

Interview: the Tunisian revolution one year on

14 January marked the first anniversary of the downfall of the hated dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali by the Tunisian revolution. The Socialist spoke to two socialists who are campaigning in Tunisia and who sympathise with the politics of the Committee for a Workers' International, to which the Socialist Party is affiliated. For more international news and analysis see: socialistworld.net

Can you describe the situation in Tunisia today?

Revolution is a process, not a single act. This process is still continuing, which can be seen by the new wave of protests which has taken place in Tunisia, especially since the beginning of the year.

Every day, new protests against the authorities, new strikes for better social conditions, sit-ins by people expressing their grievances are occurring all over the country.

The anniversary of the revolution has provided a momentum for what seems to be the biggest wave of mobilisations since one year ago, which has taken in some areas an almost 'insurrectional' character. In the mining areas around Gafsa, the situation is explosive, with regular strikes and demonstrations, and entire localities being self-run by inhabitants.

A regional general strike has also taken place and lasted five days in the governorate (region) of Siliana, in the south, between 13 and 18 January, to protest against poverty and the social marginalisation of the region.

Revolution in Arabic means a complete, fundamental break from the past, but this has not happened. All these protests show that people have still got much to fight for, that conditions for the majority have not fundamentally changed.

The objective conditions in society that caused the revolutionary upheaval are still present. In many respects daily life for the majority has actually got worse. Unemployment has literally exploded, while this issue was at the heart of people's demands in the first place.

Since 14 January of last year, there have been 107 cases of new self-immolations in the country, with at least six during the first week of this year. Most of them are unemployed people, desperate and ready to do anything to get a job.

There has been no fundamental break from the past system; consequently it is entirely predictable that the mass of people continue to struggle. So it is clear that the revolution – people looking for real change in society, and erupting en masse onto the scene to impose it – is still alive.

After the first stage of the revolution can you draw up a balance sheet of what has been won and what is still to be won?

The first thing to note is that the capitalist class was relying on the old regime of President Ben Ali to defend its interests. When Ben Ali was overthrown,

the capitalists were initially destabilised. Faced with a revolution that threatened their social existence, they had to concede important demands especially in the political sphere, in an attempt to restore a certain control.

Under the pressure of the mobilisations, a lot of leading figures in the state machine were removed, the ex-ruling party, Ben Ali's RCD, was dissolved, etc. The movement was so powerful that even the commentators in the capitalist-controlled media were forced to admit that this was a revolution.

However, since the initial revolutionary upsurge, there has been a conscious attempt by the capitalists to concentrate attention solely on questions of political democracy and political representation, but not to concede on the fundamental social foundations of capitalism.

All the elements linked to the capitalist class have deployed efforts to derail the revolutionary process towards the safe channels of 'legality', towards the old existing constitution and institutions. But it was the revolutionary youth and workers who imposed the election for a new Constituent Assembly, after the second mass occupation of the Kasbah Square.

The majority have no clear objectives in which direction to take society, the political consciousness is quite mixed. The mass of the people are trying to navigate themselves through the daily poverty and corrupt state bureaucracy bearing down on them.

However, there is a realisation among many that simply by removing the figurehead of the old regime, their lives have not and will not improve fundamentally.

People are angry and frustrated by the lack of progress. Many lost friends and relatives in the revolution, but see that their sacrifices have been hijacked by the ruling class. Even the martyrs' families have seen their cases denied real justice. A lot of the killers are still

running free, including some whose identity is known.

And the people injured by the state's repression in the beginning of the year have been denied proper medical assistance. 90% of the people who were shot still have the bullet in their bodies, because of the lack of serious medical treatment! A lot have lost their jobs, or even their lives, since. In some cases the police have even been sent against them when they were protesting.

The British press has made a lot of the Islamist parties' election victory. How do socialists view it?

The 'moderate' religious party Ennahda was the main winner of December's parliamentary elections. It made gains at the expense of the other parties because it exploited the pressing social issues – poverty and unemployment,

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 45 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world.

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“Revolution is a process, not a single act”

etc - of the majority.

Ennahda was also able to convince many voters that the other 'secular' parties were 'anti-religious' and wanted to attack Islam. This was made possible because most secular parties encouraged the political debate to be polarised in such a way that the burning social issues were not really addressed.

Ennahda also bought votes with money from the Qatar regime and elsewhere. Ennahda members promised voters gifts of all sorts, such as sacrificial sheep for the feast of 'Aid al-Adha'. When these didn't materialise there were protests.

It is not so much that Ennahda is a strong force in society; rather it is the case that the other opposition parties are very weak. And Ennahda was then able to fill the vacuum.

However, Ennahda will lose support as it fails to deliver in terms of improving the social conditions of the poor. This cannot fail to happen, as Ennahda's policy is nothing but a new version of the old regime's policies. And many people are drawing such a conclusion.

In January Ennahda attempted to impose figures associated with the old regime at the head of the public media. This provoked such an outcry that they had to step back.

