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Tunisia

The trial of strength did not take place

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV455 - December 2012 -

Publication date: Wednesday 19 December 2012

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This interview with Nizar Amami, a trade unionist who works in the Post Office, was made by Dominique Lerouge for the French NPA newspaper *TEAN* in Tunis on 17 December 2012. Nizar Amami is the LGO Coordinator and one of the leaders of the Popular Front.

In what context did the attack on December 4 against the national headquarters of the UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union) take place?

This was the umpteenth attack since the elections of October 2011. For example there was, in February 2012, during a strike by rubbish collectors, the dumping of heaps of rubbish in front of offices of the UGTT and the starting of fires at some of them. There are also campaigns in the media against the UGTT, arguing that it should confine itself to a strict defence of immediate demands.

However for months there has been the development, particularly in the regions, of social struggles where trade unionists are playing a decisive role. But Ennadha [1] and the CPR [2] refuse to recognize that the UGTT has a deserved role on the political terrain. All the more so as the ruling coalition is in crisis.

Why has Ennadha stepped up its attacks?

The elections of October 2011 made Ennadha the hegemonic political force, and underlined the weakness and fragmentation of the left political parties.

But Ennadha comes up against the existence of the UGTT, which is the best established and most organized force in the country. Hence its desire to divert public opinion, destabilize the mobilizations and harass the UGTT in order to limit its influence and prepare in the best conditions for the 2013 elections.

In what way is this attack linked to the recent mobilization in Siliana?

What happened in Siliana was based on the strike called by the UGTT on Tuesday, November 27, which was renewed the following day.

This movement followed movements in other parts of the interior of the country in which the UGTT had played a decisive role. So this government, weakened by its inability to meet the population's social and economic expectations decided to fire buckshot into the crowd. Faced with the continuing mobilizations locally and the wave of solidarity in the country the government has been forced to partially back down. And this Ennadha does not accept.

Why was the call made for general strike on December 13?

The December 4 attack provoked even more indignation in that it happened on the day of the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the assassination of Farhat Hached, hero of the struggle for independence and founder of the UGTT. [3] Immediately, regional strikes started, and the next day a national strike was decided for the next week, demanding in particular legal action against the aggressors and the dissolution of the Islamist militias.

Why has this strike call been cancelled?

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Today, a number of activists say that the decision to call a national general strike was probably hasty. They think it would probably have been better to take the other option which had been discussed, namely, to continue to organize regional strikes.

Once past the immediate emotion, many people were unsure about the chances of success of such a trial of strength with the government.

In all its history, the UGTT has in fact only once called a national general strike, on January 26, 1978, and that ended with hundreds of dead and wounded, as well as a thousand arrests. [4] The UGTT was dismantled and almost disappeared for good. It took it more than ten years to rebuild.

This cancellation disappointed some trade unionists, as well as radicalized activists in other sectors. All the more so as the agreement finally reached with the government does not even include the dissolution of the Islamist militias.

A meeting of the Administrative Commission of the UGTT is scheduled for mid-January to decide on the initiatives to be taken in the event that the demands of the UGTT are not met.

How has the relationship of forces evolved after this test?

Over the last month, the relationship of forces has improved a little: important mobilizations have taken place; the determination of the UGTT not to restrict its activity only to immediate demands has been reaffirmed. The wave of solidarity with the UGTT has been considerable, particularly on the part of the Popular Front [5], associations of women, young people, the Union of Unemployed Graduates, the UGET [6], the LTDH [7], etc. For the LGO [8], this arc of forces represents the workers' and people's pole which alone can make possible the achievement of the objectives of the revolution. Many trade unionists are determined to regain the offensive in mid-January in the event that the agreement with the government turns out to be a fool's bargain. Moreover, tensions seem to be developing within the Islamist ranks.

[1] Ennadha ("Renaissance"): a reactionary and liberal Islamist party that dominates the government.

[2] Congress for the Republic: a party of the centre, banned under Ben Ali, led by Moncef Marzouki (President of the Republic).

[3] On 5 December 1952, Farhat Hached, a UGTT trade union leader, was assassinated by the Red Hand, a far-right French settlers' organization linked to the French secret services. The armed struggle was then really developing. The Tunisian national movement became radicalized and demanded the abolition of the French protectorate and the proclamation of independence.

[4] On 26 January 1978, the UGTT called a general strike which was violently repressed. In Tunis, the protesters invaded the city centre and the well-off neighbourhoods, building barricades and vandalizing public buildings. President Bourguiba's army fired on the crowd (Ben Ali was then head of Security): there were more than 200 dead and many injured. A thousand trade unionists were imprisoned, including the main leaders. Habib Achour, president of the UGTT, was sentenced to ten years hard labour.

[5] Popular Front for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution. Formed during the summer of 2012 by 11 parties coming from the Marxist and Arab nationalist traditions (including the ex-Tunisian Communist Workers Party, PCOT, and the Left Workers' League, LGO), RAID-ATTAC and independents.

[6] General Union of Students in Tunisia.

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[7] Tunisian League of Human Rights.

[8] The LGO is a Trotskyist organization which was formed in January 2011 and obtained its administrative recognition in December 2012.