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

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

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## **Abstract**

This study attempts to explore the nature of the Tunisian national trade union, the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), as it operates in Tunisia today. This was achieved by conducting in-depth interviews with Tunisians living in the greater Tunis area in the fall of 2019. Through the lens of both those affiliated with the UGTT and those who have no ties to the organization, an image of the UGTT is able to be revealed as a conspicuous entity. Is its aim to hold power in government? Or rather stay outside of the sphere of national politics to effect change? Though the UGTT has decades of history grappling with these questions, its modern role is unique in both an ideological sense and a practical one. The establishment of a democratic government in Tunisia after the 2011 revolution ostensibly cleared the path for the UGTT to advocate its causes more freely and aggressively than under previous authoritarian regimes. However, it remains to be seen whether the organization will break out of the advantages of the institutionally-liminal space it occupies, and whether the Tunisian people will see the UGTT as a worthy mode of class action and organization.

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# Introduction

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

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

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<sup>1</sup>Visser, Jelle, "Union Membership Statistics in 24 Countries: MLR MLR." *Monthly Labor Review* 129, no. 1 (01, 2006): 38-49.

<sup>2</sup>Bogaert, Koenraad, "Contextualizing the Arab Revolts: The Politics behind Three Decades of Neoliberalism in the Arab World." *Middle East Critique* 22, no. 3 (February 2013): 213-34.

<sup>3</sup>Margaret Coker, "Nobel Peace Prize Awarded to Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet." *Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, October 9, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/nobel-peace-prize-awarded-to-tunisian-national-dialogue-quartet-1444382662>.

<sup>4</sup>For a broader discussion of what is meant here by the term "power" and how it is exercised, see: Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777-95, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448181>.

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

## Background

Tunisia's history with trade unionism can be traced back to the origins of the independence movement (from 1881 to 1956, Tunisia was under French occupation<sup>5</sup>)— an important relationship between the social and the political sphere that the trade union presently works to maintain. Before the creation of the UGTT, there existed first the Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (CGTT), a trade union founded in 1924 by Mohammad Ali al Hammi which aligned itself with the Tunisian nationalist and anti-colonial Destour party. This was the first break from the French trade union, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), to gain real autonomy on behalf of the Tunisian worker. The CGTT was quelled by the colonial authorities. Years later in 1946, the UGTT was formally established by Farhat Hached.<sup>6</sup> From the start, the goal was to advocate for both workers' rights and Tunisia's independence from France. This duality is important to note here as we aim to trace the organization to the postmodern age in which there is no longer a direct colonial influence to point to, but rather multiple forms of control (governmental, international, etc.) which the union ostensibly aims to subvert.

As was the case for other countries in the Maghreb with a history of colonialism, the end of the colonial power did not lead to an increase in the power of the citizen of the now-

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<sup>5</sup> The effects of this colonialism can be expanded upon in multiple volumes, but for the purposes of this research, I am interested in the impacts of French colonialism on the political structure of Tunisia post-independence as well as how this structure impacted the creation and development of the UGTT.

<sup>6</sup> Hèla Yousfi, *Trade Unions and Arab Revolutions: the Tunisian Case of UGTT*. (New York ; London: Routledge, 2018), 4.

postcolonial state.<sup>7</sup> In the absence of the French authority's disciplinary control, power was simply transferred to new authoritarian (yet now described as "nationalist") actors. The Neo-Destour party (successor to the Destour party of the pre-1930s era) led the anti-colonial and nationalist effort to remove the French authority from Tunisia. After independence, this party assumed power. However, there was a large conflict within Neo-Destour, primarily between its top leaders: Habib Bourguiba and Salah Ben Youssef.<sup>8</sup> The former chose to work with the leading French authorities in the process of independence (initially due to his willingness to accept the softer "autonomy" rather than independence) while Youssef took a more radical approach. Eventually, Bourguiba's influence won over Youssef's and the former went on to become the first and longest President of Tunisia (Bourguiba can further be understood to be the single most decisive entity regarding the setting of the tone of how the UGTT was to operate in the Tunisian independent state).<sup>9</sup>

