

# Middle East Solidarity

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**‘There is power  
in our collective  
organisation’**

**Rima Majed: a year after Lebanon’s uprising**

## **Resistance is still fertile in Algeria**

Elections have not snuffed out struggle in the ‘New Algeria’ promised by regime

## **Soldiers and workers protest in Yemen**

Sit-ins and strikes challenge Saudi-backed government

## **Refugees demand justice from UN in Sudan**

Solidarity is crucial to the revolution, say labour activists

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Prime Minister dies after 50 years in office



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## About us

Events in the Middle East often dominate the news, but it is war, sectarian violence and western military intervention which grab the headlines.

Middle East Solidarity shows a different side to the region.

We report on resistance to repression and imperialism from Morocco to Yemen, covering the strikes and protests which are missed by the mainstream media.

We carry the voices and stories of the women and men who are still fighting for bread, freedom and social justice to new audiences.

Our practical guides to campaigning and resources for activists aim to build a stronger solidarity movement.

Middle East Solidarity is a joint project of MENA Solidarity Network, Egypt Solidarity Initiative and Bahrain Watch, and is supported by funding from UCU, PCS, NEU - NUT section and a number of Trades Union Councils and local trade union branches.

Find out more here:

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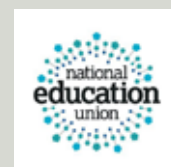
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Protesters in Algiers highlight Palestinian and Sahrawi solidarity | Photo: Zoheir Aberkane

## How far will normalisation with Israel go?

Morocco's recognition of Israel is the latest in a flurry of deals ending the diplomatic boycott of Israel by Arab states. This trend has deep roots, argues **Ameen Nemr** despite its recent promotion by Trump and Netanyahu.

The announcement on 11 December that Morocco will open diplomatic relations with Israel brings to 4 the number of Arab states recognising the Zionist state this year.

A flurry of activity around this issue over the last year has been hailed by Trump as a major breakthrough for US policy in the Middle East, which has long sought to end the diplomatic and economic isolation of its Israeli ally in the Middle East.

UAE became the first state in the Gulf to open diplomatic relations in August, and was quickly followed by Bahrain, then Sudan and Morocco. Oman, Qatar and Djibouti are expected to be next.

There is some speculation that Pakistan may also agree to normalise relations with Israel, under pressure from both the US and Saudi Arabia.

Although this current trend has hit

the headlines, many Arab governments have long had ties with Israel. In 1996, the former Israeli president visited Doha and appeared on Aljazeera TV, in addition to the establishment of trade relations with Qatar during the same year.

While Israeli PM Netanyahu celebrated the normalisation with Morocco as "historic", the two governments enjoyed security and economic ties for 60 years before the announcement. The deal also came with a sweetener, US unilateral recognition of Morocco's 50 year old illegal occupation of Western Sahara, which was announced by Trump on 11 December.

**Saudi Arabia's competition with Iran, has already sparked or fuelled wars across the region.**

Saudi Arabia's influence over the normalisation process has been crucial, despite the fact that historically Saudi Arabia's religious institutions opposed such moves. But there is no resistance now in the path of the Saudi crown prince, Mohamed Bin Salman. He may, however face some pressure from the incoming Biden administration over Saudi Arabia's appalling human rights record. Cementing a new round of

normalisation deals in the dying days of the Trump presidency will help bolster Saudi Arabia's role in the security architecture of the region. Bin Salman is also driven by Saudi Arabia's competition with Iran, which has already sparked or fuelled wars across the region.

The assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh on 30 November was blamed by Iranian officials on Israel. It is worth mentioning that the assassination happened after the secret meeting between the Saudi Crown Prince, MBS and the Israeli PM Netanyahu in NEOM, a city in North-West of Saudi Arabia.

While Netanyahu revealed the visit to support his re-election campaign, Saudi Arabia denied the visit. Later, the Saudi Prince, Turki Al Faisal, who has a long history of meeting Israeli officials which had already been seen as steps toward normalisation, criticized Israel. Some saw this as just a cover up for actual strong hidden ties.

In addition, normalisation between the UAE and Israel, will give the latter a direct platform to talk to Arabs about the Israeli narrative of the conflict and affairs in the region.

Terms like the 'Peace of the brave' which were used during the 1990s in the context of the push towards the Oslo peace process are once again being used to cover up the betrayal of the Palestinian cause.

## YEMEN

# Protests by soldiers and workers hit back at regime

Mirfat Sulaiman

As the war on Yemen enters its 6th year, the administration imposed by the Saudi Coalition in Aden is facing protests by army veterans and workers. While the government of Mansour Hadi – in whose name Saudi-led forces invaded Yemen in 2015 – resides in hotels in Riyadh,

Aden is governed by an administration which is failing to fulfill its basic obligations to meet the needs of local civilians according to international law. Services are collapsing, resulting in water shortages and electricity cuts. Power is off for 6 hours at a time and only on for two.

The fall of the local currency compared to the dollar is a major issue. Wage value had been falling over time, but since the end of July of this year, in Houthi-controlled areas the Yemeni rial is worth 600 to a dollar while in Aden and Southern areas under Coalition control it is 790 rial.

The new currency is worth less than the previous – in some areas locals refuse to use it – and the resulting rise of food prices adds to the general social crisis.

Around 2000 army personnel, including retired soldiers, families of servicemen who have been killed and young soldiers have camped outside the Saudi Coalition office in the Daar Saad district in Aden.

“For over three months



Army veterans on the march for justice | Photo: via Facebook

leaders and those in high ranks, retired officers, alongside the families of the wounded and killed in service are at the protest camp, which is peaceful and civilised,” said Ali Mansur Maqraat, a Brigadier-General, editor of the Army Newspaper told Middle East Solidarity.

“Our army committee led by Major-General Saleh Zunqal and others will put together a plan for escalating the programme. Last sunday we blocked all the roads to the Coalition offices and stopped all entry to the base.

We walked to the Oil Port in Little Aden and blocked it for hours. We are doing this for our basic salary that many of us depend on for our families who are starving and under the poverty line.”

“All this did not shake or provoke any reaction from the Coalition leaders to try to understand and find a solution, but they met General Saleh Zunqal and his comrades and asked them to pack up their camp and leave.”

He added, “whoever dreams that the Coalition forces would give wages or 10 megawatts of electricity, build one classroom or restore Aden hospital, he is

mad and deluded. We are in the 6th year of the war and we have not seen anything like this.”

General Zunqal, leader of the army committee organising the protests, told online newspaper Aden al-Ghad that the Saudi Coalition was simply fuelling the conflict. “The Coalition will give the weapons and money for internal fights and the destruction of every beautiful thing,” he said.

Retired army officers sparked the first light to the Harak movement for independence of South Yemen against former president Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2007, seen by many in Yemen as a precursor to the Arab uprisings of 2011/12.

Teachers have also been taking action. The independent teachers’ unions in the South have been organising ongoing on-off strike action since 2017. “They promised us a deal and we ended our strike then, we returned to teaching, but they didn’t fulfill their promises, this time we are on full strike until our demands are met. Our war is with Hadi’s government” teacher and union member Fayruz Ali Al-Radini told Middle East Solidarity. The teachers

strike (which covers all schools in Aden) is demanding payment of a teaching-allowance that has been stopped for the last 10 years.

Meanwhile, workers in the Department of Communications in Aden, have scored a court victory, winning their right to be recognised as fully employed. “Although the case has been won, it is not clear when the court order will have an effect on the ground” said solicitor Nazar Sraro. The legal battle has been going on since 2011.

The then-dictator of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, ordered the employment of thousands of people to try to calm the growing South independence movement, as the citizens of the former Democratic People’s Republic of Yemen saw themselves treated like second class citizens. However, this did not always translate into real jobs with proper conditions.

The current protests show the possibility for building a new movement among Aden’s workers to challenge Hadi’s government and the Saudi coalition.

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## BAHRAIN

# 'Who ate the power of the poor? The Prime Minister'

## MENA Solidarity

Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the Prime Minister of Bahrain, died on 11 November after half a century in power.

He took office one year before Bahrain gained independence from the British, in 1971, and was one of the longest serving Prime Ministers in the world.

Uncle of the current King, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, he was considered one of the hardliners in the al-Khalifa family and was close to the al-Saud ruling family in Saudi Arabia.

In 2011 during the so-called "Arab Spring," under the guise of a Gulf Cooperation Council force, the Saudi Arabian military crossed the 12-mile bridge to Bahrain, it's only land border, and assisted in crushing the uprising.

Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa was a terrorising figure in Bahrain, with many people too scared to utter his name when discussing corruption and the increasing political repression. He was known locally as Mr. 50/50, as he reportedly took up to a 50 percent cut from all commercial deals.

During the uprising, protestors congregated around the Financial Harbour in Bahrain with one Dinar notes - the amount he allegedly purchased the land for that the development is located on.

In 2004, Ronald E.



