Labour Movements and the Arab Uprisings: Comparing Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia

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Abstract
Starting from the view that the success of a revolt from below against an authoritarian regime rests on the implicit formation of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition, this article is interested in assessing the role played by workers in the 2010-2011 uprisings in three North African countries. In particular, it is argued here that workers were crucial in Egypt and Tunisia for three main reasons. To begin with, they were the most serious menace to Mubarak and Ben Ali’s regimes throughout the 2000s. Secondly, workers became a source of inspiration for other sectors and groups, determining the reciprocal strengthening between ‘economic’ strikes and ‘political’ demands, up to the point of the outburst of relentless protests. Finally, during the uprisings, workers through contentious actions and strikes favoured the establishment of a broad coalition that the military was unwilling to repress. On the contrary, the kingdom of Morocco was able to weather the storm. This was not only – as often suggested – the effect of the rather moderate approach chosen by the 20 February Movement, but also a consequence of the weakness of the Moroccan labour movement throughout the 2000s.

1. Introduction
The vast spread and radical social protests, which hit virtually every country in the Middle East in 2010-2011, have been one of the most important political events on the international scene in the last decades. Taking the world by surprise, the Arab uprisings – as these massive political upheavals have become commonly known – have led to a cascade of contending explanations. Nevertheless, not only the bulk of academic analyses have been focused on those regimes where the rulers were defeated, but they have also been overwhelmingly interested in explaining the political trajectory followed by those states that experienced a ‘transition’. Without neglecting the theoretical relevance of analysing these developments, this paper does not try to understand why the Arab Uprisings have not fulfilled the expectations of radical political and social changes which were shouted in the streets.

Rather, this paper aims to assess the role played by workers in the long cycle of contentious politics throughout the 2000s, as well as in the storm of the revolt. Certainly, the success of an uprising from below is, first and foremost, the product of the implicit formation of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition in which social classes with divergent material interests and political forces traditionally at odds mobilize
jointly throughout most of the state’s territory for a significant period of time against the common enemy – that is, the regime (Foran 2005: 15; Abdelrahman 2012: 615-618; Angrist 2013: 549-550). There are several reasons for this. Yet, two of these seem crucial. To begin with, the challenge from below has to be so powerful that the management of the crisis cannot be carried on by the Ministry of Interior. Rather, the Ministry of Defence becomes the institutional center that has to tackle the crisis. On the contrary, narrower protests do not own a similar potential and can be easily repressed by the police. Secondly, even when social and political restricted mobilizations are strong enough to trigger a serious menace for the regime, it is unlikely that, given the class, ethnic, regional, or confessional character of the protests, the army will not repress them. By contrast, this might not happen when (nearly) all social classes and political tendencies are mobilized in the streets.

The emergence of an apparently unique and coherent popular will should not, however, lead political scientists to obscure everything in meaningless expressions, such as ‘the youth’ or ‘the people’. On the contrary, in order to improve our understanding of the events, it seems crucial to assess the specific role played by each group, class, and actor in the uprising. Focusing on workers and their contentious actions, as well as providing a comparison among three countries – Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia – that share sufficient similarities (Pierson and Skocpol 2002), this article claims, therefore, to be original and fruitful.

To be clear: this paper does not support the view that, unlike the Moroccan revolt, the Tunisian and Egyptian popular uprisings were successful in defeating long-lasting autocrats given the mere collective actions of workers. As already stated, it was the implicit formation of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition in the former two countries and its non-establishment in the latter that explain the different political trajectories. Yet, the role played by workers in Tunisia and Egypt was crucial in several ways. To begin with, in the last decade of Ben Ali and Mubarak’s rules they were the most serious threats to their regimes. Secondly, showing that their collective actions were successful, workers became a source of inspiration for other social classes and political forces as well, in a reciprocal interplay among pro-democracy mobilizations and socio-economic struggles. Finally, during the weeks of relentless protests, workers were an important element, especially playing a key role in the last days of the uprisings, in the physical formation of that broad coalition that the military – both in Tunisia and Egypt – was unwilling to repress. In Morocco, on the contrary, it will be shown as many of these elements were completely or partially absent, weakening therefore the development of a radical protest movement.

The article proceeds as follows. Part one reviews the existing literature on labour movements, pointing out the formidable bias towards the study of democratization and the consequent misinterpretation of the real strength of workers’ protests in destabilizing and defeating authoritarian regimes. In the second section, case selection is provided and fully justified, highlighting the positive aspects in taking into account Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia. The third part is dedicated to understand the roots and forms of the Egyptian and Tunisian labour movements, as well as the weakness – at least in comparative perspective – of the wave of workers’ actions in Morocco. Finally, the conclusion briefly reviews the main findings.
2. Abandoning the theoretical lens of democratization studies

The role of social classes in politics is a classic and contested issue. Some theoretical traditions have seen the continuous struggle among classes as the engine of history, whilst other schools of thought have simply neglected the appropriateness of class analysis. This is not the right place to re-open this long-lasting debate, and it should be enough to state that this article embraces the former strand of research. As already stated, the interest here is strictly related to the working class; arguably, the most analysed, evoked, and feared social class. As made clear by Samuel Valenzuela (1989: 447), the exceptional place occupied by labour among the forces of civil society is the result of its unique capacity for mobilization, thanks to the common interests shared by workers and their organizational networks. Even more significantly, labour is special because through strikes and other forms of protest, it can interrupt the process of capitalist accumulation, therefore touching the heart of the system. However, the academic concern towards the working class has been largely restricted to its role in democratization, producing a continuous tension between scholars who have seen it as the class agent of democracy and others who, on the contrary, have attributed that status to the bourgeoisie (for a brief account of this literature, see Bellin 2000). The last wave of democratization, started in the 1970s, has reinvigorated this debate. Thus, in response to the elite-centric explanation provided by the ‘transitologist’ literature, a new interest towards the role of labour has emerged (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Collier and Mahoney 1997; Collier 1999). In general, this literature has been characterized by three aspects that will be treated as problematic here: a) class consciousness is seen as a stable and immutable feature that once achieved tends to be re-produced through nearly natural mechanisms; b) ‘economic’ and ‘political’ demands are regarded as distinct, with the latter seen as the expression of more ambitious and far-reaching requests; and c) the role played by the working class is believed necessarily mediated by the action of trade unions and labour parties.