In order to understand the shifts that occurred in the UGTT post-revolution in 2011, it is helpful to understand how the union changed after independence from France was achieved and how it operated in the authoritarian regimes of both Habib Borguiba and Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. Much of the existing literature (particularly works written in/translated into English) on the UGTT focuses on its role in Tunisia's revolution and the broader context of Arab Spring

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<sup>7</sup> Michael J. Willis, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco From Independence to the Arab Spring*, (Oxford University Press, 2014), 37.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>9</sup> For a broader discussion on Bourguiba and his actions as a political figure, see: Brown, L. Carl, "Bourguiba and Bourguibism Revisited: Reflections and Interpretation." *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 1 (2001): 43-57. [www.jstor.org/stable/4329581](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4329581).

uprisings<sup>10, 11, 12</sup>. For the scope of this study, however, it has been helpful to outline the nature of the UGTT pre-revolution and the ways in which its influence was both strengthened and limited by the authoritarian regimes it operated under. This is a theme that was also echoed in each interview that was conducted.

Issue 56 of the Anarcho-Syndicalist Review discusses the ways in which the UGTT was suppressed by both Bourguiba and Ben Ali in the article: “Tunisia’s UGTT: Caught between struggle & betrayal”. The Bourguiba years held their fair share of conflict between the UGTT and the state, but in the ‘60s/’70s the former was allowed a relatively large level of autonomy. This autonomy subsequently led to clashes in which state violence was effected against the workers.<sup>13</sup> One essential source to this discussion can be found in Issue 67 of the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) Journal. This journal included a report on a UGTT strike in late January of 1978: “A general strike called by the half-strong Union générale des travailleurs tunisiens (UGTT) was met with violence by the regime. Army, police and paramilitary units joined in a general offensive against the workers, leaving more than two hundred dead and hundreds more injured and arrested.”<sup>14</sup> While this report contextualizes the importance and danger of protesting with the UGTT, it reveals looming disparities between the former and current images of the institution. Where a general strike would garner the response of state violence in 1978, today the same action is part of the sanctioned list of responses allowed by the government apparatus in response to any discontent with economic conditions.

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<sup>10</sup> Lorenzo Feltrin, “Labour and Democracy in the Maghreb: The Moroccan and Tunisian Trade Unions in the 2011 Arab Uprisings.” *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 40, no. 1 (February 2019): 42–64. doi:10.1177/0143831X18780316.

<sup>11</sup> Bassem Karray, “Proposals, Intermediation, and Pressure: The Three Roles of the UGTT in Tunisia’s Post-Revolutionary Constitutional Process.” *Socioeconomic Protests in MENA and Latin America*, June 2019, 123–44.

<sup>12</sup> Mohamed-Salah Omri, “No Ordinary Union: UGTT and the Tunisian Path to Revolution and Transition.” *Workers of the World* 1, no. 7 (November 2015): 14–29.

<sup>13</sup> “Tunisia’s UGTT: Caught between Struggle and Betrayal.” *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, no. 56 (2011): 22–23.

<sup>14</sup> Nigel Disney, “The Working Class Revolt in Tunisia.” *MERIP Reports*, no. 67 (May 1978): 12–14.

This sort of clashing was not allowed to continue, however, in the Ben Ali era: “In 1989, Ben Ali’s regime imposed direct submission on the UGTT leadership, headed by Ismail Sahbani, who collaborated in the implementation of neoliberal economic policies and fiercely fought the union left...The history of the leadership of the UGTT is a story of betrayal and maneuvering. From its support for Ben Ali’s candidacy in the elections of 2004 and 2009 to social welfare reform, from the implementation of neoliberal economic measures to their abandoning of the Gafsa UGTT activists, jailed during the 2008 uprising, when they limited themselves to a simple request for the release of the prisoners.”<sup>15</sup> This is where the ethos of the union is least convincing as it threw its weight behind the top-down neoliberalism of Ben Ali rather than attempt to continue any sort of grassroots or local efforts to achieve growth or improve conditions for workers.

