

Tunisia: Interview with Kassrine workers' leader

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Interview with Mohamed Sghaier Saihi, Assistant General Secretary of the regional union federation in Kassrine, Tunisia. We interviewed him by email on 8 August.

MENA Solidarity: What are the main causes of workers' anger in Tunisia at the moment?

Mohamed Sghaier: Here are the main causes of the revolutionary process:

1- The high rate of unemployment, especially among high schools and university graduates (about 16 per cent). These young people had expectations of getting jobs and living with dignity. Unfortunately they were twice disappointed: once before the elections of 23rd October and again then under the rule of Ennahdha, an Islamist party in coalition with two small liberal parties.

Instead of going down, unemployment has grown to about 20per cent. And the number of unskilled workers is also getting bigger and bigger, still unemployed. These people are expressing their anger with roadblocks and unplanned sit-ins day after day, they are a real threat to social stability and day after day they cause trouble as they organise sit-ins and block routes and roads.

2- Social injustice. Over the last decades Tunisians have become aware that the poor get poorer and the rich get richer. The working class (particularly in the private sector) is targeted for all sorts of exploitation. Nothing has really changed since the uprising. The system is still there, even the laws which governed relations between employers and workers under the old dictatorship are still in force, laws which of course favour the 'lords of our labour ' as we call the bosses.

3- Inequality between the regions. Since the early sixties the government has always tried to develop the coastline and totally neglected the interior. As a result the country was divided into two different worlds, a relatively modern and easy-living Tunisia and a poor and under-developed Tunisia. Through the years this has caused a sense of frustration which exploded in January 2011 with the uprising that officially opened and inaugurated the Arab spring.

4- Dictatorship. Ben Ali was the absolute and unique governor, everything was done on his name. All the institutions submitted to his orders. His relatives and in-laws made Tunisia their private property.

You may wonder why I'm going back to tell you old stories. Simply because things have not really fundamentally changed. This brief outline may somehow answer your first question.

MENA Solidarity: Has anger been expressed in strikes? If so, please could you describe the nature and outcome of these strikes.

Mohamed Sghaier: I would immediately answer: YES. There are strikes in nearly all sectors. You may have heard about the latest crisis between UGTT, the General Union of Tunisian Workers, and

the government. A week ago the UGTT leaders planned a series of strikes in Sfax (the Tunisian Liverpool, our biggest industrial port), after the government arrested and jailed four trade unionists working in a hospital in that city. These four militants are accused of attacking the hospital manager, which is not true. The union leaders are demanding their members be freed, and the Ennahdha leaders refuse. This conflict situation has led to real physical confrontation and it may lead the country to disaster.

MENA Solidarity:How is the government responding to workers demands?

Mohamed Sghaier:The government seems deaf. Instead of increasing wages it is diverting a huge amount of money to “recompense” their Islamist militants who were persecuted by Ben Ali. Standards of living are decreasing, food prices are getting more and more expensive. Tunisians are starting to make jokes along the lines of ‘Come back Ben Ali, all is forgiven!’ because they say things were better even then.

MENA Solidarity:How are workers organising? Are they organising independent trade unions?

Mohamed Sghaier:After the revolution we saw the birth of two new unions. But these smaller unions at present have no real impact on the social movement. The UGTT remains the strongest union federation.

MENA Solidarity: Are workers’ struggles linking with other groups: the unemployed, students etc?

Mohamed Sghaier:There are very close links between workers’ struggles and different groups of civil society representing the unemployed, students, lawyers, the women’s movement, etc.

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