The overwhelming dominant economistic and positivist reading of Karl Marx’s works tends to represent the working class as a fixed entity merely defined by its objective position within the capitalist structure. Over time, it is argued, workers acquire greater class consciousness and act as a coherent and homogenous body that, pursuing its own interests, brings a social revolution and the establishment of a class-less order. Although romantic, such a narrative is completely unrealistic. Certainly, classes are the structural product of the objective relationship that is formed in the process of production between those who own the means of production and the direct producers. However, as long as classes do not self-recognize themselves as forces who share material interests and common experiences, their class potential remains latent. This is elegantly expressed by Brecht De Smet (2015: 68): “[..] whereas the process of formal and real subsumption of labour under capital [..] creates a workforce, it does not constitute the working population as a collective subject”.

What transforms a class in itself into a class for itself is a long-lasting and fiercely disputed question. As far as this article is concerned, the crucial aspects to understand why workers sometimes behave as atomized individuals, whereas in other occasions transcend themselves into a broader subject, rest on two premises. To begin with, class is a social relation. In this regard, class formation is continually being made and remade in an open-ended and always ongoing process, in which greater class solidarity is always challenged by the
continuous capitalist transformations and reorganizations, as well as by the turnover – both natural and legal imposed – of workers. In short, class formation is not something that happens once and for all to produce a working class with a fixed character, but a process of continuous ups and downs. Secondly, workers’ consciousness can be effectively examined through the investigation of collective actions by workers (Posusney 1994: 212). That is, work-stoppages, wildcat strikes, public demonstrations, workers’ requests, and factory occupations say much more on workers’ consciousness than is generally assumed by scholars. The implicit assumption here is that emancipated men and women do not exist in a state of nature. On the contrary, workers learn by struggling in a complex process that can be described as a “pedagogy of revolt” (De Smet 2015: 89-101). Seen in this light, what has often been considered as the lack of consciousness among North African workers was actually the effect of an implicit comparison with a standardized and stereotyped narrative on the working class. One of the main elements on which these misleading views has been built is the compartmentalization of ‘economic’ and ‘political’ demands into two rigidly separate fields. According to a widespread belief, workers focus on ‘economic’ requests rather than on more general ‘political’ issues have a lower revolutionary passion. The general idea here is the presence of a “hierarchy of struggles”, in which economic ‘demands’ are regarded as more moderate and sectorial (Abdelrahman 2012: 614). However, the separation between ‘economic’ and ‘political’ spheres is – at least, for two main reasons – falsely conceived. First and foremost, capitalism as mode of production is a social phenomenon – that is, it cannot be fully understood if a separation between the economic structure, on the one hand, and social, juridical, and political forms, on the other, is drawn (Wood 1981: 78). Rather ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ are continuously interconnected, although the former defines, so to say, ‘the limits of the possible’. The crucial aspect here is the peculiar character of capitalism. In sharp contrast to the previous modes of production, in fact, it has economic rather than extra-economic powers of exploitation, whilst at the same time it tremendously lacks direct coercive power. This means that whereas, for instance, in a feudal system the transfer of surplus labour to a private lord took place by rents, taxes, or labour services, in capitalism appropriation is determined by the complete separation between producers and the means of production. In this regard, coercion or extra-economic powers are, in principle, unnecessary to force workers to give up their surplus labour, although they remain crucial to sustain private property and prevent serious challenge to the system. Therefore, the concentration by workers on economic demands does not reflect their lack of consciousness, but it is something determined by the perfect coincidence in capitalism between the organization of production and the appropriation of surplus value (Ibid.: 89-93). Secondly, as well-testified by those who have tried to re-read the Arab uprisings through Rosa Luxemburg’s *The Mass Strike* (1906), the degree of state repression is also an important issue (Abdelrahman 2012; Zemni, De Smet, and Bogaert 2013; Bogaert 2015). In an authoritarian regime where the simplest expression of discontent is severely forbidden and “strike is a political crime, it must logically follow that every economic struggle will become a political one”, showing that the “separation of the political and economic struggle and the independence of each other, is nothing but an artificial product of the parliamentarian period” (Luxemburg 1906: 41, 59).
Finally, as pointed out by many scholars, it is something to bring down the existing order, it is something else to build a new society. The former is what Luxemburg (1906: 23) – exactly in *The Mass Strike* – described as the process in which “the apparent order is transformed into chaos”, whilst the latter encompasses the development through which “the apparently ‘anarchistic’ chaos [is] changed into a new order”. Despite the full acknowledgment of the existence of these two rather distinct processes, focusing simply on the establishment of new procedures and institutions through which conflicts in society are resolved, a vast literature has stated that the working class cannot be a positive element in the process of building a new order without relying on, or organizing itself in, trade unions and labour parties. Moreover, it is interesting to note that this view has been shared by democratization studies (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992: 9; Collier 1999: 16) and analyses on social revolutions alike (Tilly 1973: 436; Skocpol 1979: 29). These previous findings are not challenged here, since it is fully recognized that without being organized in stable, representative, and numerically relevant political structures, workers cannot play any significant role in the re-constitutive phase. This article, however, is interested in studying the former part of the process – that is, the defeat of the old regime or, to use Luxemburg’s lexicon – the transformation of order into chaos.

