

Tunisian workers hold one-day general strike against rising food prices

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On June 16, workers across Tunisia walked out in protest against President Kaïs Saïed’s plan to rewrite the constitution and slash vital subsidies that keep wheat and bread affordable for workers. Wheat and grain prices have surged on global markets due to rampant speculation, and now the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine that has prevented Russia and Ukraine from exporting their wheat.

A week before the strike, Tunisian Finance Minister Sihem Boughdiri had reported that wheat subsidy costs this year would rise 1 billion dinars to 4.2 billion dinars (€1.3 billion). This is 3.5 percent of Tunisia’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the equivalent of the annual budget of the Health and Labor ministries, she reported. Echoing the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is calling for “strict limiting of wage spending” and “better targeting of subsidies,” Boughdiri called for “gradual revision of subsidies for staple goods, but without at all eliminating them.”

In January 2021, ten years after a revolutionary uprising of the Tunisian working class toppled President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali, youth came out in Tunis and nationwide to protest the lack of democratic rights and what were already then rapidly-rising food costs.

“People are hungry. They want revenge against the state. I won’t lie about it, they want another revolution,” one youth in Tunis told the press, while his friend said: “The police don’t dare to come here. Even the Tunisian media doesn’t come here. No one listens to what we have to say.”

A trader bringing food from the countryside to Tunis said: “Everybody I spoke to [in the villages] was angry. It’s all age groups. Even children aged 10 are angry. ... I see families of up to 10 members who can’t afford [the food prices]. They don’t even have 200 millimes for a baguette.”

This year, inflation and, in particular, the explosion in food prices is taking place around the world, now

accelerated by the NATO-Russia war. As the IMF and the Saïed administration work to starve Tunisian workers by slashing state subsidies that have so far prevented speculation in global grain markets from making bread unaffordable, anger and opposition in the working class are reaching explosive levels.

The General Union of Tunisian Labor (UGTT) bureaucracy, a longstanding pillar of the Ben Ali regime that now works closely with Saïed and international banks, felt compelled to call a one-day strike for June 16. The working class responded massively. Airports, mass transit, post offices, energy companies, ports, wheat, fuel and phosphate monopolies and other workplaces shut down on June 16. Fully 96.2 percent of UGTT members participated in the strike.

“Our wages are low and the prices are getting higher ... and meanwhile, [Kaïs Saïed] is very stubborn. He is making decisions alone without consulting us,” UGTT official Naza Zuhein told AP at a march of striking workers in Tunis, stressing that life in Tunisia has “become impossible.”

“We, as citizens, as public sector employees, are burdened with a great part of the charges of state debt,” complained another worker alongside Zuhein.

While Saïed maintained a deafening silence on the strike, refusing to make any public statement, his government is clearly terrified of the mounting anger in the working class. Mezri Haddad, an associate of Saïed who was also a close supporter of Ben Ali before his regime was toppled by the workers, denounced the strike as an act of treason: “The UGTT’s decision to launch a general strike is an anti-national action that has the character of high treason and a threat to national security,” Haddad said.

Despite the mounting panic in the Saïed administration, US and global financial firms are stressing that they must work closely with the UGTT bureaucracy as their only

hope to impose starvation conditions without provoking a new working class uprising. The Fitch ratings agency wrote: “Passing political and economic reforms without the UGTT’s backing would be challenging.”

In reality, however, what the last decade has conclusively shown is the bankruptcy of the Tunisian bourgeoisie and the UGTT, their failure to establish a democratic regime breaking the domination of imperialism over Tunisia, and the continuing discontent among workers and youth. Kais Saïed exemplifies this political bankruptcy. Originally presented as an anti-corruption candidate, he suspended parliament last year and is trying to establish absolute rule over Tunisia.

Now even more than in 2011, when the uprising in Tunisia triggered a revolutionary struggle in Egypt that toppled President Hosni Mubarak, the political crisis in Tunisia is directly bound up with world conditions and the international class struggle. After a decade of reckless money-printing by the major central banks for bank bailouts of the super-rich, prices are exploding around the world. And the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine is sowing the seeds of horrific famine in north Africa and internationally.

Africa overall depends on Russia and Ukraine for 44 percent of its wheat, and Tunisia specifically depends on Ukraine for over 70 percent of its wheat. However, as Washington threatens to confiscate Russian dollar holdings in international banks, and Ukraine has mined its ports which are blockaded by Russian warships, it is impossible for Tunisia and countries across Africa to import desperately needed grain and foodstuffs.

These conditions are driving growing strikes and protests by workers demanding wage increases and protection from rising prices not only in Tunisia, but around the world. On Monday, one-day nationwide strikes will take place in the Moroccan and Belgian public sectors after a one-day strike yesterday in Italy. Spanish steelworkers and postmen and French truckers are going out on strike as are airline and airport workers across Europe.

The emerging struggle between the working class and the Saïed regime and its associates in the UGTT bureaucracy has vital lessons for workers not only in Tunisia but around the world. The failure of the 2011 uprising in Tunisia to secure its aims was not due to the failure of the working class to struggle. It struggled mightily, but it did not have a revolutionary internationalist perspective and leadership that would allow it to take power into its own hands after toppling

Ben Ali.

In Tunisia, Saïed’s attempt to establish a one-man dictatorship is increasingly acknowledged to be bound up with deep-rooted economic problems related to social inequality.

“This strike is the culmination of the collective failure of ten successive governments, of the UGTT, of the IMF and the international partners of Tunisia. The transition towards democracy was not accompanied by any change in the economic structure of the country,” Denison University economics professor Fadhel Kaboub told *Arab News*.

This confirms the assessment made by the International Committee of the Fourth International as the Tunisian revolution broke out in 2011. The decisive question, it explained, was developing the revolutionary struggle in Tunisia into part of an international struggle of the working class for socialism and to bring down the capitalist system. This required first and foremost, the ICFI wrote, the building of a Trotskyist revolutionary leadership in the working class:

“Weak and dependent, tied by innumerable threads to foreign imperialism and native feudal forces, the bourgeoisie of countries such as Tunisia is a thousand times more fearful of and hostile to the revolutionary force of the working class than it is to imperialism. ... Without the development of a revolutionary leadership, another authoritarian regime will inevitably be installed to replace that of Ben Ali.”

The emerging struggles of the Tunisian and international working class against inflation and the danger of world war give this statement renewed political significance.



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