

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8861>



Obituary

Ahlem Belhadj (1964-2023)

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

Publication date: Tuesday 21 March 2023

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The death of Ahlem Belhadj in Tunis on 11 March [2023] affected the feminist movement, the trade union movement and the revolutionary left in Tunisia and beyond.

A child psychiatrist by training, Ahlem became involved in the revolutionary struggle while she was a student, first as a student union activist and then by joining the Tunisian Trotskyist group affiliated to the Fourth International. This was the time when her country was still being ruled authoritatively by the founder of modern Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba.

In 1987, he was overthrown by a coup led by Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who ruled Tunisia with an iron fist until he was overthrown in January 2011 by a popular uprising. We know that it was the Tunisian uprising that triggered the revolutionary shockwave known as the 'Arab Spring', inspiring other populations in the Arabic-speaking world.

Becoming a professor of child and adolescent psychiatry, then head of child psychiatry at Mongi Slim Hospital in La Marsa and president of the Tunisian Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Ahlem continued her union involvement and became secretary general of the General Union of University Hospital Doctors, affiliated to the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT).

As the revolutionary group she had joined entered a period of crisis, she distanced herself from organised political activism while maintaining her political convictions, in a way that resulted in the continuation of personal relations with the Fourth International. At the same time, Ahlem threw herself wholeheartedly into feminist activism, becoming president of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, first in 2004 and then again in 2011, the year of radicalisation of the Tunisian social movements. In this capacity, she played a leading role in the revolutionary upheaval in Tunisia and in the ensuing constitutional process, notably by fighting against moves to reintroduce clauses discriminating against women in the new Tunisian Constitution.

Ahlem thus became a leading figure in her country, as evidenced by the widespread reaction from political, trade union and association circles as well as the media, when she passed away. Her reputation as a leading figure in Tunisian feminism extended beyond the country's borders: she received the Simone de Beauvoir Prize on behalf of the AFTD in 2012. In the same year, the US magazine Foreign Policy ranked her 18th on its annual list of the 100 most influential thinkers in the world. She was also the subject of several reports in the international press.

Her premature death came after many long years of battling illness. Anyone who knew Ahlem could only admire her exceptional courage in the face of the disease that was eating away at her, as well as the difficulties of her family life. The mother of two young children, she found herself having to look after them alone after her partner Jalel Ben Brik Zoghlami went into exile and then they separated amicably.

It obviously takes a unique strength of character to combine the maternal, professional, union and feminist responsibilities that Ahlem did for years. She was striking in her intelligence, her affability and her friendly warmth, as well as in her ability to laugh in the face of adversity. Her death is a huge loss for all the battles she fought, and a painful loss for all those who knew her well during these various battles.

March 2023

This article was mistakenly not posted at the time.

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