In this regard, it will be shown that the working class can also express its disruptive power in a much more indirect and consequential way. This can be the effect, as testified by the Egyptian events, of scarcely organized and centralized networks, which are largely the product of the workers’ mobilization themselves, or, as shown by the Tunisian protests, by the presence of autonomous and non-coopted local trade union branches, which gradually forced a bureaucratized and regime-friendly union’s leadership to embrace anti-regime postures, up to the point of authorizing regional general strikes.

3. Why Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia?

As widely known, the Middle East is one of the least coherent and homogenous world areas (Achcar 2013: 35). In Giacomo Luciani’s (1995: 212) own words, “this is a land of extremes”. Countries in the region range from disturbing opulence to painful poverty and from apparently end-less hydrocarbon resources to complete scarcity. Again, quasi-feudal system of overlapping dynastic and religious authorities coexist with modern and articulate forms of authoritarianism, as well as the high ethnic homogeneity of some polities is counter-balanced by old and new tribal divisions in others. In other words, proposing generalizations about the whole Middle East appears complicated and scarcely feasible. A good starting point to tackle the excess of dishomogeneity of the region might be to restrict scholarly attention to sub-regional units. However, focusing only on North Africa, for instance, does not mean dealing with a completely homogenous cluster of countries. Several differences remain present, even though these are certainly softened. A second important task in the attempt of reducing heterogeneity is to select countries that shared “sufficient similarities” (Pierson and Skocpol 2002). These are not definable in abstract and fixed terms, but rather derive by the specific theoretical framework adopted. Since this article starts from the assumption that the Arab uprisings were, first and foremost, class-based revolts against decades of neoliberal policies, there is an intellectual interest in selecting countries with similar economic profiles and class structures (Achcar 2013: 53-96;
Taking Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia into consideration, it is therefore possible to deal with countries that followed a rather analogous economic trajectory in the last decades and that show a similar composition in class terms. There are several reasons for this.

First of all, all are non-hydrocarbon exporting countries in which, unlike in many other Arab states, the absence of direct oil revenues means that these cannot be used to provide a valid support for the regime (for a general introduction to the so-called oil curse literature, see Ross (2001: 332-337)). Even more importantly, whilst in several oil-rich countries an aristocracy of labour – which enjoyed comparatively better salaries and social conditions vis-à-vis the working class as a whole – is often present in the extremely remunerative and largely labour-saving hydrocarbon activities, resource-poor countries tend to have a much more homogenous working class.1

Secondly, in the 1980s the three countries were forced to abandon the semi-rentier state that they had developed in the previous years. In Morocco and Tunisia this was largely the effect of the sudden and violent downfall of phosphate prices in the late 1970s, which was not sufficiently compensated by the emergence of the tourism industry or by other rents. In Egypt, on the contrary, the collapse of oil prices on the global markets in 1985-86 pushed down indirect non-taxes revenues (workers remittances, especially from Gulf countries, and Suez Canal tolls, largely dependent on oil-transporting ships), whilst the weakening of the Eastern block and its subsequent collapse decreased the value of Egypt’s geopolitical rent. As soon as 1983, Morocco was the first country in North Africa to embrace an IMF (International Monetary Fund)-sponsored Structural Adjustment Program. Three years later, on the brink of bankruptcy Tunisia was forced on the same route; whereas Mubarak’s Egypt ‘surrendered’ only in 1991. In other words, the three countries were pushed at the forefront of the neoliberal counter-revolution in the region.2

Thirdly, in sharp contrast to the other two countries of the region – that is, Algeria and Libya – manufacturing activities played a crucial role in the Egyptian, Moroccan, and Tunisian economy. On the eve of the Arab uprisings, manufacturing value-added as percentage of GDP ranged from 16 percent in Morocco up to 18 percent in Egypt, with Tunisia exactly in between.3 In particular, low-value added textile and garment activities were decisive in all three countries, remaining the leading employment sector in Morocco and Tunisia throughout the 2000s, and ranking second only to food manufacturing in Egypt. The end of the Multi Fibre Agreement in 2005, which had set quotas on the amount of textiles and garments that countries of the ‘South’ could export to the ‘North’, exposed North African countries to the ferocious competition of cheaper South East Asian products (Hanieh 2013: 58). In turn, this led to massive lay-offs, closures of several no longer competitive enterprises, and a significant downgrade of workers’ wages and conditions.

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1 The presence of a partially favoured layer of workers has been seen by several scholars as a serious hindrance to the development of a radical labour movement. Quite recently, Bellin (2000) has provided an interesting update of this long-established view. Personally, in an article currently under review, I have tried to use the insights developed by the aristocracy of labour literature to explain – together with other factors – why the Algerian uprising in 2011 was limited to marginalized sectors of society, failing to attract workers and being therefore condemned to the defeat.

2 Similarly, it has to be underlined that, compared to Morocco and Tunisia, Egypt had much stronger economic and political relations with the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia.

