

# Algeria: Trade Unions and the Hirak

Thursday 25 June 2020, by [LARABI Samir](#), [SMITH Shelagh](#) (Date first published: 3 June 2020).

**Since February 22, 2019, Algeria has been living to the rhythm of a huge popular movement unprecedented since the country's independence in 1962, a movement that can be described as a real revolutionary process.**

The current popular movement has accentuated the regime's crisis and is fundamentally challenging its authority over society. The popular dynamic, with all its limits and contradictions, is part of a process of overthrowing the regime and the construction of a democratic and social republic.

A process that has mobilised all fringes of society, mainly people and workers crushed by decades of austerity and repression.

Throughout this struggle, workers have been an important mobilising force in the ongoing popular Hirak, either through union intervention, in citizen collectives or as individuals. However, they have taken part in the movement without a class identity and without highlighting the specific demands of the world of labour, which represents more than 9 million people.

From the first days of the outbreak of the popular Hirak, many unions and Trade Unions and the Hirak Metalworkers' union leader Kouadria Smain addresses a mass meeting, April 2019 Photo: courtesy Kouadria Smain via Facebook 2323 workers' collectives have shown their full support for the popular struggle, including the autonomous unions affiliated to the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions (CSA).

From the first weeks, the CSA displayed its support for the popular movement, the non-recognition of the government and the demand for the return to popular sovereignty. The demands of the CSA, which exists only in the public sector, are not corporatist or socio-economic, they adopted the demands of the street, namely the departure of the system and the establishment of the second Republic.

The CSA organised two strikes and two marches, with the same political demands, in the capital Algiers on April 10 and May 1, 2019, despite the attempts of the regime to repress them. Even though confined to the public service sector, these two events raised great hopes among the population in struggle. But afterwards the leaders of these unions became passive.

They preferred to engage in a kind of coalition with certain parties and civil society organisations, in groupings and meetings which demanded the return to the electoral process with a minimum of guarantees on the transparency of the elections.

In fact they were not far from the regime's proposal of a political solution within the constitutional framework. These unions' leadership did everything to impede the day of national protest in October 2019 and undermine the participation in a general strike in December 2019, on the eve of the presidential elections.

An attitude which deprived the popular Hirak of a considerable strike force and the prospect of

consolidation by organised workers. This meant the movement missed a historic chance for change by and for the workers those leaders are supposed to represent.

At the same time, many workers in the economic sector mobilised to support the Hirak and distanced themselves from the bureaucratic apparatus of the UGTA symbolised by Abdelmadjid Sidi Said. Dozens of economic, even strategic companies went on strike in solidarity with the popular movement.

With the start of the revolutionary process, a new coordination within the UGTA was born. This brought together four regional unions who affirmed their support for the movement of “building a new republic” and demanded the departure of Sidi Said and all the leaders involved in the union’s betrayal.

They were joined by several members of the National Executive Commission (CEN), the highest body between two congresses, then by the National Federation of Workers in Metallurgy and Mechanics, Electricity and Electronics (FNTMMEE). The coordination called “National Committee for the reappropriation of the UGTA by the workers” organised rallies on April 17 and May 1, 2019 in front of the union headquarters, and attracted many unionists, workers and left-wing activists.

The Committee launched a national petition for the organisation of an extraordinary national congress of the UGTA before the end of 2019, which only delegates duly mandated by the base should attend. However, this movement to reclaim the UGTA could not gain the confidence of all workers and union officials, nor prevent the organisation’s planned congress from being held.

This movement for change did not last, due to lack of initiative and combativeness and the lack of involvement of the workers in this fight against the bureaucratic apparatus, as well as the objective contradictions in the world of labour.

Known for its long traditions of radical union struggle, the region of Bejaia stood out by the level of real and effective involvement of the unions (UGTA and autonomous unions’ sections) in supporting the popular Hirak from the first days of the current revolutionary process.

Both in the economic sector (public and private) and in public service, local unionists and workers’ collectives got strongly involved in the mobilisations and strikes, and some are very active in the Pact of the Democratic Alternative (PAD, an alliance of some opposition parties including the left with some trade unions and civil society organisations).

The mobilisation reached its peak during the general strike of December 9, 10 and 11, 2019. During these days of strikes, large processions of workers from the UGTA and autonomous unions unified in the streets.

This demonstrates the ability of workers to unite in struggle, beyond corporatism and the internal struggles between union apparatuses. This experience once again demonstrated that the revolution cannot succeed without democratic organisation and without the massive support of the workers. The workers’ show of force once again proves its ability to mobilise and struggle better once it has freed itself from bureaucratic obstacles.

At this crucial moment in the revolutionary process, the Hirak needs a new lease of life in terms of organisation and perspectives in favour of the workers, not a so-called road map to resolve the regime’s crisis.

It needs to offer a perspective for going beyond the current regime, with its union oppression, its social misery, exploitation and precariousness. The unity and permanent mobilisation of workers

from all sectors can only open up historic political possibilities for the construction of an authentically democratic and social Algerian republic free from all forms of market domination.

*Translated by Shelagh Smith*

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