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afgazad@gmail.com

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By Alex Lantier

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Mass protests against unemployment shake Tunisian regime

Protests against unemployment and austerity that started this week in impoverished industrial areas of southern Tunisia are spreading nationwide. Protesters oppose the 2018 austerity budget, agreed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), that cuts subsidies and raises fuel and food prices, amid stagnant wages and unemployment of 15 percent (over 30 percent for university graduates).

Masses of people recall how such protests escalated in 2011, ultimately toppling Tunisian President Zine El Abedine Bin Ali and triggering revolutionary struggles of the working class in Egypt. Protests are called for today in the capital, Tunis.

On Wednesday and Thursday, protests continued in southern Tunisia and reached working-class suburbs of the capital, Tunis. Youth stormed the city courthouse in Siliana and set up roadblocks in Kasserine, clashing violently with police. In Thala, protesters burnt the town's national security building and forced police to retreat from the area. Protests erupted in Tebourba, a city 30km west of Tunis, after the burial of a man killed during a police crackdown on protests Monday night.

Clashes with police also broke out in the Ibn Khaldun neighborhood of Tunis. Ahmed, a youth who protested Wednesday night in Tunis, told RFI: "The cost of living in Tunisia is too high. It's a catastrophe. There are two types of people: the rich and the poor."

The clashes in Tunisia are the focal point of an international wave of protests against austerity measures dictated by international finance capital and imposed by governments across the region. Last year, mass protests erupted when the Egyptian regime agreed to

IMF calls to slash food subsidies and briefly tried to hike bread prices. Now in Algeria, thousands of medical students are boycotting exams and marching to protest cuts to funding and supplies in the country's hospitals.

And yesterday in Sudan, protests continued over bread price hikes, after the regime agreed to IMF demands to float the country's currency against the dollar. Police attacked Khartoum University students who chanted, "No, no, no to price rises!" amid growing anger after a video emerged of an Ahfad University dean beating female students protesting high food prices.

This comes, moreover, amid a global escalation of class conflict—with strikes by pharmaceutical and municipal workers in Israel, autoworkers in Romania, rail workers in Britain, and metal workers in Germany—as the banks prepare explosive attacks on the European working class.

The Tunisian political system is discredited, and the ruling class is desperately trying to block a new revolutionary explosion. The government—a coalition of Nidaa Tounes, the rebranded version of Ben Ali's old ruling party, and the Islamist Nahda party—is pledging repression and slandering protesters as saboteurs.

Tunisian army units are deploying to cities including Thala, Kebili and Bizerte, and the tourist resort of Sousse to hold government buildings against the population. The army is rounding up hundreds of people each night; approximately 600 people were arrested as of yesterday.

The ruling class is still terrified, however. Yesterday, Tunisia's *Le Temps* wrote: "Mystery and confusion grow day to day and speeches, whether they be official or partisan, bring virtually nothing new... The widespread fear raises several questions including, essentially, that of identifying what is the miracle that will bring us peace."

In a press conference Wednesday, Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed tried to reassure the bourgeoisie: "The State is still standing. We will guarantee the protection of all our institutions and corporations thanks precisely to the mobilization and surveillance by our military and police units, who have shown, as usual, a high sense of patriotism and unwavering devotion to the defense of the superior interests of the nation."

Chahed denounced protesters as "destroyers paid for by networks of corruption, embezzlement and smuggling against which the government has decided to wage a ruthless war. Unfortunately, the thugs are being incited by certain irresponsible politicians."

Yesterday in El Guettar, police arrested members of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), the pro-Ben Ali trade union, and of the petty-bourgeois Popular Front coalition—including Labor Party member Habib Tebas, UGTT official Jemal Cheaïcha, and Popular Front member Talal Tabassi. This repression is reactionary; those arrested should be released.

The fundamental issue, however, is that the working class needs to build a new revolutionary leadership, in Tunisia and internationally. Since 2011, the nationalist strategy of the UGTT and the Popular Front has been exposed as counterrevolutionary and bankrupt. Seeking a deal with Nidaa Tounes underwritten by the banks, they proved hostile to an international, revolutionary struggle of the working class. They succeeded only in tying workers in Tunisia to a rebranded version of the Ben Ali regime, to imperialism as it waged war in Libya and Mali, and to poverty.

The UGTT, a pillar of the Ben Ali regime, is hostile to protesting workers and youth. UGTT leader Nouredine Taboubi has denounced protests as “dubious,” declaring: “We will not accept under any pretext that demonstrators turn under cover of night into raiders of state property.” He demanded that any political party calling protests “control the demonstrators.”

Now, however, the UGTT has joined calls for protests in Tunis today.

Popular Front leader Hamma Hammami is not retracting calls for protests while youth are still fighting police and the army. But he is making clear he opposes a revolutionary overthrow of the Nidaa Tounes regime by the working class. He appealed yesterday to Chahed to “find solutions” to unemployment and select “an independent commission of national personalities known for their integrity and competence, to investigate the protests,” according to *Tunisie Numérique* .

Broad sections of the Tunisian bourgeoisie, and behind them their allies in the imperialist capitals, are hoping that these forces will control the situation, block a struggle for state power by the working class, and strangle the movement—as they did in 2011. In a column titled “The UGTT, the voice of reason,” *Le Temps* wrote: “While our country undergoes a new bout of social fever, this powerful trade union, whose capacity to control protests is well established, continues to exhibit the greatest patriotism.”

This new upsurge urgently raises the political lessons of the previous struggle. None of the problems that drove Tunisian workers to revolution in 2011 could be solved under capitalism. Poverty and social inequality grew, as imperialist wars devastated the region. The task now is a break with the old, nationally based organizations and a turn towards

revolutionary struggles that are emerging internationally. The perspective laid out by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) during the initial revolutionary struggles in Tunisia has been vindicated.

It wrote, “The only viable program for the working class and oppressed masses of Tunisia and the entire Maghreb and Middle East is the program advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International of socialist revolution. ... This struggle cannot be conducted simply on a national scale. Trotskyist parties must be built throughout Northern Africa and the Middle East to unite the working masses under the banner of the United Socialist States of the Middle East and the Maghreb, as part of the world socialist revolution.”

It added, “We call on readers of the WSWS in Tunisia and throughout the Middle East to contact our web site. We call on all those who seek to put an end to dictatorship and exploitation in Tunisia and the entire region to take up the fight to build sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International.”