

Working for the Worker? A Study of the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT)

By Ava Erfani

Ava Erfani will graduate from UNC Chapel Hill in 2021 with majors in Political Science and Interdisciplinary Studies as well as a minor in Asian Studies. She designed her Interdisciplinary Studies major to focus on colonial and neocolonial relations, leading her to study the continuities and transformations between colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary political conditions across regions. Her time abroad in Tunisia inspired her to write “Working for the Worker” based on her study of regime transitions in Tunisian politics and her conversations with local Tunisians.

What does the existence of a national trade union mean? As a form, the institution rose in popularity and necessity after the Industrial Revolution, and its multinational presence has also depended on the simultaneous proliferation of the industrial sector in each country. As labor was forced into modernity via the leveraging of wages, so too was the work force galvanized to stave off the most glaring parts of industrial working conditions by means of the formation of trade and labor unions. The existence of a national trade/labor union in a modern state is no new concept; many developed countries have significant proportions of their working populations involved in a trade union.¹ However, the efficacy and impact of these unions remains a point of

contention.

This friction is particularly relevant in respect to the Arab Spring uprisings, which can be linked to a broader public rejection of neoliberal economics.² My interest in this issue led me to study the Tunisian national trade union, the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT). As evidenced by the widespread protests leading to the Tunisian revolution in 2011, the Tunisian worker was not sufficiently aided by the efforts of the UGTT. However, the union (along with three other major civil society organizations) was entrusted with the task of establishing order in 2014 during a political crisis which threatened the democracy won by the Tunisian revolution.³ In the context of Tunisian labor relations and government power,⁴ I chose to exam-

ine the UGTT as both a wielder of citizens' and the state's faith: two forces which are often diametrically opposed yet find an ostensible confluence via the union.

Background

Tunisia's history with trade unionism can be traced back to the origins of the decades-long independence movement against French occupation⁵—an important relationship between the social and the political sphere that the trade union presently works to maintain. Before the creation of the UGTT, there existed first the Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (CGTT), a trade union founded in 1924 by Mohammad Ali al Hammi which aligned itself with the Tunisian nationalist and anti-colonial Destour party. This was the first

break from the French trade union, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), to gain real autonomy on behalf of the Tunisian worker. The CGTT was quelled by the colonial authorities. Years later in 1946, Farhat Hached formally established the UGTT.⁶ From the start, the union's goal was to advocate for both workers' rights and Tunisia's independence from France. This duality is important to note here as I aim to trace the organization to the post-modern age in which there is no longer a direct colonial influence to point to, rather multiple forms of control (governmental, international, etc.) which the union ostensibly aims to subvert.

As was the case for other countries in the Maghreb with a history of colonialism, the end of the colonial power did not lead to an increase in citizens' power in the post-colonial state.⁷ In the absence of the French authority's disciplinary control, power was simply transferred to new authoritarian (yet now described as "nationalist") actors. The Neo-Destour party⁸ led the anti-colonial and nationalist effort to remove the French authority from Tunisia. After independence, this party assumed power. However, there was a large conflict within Neo-Destour, primarily between its top leaders: Habib Bourguiba and Salah Ben Youssef.⁹ Due to his willingness to accept the softer "autonomy" over independence, Bourguiba chose to work with the leading

French authorities in the process of independence, while Youssef took a more radical approach. Eventually, Bourguiba's influence won over Youssef's and the former went on to become the first and longest President of Tunisia.¹⁰ Bourguiba also played a strong role in setting the tone of UGTT operations post-independence.

In order to understand the shifts that occurred in the UGTT post-revolution in 2011, it is helpful to understand how the union changed after independence and how it operated in the authoritarian regimes of both Habib Bourguiba and Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. Much of the existing literature on the UGTT—particularly works written in or translated into English—focuses on its role in Tunisia's revolution and the broader context of Arab Spring uprisings.^{11, 12, 13} For the scope of this study, however, it has been helpful to outline the nature of the UGTT pre-revolution and the ways in which its influence was both strengthened and limited by the authoritarian regimes under which it operated. This is a theme that was also echoed in each interview I conducted.

