

For proletarians the “Arab Spring” has just started

From Egypt to Tunisia

Port Said, Alexandria, Cairo, Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Gafsa, Tunis, Sfax... For large sections of the proletariat in Egypt and Tunisia, the outlook is the same: the first attempt at insurrection failed. The impetus to break free from the yoke of the autocracies was confiscated by the historic compromise between the state and the Islamists. The so-called “social question” was drowned in institutional reform and the quarrels of religion. The condition of the proletarians and the poor peasants just got worse. There are plenty of good reasons for taking to the streets again, for renewing the fight – a fight which is immediately political, and not just because the dominant classes impose confrontation on this terrain. Straight away the struggles point to the questions associated with the exercise of power - Who exercises it? Under what conditions? To do what? -, and of social organisation – with, as an absolute priority, action for the liberation of women, and the reappropriation of social wealth by proletarians, with or without jobs. This is why the struggle under way is decisive, not only for the absolutely poor of Tunisia but, following the example of that of proletarians in Egypt, for the whole of the exploited and oppressed classes of the region and, beyond that, of the whole world.

In Tunisia since 2011, it hasn't stopped¹

It's a fight which the rebels of the red triangle of Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine and Gafsa have never really given up since the first movements which threw out Ben Ali. It's a fight punctuated by the general strikes which followed, which for a long time, for far too long, remained isolated while the capital city progressively fell under the yoke of the Salafist purifiers. The execution of Chokri Belaid put the match to the powder keg in Tunisia. He was a secular, pan-arabist and statist lawyer, who led the parliamentary opposition to the regime of Ennahda, the party directly descended from the MTI², which was destroyed by Ben Ali. The parliamentary and constitutional road to social transformation had shown how useless it was despite the willingness of the regime, and the opposition, made up of the Movement of Democratic Patriots (MOUPAD) and the Popular Front³, to follow it, including after Chokri Belaid had been eliminated. The reply from the barricades showed itself to be far more effective and realistic: the Islamist regime

took a step back by proposing new elections and a new government of technocrats above the political free-for-all. It was a step which, it should be understood, doesn't represent any concession, even the most minimal, to the movement of the proletariat, but only a timid, first attempt to calm the street, to play for time. But even this small step has provoked strong dissensions in the Islamist camp.

Against the state and everything supporting it

This is yet more evidence, as if it was needed, of the realism and effectiveness of the insurrectional project in the face of the completely illogical one which gives the state the responsibility for dismantling itself. The fact that the Tunisian state is plunged into a deeper and deeper political crisis combined with the worsening of conditions of life for the proletariat is a potentially explosive mixture. What happens next depends on the capacity for the developing insurrection to provide itself with independent organs, both of combat and also counter-power. Such organs have been cruelly lacking so far, including inside the red triangle. Here and even more so in the rest of the country, because of the hegemonic role played by the UGTT (the big union federation once aligned with the Ben Ali regime, today aligned with the parties which represent it in parliament and in society, headed by the Popular Front), the rebels have still not been able to free themselves from the chains of parliamentary and bourgeois democracy. The general strike called by the UGTT on the day of the funeral of Chokri Belaid was an attempt by the non-islamist bourgeois camp to smother the insurrectionary impulse in pacifism and the defence of the institutions restructured and rebuilt on the ashes of the Ben Ali regime.

The general strike, an attempt at control

This was an attempt which met with some success because, on Friday 8 February 2013, Tunisia experienced the most sustained general strike and the most important demonstrations for several decades. However, the social peace operation by the union and the state left, carried out in close coordination with the widely deployed forces of repression, was not completely successful. This is shown by the almost 400 arrests and the violent confrontations which accompanied many of the rallies. One example amongst many others: on the night of Friday-Saturday, in the town of Souk Jedid, 17 km from Sidi Bouzid, rebels set fire to the office of the ruling party Ennahda and also to the office of an Islamist NGO. They also set fire to three offices of the district administration. The isolation of the movement to the red triangle has played a major role in the recent past in preventing the emergence and the formalisation of an autonomous revolutionary political stance. And yet a new front of proletarian radicality seemed to open up in the second city of the country, Sfax. In this urban area of the south east there has been a series of powerful demonstrations

¹ Refer to our pamphlets: #2 “*Tunisia: emergency state restructuring after an incomplete attempt at democratic insurrection*” and #3 “*Egypt: a historic compromise over an attempt at democratic insurrection*”

² “Movement of the Islamic Tendency”, an underground formation of Islamists in the 1980s.