3 It should be noted that while Libya has historically been a classic example of rentier state with a tiny manufacturing sector, Algeria has gone through a tremendous process of de-industrialization in the 1990s and 2000s.
Fourthly, the programs agreed with the IMF committed the three countries to a set of macroeconomic policies and liberalization measures, as prescribed by the Washington Consensus, which were rather similar among them. Public expenditure was substantially reduced; subsidies on goods and service, including health and education, were curtailed; agricultural rents were liberalized; and state-owned enterprises were listed to be sold (Owen 2004: 115-118). Although in the 1990s, many other Arab countries were involved in adopting similar measures, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia dominated the privatization process. The three countries together, in fact, constituted 97 percent of total revenues from privatization in the region (Hanieh 2013: 49). Throughout the 2000s, the process simply speeded up and the total amount of state divestitures skyrocketed. In conclusion, it seems that Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia share several relevant similarities in their economic structure and social composition, making possible and interesting a comparison among them. Nevertheless, this has (almost) never been the case. The main reason lies in the development of an overwhelming dominant typology in which the region has been split between authoritarian monarchies (the Gulf states, Jordan, and Morocco) and authoritarian republics (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen) (Angrist 2010: 5). More specifically, the two resource-poor monarchies of Morocco and Jordan have been constantly analysed together (Lust-Okar 2004; 2005). The outburst of the Arab uprisings and even more their subsequent developments seemed to largely vindicate this theoretical approach. After all, the downfall of long-lasting dictators was limited to authoritarian republics, whereas authoritarian monarchies were largely bypassed – with the partial and significant exception of Bahrain – by radical protests. As eloquently stated by Yom and Gause III (2012: 74), “the Arab Spring might just as well be called the Arab Republics’ Spring”. Nevertheless, the actual causal mechanism at stake remained highly debatable. The fact that monarchies have been overthrown in the decades that followed the end of World War II throughout the Arab world means that cultural arguments pointing to some kind of natural authority owned by monarchical families, as well as institutional explanations based on a supposed Arab monarchs’ position above the fray of everyday politics are tremendously weak. As shown by some relevant studies, the new ‘monarchical exceptionalism’ rests largely on other elements – the formation of a cross-cutting coalition that buttressed the regime, the

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4 Three important exceptions here are Hanieh (2013: 47-97); Hinnebusch (2015); and Rivetti (2015).
5 In this regard, Israel, Lebanon, and post-2003 Iraq have often been seen as ‘exceptions’.

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economic support of direct or indirect rents, the establishment of hereditary regimes, and the presence of foreign patrons (Yom and Gause III 2012; Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2013). That is, the ‘monarchical exceptionalism’ was not the product of monarchy at all.

4. The role of the working class in Tunisia and Egypt and its nearly non-role in Morocco

In Tunisia, the two decades that preceded Ben Ali’s fall were characterized by a process which has been described by several activists and militants as one of “accumulation of social struggles” (Yousfi 2015: 58).

As shown by the data on the number of strikes provided by International Labour Organization (ILO), these increased from an yearly average of less than 300 episodes between 1996 and 1999 to about 380 from 2000 and 2003, up to more than 400 actions in the period 2004-2007. Moreover, the number of workers involved in strikes skyrocketed, passing from an yearly average of about 30,000 people in 1996-1999 to slightly less than 40,000 in 2000-2003, up to an astonishing 84,300 in 2004-2007. Finally, as underlined by Beinin (2016: 72), throughout the whole period some 40 to 75 percent of the strikes were in manufacturing, suggesting two important considerations. On the one hand, taking into account the already described crucial role of this sector for the Tunisian economy, these workers’ actions posed a serious menace to Ben Ali’s regime and his attempt to promote the country as an ideal outpost for European enterprises in searching of cheap labour and social peace. On the other, since just between 4 and 30 strikes per year were reported in the education, public health, and social work sectors – that is, in the traditional strongholds of the Tunisian labour movement – it is extremely likely that the total number of strikes was actually much greater than reported, showing the extraordinary and long-lasting mobilization of workers in Tunisia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Strikes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>27,751</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>35,683</td>
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<td>1998</td>
<td>277</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>308</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>411</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>380</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>345</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>46,893</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>391</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>466</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>392</td>
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<td>2007</td>
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<td>2010</td>
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Source: Beinin (2016: 72, 127)
Workers’ actions and strikes took place in a context characterized by high regime repression and scarce support from the leadership of the sole legal trade union in the country – that is, the Union Général Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT). As pointed out by Chouikha and Geisser (2010: 417), the historical ambivalent nature of the UGTT – both “bras armé du régime” and real social opposition – was exacerbated in the last decades by two developments. To begin with, after Ben Ali’s ‘medical coup’ in 1987, the UGTT’s leadership pointed to normalize its relation with the regime, restructuring its inner circle, pushing aside several radical militants, and becoming a crucial transitional belt in a rapidly changing neoliberal economic environment (Zemni 2013: 138). Inevitably, pursuing these aims, the UGTT largely lost its capacity to represent workers and became a ‘managerial’ union, which backed Ben Ali’s candidacy without any critique in the four presidential elections held between 1994 and 2009. Secondly, the long history of dissent and
militancy of the UGTT’s local unions, as well as the partial autonomy of some federations and regional branches vis-à-vis the central bureaucracy was kept alive and even strengthened throughout Ben Ali’s regime, determining the emergence of an unprecedented “structural ambivalence” within the UGTT (Chouikha and Geisser 2010: 418). In fact, whilst the major representatives of the unions had been completely co-opted by the regime, the rank-and-file members remained militant and radical, constantly trying to revitalize the whole structure of the UGTT and break its hierarchical structure. The presence of ‘two UGTTs’, which emerged straightforwardly in December 2010-January 2011 uprising, became for the first time easily recognisable after the outburst of the Gafsa basin revolt in the first months of 2008. This was one the most important social struggles in Tunisian history, marking a formidable acceleration in the process that led to Ben Ali’s fall.

