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Tunisia

Southern Tunisia reaches boiling point

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Since 2011, social demands have continued to feed discontent virtually everywhere in Tunisia, preventing the stabilisation of the regime. This is currently the case in the region of Tataouine where a good part of hydrocarbon production takes place.

A brief chronology

March 16 Faced with this pressure, which is especially intense in this region, the UGTT union federation in Tataouine called for a general strike in the oil sector where numerous conflicts have taken place in recent years. This strike came after the dismissal of 24 employees by the Canadian company Winstar which refuses to participate in the social and economic development of the region.

April 8 Unemployed youth demanding massive job creation measures occupied the roads used by the oil trucks. They called for a general strike by the whole population for April 11.

April 11 All activities came to a halt in Tataouine, with the exception of some bakeries, pharmacies and the regional hospital. The demonstrators allowed traffic to circulate again, except for the oil trucks.

April 23 Thousands of young people organised an unlimited sit-in near the oil protected by the armed forces.

April 27 The Prime Minister during a visit to Tataouine proposed the creation of 2,500 precarious and poorly paid jobs, 500 of them immediately. He was met with cries of “work, freedom and dignity” and had to be rushed away.

May 7 The people demonstrated massively in support of the sit-ins.

May 16 A new proposal from the government included the hiring of 1,500 workers by the oil companies and the creation of 2,000 precarious jobs in other activities. Some of the mobilised youth deemed this compromise acceptable, while others rejected it and continued to blockade the oil operations.

May 20 Despite warning fire from the army, demonstrators succeeded in halting operations at the main gas pumping station in the Tunisian south! Something never seen in more than half a century since the beginning of the exploitation of hydrocarbons in the country.

May 21 The security forces receive orders to prevent the blockade of hydrocarbon extraction sites by all means.

May 22 The security forces intervene against youths wishing to blockade a production site: one youth was killed and fifty others wounded. In the neighbouring town to Tataouine, where a general strike had been called on this day, violent confrontations took place. Mobilisations also took place in numerous other towns around the country.

The main demands

In addition to the immediate creation of jobs, the demonstrators wished to force the oil and gas companies to pay 20% of their profits to a fund for the economic development of the region. This has been categorically rejected by the neoliberal coalition government made up essentially of the Islamists of Ennahdha and certain notables from the old regime.

A desire for self-organisation

For some years, the government has made promises or signed agreements which it does not respect. This time, the unemployed youth decided not to let them get away with it.

One of them said "In 2013, after months of occupation of the central square in the town, we were bought off with a dozen jobs in a worksite belonging to the president of the employers' union. The contracts, without any social security coverage, ended after six months". This time, "neither civil society, nor the political parties, nor the UGTT will negotiate in our place."

For this reason, each decision is taken after a vote taken first on each sit-in, then at the level of their coordination. One of the members said: "We try to remain transparent and respect the wishes of everybody participating in the sit-in. This is possible through votes and consultations among ourselves. We spend all our time discussing all the details of our demands and the solutions which we propose to the government".

Nationalisation of natural resources on the agenda

Even if it does not form part of the platform of demands, this question is posed by numerous demonstrators: "Of the thousands of posts created to exploit hydrocarbons, only a few hundred have been attributed to the youth of Tataouine". "The foreign companies act as if Tunisia was still colonised". Despite its radicalism, the movement enjoys fairly broad popular support across the whole country.

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