Bahrain's Financial Harbour | Photo: ChintoBoy via Wikimedia commons

Neumann, former US Ambassador to Bahrain, wrote about the Prime Minister in a cable released by Wikileaks, saying "While certainly corrupt, he has built much of modern Bahrain."

In 2004, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, currently serving life in prison, spoke publicly about the poverty and inequality in Bahrain, blaming it on the policies and corruption of Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa.

Naming a senior member of the ruling family in this way was crossing a well understood red-line.

Al-Khawaja was arrested and the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, the human rights organisation he founded, was banned and forced to take its work underground.

There were protests for al-Khawaja's release with chants of: "Who ate the power of the poor? None other than the Prime Minister."

After the 2011 uprising, al-Khawaja was sentenced to life imprisonment. His daughter Maryam al-Khawaja alleges that the reason why her father was tortured so

severely after his arrest, was not released in 2012 and continues to reside in prison, is because of Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa's personal vendetta against him.

Former US Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, wrote in his memoir that he had once advised the King to remove the Prime Minister from Office, as he was "disliked by nearly everyone but especially the Shia."

**"While certainly corrupt, he has built much of modern Bahrain"**

During Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa's time as Prime Minister, British colonial officer, Ian Henderson, known in the country as 'The Butcher of Bahrain,' ran the notorious Security and Intelligence Service (SIS).

The SIS was the main organ of the systematic torture taking place within the country. Between 1975 and 1999, at least 37 Bahrainis were killed by the police, 15 in police custody having believed to be

tortured. Henderson retired and left Bahrain in 1998.

Bahrain's relationship with the UK has a long history, and the island was a British protectorate before gaining independence.

Upon Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa's death, the UK's Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, released a statement, writing: "As a friend of the UK, HRH Prince Khalifa exemplified the deep and close relationship between our two countries and people, a historic relationship that will continue to be a positive force for cooperation and partnership into the future."

Meanwhile, the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) recently reported that 18 people have been arrested, including a 16-year old girl and 14-year old boy, due to social media posts made regarding Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa's death.

Go to [www.birdbh.org](http://www.birdbh.org) for more information about how you can support Bahraini activists and political prisoners against repression.

# ‘There is power in our collective organisation’

## A year after Lebanon’s uprising

Students take to the streets of Beirut, 20 December 2020 | Photo: Mada Student movement via Facebook

In October 2019, a massive popular uprising shook Lebanon, triggered by rage at the corrupt elite’s attempts to make ordinary people pay for the economic crisis. We asked university lecturer and trade union organiser **Rima Majed** what are the prospects for collective resistance, a year after the people shook the neoliberal sectarian regime.

**It’s been over a year since the popular uprising, which brought hundreds of thousands into the streets. Why are the same elites still in charge?**

The revolutions we have seen in the region recently have taken the shape of social explosions. We’re not talking about revolutionary coups, where there is a party which is organised or there are defections in the army. There is no project ready to take over, politically. This question of the lack of political organisations and parties, and also social and labour organisations is clear throughout the region.

In the only revolutions which were able to create some sort of transition; Tunisia and Sudan - we saw that the Sudanese Professionals Association, and the UGTT Union Federation played an important role. In Egypt, for example, during the first period after the revolution it was the Muslim Brotherhood which took that on, not because they were the most popular but

because they are the most organised.

There is a question of organisation on the side of the revolution. People are trying to organise, but there are internal and external factors which made it difficult for radical change to happen in the first year.

Internally, one can talk about the problem of organisation, the lack of leadership and sometimes the rejection of leadership. At the beginning of the Lebanese Revolution, there was a very strong narrative of rejection of leadership and an idea that political involvement was just about raising demands in the street, but that it was not our role to think about the transition.

But it has also been an exceptional year for all revolutions in the second wave of the Arab uprisings. In Lebanon specifically, within ten months of the start of the revolution there was a deep financial freefall that really transformed society and class relationships. Rates of unemployment have almost doubled



this year. More than 50 percent of the population are living at the poverty line. We are also experiencing a pandemic, which is a very exceptional coincidence, for a revolution to be faced with this. The virus has brought all sorts of questions about how we mobilise in the context of a lockdown.

And then of course, we had the third greatest explosion in history in August this year. It created an immediate reaction during the first few days as people poured into the streets and showed all sorts of social solidarity. It culminated just four days after the explosion on August 8, there was a huge demonstration of tens of thousands in Beirut, it was so heavily repressed that we have not seen a major protest since then.

There is also a general feeling of defeat, of fatigue, as people are trying to make sense of those huge transformations. We have had 300,000 people displaced, and there are around 6-7,000 who have suffered permanent injuries. The social implications of these external factors are very important to understand what is happening to the revolution.

The country is experiencing what is really an exodus, and people are just feeling that we have failed and nothing will change. This is also affecting our chances of organising, of convincing people we need to carry on with the struggle.

Saad Harriri, the Prime Minister toppled by the street movements last year is back in power again but he still is unable to form a government. Still, for some there's a feeling that we are back to square one. I don't agree, I think the regime has been weakened this year, whether they want to acknowledge it or not.

There were times when they could have crashed. There were opportunities we could have taken if we had been organised. After the explosion on 4 August there was an opportunity. The weakness was on our side.

In the past month, we have seen a renewal of hope, with secular and independent university students winning student union elections in all universities that held elections. This was followed by the declaration of a new student front and forming new student unions across universities.

Similarly, university professors have also been organizing and mobilizing on various campuses. The elections in the professors' association at the Lebanese

University resulted in about 40 percent of the seats going to the independent professors list. This is an important development. Similarly, adjunct professors at the American University of Beirut have called a strike in protest at their poor working conditions. Their salaries have lost more than 80 percent of their purchasing power because of the financial depreciation, and the inequities in salary adjustments within the institution. This move has been supported by Faculty United, an independent faculty association that recently mobilized to defend adjunct faculty members' right to strike.

### **Who is on the side of the revolution?**

The revolution has several streams. For example, those who are liberal, and these are the ones who are probably the most organised with the most resources. We have political movements like Saba'a, which is founded by businessmen, it is purely liberal and mainly asking for reform.

Socially we've seen one of the strongest, most organised and well-funded organisations which is called 'Ana khat ahmar' (I am a red line). This was created by owners of marketing and advertising companies who started with the slogan 'the private sector is a red line.' They are very clearly saying we have inflated state employment, we need to support the private sector. They are saying that Lebanon is a liberal economy and that these leaders, because of their sectarian clientelism, have not respected that.

They have directly or indirectly halted the organisation of workers, by deploying a rhetoric saying "We and our employees are together in the fight against this ruling elite. Our businesses are unable to flourish so we are unable to pay our employees." They are blaming politicians for the economic situation and using this as an excuse either to cut salaries or not to respect labour rights. These are people who are clearly richer than everyone else, who have the resources and who are mobilising for their own interest.

On the other hand there is a broad spectrum of centre-left, and more radical left, feminist movements, the student movement. They are also trying to organise and mobilise and are shaping the discourses and the different trends within the uprising.

There are several nascent labour unions or alternative unions or workers'

associations, which were created last year. I am part of that effort. It is difficult. But yes, there is power in our collective organisation.

There are growing voices criticising or blaming activists, saying that the revolution has failed. I think we need to move beyond the success and failure paradigm. There is a lack of historical materialism in understanding what was possible.

This is a country where we always talk about freedoms, and how there is a very vibrant civil society, but it took the shape of NGOs. We have not seen any serious political party being created in the postwar era, a serious opposition party. There were attempts but it has always remained modest and marginal. There's a very heavily individualistic culture, which is a product of neoliberalism over decades.

During the uprising, the graffiti around Beirut and especially on the banks, people were spraying 'Give me back my money'. It wasn't 'give us back our money.' I've seen repeatedly that this creates an organising problem, a difficulty in retaining people beyond their individual interest.

There is also another material problem in that all of us, especially with the financial crisis, are part-time activists facing a full-time regime. We all do what we can in the time but otherwise we need to work to survive. We don't want leaders but we don't have the time to do it ourselves.

### **What went wrong with the unions that were founded a couple of generations ago, and what alternatives are people trying to build?**

Lebanon was somewhere with strong labour unions before the civil war started in the 1970s. And we saw them being very active in the first few years after the end of the civil war in the early 90s. At that time there was a deep financial collapse and a currency devaluation. It was mainly the unions that mobilised and pushed for an adjustment of salaries.

There was a very active movement back then. With the neoliberal policies of reconstruction with Rafiq al-Hariri who came to power in 1992, there was a clear decision to put an end to the labour movement because they knew this would be an obstacle to their policies of neoliberalisation, but also because this could have been a problem

for sectarian clientelism.

There was a change in the composition of the political elite in Lebanon during the postwar era whereby most politicians were either bankers or businessmen. Therefore, they employ people in their companies in return for their political allegiance. It is an indirect agreement, what we call *wasta*. There aren't a lot of jobs, and the few jobs that are there, are mainly controlled by politicians.

There were still big sections of the labour movement, specifically the teachers' unions, taxi drivers, that were still very active. So what happened in the 90s was a process of co-optation of the General Workers Union Federation.

