countries, and isolate them by industry, in order to subordinate them to corrupt and hated regimes. The French unions also denounce "yellow vests" protests as right-wing and even anti-Semitic, in order to legitimize the Macron government's right-wing policies.

The new wave of struggles in the Maghreb comes eight years after the "Arab spring" in 2011 when a revolutionary movement of the working class overthrew imperialist-backed dictatorships of Zine El Abedine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt.

As workers move into struggle once again, it is essential to learn the lessons from this experience. Even the most heroic struggles will not defeat capitalism without a political struggle against the trade union apparatuses and their political allies and the creation of a revolutionary and internationalist leadership in the working class. With the help of trade unions such as the UGTT, the main ally of Ben Ali's overthrown regime, the bourgeoisie was able to suppress the mass movement.

From a national perspective, UGTT supported the Constituent Assembly to maintain illusions about a possible reform of Tunisian capitalism from 2011 until Nidaa Tounes' return to power in 2014, covering for the former Ben Ali regime. The reactionary evolution of the Tunisian regime since then has confirmed the analysis of the International Committee of the Fourth

International (ICFI). The ICFI was alone in insisting that 2011 marked the opening of an era of international revolutionary struggles, whose only progressive resolution lies in the taking of power by the working class and a struggle for socialism. The same tasks confront the working class today.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact