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The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and a Social Movement: meaning and significance of a protest movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia

Eric Gobe*

Abstract

The year 2008 was marked, in Tunisia, by the Revolt of the Gafsa Mining Basin. The social mobilizations which shook this poor area, located close to the Algerian border, represent the most important protest movement seen in Tunisia since the Bread Revolt of January 1984. Within Tunisia's authoritarian context, this Revolt of the Mining Basin has shown that significant segments of the Tunisian population were able to voice their protest; at the same time, however, the protest movement, due to the limited support it enjoyed within Tunisian society, was unable to grow, nor was it able to withstand the coercive policy of Ben Ali's regime.

The year 2008 was marked, in Tunisia, by the Revolt of the Gafsa Mining Basin. The social mobilizations which shook this poor area, located close to the Algerian border, represent the most important protest movement seen in Tunisia since the Bread Revolt of January 1984. More than a year has gone by and it is now possible to draw a report of the events. These mobilizations took place over a period of up to six months, across various categories of the population, such as the unemployed – particularly university graduates – the temporary workers on various municipal building sites, high school students, and families of the workers in the phosphate mines who had had a work accident. In other words, the “space of revolt” (Le Saout, 2000, p. 49) comprised marginalized populations, who were put aside in economic and social terms, in an area which itself is located on the edge of Tunisia.¹ The protest started on January 5, originating at the delegation (sub-prefecture) of Redeyef (which, according to the last census, from 2004, numbers 26,143 inhabitants) and reached the other large mining towns, notably Moularès (*Um al-`Ara'is*, in Arabic, which numbers 24,487 inhabitants), M'dhila (12,383 inhabitants) and, to some extent, Metlaoui (37,099 inhabitants). With the exception of Gafsa, the entire mining

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¹ Throughout the 20th century, this region witnessed a number of work-related conflicts linked to the mine. It was also from Gafsa that, in 1980, an armed operation was launched, aimed at putting an end to Bourguiba's regime. Although the protest movement of 2008 is linked to problems that are different from the previous conflicts, it was deeply inspired by the collective representations related to the region's past, in order to construct its own representation.

basin was shaken by an unprecedented social conflict. The original aspect of the mining basin movement, within the Tunisian context, has to do with the large number of repertoires of action used by the protagonists of the movement – the latter had recourse to the classic hunger strike, demonstrations or sit-ins at various public locations. They also organized long-lasting sit-ins by setting up tents at certain strategic sites, in order to stop, or at least slow down the economic activity, in the phosphate extraction areas. Camps were set up in front of the iron ore washing plants, or along railway tracks, in order to stop the trains carrying the phosphate; at the same time, some high school students and young unemployed men set out to tear apart hundreds of meters of railway tracks linking M'dhila to Moularès.

The protest movements sometimes turned into riots: some groups of high school students and young people living on the margins of society, who got together in their neighborhoods, attacked the police and representatives of the authorities. They also blocked the main roads in the towns, by setting tires on fire. Throughout the entire time these movements took place, the phases of rising tension were punctuated with pauses, which resulted in some apparent progress in the negotiations between the instigators of the mobilizations and the authorities. The demands put forth by the various people involved in the protest revolved around the fight against unemployment and precariousness – in a nutshell, one can say that all the participants in the various mobilizations demanded either to be hired or to become permanent employees in stable and public positions. In this context, the unemployed graduates were the key instigators of the mobilizations that took place in the various towns of the mining basin. Since March 2007, tens of unemployed graduates of Tunis University have decided to form an association – the Union of Unemployed Graduates, which is not recognized by the authorities – in order to denounce the “precariousness of their conditions”. Since then, this association which, until then was tolerated by Ben Ali’s regime, has brought about the formation of regional and local committees of unemployed graduates in Tunisia’s main urban centers, as well as in the towns of the mining basin – in Gafsa² and in the

² In September 2007, the police forces repressed a gathering of the Regional Committee of the Unemployed Graduates of Gafsa, “presided” by Afef Bennaceur. See Ammar Amroussiya, “Intifadat al-Haud al-Manjami: Muhawala Taqwimiyya [The Uprising of the Mining Basin: Evaluation attempt]”, *Al-Shuyu'i*,

delegations of Redeyef and, to a lesser extent, of Moularès. In fact, it was the local committee of defense of the unemployed in Redeyef which kicked off the protest movement. The academic background as well as the militant training of these young committees meant that the unemployed graduates found themselves at the heart of the protests. Regarding the episodes that took place in the mining basin conflict, they contributed to the continuation of the mobilizations which they partially supported, with the help of certain trade union leaders in Redeyef. These leaders formed a negotiation committee aimed at formalizing and legitimizing the various demands.

In light of the above, can it be claimed, however, that the protests that took place in the mining basin represent a social movement, as defined by Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2007, p.8) They undoubtedly exhibit certain features. First of all, they are part of a “sustained campaign of claim making” linked to an “array of public performances including marches, rallies” or even demonstrations. We have also seen “repeated public displays of worthiness unity, numbers and commitment by such means as wearing colours, marching in disciplined ranks, sporting badges that advertise the cause, displaying signs, chanting slogans and picketing public buildings”. At the same time, however, the “social movement basis”, in other words “the social background, organizational resources, and cultural frameworks of contention and collective action” turned out to be insufficient in order to bring the demands to a successful conclusion. In spite of the rapid spread of the protest movement, the initiators of the mobilizations were too marginal to impose their demands on the authorities: the local trade union leaders responsible for the movement in Redeyef were at the margins of the regional trade union system – all the more so at the national level; the committees of unemployed graduates, for their part, were too young, and had little experience with political conflicts. Given Tunisia’s authoritarian context, marked by the closing of the structure of political opportunities, this basic weakness of the social movement turned out to be fatal for the perpetuation of the protest. Moreover, the fact that certain protests turned into riots also accounts for this inability of the protests to lead to a sustainable social movement. Therefore, the episodes of protest that took place in the mining basin represent an aborted

n° 16, mai 2008, <http://www.albadil.org/spip.php?article1757>, consulted in July 2009. All the texts in Arabic were translated by Eric Gobe.

social movement, to which the massive police and military repression that took place in the month of June put a strong halt.