The attempts initially failed but then what we saw was a mushrooming of hundreds, if not thousands of unions, which were all fake.

According to the rules of the Federation, all unions had equal right to representation on its bodies, regardless of their size. So there was a mushrooming of unions created by political parties in order to take the Federation over from inside.

The official General Confederation of Workers did not mobilise during the uprising in 2019. But there were alternative unions that we have seen before the uprising, including the public sector employees and teachers' movement with the Union Coordination Committee (UCC), but also other, smaller movements such as the workers employed by the state electricity company, EDL. And we've also seen previously a strong movement

of Middle East Airlines workers, the pilots.

There was also the struggle of the Spinneys' supermarket workers for union rights, that also ended with the defeat of the workers. All the active members were sacked from their jobs. In the end it was a failure for the workers, but it was an important movement, an important attempt at organising.

The UCC movement succeeded in the end in guaranteeing a salary and scale adjustment, despite it falling short of the initial demands. The movement quickly came to an end and was unable to continue organizing.

We've also seen how workers in the telecom companies were the first to strike at the beginning of the uprising last year. The Mobile Operators Employees Syndicate declared an open strike in November 2019 to protest at the deprivation of their benefits which formed around 30 percent of their income. They went on strike again in summer 2020 with demands related to their working conditions and their salaries.

Similarly, after a wide mobilization in October 2019 against telecom companies charging mobile bills in US dollars, the Ministry was pressured to issue a circular forcing the two mobile operator companies to only charge in Lebanese lira.

This was one of the successes of the revolution, that with the pressure and the mobilisations in front of those companies, we forced those companies to bill in Lebanese lira, at the official

rate, which is not the real rate.

There was another success over parking meters. Street parking in Beirut is run by a private company, which is actually owned by politicians. But after a campaign everyone parks for free - until today. Most of the machines are not functioning anymore after campaigners smashed them up. These are not exactly strikes, but more like civil disobedience.

There is a new dynamic of labour organising and this is a promising start, despite the many obstacles of course. It's a difficult context but there are these different groups which were created. We started the University Professors' Association and we're still organising and working on it now.

The alternative union for journalists, that was also very active. Doctors are also organising, and a campaign is underway in the Engineers' Order to push for elections to the leadership. These are all important dynamics of labour organising that need to be supported.

#### **Have there been any new efforts organising around workplaces?**

At the beginning we declared the Professionals Association and many associations were formed: journalists, teachers, university professors, doctors, engineers, workers in the arts and culture sector, and so on. But there were internal divisions. Now we are back to organising each sector separately, and we just create an alliance when we need



Teach-in during the October 2019 uprising  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons



to.

Lebanon has 36 private universities, in a society of only 4.8 million people. There is only one public university, the Lebanese University which is underfunded. Professors at the private universities do not have a syndicate, so there is no legal body that can negotiate collectively. As for professors at the Lebanese University, they are public sector employees and therefore are legally unable to establish a union.

### So officially they are banned from strike action?

There have been several occasions where professors went on strike, the latest one in the private sector is the part-timers strike at the American University in Beirut (AUB) in December 2020; and the Lebanese University student and professors' strike in summer 2019. . As I explained, the Lebanese University can't have a union, but they have an association. In the private sector universities there is also no active union. The only organisation we have is the one at the AUB, Faculty United, which is a chapter of the American University Professors' Association, because it is an American university. This is the one which is the most organised in the country.

We are trying to set up similar organisations in the various other universities. There is a big debate at the moment about whether we should unionise legally or just form associations. We are all employed on consultancy/fixed-term contracts. We are not entitled to social security. We also pay higher brackets of tax from our salary and the university pays lower tax for employing us.

There is also the fact that they can fire anyone at any point. Contracts are usually short term and renewable.

### Do you have zero hours contracts?

We do have this, mainly for part-timers and adjunct professors. These are now the most active and organised among the Professors Association. Full-time professors have contracts that are usually 3 years. Both AUB and LAU, the two American universities have recently introduced a tenure system. People who got tenure, still don't have a contract, so it does not mean they cannot fire you. We have very few tenured professors in our movement because most people who get tenure don't want to be



involved.

It has also been a difficult year to organise. It has been difficult to meet, difficult to agree on priorities. Some professors joined because they want to preserve the profession, from a very technocratic perspective, rather than because we are workers and we want to defend our rights. But there are others who are more radical and see this as a labour issue. These are the ones who are pushing more for unionisation.

### Are other similar things happening in other sectors or professions?

Yes, among the engineers. In their field it is less radical, because they have a professional order, not a workers' union. But they also have elections which are very important nationally. For decades this order has been co-opted by the political elite. After 2015, the last elections were the first breakthrough as the new head of the order was not affiliated with one of the political parties.

However at the beginning of the revolution he refused to call for a strike and therefore this created a lot of tension and divided people. A new group of younger architects and engineers emerged. Those people have created a new organisation which has worked very hard for the elections and they have candidates running in all the different regions.

There are also journalists who have set up the Alternative Journalists' Union. They have been very active because the past months have seen a very intense crackdown on journalists.

We have also seen pharmacists striking, because the big pharmaceutical companies will not provide them with medication as they are being forced to sell them at the official exchange rate so they consider that they are losing money, since the real exchange rate

is much higher. So they are simply not supplying the market, which is a catastrophe in terms of public health. This is what was behind the one-day strike in October 2020.

All of these groups have been active in different ways, whether they have said they are revolutionaries or not, they have been active in terms of demanding labour rights.

### How might different struggles develop, especially around any bail-out deal which is tied to attacks on the public sector and assault on jobs?

It depends whether those fights intensify or not. There is such a high level of youth unemployment which means they should organise as unemployed but we haven't seen this happen yet. The same can be said for informal workers. It will be very difficult for the economy to pick up again in the coming months or even years. This is a new social and economic reality, where struggles will intensify, but not necessarily taking the shape of unions. What we are seeing in our own efforts at organising is that most of the very active professors have left the country. We're losing our most active and vocal unionists. I think this is happening in many other sectors. There is a sense of general fatigue: people are scared and want any kind of stability.

But at the same time, in some sectors people might become even more angry, and it might take the shape of more violent mobilisations.

Organising is a difficult task in circumstances where you have few resources and little protection. It is a difficult setting, but it is not impossible. *Rima was speaking to Anne Alexander. Edited by Almaas Yahye. Send messages of solidarity to Faculty United at AUB on Facebook.*



Demonstrators are still on the streets  
Photo: Zoheir Aberkane

# Resistance is still fertile in the ‘New Algeria’

The Algerian regime hoped that a referendum on constitutional changes would draw a line under two years of mass mobilisations from below, writes **Shelagh Smith**, but the low turnout and continuing strikes tells a different story.

November 1 is the celebration of the start of the Algerian war for independence from the French in 1954. The government cynically chose this date for the referendum on changes to the constitution, using the slogan “November 1954: liberation, November 2020: change”, hoping that promises of a ‘New Algeria’ would mobilise popular support.

Despite 66.8 percent of voters approving the amendments the turnout was only 23.7 percent, so the changes were in effect approved by less than 14 percent of the electorate.

This represents a historic defeat for the regime, despite heavy promotion by government machinery and the media, while opponents of the referendum were stopped from campaigning and meeting publicly.

There was a massive boycott in Kabylia, where only 0.7 percent voted in Tizi Ouzou for example. There were boycotts in cities elsewhere and in the diaspora. But there was also a huge abstention in the High Plains and in the south of the country, areas traditionally the electoral reserve of the regime, with a turnout of 13 percent in the east and 16 percent in the west. This shows the regime is losing its base.

The “New Algeria” proposed in the referendum looks remarkably like the old Algeria. The President and the executive retain the same exorbitant powers, including over the courts and the judiciary. Controversially, the army could now be deployed outside the national territory to support international peacekeeping missions, for example in Libya. While the new constitution favours freedom of speech and assembly, the regime

has intensified its repression of the population. Journalists, bloggers, activists, and ordinary citizens are continuing to be jailed. Access to news websites such as RadioM, Maghreb Emergent, Interlignes, and Tout Sur l'Algérie has been blocked.

In Algeria the military retains a firm grip through its preferred presidential candidates, and every president writes a new constitution to try to strengthen his power. Tebboune wanted a popular plebiscite to strengthen his illegitimate regime, but unlike his predecessor Bouteflika, he has been unable to improve living standards due to severe economic conditions magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thousands of workers have lost their jobs, and millions of people are in real distress.

The authorities initially hid the fact that Tebboune was flown to a specialist hospital in Germany at the end of October to be treated for Covid-19, and the state of the 75 year old's health is still unknown.

