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Tunisia

”Work is a right, gang of thieves!”

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“Work is a right, gang of thieves,” was the slogan with which the Tunisian revolution started on December 17, 2010 in Sidi Bouzid. If this slogan links political and social demands, it is because an especially harsh context of economic crisis in this "weakest link" of the globalized capitalist system was combined with a political context of repression, lack of freedom, widespread corruption and nepotism. With this explosive mixture, the first expressions of popular anger very quickly took on the speed of insurrection in the poorest regions before generalizing and becoming a genuine revolutionary process.

The Tunisian economy is almost entirely turned towards outsourcing for export. With 1,250 French companies in Tunisia and one third of trade taking place with France, it is highly dependent. And in the countries of the South, the consequences of the global economic crisis have been far more severe than in the large imperialist metropolises: it is notably easier to dismiss employees and close factories where the rule of law is non-existent. Dictatorship is also a political system which exacerbates the exploitation of workers.

Thus, the global economic crisis has been experienced head-on by workers in Tunisia, with closures of plants from 2008, job losses and a tightening of working conditions, already harsh previously (up to 48 hours of weekly work). Unemployment (as high as 50% in the region of Sidi Bouzid) and casualisation explain the despair and lack of prospects of a youth educated to a level equivalent to that of European countries. To this is added the daily humiliations suffered for decades, the corruption that invades all layers of society like a generalized cancer and a nepotism which is increasingly unbearable for the population.

Initially, it was then the workers and unemployed of the poor cities who participated in the first demonstrations of anger following the revolt in Sidi Bouzid. During the first two weeks, the geographical boundaries of the revolt were those of a Tunisia divided by a vertical line into "interior" regions whose sole lot is misery, unemployment and marginalization, and coastal regions which for historical reasons and clan-based logics are not doing so badly.

The uneven organisation of the working class, together with the very weak mobilization of the inhabitants of the big cities during these first two weeks, kept the mobilization at the level of riots or revolts, even if the involvement of militants from the left of the UGTT prepared the ground for the emergence of a genuine revolutionary process.

Faced with this social anger, the regime had to make concessions and promises - that nobody believed. But its main response was repression, which very quickly broadened and hardened to the extent that the mobilization strengthened, leading to a cycle of repression - radicalization. And it was this bloody repression that triggered the mobilization in the other regions. In early January, the left of the UGTT succeeded in getting the federation to allow regional unions the freedom to call a general strike. And a part of the bourgeoisie and of the petty bourgeoisie saw the opportunity to get rid of this mafia regime which systematically racketeered them and joined the movement.

From there, the general mobilization was intended to put an end to the Ben Ali clan, and the demonstrations broadened and extended throughout the territory until the surprisingly rapid departure of the dictator. Political claims – the common denominator - took precedence over the denunciation of social injustices.

Immediately after the fall of the dictator, the social aspect was overshadowed. Today, the bourgeoisie still in power would obviously not welcome the deepening of the revolution, which would be at its cost. In terms of freedom and democracy, the deepening of the revolution would mean the strengthening and generalization of forms of self-organization (including the local Committees for the Protection of the Revolution) which are very heterogeneous

at the moment but which would benefit the popular layers. Socially, the strengthening of these forms of self-organization also means the return to the forefront of the question of social injustice, the basis of this revolution sometimes presented in a reductive manner as solely democratic. And the bourgeoisie can count on its imperialist supporters and a part of the petty bourgeoisie concerned with its own comfort and security, as well as figures from the Ben Ali regime, all winners in the development of the counter-revolution.

Thus, the social dimension of the revolution was, under the two governments of Ghannouchi and Béji Caïd Essebsi (since February 27), fully denigrated by the ministers, the mainstream media and opportunists on all sides, who denounced “purely material concerns which are detrimental to the economic stabilization of the country”.

Propaganda against the UGTT and PCOT then developed in the press and audio-visual media as well as on social networks; the PCOT because it was the only party of the radical left, with some popular profile; the UGTT because it played a highly political role in the accompaniment and organisation of the revolt which, with the help of its most radical activists, turned into a revolution. It should be remembered that the role of the UGTT is complex, between the radicalism of a substantial part of its base and the sclerosis of its bureaucratic leadership.

The UGTT was also after the fall of Ben Ali the spine of the “National Council for Safeguarding the Revolution” comprising all parties not involved in the Ghannouchi governments, as well as various unemployed, youth and human rights associations. This Council was intended to be - and could have been - a tool for control of the activities of the interim Government. But its extreme heterogeneity (stretching from organizations of the far left to the very conservative Islamists of Ennahdha) prevented it from having a real weight and the defection – de facto – of the UGTT leadership has considerably weakened it. In addition, this Council being a cartel of organizations, it does not represent the reality of the mobilizations where structures of rank and file self-organization are spreading.