A detailed examination of the economic and social situation of the mining basin and of the various conflict-laden episodes that took place throughout the first part of the year 2008, will help gain a better understanding of the dynamics of the movement.

The reasons behind the anger: economic and social background of the protest movement.

Since the end of the 19th century, the economic activity in the mining basin has revolved around the exploitation of phosphate ore. The public enterprise managing this exploitation the Gafsa Phosphate Company (GPC) – remains to this day the largest employer in the area. The company, however, has been gradually restructured, following the implementation of the 1986 structural adjustment plan. The modernization of the enterprise – closing the underground mines in favor of those above ground – has led to a 75% drop in its personnel, from 14,000 in 1980 to 5,853 in 2006.³ The economic fabric of the region, for its part, has remained unchanged for the last 25 years – private investments remain insignificant and the State has not set up any development plan in order to diversify the economy and develop public infrastructures.⁴ For these reasons, a vast majority of the population feels that the mining basin has not enjoyed the same care on the part of the central government, compared to other regions, particularly the Sahel, main provider of the Tunisian political and economic elite. These feelings are not new, but the difficult situation faced by large segments of the population has exacerbated them, leading to a tendency towards rebellion, as we can see from this extract of a press release published while the movements were taking place, by the “participants in the sit-in of the Redeyef Local Work Union”:

³ “Intifadat al-Fuqara’ bi-Mintaqat al-Haud al-Manjami min ajl al-Shughl wa-l-Huriyya [The Uprising of the Poor People of the Mining Basin: in favor of work, freedom and dignity]”, *Al-Badil ‘Ajil*, Distribution list of the PCOT (French for *Parti Communiste des Ouvriers de Tunisie*, Tunisian Workers’ Communist Party) internet site, 13/08/2008, <http://www.albadil.org>, consulted in July 2009.

⁴ Mahmoud Ben Romdhane et Ali Kadel, « Le bassin minier de Gafsa : le désespoir sous les trésors », *Attariq al Jadid*, August 7, 2008.

“At a time when our youth suffers from destitution, poverty and unemployment, the towns in the Sahel are receiving factories and institutions where nobody works. Our youngsters, our daughters, our families are forced to emigrate and to scatter, in search for work. Where is our share of the development? Where has our share of the national wealth gone to? Where is the just retribution for our participation in the building of the nation and of its economy, after more than 50 years?”⁵

This feeling of having been “left behind” in the development of Tunisia also grew in the two years that preceded the “events of the mining basin”, due to a considerable increase in the benefits from the export of phosphates: compared to 2005, the price of the phosphate-derived products rose by 11%, and by 47%, compared to 2007. Moreover, as pointed out by Tunisian economists Mahmoud Ben Romdhane and Ali Kadel, the prices sky-rocketed in October 2007 to the extent where, in the first quarter of 2008, they were 125% higher than in the first quarter of 2007. Naturally, the rise in the price of phosphate-derived products impacted on the export benefits which rose from DT 858 million, in 2005, to DT 1,261 billion, in 2007, reaching DT 781 million in the first quarter of 2008.⁶

These data contrast with the official unemployment figures (for 2007) in the main towns of the mining basin, where they are much higher than the national average (14.1%). The unemployment rates in the cities of Moularès, M’dhila and Redeyef, for example, stand respectively at 38.5%, 28.4%, and 26.7% – in other words, these are disaster areas, as far as employment is concerned.⁷

A number of sub-contracting companies revolve around the GPC, whose workers’ positions are unstable and who earn low salaries, giving rise to feelings of frustration in

⁵ The participants in the sit-in of the Local Labor Union of Redeyef, « Bayan ila Ahali al-Redeyef [Official statement to the population of Redeyef] », *Al-Badil ‘Ajil*, PCOT distribution list, Feb. 14, 2008, <http://www.albadil.org>.

⁶ Mahmoud Ben Romdhane and Ali Kadel, *op. cit.*

⁷ Carole Vann, « Tunisie : la révolte à huis-clos du peuple des mines », *Swissinfo*, http://www.swissinfo.ch/fre/a_la_une/En_Tunisie_la_revolte_a_huis_clos_du_peuple_des_mines.html?siteSect=106&sid=9851233&cKey=1224233537000&ty=st, consulted in July 2009.

relation to the work conditions of the employees of the GPC itself.⁸ Indeed, the protest movements of the mining basin is linked to a split between the category of the fully-integrated employees – which more-or-less comprises the workers and the managerial staff at the GPC – and the “forgotten ones” that are part of the workforce. It is easy to see that the GPC employees’ participation in the various mobilizations was very limited: since a reevaluation of the status quo was not really in their interest, they actually represent a working class aristocracy, with relatively privileged employment conditions, as their average salary is around DT 1,000 – which represents slightly less than five times Tunisia’s minimum wage.

