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Tunisia

"Work, Freedom and Dignity"

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On Friday July 15, 2011 in Tunis an attempt at a “Kasbah 3” was violently halted by the police and the military [1]. But what did all these youths, women, all these unemployed people, workers, precarious employees want? “Democracy? They have had it, the dictator has fallen and has even been tried, what do they want now?! That is the question the Tunisian prime minister posed on national television at the beginning of the week, after the death of a youth at Sidi Bouzid, killed by the police following demonstrations.

Even if he is very old, I am not sure that he does not understand – I think rather that he doesn't want to understand. This same discourse can also be heard here in Europe in relation to the immigrants at Lampedusa “What do they want here in Italy or in France, they have their freedom now!” Thus the bourgeoisie on both sides of the Mediterranean does not wish to understand that freedom without social justice is not freedom. That their democracy will always be abstract for the great majority of the population as long as social classes exist. Yet, since December 17 of last year, the first day of the demonstrations in Sidi Bouzid and until today, one slogan has always been on the lips of the demonstrators – “Work, Freedom, Dignity”.

To understand the revolutionary process in Tunisia, we need to review all the social struggles underway. Every day since January, there are strikes, mobilisations, sit ins, re-appropriations of land. Every day, groups of individuals demonstrate before a ministry, a town hall, an enterprise, on a village square or in the streets of a city... you could say that the demands and claims are being constructed to the extent that the victories and front lines become clear.

What is revolutionary in Tunisia today is not the fall of Ben Ali or a few individual liberties acquired, but rather the change in the relationship of forces. Today the bourgeoisie in Tunisia is afraid, it makes concessions and the more it does so the more the working class demands them. Categories of the Tunisian population which have never in the past 163 years, since the time of the general revolt against the Beys, questioned their place in the relations of production, have risen up and taken that which they deem just. Small farmers from the most remote steppes of Tunisia, garbage collectors, housewives, building workers, porters at wholesale markets, bank employees and even police officers, all are organising.

In the current context of capitalist crisis, workers in Tunisia have obtained employment rights, wage increases, an end to the process of privatisation in the post and in water distribution, the re-employment of victimised trades unionists, the creation of collective agreements in the construction sector... the list of victories is long. However the struggles continue to accelerate. What is at stake in this process is not only the fact of having worked a job at no matter what price but having a job and the power to do it in dignified conditions of life. Indignation here is not just an abstract or metaphysical concept but the expression of social and trade union demands for a better distribution of wealth.

Impotent in the face of these demands, the regime and the bourgeoisie that it represents have displaced the debate towards the political-media sphere. Thus the television speaks only of elections, the constituent assembly, the international economic crisis (not even about the Tunisian economy), of alliances and political parties. Meanwhile, this regime accuses both trades unionists and their UGTT federation, as well as the parties of the far left, of sabotaging the national economy and of irresponsibility. The last rumour launched by the regime through its press organs claimed that all the grocers and small artisans will lose their trades if the leftists take power. At the same time, these same press organs exaggerate the Islamic risk and hold up the threat of a religious fundamentalism which will plunge the country into the Middle Ages.

This Islamist question is very real, it is complex. Today, on the left, it polarises two camps. The first calls itself modernist and constructs its discourse on a struggle against fundamentalism at the expense of a challenge to current economic and social choices and positions itself in a social democratic framework. On the other side, the radical left – which does not deny this threat, but on the contrary fight it in the unions or in the universities – does not consider it as the priority of struggle today. For this left, the religious fact can only be fought by a better distribution of wealth, solid social guarantees and above all the purging of the forces of the old regime, whether in the police, the justice system, the administrations, media or culture. That is why the Ligue de la gauche ouvrière believes firmly in trade union organisation and the multiplication of workers' and precarious employee fronts in the private, public, artistic or economic sectors.

The Tunisian regime today as yesterday cannot exist and repress without the backing and the cooperation of the Western powers,. I would like to touch on two essential aspects of north-south relations here.

– First, economic exchanges. Three days after the departure of Ben Ali, Benetton stated that it would close its factories in Tunisia. Other big groups known for their incestuous links with the Trabelsi or Ben Ali clan then followed. It is not the Tunisian bourgeoisie which will miss Benetton but the three thousand people employed in its factories in the Sahel and the other workers who they try to scare so that they will continue to accept the same working conditions as under the dictatorship. For in recent years numerous multinationals have established themselves in Tunisia thanks to the complicity of the regime – complicity in the obtaining of special tax arrangements, privileged terrains, derogation from collective work agreements, and a pliable police force capable of repressing any mobilisation.

That is what is called globalisation! and this globalisation has only been possible with the complicity of international governments, notably the French and Italian ones. Indeed, the statements of French and Italian policies in the last twenty years tell us enough. And even today when the Italian foreign minister for example practices blackmail in blocking the investment projects underway, even projects in the phase of finalisation. It is like punishing a naughty pupil.

– But relations between the two banks of the Mediterranean do not stop with exchanges of goods or economic relations. There is a tool that global capital has always used to enslave, dominate, colonise weaker countries, that of debt. This odious debt that Tunisia has paid from the time of the Beys until today is a useful tool. If France stole a march on Italy in 1881 in occupying Tunisia, it was because the Bey was more indebted to the French banks than the Italian ones. If France cancelled a part of the Tunisian debt after independence, it is because it had again lent it money so as to allow the young Tunisian republic to buy out the lands that had been occupied and exploited during its protectorate.

This same debt that today the Tunisian government rushes to pay, to the point even of making it a question of national honour, is none other than that of a global capitalism, which the Bretton Woods institutions have erected as a model of globalised capitalist development, even when they precisely know that those with whom they dealt were an anti-democratic and anti-human mafia.

Our young organisation is today at the heart of the campaign against the payment of the debt and if we are here with you ten years after Genoa, it is to confirm the necessity of a common front against this capital and its bourgeois and retrograde governments. The revolutionary processes that we have seen for some months around the Mediterranean can only be finished by an effort of all, whether in the north or the south. It comes down to us today more than ever to say, to shout, to explain that “the revolution is possible”. And for those who tell us today that it is finished and that we cannot win, a single response: “out of the way!”.

(The Ligue de la gauche ouvrière (Workers' Left League) is a Tunisian anti-capitalist organisation formed in the

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course of the revolution. This is a statement made by a representative of the organisation at a public meeting organised by the Italian anti-capitalist organisation Sinistra critica on July 22, 2011 in Genoa to mark the 10th anniversary of the mobilisation against the G8 summit in that city in 2001).

[1] The first mobilisation in Kasbah square before the Dar el Bey palace, the residence of the prime minister, took place in January 2001 to force a reshaping of the "transitional government", while the second in February forced prime minister Ghannouchi to resign