Prime Minister Béji Caïd Essebsi has continued to manoeuvre to try to give an acceptable façade to a mobilized and highly vigilant populace, while preserving the interests of the state-party RCD. Thus, his decision to dissolve the RCD and the political police was only symbolic, since the police are still present on the ground and continue the same practices, and the former leaders of the RCD have not only been allowed to form new parties but also retain their places in the state institutions and some large enterprises. Counter-revolutionary forces are also trying - without real success until now - to divide workers by reviving tribal conflicts or regionalist sentiments.

The offensive of the pro-Gaddafi forces at the Tunisian border forces may also be a source of worry. Because apart from a government press release denouncing the violation of the Tunisian territory by Gaddafi’s forces, there was no official reaction to the other possible violation that the imperialist forces propose to further establish themselves in the region.

Furthermore, institutionally, to empty the National Council for Safeguarding the Revolution of its content, the Government has set up a “Higher Body for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution” responsible for proposing an electoral law for the constituent assembly elections on July 24. This bloated body has a purely advisory role and does not formally include the most radical parties (the LGO and the PCOT) and some organizations rooted in popular movements (including the structures of self-organization of workers and unemployed associations). Nevertheless, the demands of the street and the magnitude of mobilizations have forced this body to submit to the Government proposals in synch with the movement. It has thus proposed that the leaders of the RCD (from the reign of Ben Ali) are prohibited from participation in the elections. The Prime Minister's rejection of this proposal was strongly opposed by members of the Higher Body as it undercut the little legitimacy it had.

The organization of the constituent assembly elections is a victory in itself given the history of Tunisia. But several voices are now raised in favour of its postponement, basing themselves on four main arguments:

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- Today, the only forces that are prepared, organized and equipped with the necessary means to conduct their electoral campaign are the counter-revolutionaries (the bourgeoisie, the remnants of the RCD and the Islamists). Therefore the question of the participation of figures from the old regime in these elections should first be resolved.
- The Islamists (ready to ally with the former leaders of the RCD) should not be offered an election campaign on a plate by organizing these elections on the eve of Ramadan.
- End of year university examinations would make sections of the youth, the main force of this revolution, less available.
- Finally, the newly formed parties as well as those which were forced into hiding under Ben Ali, should be given the time to organize and prepare for these elections.

The organization and coordination of the workers' movement may actually require more time, primarily because of the mistrust that prevails today (and which is fed by the government and the mainstream media) of all political parties, accused of opportunism. But the future of this revolutionary process is also and above all in the structures of rank and file self-organization. These structures are now fragile and their role unequal according to region and workplaces. But their development, their generalization and their radicalization are fundamental issues. It is crucial – according to the revolutionary activists - that the elections are a stage in the revolutionary process and not simply an institutional milestone leading to the predictable neoliberal outcome. And it is the responsibility of the revolutionary forces to build and strengthen these mobilisations, thus to be present among workers, in the workplace and in the popular neighbourhoods, to participate in the generalization of these structures of self-organization. Finally, the creation of a political tool, defending the interests of the working class in the broadest sense, will be the consequence of this generalization and radicalisation of self-organizing structures.

This is what will give legitimacy to this tool and strengthen that of the organizations that have contributed. And this is possible because despite the pervasiveness of the issue of elections, the social mobilization continues. In regions of the interior as well as in the main popular neighbourhoods of the large cities, the population is expressing its disappointment at this revolution which has changed nothing in its economic situation and promises "a second revolution". Social mobilization therefore returns to the first level - even though it experiences ebbs. Strikes, protests and occupations of factories multiply. The main demands relate to job creation and job security, wage increases, improved working conditions and the exclusion of corrupt bosses compromised with the Ben Ali regime. The lock-out threats made against a number of workers partly explains the ebbs that the mobilization experiences. But the example of the garbage strike in itself shows the level of mobilization: Ten days of strike were finally victorious, ending the subcontracting system which meant insecurity and wage discrimination for these workers.

But despite the general combativeness and vigilance, the RCD is still in power and the assumption of power by the revolutionaries is not yet on the agenda. The counter-revolution is organized; the ruins of the old regime can be restored, with the assistance of the petty bourgeoisie, the national bourgeoisie and its imperialist supporters.

It is therefore a change in this relationship of forces that revolutionaries are working for today, as an unavoidable precondition for a change of direction. They are aware that the partial victories obtained until now (the fall of Ben Ali, the exclusion of ministers belonging to the RCD, the dissolution of the RCD and the political police, the exclusion of governors, delegates, directors of public and private companies) have been through mobilizations in the street and in the workplace. And it will again be on the street, of course, and through strikes, demonstrations and occupations that the oppressed will change the relationship of forces and will write – as they have done until now – their Constitution, and sketch the profile of the society of tomorrow, a society where work will be a fundamental right and the band of thieves will have no place.