The six-month-long popular revolt in the Gafsa basin started as a protest against the fraudulent results of the recruitment of 380 temporary technicians, administrative assistants, and manual workers in the Gafsa Phosphate Company (CPG, the French acronym), evolving into a direct challenge to the regime, which replied with unusual – also for Tunisian standards – brutality. The region of Gafsa, located in the southwest of Tunisia and faraway from the Tunisia of “comfort and development, which covers the coastal areas”, has been dependent on the mining industry since colonial times (Ayeb 2011: 470). In the aftermaths of independence, the four small towns (Redeyef, Oum El Araïes, M’dhilia, and Métlaoui) created ex novo to exploit the richness of the soil enjoyed the full masculine employment granted by the CPG (Allal 2010: 115). However, this policy changed drastically with the implementation of a modernizing plan financed by the World Bank in 1985, which pointed to ‘restructuring’ the enterprise after years of mismanagement and economic losses. In turn, this led to a heavy loss of jobs, which declined from over 14,000 in the 1980s to just around 5,500 in 2007. (Zemni 2013: 129). The lack of other available occupations in a mining region in which agriculture is notoriously arduous for its climate conditions and absence of water determined the pauperization of large echelons of population, with unemployment ranged from 20.9 to 38.5 – that is, more than twice the national average – in the four aforementioned mining towns (Beinin 2016: 85). In this regard, it was not surprisingly that the new recruitment competition announced by the CPG, after six years of no new hiring, was seen by several people in the Gafsa region as an important opportunity. However, the clientelistic and mafia-style way in which the process was conducted, rejecting a previous agreement in which 20 percent of the new positions should have been reserved to qualified locals or children of former employees disabled or deceased due to work incidents, sparked outrage and protests (Allal 2010: 116). The epicentre of the rebellion was Redeyef, in which four UDC (Union des Diplômés Chômeurs) members occupied the UGTT offices as soon as the results of the recruitment process were made public – that is, on January 5, 2008 (Beinin 2016: 86). In the following days, the movement rapidly enlarged to widows of miners killed in work accidents, students, professors, unemployed youth, and also CPG employees (Allal 2010: 110). At the helm of the protests, playing a crucial role in organizing these, there were dissident local UGTT members and militants of the tiny and illegal Parti Communiste des Ouvrier Tunisien (PCOT). On the contrary, Tunis-based intellectuals, representatives of the other opposition parties, and NGOs remained largely silent and
scarcely involved in the events (Chouikha and Geisser 2010: 419). As soon as the revolt gained momentum in April – when for the first time the movement achieved a national character thanks to the march in solidarity with the Gafsa region which took place in the capital – political repression skyrocketed (Beinin 2016: 87-88). Eventually, after six months, three protesters killed, dozens injured, and hundreds arrested, the active movement on the ground was halted (Allal 2010: 107). Nevertheless, as stated by Chouikha and Geisser (2010: 416), underlying the relevance of what had happened there has been “a before and an after Redeyef”.

Two years later the fatal uprising for Ben Ali started in the same geographical context. As widely known, it was Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation, after being humiliated by a policewoman, who stopped him from working as a street fruit vendor, which sparked the protest. The 26-year-old man acted in front of the governor’s office in Sidi Bouzid, the capital of a Gafsa’s neighbouring region, implicitly underlying the political nature of his gesture. Nevertheless, had the UGTT local members failed to immediately organize the self-promoted and spontaneous reaction triggered by Bouazizi’s family and friends, protests would have not spread (Mabrouk 2011: 631). The role played by local union cells in giving a political reading of the events, in supporting a movement which was leaderless, acephalous, and without any clear demand was absolutely crucial (Yousfi 2015: 60-63). For over one week, before spreading throughout the region, protests were limited to Sidi Bouzid. It was the organizational structure provided by militant UGTT sections, the ferocious repression of the police (which shot dead two demonstrators in Menzel Bouzaiane on December 24), and the lawyers’ mobilization (a well-established and long-lasting stronghold of opposition to Ben Ali) which ignited the country and gave a national character to the movement, attracting urban lower and middle classes into the protest (Zemni 2013: 130). As soon as the uprising spread in cities such as Kasserine and Thala, growing in intensity with demonstrators who attacked and ransacked the ruling party local offices, the response of the security forces became ruthless. On January 8 and 9, the police fired on the crowd in Kasserine and Thala, killing dozens of protesters and pushing the movement into direct and total confrontation with the regime. The deployment of the military into the streets, order by a scared Ben Ali, was generally well-welcomed by demonstrators. Yet, the real intentions of the armed forces remained unclear for days. It was the shift in the balance of power between the regime and protesters, rather than the often evoked professionalized character of the army, which explains why, unlike in 1978 and 1984, “the Tunisian military defected” (Brooks 2013). In the development of a such situation, two steps were crucial – that is, the general regional strike in Sfax on January 12 and the apparently moderated two-hour strike in Tunis on January 14. Both of them were organized by the UGTT, after that the National Administrative Committee of the Union recognised the right of local sections to organize peaceful protests on January 11 (Yousfi 2015: 73). This decision was an internal compromise between the militant local cells, which asked for a national general strike, and the central bureau, which remained close and loyal to the regime as eloquently shown by the words pronounced by the UGTT secretary general, Abdessalem Jrad, upon leaving a meeting with Ben Ali on January 12: “I have found that the President of the Republic possesses a profound understanding of the principal problems and their causes” (quoted in Beinin 2016: 105). Nevertheless, the attempt of the UGTT leadership to balance the
two centrifugal forces present in its organization failed miserably. The right granted to regional bodies to organize strikes became, in fact, an unexpected and crucial springboard for the protest movement. In particular, the regional strike in Sfax was a key turning point for, at least, four main reasons. To begin with, although the Tunisian uprising, unlike the Egyptian’s, was characterized by a clear proletarian constituency since its early phases, the strike in Sfax marked the first actual action of workers as a collective body, rather than as mere individuals. Secondly, on the eve of the uprising in the Sfax region there was the highest concentration of manufacturing (especially, agrofood, chemical, and electric firms) of the whole country (Ayadi and Matoussi 2014: 7-11). This datum underlines the crucial role of this region for the Tunisian economy and the disruptive potential of a general strike here. Thirdly, according to union estimates, the strike brought more than 30,000 people to the streets, being backed also by middle class sectors and local businessmen, who were fed up with their marginalization in comparison to the capitalists of Sousse and Monastir (Zemni 2013: 131). In other words, a cross-class coalition took real and concrete form for the first time in this geographical context. Fourthly, what happened in Sfax, as well as in the other two regions where strikes were called by local UGTT sections – that is, Tozeur and Kairouan – profoundly affected the military’s behaviour, which facing the people as an apparently organic and unique body refused to use force against protesters, disobeying to the repeated Ben Ali’s calls to shoot (Brooks 2013: 206). The rupture in the chain of command and the spontaneous withdrawal of the army from the streets on January 13 meant that the autocrat was alone and naked. Yet, he formally remained in power. It was a moderate two-hour regional strike in Great Tunis called by the local UGTT on January 14, and even more its radical developments throughout the day, to force Ben Ali out of power. Significantly, the now famous great manifestation in Habib Bourguiba Avenue, in which workers, urban middle classes, and the youth of peripheral districts marched together beyond the slogan ‘Ben Ali dégage’, started as an UGTT gathering in the square dedicated to Mohamed Ali Hammi – that is, the ‘father’ of the syndicalisme tunisien.

