

**FRIDAY 20 MAY 2011**

## **Support the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa**

Today we will be discussing international issues on the agenda. Probably the most inspiring events of recent times have been the uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring. Starting with the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, which resulted in the toppling of the hated dictator Ben Ali, the uprisings have spread to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain.

Years of repression, corruption and mass unemployment amongst the youth have resulted in the uprisings. The social and economic grievances that have fuelled the uprisings are of course the same grievances that workers in Greece, Ireland, Portugal, France and the UK have, ie they are part of the same struggle where workers are expected to pay for the economic crash of 2008.

In 2008, phosphate miners in Gafsa, Tunisia, where unemployment is 30%, were at the centre of an intense struggle, over a six month period. Starting in January, trains between quarries and factories were halted; unemployed youth occupied the regional office of the UGTT union federation (similar to our TUC) demanding justice; strikes and demonstrations spread, attacking the boss of the phosphate company, who was also regional deputy of the ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), Ben Ali's party.

Unemployed youth, university students, school students and teachers joined the struggle.

The UGTT leadership was hostile to the actions, threatening to suspend militants who took part. But the rank and file, particularly teachers, carried on being involved. Then the regime cracked down.

Mohamed Bouazizi, the street vendor who set off the movement of January 2011 by burning himself to death in protest, and his family, were involved in that earlier movement. He was not just an unknown individual, but a respected militant.

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In Egypt workers were critical in bringing the reluctant generals to the decision to force Mubarak out. They also continue to play a role by engaging in strikes since Mubarak's departure. But there isn't a nation-wide leadership of the workers' movement, despite the fact that it has been developing on the basis of local mobilisations around economic issues for over a decade.

So while it is clear that a large element of the working class opposes in practice much of the neo-liberal programme that has been put in place since 1991, there is no national network and no significant political party that can put forward a programme that credibly speaks in the name of any large sector of the working class

Some groups of Egyptian workers have been raising demands like a national monthly basic minimum wage of £E 1,200. Certain kinds of anti-corruption demands also have a specific working-class component. For example, workers demanded the dismissal of the CEO of the public sector Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in Mahalla al-Kubra, the largest textile enterprise in Egypt, on the grounds of corruption. And they won this demand after a three-day strike.

PCS should do all it can to support the working class and labour movements so that they can be central to the re-making of new societies in the Middle East and North Africa based on the principles of democracy and secularism.

We should all take inspiration from the revolutions. If workers in Egypt can be central to removing the so-called strong man Mubarak then there's no reason why united strike action in the UK can't defeat the coalition's plans to make us pay for their crisis.

## Build the biggest Yes vote possible

We need to deliver the biggest yes vote possible for in our ballot for action on jobs, pay and pensions. We have raised our criticisms elsewhere about industrial action tactics and how seriously we are fighting for each demand. We don't see this as being 'disloyal' to the Union.

### How to Join PCS INDEPENDENT LEFT

If you want a positive voice for members, creative solutions to the critical issues facing us, and honest accounting not spin, You should join the **Independent Left** – a socialist voice for members in the Union. To find out more simply fill in this form and give it to an IL rep or send to:

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