³ A heterogeneous coalition of 12 Tunisian political opposition formations, from the left and the statist extreme left, including MOUPAD.

since Wednesday 6 February, attacks on the regional government office and the Ennahda headquarters, along with attempts to loot shops and supermarkets in the poorest neighbourhoods (such as the attack on a large part of the El Bahri shopping centre). The army was deployed at key points in the port town.

Islamists in local branches of Ansar Chariaa (Salafist jihadist organisation) also organised patrols to restore order. Caught off guard by the anger of the population, the Islamists initially reacted weakly by concentrating their forces on the supposed plot by France against Tunisia. Bearing a legal status since May 23 2012, the *Ligue de protection de la révolution* (League for protection of revolution LPR), created by Mohamed Maalej, close to Ennahda and whose goal is to “reinforce arabo-muslim identity”, has immediately reacted against rising of popular discontent against Islamic regime by multiplying patrols in neighbourhoods to restore order.

But we should have no illusions about this initial weakness – their striking power and their popularity were only slightly undermined. The fight isn’t over. For it to continue determined strikes in the factories and land occupations in the countryside must be added to the barricade fighting.

In Egypt repression has never stopped

The repression of the sparks of revolt against the consolidation of the Islamist regime and against the historic compromise between the Islamists and the army also detonated the present insurrectionary events in Egypt. These are of a size and strength clearly inferior to those in Tunisia but they indicate the active and collective detachment of a part of the proletarian population from the trap of bourgeois democracy and parliamentarism, even if it’s still a small minority. It’s still a long way from the imposition of normality.

As in Tunisia, the funds of the state are rapidly running out while the pockets of proletarians and poor peasants have been empty for a long time. It’s said that the army might take over the country again in its own name. The regular declarations of states of emergency and the frequent impositions of curfews in the big cities are seen by rebellious proletarians as signs of a rapid degeneration of the regime towards the restoration of an open dictatorship under cover of “defence of the revolution”. In their turn hundreds of thousands of Muslim Brotherhood activists are waiting for the signal to imitate their

Iranian peers of the Basij militias and parade in the streets to restore Islamic order against the impious rioters. New forces seem to be emerging in the proletarian camp. The world media exploit their naivety by depicting them as being like the Western Black Bloc: young rebels more motivated by carrying out spectacular and episodic proletarian violence than the methodical exercise of force by the exploited and oppressed classes in the service of a project of social transformation and destruction of the state.

But the most interesting “show” is not to be seen, not even in that largely mediated and symbolic space that is Tahrir Square in Cairo. More and more the poor of the main cities in Egypt choose direct action against the representatives of the state and its institutions. But for the time being, apart from these new formations autonomous youth, the situation seems to be the same as in Tunisia, with no process of self-organisation of the revolt seeming to emerge from the violent street fighting.

Struggle imposes a political leap

In Egypt the National Salvation Front (made up of 21 non-islamist organisations of the left and centre left of the state) still, even if with difficulty, provides the political representation of the movement. In comparison to the present situation in Tunisia, the class struggle in Egypt has not affected production and has not swept through the countryside. This is a serious handicap which can be added to the still strongly minority nature of the struggle. The road to liberation from the yoke of the Islamists and the army has to go via the return of class struggle in the factories and the countryside. This is indispensable for the constitution of stable autonomous political organs of the exploited and the oppressed in Egypt which are capable of putting the destruction of the state and class society at the heart of their strategic plan. If this way forward can materialise then the “Arab Spring” will finally ring out for the proletarians and poor peasants of the whole region and beyond, inscribing in sweat and blood the second serious attempt (after that of Tiananmen Square in China) to reverse the proletarian political cycle on a global level, since the historic defeat of the world revolution of the 1970s. This is an objective at once terribly ambitious but at the same time not unattainable.