The Islamist parties, weakened in recent times, were split over the referendum, but united in their



**Since February 2019 Algeria has been rocked by a peaceful mass movement which forced president Abdelaziz Bouteflika to step down after 20 years in power, after he proposed to stand for a 5th term. Against widespread opposition and boycotts, Abdelmadjid Tebboune was declared elected president on 12 December 2019.**

**Protesters want the removal of an entrenched political class that has held power in Algeria since independence in 1962. They demand a civil, not a military state, based on the rule of law. The eruption of the Covid-19 pandemic has forced protesters to leave the streets for now, but the struggle continues.**



Photo: Zoheir Aberkane

rejection of Tamazight, the Berber language, as the second language of the state confirmed in the new constitution. They claim this is against national unity. An extreme right wing current uses TV and radio channels to incite racial hatred. For example the MP Naïma Salhi, President of the Fairness and Proclamation Party (PEP), said she was ready to kill her daughter if she dared to "speak Kabyle".

But Kabylia's boycotts and activism are part of one national mood. This infuriates certain political institutions which have tried to drive a wedge between Kabylia and the rest of the country by banning the Amazigh flag, and stopping demonstrators joining marches in the capital. The regime sees Amazigh identity as a threat to Algeria's pan-Arabism and Islamism, which is encouraged and supported by the Emirates and Qatar in particular.

The economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic is combined in Algeria with a public health emergency and continuing social unrest. President Tebboune's response package included a 50 percent cut in public spending and investments, and reduced imports.

But the economy was already in trouble due to the collapse in oil prices – Algeria depends on oil and gas for 95 percent of its export revenue. The government has been drawing on its reserves, which are now severely depleted. The surplus accumulated during the 2000's was spent on buying

the population off and at the same time allowing an elite to get rich at people's expense.

With increasing unemployment and poverty, and the repression with which their protest movement has been met, the Hirak is bound to reassert itself during 2021. The regime has no economic room to manoeuvre, and certainly no political will to give up any of its power.

Tebboune has tried for the whole of 2020 to demobilise the movement, on the one hand calling it the "blessed Hirak", seeking to co-opt elements of the opposition, and on the other hand using the Covid-19 pandemic to massively increase repression. But the popular movement has not been defeated. Algerians no longer want to live as before. The question of popular sovereignty, respect for democratic freedoms and social justice remain the main aspirations of a people in struggle since February 2019.

Despite the Algerian people's rejection of the referendum, Tebboune can count on strong support from outside the country. President Macron of France declared: "I'll tell you frankly: I will do everything in my power to help President Tebboune in this period of transition. He is courageous. You don't change a country, institutions and power structures in a few months. There was a revolutionary movement, which is still there, in a different form. There is also a desire for stability,

especially in the most rural part of Algeria. Everything must be done for this transition to succeed."

This intrusion into Algeria's affairs, on the side of a discredited and authoritarian regime, has caused immense anger. It is seen as support for the continuity of the system guaranteeing French and other Western interests in the country. It comes just after the historic defeat of the regime during the referendum elections of November 1.

As Samir Larabi of the Parti Socialiste des Travailleurs (PST) has written, "The French regime was only waiting for this moment to put pressure on Algeria for more concessions and in a few weeks we will see other powerful countries, such as the USA, Great Britain, the Russians, Chinese and the Gulf monarchies, align with the French position to have its share of the pie."

Three years ago Macron talked of enhancing Franco-Algerian relations by forging new economic ties and boosting investment in renewable energies, innovation, the digital economy, the automotive industry, and pharmaceuticals. With its low wages, Algeria has attractive labour costs for investors. It's not all one way: the French home equipment company FrigorBrandt was saved from bankruptcy by the Algerian group Cevital, saving jobs in both countries.

Algeria's economy is dominated by the hydrocarbon sector, accounting for

around 28 percent of GDP, 58 percent of government revenues and 98% of all exports. The EU is Algeria's biggest export market for oil hydrocarbons and natural gas, with Turkey in 6th place, and Algeria is the EU's third largest supplier, after Russia and Norway.

The largest imports come from the EU, but China has now overtaken France as Algeria's number one source of imports, and has also been involved in heavy development of state infrastructure, including roads, nuclear power and car assembly plants. Turkey has also been investing heavily in Algeria, and there has been a greater interest from Gulf investors.

The EU and Algeria also cooperate on security and migration, which is crucial to France, especially in mediation efforts in the "fight against terror" in the Maghreb-Sahel region, including Libya, Tunisia and Mali. France relies on Algerian assistance in its fight against armed militancy, organized crime, and illegal immigration in the Sahel.

These policies, and the strong support of key member states such as France, underpin EU relations with Algeria, despite the European Parliament sometimes amplifying criticisms of the Algerian regime's human rights abuses.

On 26 November, the European Parliament adopted an urgent resolution highlighting "The deteriorating human rights situation in Algeria, in particular the case of journalist Khaled Drareni," who was sentenced to two years in prison on 15 September 2020. It "calls on the Algerian authorities to unblock media outlets and to halt the arrest and detention of political activists, journalists, and human rights defenders, as well as any person who expresses dissent or criticism of the government."

Under the Treaty of European Union and the EU-Algeria Association Agreement, the EU and its Member States are to place human rights, including respect for international human rights conventions, at the centre of their collective and bilateral cooperation with Algeria.

However, far from supporting the Algerian people who are fighting for their democratic rights, it has been revealed by Privacy International, a data rights charity based in London, that during the height of the protests in 2019, the EU was training police and security forces in open source



**"Free the press": protesters condemn Khaled Drareni's jailing**  
Photo: Zoheir Aberkane

intelligence (OSINT) surveillance techniques including harvesting data from social media sites and mobile phones, including creating fake online identities which have been used to spread disinformation. The agency funding this is the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL).

In the absence of a free press, social media plays an important role, but is plagued by what Algerians call "les mouches électroniques" – electronic flies. The EU is helping unaccountable security agencies that arbitrarily target activists, journalists and others: this is against the EU's own policies on disinformation.

Over 90 people are currently in prison in Algeria for acts related to the Hirak, according to the National Committee for the Liberation of Detainees (CNLD) with charges based

largely on publications on Facebook. On the day of the referendum "preventive" arrests of activists took place in Algiers, among them photojournalist Zoheir Aberkane, whose photos Middle East Solidarity Magazine has been pleased to publish. Other journalists have been arrested for "insulting the president" and filming a gathering of women activists. Independent news sites like Radiom.info and maghrebemergent.info have been censored. Lawyers recently observed a two-day strike to denounce the serious abuses of the justice system, where control over all the jurisdictions of the country has reached such a point that it has been nicknamed "Justice by telephone", since sentences are dictated by a political police out of control.

[Turn to page 20 for more details of the clampdown in Algeria and what you can do to help build solidarity](#)





Photo: Numilog workers via Facebook

# Transport workers are counting on solidarity to win union rights

The strike of the workers of Numilog in Bejaia, Kabylia, is playing an important role in building confidence and solidarity in the Algerian workers movement. Their conflict with the transport and logistics firm, part of the huge Cevital group, began in July when three workers were sacked for setting up a section of the national UGTA trade union.

The workers had been complaining about their working conditions, the lack of rest periods, long hours, the absence of safety standards, humiliation and repeated threats of dismissal, as well as low wages. The strike began in solidarity with the three trade unionists, whereupon 195 of the 250 employees were sacked for being members of the union. Since then they have led an active strike, with marches, meetings and sit-ins.

On November 18 the courts ruled in the workers' favour and ordered their reinstatement, but the Numilog management has refused to budge. The Ministry of Labour and the local authorities in Béjaïa have done nothing to help enforce the ruling, so on 25th November the workers travelled to the capital Algiers to hold a sit-in at the Ministry. Ten workers were arrested, as well as two members of the Parti Socialiste des Travailleurs (PST): Kamel Aïssat and Samir Larabi. They were all released later the same day.

The struggle at Numilog has been inspirational for other workers. In

September the workers of the brewery company BSA, in El Kseur, ended their strike after winning their demands.

In Samha Brandt at Sétif, another Cevital subsidiary which manufactures household appliances, hundreds of workers were unfairly dismissed, and workers organized to fight for the reinstatement of their colleagues.

Numilog is part of the Cevital group, the largest private conglomerate in Algeria, created by Issad Rebrab, whose personal fortune is £3.9 billion dollars. Although his business thrived under ousted president Bouteflika, he backed the protests against the president which began in February 2019, and called Cevital a "Citizen enterprise".

Later that year he was sentenced to six months in prison for tax, banking and customs offenses, in an anti-corruption campaign seen by many as a ploy to defuse the movement and settle scores. The majority of the workers at Numilog took part in marches in Béjaïa to unlock the investments of the Cevital group at the time, and now find themselves on the streets, blaming Rebrab for his ingratitude. This is not the first time that companies in the Cevital group have refused to recognise trade unions, installing house unions instead.

There has been some criticism of the support socialists and activists have given to this UGTA section. Samir Larabi explains the nature of the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA) in his article "Algerian Trade Unions: a

History", in MENA Solidarity Network's research report "Trade unions and the Algerian Uprising". The UGTA is indeed a bureaucratic union that has supported the political choices of the regime, as of course have the employers. But there are combative sections of the UGTA, and it is vital to build solidarity with workers in struggle for the defence of democratic and trade union freedoms, no matter what union they are in.

