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THE ORIGIN OF THE NATIONAL WORKING-CLASS MOVEMENT IN TUNISIA (1924-1925)

In the 20's of our century Tunisia was a French colony with a low level of economic development. Modern industries were in fact merely starting under way. The development of mining (phosphorites, and iron, lead and zinc ores), a sector traditional for colonies, received the greatest impetus. Functioning also were some enterprises of the food processing, metal making, wood working, leather and sowing industries as well as enterprises concerned with municipal services (electric, gas and water supply). Transportation facilities were developed comparatively well. All sizable enterprises were owned by foreign capital. The First World War invigorated business activity appreciably. The total sum of capital investments approximately trebled between 1907 and 1919. New companies sprang up. The number of mining enterprises increased from 37 in 1914 to 58 in 1924, and the value of their exports rose from 15,500,000 francs in 1914 to 97,700,000 francs in 1924.¹

The industrial development was paralleled by the growth of the working class. Unfortunately, the state of statistics being what it is we cannot determine reliably enough the number of employees for their distribution over the sectors of production. According to the Census of 1921, there were 110,310 Tunisian labourers and 30,926 European workers (farming, trade, industry and transport), the total population number being 2,093,939. Farming accounted for the bulk of Tunisian labourers. The number of employees in industry and transport can be tentatively set at 30,000 to 35,000 (mining accounting for approximately half of them). In the first postwar years the number somewhat increased. For example, the number of employees in mining increased from 14,245 in 1920 to 19,920 in 1924.² In March 1924, 20,000 workers, out of whom 80 per cent were Tunisians, were engaged in mining, according to L. Jouhaux, Secretary General of the French General Confederation of Labour.³

In the early 20's most Tunisian workers constituted an amorphous mass of newcomers from villages and nomadic camps. Poverty, frequent crop failures and elementary calamities, and the landowners' extortions and oppressions compelled them to leave their best places and migrate to cities, mining settlements or colons' farms. Vagrancy was rampant. No less than 95 per cent of Tunisian workers were nomads

or persons without settled residences⁴. They worked several months a year (no more than eight to ten months). Having saved some money, they returned to their native places and left them again to earn more as soon as their miserly savings ended.⁵

Enmeshed by medieval customs and religious prejudices, the workers were under the influence of the tribal sheikhs, Muslim religious brotherhoods and marabouts. Illiteracy was wholesale: in 1924, out of each thousand Tunisians only two could really write and count. Illiterate and downtrodden villagers were afraid of cities. The modern industry could employ them with difficulty, and therefore there was latent unemployment in the country though there was no unemployment as a registered social process. On the contrary, employers kept complaining of a shortage of manpower and tried as hard as they could to attract it from abroad.⁶

The labour legislation was in a rudimentary state. Only the French acts on industrial accidents (as of March 15, 1921), on employment and a weekly day-off (as of April 20, 1921) were enforced in Tunisia in the early 20's.⁷ The demands of the progressives of France and Tunisia on the extension onto Tunisia of all French social laws encountered a stiff resistance of the patronate and the colonial powers which followed its lead. In particular, the owners were frantically against the French law of 1919 on the eight-hour working day, defining it as an "anti-economic and chimerical measure". Though a 8- and 9-hour working day had been established in most sectors de facto, a beylical decree of June 15, 1910 was still in force: the decree prescribed a 10-hour working day and provided for numerous exceptions which enabled employers to increase it up to 11 to 12 hours.⁸ Meagre as the Tunisia labour legislation was, it was controlled entirely on the owners' will. In the country there were neither sufficiently well-organized labour inspection nor conciliatory conflict-setting commissions. But what was especially important, the authorities did not recognize the workers' right to trade union membership and thus deprived them of their basic weapon of protecting their class interests. Of course, trade unions originated without any legal sanction. However, the "recognition of the trade-union right was a necessary condition for the development of any social legislation" as noted L. Jouhaux.⁹

The colonial protectorate regime subjected Tunisian workers to severe discrimination. Regardless of their skills and abilities, they were regarded as second-rate or even third-rate workers. (On the scale of values of an ordinary businessman they ranked second to Italians and Russians)¹⁰. In pay rates there was a considerable difference between the European and Tunisian worker (see table on p. 97).

