

Tunisia, Egypt, ...

# It is up to the workers to take charge!

## ***“Dictators, clear off!”***

The shock wave of popular movements that shook a number of countries in North Africa and the Middle East has seen Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, in power for 23 years, flee with his Trabelsi mafia clan, and it is also weakening the grip of Muhammad Hosni Mubarak, the head of state in Egypt, and highly respected by the international community for 29 years.

Other countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and even Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Sudan, Libya and Morocco are at risk of major political upheavals and their respective cliques are already attempting to save their necks with measures against corruption, by reducing prices, by replacing ministers and even whole governments ...

A new generation, well-educated and equipped with modern communications technology, *“peaceable when allowed to be but violent when it has to be”*, occupied the streets, effectively defeating the police but at the cost of hundreds of lives, and demanded an end to poverty and repression and, above all, that the *“dictators”* depart along with their corrupt regimes.

This is something new in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere: the youth and the population at large are no longer afraid of demonstrating and have lost their fear of repression: *“better to die for something than live for nothing.”* The twenty-first century generation seems to want to bring an end to the twentieth century regimes.

This is a situation full of contradictions:

– Until now, the working class itself seems to have played a secondary role and has tended to be submerged in the *“population”* at large.<sup>1</sup>

– Consequently, the great powers, especially the United States and major European countries, despite their obvious disquiet, are still out to present these revolts as mere *“democratic”* movements following the example of all the *“colour and flower revolutions”* we saw in Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc twenty years ago. A simple change of regime was supposed to improve everything in a society that remains deeply divided into classes.

Rather than just seeing here a simple *“hunt for dictators”*, we should acknowledge the real challenges that these people, and the working class in particular, are confronted with.

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1. There is still a lot of information lacking. It has been reported, for instance, without much detail, that in the beginning of the movement in Egypt, the workers in a factory in the south of Cairo would have chased out their corrupt management. Elsewhere there would have been strikes. We shouldn't forget neither that the last years there have been important strike movements in Egypt.

## **Popular movements confront the economic crisis**

Why is the discontent and anger in these countries expressing itself in the streets, in riots, revolts and demonstrations rather than being expressed in places where all the social wealth is produced: the factories, workshops and offices?

It's primarily because very high unemployment and widespread poverty makes striking very difficult when faced with fierce repression from the state and its loyal unions. Also, because of the way the crisis manifests itself in these countries: particularly in inflated prices. Under pressure from the IMF and the World Bank, state subsidies to prices of fuels and staple foods (flour, sugar, oil, ...) have been cut severely to make these economies *“more competitive”* which has meant a drastic reduction in the living standards of the whole population.

The economic crisis is particularly affecting Europe and North America while countries like these still maintain relatively high rates of economic growth. But they also suffer from the speculation on raw materials as a consequence of the same economic crisis and higher rates of inflation that reduce the state's debts.

This is why the crisis is seen as more of a problem of consumer prices than one of low wages arising from exploitation in the workplace.

## **The *“dignified revolution”***

On 17th December 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi, a young unemployed graduate reduced to selling fruit and vegetables for a living, had his goods confiscated once again by police because they refused him a license. He made a sacrifice of himself by setting himself on fire and died on January 4th. Youths took to the streets spontaneously: against rising prices, unemployment and the terrible complacency of the authorities. They demanded the *“right to work”* and better living conditions. The revolt spread from town to town and eventually became focused in Tunis, the seat of government.

On January 13th 2011, after weeks of struggle and rebellion, Ben Ali promised new freedoms of political expression and the press; he reduced prices of basic commodities, he even promised to create 300,000 jobs and to no longer stand as a candidate in 2014 elections. But at the same time, he gave orders to General Rashid Ammar to fire on the crowd. When he refused, Ben Ali dismissed him. The general himself, in turn, no doubt *“following U.S. advice”*, dismissed Ben Ali the next day and the army occupied the airport. Rashid Ammar *“ad-*

vised” and most of all *allowed* Ben Ali to flee to Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, France, completely out of touch with the real events and not briefed by its “*American allies*”, wanted to dispatch lots of equipment and experts to help make the Ben Ali regime’s repression a bit less bloody.

Let’s skip over the various twists and turns in the forming a government, with all sorts of “*opponents*” coming in and going out. A new government was formed from representatives of the different parties, except the Stalinists and the Islamic fundamentalists, and with old Muhammad Ghannouchi as prime minister who had the role for 11 years as part of the Trabelsi clan. In six months time “*free and democratic elections*” would be held for the “*Tunisian population*” to choose their new exploiters. Little has changed ... the spectacle of a game of musical chairs for ministerial positions begins and on February 5th the police again fire into the crowd, killing several young people.