The struggle at Numilog brings into focus the reality of workers' rights in Algeria today, where despite legal guarantees, private and public/private firms sack workers who organise union branches, and the labour inspectorate turns a blind eye. In practice, trade union rights violations are rampant: Algeria ranks the worst (five out of five) in the ITUC Global Rights Index of violation of trade union rights. The youth unemployment rate stands at 30 percent, especially among women and the higher educated.

However, estimated trade union membership increased from 1.9 million in 2012 to 2.6 million in 2019, a relatively high trade union density at 34 percent of employees. This is an underestimate, since it excludes the independent unions which have played such a crucial role during the hirak movement.

[Read more on page 20 about action in solidarity with Algerian activists](#)

# OUT NOW

## MENA Solidarity Research Report No.1



### TRADE UNIONS AND THE ALGERIAN UPRISING

A Research Report by MENA Solidarity Network



By Hamza Hamouchene, Samir Larabi and Shelagh Smith

**Contents include:** A year of the Hirak - History of the Algerian workers' movement - The struggle in Kabylia - Teachers drive union change - Trade unions and the Hirak - Britain's role in Algeria - Political prisoners and repression - A guide to solidarity action

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Photo: Sudan Labour Bulletin

# Sudan's workers on the march for their rights

The revolution in Sudan got rid of dictator Omar El Bashir, but workers are still fighting for basic rights to organise. Activists from **Sudan Labour Bulletin** are on the frontline of mobilising solidarity with their struggles for dignity.

## How did the labour movement in Sudan begin?

The workers' movement came into existence in Sudan as a natural consequence of the colonial projects in the area. The first strike in Sudan was staged by the forest workers in 1908, it was followed by other strikes of lesser importance. Eventually the self-consciousness of the numerically small working class found expression in the ubiquitous workers clubs that emerged in the mid 1930s.

The largest strike on record from that era was organised in March 1948

by the nascent Railway Workers' Affairs Association. It is recorded in the annals of the workers' movement as 'The 33 Days Strike', marking its heroic length.

The strike was the response of the railway workers to the initial refusal of the British colonial authorities to recognise their association, arguably Sudan's first trade union. That record length of strike was surpassed only recently by the Kenana sugar factory workers' strike of 2020.

The first trade union law was passed later in 1948 and the General Federation of Trade Unions was formed in 1950. The trade unions which played a decisive

role in the history of Sudan were the Railway Workers' Union, the Port Workers' Union, Textile Workers' Union, the Doctors' Union and The Teachers' Union.

### **Are workers a majority in Sudanese society?**

This is a matter of considerable debate and eventually fission in Sudan's Communist movement. Indeed, it can be argued that wage labour as such does not constitute a majority of the workforce. The majority of Sudan's peoples continue to live off the land, as peasants or pastoralists.

However, the penetration of commercialisation and wage labour continues unabated, and in ways and forms that do not necessarily generate a majoritarian industrial workforce but nevertheless are creating an expanding mass of people who earn a living through selling their labour.

The term informal labour and its offshoots is ill-suited to describe this wide and arguably, heterogeneous class of people in terms of their integration in the fragmented labour market. Their experience of waged work is often seasonal but in general, coercive and depriving.

However, employment, even if temporary, is a blessing in such conditions. Human beings are superfluous to capitalism and the lives of those who die in military conflicts in the peripheries are not central in the public discourse which of course is controlled by the ruling class.

An important and central component of the wage labour system is the regime of seasonal agricultural labour and its articulation with Sudan's peripheral wars. This is a poorly explored aspect of the evolution of wage labour in Sudan and a major blind spot in theorisation and debate about Sudan's working class.

### **What were the main challenges facing labour activists during the dictatorship of Omar el Bashir?**

After the coup of 1989 which brought El Bashir to power, a committee was established to dismiss political opponents of the regime from their jobs. The committee issued what they called 'The Public Good Law' to justify their actions. The earliest workers' bodies which suffered as a result of this law were the Railway Union, the Mechanical Transport Union and the

River Transport Union. In an episode of extreme brutality, the newly ensconced regime murdered the doctor Ali Fadul who was at the helm of a doctors strike. Other labour and political activists were arbitrarily arrested and dismissed from their jobs in what was a purge of political opponents or likely opponents by the state bureaucracy. Sacked trade unionists were replaced with regime enthusiasts.

The regime soon launched its own corporate trade unions and trade union federation while passing a new law that criminalised strikes. Under these repressive conditions, strikes made a surprising comeback.

The corporate trade unions of the regime came under serious pressure from wildcat strikes of employees at the lower rungs of the state by teachers, nurses and workers in the public water and electricity facilities. The law thus became a dead letter and another relic in the museum of oppression. The labour movement, fragmented and devoid of a trade union framework, broke the seams of the corporate model.

Beyond the infrastructure of repression the greatest challenge facing the labour movement arguably relates to the sectoral, demographic changes within the working class. This is primarily as a consequence of the sell-off of state corporations to private interests and the crash dismantling of the state sector, given the fact that the state was and remains the dominant employer in the formal labour market.

As a consequence, a primary strength of certain sectors like the Railway Workers' Unions, namely the geographic concentration of strategic contingents of labour was lost. The fragmentation of labour across small manufacturing and service units is arguably a major challenge to workers' organisation.

Health workers and teachers' strikes, along with the other strikes mentioned above gave professionals confidence in their ability to organise and they also opened new spaces for opposing the totalitarian regime. On a larger scale, they reminded all factions of the people that issues and demands raised by different bodies are interlinked and can be attained only by eradication of the regime.

### **What role did organised workers play in the revolution against El Bashir?**

Workers engaged in the revolution against El Bashir as ordinary citizens and sometimes as part of small closed

groups, and this is due to the repressive nature of the regime. Despite that, a few exceptional moments stand out, for example workers of the Terrestrial Port (the main bus terminus for Khartoum and its suburbs) organised a strike where they shut down the capital's bus network.

Also, there were many protests by workers and professionals in different sectors such as electricity, telecommunications and healthcare which all delivered fatal blows to the regime and led to its demise in April 2019.

### **Can you tell us more about how the general strikes were organised during the revolution?**

In 2019 revolutionaries raised slogans and demands that united different political and professional bodies. Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) which comprises different professional bodies including doctors, lawyers and journalists), adopted these demands and supported revolutionaries in the street. That's why when the SPA called for general strikes, the masses responded promptly.

All professional and workers' bodies conducted general strikes that forced the generals of the Transitional Military Council (TMC) to open negotiations with the opposition political coalition, the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC).

Also, the general political atmosphere helped by uniting the masses after the massacre on 3 June 2019, during which the TMC murdered revolutionaries who were protesting in front of the military headquarters in Khartoum.

### **What has happened since the Transitional government came to power?**

Despite the formation of a Transitional government, workers' conditions are the same. Living conditions are getting worse everyday and wages cannot keep with the increase in prices. Also the same labour laws are still in effect and there have been many workers who were arbitrarily dismissed since this government was founded for demanding their basic rights.

The strikes are still happening, the latest of which is the doctors-in-training strike. They are demanding a career ladder, salaries (most of them work for years with no salaries at all) and health insurance.



### What are the legal developments in relation to workers rights to organise?

In relation to the right to organise workers' conditions are the same as during the El Bashir era. What has happened until now is the appointment of workers' steering committees by the Transitional Government instead of letting workers elect their representatives democratically. Most of these appointments have been merely political. Also, the trade union act still has not passed, as the authorities are trying to dictate a law which will restrict trade union liberties.

The SPA and the Sudanese Communist Party are also supporting this law. The Communist Party is inclined towards more restrictions and more state intervention in workers' organisations. The cause of this requires an understanding of the party's grand strategy. It has become cut off from the working class and is convinced that alliance with bourgeoisie is the only tool

to transform society, albeit with some tensions which can be transcended. This means looking at trade unions as a political bargaining chip in negotiations with other political powers rather than "schools of struggle."

In short, workers' interests have been ignored in writing the bill, and statist views dominate. This proposed act was drafted and decreed from above and the workers were never consulted about it. And although Sudan has signed up to the ILO's Convention number 87, which guarantees the right of workers to organise, it has not been implemented in reality. All talk about trade union liberties is pure propaganda from the government.

### Do political parties play a big role in the labour movement?

Today political parties play a negative role in the labour movement: firstly by being a part of the ruling coalition, political parties actively suppress the

labour movement for the reasons mentioned previously and secondly, through their insistence on an authoritarian labour act that violates the basic principles of building a democratic labour movement

### What are the challenges facing the Sudanese labour movement today?

The key workers' demands include improving the working environment, increasing wages, having the freedom to organise without harassment from employers. Challenges include

building grassroots organisations that truly represent workers interests and changing laws that cripple the labour movement, especially the 1997 Labour Code through which hundreds of workers have been arbitrarily dismissed since this government took over.

