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The Tunisian Inspiration: Countering Authoritarianism with Social Justice Unionism

Looking around the world today, it may seem bleak: crackdowns on civil liberties and worker rights are happening everywhere: Cambodia, Colombia, Egypt, Hungary, Turkey, the United States and elsewhere.

Yet whenever and wherever basic rights are under attack, there always will be people resisting.

The question for unions is: Will the labor movement be a part of that resistance—or not?

In Tunisia, unions answered with a resounding, “Yes!”

HERE'S HOW IT HAPPENED:

Back in 2011, people across the Middle East began rising up against decades of corruption and misrule that left their countries with few opportunities for citizens to improve their lives.

The spark that set off the uprisings across the Arab world took place in Tunisia, a small country at the top of North Africa along the Mediterranean. President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali had ruled Tunisia for decades. With his family, Ben Ali held sway over a large percentage of the country's private economy, controlling real estate, hotels, airlines, telecommunications and automobiles.

On December 17, 2010, a 23-year-old Tunisian market vendor set himself on fire to protest the government corruption that made it impossible for him to earn a living. Mohamed Bouazizi died from his injuries. But Bouazizi's action in his small town far from the capital touched a nerve in Tunisian society, and momentum spread quickly across the country.

UNIONS PLAY CENTRAL ROLE IN THE UPRISING

People stood up and marched on local governments. The more the government shot or beat up protesters, the more crowds increased, calling for “Bread, Freedom and Social Justice.”

Local unions and their members understood that those demands represented what all working people wanted, and began to join the protests, ultimately playing a central

role in the revolution as they took to the streets and helped organize security for their neighborhoods. Pushed by grassroots union activism and calls by local unions to take action, the national Tunisian Labor Federation (UGTT—the Tunisian AFL-CIO) increasingly took a stronger and stronger stance in support of the protests. The regime still held a monopoly on violence, and as a leading institution in the country, the UGTT made a decision to put its political power and voice on the line, risking everything to follow the people in this peaceful movement.

With UGTT calling a national strike on January 14, 2011, more than 150,000 Tunisians rallied in front of the symbol of repression, the interior ministry (imagine

the FBI, CIA and National Security Council all rolled into one). By the end of the day, Ben Ali had fled.

LESSONS IN “SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM”

The UGTT's actions during the Tunisian protests were not a given. If you had asked an average worker in Tunisia in June 2010 about UGTT, many would have expressed disappointment. They might have said, “They are a movement from another era. They were great and powerful back in the day, but now I don't see what they do.” But the UGTT made a choice when it counted, and in doing

so, the union federation recaptured the imagination of Tunisian workers and their communities.

With the labor movement facing such challenges and overwhelming odds in much of the world with repressive states and “organized capital,” what are the lessons from Tunisia in building the labor movement through social movement unionism?

■ *The national federation listened to the grassroots.* The UGTT Executive Council met in executive session continuously throughout the protests. The top leadership—national union presidents and

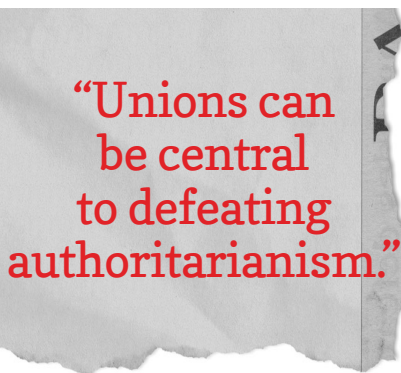


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federation top leadership—dropped everything. The UGTT created a war room not to direct the action but to listen to the voices of union members and the community who were taking action in the streets, while guiding the change.

■ *The movement was bottom up.* Local labor movements, responding to their grassroots, tapped into the pulse of a social movement. Astute locals, in tune with the public, channeled information up to the leadership.