For decades, the major powers have used the pretext of the “*regional stability*” to support the dictatorships they endorsed in the fight against “*Islamic fundamentalism*”.<sup>2</sup> The same major powers have also benefitted greatly from the repression that provided a submissive, flexible and low cost workforce.

The U.S. administration adjudged that the degree corruption of the Tunisian state and the greed of the Trabelsi clan had become an embarrassment (see the Ambassador’s reports released by *WikiLeaks*); and, considering that popular anger might spread to other countries, it pushed for Ben Ali’s removal.

### **“We’re not leaving, he must go!”**

On 25th January, “*the Day of Rage*”, protests began in Cairo and other Egyptian towns (especially Alexandria and Suez), clearly inspired by the events in Tunisia of a few weeks before: Tunisian flags were carried in the demonstrations to alert Mubarak to what could happen to him.<sup>3</sup>

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2. To remind: Islamic fundamentalism was an ally of the US in order to counteract the influence of the Soviet Bloc, particularly in Afghanistan, the present base of al-Qaeda. By contrast, when the FIS won the “*democratically held*” elections in Algeria in 1991 it resulted in a military putsch with support of the US. When ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran gave his blessing on February 5<sup>th</sup> to the “*Islamic revolution in Egypt*”, this description was formally objected to by the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, according to whom it was about a “*revolution of the people, and not a religious revolution*”. In contrast to the American pretexts they have but very little in common with al-Qaeda or the regime in Iran. When they defend the introduction of Sharia, the holy law of medieval Islam, they are not yet known for their lapidation of adulterous women. And it has been particularly the support by the great powers to Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak which made them so popular in Egypt. The popular movement in Egypt, meanwhile, is the most flagrant combat against al-Qaeda and all other terrorists.

3. The appeal was made by the “*April 6 Youth Movement*”, a network active on Facebook and Twitter, with tens of thousands of participants, mostly qualified young without any political past. The date chosen was the one of the national celebration of the police! This network was founded in early 2008 in support of the workers in El-Mahalla El-Kubra, an industrial town, in preparation of a strike. This

The demonstrations raised the slogans of the popular movement in Tunisia: against repression, police brutality, the permanent state of emergency, the lack of freedom of expression and corruption. But behind these demands there was also the same revolt as in Tunisia against unemployment, rising prices, poor housing, and very low wages. From the beginning, all these demands are summarised in a single slogan: “*Mubarak, clear off!*”

Faced with a violent crackdown, the demonstrations could not take any other form than a violent reaction. There were clashes between demonstrators and the “*security forces*” in Cairo and in Suez, and the police did not hesitate to fire on the crowd. Demonstrators in several cities set fire to police stations in response. Demonstrators in Suez and in the Sinai region began arming themselves. Large numbers were arrested.<sup>4</sup>

On Friday, January 28<sup>th</sup>, the first mass rallies took place in Cairo, Suez, Beni Suef, Mansoura, Manufiya and elsewhere. The regime tried to cut off all communications: Al Jazeera television, the Internet and telephone links. That evening in Cairo, the demonstrators torched the headquarters of the NDP, Mubarak’s Party, and other buildings of the regime.<sup>5</sup> Police with tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons were not enough. The army was brought in, but the decreed curfew was ignored by the demonstrators. There were already 105 dead.<sup>6</sup> One million tourists would be evacuated from the country.

Unable to manage the situation other than through letting loose its “*Special Security Forces*” to create carnage, the regime decided to temporarily withdraw all its “*security forces*”. Widespread looting and general insecurity ensued which “*destabilised*” the country and was a justification for the ultimate slogan of all oppressors, “*It’s either us or chaos!*”<sup>7</sup>

But the population didn’t turn against the demonstrators. Instead of yielding to the blackmailing offer of “*protection*”, “*neighbourhood committees*” (a kind of civil guard) were organised.<sup>8</sup>

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network rejects the label “*political organisation*”.

4. Meanwhile, at January 28<sup>th</sup>, with support of the Muslim Brothers, Mohammed Al Baradei (Nobel peace prize winner) came back to Egypt; very modestly he proposed himself as a new head of state, something strongly challenged by most demonstrators who refuse to bind themselves to one or other “*oppositional forces*”.

5. Three days later, on January 31<sup>th</sup>, Mubarak’s NDP is excluded from the *Socialist International*. Great solidarity with a sister party under fire!