This form of duality of the market is particularly hurtful to the temporary workers and graduate unemployed, since Amara Abbassi, Secretary-General of the Regional Union of the UGTT (General Tunisian Labor Union), deputy, and member of the RCD’s⁹ Central Committee, owns several of these subcontracting companies.¹⁰ Abbassi was hired by the GPC as a trade union representative, for a managerial position, in the early 1990s, and signed a sub-contracting agreement with this company. This contract enabled him, first of all, to set up an interim company, which provided the additional workers the GPC required. At a later stage, Amara Abbassi, together with his brother and another close relative, Brahim Houchati, set up two other companies – a caretaking company and a maintenance company – both of which also worked for the GPC. This way, he manages a three-company holding, employing around 800 paid workers, with a varying status of precariousness and earning between DT 200-300.

In addition to presenting the socioeconomic determining factors of the protest movements, a distinction should be made between the various elements that contributed to this “rebellion of the people of the mines”. In fact, the trigger is easily identifiable: it was the announcement, on January 5, 2008, of the results of a hiring contest for 380 workers, technicians and managerial staff, by the GPC,¹¹ that led to the “explosion” (Le Saout, 2000, p.55). Within the socioeconomic context of the mining basin, the

⁸ Karine Gantin and Omeyya Seddik, “Un bastion ouvrier dans le bassin de Gafsa. Révolte du peuple des mines en Tunisie”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, July 2008.

⁹ The ruling party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD – French for: Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique).

¹⁰ Ammar Amroussiya, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Adbelmajid Haouachi, “Gafsa : les raisons de la colère”, *Réalités*, n° 1153, January 31, 2008.

publication of the list of the people hired was perceived by the unemployed graduates as a denial of justice. In order to understand this feeling, one should recall that since 1986, following an agreement concluded with the Regional Union of the UGTT, the GPC has been recruiting workers from the Gafsa region, on the basis of a contest. In 1993, the arrangements called for by the agreement evolved, with the GPC now hiring a quota of 20% – essentially determined by the Regional Union of the UGTT – of people originating from the mining basin, based on “major social considerations”. Following the announcement of the result, the unemployed graduates hinted that the Regional Management of the UGTT,¹² headed by Amara Abbassi, favored the recruitment of friends and direct relatives, on the basis of tribal and political affinities:¹³

“Following an unjustified period of time [during which the results were] withheld, on Saturday, January 5, the final results of the recruitment process of workers and managerial staff for the Gafsa Phosphate Company have unleashed [...] the despair of the unemployed workers in the region and of their families, which have long doubted the transparency and fairness of the contest. They believe that the choice of children coming from comfortable homes represents a gross injustice, in light of their poverty. They were also surprised by the sharp drop in the number of managerial positions, which dropped from 40 to 21. Therefore, such results can only cause anger and indignation. [...] We believe that popular protests [...] are the natural response to corruption, nepotism and to the denial of the principle of equal opportunities, which should serve as guideline in the recruitment process for the public sector.”¹⁴

¹² And equally, unofficially, by the local figures of the RCD, the ruling party.

¹³ The effects of the announcement of the results were all the more deleterious that the GPC had not organized any competition for the past six years, due to its policy of non-replacement of those leaving for retirement. Therefore, the expectation and hope to be hired were very high. See “Ihtijajat ‘Arima Tunadi bi-Haqq al-Shughl. Murasala min Gafsa [Strong Protests in Demand for Employment, Correspondence from Gafsa]”, *Akhbar al-Badil*, Jan. 7, 2008, http://www.albadil.org/spip.php?page=breves&debut_breves=160#pagination_breves, consulted in July 2009.

¹⁴ The Regional Committee of Unemployed Graduates, “al-Nata’ij al-Niha’iyya li-Munazara Sharikat Fufat Gafsa: Tamakhada al-Jabal... fanjaba fa’ran [Final Results of the GPC Contest: The mountain... gives birth to a mouse]”, *Akhbar al-Badil*, Jan. 13, 2008, http://www.albadil.org/spip.php?page=breves&debut_breves=160#pagination_breves, consulted in July 2009.

This was how the social explosion started, directed both at the GPC and at the “trade union aristocracy attached to the status quo.”¹⁵ That same day, in Redeyef, a small number of unemployed graduates – four people – go on hunger strike at the local center of the UGTT, in protest against the results of the contest, and in order to claim their right to employment. The next day, they are joined by hundreds of high-school students, unemployed people and their families, as well as by some trade unionists, for a peaceful demonstration. The procession crosses the city, ending with a one-hour sit-in opposite the GPC head office in Redeyef.

In Moularès, the first demonstrations of discontent are not fully organized: hundreds of unemployed workers and their families take to the streets to demonstrate and block the town’s main thoroughfare for many hours, preventing anyone from either entering or exiting the GPC’s head office. They then proceed to the city’s phosphate washing plant, where they hold a sit-in till the evening.¹⁶ From that first day of demonstration onwards, the mobilizations multiply until April 6 when Ben Ali’s regime decides to launch a first massive operation of repression which, in fact, was to be characterized by a relative failure.

The sharp rise in protest movements

The collective action which is launched is partly “spontaneous”, particularly in Moularès and M’dhila. The protest movements have no unified leadership, with the exception of Redeyef where, as early as January 6, 2009, a small group of local trade unionists, who place themselves in opposition to the UGTT regional management, undertakes to set up a negotiation committee. Headed by Adnane Hajji, secretary-general of the local section of UGTT for the primary education, this committee serves as an intermediary in the initial negotiations between the unemployed graduates and the delegate (*mu’tamad* – the Tunisian equivalent of the French sub-prefect). Indeed, faced with the gradual spread of the hunger strike, the State representative comes into contact with the trade unionists who

¹⁵ « Les enseignements d’une crise qui n’est pas passagère, Témoignage d’un enfant de Redeyef qui pense sa société », *Attariq al Jadid*, August 7, 2008.

