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Tunisia : the defeat of fear

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Extrait de l'interview traduits par les camarades de workers' liberty

<http://www.workersliberty.org/story...>

These are longer extracts than in the printed paper. The fear and depression which dominate the whole world today have been spectacularly defeated all over the place in Tunisia....

At the start, in the two or three days after the fall of the regime, what everyone talked about was corruption and about the political parties and individuals who were going to take over. Now, people are wondering about how the movement is going to go forward.

Some people say : since... there are still four ministers from the old regime, the demonstrations must continue until they're gone. Others think that behind the scenes parties are usurping the movement for their own interests, and ask questions about the strangely large number of political formations - when were they set up, etc. ... Some people fear that the army will take over if the movement continues...

For us, what can be done now is to continue the revolution, but not in the form of demonstrations, riots, etc., rather through struggles wherever possible, in the factories, in the administrations, etc.

At the end of the day, what this « revolution » has given us is the fact that people are no longer afraid to express themselves, and not only in papers or in the internet, but above all in the workplaces where they are...

The main street of Tunis, Avenue Bourguiba, has become an enormous discussion space : everywhere you see people discussing, debating, or demonstrating. Currently there are demonstrations every two or three hours...

Another gain is the constitution of neighbourhood committees. Those structures are totally spontaneous. Officially, publicly, they have been set up to supplement the forces of order and to maintain order... In fact, in practice, those committees have allowed people to chill out, to let off steam, to discuss, every night, and have thus in fact defied the government curfew.

That confirms a general tendency that can be summed up thus : as soon as the masses begin to take their destiny in hand, and to reflect, they set up structures, committees, councils, soviets, shoras - the name does not matter...

Now the neighbourhood committees are practically over. The army has told us : go home, we do not need you any more, you played a role for a while, but that's finished... But people have made links with their neighbours... There is a movement of mutual aid and support which did not exist before...

The interior regions of the country feel themselves a bit abandoned in comparison to the coastal regions... There are strong regional imbalances.

The response of the standard leftists is that we must invest, build businesses, and develop the regions... The UGTT is preparing a programme whose sole objective is to generate economic growth... As in the period of collectivisation

[of some of agriculture], the UGTT thinks of itself as a party jointly managing the country.

Our conception is quite different. Technological, agricultural, and social choices should be revised. We should have a system based on mutual aid. Just because a region produces a lot, that does not mean it should grab everything. We should redistribute so that everyone gains from the national wealth...

There are many social demands. In Tunisia there are many workers who have no legal status, ill-paid day labourers... Small and medium businesses do a lot of subcontract work for big European businesses. Conditions of work are truly lamentable.

A law of April 1972... allows foreign businesses to open export factories here with a five year tax break. Those businesses benefit in fact from state protection, from free infrastructure for example, on the pretext of the struggle against unemployment - and in them there are no trade unions or anything like that, despite the poverty wages.

There are also demands of a more political sort. In businesses and administration, there is corruption, string-pulling, cronyism : there is a whole movement today against all those practices and that mentality.

The UGTT... has always had a fundamental political role in the country, for example in the 1960s experience of collectivisation [of agriculture] in Tunisia : that was a UGTT project.

Later, with the rise of raw capitalism in the 1970s, the UGTT supported what is called « liberal democracy ». The UGTT has always been a prop for the government.

Since the uprising went beyond all the party and union cadres, from the start, the UGTT is now pretending to embrace it. It is jumping on the bandwagon and hegemonising all the opposition political organisations.

For example, all the opposition parties now meet at the UGTT offices.

It put forward three ministers for the government, and then withdrew. Why ? Because when all the political formations, leftists, Arab nationalists, etc., all essentially petty bourgeois, put themselves under the aegis of the UGTT, it became the main political force of the country.

Thus it is no longer simply a union ; it has practically become a government within the government. The common front under the aegis of the UGTT is haggling to try to get a government where all the movements involved, 25 of them, will be represented, and that is impossible. There will be big political squabbles about places in government.

The UGTT was founded in 1946 and has always been a political force. I would even say - a political party, and a component of the political machine of the Tunisian bourgeoisie. It participated actively in the national liberation struggle from the start, and the wages-and-conditions dimension has always been sidelined. It was always the national liberation struggle aspect which predominated...

[As for the army] it has to be said that Ben Ali did all he could, from the start, to limit the role of the military. He is from a military background himself, and thus knows very well the danger that the army could represent for his power.

As a counterweight he consolidated the repressive apparatus of the ministry of the interior : today there are 50,000 soldiers but 220,000 police...

The military did not want to intervene to limit the disturbances. Then, for 24 hours, there was total anarchy triggered by the absence of the police... The military intervened, but only to re-establish order...

If the movement carries on in the same way, the army will intervene directly, for the bourgeoisie will not tolerate the situation...

The army refused to fire on the masses, and put pressure on the dictator to make him pack his bags and go... Now the military is politicised and intervenes directly in the political and social field...

We think that the Tunisian Islamists are very dangerous. They were absent from the uprising, except on the last day when they tried a manoeuvre to hegemonise it, by way of the instrumentalisation of martyrs, but without success. Their tactic today is to participate, but in an invisible way.

In fact they have infiltrated many plebeian areas of Tunis. The leader of the fundamentalist party Ennahda is about to return to Tunis, and he intends to restructure the movement to bring forward new generations.

The Islamists thus have a secret agenda : they do not put themselves forward immediately, but are preparing for the next elections. They are there, they are ready. When the others have run out of puff, they will go onto the attack.

All the more so, because it appears that Qaddafi is allying with them. That is a bit of trickery, of course ; he is not a fundamentalist, but he is pursuing a scorched earth policy because he is very scared for his own power...

Conversely Ghannouchi, the leader of the Tunisian fundamentalists, has declared that he understands the position of Qaddafi, who was against the movement from the start...

The slightly reassuring factor is that the new generation, let's say those between 15 and 25, did not live through the rise of Islamism in the 1980s, and so it is a little inoculated against fundamentalism, though nothing is certain there. It seems that people in the neighbourhood committees are already scared by the arrival of fundamentalism - the arrival of Ghannouchi...

None of that stops the fundamentalists wanting to take over, even if that's not something they can do tomorrow. We have to remain very vigilant ; all the more so because leftists are now making alliances with the fundamentalists, and that is very dangerous.

For example, in the meeting of all parties which took place recently, there were representatives of the fundamentalists there too : so in the same hall we had Trotskyists, Stalinists, Islamists, etc. We find it really incomprehensible that people ally themselves in this way.

It's like in Europe : you have the Islamo-leftists, and we too have those sorts of alliances, but with all the nuances and different degrees varying from one group to another.

The two comrades make clear that they think it is a « leftist » illusion to believe that there are possibilities of social revolution in Tunisia now : « you have to see things with their limits and work for the long term... »