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Tunisia

The revolution is on the march!

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“The most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historical events. In ordinary times the state, be it monarchical or democratic, elevates itself above the nation, and history is made by specialists in that line of business - kings, ministers, bureaucrats, parliamentarians, journalists. But at those crucial moments when the old order becomes no longer endurable to the masses, they break over the barriers excluding them from the political arena, sweep aside their traditional representatives, and create by their own interference the initial groundwork for a new regime. Whether this is good or bad we leave to the judgement of moralists. We ourselves will take the facts as they are given by the objective course of development. The history of a revolution is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny” [1].

Throughout the week which followed the fall of Ben Ali, demonstrations demanding the dissolution of his party, the RCD, became more and more frequent, going so far as to invade and ransack the party's offices in every city in the country. Under the pressure of the masses this party has de facto liquidated itself, but its principal cadres still hold the key positions in the state apparatus, at the levels of administration, production, police and of course government.

A weakened provisional government

In Tunis, the demonstrators were joined by thousands of young unemployed who had come in a caravan from the centre of the country, including those from Sidi Bouzid where the revolt started last December, to demand the fall of the provisional government. Thousands of demonstrators occupy the street permanently, including defying the curfew. There is an unmistakable sign of the times: officers of the army and the police now ask them politely, though in vain, to disperse...

On Friday January 21, increasingly put in difficulty by this pressure, Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi had however promised to leave the political scene after the elections...just as Ben Ali had done shortly before his fall! He also announced that all the antidemocratic laws, such as the antiterrorist law and the press code, would be removed from the statute book. Opposition political parties have been legalized and, faced with the revolt in the prisons, thousands of prisoners were amnestied. But that is not enough: the street demands a radical and immediate change and, as comrade Fathi Chamki [2] underlines, legitimacy is today in the street, not in the institutions.

Thus, the provisional government decided to reopen the schools and the universities on Monday January 24, but the General Union of Primary School Education immediately launched a call for a general strike “until the fall of the government”. Reaffirming its “complete commitment to the demands of our people, which mean bringing down the present government, considered as a prolongation of the Ben Ali regime”, this trade union demands “the formation of a provisional government which excludes the enemies of our populations”.

Indeed, for the majority of the Tunisian people - who evoke it with humour: “We drove out Ali Baba, but the Forty Thieves are still there” - one thing is clear: the politicians from the Ben Ali regime who still hold the key positions must be driven out, and not only from the “government of national union”. They must disappear from the scene and the guiltiest among them must be judged and convicted for their crimes. Moreover, things will undoubtedly not stop there, because the masses want a profound change, not only democratic, but also social, in economic policies, in the control over and distribution of the wealth of the country.

The bourgeoisie is trying desperately to conduct a face-lifting operation, with the support of imperialism, especially French and American. In the West, the capitalist media today deride the despot whose crimes they covered for so long. Ben Ali and his wife are now used as scapegoats, to divert attention from the support that the dictatorship enjoyed from business circles. And to hide the backstairs manoeuvres aimed at cheating the Tunisian people of the fruits of their victory. It is in this way that the “markets” in particular have entered the dance. By revising downward their sacrosanct “rating” of Tunisia, they seek to punish the masses who had the unbearable audacity to revolt not only against one despot but also against his neoliberal policies. As long as the masses stay mobilized, these attempts will remain jeopardized and the situation will continue to be extremely unstable.

Workers’ control

During the demonstrations on January 22 and 23, something unheard of happened: 2000 police officers - some of whom wore red arm-bands – marched together and joined the demonstrators. Although it was obviously an attempt to excuse and rehabilitate themselves in the eyes of the people, after the fierce repression of the last few weeks, it seems also that a real process of the development of political consciousness is taking place. Thus, these police officers are demanding the creation of a trade union and, as one of them said “We are workers too”, while for a second, “the revolution is for everyone. We also demand our rights, in particular pay rises”.

Less “spectacular” but without any doubt more fundamental: the employees and civil servants of the state enterprises, the ministries and the central administrations of the state are organizing occupations of their work places to demand a purge and the dismissal of those in leading positions, almost all notorious members of the RCD. In several cases, this demand has even been successfully implemented, as with the National Social Security Office, the Star insurance company and the BNA bank, where the managers were driven out to the jeers of the workers.

Forms of workers’ control are also developing, above all concerning the accounting books of companies, in order to lay bare the corruption of the many employers linked to the Ben Ali regime. The employees of the central administration of taxes, while demanding the immediate resignation of the managing director, took control of the files in order to inquire into tax avoidance by the elites.

The role of the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) -which has 500,000 members in a country whose population is almost 70 per cent urban, and whose militants are very much present in the demonstrations -appears more and more as a central element in the process, thanks to it having been taken in hand by the rank and file and by its left wing. The bureaucratic leaders who were linked to the regime have been pushed aside and, after having forced the withdrawal of UGTT ministers from the provisional government, the trade-union rank and file pushed the leadership to formally take a position in favour of the resignation of the present government, to call for rolling strikes to support this demand and to constitute a “revolutionary government” with the political forces of the opposition.

All power to the revolutionary people: For a workers’ government!

Through the committees of self-defence, of supply and of workers’ control in the workplaces, phenomena of dual power are appearing, while the repressive forces of the state apparatus are starting to divide, part of them taking the side of the people. Eventually, these forces could disintegrate, if committees of soldiers and police, closely linked to the popular committees, make their appearance.

The revolution is on the march!

The situation in Tunisia corresponds perfectly to the traditional definition given by Lenin of a revolutionary situation: those above can no longer govern as before, while those below no longer want to be governed as before. The popular process, by its dynamics, which are specific to every authentic revolutionary situation, openly poses the question of power and traces the perspective of its permanent growing over into a socialist revolution. Such an outcome is not absolutely guaranteed, but it is possible.

Besides the elementary democratic demands – a purge of the state apparatus, convocation of a constituent assembly, organization of really democratic elections - the maintenance, the extension and centralization/articulation of the positions which the Tunisian workers are conquering will be a key question in the weeks to come. The ruling class will do its utmost to claw them back.

For the moment - but only for the moment - the Tunisian bourgeoisie, the principal support of the dictatorship, is discredited and finds itself in a precarious situation, while imperialism was caught off balance by the breadth and depth of the popular uprising. The moderate opposition is quite weak, and as for the Islamists, although they are recognized by the masses as a political current which must be legitimately included in the democratic process, they do not have real mass influence.

In this situation, the UGTT is today the only mass workers' organization which has the confidence of the population. It could play, if it gets rid definitively of the bureaucrats who were accomplices of or complaisant with the regime, a decisive role, with the active support of the revolutionary activists, of the Tunisian radical Left and with the support of internationalist solidarity. The putting forward of the demand for a workers' government of the UGTT based on the popular committees, could quickly take on its full importance. The invitation that the leadership of the UGTT has just launched, to constitute with it a "revolutionary government" goes in this direction, but it is addressed to all the political forces of the opposition, including its bourgeois wing. New clarifications will therefore be necessary.

Finally, as the comrades of the Maghreb Commission of the New Anticapitalist Party in France underline: "Faced with the world-wide crisis of capitalism, the workers and the population of Tunisia show us the only possible way out: the most resolute struggle. To organize and fight here for an alternative to the capitalist world order and to imperialism which is at the heart of it, is also a support for all oppressed people, just as their struggles are a support and a real encouragement for us. "

[1] Leon Trotsky, preface to *History of the Russian Revolution*

[2] see *The social and democratic revolution is on the march!* in [this issue](#)