¹⁶ During these protests, the demonstrators shout slogans calling for work and thrashing corruption. On some of the banners one can read “Work is Everyone’s Right... No to Corruption and Opportunism.”

support the mobilization of the unemployed graduates, i.e. with the representatives of the local sections of UGTT, with the exception, naturally, of the miners' union.¹⁷ The trade union committee, whose members have formalized the demands of the people on hunger strike, is granted a certain number of advances on these demands by the prefecture's authorities.¹⁸ The preliminary agreement passed on January 9 between the delegate and the trade union negotiation committee is accepted by the people on hunger strike, who suspend their action that same evening.

In M'dhila, things are rather different, as the protest movements turn into riots. Following the announcement of the results, a few hundred unemployed people take to the streets to demonstrate and form a sit-in in front of the head office of the town delegation (*mu'tamadiyya*). The GPC workers fear that if they go to work they will be subject to popular vindication.¹⁹ On the evening of the 8th, however, tension rises, and a few young unemployed people block the entrance to the town by setting barriers of tires on fire. On the morning of the 9th, high school students take to the streets and join the unemployed and their families who are demonstrating. On the night between January 13th and 14th, a group of demonstrators set fire to some tires in front of the home of M'dhila's delegate.²⁰ The following night, angry young men – high school students and unemployed people – set fire to an office of the caretaking company of M'dhila's chemical complex (owned by

¹⁷ On January 6th, the number of strikers stands at seven. The next day, it rises to 21. On January 9th, one numbers 25 hunger strikers, aged 29-42, some of them high-school graduates, while others have a professional diploma or a university degree. See the “Bayan ‘ilami haula al-Zuruf ta’liq al-Jau’ bi-r-Redeyef [Information press release in relation to the circumstances in which the hunger strike in Redeyef was suspended]”, *al-Dimuqratiyya al-Niqabiyya wa al-Siyasiya*, n° 123, Jan 12, 2008, which is found on the http://www.albadil.org/spip.php?page=breves&debut_breves=160#pagination_breves, consulted in July 2009.

¹⁸ The agreement stipulates that the contest, in its actual form, “will no longer exist and will be replaced by a test based on each file, supervised by a selection committee, in which the Local Union of the UGTT in Redeyef will be actively involved: 17 people will be hired in the near future, and priority will be given, as much as possible, to the unemployed graduates on strike; the files of the other strikers will be looked at, in order to try and find an employment for them in other sectors.” On the other hand, the State representative refuses to go over the list of the 64 people hired, based on the quota of Redeyef, following the controversial contest.

¹⁹ On January 7th, a few hundred workers at the GPC go on strike, not for reasons of solidarity with the demonstrators, but because the management has ordered them to reach their place of work by going through Gafsa and Metlaoui, rather than through the village of Borj Laakrama, one of the poorest areas, with one of the highest rates of unemployment. See “Ihtijajat ‘Arima Tunadi bi-Haqq al-Shughl...”, *op. cit.*

²⁰ The emblematic figures in power (the mayors, delegates, RCD representatives, etc.), who are protected by the police, are booed on a regular basis.

Amara Abbassi, secretary-general of the UGTT Regional Union), while others start taking apart a chunk of the railroad tracks, in order to paralyze the phosphate transport.

In Moularès, on January 10th, between 1,700 and 2,000 high-school and professional training students also take to the streets to demonstrate.²¹ Tens of unemployed people and their families set up tents on the roads leading to the GPC, in order to block trucks and trains transporting phosphate. Among these tents, the “Eleven Widows” tent was to become a symbol of the movement. This tent, set up by the wives of former GPC workers who had died following a work accident, was to become the heart of the various tent camps. They would relentlessly demand that their children be hired by the GPC.

On January 14, high-school students take to the streets, once again. In order to express their anger, they tear copy-books and books apart, while shouting slogans against corruption.²² In addition to the unemployed and the high-school students, seasonal and temporary workers on the municipal construction sites join the protest movement by occupying the municipal warehouses.

For its part, the local Unemployed Graduates’ Defense Committee demands in vain that the quota of people hired by the GPC, posted in Moularès, be increased and that their files be examined seriously.²³ However, unlike what is taking place in Redeyef, here, the unemployed committee in this delegation (*mu’tamadiyya*) does not enjoy the support of the trade unionists, and is unable to control the protest movements in the city.

It must be pointed out that in the first days of the conflict, the police force intervened ad minima, and mainly kept an eye on the various demonstrations. Ben Ali’s forces which, in such circumstances, would use coercive force straight away, was

²¹ “Tatawasal al-Ihtijajat fi Manatiq al-Haud al-Manjami bi-Gafsa [The protest movements continue in the Gafsa mining basin]”, Jan. 13, 2008, Correspondence of Gafsa, *Akhbar al-Badil*, http://www.albadil.org/spip.php?page=breves&debut_breves=160#pagination_breves, consulted in July 2009.

²² The most commonly found slogan refers to the founding father of Tunisian trade unionism, Ferhat Hached: “Oh Ferhat, Oh Hached, come to see the corruption.” See “al-Ihtijajat haula al-Tashghil bi-Haud Gafsa al-Manjami Tatwi Usbu’ha al-Awwal [The protest movement around employment in the Gafsa mining basin has just completed its first week]”, January 14, 2008, *Akhbar al-Badil*, http://www.albadil.org/spip.php?page=breves&debut_breves=140#pagination_breves, consulted in July 2009.