Issue 56 of the Anarcho-Syndicalist Review discusses the ways in which the UGTT was suppressed by both Bourguiba and Ben Ali in the article: "Tunisia's UGTT: Caught between struggle & betrayal." The Bourguiba years held their fair share of conflict between the UGTT and the state, but in the '60s and '70s

the former was allowed a relatively large level of autonomy. This autonomy subsequently led to planned retaliations by the state against the workers.¹⁴ One essential source to this discussion can be found in Issue 67 of the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) Journal, which included a report on a UGTT strike in late January of 1978: "A general strike called by the half-strong Union générale des travailleurs tunisiens (UGTT) was met with violence by the regime. Army, police and paramilitary units joined in a general offensive against the workers, leaving more than two hundred dead and hundreds more injured and arrested."¹⁵ While this report contextualizes the importance and danger of protesting with the UGTT, it also reveals looming disparities between the former and current images of the institution. Where a general strike would garner the response of state violence in 1978, today the same action is part of the sanctioned list of responses allowed by the government apparatus in response to economic discontent. This sort of clashing was not allowed to continue, however, in the Ben Ali era:

In 1989, Ben Ali's regime imposed direct submission on the UGTT leadership, headed by Ismail Sahbani, who collaborated in the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies and fiercely fought the union left... The history of the leadership of

the UGTT is a story of betrayal and maneuvering. From its support for Ben Ali's candidacy in the elections of 2004 and 2009 to social welfare reform, from the implementation of neoliberal economic measures to their abandoning of the Gafsa UGTT activists, jailed during the 2008 uprising, when they limited themselves to a simple request for the release of the prisoners.¹⁶ The union's alignment with the regime marks a shift in the ideological posture of the UGTT; rather than advocate for its rank-and-file members, the leadership rallied behind the top-down neoliberalism of Ben Ali.

In many ways, the union seems far from the description of a monolith. It is comprised of twenty-four regional unions, nineteen sector federations, and twenty-one general unions with a total of around 750,000 members from all geographic areas of Tunisia.¹⁷ This regional component of diversity is a widely celebrated attribute of the union that is rare for many civil society organizations, which in turn fosters the public's trust in the institution. Even so, in the Post-Democracy Era there remains the question of how much the UGTT can truly accomplish on behalf of the worker, especially when the country faces difficult economic conditions.¹⁸ It is often credited for "stabilization" post-revolution and the prevention of total state control by the Islamic

party à la the 1979 Iranian revolution. In this way, it is viewed as a worthy representative of the Tunisian people based on its ability to uphold and protect the democracy that they were protesting for in 2011. However, the same economic symptoms which persisted before the 2011 revolution continue to exist today, so it remains to be seen whether authoritarianism is truly what was holding the UGTT back from affecting a stronger position for labor in Tunisia.

Methodology Overview

This research is based primarily on interviews as well as scholarly sources, some of which outline the history of Tunisia and the trade union movement, and others which discuss the politics in post-revolution Tunisia. I conducted a series of four interviews with Tunisians living in Northern Tunisia during the fall of 2019. These interviews were conducted with two members of the UGTT as well as two non-members. Interviews conducted with members were completed in French/Arabic with the aid of a translator, while the interviews with non-members of the union were conducted in English. I was able to interview the members of the UGTT thanks to the connections of my professor, Mounir Khefifa, and my advisor, Rached Khalifa. My advisor also connected me with one of the non-member interviewees, a female master's student

who was enrolled in his graduate seminar. The questioning for the interviews done with members of the UGTT differed from the questions asked of non-members. The purpose of interviewing non-members was largely to determine a sense of public perception rather than institutional or official knowledge about the inner structure/working of the organization.

Further, I was able to contextualize my findings based on a series of lectures attended in September and October 2019 via SIT's academic program and the course "Politics, Civil Society, and Migration in Tunisia." This course provided me with a broad historical background regarding the politics of Tunisia, especially regarding the forces that both pushed the revolution in 2011 and facilitated the formation of government and order following the revolution. A program visit to the Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Économique et Sociaux (FTDES), a Tunisian NGO formed after the revolution to organize social and political movements, also aided me in understanding how the civil society sector is related to the UGTT as well as the government. I utilized this visit in particular to inquire about the manner in which jobs are created and provided in Tunisia by the government and the role of UGTT influence. The representative of the FTDES whom we met with was extremely helpful in providing this information. From this conversa-

tion, it seemed that FTDES, though its organizational history is much shorter, faced a similar dilemma as the UGTT insofar as it created both an avenue for people to organize and a simultaneous entrenchment of the status quo which allowed—and perhaps encouraged—this sort of sanctioned form of protest.