Tunisian graders and children earned from 2.25 to 4 francs a day. French office employees received a "colonial third" equal to 35 per cent of their salaries in addition to their basic pay regardless of distance and posts throughout the territory of Tunisia.

In the first years after the war of 1914-1918 the living standards of workers deteriorated appreciably. Prices were much higher than be-

Day Pay Rates (Francs) of Miners (1923)

	Underground		On surface	
	Minimum (unskilled)	Maximum (timberer)	Minimum (unskilled)	Maximum (European adjuster, Tunisian machine operator)
Europeans . . .	6	18	6	25
Tunisians . . .	4	16	4	8

Source: *Renseignements coloniaux*, 1925. N 10 bis, p. 485.

fore the war. The costs-of-living index (1914 = 100) of a French family of four amounted to 421 in 1924, of an Italian family to 442 and of a Tunisian family to 410. Meanwhile the index of nominal wages averaged 300 for the industry as a whole and even less, 200 in farming in 1924 (1914 = 100). All that led to an essential decrease of real wages. According to the data published in L. Jouhaux's report, in nearly all industries the wages of skilled workers, i. e., Europeans, decreased by 10 to 15 per cent. The index of real wages in metal making, sewing, food processing, printing and mining dropped in 1924 to 85-90 (1914 = 100). The real wages of day labourers, i. e., the bulk of Tunisian working people, dropped even more. Its index amounted to 52 in 1924 as against 100 in 1914.¹¹

The deterioration of the material position of workers naturally intensified their class struggle. Their resentment was spearheaded against the colonial regime, against the government of the protectorate. "Tunisian workers", wrote in this connection Tahar al-Haddād, a progressive Tunisian poet, revolutionary and journalist (1901-1936), "believe that their failures stem from the government which does not give them the bare necessities and does not prevent the disasters which they encounter, does not give them knowledge which they need and does not show justice with respect to them".¹² Therefore, they sympathized with the nationalist party Destour which had been set up in 1920, and supported its slogans and anti-imperialist actions, contributing thereby to its advance in 1920 to 1924.

Political struggle, noted al-Haddād, referring to the national-liberation movement under the leadership of the Destour, is "the first at which the Tunisian people arrived". But at the same time the "people began to sense that the political movement alone was insufficient."¹³

The Destour Party, which expressed the interests of the national bourgeoisie, mainly bourgeoisie of the capital, and some landlords, was too far removed from the people at large, let alone the working class. The party was confined to representing its national interests, but paid no attention to its specific class interests. The Tunisian wor-

kers sensed this in some way or other and spontaneously gravitated to the French socialist organisations which were intensely active in those years. In 1919 a Tunisian Federation of the French Socialist Party took shape organizationally. Most of its members voted in 1920 for joining the Third International and paved the way for the Communist Party of Tunisia.¹⁴ Its leaders Louzon and Finidori began to publish the first communist newspapers *Habib al-Umma* (1921) and *L'Avenir Social* (1919) and launched the propaganda of the ideas of the October Revolution. The socialist newspaper *Tunis-Socialiste* was also highly popular. Its publishers Duran-Angliviel and Cohen-Hadria introduced the Tunisians to the French working-class and socialist movement and came out for social reforms in the country. Arabic translations of Marxist works became available.