²³ “Asda’ Gafsa: Tawasul al-Haraka al-Ihtijaiyya min ajl al-Haqq fi al-Shughl [Echoes from Gafsa : continuation of the protest movement for the right to work]”, Jan. 1, 2008, *Akhbar al-Badil*, http://www.albadil.org/spip.php?page=breves&debut_breves=160#pagination_breves, consulted in July 2009.

counting on the shortness of breath of the movement. The police mainly circled the towns in order to control entrances and exists.

After eight days of restlessness and protests, the level of intensity of the sit-ins, demonstrations and occupation of emblematic places drops, and take on a routine appearance until mid-February. In M'dhila, where the protests were more like riots, the dynamics of the protest died off. In Redeyef, the various protest movements are organized around the main office of the UGTT Local Union (sit-ins, demonstrations, processions), surrounded by the negotiations' committee, mainly comprising members of the primary school teachers' trade union.²⁴ Each Sunday, this committee organizes a demonstration, during which the unemployed, unemployed graduates, temporary workers, as well as the high-school students and their parents, claim their right to work.²⁵ Invariably, the procession walks towards the main office of the UGTT Local Union, where Adnane Hajji pronounces a speech in which he exposes the nepotism and corruption which plague the distribution of jobs, as well as the trade union bureaucracy and the local people in charge of the RCD, who try to use tribal and clan affinities to divide the social movement.²⁶ In Moularès, the absence of trade union leadership does not prevent the holding of long sit-ins. The sit-in of the unemployed graduates, headed by Hassen Ben Abdallah, which takes place at the head office of the UGTT Local Union, lasts till March 24, when an agreement is reached, according to which some 20 unemployed persons are to be hired by sub-contracting companies. The sit-in of the relatives of the people who died while working in the mines – the camp with the tent of the “11 widows” who participated at the blocking of the activities of the GPC – ends on February 24, following a presidential promise to get their children and those of some other 60 widows hired by the GPC.²⁷

²⁴ Adnane Hajji (secretary-general of the local section of UGTT for the primary education), Bechir Laabidi, Taeïb Ben Othmane both are members of the local section of primary teachers), Adel Jayyar (member of the local section of secondary teachers), Boujemaâ Chraïti (male nurse).

²⁵ On the banners held by the demonstrators, one can read: “Work, Freedom and National Dignity”; “We Want Jobs, No to Promises and Illusions.”

²⁶ “Wamdat mushriqa min Ihtijajat al-Haud al-Manjami [The luminous sparks of the protest movements in the Mining Basin]”, *Al-Badil 'Ajl*, Distribution list of the PCOT internet site, Feb. 14, 2008, <http://www.albadil.org>.

²⁷ « Akhbar al-Haud al-Manjami [Information from the Mining Basin] », Feb. 2, 2008, *Akhbar al-Badil*, http://www.albadil.org/spip.php?page=breves&debut_breves=140#pagination_breves, consulted in July 2009.

The promises made to the various protagonists of the “revolt”, as well as the specific agreements reached, contribute to the end of a number of mobilizations, while at the same time, others appear and spread. A number of decisions passed by the local bosses also lead to some tensions: on February 19, the executive office of the Regional Union of Gafsa (UGTT), headed by Amara Abbassi, decides to put an end to all trade union activities. That same day, Adnane Hajji takes to the streets with part of the residents of Redeyef,²⁸ denouncing an “unjust decision” and demanding its cancellation.

Some time around February 25, a period of calm settles in. Indeed, the authorities suggest to their various counterparts – the Negotiations Committee in Redeyef and the Unemployed Graduates in Moularès – that a truce be entered into, in order to generate the conditions favorable to negotiations. Demonstrations, processions and strikes are halted for a period of two weeks.²⁹ The delegate enters into talks with the Negotiation Committee in Redeyef, on the issue of employment in the mining basin.

However, on March 13, the authorities order the police force to carry out the evacuation of the main office of the UGTT Local Union, which contributes to the renewal of the mobilizations. The latter tend to exasperate Ben Ali’s government, which still does not see any sign of a weakening of the protest actions, and which has no intention of agreeing to all the demands, particularly that which consists in questioning the results of the contest aimed at rewarding some of its henchmen. Therefore, in early April, the authorities decide to put an end to all this by resorting to force, particularly *versus* the better organized protest movements, i.e. the negotiations’ and the unemployed committees in Redeyef.

From one wave of repression to another: the protest movements faced with the State’s coercive action.

In the night between April 6 and 7, the attack launched by a group of youngsters with covered faces, on a police station in the center of Redeyef, serves as a pretext for the

²⁸ In May, this decision is ratified by the executive office of the UGTT.

²⁹ Ammar Amroussiya, *op. cit.*

authorities to launch a series of repressive operations.³⁰ The nature of the police action, which is strongly coercive, takes on the shape of a collective punishment, aimed at generating terror, at choking the feeling of resistance and at breaking the ties of solidarity within the population. The police force comb certain neighborhoods and carry out some violent raids – including the use of tear grenades – at the homes of the participants in the movement, after which they place tens of people, particularly young militants, under arrest. On the morning of April 7, Adnane Hajji, Adel Jayyar, Taïeb Ben Othmane, Boujemaâ Chraïti are roughly apprehended.³¹ However, contrary to police expectations, the population organizes itself. The local sections of trade unions in Redeyef, except for the miners' trade union, call for an unlimited strike uniting the public sector's workers – including some GPC workers – the employees of the sub-contracting firms, the town's shopkeepers and the liberal professions. Teachers, for their part, occupy one of the town's schools, whereas groups of youngsters harass the police throughout the day. The cell-phone and the ability to move about quickly means that these groups succeed in putting a lot of pressure on the anti-riot police.