Concerns

Of course, this study must not be taken as representative of the Tunisian public or be generalized to make assumptions beyond the scope of the paper. Rather, this study can be used to further general discussion on the efficacy of the UGTT and how it operates in the socio-political space of Tunisia's democracy. Multiple factors served as ethical concerns in the process of this research. The existence of a short time-frame to complete the interviews, as well as an effective language barrier, made it difficult to recruit interviewees and/or set up times for interviews that would be convenient for the interviewee, myself, and possibly a translator if needed. Thus, I was largely reliant on existing contacts in the Tunis area to find possible interviewees, introducing bias in my sample in terms of region and, likely, social status. These same biases exist due to the fact that no Tunisians living in southern Tunisia were represented in this research, even though some interviewees were originally from the South.

Research Findings

I will present the interviews I conducted in two major parts. I will present the perspectives of those who were involved in the UGTT directly in order to give a deeper understanding of how the union operates. My goal during these interviews was to understand the more logistical aspects of membership and the structure of the union, and subsequently to inquire about the political reach and aims of the UGTT from the perspective of a current and former member. Secondly, I will present interviews with those who were not directly involved in the union so as to present a more general discussion of the influence and power of the UGTT, even to those who are not directly impacted by it via membership. My primary objective during these interviews was to openly question the interviewees about their experience or their thoughts regarding the UGTT from their respective positions.

Members

1. Involvement

The first two interviews were with Youssef Khelifa, a lecturer at the Higher Institute of Design of Tunis, and Tahar Labassi, a linguistics professor at the University of Tunis and also the former Chief of Staff of the Minister of the Department of Education in Tunisia. Khelifa had made a request to become a member of the UGTT in 2005; in order to join, he had to win favor in elections at the

Higher Institute of Design. He was elected as a basic member in 2006. Khelifa was involved in the principal syndicalist sector of higher education and continues to work in this capacity as of the publication date of this paper. He describes his work with the union as generally low-maintenance, with the exception of election periods and more charged political climates—the zenith of these being the political climate during the 2011 revolution. Labassi had no official role in the UGTT at the time of the interview, but had been involved at the highest levels of the organization since 2002. He became Vice Secretary General of the trade union of teachers and a member of the national council of trade union university teachers during his time of involvement before stepping down in 2014. He continued to work with the UGTT following 2014 as a consultant.

2. Perception

Khelifa began by qualifying his view of his membership: that it was beneficial “psychologically” but not “financially” (though he said that he enjoys it because of this reason).¹⁹ He highlighted the importance and power of the union: when we talk about what strikes or movements can take place, the UGTT is quite important because it can decide the level of success due to its ties with influential people in the government. Under the old regimes, the organization was not “too free to

advocate for workers, but now, it is more free²⁰ to conduct its work. Before the revolution under Ben Ali and Bourguiba, there were acts of violence and armed, bloody conflicts between the UGTT and the state. Now that democracy has been achieved, there is no longer this sort of conflict. Khelifa lamented the fact that, though the UGTT has more power, the workers of Tunisia are suffering more than they were before the revolution due to a horde of economic reasons.

He discussed the ways in which there was “certainly a change [in the UGTT] especially with the new emergence of Islamist parties”²¹ post-revolution. Here, he pointed to what he called the real function and strength of the UGTT: to defend and secure modernity for the country.²² To Khelifa, the UGTT aims to protect and make a consensus between the Islamist and Modernist parties. This is why, he said, the UGTT worked against the Islamists after the revolution in order to stabilize the country. The UGTT supported many of the uprising movements at the time, so the government had to take it seriously due to the weight of the organization. The leadership works with both labor and the government, but from Khelifa’s point of view, the first objective is always to protect workers’ rights.

Labassi had a more critical perception of the UGTT, which he attributed to his former degree of involvement in and now relative

freedom from the organization.²³ He described the union as the only space where real politics was possible under the Ben Ali regime, though it was always committed to the upholding of the state. He admitted that today there is a question of whether or not the organization is actually a hindrance. He also described the nature of the UGTT’s negotiations with the government, which usually operates by dealing with ministers of various departments of government. These ministers would often sign agreements with the UGTT that would purportedly meet the demands of workers, but due to the high turnover rate of ministers they knew that the onus would fall on a successive minister and likely not be upheld. He did not place all the blame on this pattern, noting that the government is under great economic pressure due to a lack of means. However, the UGTT faces pressure itself from the working class as the economic situation worsens while the cost of living rises.

