

Tunisia: Wave of protests against repressive regime

CLASHES BETWEEN protesters and police over unemployment, the high cost of living and the repressive regime of president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, are reportedly spreading across Tunisia, with the latest protests in the cities of Regueb, Thala and Kasserine in the country's southern and central regions. Reports from activists say that at least 35 people have been killed in the protests.

Despite the regime's crude attempts to stop reporting, including blocking Facebook and blogs, protests are reported to have taken place in high schools, following the re-start of schools after the holiday break. Demonstrations planned by students in Tunis were blocked by police.

Lawyers have also recently joined the protests but they too were attacked by police. Lawyers once again protested on Monday 3 January at the main courthouse in Tunis. The Tunisian Bar Association announced a "general strike" for 6 January in protest over the police attacks.

The protests began in Sidi Bouzid town, last December, after a young graduate, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire when police stopped him selling from a street stall. (His family reported that he died from his injuries on 4 January). This triggered demonstrations against poverty, unemployment and a lack of democratic rights across the country. The trade union federation in Sidi Bouzid has also announced a general strike on 12 January.



Widespread protests have grown over unemployment, the rising cost of living and a lack of democracy.

Joe Higgins, Socialist Party (CWI, Ireland) Member of European Parliament (MEP), sent the following message of solidarity to trade unionists, socialists and democracy activists in Tunisia.

Dear comrades and friends,

I have followed with great interest the mass protests taking place in Tunisia over the last week. I applaud the courageous action of youth, trade unionists, socialists and thousands of working people in taking to the streets to protest against mass unemployment, falling living standards and a lack of basic democratic rights.

Your mass revolt against such a

repressive regime is an inspiring example to working people and youth everywhere.

The conditions in which the people of Tunisia are forced to live are deplorable, with the great majority of Tunisians facing rising inflation and high unemployment while the corrupt ruling elite flaunts its wealth. Even the US, which supports the Tunisian dictatorship, in a cable released by Wikileaks, described the

family of president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali as a "quasi mafia" and the Tunisian regime as a "police state".

The fact that unemployed graduate, Mohammad Bouazizi, set himself alight after police confiscated the fruit and vegetables he was trying to sell in Sidi Bouzid town – sparking the recent protests – and that another young man committed suicide by throwing himself onto high-voltage cables in protest at unemployment, speaks volumes about the deep sense of frustration and even desperation felt by many Tunisians.

From other examples in history, we can see that a social explosion is inherent in this situation and can quickly become a mass movement against the continued rule of the regime. I salute your courage in the face of systematic state repression that sees any dissent suppressed and torture used routinely.

Despite the regime's attempts to stop journalists covering the last few days of protests, it is reported in Europe that police repression led to the deaths of two protesters, at least. I strongly condemn this and the regime's other attempts to crush growing opposition, including attacks against thousands of workers outside the offices of the General Union of Tunisian Workers, in Tunis, and police attempts to stop a demonstration by the Tunisian Federation of Labour Unions, in Gafsa.

The problems facing working people are inter-linked on a global level: the dramatic fall in tourist revenue in Tunisia is linked to the economic and social crisis in Europe and governments' attempts to make workers pay for the crisis of the capitalist system with savage austerity measures. This is causing a sharp decline in living standards and large-scale job losses throughout Europe, not least in Ireland, and a subsequent collapse in tourism. A solution to the deep problems facing working people in Europe, Tunisia, North Af-

rica and everywhere requires united workers' action and solidarity across all borders.

Mass demonstration

I LEARNED from my CWI comrades in Lebanon that a call has been made for a huge protest demonstration, in Tunis on 26 January 2011, and for solidarity protests and lobbies of Tunisian embassies in the run-up to this important event. I fully support this call and I and the CWI will do all we can to bring this issue to the attention of the workers' movement in Europe and further afield.

I pledge to highlight your fight for democratic rights, including the right to organise, assemble and protest, and to form independent unions. I support your struggles for jobs and against the regime's disastrous privatisation programme and the ending of state subsidies for food.

Despite president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali's reputation for iron rule over two decades, I believe that the mass action you and thousands of others have taken, so far, has already shaken the regime, leading to government 'pledges' to create new jobs and the sacking of some ministers.

I fully support your continuing efforts to employ the traditional methods of mass struggle of the workers' movement, including mass protests, strikes and general strikes.

I am confident that such mass struggles will also bring to the fore the need for the working people and youth of Tunisia to have a party that represents their class interests, not that of the corrupt ruling elite, and for a genuine democracy – a government based on the needs of the working class and poor, the mass of society.

Please let me know what other action I and the CWI can take to aid you at this crucial time.

Yours in struggle, Joe Higgins

the **committee for a**
workers international

THE COMMITTEE for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated. The CWI is organised in 40 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world. For more details including CWI publications write to: CWI, PO Box 3688, London E11 1YE. email cwi@worldsoc.co.uk

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Eljeer Hawkins, Socialist Alternative, Bronx, New York



The regime of president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali has closed all schools and universities in an attempt to repress the escalating street protests.