In Egypt, from 1998 to 2010 nearly three million people participated in strikes, sit-ins, demonstrations, and other collective actions in the “longest and strongest wave of worker protest since the late 1940s” (Beinin 2012: 92). A crucial turning point in workers’ mobilizations, which became the most serious menace faced by Hosni Mubarak’s regime, was the strike at Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in the Delta town of Mahalla al-Kubra in December 2006. Although this should not be interpreted as the beginning of the protest wave, there has certainly been a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ Mahalla. There are several reasons for this. To begin with, one fifth of all public sector textile workers were concentrated there in the largest factory of the whole Middle East where 24,000 workers were employed. Secondly, since it was established in 1927, the Misr has been the beating heart of the country, emerging as the litmus test of Egyptian social and political transformations (Beinin and El-Hamalawy 2007). Finally, Mahalla’s events played a “transformative role” in workers’ actions, bringing to an intensification and radicalization of them (Alexander and Bassiouney 2014: 101). The protests in Mahalla erupted as a response to unmet promises. In March 2006, in fact, Prime

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6 This section is adapted from Del Panta (2016: 614-639).
Minister Nazif announced an increase in the annual bonus given to all public workers from 100 Egyptian pounds to two months’ salary. However, when December came, workers found just 89 pounds – that is, the same old 100 pounds less deductions for taxes and social benefits. On December 7, production ceased and the factory was occupied. After four days, a forty-five-day bonus, assurances that the factory would not be privatized, and a promise that in case of profits higher than 60 million pounds 10 percent of these would be distributed to workers were granted by the government (Beinin 2016: 76). This victory galvanized workers in the textile sector and in the following three months about 30,000 of them in a dozen textile mills in the Nile Delta and Alexandria took part in several different forms of protest (Beinin and El-Hamalawy 2007).

As stated before, Mahalla was not the starting point of the long labour protest wave. From 1998 to 2003 there was an average of 118 contentious collective actions per year, marking a significant increase from what had happened in the previous cycles of protests. Then, in 2004 alone – the year in which Ahmed Nazif’s businessmen government was appointed – there were 265 episodes of workers’ disturbances.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Actions</th>
<th>Alternative Number of Actions</th>
<th>Workers Involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>115**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>164</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>102*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>132*</td>
<td>138**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>96</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>266</td>
<td></td>
<td>386,346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>202</td>
<td></td>
<td>141,175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>222</td>
<td></td>
<td>198,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>692*</td>
<td>474,838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>447*</td>
<td>541,423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>478*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>530*</td>
<td>530**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Beinin (2016: 66); * Abdelrahman (2015: 57); ** Alexander and Bassiouny (2014: 108)
However, not only did workers’ actions skyrocket in number and assume a more militant character, but they also spread to the private sector that until 2004 had remained substantially untouched. In this regard, the strike at the ESCO Spinning Company in Qalyub, north of Cairo, and the mobilization at the Ora-Misr Company were paradigmatic (Beinin 2013: 191-192).