In many ways, the union seems far from the description of a monolith. It is comprised of 24 regional unions, 19 sector federations, and 21 general unions with a total of around 750,000 members from all geographic areas of Tunisia.<sup>16</sup> This regional component of diversity is a widely celebrated attribute of the union and one that is rare for many civil society organizations; this is why it is able to reach high levels of trust among the citizens. Even so, in the post-democracy era there remains the question of how much the UGTT can truly accomplish on behalf of the worker, especially when the country faces difficult economic conditions.<sup>17</sup> It is often credited for “stabilization” post-revolution and the prevention of total state control by the Islamic party à la the 1979 Iranian revolution. In this way, it is viewed as a worthy representative

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<sup>15</sup> “Tunisia’s UGTT: Caught between Struggle and Betrayal,” 23.

<sup>16</sup> Hèla Yousfi, *Trade Unions and Arab Revolutions: the Tunisian Case of UGTT*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> For an outline of these conditions in the era following the revolution, see: Rouissi Chiraz and Mohamed Frioui, “The Impact of Inflation After the Revolution in Tunisia,” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 109 (January 8, 2014): pp. 246-249, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.12.453>

of the Tunisian people based on its ability to uphold and protect the democracy that they were protesting for in 2011. However, the same economic symptoms which persisted before the 2011 revolution continue to exist today, so it remains to be seen whether authoritarianism is truly what was holding the UGTT back from effecting change for the workers of Tunisia.

# Methodology

## Overview

This research is based primarily on interviews as well as scholarly sources which outline the history of Tunisia and the trade union movement and others which discuss the politics in post-revolution Tunisia. I conducted a series of four in-depth interviews with Tunisians living in Northern Tunisia during the fall of 2019. These interviews were conducted with two members of the UGTT as well as two non-members. Interviews conducted with members were completed in French/Arabic with the aid of a translator, while the interviews with non-members of the union were conducted in English. I was able to interview the members of the UGTT thanks to the connections of my professor, Mounir Khelifa, and my advisor, Rached Khalifa. My advisor also connected me with one of the non-member interviewees, a female master's student who was enrolled in his graduate seminar. The questioning for the interviews done with members of the UGTT differed from the questions asked of non-members. The latter form of interview was largely to determine a sense of public perception rather than institutional or official knowledge about the inner structure/working of the organization.

Further, I was able to contextualize my findings based on a series of lectures attended in September/October 2019 via SIT's academic program and the course: Politics, Civil Society, and Migration in Tunisia. This course provided me with a broad historical background regarding the politics of Tunisia especially regarding the forces that both pushed the revolution in 2011 and facilitated the formation of government/order following the revolution. A program visit to the Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Économique et Sociaux (FTDES), a Tunisian NGO formed after

the revolution to organize social and political movements, also aided me in understanding how the civil society sector is related to the UGTT (and the government as well). I utilized this visit in particular to inquire about the manner in which jobs are created/provided in Tunisia by the government (with some UGTT influence). The representative of the FTDES whom we met with was extremely helpful in providing this information. From this conversation, it seemed that FTDES faced a similar dilemma as the UGTT (though its history is much shorter) insofar as it created both an avenue for people to organize and a simultaneous entrenchment of the status quo which allowed (and possibly encouraged) this sort of sanctioned form of protest.

## **Concerns**

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

# Research Findings

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

## Members

### 1. Involvement

The first two interviews were with Youssef Khelifa, a lecturer at the Higher Institute of Design of Tunis, and Tahar Labassi, a linguistics professor at the University of Tunis and also the former Chief of Staff of the Minister of the Department of Education in Tunisia. Khelifa had made a request to become a member of the UGTT in 2005; in order to join, he had to win favor in elections at the Higher Institute of Design. He was elected as a basic member in 2006. Khelifa was involved in the principal syndicalist sector of higher education and continues to work in this capacity as of the publication date of this paper. He describes his work with the union as

generally low-maintenance with the exception of election periods and more charged political climates (the zenith of these being the political climate during the 2011 revolution). Labassi had no official role in the UGTT at the time of the interview, but had been involved at the highest levels of the organization since 2002. He became Vice Secretary General of the trade union of teachers and a member of the national council of trade union university teachers during his time of involvement before stepping down in 2014. He continued to work with the UGTT following 2014 as a consultant.

