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Arab revolutions

Trade union struggles in the Arab region

- News from around the world -

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Since the outbreak of the revolutionary in January 2011 and even before that, trade unionists, like workers throughout the region, played an important role in the struggles and the fall of the dictators.

Remember that it was the general strike organised by the UGTT trade union in Tunisia on January 14, 2011 which led to the departure of Ben Ali from power after weeks of protest, while in Egypt the workers' movement and massive strikes helped push the military leaders to sacrifice Mubarak to save their regime, which is still being opposed by the people. In Bahrain, it was as a result of the strikes by various unions that paralysed the capital Manama on 14 March 2011, that Saudi troops, backed by the security forces intervened to suppress the people's movement. Today, the trade union movement of the different countries of the Middle East and North Africa continues its daily struggles for better conditions of life and work, but also to deepen the revolutionary process.

Arab revolutions: Trade union struggles
Joseph Daher

Tunisia: constant mobilizations

In Tunisia, waves of strikes and protests against the policy of the Islamist Ennahdha party have taken place in recent months. In the Kasserine region, for example, there were general strikes in Majel Bel Abbes in August, and in Thala, Sbiba, Hassi Frid and Laayoune in October. Weekly demonstrations and sit-ins are held in Kasserine and on a regular basis in different regions.

This summer, a large number of mobilizations took place for the right to water and electricity, as well as for the defence of women's rights. Many trade unionists were also arrested several times because of their opposition to the policies of the government and their union activities. They include Juliet Hidouri, trade unionist and coordinator of the sit-in of Casbah 1 and 2, a member of the Left Workers' League, arrested in the village of El Omrane with Menzel Bouzayenne, following a demonstration demanding the right to decent work and equitable development between the regions. On the night of September 27, 2012, the police attacked the demonstrators with a brutality reminiscent of the Ben Ali era, the raiding of houses was followed by the arrest of 25 people, including Abdesslem Hidouri. The latter was subsequently released.

Journalists' trade unions have also mobilized to denounce the government, dominated by the Islamists of Ennahda, who since the beginning of the year have appointed new directorates at the head of television, radio and public newspapers without consulting editors and professional organisations. The authorities are accused of seeking thus to control the editorial lines of these media.

Trade unionists play a leading role in these mobilizations, a real dynamic exists between trade unionism and the rest of the social movement. The role of the UGTT is decisive for the development of this articulation.

Egypt: challenges and organizations

In Egypt, the first half of September saw more than 300 demonstrations taking place. This is the highest number recorded since the beginning of this year. The majority of these events called for better conditions of life and work, long term contracts and nominations. In October, strikes and demonstrations continued on a vast scale.

During the same month, two groups of independent workers and several political parties joined forces to form a national Front for the defence of the rights of labour and trade union freedoms. The objectives of this front include the cancellation of the restrictive law on trade unions 35/1976, a draft law promoting freedom of association for workers, the protection of trade unionists and employees against dismissal in retaliation, the fight against violations of labour law perpetrated by the state or employers and the establishment of a fair scale of wages based on a minimum and maximum salary (no more than 15 times the minimum wage).

These notable advances are not appreciated by the new Egyptian authorities (Muslim Brotherhood) or the old ones (the armed forces), which combine again. Repression continues in a very strong way against trade unionists under the presidency of Mohamed Morsi. Many laws and decrees prohibiting strikes and worker protests have been enacted. The new regime is trying to break the will of the employees on strike, while the Ministry of Labour is working at the same time to weaken and control the independent trade union movement.

Bahrain: resistance despite the repression

In Bahrain, teachers unions have been especially affected by repression. They were massively involved in the popular mobilizations and the still active resistance against the authoritarian regime. Mahdi Abu Dheeb and Jalila al-Salman, respectively president and vice-president of the teachers' union, were respectively sentenced to five years and six months in prison on October 21, 2012. They were accused of "inciting hatred of the regime" and "attempting to overthrow the system by force". More than 5,000 teachers were questioned by disciplinary councils set up illegally and more than a thousand were brought to court. Many teachers were also suspended or dismissed, a process still in progress today, simply for expressing political opinions.

The motto "proletarians of all countries, unite!" has never been more relevant.