■ *UGTT organized beyond labor's base.* UGTT broadened its focus from the rights of unions and their members during this protest movement. UGTT leaders spoke of the working class, one not segmented by sector or union membership. They sensed that the issues on the street are the labor movement's issues: Bread, Freedom, Social Justice. Without worker democracy, there eventually will be no labor movement. Together, UGTT community networks protected neighborhoods, hosted events in union halls and coordinated actions with the protest movement.



■ *Labor used its political insider status for something beyond its own short-term gain.* UGTT put it all on the line, used all its connections and channels of influence to reflect the voice of the people to the state, and hold the state accountable.

THE RESULT? WORKERS FLOCKED TO UNIONS, EVERYONE BENEFITED

Tens of thousands flocked to Tunisia's labor movement because it played this social role, one that encompassed aspects of both "lead from behind" and lead by galvanizing. When I met with the

leader of the public-sector government workers after the uprising, he said, "We're having a big problem. We have just gained thousands of union members and we aren't even organizing. Can you give us some tips?"

We in the United States should have such a problem!

The lesson from Tunisia are inspiration to union members and leaders everywhere: when faced with authoritarian regimes or institutions that deny people their basic rights, unions and other civil society organizations face a choice: Step up, form coalitions and build true economic and political freedom. Or, appease the ruling elite which will, eventually, work to destroy the labor movement. The union movement is central to defeating authoritarianism—in Tunisia and around the world.

—Shawna Bader-Blau is Executive Director of the Solidarity Center. The Solidarity Center is the largest U.S.-based international worker rights organization. Allied with the AFL-CIO, the Solidarity Center assists workers across the globe as, together, they fight discrimination, exploitation and the systems that entrench poverty—to achieve shared prosperity in the global economy. Learn more at www.solidaritycenter.org.

ADVICE FROM AN EXPERIENCED LABOR LAWYER, PART ONE.

Labor lawyer Ken Page is Steward Update's newest contributor. Here, he starts with two pieces of advice on grievance handling. We'll have more from him in future issues. You can see it all now at www.unionist.com.

1 COLLECTIVE WORKER AND UNION POWER IS BETTER THAN ARBITRATION. It's collective worker and union power in the workplace that always has the most impact when resisting any form of employer abuse. It's also the best tool to get the fairest results when a member faces disciplinary charges or the union disagrees with the management's incorrect implementation of the contract.

Historically, labor fought hard for arbitration, a tool to help moderate employer abuse in the work place. But, it is important to note that the highly technical and bureaucratic nature of arbitration is usually not designed to consistently provide workers the fairest results.

2 IF YOU HAVE TO USE ARBITRATION, STEP ONE IS BUILD TRUST WITH THE MEMBER(S) INVOLVED—AND OTHERS. I have handled hundreds of arbitrations. (I've always been on the workers' side—never management's.) These hearings have addressed discipline arbitrations where the employer was seeking to impose some form of workplace

punishment, and other, more general grievances where there's a dispute over the collective bargaining agreement. For disciplinary hearings make sure that you meet with the union member(s) and create a space that allows for open and honest exchange. Immediately file any grievance documents or other paperwork and pay close attention to any timelines your contract sets. As a steward, you want the member(s) involved to feel that the union will listen patiently and provide sound, objective advice. After meeting and getting all the details from the member, the broader investigation into the facts will guide your next steps.

Talking Right-To-Work With Non-Union Workers

Editors' note: Union members and their allies in Missouri beat back an effort to establish so-called right-to-work in their state in August. Shannon Duffy reflects on how he talked with voters, at their doors, about opposing anti-union policies when most don't have unions.

Back in the eighties, when I was a steward at Ozark Air Lines, a co-worker was suspended for three days without pay over something that was understood by everyone to be totally arbitrary and unfair. A grievance was promptly filed, but the union knew that the process would take months to resolve and that, in this case, justice delayed meant justice denied. Our co-worker was going to be seriously short on his next paycheck and winning the grievance and getting him his money back could take almost a year. Help was needed now.