6. That day the army was also deployed to protect the famous National Museum; the ‘horrible’ demonstrators joint up with the soldiers to make an end to vandalism.

7. The looters are first of all the poorest: they claim their “*right to eat*” and attack small shops where the prices continue to rise. But they are chiefly criminals (miraculously “*escaped from prison*” and others). But finally they are the cops of Mubarak who unmasked themselves as true criminals by creating and organising the chaos Mubarak needed in order to justify a bloody repression.

8. These “*neighbourhood committees*” are often composed of proletarians defending themselves against general insecurity. But there are also the small shopkeepers who defend the little they have against those who have nothing at all.

Many factories closed, not only to avoid giving the workers the initiative but especially because the latter were at home defending their families and their property against looters.

The same January 28<sup>th</sup>, Mubarak used a traditional manoeuvre of all dictators: on the one hand, he dissolved his government to try to calm the anger while appointing Omar Suleiman, former head of the “*Egyptian General Intelligence Service*” (the secret police) as Vice-President (a position that did not exist previously). In addition, he invited a military, Ahmed Shafik, to form a new government. Finally, he announced he would not apply for re-election as president in the elections in September 2011.

The army replaced the “*Special Security Forces*”. The soldiers, mostly recruited from the working class themselves, were less likely to fire on the crowds and their superiors knew that.

Then there were the “*pro-Mubarak forces*” who tried to regain control of the situation. They were composed of small shopkeepers annoyed because for over a week their “*businesses*” had been suffering and because their shops were at risk from looters. There were also men hired from the slums and from among the poor who were willing to sell themselves to the highest bidder to “*clean up*” Liberation Square. Finally, there were Mubarak’s cops, dressed as civilians, who supplied instructions for organising and unleashing violence.

February 1st was called the “*March of the Millions*” day, with the largest of all the demonstrations.<sup>9</sup> Two nights of extreme violence followed, with many dead and the army finally forced to point its guns toward those who caused the violence. The “*pro-Mubarak forces*” disappeared from the street. The grand finale, scheduled for February 4th, called the “*Day of Departure*” of the dictator, nevertheless proved a failure: despite a huge demonstration, Mubarak clung onto power. Why?

For the United States the Tunisian extortionist, Ben Ali, president of a small non-strategic country, was replaceable. But it was a lot more difficult for them to get rid of Mubarak, strategist and pillar of the “*American stability*” in the region. Barack Obama, while saying it was “*for the Egyptians to decide*”, had to at least offer him an “*honourable exit*”.<sup>10</sup> Mubarak could leave and

9. The “*Two Million*” proclaimed by *Al Jazeera* for that day on Liberation Square only was largely exaggerated. But if we count the total numbers of participants for all demonstration we can certainly speak of many millions.

10. The special representative of Obama in Egypt, Frank Wisner, declared on February 5<sup>th</sup> 2011, after a meeting with Mubarak, in front of television cameras that Mubarak “*was of great importance for an orderly transition*”; Wisner was subsequently disclaimed by a very compromised White House because he said it *in public*. One day before, two over-faithful allies of the US, Silvio Berlusconi of Italy and Mark Rutten of the Netherlands, also very indiscreet, said exactly the same during the European summit in Brussels. Who still needs *WikiLeaks* to make state secrets public? Betrayal of “*friend*” Mubarak could have serious consequences in the region with all the other faithful “*friends of the US*”. Sometimes the great and smaller powers forget the old adagio: “*We do not have friends, we only have interests!*”.

the whole US foreign policy could risk losing credibility, even more than if Mubarak stayed.<sup>11</sup> And all the world’s leaders, including those outside the “*Arab world*”, seeing the demonstrators in these other countries, wanted to make clear above all that “*the street can’t rule*”.

On Sunday, February 6<sup>th</sup> 2011 Mubarak appeared again on Egyptian state television as head of Government.<sup>12</sup> For him, it was time to return to “*normal life*”. What was of great significance that morning was that the Cairo Stock Exchange and the commercial banks were the first by some hours to open their doors. While it was the day that the demonstrators chose to commemorate the martyrs in Liberation Square, all the “*opposition forces*” were starting to negotiate behind the back of the demonstrators with the regime’s vice-president, but they were also televised beneath a huge portrait of Mubarak himself.

All these people from the old regime, who changed course and suddenly became great democrats, provided the demonstrators with their first lesson: democracies can do something that dictators can’t: ignore public protest. The Egyptian army had begun restricting the space for demonstrations and Cairo seemed to be resuming a “*normal life*”.