The propaganda of socialism, often naive and emanating from heterogeneous and contradictory sources met nevertheless with a keen response among the Tunisian masses and especially among the capital's revolutionary young people. Many Tunisians embraced socialist ideas directly in France. During the First World War 63,000 Tunisians were mobilized and sent to Europe, while others worked at French enterprises where they realized those immense advantages which give workers their class solidarity and organization. This fact, along with local agitation, explains perhaps that sharp change in the Tunisians' attitude to the trade-union movement which originated in Tunisia even before the war of 1914 to 1918. In the first post-war years the Tunisians began to support actively the French trade unions in Tunisia and set up new trade unions in cooperation with European workers. In 1924 there were in Tunisia 56 trade unions which functioned on a semi-legal basis. In 1919 they joined the Tunisian Department of Trade Unions of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT). The organization was led by Europeans, mainly Right-wing Socialists headed by Durel.

For all its reformism, the Durel trade unions became a serious school of class education. At trade-union rallies and meetings, former villagers and nomads heard for the first time calls for the emancipation of labour, freedom, equality and brotherhood. The trade-union leaders, Tahar al-Haddād recalls, said "that the faith of workers is labour, the enemy of this faith is capital; between them (workers—*Auth.*) there can be no racial or religious differences which would only dissolve the bonds of their union, and be used by capital as a vent for disuniting them and doom their efforts".¹⁵ These speeches, Tahar al-Haddād notes, produced a deep impression on Muslim workers. Gradually they accumulated the experience of class struggle, began to formulate their demands and fight for their realization.

The first post-war years saw an upsurge of the working-class movement in Tunisia.

As is clear from the table, the strikes assumed an especially mass scale in 1919 and 1920. In these years they involved large enterprises where workers were better organized and initiated the struggle for

their trade-union rights, higher wages and a shorter working day. They were followed by the workers of small enterprises. In 1920 railwaymen, miners and tram workers struck work. The strike was especially active at flour mills in November 1921. The authorities were forced to resort to the military administration to organize the delivery of flour from Marseille.¹⁶ Though many strikes failed, on the whole workers scored impressive successes. In metallurgy, in construction, in wood-working and in port operations the owners agreed to introduce an eight-hour working day, and on railways a nine-hour working day. Miners were less successful; they still worked from nine to ten hours a day.

Strikes in Tunisia

Year	Number of Strikes	Number of Enterprises on Strike	Number of Strikers
1918	—	—	—
1919	14	104	4047
1920	6	9	5520
1921	6	101	2254
1922	9	248	1593
1923	6	25	1227
1924	16	149	2208
1925	15	73	3170
1926	10	36	728

Source: *Statistique générale de la Tunisie. Année 1927*, Tunis, 1928, pp. 480-481.

The first advances of the movement did not influence in the same way the position of Tunisian and European workers. The trade-union leaders were concerned first of all about the needs of European workers. Though Tunisians participated in strikes on an equal footing, they felt themselves aliens in the French trade unions. The leaders of French workers in Tunisia displayed "condescension while helping Tunisian workers and even distributing allowances among them during strikes. Nevertheless, Tunisian workers began to feel injustice and discrimination inside these trade unions which called for the struggle against injustice, discrimination, racial and religious prejudices".¹⁷

The condescension and paternalism of trade-union leaders, a privileged position of French workers in the trade unions, and the racialist trends in their midst all alienated Tunisians from the Departmental Union of the CGT and made them gravitate towards the establishment of independent organizations. Even during the war Muslim railwaymen set up their fund of reciprocal aid while tobacco workers established an organization separately from the French.¹⁸

As the working movement was on the upgrade and there were greater frictions between the Tunisians and the French trade-union leaders, Mohammed Ali, a Tunisian nationalist revolutionary who hailed from the thick of the people and who preserved his bitter hatred for the colonialists and his passionate desire to help his "brethren in poverty",

as he said, returned from Europe to Tunisia¹⁹. Mohammed Ali was born in al-Hamma, a village not far from Gabes. As a young man he went to the Orient and visited Turkey and Egypt. In 1911 he arrived in Tripolitania to fight against the Italians.²⁰ Here he met Enver Pasha, one of the leaders of the Young Turks Party "Unions and Progress", and after the defeat of the Turks went with him to Constantinople. In 1913 when Enver Pasha became war minister of the Ottoman Empire and the most influential member of the Young Turks triumvirate, Mohammed Ali joined the Turkish army and became Enver's chauffeur. In 1918 he followed his patron to Germany. He studied in Berlin, received a degree in political economy, and returned to Tunisia in March 1923.²¹