Already Ennahda has experienced a fall in support in the opinion polls, from 41% to 28%. And a certain part of Ennahda's electoral support is on the streets to protest against the party they voted for in October. That does not mean an automatic drop in support for

right-wing political Islam in general - as more fundamentalist wings are also trying to step in - but it shows that a significant layer of Ennahda's votes is not based on firm ground.

The workers, through strike action, played a decisive part in the revolution. What is happening now within the workers' movement?

In December 2011, a new national bureau of the UGTT [Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, the Tunisian TUC] was elected. This is significant, as this new leadership is currently in a 'cold war' with the government. Among the 13 members of the new bureau, there are nine who purport to be from a 'Marxist' tradition.

The UGTT is potentially more powerful than any political party in the country, and to an extent the new leadership understands this. The UGTT leaders are not revolutionary. Despite coming from a Marxist background, they are not relating their day-to-day activities and propaganda to the socialist transformation of society.

Nonetheless they are much more to the left than the previous leadership and not directly associated with Ben Ali's dictatorial regime as the previous ones were.

A number of them come from a militant background, they know that the crisis of capitalism is worsening the attacks on the working class and are more attuned to the mood of the rank-and-file workers. They are therefore pressurised to speak the 'language of the class struggle' and adopt a more radical stand in relation to the new government.

There are workers' struggles breaking out everywhere in Tunisia at the present time, including some key sectors of the working class, for example

in the gas industry where a blockade of the port of Gabès has taken place. The oil sector has also been hit by strike actions. Workers and poor have also been involved in blocking the railways and roads.

Figures have been released stating there are on average four road blockades taking place every day. There have been sit-ins and in some cases hunger strikes, to improve working conditions and to demand more jobs.

These strikes have not only addressed social and economic demands, but have also been political in character – demanding the removal of corrupt officials and managers associated with the old regime, and targeting the new government's impotence in the face of their grievances.

The main challenge is for the UGTT to turn itself into a democratic and fighting body, working to strengthen the organisation of the working class, including orientating towards the massive amount of angry unemployed, and to embrace a positive programme which can challenge the rule of capitalism.

Of course we are not utopian. Without a mass party for working people that can be a lever for achieving a socialist revolution, all sorts of prospects could open up. That's why building such a party is now the most important task for revolutionaries.

The imperialist powers want to showcase Tunisia as a democratic 'model' of a capitalist-controlled transition. Imperialism would be panicked if there is a workers' movement going in the direction of controlling the economy. That is something they want to avoid at all costs because of the consequences for the entire region. This is the reason why there is such an aggressive ideological campaign in the media to attack workers on strike, a campaign aimed at scaring people, saying that strikes and sit-ins are "pushing away investors and destroying jobs", etc.

But this campaign seems to have little effect on the working class. The capitalists expected that with a new elected government, it would have sufficient authority to bring social stability. The

demand from the new President of the Republic, arguing for a "social truce of six months" has reflected this. But it does not work. The continuous pressure put on the government because of the struggles and strikes could result in imperialist countries providing the Tunisian government with more financial support to calm the situation. But their margin of manoeuvre is limited, given the general economic conjuncture.

What role has been played by the left forces in Tunisia?

The left has historically played a central role in many important working class struggles and social gains, including on women's rights and to provide a public healthcare system.

There are now many organisations on the left. However, the litmus test in Tunisia today is the application of a socialist programme to take the workers' struggles forward.

The country could experience a Greek-style period of protracted struggle, because of the lack of a mass workers' party with a socialist programme to carry the movement towards challenging the capitalist system.

There can be no permanent solution for society's problems within capitalism. Those forces on the left who argue that a first, 'democratic capitalist' stage needs to be fulfilled before talking of socialism are misleading the working class. But capitalism is only interested in exploiting workers, not in putting in place a real democracy.

The only way out of the impasse is for the working class to achieve socialism. Concretely, a socialist programme must address the questions of a full jobs programme based on sharing the work and on massive investment in public infrastructure, a decent welfare for all, workers' control of industry and banks... But unfortunately the left does not put forward a clear programme on these issues.

The CWI in Tunisia demands the non-payment of the country's 'debt' from the old regime, the nationalisation of the banks and of the entire wealth of the ex-ruling clans under democratic control of the working class and the population, and a government based on the workers and on the people who have made the revolution, in order to fulfil these measures. At the moment we argue for the organisation of a general strike as a first step to unite in one powerful show of strength all the people who are struggling in different parts of the country.

What message would you like to give to workers fighting austerity measures and the crisis of capitalism in other countries?

After the revolution the media opened up a bit in Tunisia. So instead of the usual football matches on TV, we were also able to see workers' struggles in Europe, such as in Greece. Greece is to Europe what Tunisia was to the Maghreb and the region, in the sense that these workers' struggles have been hugely inspiring.

In Britain there has recently been a regeneration of the trade unions and workers' strikes after a relatively long period of quiescence. This is very significant, as it also shows the limitations of the rulers' propaganda, and how the situation can be transformed if working people organise and take their fate into their hands.