Go to <https://www.facebook.com/SudanLabourBulletin/> to find out more (in Arabic).

## Sugar workers' historic strike wins concessions but not a free union

The longest strike in Sudanese history, organised by over 1000 workers at Kenana Sugar Company, ended in September having won some concessions from management and the government.

The workers had spent more than a month on strike, demanding basic trade union rights, increased wages to offset the spiralling cost of living, the removal of figures associated with the old regime from the company and the reinstatement of 34 workers sacked for taking part in the uprising against dictator Omar el-Bashir last year.

The deal restored company transport services, promised to activate a committee to look at the cases of workers dismissed for activism in the revolutionary movement and agreed to cancel all salary cuts and outstanding disciplinary warnings and suspensions.

Workers' demands for a pay rise, benefits in retirement and for company investment in health and education services did not figure in the agreement, which also recognised the formation of a new steering committee for the workers' union, although its representatives don't appear to have been important enough to have signed off the deal to end the



Photo: Sudan Labour Bulletin

strike. Activists from Sudan Labour Bulletin told Middle East Solidarity that the government was trying to stop the strike without allowing workers to vote on proposals themselves or elect their own committee.

Kenana Sugar is one of the largest producers of white sugar in Africa. The company employs around 6000 people and processes 400,000 tons of sugar a year, alongside 65 million litres of ethanol and 80,000 tons of animal fodder.

The company has major export markets in the Middle East and further afield, and counts the Government of

Saudi Arabia, the Public Investment Authority of Kuwait and the Government of Sudan among its major investors.

"The significance of the Kenana Sugar factory workers' strike lies in the fact that it mirrors the struggle of the Sudanese people at large in their fight against multinational capital for self-determination," Sudan Labour Bulletin told us. "It also demonstrates how the government colludes with its Gulf allies/patrons in oppressing and exploiting the population."

Go to [www.menasolidaritynetwork.com](http://www.menasolidaritynetwork.com) for updates



Photo: Sudan Labour Bulletin

# ‘We must reject this divide-and-conquer rhetoric’

Sudanese police forced a sit-in by refugees outside UN buildings in Khartoum to disperse on 15 December. Activists from **Sudan Labour Bulletin** explain why solidarity with refugees is a crucial task for Sudanese revolutionaries.

Late on 15 December, a two-month long sit-in by refugees in front of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the Khartoum 2 district in the center of the capital, was forcibly broken up by Sudanese police. Refugees were dumped in the middle of an empty spot that is used as a parking lot for trucks and for landfill.

The refugees in the sit-in are demanding the resolution of their cases that have been pending for many years

and that the facilitation of procedures for renewing their identity cards or issuance of new ones to those who are eligible. Refugees say that the absence of an official legal status exposes them to many personal and economic risks.

Refugees have repeatedly complained of being targeted by civilian-dressed individuals who claim to be affiliated with the Sudanese police, forcing them to pay for their release, or being fired from work without compensation because they are unable to plead in the



courts. They consider that the failure of the Office of the High Commissioner to legalize their status has contributed to the exacerbation of their already poor conditions. Most of the refugees are requesting resettlement in a third country, especially as conflicts flare up in their countries of origin.

Most of the refugees involved in the sit-in work in the informal sector, according to testimonies collected by the Sudan Labour Bulletin.

This has been severely affected by the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic, leading to the majority of them losing their livelihoods. The denial of identity cards and the absence of financial support supposed to be provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has increased the impact of the crisis in living conditions.

One of the refugees stated that he was unable to pay the monthly rent for a room in which he, his wife and his infant child have been living during the past months. "We can't get food to eat, there is no work and the prices are increasing. But the UNHCR does not want us to give us identity cards or the pennies we are owed. Our landlord has kicked us out. What are we supposed to do?" said a refugee, who preferred to withhold his name.

But what is the story of Sudan with the issue of asylum?

And why does the dispersal of the refugees' sit-in constitute a serious threat to the revolutionary cause?

According to UNHCR figures, Sudan hosts about 1 million refugees from neighbouring countries while there are 1.8 million internally displaced persons and about 1 million Sudanese refugees in various countries of the world. In addition, a number of refugees are moving through Sudan as a port of migration towards other destinations in Europe, mostly via the Mediterranean.

According to the International Organization for Migration, these refugees enter the informal labour market and are exposed to major violations by the security services and employers. Sudan also hosts a number of refugees from Syria and Yemen in smaller numbers, who often access official support from the government as they did during the previous regime, or they are active in business with investments in the service and trade sectors.

There are a large number of Sudanese refugees dispersed in various parts of the world. According to conservative

figures, their number is estimated at about two million Sudanese, a little less than half of whom live in Egypt, while the rest are distributed among Chad, Ethiopia, South Sudan, the United States, Europe, and finally, Israel.

Sudanese refugees abroad are experiencing the same problems that prompted the sit-in in Khartoum. Last February, a number of Sudanese refugees in Niger held vigils to protest their detention in a camp in the middle of the desert and complained about the ill-treatment of official authorities, the absence of health care and the constant

## Massacre in Cairo

About 2,000 Sudanese refugees staged a sit-in in front of the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Mohandessin in the Egyptian capital In Cairo, in October 2005, they demanded the commission to settle them in a third country. On December 30, 2005, the Egyptian security forces cordoned off the sit-in and dispersed it with excessive force, killing 25 refugees and wounding 169 according to Egyptian police statistics, while other sources said that the number of dead reached 134 and more than 400 refugees were injured. The attack is known as the Muhammad Mahmoud Square massacre.

threats by camp officials.

On the other hand, in 2018 Israel ordered African asylum seekers, most of them from Eritrea and Sudan, to return to their countries of origin within three months or face prison, with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu calling them "infiltrators". May Golan, a member of the Israeli parliament for the Likud party, stressed the same message in October 2020, posting on Facebook "There is peace now in Sudan, go back to your country."

She also tweeted about expelling refugees, saying "Nothing will deter me from the struggle for an immigration policy and the expulsion of all intruders from Israel and their return to their countries of origin."

This last message was posted November 20, just as the Sudanese

media which is in favour of normalisation of relations with Israel was full of propaganda messages about peace and tolerance.

This is not a new incident, as there have been many cases of attacks on African asylum seekers at the hands of demonstrators, and the Hebrew newspaper Haaretz reported an attack on Sudanese refugees during demonstrations in south Tel Aviv in 2012, during which a member of parliament from the Likud Party called them "cancer".

Sudan is considered a transit route for migration to Europe, through which asylum seekers from the Horn of Africa, the Lakes Region, West Africa and from Sudan itself, heading towards the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, in what European security services call the eastern route.

The European Union's attempts to stop immigration had negative consequences for Sudan because of its support for the Bashir regime which it used as an external police force against migrants through the agreements known as the Khartoum Process.

The evidence is too large to hide, which makes the issue of refugees and migrants and attempts to deal with it have major social and political consequences for Sudan.

Refugees and different countries of the world are legally invoking the United Nations Convention of 1951 and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, known as the Geneva Convention. Article 1 of the Convention clearly defines who is a refugee.

They are a person who is outside their country of nationality or the country of their habitual residence, due to a justifiable fear of being persecuted on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, belonging to a certain social group, or because of a political opinion.

In theory, a refugee is a citizen of a country who no longer enjoys the protection of his government, and that is why the international community plays this role. It is the primary responsibility of host governments to protect refugees.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees maintains a "supervisory obligation" for this process, and intervenes as necessary to ensure that bona fide refugees are granted asylum and are not forced to return to countries where their lives are at risk.

Both principles were violated in the event of the dispersal of the refugee

sit-in on 15 December. According to the documents of the High Commissioner for Refugees, the rights of refugees include freedom of belief, freedom of movement from one place to another, the right to receive education, travel documents, and the opportunity to work, and the 1951 Geneva Convention likewise stresses the importance of the refugee's obligations towards the host government.

Many of the refugees who were dispersed from the sit-in believed that they did not demand anything more than what was stipulated in international conventions, including the Geneva Convention.

A number of refugees interviewed by the Sudan Labour Bulletin said that they have "strong complaints" about corruption in the High Commission for Refugees in Khartoum, and many of them say that they heard or know a number of cases that had the right to resettle in a third country after they paid large bribes to UNHCR employees.

Others' requests were delayed or rejected without justification or after they were told that they had been resettled.

However, none of them stated that they were subject to a direct request to pay a bribe, but they say that their papers are always said to have been "lost" after they have passed many stages of the asylum approval process, without a convincing reason.

This may be due to their fear of being personally targeted by UNHCR employees. However, corruption accusations have affected a number of UNHCR employees in previous years and included several African offices.

The American network NBC conducted a 7-month long investigation, which included interviews with more than 50 refugees registered in Kenya, Uganda, Yemen, Ethiopia and Libya, with no ties to each other, in which they described corruption and exploitation by staff of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other agencies to obtain bribes or extort the refugees by various means.