Having returned to his native country, Mohammed Ali could not keep aloof from the events in progress there. He saw a precipice separating the masses from the Destour leaders and came out against their one-sided emphasis on politics. "Possibly", writes Félix Garas, "he understood intuitively what the Tunisian national trade-union movement could become".²² Be as it may, he did not join the Destour Party and dedicated himself completely to the struggle for the cause of the Tunisian workers. He associated with the group of young revolutionaries, including Larbi Mami, Tahar Botoria and Tahar al-Haddād. Socialist ideas, propounded in the literary cafés and circles captured their imagination. Tahar al-Haddād is said to have read the Arabic translations of Marx's works.²³ Just like Mohammed Ali, they all came from far-out provinces. Their unquenchable thirst for knowledge brought them to the capital with "its miracles and horrors, with its broad shadowy avenues, with its hollows and black poverty"²⁴ and posed before them those agonizing questions of good and evil, of the causes of the Tunisian people's hardships. After long debates and meditations Mohammed Ali, Tahar al-Haddād and their friends came to the conclusion that the results attained in Europe could be traced to the working class's good organization and prolonged struggle and that the Tunisian people should also set up unions and associations to force the government to take the road of economic development and popular welfare.²⁵ Finally, they came to the conclusion that capitalist production for the sake of profit should give place to cooperatives of producers. This doctrine of cooperative socialism had probably been induced by the ideas of Lassalle whom Mohammed Ali had perhaps met in Germany. At any rate, back into Tunisia, he enthusiastically introduced his comrades to the principles of the cooperative movement.²⁶ But then the ideas and principles of cooperative socialism were widespread among French socialists as well and in particular among the followers of Jaurès. Be as it may, the young revolutionaries decided to set up in various areas of Tunisia agricultural, industrial, commercial and financial cooperatives (*shirkāt ta'awuniyah*) headed by representatives of the patriotic young people. Further it was contemplated to pool these cooperatives and set up general leadership which would lead to a single goal: "community of cooperators (*ammat al-mushtarikin*) which would, relying on knowledge and

wisdom, conduct the affairs of the community, and especially those enterprises they would create".²⁷ The socialist programme of Mohammed Ali and his friends sustained in the spirit of Lassalle's ideas of free cooperatives was, of course, a pure utopia, as the authors of the programmes soon realized themselves.

All admirers of cooperative socialism regarded as their basic target the transformation of society by establishing associations of producers, and all of them began, when faced with practical difficulties, with the organization of consumer cooperatives of workers. The young Tunisian revolutionaries were no exception in this respect. Since they had neither funds nor opportunities to organise industrial or agricultural cooperatives, they decided to set up, to start with, a consumer cooperative and worked out a draft of the Rules of the Tunisian Economic Cooperative Society (*Jām'iyat at-ta'awun al-iqtīḍādī at-tūnisi*). The society was to trade in foodstuffs and household goods. Its main purpose was to "deliver workers from exploitation" of tradesmen by eliminating trade monopolies and introducing cooperative principles of buying and distributing goods. It was contemplated to set up a cooperative fund for aid to "members of the nation who are corrupted by unemployment or cannot any longer apply their abilities". By organizing lectures, reports and publications, the society intended to carry on the propaganda of socialism and contribute to the elimination of illiteracy.²⁸

On June 29, 1924, a meeting was held in the grand hall of Khalduniya in the presence of Tayyeb ben Moustafa, Mahmoud Bourguiba, Othman Kaak and others. Tahar al-Haddād, Tahar Sfar, and Mohammed Ali spoke to the audience and the Rules of the Economic Cooperative Society were endorsed. In a week, on July 6, 1924, a fee collecting committee headed by Mohammed Ali was set up. The leading committee immediately proceeded to the propaganda of the principles and purposes of the Society. Meetings and rallies were held in various areas of Tunis. The speakers were Mohammed Ali and his associates. Mohammed Ali's speeches "produced a strong impression by their fervent conviction, clarity of presentation and depth of views"²⁹ on Habib Bourguiba, now President of the Tunisian Republic who heard as a young man Mohammed Ali. The latter won very quickly the sympathy of the revolutionary young people and became highly popular among the Tunisian workers.

