

Algeria: The Battle for Change in the Classroom

Thursday 25 June 2020, by [HAMOUCHE Hamza](#), [SAMIR Bordj](#), [SMITH Shelagh](#) (Date first published: 3 June 2020).

Could you briefly describe the school system in Algeria for our audience in the United Kingdom?

To answer this question, firstly I must place myself in my role as a trade unionist, that is to say to inform, and at the same time challenge the Algerian education system. The Algerian constitution guarantees the right to education for all. It is compulsory, free for all children of school age up to the age of 16.

More than 9.2 million students are enrolled in public schools, of whom about 63,800 students are in private schools. The evolution of the Algerian education system has gone through three periods since 1962: a policy of recovery of the colonial system, followed by reforms to assert independence and confirm national sovereignty, and finally a policy of managing student admissions.

The main reasons why our education system does not work are: it is trapped by ideological and political struggles; the incompetence of the main players in the sector; uninspiring programmes of study oriented towards learning by heart rather than understanding; stultifying bureaucratisation; the teachers only copy a programme dictated by the ministry without taking into account the particular difficulties and needs of the students; the negligence of the State through lack of research in the sector.

The best way of bankrupting a public service is lack of state financial support, a deterioration that prepares the way for the commodification of Algerian schools: schools dedicated much more to social training than to developing knowledge in the service of society.

Which union do you belong to?

I am a founding member of CLA (Conseil des Lycées d'Algérie, Council of Algerian High Schools), founded in 2011. But the CLA already existed long before. The CLA in 2001 was not a trade union; it was a movement of discontent by teachers without a clear status (that is to say those with short-term contracts) mobilised together to regularise their situation.

After its beginnings outside the official institutional framework, firstly in Algiers, and then after spreading in 2007 to other regions, the CLA obtained official recognition from the Algerian state in 2013, and was transformed into the Council of Teachers in Algerian High Schools (CeLA). The CeLA today is established in around thirty wilayas or regions. We defend free, good quality public schools.

Do the different education unions work together?

In 2006, an inter-union organisation was formed within the education sector to counter the reform which was taking place, but especially on three united demands: a salary increase of 100 percent, the elaboration of specific pay and conditions regulations for employees, and retirement after 25

years of service. The following year, the organisation expanded to include all autonomous public service unions.

The late Idir Achour, former General Secretary of the CLA, always worked for a united union front to build a real balance of power and to achieve a general strike. This is evidenced by the recent creation of the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions (CSA) and the constant maintenance of relations with combative unions in the local sections of the UGTA (majority national union, which largely covers the private sector, but is very bureaucratic and in bed with the regime).

What were the demands raised by strikes in recent years? What have been their successes and failures?

In 2004, the education trade union movement launched four strikes, including a three-month one that achieved a 60 percent increase in salaries, which was completely offset by the increase in the cost of living.

Some of the other demands were: wage increases, the promulgation of employment regulations in education, and retirement after 25 years of service; guarantee of trade union freedoms and the right to strike, campaign against a public service statute which aimed to enshrine precariousness; campaign to defend public education and to denounce the planned dismantling of technical education; campaign to regain the pedagogical power of teachers.

The successes were: a slight improvement in promotions to the category of public service status and a 60 percent increase in salaries. Failures: cancellation of early and proportional retirement, tightening of laws relating to the right to strike and to demonstrate.

What role have teachers played in the Hirak?

Algerians cannot and will not suffer any more humiliation. They want to live in an Algeria of democracy and social justice. National wealth must be distributed fairly. Teachers believe that Algeria after February 22, 2019 will never be the same as before, and have engaged in the Hirak from the start.

On March 10, 2019, unionised and non-unionised teachers followed the call for a general strike and demonstrations in all the cities of Algeria. On October 28, 2019, on the initiative of the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions (CSA), teachers took part en masse in the demonstrations by closing schools, high schools and universities, in a general strike which gained 80 percent support at the national level, to demand the departure of the existing system.

The ruling class has turned to the use of force to push its roadmap and is in a strong position because it holds the means of persuasion and disinformation (the mass media, the judiciary...). But the struggle continues because the regime has no legitimacy.

Could you tell us more about recent strikes and marches by primary teachers?

Primary school teachers in Algeria suffer on both a pedagogical and a social level. On the pedagogical level, the teachers are asking for a reduction of the timetable which has reached 30 hours per week, the cancellation of classroom newsletters, the generalisation of new technologies, and a reduction in class sizes which sometimes reach 36.

They are demanding that primary schools become the property of the education sector and not of the municipalities, which manage them poorly; and to cease performing a supervisory role in the playground and in the canteen.

On the social level, they are demanding a remuneration which allows them to live a dignified life (faced with soaring prices, 31,000 DA per month, or 200 €, is insufficient for even one person to live in dignity); bring the primary level into line with other levels (revision of the specific pay and conditions regulations). Faced with such a situation, the CeLA can only be united with primary school teachers in their efforts; by declarations and sit-ins in front of the Education Departments.

Interview by Hamza Hamouchene and Shelagh Smith.

Translated by Shelagh Smith.

Bordj Samir is a teacher and a founding member of the CeLA union.

Hamza Hamouchene is a London-based Algerian researcher and activist. He works for the Transnational Institute (TNI).

Shelagh Smith is a member of the National Education Union in Britain.

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Transnational Institute (TNI)

https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/tradeunions_algerianuprising_0520_hires-1.pdf

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