In fact, the police intervention squads find themselves overcome by the size of the popular reaction, as the people of Redeyef have no qualms about taking to the streets to demonstrate. On April 9th, hundreds of women form a procession and walk towards the main office of the *mu`tamediyya*, where they improvise a sit-in and call for the release of the people under arrest. They are joined by hundreds of unemployed people and trade unionists, who are backed by delegations from the sections of the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH) from Kairouan, Monastir and Jendouba. These sections are headed by Messoud Romdhani, coordinator of the National Support Committee with the Residents of the Mining Basin.

Faced with the popular occupation of the streets, the authorities decide to redeploy the police force outside the city and at certain strategic places occupied by the

³⁰ A number of extreme left militants, notably of the PCOT, believe that this action launched against a police station was masterminded by the authorities, to serve as a pretext to launch the repression. In their view, they chose July 7th, as it was the day chosen to render official the recruitment of the laureates of the GPC contest. The objective of the authorities, therefore, in launching the repression on that day, was in order not to have to deal with a new phase of demonstrations. See "al-Redeyef... wa Hadhhi Hazima Ukhra [Redeyef... This other defeat]", *Al-Badil 'Ajil*, Distribution list of the PCOT, April 20, 2008, <http://www.albadil.org>.

³¹ Bechir Laabidi is arrested the next day.

delegation. That same evening, the police releases 22 out of the 39 people incarcerated, while those remaining are released the next day. The latter include Adnane Hajji, Taïeb Ben Othmane and Bechir Laabidi, who are greeted festively by the population of Redeyef.³²

Although Moularès and M'dhila are not invaded by the police, these two délagations, nonetheless, are the stage of confrontation between the police and demonstrators. On April 7th, in Moularès, the official hiring of a number of winners of the contest leads to some demonstrations. Hundreds of youngsters, accompanied by their mothers, organize a sit-in in front of the city's main offices of the delegation, as well as of the main police stations and offices of the National Guard. Some demonstrators block the main roads, thereby preventing the operation of the phosphate washing plants, while others set up tent camps along the railroads themselves.³³ The police attempt to break-up the various sit-ins with tear-gas and water canons but, once again, they are overcome by the numbers.

The fact that the police back away from the repressive option means there was room, once again, for processions, sit-ins and other demonstrations, in Redeyef, Moularès and M'dhila. The demonstrations witness a renewal in tension in early May, leading to the death of a young man of 24. On May 5th, a group of young unemployed people occupy the site of an electric generator, in order to halt the activities of the mine washing plants of the village of Tabbedit. Their goal, by carrying out this spectacular action, is to protest against the fact that the prefecture's authorities did not fulfill one of its engagements calling for the hiring of a number of unemployed men by the GPC. The delegate, accompanied by some policemen, makes his way to the place in order to scatter the participants in the sit-in. As the use of tear-gas proves insufficient in order to evacuate the young men, the electric generator is set in motion, causing the death by electrocution of Hichem Ben Jeddou El Aleimi.³⁴

³² "Akhbar Wataniyya: al-Haud al-Manjami fi Usbu' [National News: The Mining Basin this week]", *Al-Badil 'Ajil*, Distribution list on the PCOT internet site, April 14, 2008, <http://www.albadil.org>.

³³ "The Mining Basin: some information", April 8, 2008, *Akhbar al-Badil*, http://www.albadil.org/spip.php?page=breves&debut_breves=120#pagination_breves, consulted in July 2009.

³⁴ Fédération des Tunisiens pour une Citoyenneté des deux Rives (FTCR), « Un jeune du bassin minier mort électrocuté », May 7, 2008, press release published on the internet site of the FTCR, www.ftcr.eu, consulted in July 2009.

Throughout the month of May, police pressure mounts, violent brushes between demonstrators and the police multiply and a number of young unemployed men are arrested and judged by the Gafsa magistrate's court.³⁵ On May 30th, Metlaoui joins once again the round of protest movements, by holding a series of demonstrations and sit-ins which are violently suppressed by the police. On June 2nd, a vehicle from the National Guard, which was chasing after some young demonstrators, hits and kills young Nabil Chagra. This time, Ben-Ali's regime has decided to put an end to the "Mining Basin Rebellion", whatever the human cost may be.

On June 6th in Redeyef, after the police announced the start of a curfew, they shoot without warning at a procession of demonstrators, killing young Hafnaoui Maghdhaoui, aged 25, and wounding 21 others, more or less seriously. In order to guarantee the success of the repressive action, the army deploys on June 7th in Redeyef, and takes hold of the major parts of the city. During the following days, as the army comb the surrounding mountains, where some residents have taken refuge, the police launches a campaign of combing and arrest of "activists", both in Redeyef and in the other towns of the mining basin.³⁶ Throughout the month of June, the arrest operations multiply: according to a press release of the Gafsa section of the LTDH dated June 23rd, some 150 militants are questioned in a little over two weeks, in Redeyef alone.³⁷ The emblematic figures of the movement are also targeted by the authorities: Adnane Hajji is arrested on June 22nd, while Adel Jayyar, Taïeb Ben Othmane, Boujemaâ Chraïti, Bechir Laabidi, Mohamed Merzougui and Boubaker Ben Boubaker – the latter two are active members of the Committee of the Unemployed Graduates of Redeyef – are arrested in early July. They are accused of serious offences and crimes, such as "Organizing and forming a gang set to commit acts of aggression against people and property; acting violently towards representatives of the authorities in the exercise of their duties; attempting to destabilize the order of the Republic; carrying sharp weapons and

³⁵ The counts of indictment invariably relate to "acts of violence and threats perpetrated against public officers", "attacks with sharp arms and hard objects", "forbidden carrying of sharp arms", or even "being drunk in public" and "disturbing the public order". The sentences pronounced by the magistrate's court vary between 3-4 months in prison for some, with suspension, for others. See daily *Le Temps* (Tunisia), May 31, 2008.