Having started their propaganda, the leaders of the Society encountered the grim class struggle of every day and quickly got rid of their illusions on a peaceful reorganization of society on the basis of cooperative socialism. The drought and crop failure of 1924 aggravated even more the national and class contradictions in the country. The Communists' and nationalists' agitation was very effective. The cafés were decorated with slogans: "Tunisia for Tunisians!", "Independence or Death!" A wide response was caused in the masses by the Communists' calls to eliminate the colonial protectorate system, abolish caids and divide the land among its tillers.³⁰ The Communists'

slogans and appeals were not in vain. Tunisian workers spontaneously, without any sanction or even contrary to the leaders of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) declared strikes which soon assumed a well-pronounced political character. On August 13, 1923, two thousand dockers of Tunis struck work. Their demands were to organize work better and raise wages to the level of the dockers of Marseille. Having met no support of the CGT, the dockers started a strike on their own; the strike continued 23 days.³¹ Mokhtar al-Ayari, a professional revolutionary, a Communist, a former railwayman, played an important role in the strike. The strike committee braved the blackmail of the bourgeois press which demanded that soldiers or convicts be sent to work at the port; on August 25 it turned down the arbitration of the sheikh of the Medina and on August 28 organized a march against hiring bedouins to break the strike. Three marchers were wounded during a clash with the police.³²

The scale of strikes became especially large in Bizerte and its environs. On August 15, 1924, the dockers of Bizerte struck work. On August 22 the workers of a brick works in Menzel-Djamil and on September 4 the workers engaged in the reconstruction of the Bizerte port joined them. They were followed by the farm labourers of Djebel-Kharouba, the carters of Sidi-Ahmed and others. The strikers were extensively supported by the local Communists.³³ Bizerte's workers were guided by the leaders of the local trade-union branch of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) Mohammed Khemiri and Tahar ben Salem. The most dramatic stage of the class struggle in Bizerte set in with the events of September 11, 1924. On that day M. Khemiri, Secretary of the Bizerte branch of the CGT, was arrested. In the evening a huge crowd gathered outside the police commissariat. The speakers—Frenchmen and Tunisians—called upon the audience not to disperse until Khemiri had been released. Then the police and a Senegal detachment opened fire. One person was killed and six wounded. Mohammed Khemiri was exiled from Tunisia.³⁴

The wave of strikes sharply changed the plans of Mohammed Ali and his friends. In the very first days of the class battles they came to the rescue of the strikers and tried to alleviate their hardships as much as possible.³⁵ In Tunis and Bizerte the workers' actions were spontaneous, they had not been preceded by any serious preparations. They had neither their own organization, nor effective aid from the leaders of the CGT who had taken up a wait-and-see attitude. Under these conditions Mohammed Ali and his friends realized the entire importance and necessity for the organization of the proletariat. Therefore, they decided to postpone the organization of the Economic Cooperative Society and proceeded to the establishment of trade unions.

During the strikes in Tunis and Bizerte the movement for the establishment of independent national trade unions assumed a very wide scope. The dockers of the capital's port pioneered the organization of trade unions. The working people of Bizerte followed suit. Tunisian

workers left en masse the trade unions of the CGT and joined Mohammed Ali's organization. In October and December 1924, independent trade unions were set up at many enterprises of the capital. In November and December 1924, the movement embraced the cities and mining settlements of central and southern Tunisia. National workers' organizations were set up in Sfax, Gafsa, Metlaoui, Sousse, Mateur and elsewhere.