## **2. Perception**

Khelifa began by qualifying his view of his membership: that it was beneficial “psychologically” but not “financially” (though he said that he enjoys it because of this reason).<sup>18</sup> He highlighted the importance and power of the union: when we talk about what strikes or movements can take place, the UGTT is quite important because it can decide the influence, especially as it works with influential people in the government. Under the old regimes, the organization was not “too free to advocate for workers, but now, it is more free”<sup>19</sup> to conduct its work. Before the revolution under Ben Ali and Bourguiba, there were acts of violence and armed/bloody conflicts between the UGTT and the state. Now that democracy has been achieved, there is no longer this sort of conflict. Khelifa lamented the fact that though the UGTT has more power, the workers of Tunisia are suffering more than they were before the revolution due to a horde of economic reasons.

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<sup>18</sup>Youssef Khelifa in oral interview with author, 4 October, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

He discussed the ways in which there was “certainly a change [in the UGTT] especially with the new emergence of Islamist parties”<sup>20</sup> post-revolution. Here he pointed to what he called the real function and strength of the UGTT: to defend and secure modernity for the country (he saw the new political Islamists parties as trying to “take Tunisia backwards”<sup>21</sup>). To Khelifa, the UGTT aims to protect and make a consensus between the Islamist parties and Modernist parties. This is why, he said, the UGTT worked against the Islamists after the revolution in order to stabilize the country. The UGTT supported many of the uprising movements at the time (populists, strikers), and so the government had to take it seriously due to the weight of the organization. They work with both the workers and the government, but from Khelifa’s point of view, the first objective is always to protect workers’ rights.

Labassi had a somewhat more critical perception of the UGTT, which he attributed to his former degree of involvement in (and now relative freedom from) the organization.<sup>22</sup> He described the union as the only space where real politics was possible under the Ben Ali regime, though it was always committed to the upholding of the state. He admitted that today there is a question of whether or not the organization is actually a hindrance. He also described the nature of the UGTT’s negotiations with the government, which usually operates through dealing with ministers of various departments of government. These ministers would often sign an agreement with the UGTT that would purportedly meet the demands of workers, but due to the high turnover rate of ministers they know that ultimately, the onus will fall on the successive minister and will likely not be upheld. He did not place all the blame on this pattern, however, noting that the government is under great economic pressure due to a lack of means. However, the UGTT

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Tahar Labassi in oral interview with the author, 12 October, 2019.

faces pressure itself from the working class as the economic situation is worsening while the cost of living rises.

Labassi's main qualm with the UGTT was in its failure (or as he called it, refusal) to change post-revolution. To him, changing means working as a trade union should work in a traditional democracy. He believed that the UGTT does not want to change because it is in a rather favorable position: it has an effective monopoly on unionism in the country.<sup>23</sup> The government cannot give other trade unions many rights; the UGTT has made it so that only its own organization can win any favor in the eyes of the government. Labassi pointed to the UGTT's failure to support the initial protests for the 2011 revolution which began in the south of Tunisia.<sup>24</sup> The union was rather on the side of the government at the time. However, the UGTT is also not officially part of the government.<sup>25</sup> It plays a quasi-governmental role, and this is likely where it prefers to stay according to Labassi. He, however, believed that the union should embrace a role in national politics and move towards the path of official institutionalization on the federal level.

## **Non-Members**

### **1. Involvement**

I interviewed Lassaad Bouattour, a civil servant working for the Ministry of Finance in Tunisia, and Rawe Khefi, a master's student at the Université de Tunis el

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<sup>23</sup> As opposed to Morocco's union format which follows the model of competitive unionism. See: Lorenzo Feltrin, "Labour and Democracy in the Maghreb: The Moroccan and Tunisian Trade Unions in the 2011 Arab Uprisings", 45.

<sup>24</sup> This was not the first time this siding has occurred: in February of 1984, during the "Bread Riots" caused by IMF-imposed measures to decrease agricultural subsidies, the postal service and education unions struck without UGTT approval, causing their organizers to be excommunicated from the union. Yousfi, 17.

<sup>25</sup> As opposed to an established political party such as the Labour Party in the UK

Manar within the Higher Institute of Human Sciences. Khefi had a background in unionism in her undergraduate years, though not through the UGTT. Neither had any direct relationship with the UGTT, meaning that they were not nor had ever been part of the union and did not know anyone beyond the level of acquaintanceship who was involved with the union.

## 2. Perception

Bouattour outlined his major thoughts via a short history of the UGTT's activity since Tunisia's colonial period. He acknowledged it had a strong effect in the turn of independence. The syndicalist movement was threatening to the colonial powers— this, according to Bouattour, is why Farhat Hached<sup>26</sup> was assassinated, an act which immortalized the UGTT as a symbol/martyr for the national spirit<sup>27</sup>. After independence, he noted, the Neo-Destour party and the UGTT viewed themselves as co-managers of the country— this led to some clashes, but this sharing of power was largely peaceful. Ben Ali was more authoritarian; Bouattour also emphasized that he was dealing with not only the UGTT, but the Islamic Tendency movement (MTI)<sup>28</sup> as entities that were politically resistant to the state. Ben Ali would pick sides between UGTT and Islamists where it was convenient. Bouattour mentioned that around 1991, however, Ben Ali became more hostile towards the UGTT, insisting that the union would need to operate on his terms and even going so far as to choose its top directors.

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<sup>26</sup> Former leader of the UGTT during the independence movement

<sup>27</sup> Though there has been no conclusive investigation, it is largely believed that the armed French organization La Main Rouge was responsible for the attack on Hached, whose death is commemorated every year in Tunisia. "Tunisia Urged to Reopen Hached Case." News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera Media Network, December 27, 2009. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2009/12/20091227135724498458.html>.

<sup>28</sup> See: Rory McCarthy, *Inside Tunisia's Al-Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Bouattour became most critical of the union when discussing the education sector. As a father himself, he remarked that the UGTT's education sector union is "an enemy of any mother/father in Tunisia"<sup>29</sup>, especially after mass strikes by education workers last year. He also said that today, the main way to get power is through the UGTT, while under Ben Ali similar benefits such as wage increases or job opportunities would come from membership in the party. Ultimately, he lauded the UGTT for its role in stabilizing the government post-revolution, but believed that they should not take their activities too far in the political (as well as social) realm in order for the country to be able to grow economically.

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

However, she criticized the union for its failure to support the miners' protests in Gafsa in 2008 and the initial seeds of revolutionary protests as well. She praised its ability to prevent the Islamist parties from gaining too much power after the revolution and said that it was clearly committed to upholding the "Tunisian way of life".<sup>30</sup>

Fundamentally, Khefi saw the UGTT as remaining more pro-government than pro-people

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<sup>29</sup> Lassaad Bouattour in oral interview with author, 19 November, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Rawe Khefi in oral interview with author, 30 November, 2019.

following the revolution, and criticized its passivity regarding politics particularly after the Quartet period of 2014. For these reasons, she did not see the UGTT as becoming popular among her generation as a form of activism or movement.

## Discussion and Analysis

A certain repetition took place during the course of each interview wherein the interviewee would feel it necessary to outline the history of the UGTT/Tunisia before beginning to describe their own perception of the institution and/or how they were involved. Each gave relatively the same story regarding Tunisia's history since the colonial period, though each differed in their explanations of why certain movements proceeded while others failed (e.g. Gafsa riots in 2008 vs. the Kasbah protests of 2011). This pattern made sense— it is difficult to say what exactly the UGTT is or does without discussing its history. The past of the UGTT is precisely why it is so valued an institution in the Tunisian collective conscious today. Though all the interviewees had different political leanings, they followed some similarities in their beliefs, especially that the government must continue on a secular path and that the UGTT was helpful in this endeavor. Each was concerned by the threat of major Islamic political and social forces, the most prominent being the Ennahda political party which won the highest percentage of votes in the last parliamentary elections.<sup>31</sup>

