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Thousands march to mark anniversary of Ben Ali's overthrow in Tunisia

On Sunday, thousands marched in Tunis to mark the anniversary of the toppling of President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011. That event began the so-called “Arab spring,” as only 11 days later a revolutionary movement of the working class erupted in Egypt and toppled another imperialist-backed dictator, Hosni Mubarak. Seven years later, the Arab bourgeoisie has proven incapable of resolving any of the issues that drove workers to rise up in Tunisia and in Egypt.

The Middle Eastern bourgeoisie and its imperialist backers are still consumed by fear of social revolution. Yesterday’s march came after worker protests in Iran and a week of insurrectionary clashes of working-class youth with police, beginning in the old mining belt of southern Tunisia, where the 2011 uprising began.

The new wave of protests was prompted by anger over mass unemployment, corruption and the 2018 finance law. The Tunisian regime responded by sending in the army and jailing 800 people in an effort to crush the movement and ensure that yesterday’s anniversary not lead to a new insurrection.

The official march took place under conditions of a police lockdown. It included the pro-government General Union of Tunisian Labor (UGTT) trade union, a key ally of the ruling Nidaa Tounes party, the new name of Ben Ali’s Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD). Only a few thousand people attended the march—far fewer than the numbers of youth who have clashed with police in southern Tunisia and in Tunis since the beginning of the year.

Nonetheless, as France24 reported, even “the high security of an event heavily monitored by police could not hide the rising social anger in Tunisia since the beginning of the year.” The report continued: “Seven years after the departure of Ben Ali, who now lives in Saudi Arabia, many Tunisians say they have won liberties but lost living standards. Among the marchers, more radical slogans rapidly emerged: ‘Government, resign,’ ‘The people want to bury the finance law,’ and ‘The country is rising up while the government celebrates the revolution...’”

The revolutionary uprising in Tunisia in 2011 vindicated the Trotskyist revolutionary perspective advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Followed quickly by the even larger uprising in Egypt, it made clear that the Stalinist bureaucracy’s restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union had not ended the era of world socialist revolution inaugurated by the October 1917 revolution. Through an international wave of strikes and insurrectionary struggles, the working class showed that it remains the main revolutionary force in capitalist society.

The 2011 struggle in Tunisia began amid outrage over unemployment and official corruption when Mohamed Bouazizi, a graduate forced to work as a vegetable vendor, burned himself to death after an official confiscated his vegetable cart. The movement was fueled by the emergence of WikiLeaks and its publication of leaked State Department dispatches, including on Tunisia. These showed that US diplomats who in public praised Ben Ali privately dismissed his regime as totally corrupt.

Despite relentless and predictable efforts by Nidaa Tounes and its supporters to present the revolution as a dead end, based on their own record of economic stagnation and repression since 2011, there is rising opposition. Even in the media, the question is being raised of whether a new 2011 could take place. Mohamed Ali, a worker at a tire factory that was privatized for a token price, told reporters at the Tunis protest yesterday: “My problem is not the revolution, it is the government.”

Feres, a high school student in the working class Ettadhamen district of Tunis known as the “heart of the revolution,” described his anger over trying to speak to President Beji Caid Essebsi, a longtime member of Ben Ali’s party, when Essebsi visited Ettadhamen. He said, “We tried to talk to him and the policemen insulted us. Tunisia is our country, but this is not our government. We lie here in poverty and they despise us.”

What is being prepared, in Tunisia and internationally, is a new upsurge of the working class directed against not an individual dictator like Ben Ali or Mubarak, but the capitalist system as a whole. As the International Crisis Group’s Michaël Ayari told *Middle East*

Eye, “The popular proverb saying ‘Ben Ali left but the forty thieves stayed’ is true... If before, the mafia was clearly identified in people’s minds with the Trabelsi clan [i.e., Ben Ali’s family], now it is the state in its entirety that is considered a criminal entity.”

The political crisis in Tunisia raises with particular sharpness the fundamental problem facing the working class internationally: the building of a revolutionary leadership. The seven years since the 2011 uprising have conclusively demonstrated the bankruptcy of not only the ruling class, but also the organizations that dominated what passed for the “left” in Tunisia. They are on the other side of the barricades from the working class.

Promoting a national perspective, rooted in affluent sections of the middle class and Tunisia’s pro-government trade union bureaucracy, they blocked any attempt by the workers to seize power in 2011. They tied workers to the perspective of waiting for deals negotiated between the Tunisian state, the international banks and the imperialist powers as they waged war in Libya, Syria and Mali. They adapted to the return to power in 2014 of Ben Ali’s cronies in Nidaa Tounes, which since 2015 has ruled in coalition with the Islamist Nahda party.

In short, they drove the working class and the revolution into a dead end. Now, amid a new upsurge, they do not want a revolution and the taking of power by the working class. They want, at most, to tinker with the existing regime’s policies.

Addressing the official march in Tunis, Hamma Hammami, the leader of the petty-bourgeois Popular Front coalition, said: “We will keep putting pressure on the government until it revises the new finance law that makes the poor poorer and the rich richer.”

As for the UGTT, which denounced workers fighting Essebsi’s police as “dubious” and “raiders of state property,” it made very clear yesterday to *Le Monde*, the most prominent press organ of France, the former colonial power in Tunisia, that it supports Essebsi’s budget talks with the International Monetary Fund. *Le Monde* rejoiced that the Tunisian government “has been able to rely until now on the support of the UGTT, with which it has established a fruitful working relationship.”

This “fruitful working relationship” has consisted of talks carried out behind closed doors with the personnel of the international banks and the old Ben Ali regime.

An unidentified UGTT official told *Le Monde* that Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed “has enjoyed our tacit support.” He continued, “Chahed’s opponents are trying to destabilize the government. But we are very attached to the current political stability.”

The UGTT official cited to *Le Monde* the lowering of the number of strikes before the latest outbreak of struggles in Tunisia as proof of the UGTT's good will, i.e., the union's resolve to strangle working-class opposition to the Essebsi regime.

Le Monde wrote that the UGTT might call some strikes, but only to keep working-class opposition from escaping its control: "The UGTT will probably take up arms in the coming days on the social front, but only so as to better oversee it. As often in the history of contemporary Tunisia, the UGTT's zigzags can prove to be decisive ..."

Such comments reflect hopes in ruling circles that Essebsi's crackdown and promises Saturday to boost social spending will be enough to end last week's protests. Social Affairs Minister Mohamed Trabelsi announced a hike to the welfare budget of 100 millions dinars (\$40.2 million), with aid to poor families rising from 150 dinars (50 euros) to 180-210 dinars (60-70 euros) per month. With the monthly minimum wage of 326 dinars (111 euros) covering just two weeks' shopping for a family of four, however, the proposed 30-to-60-dinar increase is a pittance that will solve nothing.

As all the other avenues are exhausted, the working class, in Tunisia and internationally, is being left with no choice other than to build a revolutionary leadership and mount a direct struggle for power.

As the ICFI explained in its statement in 2011 on the outbreak of the Tunisian events, "The only viable program for the working class and oppressed masses of Tunisia and the entire Maghreb and Middle East is the program advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International of socialist revolution... We call on all those who seek to put an end to dictatorship and exploitation in Tunisia and the entire region to take up the fight to build sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International."

The authors also recommend:

[The mass uprising in Tunisia and the perspective of permanent revolution](#)

[17 January 2011]