



Solidarity with the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East

North Africa and the Middle East are aflame. Mass demonstrations drove Ben Ali out of Tunisia and Mubarak from the presidency of Egypt. Protest continues in Syria despite increasingly bloody repression. Every day brings new accounts of demonstrations and protests; each day the upsurge spreads to another country: Iraq, Aden, Yemen, Bahrain, Morocco, Oman, etc.

No struggle has only victories. In Bahrain, the Gulf Cooperation Council of reactionary oil governments of the Persian Gulf sent in troops in order to suppress the demonstrations. In Libya, Qaddafi's dictatorship has fought back with heavy weapons and foreign mercenaries, and inflicted bloody setbacks on the movement. And the US and European imperialist powers are carrying out an air campaign against Qaddafi's air force, tanks and artillery, and they will use this intervention in an attempt to become the arbiters of the outcome in Libya. This military situation is a major obstacle to the Libyan movement. But the old Middle East is dying. It will never be the same.

Against tyranny and free-market misery

The most notable feature is that the people are rising in anger against tyranny. The people are demanding real elections. They are against the emergency laws that last for decades on end, the banning of unions and strikes, the imprisonment of activists, and the repression by police, military, and security forces. And they are also against the corruption of the regimes, in which oil money and other revenues went to benefit a handful of cronies of the ruling regime.

But it's not just a movement against political tyranny and corruption. It's a movement against poverty, unemployment, low wages, and economic hopelessness. In some countries, unemployment rates have reached 30% or so. Millions of youth have graduated from school only to find no jobs available. And food prices have jumped, recently reaching another record level, thus compounding the misery.

This misery has been intensified by free-market reforms. Country after country, from Egypt and Iraq to Libya and Tunisia, have refashioned their economies according to the World Bank, the IMF and the free-market economists. This has resulted in vast inequality, the lowering of wages, and the destruction of government services.

Here in the US, the TV and newspapers present the problem as bad governments whose misrule have blocked the benefits of pro-business reforms. The truth is the opposite. It's these bad governments who were the motor of pro-business reforms, and it is these free-market reforms which have devastated the people. Some of the regimes which are now tottering were poster children for neo-liberal reforms. The last IMF report on Tunisia in 2010 strongly praised Ben Ali's regime for its economic policies.⁽¹⁾ And just days before the uprising in Libya, the IMF lauded Qaddafi's regime for "enhancing the role of the private sector".⁽²⁾

Last year saw mass demonstrations against austerity and free-market reforms in various countries in Europe. This year we are seeing the Middle Eastern upsurge. At base, it too is an expression of growing anger at the poverty caused by pro-business market reforms.

US imperialism backs tyrants for decades on end

Obama, and Bush before him, posed as champions of freedom. But the US government backed most of these regimes now under attack. Egypt, for example, received more US foreign aid (mostly military aid) than any other country except Israel. The US government knew that

Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia were tyrants. But it backed them anyway. Indeed, it backed them *because* they were tyrants: this was an example of US imperialism in action.

This is no secret. If one listens to the TV commentators, the talking heads worry about how the insurgent peoples will vote. They often suggest that, for this or that country, it might be better to have a regime that follows US policy prescriptions than one which is elected.

Egypt and the working class

If it were up to the businesspeople of the world, there wouldn't be uprisings against dictatorships. Not in Egypt, which Mubarak's regime was a lynch-pin of US foreign policy. Not in Yemen, when Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime has been a major ally of the US's supposed war on terrorism. Not even in Libya, where Qaddafi had settled his differences with Western governments and adopted pro-business policies.

So where did this upsurge come from? The media often makes it sound as if Egypt was quiet until recently. Actually, in the last several years, workers and students carried out several thousand protests and strikes, including some strikes at major factories. This took place despite repression and difficulties, and it laid the basis for the current upsurge.

There is talk of how important the internet is in these upsurges. It's asked, "was this a cell phone and twitter revolution?" But, while activists made good use of the internet, this was simply one of their tools, not the source of the uprising.