Mohammed Ali received substantial aid from the Tunisian Communists. The type of propaganda among the strikers, and in particular the agitation for the transfer of land to its tillers, anti-imperialist slogans ("Tunisia Belongs to Workers and Peasants, and not to France"³⁶), the attempts to link urban strikes with actions in the countryside (Djebel-Kharouba in September 1924 or Pothinville in January 1925) and finally a challenge addressed to the yellow trade unions all pointed to the Communists' active participation in the movement; possibly, they initiated many strikes. There were Communists in the leadership of the movement as well as in elected trade-union agencies. During the strikes in Hammam-Lif and Pothinville in January 1925 when Mohammed Ali was not allowed into the trouble zone, the movement was headed by Finidori, a leader of the Tunisian Communists, editor and publisher of *L'Avenir Social*³⁷. The colonial authorities connected the strikes of 1924—1925 not only with Mohammed Ali but also with the leaders of the Tunisian Communists. The arguments expressed by some authors to belittle the role of the Communists are not sufficiently convincing³⁸. As for Ali Belhaouane's statement that the Communists along with the Socialists and members of Right-wing parties came out as bitter enemies of Mohammed Ali, it is entirely incomprehensible in the light of well-known facts.³⁹

The organization of trade unions at enterprises and construction sites, in mines and quarries, was paralleled by their amalgamation and the establishment of central agencies. On October 12, 1924, in Bizerte, which had actually become the centre of the movement, nine independent local trade unions made up a single organization and announced the establishment of the Tunisian General Confederation of Labour (Jāmiyat umūm al-amalah at-tūnisīyah) headed by a provisional bureau of three members. On October 14 a similar organization was set up in Tunis. On December 3, 1924, both centres fused into a single organization under the leadership of Mohammed Ali⁴⁰ who had become a generally recognized leader of the Tunisian national working-class movement.

Having given his leadership to the Confederation, Mohammed Ali preserved in the main his old views. Paradoxically as it might seem, in theory he denied the need for class struggle and advocated a social renewal of Tunisian society on the basis of cooperation between all classes of the nation.

On December 3, 1924, a meeting of representatives of Tunisian trade unions endorsed the charter of the Confederation and set up its leading agencies: the Provisional Executive Committee and the Com-

mittee For Propaganda and Information. The Provisional Executive Committee included Mohammed Ali (Secretary General); Ibrahim ben Ammar (Assistant Secretary), Mohammed Qaddour (Treasurer) and Béchir Joudi (Assistant Treasurer). Mokhtar al-Ayari, Mohammed al-Gabadi, Mohammed al-Ghanouchi, Tahar al-Haddād and Béchir Faleh⁴¹ were elected as members of the Committee For Propaganda.

The scope of the movement and the establishment of the Tunisian General Confederation of Labour worried Durel and other leaders of the Department union of the CGT. In October 1924, Durel met Mohammed Ali and expressed his apprehension about a split of workers in the face of a "united force of capital". On October 18, 1924, the newspaper *Tunis-Socialiste* condemned the establishment of "separatist Muslim trade unions". However, the leaders of the Tunisian General Confederation of Labour turned down Durel's claims to the monopoly of representing Tunisian workers. Mohammed Ali told Durel that Tunisian trade unions were based on the principles generally accepted in the world working-class movement, that they were open for French workers and that Tunisians, like any other nation, were entitled to their own working-class organizations.⁴²

On October 24, 1924, Léon Jouhaux, Secretary General of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) himself, arrived to save the situation. He cooperated closely with Edouard Herriot and the Left Cartel government he headed (between June 14, 1924 and May 10, 1925). The ruling circles of France were concerned about the events in Tunisia. Herriot regarded Mohammed Ali as a genuine leader of Tunisian nationalism and the movement he headed as a real menace to the French positions in Tunisia. Having sent Jouhaux, he "requested his cooperation in the realization in Tunisia of a properly trade-union programme and not a political one masked by a trade-union programme".⁴³ On November 6, 1924, Jouhaux left Tunisia after a two-week propaganda tour which brought no effect. Tunisian workers did not follow the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) which abandoned since that time the wait-and-see policy and took up an openly hostile position with respect to the Tunisian General Confederation of Labour.