The reputation of the UNHCR office in Khartoum has not been better. Sally Hayden published a report on persistent corruption in the resettlement process in Khartoum, full of individual stories and evidence of corruption and bribery in the office.

According to the opinion of a current employee, the Inspector General's Office (IGO) in Geneva, which is mandated to



Photo: Sudan Labour Bulletin

investigate these charges, is working slowly and nothing has changed. "The magnitude of corruption in the office... is (on) an unprecedented scale... This operation is the worst in terms of corruption [and] mismanagement," says a former senior employee in the Khartoum office in the report.

Another employee in the UNHCR office told The New Humanitarian, "If they [staff] talk they will lose their job. They will be attacked and harassed. I believe lots of people in UNHCR know about this but no one wants to talk about it."

**There are no free people and no citizens in a world that turns the poor into each others' enemies while the warmongers remain in their seats.**

The refugee issue today is bigger than a single country. It can only be solved at a global scale. Military conflicts, famine, health and economic disasters have made 23 million people refugees, internally displaced or stateless.

And we Sudanese are a large part of

them. It has many nationalities, but the causes are the same, and they all suffer corruption, exploitation and extortion, and suffer racial discrimination and forced labour.

There are no free people and no citizens in a world that turns the poor into each others' enemies while the warmongers remain in their seats.

Without solidarity that transcends nationalities and borders, without a revolutionary policy that fights racism, false nationalism and xenophobia, without decent work and a decent life for all, the dispersal of the UNHCR refugees' sit-in will not be the last.

The ruling authorities always focus on removing local sympathy for the refugees, portraying them as a plague, and blaming them for their own economic and political failures.

We might be the next victims. That is why we must reject their "divide-and-conquer" logic. And if the oppressed persecute each other instead of joining together against their exploiters, all of them will go down to defeat.

Edited by Anne Alexander



## Moroccan feminist activist faces jail for solidarity action

Moroccan youth and feminist activists are appealing for international solidarity with Fadila al-Makhloufi, a member of Al-Mussawah (Equality) feminist group and the Youth Challenge Movement after her arrest and detention on 22 October. Fadila was interrogated by the Royal Gendarmerie and investigated by the General Prosecutor in Tinghir, in the south east of Morocco in connection with a video she distributed calling for solidarity with 37 hunger-striking political prisoners from the popular movement in the Rif region. Her case is due in court on 21 January.

A massive wave of demonstrations in 2016 in the Rif region was crushed



Fadila al-Makhloufi (left) Photo via Facebook

by brutal repression, and leading activists from the peaceful protest movement were handed jail sentences totalling 230 years in 2018. Since then, activists across Morocco have continued to campaign in solidarity with the Rif prisoners.

An international campaign for Fadila has won the support of feminist, migrant and socialist organisations in France, Italy, Slovenia, Iraq, Egypt and Tunisia.

Go to [www.menasolidaritynetwork.com](http://www.menasolidaritynetwork.com) for more details

## Unions at SOAS and KCL vote against enforced adoption of IHRA definition

Trade unionists from education institutions have been organising to reject the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-semitism which they say compromises activists' ability to working in solidarity with the Palestinian people in the face of decades of dispossession and occupation, and poses a serious threat to academic freedom.

There has been sustained pressure by the Office for Students and the Education Secretary to adopt the definition and the associated examples. Universities have been told that their funding streams will be cut if they do not adopt it by Christmas.

The activists make clear that there is no place for antisemitism, Islamophobia or any other kind of racism in our ranks. In an era when the far-right is growing in confidence it is more important than ever to stand against Holocaust denial, anti-Jewish conspiracy theories and any other



Labour Party branches have been banned from discussing support for Palestine solidarity fundraising cycling events Photo via The Big Ride for Palestine

forms of antisemitic prejudice and hatred.

In November UCU branches from SOAS and KCL passed motions defending academic freedoms and rejecting attempts to enforce the IHRA definition. The motions criticised so-called illustrative "examples" as infringing upon freedom of speech.

They pointed out that the IHRA definition is already having a chilling impact, where academics feel unable to speak out on Palestinian issues.

SOAS noted that the drafter of the IHRA working definition, Kenneth Stern himself, recognised that rightwing elements "are weaponizing" his definition to chill critical speech. KCL noted the definition would "require

us to deny or suppress matters of historical record and contemporary reality," and claimed that this was a breach of the Equality Act.

Meanwhile, even fundraising activities for Palestinian causes are being squeezed inside the Labour Party, according to activists in East London. In early December, Labour Party branches were banned from discussing motions supporting The Big Ride for Palestine, a bike ride which raises money to support Palestinian children's charities and raise awareness of the impact of Israeli occupation, East London Palestine Solidarity campaigners say.

Find resources and campaign materials at <https://www.facebook.com/TheBigRide4Palestine>



## Clampdown on dissent in Algeria continues

During 2020 and the start of the coronavirus pandemic, repression of Hirak activists, human rights activists and especially journalists has increased. Over 90 people are currently in prison in Algeria for acts related to the Hirak.

On 15 September an appeal court in Algiers sentenced journalist Khaled Drareni to a two-year prison sentence over his coverage of the Hirak protest movement, for “inciting an unarmed gathering” and “endangering national unity” based on his Facebook posts. Two activists, Samir Benlarbi and Slimane Hamitouche, were each sentenced to a year in jail.

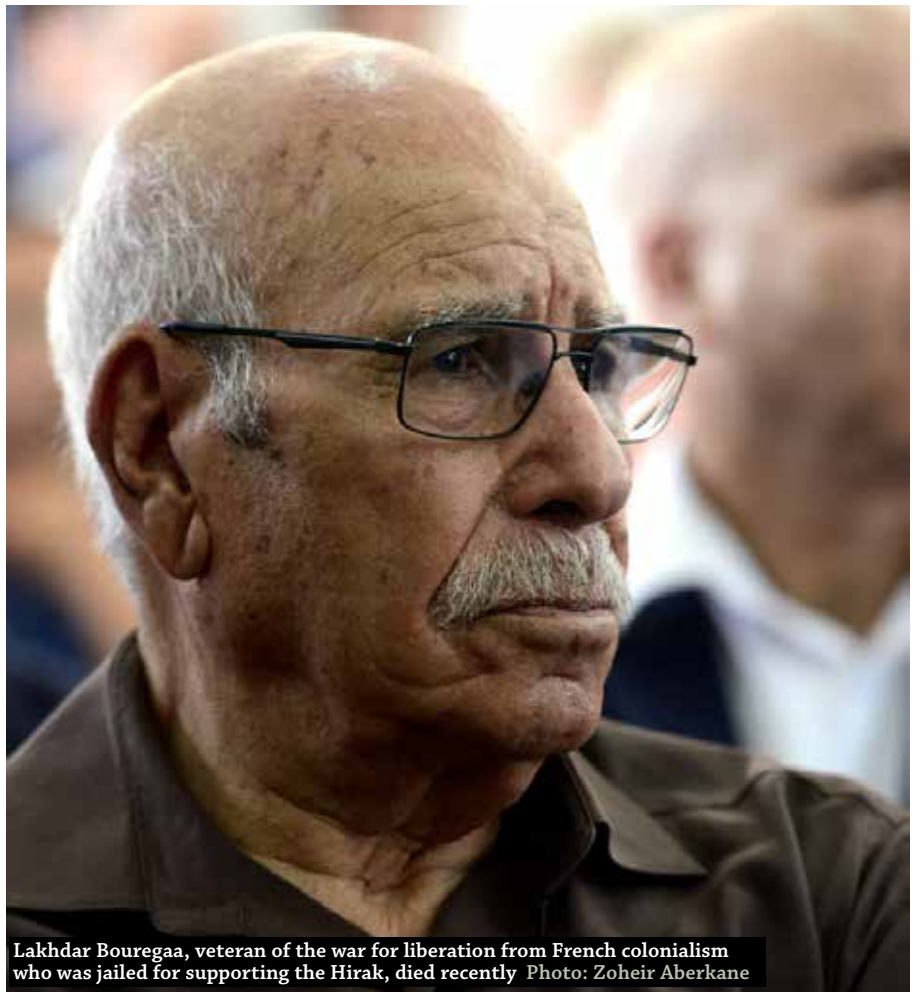
Khaled Drareni is the director of the Casbah Tribune, the correspondent of the French TV5 Monde channel and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) in Algeria. The harsh verdict is being widely condemned by Algerian and international human rights organizations.

An international support committee has launched a major international solidarity campaign entitled #WeAreKhaled. The European Parliament has also called for his urgent release, and eight independent UN experts condemned the sentence: “We are very alarmed by the extent of the crackdown on dissent in Algeria.”

Civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and journalists are increasingly monitored and harassed in the exercise of their legitimate work.” They also expressed concern with an Algerian draft law, which would criminalize the dissemination of fake news and the funding of any association that could “undermine the State or fundamental interests of Algeria.”

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked Algeria 146 out of 180 countries and territories in its 2020 World Press Freedom Index, five places lower than in 2019.