TABLE 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector/Year</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public sector</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector action as % of total actions</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Coming back to Mahalla, the December 2006 strike did not wear out workers’ protests, which erupted again in September 2007, when the promises made at the end of the previous agitation regarding the payment of an extra bonus in case of company’s massive profits went once more unmet. The strike lasted six days and resulted in a new and complete victory for workers that went far beyond the relevant economic gains acquired. In fact, CEO Mahmud al-Gibali was dismissed and President of the GFETU (General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions), Hussein Megawer, together with government representatives were forced to negotiate with the strike committee. It has to be underlined here, in sharp contrast to Tunisia, that Egyptian workers completely failed to use the lowest level of the GFETU structures – that is, workplace union committees – to mobilize any resource of the organization in their favour, being unable therefore to propel the GFETU into direct conflict with the state (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 139-142). Stimulated by these
events the strike committee at Mahalla proposed a national labour strike day on April 6 in order to advance the new great rallying cry of the working class: a monthly minimum wage of 1,200 Egyptian pounds – that is, eight times more than the prevailing basic salary. The effort was huge but the national strike was a fiasco. Not only coordination among Delta area workers was too feeble to self-organize a similar protest, but also the regime’s response was ruthless, deeming the link between labour grievances and national mobilization as an impassable red line. The strategy of ‘the carrot and the stick’ was successful, and on April 6 in Mahalla, as well as elsewhere in the Nile Delta, workers remained silent. However, the city was rocked by two days of furious confrontation between angry demonstrators, who were protesting against the high prices of unsubsidized food items, and security forces. The level of repression was exceptional: 331 people were arrested, 9 seriously wounded, several workers transferred, twenty-two of them sentenced to 3-5-year jail terms, and a fifteen-year-old boy was shot dead (Beinin 2013: 199). Despite the failure to stage a national strike, through their direct and indirect action workers were able to pose a new and serious menace to the regime.

All these events showed that, by the end of 2007, the soil had been ploughed and the blossom of the first independent union in Egyptian republican history seemed close to be achieved. With great surprise, however, this was not the achievement of militant textile workers, but the result of the mobilization of traditionally pro-regime clerical workers. The trigger of the protest was a salary disparity between the municipal tax assessors and central government workers. The mobilization started in the fall of 2007 and gained momentum at the end of the year when an eleven-day massive occupation of the street, in front of the Ministry of Finance building with more than three thousands workers, took place (Beinin 2012: 103). Eventually, tax assessors employed by local authorities won a 325 percent wage increase and, building on this success, the strike committee spent the following year organizing an independent union, which became known as the Real Estate Tax Authorities Union (RETAU). By December 2008 the permanent committee had already recruited nearly 30,000 workers across all twenty-nine Egyptian governorates (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 168). Then, with a completely unexpected movement, the Ministry of Manpower and Migration recognized the union in April 2009, ratifying both on a symbolic and effective ground the dismissal of the corporative bargain.

Although workers were crucial in paving the way to Tahrir, they did not play any role in preparing and organizing the ‘Day of Rage’ on January 25, bringing many scholars to conclude that workers were uninfluential during the now famous eighteen days. As far as this article is concerned, this was not the case at all. A crucial element that has to be taken into account here is the government’s decision to close down from January 28 to February 5 all public sector enterprises in a desperate and vain attempt to weaken protests. For sure, this had a tremendous impact on the capacities of mobilization of workers, who acted more as individuals rather than as a collective actor (De Smet 2015: 346). In the first part of the uprising, the role of workers should be neither overlooked nor overestimated. It was important for three main reasons. First of all, workers were certainly at the forefront in all the manifestations that took place in the Delta cities, as well as in those Cairo suburbs and working class neighbourhoods where the ‘soul’ of the uprising has to be found.
Revolts in Suez led by workers, for instance, turned immediately violent on January 25, when police stations and NDP headquarters were attacked. Besides, in this city the fire of protest was kept alive in the following two days, whilst downtown Cairo was strictly checked by security forces. It was in Suez that shipyard workers went on strike as early as January 26 and 27 (Beinin 2016: 108). Secondly, on February 2 workers did not answer to the GFETU call to mobilize for the regime. The plan prepared by the dominant elite to weaken the protest movement was based on two elements. On the one hand, there was the intention to clean up Tahrir through the recruitment of thugs. On the other, the mobilization of workers was supposed to show the presence of sectors still loyal to Mubarak, delegitimizing in this way the opposition. However, the plan failed miserably. Not only protesters who had erected barricades in the square held on in the ‘Battle of the Camel’, but also the rally organized by President Megawer and other GFETU bureaucrats found simply no positive answers. Finally, workers were physically present as both individuals and groups – as testified by the establishment of the founding committee of the EFITU (Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions) on January 30 – in Tahrir Square. This means that the middle class was not alone in revolting against Mubarak’s regime, bringing to the implicit formation of a broad coalition that the military – who was deployed to the streets on January 28 after that the police had been over-numbered and defeated by demonstrators – was unwilling to repress.