The difficulty in assessing the UGTT is multifaceted. The organization has a long and diverse history which makes it difficult to tie itself to a coherent ethos over time, particularly due to the various treatment it has faced under multiple regimes and the various ways the union itself has chosen to act under these regimes. The aim is to attempt to accurately assess the union on both its own terms and on the terms that the people of Tunisia hold it to. To categorize it via a traditional left vs. right dichotomy or the basic movement of state actors as the abstraction of the

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<sup>31</sup> Abdul L. al-Hanachi, "Tunisia's First Legislative Elections Post-Revolution." *Al Jazeera*. Al Jazeera Media Network, October 2, 2014. <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2014/10/20141027409786296.html>.

citizenry would be a mistake, as some have done.<sup>32</sup> This would ignore the entire basis of the union as well as a larger critique of power from perspectives outside of the bipolar political field.

As some interviewees mentioned, the ability of the union has depended on the environment around it. For Khelifa and Labassi, the UGTT is a strong (if not the strongest) Tunisian institution and should be strengthened in the democratic era in order to be even more effective. Labassi sees the natural route for the union as following the path to becoming a political party and taking on the responsibility and ostensible accountability that comes with governance rather than needing to negotiate as a civil society group. To Khefi, who identifies as a leftist, the UGTT does not do enough for the worker, and it is unclear at best whether the union is best-suited to take on the postmodern socioeconomic problems which the youth of Tunisia face distinctly.<sup>33</sup> However, to Bouattour, the UGTT is too tyrannical in its measures to advocate for workers' wages. It is these conflicting narratives that make it necessary to remove the lens of electoral politics in order to observe the kind of organization that the UGTT is, or appears to be. In this analysis, I valued the latter (perception rather than some measure of "true" existence) as I am interested in how the citizens of Tunisia view the strength of class movements and further it is unclear whether the UGTT can be objectively defined as such.<sup>34</sup> My purpose was to explore more so the effect of power and proximity to the state in an effort to fight for workers via a union organization.

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<sup>32</sup> Sarah Chayes, "How a Leftist Labor Union Helped Force Tunisia's Political Settlement." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 27, 2014. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/03/27/how-leftist-labor-union-helped-force-tunisia-s-political-settlement-pub-55143>.

<sup>33</sup> This points to the rising precarity in the Tunisian economy as a result of various governmental decisions and the impact of IMF loan conditionality. See: Rouissi Chiraz and Mohamed Frioui, "The Impact of Inflation After the Revolution in Tunisia," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 109 (January 8, 2014): pp. 246-249, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.12.453>

<sup>34</sup> Yousfi's *Trade Unions and Arab Revolutions: the Tunisian Case of UGTT* would likely go the farthest in this endeavor, at least in English-language sources.

## **Barriers**

In addition to the aforementioned difficulties, if this research was to be continued and expanded, it would be helpful to be able to speak to current members of the executive board of the UGTT. This would allow for an additional level of perception which might be interesting to contextualize the union more directly. Further, it would be useful to gather perceptions from those outside of the Tunis area, particularly in regions such as Gafsa, Sidi Bouzid, Gabes, etc. where the 2011 revolution began and where the socioeconomic conditions differ. An increase in interviews with the inclusion of more demographics as well would aid this research. Moreover, in all such interactions, the presence of a reliable translator (or the personal development of Tunisian Arabic/French fluency) would be extremely important to reduce as much of the language barrier as possible. A translator would also be advantageous in the reading of sources and texts relating to the UGTT.

