

# Tunisia: Protesters demand real democracy and social change

## Interview with CWI reporter in Tunis

Two weeks ago a powerful revolt of the Tunisian masses swept away the dictator, President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, after decades of autocratic rule, growing joblessness and high food prices. A new 'national unity' government was formed, including key ministerial positions for the former Ben Ali loyalists. Workers were outraged by this development. On 21 January, a big demonstration took place in the capital, Tunis. Jubilant and confident protesters demanded the resignation of the 'interim' regime which totally lacks legitimacy and authority. The trade union federation (UGTT) council was meeting and demonstrators urged them to call a general strike. A new upturn in the struggle appears to be developing. Elizabeth Clarke from socialist-world.net spoke to a CWI reporter in Tunis who gave the following picture of the unfolding developments in the country.

**"**HEARD MORE gunfire today (20 January) and there were army helicopters overhead. Looting and burning of cars has continued. There are militias linked to the former Ben Ali presidential guard still around and people are still organising committees of defence.

The new 'national unity' government of prime minister Mohammed Ghannouchi is already in trouble and may have difficulty surviving. Under huge pressure from below, it has to make one concession after another.

All UGTT [Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens] ministers have left the government because of protests against their involvement from within the union itself.

The prime minister, Gannouchi, resigned from the RCD, the party of the former dictator, Ben Ali. The

RCD central committee is being dissolved and all the government ministers have to leave the party of the old regime.

There have been three days of demonstrations throughout Tunisia. Protesters demand: 'We don't want this government!' 'It has no legitimacy!' 'RCD get out!'

Social demands are also being raised, as well as political demands. In Sidi Ouzid, where the movement started, before Christmas, protesters demanded: 'We want jobs, improvement of our social conditions!' and 'Share the wealth of Ben Ali!'

The government may be forced to nationalise all assets of the Ben Ali ruling family, perhaps with the intention of privatising them at a later stage.

In the public companies owned by the government, workers are saying they want rid of management. In the departments of national insurance, national security, agriculture and banking, many managers are being swept away.

Workers' control is a vital issue. If this spread to the nationalised industries and services, combined with workers' management, it would lay the basis to start the socialist reconstruction of society, based on democratic planning of the economy in the interests of all.

Only four days ago, state TV was dominated by Ben Ali's clique but now, under the control of journalists, it provides a constant coverage of demonstrations, talks about the 'revolution' and 'the will of the people' etc.

### Daily protests

GENERALLY THOUSANDS are taking part in the main protests each day. At least 2,000 took part today (20 January) in Tunis but more take part in towns like Gafsa. Here the demonstrations are more radical and working class in character. The UGTT is prominent on protests and the main organised force.

The UGTT needs to be democ-



Tunisians celebrate the death of the former president's ruling RCD party.

rated and the leaders linked to former Ben Ali regime should be immediately removed.

The mass movement is spreading, with committees being set up everywhere. These include: 'Committees for the dissolution of the RCD (Ben Ali's party)' and 'Committees for the defence of the neighbourhoods'.

Many people have trust in the army, which is seen as being apart from the Ben Ali regime. But some regard the army as having played a reactionary role, helping Ben Ali to escape.

Last Tuesday's demonstration in Tunis was attacked with teargas by police. At today's demonstrations, soldiers were to the fore, with police staying further away because they will enrage the demonstrators.

The regime is trying to avoid violent clashes and attempting to get wider support for their masquerade of 'democracy'.

Raids on supermarkets have lessened. (Many were looted and burned.) But considerable panic buying is going on, as people are uncertain about the future.

People are very clear about what they don't want - the Ben Ali dic-

tatorship or its remnants - and demand real democratic rights and a real representative government.

Our socialist demands for a government representing the revolutionary aspirations of the working class and poor get a warm reception.

Instead of attempts to make a deal between elements of the old regime and pro-capitalist opposition leaders, we talk of the need for free and fully democratic elections to a revolutionary constituent assembly, where representatives of the workers and poor could decide the country's future.

We back full democratic rights; including freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press and for an immediate end to the state of emergency.

We call for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners in Tunisia. There should be working class courts set up to judge all the criminals, assassins and torturers who are still free or even occupying leading positions in the state apparatus.

This revolution still has a lot of life in it!"

## 50 years ago: Congo's independence leader assassinated

**O**N 17 January 1961, Patrice Lumumba, the democratically elected prime minister of the newly independent republic of Congo, was assassinated at the hands of Belgian officers and troops of president Moïse Tshombe of the secessionist area of Katanga. News of his assassination sparked mass protests around the world.