Labassi’s main qualm with the UGTT was in its failure (or as he called it, refusal) to change post-revolution. To him, changing means working as a trade union should work in a traditional democracy. He believed that the UGTT does not want to change because it is in a rather favorable position: it has an effective monopoly on unionism in the country.²⁴ The government cannot give other trade unions many

rights; the UGTT has made it so that only its own organization can win any favor in the eyes of the government. Labassi pointed to the UGTT’s failure to support the initial protests for the 2011 revolution, which began in the south of Tunisia. The union chose to side with the existing regime at the time. However, the UGTT is also not officially part of the government.²⁵ It plays a quasi-governmental role, and this is likely where it prefers to stay, according to Labassi. He believed that the union should embrace a role in national politics and move towards the path of official institutionalization on the federal level.

Non-Members

1. Involvement

I interviewed Lassaad Bouattour, a civil servant working for the Ministry of Finance in Tunisia, and Rawe Khefi, a master’s student at the Université de Tunis el Manar within the Higher Institute of Human Sciences. Khefi had a background in unionism in her undergraduate years, though not through the UGTT. Neither had any direct relationship with the UGTT, meaning that they were not nor had ever been part of the union, and did not know anyone beyond the level of acquaintanceship who was involved with the union.

2. Perception

Bouattour outlined his major thoughts via a short history of the

UGTT's activity since Tunisia's colonial period. He acknowledged it had a strong effect in the turn of independence. The syndicalist movement was threatening to the colonial powers—this, according to Bouattour, is why Farhat Hached²⁶ was assassinated, an act which immortalized the UGTT as a symbol for the national spirit.²⁷ After independence, he noted, the Neo-Destour party and the UGTT viewed themselves as co-managers of the country—while this led to some clashes, the sharing of power was largely peaceful. Ben Ali was more authoritarian; Bouattour emphasized that the president was dealing with not one, but two major entities that often opposed him: the UGTT and the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI).²⁸ Ben Ali would pick sides between UGTT and Islamists when it was convenient. Around 1991, however, Ben Ali became more hostile towards the UGTT, insisting that the union would need to operate on his terms and that he would choose the members of its leadership.

Bouattour became most critical of the union when discussing the education sector. As a father himself, he remarked that the UGTT's education sector union is "an enemy of any mother/father in Tunisia,"²⁹ especially after mass strikes by education workers last year. He also said that, today, the main way to get power is through the UGTT, while under Ben Ali similar benefits such as wage increases or job opportuni-

ties would come from membership in the party. Ultimately, he lauded the UGTT for its role in stabilizing the government post-revolution, but believed that they should not take their activities too far in the political or social realm in order for the country to be able to grow economically.

Khefi held a significantly different view of the UGTT as compared to Bouattour. As someone who has been involved in leftist political movements for years in Tunisia, she hesitated to refer to the UGTT with total positivity. She did echo some of the major popular sentiments, like how the union was forced to conform to the state's demands under Bourguiba and Ben Ali. She pointed out that they were able to gain some power during the Bread Riots in which they faced violence due to the protests that they were involved in. Khefi felt that the union generally stood up for the people against the government, and that the people do not forget it.

However, she criticized the union for its failure to support the miners' protests in Gafsa in 2008 and the initial seeds of revolutionary protests as well. She praised its ability to prevent the Islamist parties from gaining too much power after the revolution and said that it was clearly committed to upholding the "Tunisian way of life."³⁰ Fundamentally, Khefi saw the UGTT as remaining more pro-government than pro-people following the revolution,

and criticized its passivity regarding politics particularly after the Quartet period of 2014. For these reasons, she did not think the UGTT would become popular among her generation as an avenue for activism or as a movement.