³⁶ "Intifadat al-Fuqara' bi-Mintaqat al-Haud al-Manjami min ajl al-Shughl wa-l-Huriyya", *op. cit.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

possessing incendiary products; and forming gangs of wrongdoers.”³⁸ The demonstrations, which become more and more sporadic, continue throughout the summer, specifically those organized in view of demanding the release of people held up, but they are ruthlessly repressed. In fact, the arrest of the leaders of the protest movements clearly marks the end of the mobilization in the mining basin. The coercive action of Ben Ali’s regime culminates with the trial of December 11, at the end of which extremely heavy sentences are pronounced against the emblematic figures of the movement: seven of them are sentenced to 10 years and one month in jail.”³⁹

While waving the stick, the authorities were also waving the carrot: in order to calm the tension, President Ben Ali dismissed the governor of Gafsa and the Director-General of the GPC.⁴⁰ However, this initial gesture was insufficient to stop the protest. In general, the concessions made by the authorities, particularly at the local level, were perceived as simple promises that were not fulfilled. The members of the Redeyef committee demanded endlessly that the measures negotiated be quickly implemented, while they denounced the government’s delaying policy.

Following the June repression, President Ben Ali tried to limit the coerciveness of his policy by denouncing the “irregularities committed by the people heading the GPC”, during the hiring contest, whose results “caused disillusion and disappointment among the young people concerned.” He also committed himself to allocate “a percentage of the

³⁸ See the file put together by the Committee for the Respect of Freedom and Human Rights in Tunisia (CDLDHT) and the FTCT: “Tunisie, janvier-juillet 2008: Le mouvement de protestation du bassin minier de Gafsa face à la répression”, <http://www.euromedrights.net/usr/00000026/00000031/00002393.pdf>, consulted in July 2009. See also the Support Committee for the Residents of the Gafsa Mining Basin, “Press Release: No to the Criminalization of the Struggles in Tunisia’s South-West Mining Basin”, July 2, 2008, www.ftcr.eu, consulted in July 2009.

³⁹ The trade unionists Adnane Hajji, Bechir Laabidi, Taïeb Ben Othmane and Adel Jayyar, as well as the unemployed graduates Tarek H’limi, Hassen Ben Abdallah, Maher Fajraoui. Of the thirty-six people judged by the Gafsa Magistrate’s court, five are acquitted, seven are sentenced to 10 years and one month imprisonment, eleven are sentenced to six years, three are sentenced to four years, one is sentenced to two years and two are sentenced to one year. The nine other accused are given a suspended prison sentence of two years. See CRLDHT, “Tunisie/Gafsa: simulacres de procès. De lourdes peines prononcées”, 18/12/2008, <http://www.crlght.org/spip.php?article146>, consulted in July 2009.

⁴⁰ His replacement, Mohamed Ridha Ben Mosbah, is appointed on June 9th, at the height of the repression. The authorities also promised to bring forward to 2009 – instead of 2011 – the installation works of the reservoirs for the clayey waters coming from the phosphate washing plants located in Redeyef, Moularès and M’Dhila 1 and 2; to hire young graduates to work on the municipal construction sites and those of the service companies; and to create small projects linked to the environment. See *Al Watan*, June 13, 2008.

income on the export of phosphate towards the construction of a new cement factory and new infrastructures, including employment in the region.”⁴¹

Overall, the severe nature of the condemnations pronounced against the leaders of the movement, the weakness of those pronounced against the young demonstrators, as well as the length of the protests, make one wonder as to the impact and significance, within the authoritarian Tunisian context, of what commentators – journalists and militants – called “the rebellion of the Gafsa mining basin.”

Significance and impact of the social movement in the mining basin.

One is forced to recognize that the affiliated trade unions found themselves in an awkward position with regards to the protest movement, which is why the position of the UGTT, particularly that of the Regional Union and of the mining trade unions were rejected so strongly by the population taking part in the movement. This rejection was even stronger since these two entities constantly refused to question the results of the contest; in May, they even published a press release, in which they recommended that those admitted following the controversial contest be hired as soon as possible.⁴² Amara Abbassi, secretary-general of the Regional union, head of the show at the RCD, attempted throughout the conflict, to bring into disrepute the actions entered into by the demonstrators, as they were a threat to his material interests, as well as those of the GPC wage-earners. He did not hesitate to make provocative gestures towards the demonstrators, and on March 31, he sent the sons and daughters of the trade unionists who succeed the contest to form a sit-in at the head office of the Local Union of the UGTT in Redeyef, in the course of which they demanded that the recruitment process of the Redeyef laureates be hastened.⁴³ It should also be pointed out that, in the mining basin, it was the local sections of UGTT of Redeyef only that supported the demonstrators and which acted as representatives of the population. In the other towns of

⁴¹ Carole Vann, “Maghreb. La région, qui fait du pays le 4^e producteur mondial de phosphate, est l’une des plus déshérités du pays”, *Le Temps* (Switzerland), October 16, 2008.