## Conclusion

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

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2000.) ProQuest Ebook Central, 224-234.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Interview Guide

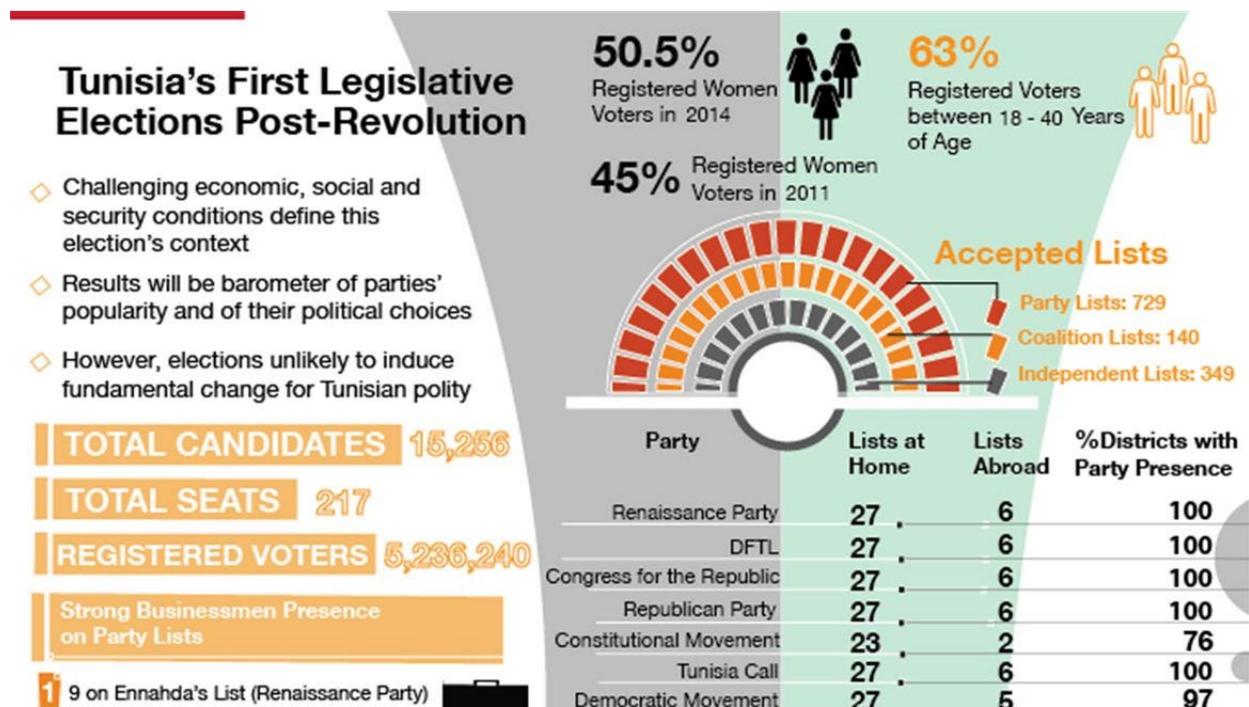
The following consists of the questions I used in interviews with members of the UGTT, though I also asked follow-up questions where I determined it necessary or helpful:

1. What does the structure of the UGTT look like/ how does it look for you?
2. How long have you been involved?
3. What is your specific role?
4. Who do you work with or meet with?
5. How does being in the UGTT help you (and are there any downsides)?
6. What are meetings structured as?
  - a. What are the goals?
  - b. To what extent is it focused on government relations?
  - c. To what extent is there a focus on local efforts or movements?
7. How has the institution changed in the era post revolution?
8. Did you work with the UGTT during the Quartet?
9. If possible, can you speak to any claims of corruption within UGTT? Or if there is no explicit corruption, is there any incentive for leaders to stall efforts at any point(s)?

The following questions were used as a guide for the interviews conducted with non-members of the UGTT:

1. What is your relationship to the UGTT? (Have you worked with the organization in any capacity in the past?)
2. What is your line of work/study?
3. Do any of your colleagues work with the UGTT?
4. If you have never been part of the union, have you ever thought about joining?
5. What is your perception of the UGTT?
  - a. In the union sphere, social sphere, political sphere, etc.
6. Do you think the union has changed post-revolution? If so, how?

## Appendix B: 2014 Parliamentary Election Results



Source: al-Hanachi, Abdul L. "Tunisia's First Legislative Elections Post-Revolution." *Al Jazeera*. Al Jazeera Media Network, October 2, 2014. <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2014/10/20141027409786296.html>.