Discussion and Analysis

A certain repetition took place during the course of each interview, wherein the interviewee would feel it necessary to outline the history of the UGTT/Tunisia before beginning to describe their own perception of the institution and/or how they were involved. Each gave a similar story of Tunisia's history since the colonial period, though each differed in their explanations of why certain movements proceeded while others failed (e.g. Gafsa riots in 2008 vs. the Kasbah protests of 2011). This pattern made sense—it is difficult to say what exactly the UGTT is or does without discussing its history. The past of the UGTT is precisely why it is valued as an institution in the Tunisian collective consciousness today. Though all the interviewees had different political leanings, they followed some similarities in their beliefs, especially that the government must continue on a secular path and that the UGTT was helpful in this endeavor. Each was concerned by the threat of major Islamic political and social forces, the most prominent being the Ennahda political party which won the highest percentage of votes

in the last parliamentary elections.³¹

The difficulty in assessing the UGTT is multifaceted. The organization has a long and diverse history which makes it difficult to tie to a coherent ethos over time, particularly due to the various treatment it has faced under multiple regimes and the various ways it chose to act under these regimes. The aim of this study is to attempt to accurately assess the union on both its own terms and on the terms to which the people of Tunisia hold it. To categorize it via a traditional left vs. right dichotomy or the basic movement of state actors as the abstraction of the citizenry would be a mistake, as some have done.³² This would ignore the entire basis of the union as well as a larger critique of power from perspectives outside of the bipolar political field.

As some interviewees mentioned, the ability of the union has depended on the environment around it. For Khelifa and Labassi, the UGTT is a strong if not the strongest Tunisian institution and should be strengthened in the democratic era in order to be even more effective. Labassi saw the union moving forward as a political party and taking on the responsibility that comes with governance rather than needing to negotiate as a civil society group. To Khefi, who identifies as a leftist, the UGTT did not do enough for the worker, and it was unclear at best whether the union is suited to take on the post-modern socioeco-

nomie problems which the youth of Tunisia distinctly face.³³ However, to Bouattour, the UGTT is too tyrannical in its measures to advocate for workers' wages. It is these conflicting narratives that make it necessary to remove the lens of electoral politics in order to observe the kind of organization that the UGTT is, or appears to be. In this analysis, I valued the perception rather than some measure of "true" existence because of my interest in how the citizens of Tunisia view the strength of class movements. Further, it is unclear whether the UGTT can be objectively defined.³⁴ My purpose was to explore the effect of power and proximity to the state in an effort to fight for workers via a union organization.

Barriers

In addition to the aforementioned difficulties, if this research was to be continued and expanded, it would be helpful to be able to speak to current members of the executive board of the UGTT. This allows for an additional level of perception which would contextualize the union more directly. Further, it would be useful to gather perceptions from those outside of the Tunis area, particularly in regions such as Gafsa, Sidi Bouzid, Gabes, etc. where the 2011 revolution began and where the socioeconomic conditions differ. An increase in interviews with the inclusion of more demographics would aid this research as well.

Moreover, in all such interactions, the presence of a reliable translator (or the personal development of Tunisian Arabic/French fluency) would be extremely important to reduce as much of the language barrier as possible. A translator would also be advantageous for reading sources and texts relating to the UGTT.

Conclusion

Though my collection of interviews were limited in quantity, they provided me with a wide range of perspectives on the UGTT. These perspectives should not be used to reflect the actual and exact sentiments of all Tunisian people towards the union, but can be useful in a discourse regarding the UGTT and a broader discourse surrounding the ethics and efficacy of national unions. This allowed me to develop a more extensive comprehension of how the union is perceived. The UGTT is in quite a unique position, whether viewed as a national union, political institution, civil society group, etc. However, in the Post-Democratic era, the UGTT does not seem to use its advantages to change the material conditions for workers—purchasing power is low, and social unrest is high. This begs the question: is the union purposefully avoiding a more radical approach to maintain its power status à la Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy,³⁵ or does it believe that its strategy is truly the most effective for its aims? These are vital questions that

are highly relevant to the exploration and imagination of the realm of possibilities that the UGTT can either create for Tunisia, or hinder.

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20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Labassi saw the new political Islamists parties as trying to "take Tunisia backwards"
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24. As opposed to Morocco's union format which follows the model of competitive unionism. See: Lorenzo Feltrin, "Labour and Democracy in the Maghreb: The Moroccan and Tunisian Trade Unions in the 2011 Arab Uprisings", 45.
25. . As opposed to an established political party such as the Labour Party in the UK.
26. Former leader of the UGTT during the independence movement.
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This picture shows the Great Mosque in the Medina of Sousse, a city on the coast of Central Tunis. Will Rowe traveled there during February 2020, while studying abroad in France.

Photo by Wilson Rowe, Class of 2021, Peace, War and Defense and Global Studies Major with a French Minor