Since the fall of Mubarak in Egypt, the workers have continued to organize. Strikes have spread throughout the economy. The old labor federation was just a tool of the regime to prevent strikes and protests, and efforts are being made to forge new labor organizations.

The future of the uprising in Egypt and Tunisia

As far as the Obama administration is concerned, the overthrow of Mubarak should have been the end of the struggle in Egypt. There should simply be minor changes in the Egyptian constitution to allow fairer presidential elections. But the same system of slightly-camouflaged army supremacy and market reforms should continue.

But the Egyptian demonstrators have declared that they are not satisfied with the army taking power. They want an end to the emergency law; the release of all arrested demonstrators; tearing up the repressive constitution, not revising it; the end to the wave of economic privatization; etc. In contrast, the army leadership has repeatedly demanded that the strikes end, while the workers have repeatedly gone on striking. And a series of confrontations have taken place between the demonstrators and the army over various demands.

So far, the army has been forced to make one concession after another, including the dismissal of various Mubarak-era officials and a promise to disband the hated state security policy. Most recently, the army has been forced to dissolve Mubarak's National Democratic Party, and to start criminal investigations of Mubarak and various of his NDP cronies.

Something similar is happening in Tunisia. When the tyrant Ben Ali fled Tunisia, this wasn't the end of the struggle, but a new phase in it. The Tunisian government tried to continue with most of Ben Ali's old officials and all his institutions. There have been demonstrations against this; there have been fights between the police and demonstrators; there is still a struggle to determine what Tunisia is going to be like.

The working class is the main force for freedom

In these struggles, at first everyone seems to be united against the tyranny of the old regime. The workers are angry both at their repression and at their impoverishment. But even some capitalists are mad, because the favored capitalists get most of the benefits of market reforms. In the Egyptian events, even one of the richest capitalists in the country demanded that Mubarak get out. The real forces in the uprising were the workers and youth, but there were splits in the regime and among the capitalists.

But when the tyrant falls, then the different class interests appear more clearly. The workers want real political liberties and an end to market reforms, but the capitalists want more pro-business policies, and they want to keep the laws that restrict worker protest.

Among the workers, too, there will be divisions. The workers' and left-wing movements in North Africa and the Middle East are in crisis, just as the left-wing movement is elsewhere. There isn't agreement on how to fight the growing impoverishment. But liberation from harsh political repression will encourage, not just better unions, but workers' political organization. It will open the way to the class struggle.

So the present upsurge is but the first step in a long struggle for freedom and economic liberation. Whatever the immediate policies of the new regimes that replace the old tyrannies, the present upsurge will eventually lead to struggle against economic oppression; against the hegemony of foreign imperialism and multinational corporations; and for the increasing organization of the working class.

False friends of the people

Many forces who claim to speak in the name of the working class will be discredited. For example, the so-called "Socialist International" (SI) was on the wrong side of this upsurge. Mubarak's party was a member of this International, and so was that of the tyrant Ben Ali in Tunisia. It was only as these regimes fell that the SI hastily expelled them.

Is this because there's something wrong with "socialism"? No, the idea of replacing capitalism with a better system is an important goal. But only those who support the class struggle are real socialists.

The "Socialist" International long ago denounced Marxism and moved from supporting to opposing the class struggle. Its members are proud to join capitalist governments. One of its members, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, is the Managing Director of the arch-imperialist and free-market IMF; he may run for President of France in 2012.

When Europeans demonstrated against austerity last year, likely as not they were demonstrating against "socialist" governments, such as in Spain and Greece. This year, in the "Arab spring", the masses again find themselves at war with allies of the Socialist International.

The struggle in Libya and the intervention

In Libya, Qaddafi speaks in the name of "anti-imperialism" and "socialism", but his regime has been engaged in neo-liberal restructuring. For some years now, it has been the friend of oil companies and the major Western powers. And long before that, the regime had outlawed political parties, banned trade unions independent of the government-controlled one, and established a police-state.