⁴² Ammar Amroussia, *op. cit.*

⁴³ “*Akhbar* [Informations]”, April 2, 2008, *Akhbar al-Badil*, http://www.albadil.org/spip.php?page=breves&debut_breves=120#pagination_breves, consulted in July 2009.

the basin (Moularès, M'dhila and Metlaoui), the local sections of UGTT did not take hold of the protest movement, as they did in Redeyef. At the national level, the federations, such as that of primary education, of secondary education and of health, or even of the postal system, did not take on any position, nor did they publish any press release, or organize any support action in order to reveal the situation in the region. As for the affiliated trade unions that sanctioned Adnane Hajji, they waited until December 3rd – in other words, until the eve of the trial of the members of the Redeyef Negotiations' Committee, to withdraw his suspension.⁴⁴ As it is the case with trade unions in certain authoritarian States, the UGTT was faced with a dilemma: either it fills the functions that were assigned to it by the authorities and, as a result, filters the demands of its members and attempts to defuse the demands from the rank and file; or it identifies with the social protests, to the point of actively supporting them (Murphy, 1999).⁴⁵ In the first case, it would be overwhelmed by the action of certain local section of UGTT and by the population not affiliated with any trade union; in the second case, it is likely to draw upon itself the ire of the authorities and bring into question the interests of the trade unionists who are henchmen of the regime (Alexander, 1996). In the latter case, rehabilitating Adnane Hajji represents an attempt, on the part of the trade union leadership, not to lose too much credibility with the rank and file, while carefully handling its relations with President Ben Ali. In final analysis, the Mining Basin Revolt contributed towards tarnishing the image, already quite harmed, of the management of the UGTT, which is finding it harder and harder to direct the demands of the rank and file (Gobe, 2006 and 2008).

One of the main points that should be noted is that, in spite of its length, the conflict remained within the confines of the mining basin. To quote the terminology used in the sociology of social movements, there was no diffusion of the conflict from one site to another. What we witnessed was a local protest movement, which was unable to alter its scale. The actors of the “multi-organizational, more-or-less autonomous space” (Camau and Geisser, 2003; Bechir Ayari, 2009) – i.e. the legal political formations that are relatively autonomous, the unrecognized parties, certain civil associations (legal or

⁴⁴ CRLDHT, “Tunisie/Gafsa : simulacres de procès...”, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ For an analysis of the trajectory of labor's power and autonomy in Tunisia, we can also see Eva Bellin (2002, p.122-143)).

not) and some professional organizations, such as lawyers – too weakened after more than 20 years of Ben Ali’s authoritarianism, were incapable of serving as intermediary and, therefore, to shift the scale of the conflict in connecting “people who would otherwise have no previous contacts” (Tilly and Tarrow, 2008, p.95). The only political party which, at the national level, became immediately conscious of the size of the movement, was the PCOT (French for *Parti Communiste des Ouvriers de Tunisie*, Tunisian Workers’ Communist Party). From the start of the movement, it practically guaranteed the daily follow-up on the events, through its internet site *albadil.org*.⁴⁶ Naturally, being a small group, it was unable to shift the scale of the conflict. Although at the national level, some parties and human rights organizations – whether official or not – did publish press releases in which they voiced their solidarity with the action, it was mainly the local militants who led campaigns of concrete support with the residents of the mining basin.⁴⁷

The LTDH, for its part, was paralyzed by the harassing campaign of Ben Ali’s regime, and as unable to echo the actions of the movement. It was the local sections of the LTDH, rather than its national leadership, that led the actions on the ground. As early as January 9th, a delegation of the Gafsa section visited the hunger strikers of Redeyef. The president of the Gafsa section, Zouhair Yahyehoui, and the militant Fethi Titay, were often found side by side with the demonstrators, in order to voice their support. Moreover, they were sometimes able to serve as mediators in the negotiations with the local authorities.

One notable point should be made: a number of Tunisian immigrant associations were actively involved in trying to break the blockade of the media imposed by the authorities. Support committees appeared in Nantes, which as an immigrant community originating from Redeyef, as well as in Paris, where the *Fédération des Tunisiens pour une Citoyenneté des deux Rives* (FTCR) created a support committee for the residents of the Gafsa mining basin. The effects of these support initiatives abroad turned out to be rather limited. The spreading through the media was mainly limited to the internet: the

⁴⁶ This article is heavily based on the PCOT’s follow-up on the episodes of the conflict.

⁴⁷ It was in Kairouan, in February, that Messaoud Romdhani suggested the creation of the National Support Committee for the Populations of the Mining Basin. Teacher, responsible for the Kairouan section of the Tunisian Ligue for the Defense of Human Rights, he has been under constant surveillance since then and is often prevented from leaving his town.

internet users covered the various episodes of the movement by posting films and still photos on the web, often caught on cellular phones. The only professional images that were broadcast were shot by Fahem Boukaddous, member of the PCOT, for the opposition satellite television channel *Al-Hiwar Attounsi*.

To this day, the conflict-ridden situations and demonstrations of discontent have only led to some limited mobilizations (Camau, 2004, p. 190). Faced with coercion and in the absence of sufficiently strong support within society, the episode of conflict has subsided, and was unable to lead to a sustainable social movement. However, within Tunisia's authoritarian context, the Gafsa protest movements have shown, on the one hand, that some significant segments of Tunisian population were capable of voicing their opposition to something; and, on the other hand, it showed the limits of Tunisia's so-called "economic miracle", which is incapable of reducing the range of regional disparities between a pauperized Tunisian South and an economically dynamic Sahel. The Gafsa Mining Basin Rebellion also reveals the fragility of the "patronage redistribution" in a region where there are precisely few resources to be distributed, particularly employment.

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