So on the morning of the third day of his suspension, we launched a "safety campaign." (We called it a safety campaign because slowdowns are illegal). So there we were, being really safe and doing everything by the book, an action known as "work to rule." Everybody was mindful of how they moved, looking where they walked and runway traffic was moving at or below the posted speed limit of 15 MPH.

Soon planes started to back up in St. Louis. Flights would arrive and then spend an incredibly long time waiting for gates. The terminal was packed with irate passengers. Meanwhile, union workers kept paying careful attention to how they



picked up a bag or piece of mail or freight and management started to lose its mind.

Our union's grievance committee was made up of one older guy and one younger guy. They were summoned upstairs and told that, if they didn't put a stop to this right now, they would be fired. They came back downstairs and the senior guy said, "Hey, you guys, this is serious. I might lose my job if you don't knock this off!" The junior member walked outside on the ramp, looked around to make sure no supervisors were near, smiled, and said four words: "It's working. Go slower." And everyone nodded and went back to doing what they had been doing before.

It soon became clear that management had no clue about how to deal. Over on the B-concourse, a senior member of management approached a group of

workers who were behaving very safely and he began screaming at them. He yelled and cursed and said that, unless they started moving faster, they would all be fired. Their response? They smiled at him and went right on being safe and conscientious workers. When no one did as he commanded, he staggered over to the steel pier that held up the jetway and leaned heavily against it. He seemed to be trying to catch his breath, and more than one person thought he might very well expire right on that spot.

However, he caught his second wind when he spied a bag runner pulling three or four carts of bags, crossing from the C-concourse to the B and going about two miles an hour. He stopped the driver and demanded to know why he was driving so ridiculously slowly. The driver said,

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TALKING RIGHT-TO-WORK WITH NON-UNION WORKERS

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“It hurts to go any faster.” It was a *great* reply because there was ice on the ground and driving over it was bumpy as hell and it *did* hurt if you went very fast. That had never mattered before; we all drove over that stuff really fast all the time. But it was still a great reply because no one could claim that it didn’t hurt. I believe the driver may also have said something logical, like how driving too fast over all those bumps might cause bags to fall out. In any event, the manager said nothing, walked dejectedly back to his vehicle, and drove away.

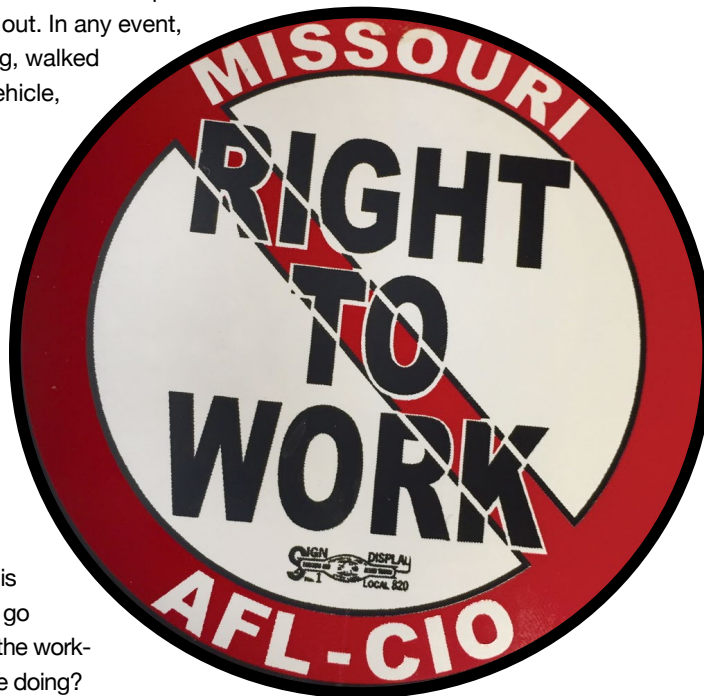
Scenes like that repeated all over the airport that day. At three o’clock our grievance committee was called upstairs again. This time, they were informed that our suspended brother would be paid for the three days he had missed and the letter of discipline would be removed from his file. So would they *please* go back downstairs and get the workers to stop what they were doing?