Qaddafi himself recognizes the similarity between his government and other repressive, pro-business governments. In January he expressed regret that Ben Ali was forced to flee Tunisia. He threatened the Tunisian people that, if they persisted in doing without their dictator, they faced "chaos with no end in sight".⁽³⁾

But unlike what happened in Tunisia, Qaddafi survived the mass upsurge that freed a large part of Libya, including Benghazi, the second largest city, and Misrata, the third largest city. Demonstrations in the capital, Tripoli, were met with gunfire, and the Libyan army took back one city after another. The regime was using heavy weapons -- tanks, artillery, shelling from naval vessels -- to overwhelm an opposition which had more enthusiasm than military training.

But UN Resolution 1973 was passed, authorizing outside military action to stop Gaddafi's massacres. The US, NATO, and various Middle Eastern governments are intervening in an attempt to stop the full power of the Libyan army from bearing down on the popular movement. So

just as the US and the European Union eventually abandoned Mubarak, they have now abandoned Qaddafi.

But the US, the EU, and the Arab League aren't on the side of the Libyan people. The US and European imperialist powers mainly want stability in Libya, and a steady flow of oil. They especially want the Arab and African peoples to forget their long history of brutal crimes against the people of this region. And the Arab League is composed mainly of oppressive regimes, and they want to stay in power. All these outside powers oppose Qaddafi's massacres, not out of love of freedom, but out of fear that a bloody outcome will set the region on fire. They want Libya to continue pro-market policies and pro-imperialist alliances. They and the Qaddafi regime are both reactionaries, but this fight between two reactionaries has eased the military situation for the popular uprising and stopped it from being drowned in blood.

Meanwhile the Libyan movement does not have a social program. It is composed of different class and political forces which share mainly a hatred for the years of political slavery. And the military struggle with Qaddafi is forcing the rebellion to have relations with any force that will help it. Despite all this, the victory of the uprising would open the way for the Libyan people to start to develop their own political life, while its defeat would encourage every oppressive government in the region to use harsher and harsher force against the people.

Solidarity with the democratic uprisings

The heroism and initiative of the people of North Africa and the Middle East has inspired working people throughout the world. It has had its reflection in the US as well. Demonstrators in Wisconsin against the union-busting attempts of Governor Walker have held signs saying "walk like an Egyptian". And some demonstrators in Egypt have expressed solidarity with the workers in Wisconsin. One held a banner reading "One world. One pain."

The US and other imperialist powers supported these reactionary regimes for decades; the world financial agencies loved them; and they all still cling to the reactionary Saudi monarchy. When tyrants fall, the imperialist powers want to restrict the struggle to getting rid of one tyrant, while preserving the same basic system of brutal exploitation. We must support the struggle of the working people for real freedoms and to dismantle the repressive apparatus of emergency laws and police. We must also support their struggle to obtain economic relief and to fight back against the multinational corporations and other exploiters.

Some people advocate that we must support Qaddafi because he has squabbled at one time with the US and Europe. They call this "anti-imperialism". They overlook Qaddafi's ties with world imperialism and the oil companies. They close their eyes to his suppression of the political rights of the Libyan people. The reality is that real anti-imperialism requires support of the working people in Libya, not their oppressors. We must oppose both Qaddafi and the plans of the US/NATO/Arab League to dictate Libyan affairs, and stand by the people of Libya instead.

We should not only support the working people of the Middle East and North Africa, but learn from them. We should be inspired to cast aside no-struggle union bureaucrats, just as Egyptian and Tunisian workers threw aside the do-nothing standpoint of the pro-regime unions there. Just as the insurgent masses have risen up and shaken regimes which seemed permanent, so we must rise in struggle, realizing that the American bourgeoisie isn't all-powerful, and it can be fought too. <

Notes: (1) September 2010. *IMF Country Report No. 10/282*.

(2) IMF Executive Board Concludes 2010 Article IV Consultation with the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, *Public Information Notice (PIN) No. 11/23, February 15, 2011*.

(3) *Al Jazeera*, Jan. 17, 2011.

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