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Tunisia

# 22nd congress of the UGTT

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**The 22nd congress of Tunisia's UGTT trade union federation was held from December 25-28, 2011. A large part of it was devoted to the election of the new national leadership.**

The new Executive Bureau (EB) is clearly better than the old one. It is based on real activists involved in the struggles, who are not corrupt.

An alternative list had been constituted around those close to the federation's former deputy leader. It includes some self styled independents, of whom some were in reality close to the Islamists currently in power (about 10 % of congress participants were estimated to be linked to the Islamists).

The overwhelming majority of members of the new EB belonged historically to the trade union left, and this is a victory for that left. Half of those elected are not, or are no longer, members of a party. This is for example the case with the new general secretary. He was part of the minority on the old EB and belongs to the democratic and left movement. He was a member of the Communist Party twenty years ago.

What facilitated the election of the victorious list was the fact that the political sentiments were not there represented by the party leaders. Sami Tahri from secondary teaching and Mohamed Msalmi from the Regional Union of Benarous, for example, are respectively in the MPD and PTPD. But they were elected to the EB as trades unionists, and do not belong to the leadership of these parties.

The PCOT did not behave in the same way. One of their activists, Hfayed Hfayed, was on the list which won as the representative of the primary teachers union. But the PCOT wanted one of its activists, Jilani Hammami, to also be on the bureau. The majority of the members of the winning list considered that it was not possible to have a second PCOT activist on the Bureau.

What is important now is to see what this new leadership will do in a situation where numerous demands are expressed at the democratic and social level. For now, it is not possible to give it a free pass. The past of those elected is known, but that does not allow us to predict what they will do now.

There was very little political discussion at this congress (Motions were however adopted with a left content, against unemployment, for jobs, against the ultra neoliberal economic project).

The orientation which results from it is not well defined, but I think that this will come. The new Bureau is seeking to transform the UGTT. A big job has started, and a change in the statutes is planned in particular.

The winning list was constituted not on the basis of ideas but so as to win the elections. That is one of the reasons there were no women on this list: those who constituted it thought that this would not allow sufficient votes for the list to win (97 % of congress delegates were men, whereas 47% of UGTT members are women).

For me the winning list should have nonetheless included a woman. The fact that there are no women on the EB is the most unacceptable choice made by this congress. It is not democratic and this has shocked many activists (Women are 50% of postal workers, and are in the majority in sectors like teaching, health or tourism. More than 60% of textile workers are women. Women have participated in the struggles to bring down Ben Ali in the same way as

men).

A debate will be opened on a change in the internal rules so as to include quotas for women in the leaderships, starting in the regional unions and branches. It will be necessary to await the next congress for women to participate at last on the EB.