Karim Tabbou, spokesperson for the Democratic and Social Union (UDS) and an iconic figure of the Hirak, received on December 7 a one year suspended prison sentence and



Lakhdar Bouregaa, veteran of the war for liberation from French colonialism who was jailed for supporting the Hirak, died recently Photo: Zoheir Aberkane

a fine. The charges against him were reclassified as “incitement to violence” after he had already been sentenced to one year for “undermining the morale of the army.”

Karim Tabbou has denounced on numerous occasions the control of the Algerian military apparatus on the political process, and spent 9 months in detention, most of it in solitary confinement.

Sadly, Lakhdar Bouregaa has died at the age of 87 years, from complications of Covid-19. A veteran of Algeria’s war of independence, he was tortured and imprisoned from 1967 to 1975 under president Houari Boumediene. In 2019 he was thrown in jail again for six months for his support for the Hirak, charged with demoralizing the army and harming National Defense.

One activist, Yacine Mebarki, was initially condemned to a 10 year prison sentence and fine of 10 million dinars (20 years of the average wage) for “insulting Islam”, after the police found an old copy of the Koran with one of its pages ripped.

The real reason is that he is a

campaigner for Amazigh (Berber) rights and prominent in anti-government protests. He received enormous solidarity, and his sentence was reduced on appeal to 1 year and 50,000 dinars.

The Parti Socialiste des Travailleurs (PST) is calling for solidarity with three other activists charged with being in a peaceful gathering (“attroupement non armée”): Said Benarab of the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), Lemnouar Hamamouche of the PST and Yanis Adjilia.

The former policeman Toufik Hassani began a hunger strike in December after being sentenced to two years in prison and a heavy fine. In October 2019 he had denounced police repression of a student march in Algiers. He was charged with threatening police officers and revealing professional secrets on Facebook.

Sign the petition for Khaled Drareni on Amnesty’s website: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/w4r-2020-algeria-khaled-drareni/>



## International campaign forces release of Egyptian human rights workers

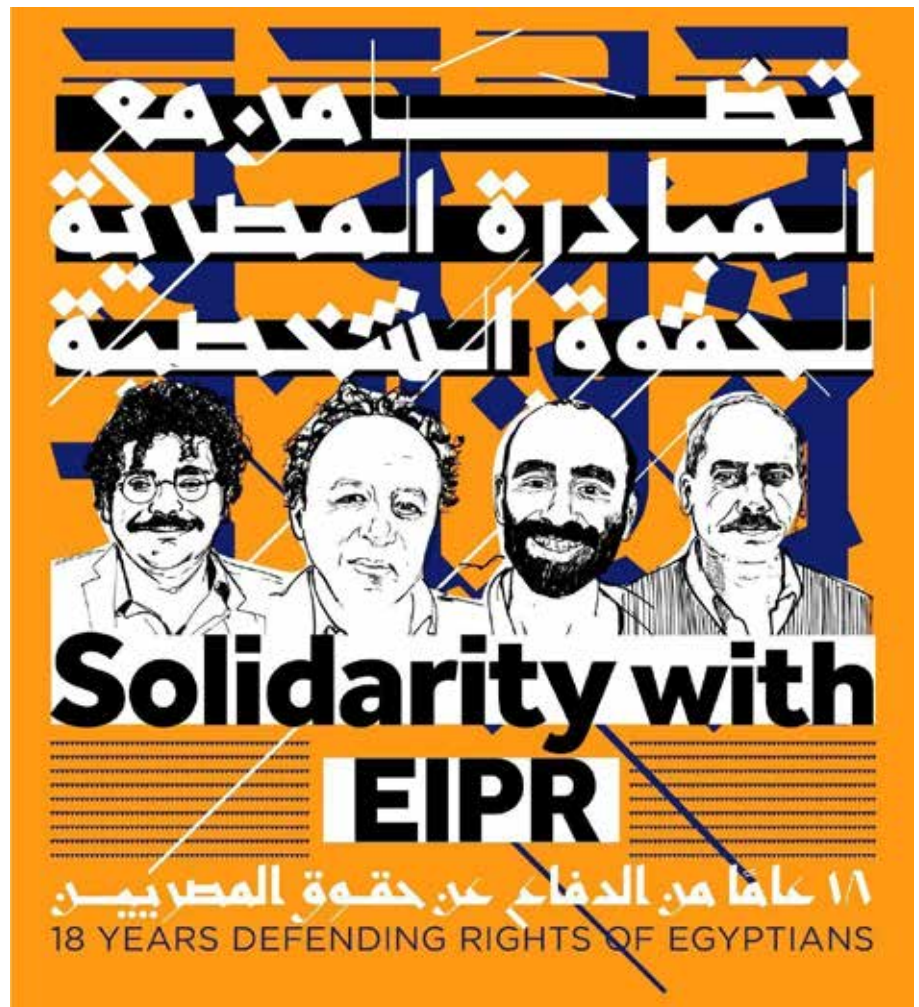
Three human rights workers from the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) whose arrest and detention on spurious ‘terrorism’ charges sparked a major international campaign were released on 3 December. Leading trade unionists from Britain and Canada were among those who added their voices to the growing pressure on the Egyptian authorities to release the men – EIPR’s director Gasser Abdel Razek and colleagues Karim Ennarah, Mohamed Bashir.

The three EIPR members of staff had been arrested between 15 - 20 November. Two of those arrested Karim Ennarah, head of EIPR’s Criminal Justice Unit, and administrative director Mohamed Bashir, had been added to a case opened by prosecutors in August 2020 which targets prominent political prisoners such as socialist lawyer Mahienour el-Masry with spurious “terrorism” charges.

Ennarah, who is an alumnus of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, and Bashir, have been charged with “joining a terrorist group” as part of case 855/2020, opened by prosecutors in August this year. Other activists named in the case include lawyer Mahienour el-Masry and journalist Solafa Magdy. Such accusations are commonly directed against human rights activists, independent journalists, lawyers and political opponents of the regime.

Activists around the world came together in outrage at the detentions, which are the latest in a long line of political imprisonments and disappearances that have marked the regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi since 2012. El-Sisi’s government has orchestrated the mass detentions of thousands of lawyers, journalists and politicians.

Vicky Blake president of the University and College Union (UCU),



Jane Loftus, Vice-President of the Communication Workers’ Union (CWU), and dozens of members of the UCU and Unison National Executive Committees are among the nationally elected trade unionists backing a statement highlighting the arrests of EIPR staff alongside those of imprisoned socialist lawyer Mahienour el-Masry and journalist Solafa Magdy – who are named in the same ‘terrorism’ case as some of the EIPR detainees. The statement also demanded action from the British government, which continues to do business with Egypt’s military rulers.

Sandy Nicoll, branch secretary of Unison at the School of African and Oriental Studies in London, where Karim Ennarah studied, said

“The release of EIPR staff members is fantastic news and will be very welcome for their families and for everyone who has campaigned over this during the last few weeks. But we need to keep up the pressure to ensure that all the charges are dropped and the harassment by the authorities comes to an immediate end. We have to keep fighting for the release of all

political detainees incarcerated by this vicious regime.”

The good news of these releases is tainted by the thousands of political prisoners who remain in Egyptian jails. Patrick Zaki, another member of EIPR staff, had his detention renewed on 6 December for another month and a half. Zaki, a researcher on Gender and Rights at EIPR, and a graduate student at the University of Bologna, was detained and tortured in February 2020, sparking major protests in Italy where there has also been a large-scale campaign for justice for researcher Giulio Regeni, murdered by the Egyptian security forces in 2016. EIPR said that Patrick ‘disappeared’ for 24 hours, but reappeared in front of public prosecutors in his home town of Mansoura on 8 February, having been beaten, subjected to electric shocks and interrogated about his work and activism.

Go to [www.egyptsolidarityinitiative.org](http://www.egyptsolidarityinitiative.org) for news of campaigns in solidarity with political prisoners in Egypt





Disabled activists join a protest in Tunisia in 2011 | Photo: Nasser Nouri

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**Strike**  
**إضراب**  
**Solidarity**  
**تضامن**

### MENA Solidarity

[menasolidaritynetwork.com](http://menasolidaritynetwork.com)

MENA Solidarity is a network of activists from different unions in the UK engaged in building solidarity for struggle to win social justice and workers' rights in the Middle East. We are supported by the UCU, PCS and NEU unions and a number of other trade union regions and branches.

**BAHRAIN WATCH**

### Bahrain Watch

[bahrainwatch.org](http://bahrainwatch.org)

Bahrain Watch is an independent research and advocacy organisation formed in February 2012 that seeks to promote effective, transparent and accountable governance in Bahrain.

**Egypt**  
**مصر**  
**SOLIDARITY**

### Egypt Solidarity

[egyptsolidarityinitiative.org](http://egyptsolidarityinitiative.org)

Egypt Solidarity launched on 11 February 2014, the third anniversary of the fall of Mubarak, in order to campaign in defence of democratic rights in Egypt.