On his return to Paris Jouhaux became a member of a consultative commission chaired by Herriot; the commission was to study the situation in Tunisia and work out adequate recommendations.⁴⁴ During the discussion of the Tunisian events in the National Assembly on January 20 and 29, 1925, Herriot reported that the commission and the government continued to explore the problem of extending onto Tunisia the French legislation on trade-union freedom. However, the head of the government bluntly refused to consider Mohammed Ali as a trade-union leader of Tunisia and enter any relations with him.

Thus, the French General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and the Herriot government took up a sharply negative position with respect to the national working-class movement in Tunisia. Thereby they ac-

tually identified themselves with the patronate and the French imperialist circles who clamoured for the suppression of the "agitator".

Only the French Communist Party came out in defence of Mohammed Ali. In the press and parliament it supported the establishment of the Tunisian General Confederation of Labour. In August 1924 the dockers of Marseille struck in solidarity. On September 15, 1924, the Unitary General Confederation of Labour (CGT) published a protest against the shooting in Bizerte and denounced the "pacifist pseudo-democrats" in power as the "most bitter aiders of imperialism".⁴⁵ André Berthon who spoke in 1920 to 1932 on behalf of the French Communist Party ascended twice the parliamentary rostrum in defence of the Tunisian Confederation. His words: "By virtue of the Bardo and La Marsa treaties, France has only one right in Tunisia: the right to go away!" literally stunned the colonialist press. On February 17, 1925, Berthon tabled a question about the attempts to suppress the Tunisian trade-union movement.⁴⁶ The Chamber refused to discuss the Communists' interpellation and confined itself to Herriot's answer who confirmed the government's position.

In the situation which had thus developed the destiny of the Tunisian General Confederation of Labour largely depended on the position of the Destour which enjoyed a considerable influence in Tunisia in 1920 to 1924. The Old Turbans of the party's leadership were inimical to Mohammed Ali, so they kept silent for a while. They wanted to make use of the Tunisian trade unions as a bill of exchange in a deal with authorities. In December 1924, the third Destour delegation visited Paris; then it established contacts with Lucien Saint, the Resident General. Like a shrewd and far-sighted politician, Saint decided to take advantage of the bourgeoisie's mistrust of the national working-class movement to split the masses, in particular workers, from the leading nucleus of the Destour, oppose them and thereby weaken the national-liberation movement, as a whole.

The Destour bonzes rose to the bait. As Bourguiba notes, Lucien Saint "secured secretly the support of the *caciques* from the Executive Commission of the Party by having seduced them with vague promises and having declared that the only obstacle for France in satisfying their political demands was the fear of the working movement suspected relations with the Communists. 'Keep aloof, dissociate yourselves from Mohammed Ali, and your affair (the constitution is meant. — *Auth.*) is as good as done'.⁴⁷ The Destour made its choice. On February 7, 1925, the Destour newspaper *Le Libéral* declared: "... the working-class movement led by Mohammed Ali has nothing to do with the Destour movement"⁴⁸. On February 22, 1925, the newspaper of the Party of Reforms *an-Nahda* published a joint appeal of fifteen prominent leaders of Tunisian nationalism. In particular, the appeal was signed by Ahmed as-Safi, Secretary General of the Destour, Salah Farhat, his assistant, Mohammed Shenik, Chairman of the Tunisian Chamber of Commerce, Beshir al-Annabi, Vice President of the Indigenous Section of the Grand Council, and Hasan Guellati, the leader of the Re-

formists. In the appeal it was stated on a meeting of representatives of the national parties and groups who declared after an exchange of opinions that though they had not direct power over workers, they had decided to "use all the strength of their influence to persuade in speech and print Tunisian workers to join the General Confederation of Labour (CGT)".⁴⁹ On March 6, 1925, a conference of the Destour leaders with the secretaries of the party sections of the capital and the internal areas of the country approved of the position taken by the leadership of the party.

