

# Eyewitness Tunisia

Nadim Mahjoub, Tunisia Solidarity Campaign, reports on what he saw of the developing revolution during a recent visit to Tunisia.

Piles of rubbish go uncollected in the centre of Tunis, as well as in other towns around the country. Workers have been on strike for two weeks to demand improvement in their conditions. Since 14th January only the police have received a wage increase. The Swiss authorities have revealed that the 622 million Swiss francs (518 million euros) deposited by Ben Ali and his family have shrunk to 80 million Swiss francs.

An investigation has opened against the President of the Tunisian Union for Industry, Commerce and Handicrafts, as well as against the administrators of the Social Security Fund, which will examine the sums of money that were illegally transferred from the Fund to the bosses' union.

There are daily sit-ins of hundreds of people in front of government offices, representing all social strata with different demands. Judges, represented by the National Council of the Tunisian Judges Association, declared a strike for 7th April demanding the resignation of the Justice Minister and the election of temporary councils instead of the implementation of new decrees.

Al-Qasbah Square is encircled with barbed wire and guarded by the army and the police. An attempt to organise a third sit-in was not successful as protesters were dispersed and even attacked and tear-gassed. Protests were confined to a small area in front of the Municipal Theatre. The police occupied the steps of the theatre preventing the few hundred people from using it as a stage to deliver their speeches and chant slogans.

In Avenue Habib Bourguiba (the scene of the massive mobilisation on 14th January) Africa Hotel, the tallest building in the Avenue, was closed by its owner and 217 employees lost their jobs after demanding permanent employment.

An important workers' struggle was the closure of Gel Boss factories in Menzil Bourguiba, 60 km north of Tunis. The director of Gel Boss had been sack-

ing workers every time he heard of their intention to form a union. On 24th March the director refused to meet a group from the newly formed union. The unionists wanted to know whether their demands, including reinstating a shop steward who had been unfairly dismissed, would be met. The director insulted and defied the unionists. On 28th March the workers went on strike in order to make the director hold talks with them and meet their demands. An attack on the director's office led to intervention by the army and the indefinite closure of all Gel Boss factories.

A section of Habib Bourguiba Avenue has become like Speakers' Corner in London. In the new Tunisia of free speech everyone is a speaker. One can hear all sorts of subjects. Some Islamists held a Friday prayer a couple of times, but the Interior Ministry ruled that any praying in the street is illegal.

I've noticed a slight increase in the number of women wearing a headscarf. Headscarves were a rare phenomenon in the capital 15 years ago. That was partly down to repressive laws, but mainly due to the character of Tunisian society with its "faith in the heart, not in the dress", but 30% of women are now thought to wear a headscarf.

It is not uncommon to hear the view that the revolution has been hijacked. Over coffee in a smoky cafe, a school teacher told me that the RCD (deposed President Ben Ali's party, now officially dissolved) is still running the show, but behind the scenes, and that those who plundered Tunisia have not been arrested. Those who killed protesters have not been arrested, but ordinary people involved in

criminal acts have been arrested.

In Attadhamon neighbourhood in Tunis, there was an initiative to broaden the Council for the Protection of the Revolution (CPR) by involving more people. In the committee there were already the Workers Communist Party (WCP), the Islamist Al Nahda Movement, the Union of Unemployed Graduates and others. On 3rd April, according to the WCP, the process of choosing new people to participate in the CPR turned into a coup organised by the new political party Al Nahda.

In the name of linking with the masses and broadening the opposition, the CPR included 29 groups. Now some of these groups are in the High Committee for Achieving the Goals of the Revolution, Democratic Transition and Political Reform. This was formed by the Interim Government and excluded the youth who formed the core of the mass movement and included parties and individuals that did not take part in the revolutionary movement. The individuals of this High Committee have been appointed, not elected. The bosses' union is part of it. The President of the committee has publicly objected to foreign monitoring of the coming elections!

In Tunis University a student told me how the left was united during the days leading to the 14th January. This was the case in her university, for example, where the militants of the Tunisian Workers Communist Party were the most active. Later that unity, which was also reflected in the 14th January Front, fell apart. She told me she thinks there has been a diversion and that manoeuvres are underway "to steal the revolution."