Chris Newby

In recent years it has been revealed that US president Eisenhower had instructed his aides to liquidate Lumumba and a top secret CIA unit was given the task of eliminating him.

Why was Patrice Lumumba so feared by western imperialism that they felt that they had no other option than to murder him?

For nearly 80 years Congo had been brutally ruled, first by the Belgian King Leopold II as his own personal fiefdom and then as a Belgian colony. Congo is an area rich in natural resources, particularly in Katanga, and these have been used to accrue massive profits for big business.

By the 1950s mass struggles were developing against imperialism. This led to the election of radical nationalists such as Kwame

Nkrumah in Ghana in 1957 and in 1959 the Cuban revolution. These events no doubt had an effect on Lumumba. In 1958 he jointly founded the main party of national liberation the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC).

On 4 January 1959, at a mass demonstration in Léopoldville (the capital of Belgian Congo), troops opened fire on demonstrators killing hundreds. This gave further impetus to the growing nationalist movement. Belgium's rulers were desperate to maintain control of their economic and political interests in Congo and moved to talks for an independent Congo in the hope that a compliant government would head off the rising tide of protest.

In the elections in May 1960 the MNC won an overwhelming victory with Lumumba being elected as prime minister. It was clear from his statements during the elections and at the swearing in of the new government (quoted below) that Lumumba was not going to be the puppet of the Belgian government:

"No Congolese will ever forget that independence was won in struggle... Together we shall establish social justice and ensure for every man a fair remuneration for his labour... We shall see to it that the lands of our native country truly

benefit its children."

Lumumba was voicing the hopes and aspirations of the masses that after decades of repression and terrible living conditions, they would at last begin to see real improvements and have a real say in how their lives would be run.

### Imperialism

ALTHOUGH NOT a socialist at this stage, Lumumba was moving leftward. There was a fear by imperialism that a Lumumba government, with the support of the masses, could move in the same direction as the Cuban revolution and break with capitalism.

Moreover, a government carrying out measures in the interests of the masses would give a massive boost to the struggle against imperialism.

Unfortunately, despite his personal courage and his popularity, Lumumba had not built a revolutionary socialist party that could have led a mass movement to repulse the interventions of imperialism.

Recognising this threat to their power, imperialism, particularly Belgium, took measures to undermine the Lumumba government with military and financial support given to Tshombe when he declared independence. They also heavily

backed the compliant president of Congo, Kasa-Vubu, who dissolved parliament and had Lumumba kept under house arrest.

Lumumba escaped but was eventually captured and then assassinated through fear that even under arrest he would be a beacon to the masses. The CIA was also heavily involved alongside Belgian imperialism in backing Mobutu the military commander-in-chief and eventual dictator responsible for the massacre of thousands.

What these events also underline is the role that the United Nations plays as a cover for imperialism. They refused to intervene against Belgian troops propping up the Katanga regime and backed Kasa-Vubu against Lumumba.

Today, Congo is portrayed in the media as a 'failed' state ravaged by civil war, ignoring the destabilising role of imperialism in the country's history.

However, what the independence struggle around Lumumba shows is the potential in Congo to build a movement capable of challenging imperialism and capitalism but it also underlines the importance of building a strong revolutionary socialist leadership of that movement capable of carrying through the struggle.

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### Congo/Cameroon: Defend rights of indigenous people

Joe Higgins, Socialist Party MEP (CWI, Ireland), defends the rights of the indigenous forest peoples of Cameroon and Congo.

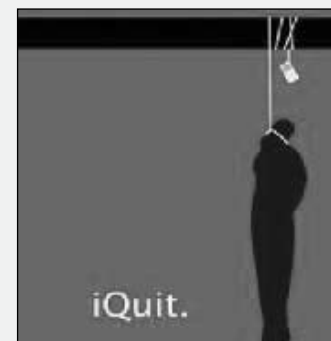
Statement by Joe Higgins, to the European Parliament (video)



### Portugal: Court hearing of trade union leaders postponed

Growing authoritarianism as economic crisis deepens and workers' resistance grows.

CWI reporter, Lisbon, Portugal



### China: Another suicide at Foxconn

Nationalise Foxconn under workers' control and management - end the scourge of 'blood factories'.

Vincent Kolo, [Chinaworker.info](mailto:Chinaworker.info)