On Tuesday, February 8<sup>th</sup> 2011, Suleiman said that there would be no reprisals against the demonstrators, which was hardly credible while he and his police assassins were still at large.

But the same day, when workers returned to work, a general strike was announced. The regime increased public sector wages and pensions by 15% immediately. It was a start! But again it’s was a case of too little and too late because inflation in Egypt had already reached 18%.

And the protests continue with still more force...

## The self-organisation of the workers for another world

We are with all our hearts with the demonstrators when they cry: “*Dictators, clear off!*” because behind these dictators stand their corrupt regimes and repression. And behind the regimes stand the great powers, that always supported these same dictators while boasting for being “*defenders of freedom, democracy and human rights*”. We also support the demonstrators for as far as the never gave the opportunity to so called political oppositional groups to “*steal*” their movement. The demonstrators have nothing to expect from this “*opposition*” of which the members are already lining

11. Hillary Clinton, on February 6<sup>th</sup>, felt obliged to clarify what “*our friends*” in the region meant: “*the governments AND the peoples*”, evidently in that order. Two days later she declared openly that Egypt needed Mubarak “*for a transition towards democracy*”, but at that moment, “*her friend*”, the assassin Suleiman, that Egypt “*wasn’t yet ready for democracy*”.

12. One day later even an uprising was reported among the very “*respectable*” staff of the Egyptian state television, in an effort to wash away the shame of ever having worked there.

up to get hold of a small job in the regime as soon as the occasion presents itself.

What is distressing the “*great powers*” is precisely the absence of credible oppositional forces, the result of decades of repression of all forms of opposition. The great powers fear the “*vacuity of power*” and they will not easily strip themselves of dictators as long as they haven’t found a convenient alternative.

The demonstrators in Cairo understood very well that one cannot trust an army still under state command; even when many soldiers, in contrast to most of their superiors, showed a certain sympathy for the demonstrators, they never fraternised<sup>13</sup> with them in order to rejoin the struggle.

By contrast, the expressions of “*patriotism*” were dangerous. Mubarak himself has, without much doubt, always been an exemplary “*patriot*”. The same applies to the national anthem raised by the demonstrators under the same national flags which have always been used to mount workers against one another in the many wars.<sup>14</sup>

Totally wrong would be the idea that it concerns only a matter proper to the “*Egyptian population*”; and neither is it a mere “*Arab affair*”; fundamentally it is a question of the world proletariat which will be compelled to unify internationally in order to live a decent life.<sup>15</sup>

This movement could overcome religious divisions: Islamic, Christian and nonreligious people demonstrated peacefully together against the regime. But the prayers which dominated many events on Liberation Square also hid the far more fundamental distinction between social classes. Obama too, in front of the camera’s, prayed for a “*good peaceful end of events*”, and most of all that the situation would not escape his control. Completely wrong would also be the idea that this “*popular movement*” would be a “*revolution*”: society remains profoundly divided into social classes, the misery and exploitation remain; and when the police might hit a little bit less hard next time, repression to defend the interest of the exploiters remains in place.

Finally, “*popular movements*” have no other perspective than accepting the replacement of one directing clique by another, even when a new regime has been warned that there are limits to the misery a population is prepared to endure.

As no real counter-power was constituted, in the final analysis the “*troops of order*” of the state are decisive. That is to say, as long as the workers do not check in with strikes, with demands aimed at extension and unification of struggles, with general assemblies, with strike committees and workers’ councils which might give a very different direction to society as a whole. Initially, this will no doubt be far less spectacular than the popular movement in Egypt; but it will also bear very different promises.

Meanwhile, the international bourgeoisie cannot rejoice too much that there has been relatively little workers’ resistance in the countries of the capitalist great powers. It will not remain so. The economic crisis will compel all of us to react.

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13. Since the beginning of February demonstrators sit down before and behind tanks, even between the wheels, out of fear that the military part, leaving them to the blind anger of the “*pro-Mubarak forces*” and particularly the secret police. In between the demonstrators did everything possible, often at the risk of their lives, to fraternise with the soldiers.

14. Other examples of this patriotism: portraits of Mubarak, smeared with a Stars of David, which were carried, and were witness of the very bad taste, yet were tolerated; the same applies to the presence of portraits of the former dictators Nasser and Sadat.

15. For instance, it is hard to see how all these masses of clandestine persons in Egypt, yet very deprived, could become part of this patriotic “*Egyptian*” movement.