It is not an exaggeration to say it was one of the best days of my life.

WHY UNIONS SCARE THE POWERFUL

Because the right wing is usually pushing right-to-work, we’re often asked two important questions: “Why should a non-union worker vote against right-to-work?” and “Since unions comprise only nine percent of the workforce, why are anti-union forces so intent on doing this? Why is right-to-work so important to them?”

“When strong unions forge coalitions with other social movements, there is enormous potential for change.”



To answer that, it’s important to understand how a workplace can be a source of great strength. An active union presence in the workplace is often the basis for other, perhaps larger, mobilizations that occur outside the workplace and in the community. When strong unions forge coalitions with other social movements, there is enormous potential for change. An organized and mobilized workforce is capable of creating

all kinds of change—and *that* is what scares them.

I witnessed it firsthand at Gate 18-B back in the eighties. It’s why those in power have waged a relentless campaign against us all these years. The idea of workers realizing how we are all connected scares the bejesus out of them.

This has never been about workers receiving an extra 25 cents an hour or a 401(k) match; that’s small potatoes to them—an annoyance. Keeping workers disorganized and, if possible, at each other’s throats is the real goal: because a disorganized workplace, where workers feel powerless, prevents our ability to act collectively in the broader struggle for social and economic justice.

Last week I spoke with a nonunion single mother. We did not discuss fair share. Instead, we talked about the myriad of issues workers face in our state. While talking about medical coverage (and her lack of it) I asked her if she thought our odds were better for expanding Medicaid in this state with a strong union movement or with a weak one? And that is when she got it.

—Shannon Duffy is a business representative with the United Media Guild (CWA) in St. Louis, Missouri. A longer essay, from which this is adapted, was published by Labor Notes, www.labornotes.org. UCS thanks both Duffy and Labor Notes for sharing it with us.

STEWARDS CAN HELP EDUCATE AND ACTIVATE COWORKERS TO VOTE

Did you know that union members vote in higher percentages than non-union working people? Why does that matter? Unions and workers' rights are being attacked every day by corporate interests and the elected officials who take their contributions. To defend our rights, we must be educated about these issues and how they affect our family's quality of life and our pocketbook.

Health care is getting wildly expensive and is the biggest cause of bankruptcy today. Student debt, Social Security and quality public education are all issues that affect working people.

So, what can we do as stewards in the workplace to help educate and activate our coworkers?

- Help people get registered to vote. Find out about your state's laws here: vote.gov. You can also find this link at opeiu.org.
- Get people committed to vote. Use the OPEIU pledge cards. Contact Jordan Budd, OPEIU's political organizer at jbudd@opeiu.org to request pledge cards today! This will help you collect contact information and OPEIU will send them a reminder to vote.

- Do a short survey to find out what issues coworkers care about most.
- Organize a committee in your local union to interview candidates for office. Find out where they stand on issues that matter to your members most—retirement, health care, minimum wage, among others. Participate in your state AFL-CIO and Central Labor Council activities.
- Volunteer to bring coworkers to a phone bank or go knocking door-to-door in different neighborhoods around your city. People power is more valuable than money.

These activities can be done on the job in non-work areas during non-work times. Bulletin boards that allow people to post about a car for sale or a school fundraiser may be used for union and election-related activities. Remember that many people have strong opinions. We want to educate people about how their vote can impact their family's economic well-being—not tell them who to vote for.

DON'T STOP WHEN THE ELECTION IS OVER! KEEPING MEMBERS INVOLVED AND ACTIVE IS THE BEST WAY TO BUILD THE POWER OF THE UNION!



AFL-CIO, CLC