The position of the Destour enabled the General Residence to complete the political isolation of Tunisian trade unions and inflict a decisive blow on them before the police and authorities of the protectorate had obstructed the working-class movement in any way possible. Apart from the shooting in Bizerte, frustration of strikes and the dispersion of marchers, the authorities interfered with the normal organizational and propagandist activity of the Tunisian Confederation by arbitrary detentions, deportations, and bans of meetings. In December 1924, the authorities detained and exiled Mokhtar al-Ayari from Mateur and Mohammed Ali from Metlaoui.⁵⁰ In January 1925, the police did not allow Mohammed Ali to enter the trouble area in Pothinville. Finally, in February 1925, the authorities arrested Mohammed Ali, Finidori, Mokhtar al-Ayari and some other leaders of the working-class movement. On February 21, just before the appeal of fifteen prominent nationalists had been published, those arrested were charged with a conspiracy against the security of the state.

The population met with indignation the news of the arrests of the national trade-union leaders. However, the reaction was weak. The Destour dissociated itself from Mohammed Ali, while the people, as Bourguiba noted, "were still terribly unorganized and had no experience of political action".⁵¹ On February 7, 1925, about three hundred dockers of Tunis struck work and attempted to organize a protest march. On March 1, 1925, the Tunisian General Confederation of Labour published in the Communist newspaper *L'Avenir Social* a protest "against any interference of political parties in its affairs."⁵²

Deprived of its leadership, the movement gradually subsided. On November 12 to 17, 1925, the criminal court of Tunis heard the case of six trade-union leaders. Mohammed Ali, Finidori, and Mokhtar al-Ayari were sentenced to ten years of banishment and al-Gabadi, al-Ghanouchi and Ali al-Karoui to five years. Finidori was sent to Algeria to be summoned to court while the rest were deported to Italy. Nearly all of them died far from their country. Mohammed Ali went to Morocco to fight on the side of the Rif rebels, but was arrested in Tangier and deported to Egypt. For some time he taught political economy at the al-Falah College in Cairo, and worked as driver; then he went to Saudi Arabia where he worked as bus driver. In 1936 he perished in a car accident on his way from Jidda to Mecca.⁵³

The violent suppression of the Tunisian General Confederation of Labour affected gravely the national-revolutional movement. Nevertheless the activity of the confederation was of major importance. Having embraced the socialist ideas and experience of the trade-union movement of Europe, Mohammed Ali, Mokhtar al-Ayari, Tahar al-Haddād and other leaders of the young Tunisian proletariat for the first time organized Tunisian workers and raised them to the struggle for their class interests.

NOTES

- 1 *Statistique général de la Tunisie. Année 1927*, Tunis, 1928, p. 169.
- 2 *Annuaire statistique de la Tunisie. Année 1940 à 1946*, Tunis, s. d., p. 113.
- 3 *Renseignements coloniaux*, 1925, No. 10 bis., p. 485.
- 4 *Renseignements coloniaux*, 1925, No. 10 bis., p. 490.
- 5 *Tunisie. Commission d'étude économiques et financiers. Rapports de la Sous-Commission d'études économiques*, Tunis, 1932, p. 278 (Further on *Rapports...*).
- 6 *Rapports...*, p. 277.
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- ⁴¹ Tahar al-Haddād, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
⁴² Tahar al-Haddād, *op. cit.*, pp. 107—108.
⁴³ *Annales de la Chambre des Députés. Débats parlementaires. Session 1925*, t. 1, Paris, 1925, p. 868.
⁴⁴ *Le Temps*, 28.XI.1924.
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⁴⁷ Habib Bourguiba, *op. cit.*, p. 381.
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⁵¹ Habib Bourguiba, *op. cit.*, p. 381.
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⁵³ For Mohammed Ali's last years see F. Garas, *op. cit.*, pp. 191-192.