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**Solidarity with Tunisian unions**  
**Union repression and unemployment**  
**January 2011**

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## Tunisia

The TUC has joined [international trade union protests](#) against the violent repression of [demonstrations](#) which have [wracked](#) Tunisia since a young unemployed Tunisian man set himself on fire on 17 December and a second youth committed suicide in the town of Sidi Bouzid. The demonstrators, including the TUC's sister organisation the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), are protesting about huge, especially youth, unemployment, and regional inequalities.

According to the UGTT, who have called general strikes around the country [this week](#) (see video of a demonstration in [Sfax](#)), over 50 people have been killed so far. The Tunisian President, Zine El Abidine, has responded by announcing plans for 300,000 new jobs, reshuffling his cabinet, and announced the sacking of his Interior Minister on Wednesday (12 January), but on the same day, police raided the UGTT headquarters which they had periodically surrounded during the days of unrest.

### **Union demands: equitable development and political reform**

The UGTT's [demands](#) include the immediate objectives of an end to the violence and harassment, and action to bring the perpetrators to justice. But they are also demanding a new approach to development in Tunisia, and an end to untrammelled globalisation, which, along with government corruption, has led to unemployment rates of 24% and the destruction of local industries such as textiles.

Forced to compete on price alone with cheap textiles from China and elsewhere, Tunisia has seen jobs lost and wages forced down. Despite the growth of extractive industries in Tunisia (including the involvement of British companies like British Gas), mining has also been hard hit. And liberalisation and privatisation of public services has also led to unemployment.

The UGTT are calling for, among other measures:

- "a development pattern that takes into account the basic needs, which is based on justice and balance between the regions, and in which the State and the public sector perform the task of investing;"
- "an unemployment fund to protect the dismissed workers and provide them

with an income that enables them to meet their basic needs when they lose their jobs due to the economic changes, especially the policy of privatizing the public institutions;" and

- "political reforms in order to deepen democracy and promote freedom."

### **UK action**

The TUC has [written](#) to the Tunisian Ambassador in London, calling on the Tunisian government "to end the violent repression of demonstrators by the Tunisian security forces, bring those responsible to justice, and tackle Tunisia's serious unemployment crisis and regional inequalities." General Secretary Brendan Barber said:

"No one should have to pay with their life for exercising their right to protest, and calling for a job."

Foreign Secretary William Hague has [called](#) on the Tunisian authorities "to take steps to resolve this situation peacefully and without further violence with a commitment to respect the right to peaceful protest. I also call on the authorities to provide due and transparent process to those who have been detained".

The TUC has called on the British Government to keep up the pressure – not just to respect the right to protest, but to allow the UGTT to operate freely, and to commit to working with social partners to address the challenge of equitable development.

### **Notes**

[Economic growth](#) in Tunisia fell from 5% to 3% in 2009 and 3.8% in 2010 due to contraction of demand from Europe – its largest export market – and that was before the worst of the global economic crisis. Unemployment in 2009 reached 13.3% and has risen alarmingly through 2010. Food price rises have also provoked unrest.

There are 22 [UK companies](#) investing in Tunisia and 400,000 UK tourists visit Tunisia every year. There are many [multinational companies](#) operating in Tunisia, many of which operate and recognise unions in the UK. In 2009, the UK exports of goods to Tunisia totalled £153 million and the UK imports of goods from Tunisia totalled £406 million.

For the latest developments in Tunisia, visit LabourStart's [Tunisia page](#).