The military’s behaviour during the uprising has spread fierce debates. For sure, up to February 10, when the SCAF convened without President Hosni Mubarak and issued its first communiqué, through which it announced that it would remain in permanent session, the military’s position remained ambiguous. As underlined by Brownlee (2012: 145), Mubarak’s regime was the military’s first option, although the armed forces refused to do the dirty work to keep this in power. The military gave the presidential circle the full opportunity to manage the crisis through its own tools. It was Mubarak’s failure to manage the crisis that brought to the astonishing military’s decision that he had to leave office. A decision not so much dictated by the occupation of a square in central Cairo, but rather related to the astonishing wave of strikes that hit the country since February 6 – that is, after that public enterprises were re-opened. The decision was a mixture of government’s economic necessity to do so, as well as an attempt to show that the situation was under control and normalization was on the way. The result was certainly something not expected by the dominant elite. The first strikes took place on February 6 and 7. These were simply the initial signs of the coming seismic shift in the balance of power. By the end of the week about 300,000 workers all around the country had been involved in a form or another of collective action (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 200). Steel and fertilizer workers in Suez immediately occupied their workplaces, while the vital activities of the Canal were disturbed by workers’ agitations, including the open-ended strike proclaimed by four subsidiary companies. This first wave was immediately followed by an even more radical and vast-spread one. Workers’ protests reached textile plants in Mahalla al-Kubra and Kafr al-Dawwar, as well as steel and iron factories in Helwan. Likewise, thousands of employees of Telecom Egypt asked for the resignation of the top manager and a 10-percent pay rise (De Smet 2016: 195). The petroleum sector, with the workers’ agitation that travelled from Suez to Ismailia, up to Port Said, was completely paralyzed; whilst the strike proclaimed by the Cairo and
Alexandria public transport workers made it difficult to get around the two main cities of the country. Medical doctors joined the fray too, staging sit-ins and protests in front of public hospitals. Even more significantly, military-run factories, which represent a significant, although complicated to assess, part of the Egyptian economy, were in ferment as well. The fact that conscripts, used as manpower, and ‘normal’ workers as well broke the strict discipline imposed by the military in their own economic complex was a clear sign that the established procedures and hierarchies were crumbling. In short, this tremendous wave of strikes and protests posed a serious threat to the existing order and made clear that a solution was needed. Eventually, the growing social soul of the protest forced the military to take the lead, with the precise aim of deflecting the uprising itself (De Smet 2016: 205). The pharaoh-turned-lame-duck had to leave.

In Morocco, the historical track record of workers’ mobilizations is largely a history of absence throughout the 2000s. The first important clue of the weakness of the labour movement in this country is therefore the lack of any empirical and well-documented analysis on the subject. Not only, in fact, the ILO does not provide any datum to assess the number of workers’ strikes in the pre-uprising decade, but also academic studies focused on the Moroccan labour movement have been scarce. To be clear: this does not mean that neoliberal policies, carried out since the early 1980s, have not been challenged by socio-economic protests over the past decades. On the contrary, a constant increase in mobilization against the consequences of neoliberal reforms has taken place in Morocco, especially in the 2000s (Bogaert 2015: 125). Moreover, the strengthening in the process of political liberalization and opening after that Muhammad VI had succeeded his father, King Hassan II, in 1999 determined a rather effervescent political scenario, in which several movements – especially inspired by transnational issues, such as the second Palestinian Intifada or the US-led invasion of Iraq – blossomed (Molina 2011: 436). Nevertheless, labour-based protests have been largely absent from the picture, only gaining momentum in the months immediately before the uprising. In this regard, the interplay between democratic mobilizations and socio-economic protests, which eventually fused in the mass strike both in Egypt and Tunisia was much weaker in Morocco. There are two main reasons for this. To begin with, the process of accumulation of anti-regime energies did not take advantage of any transformative event as was the case in Egypt with the great strike in Mahalla al-Kubra and in Tunisia with the six-month-long popular revolt in Gafsa. Secondly, the considerable increase in socio-economic protests since 2005 was almost exclusively concentrated in small villages and in the so-called Maroc inutile, being largely determined by the long-lasting uneven development within the country itself (Bennafla and Emperador 2010: 73-78). Although some of the protests evolved into conflictual social movements, the bulk of these was spontaneous and remained temporary. Moreover, and in sharp contrast to what happened in the Gafsa basin, trade union activists were not at the helm of marches and sit-ins in small towns such as Sidi Ifni and Bouarfa, where protests against rises in the subsidised price of bread or degradation of public services was led by ‘political’ militants and unemployed graduates (Bogaert 2015: 132). This was not only the effect of a moderate approach adopted by the leadership of the main trade unions after that the leader of the left-leaning USFP (Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires), Abderrahmane Youssoufifi, took government
responsibilities in 1998, but also a consequence of the extremely high fragmentation of the trade union environment – there are more than 20 official trade unions in Morocco, which represented less than 6 percent of the working class (Zemni, De Smet, and Bogaert 2013: 899). This quite uncommon – for regional standards – freedom of association, in turn, pushed many radical labour activists to join small and scarcely influential organizations rather than try to revitalize some of the main trade unions of the country, making difficult to achieve a critical mass sufficiently great to link workers, students, and the unemployed.

However, as noticed by Buehler (2015: 98), in the first eight months of 2010 over 18,453 workers in 139 different public offices mobilised, determining an increase of labour strikes by eight per cent nationwide. Moreover, this first wave of workers’ protests anticipated more significant mobilizations in the following weeks. Taking inspiration from the ongoing Tunisian protests and reacting to the constant refusal of the Moroccan government to increase wages – also after that a couple of important mobilizations had been staged in October and November – the trade unions organized public workers for a 72-hour strike between January 8 and 10, 2011. Over 80 percent of public workers joined the strike, whereas in Sidi Ifni and Safi strike participation was even higher, reaching, respectively, 95 and 90 percent of public employees (Ibid.).

As soon as protests coordinated by the country’s youth movement, sprang up across the whole country on February 20, Morocco’s trade unions endorsed the demonstrations. Even more importantly, the following day, unemployed youth from the mining region of Khouribga, characterized by a history of struggles and radical actions, set up an encampment in front of the local administration of the state-owned phosphate monopoly, Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP) (Bogaert 2015: 125). Violent clashes burned up when the police tried to forcibly break up the camp, which had been renamed ‘Employment Square’ on March 15, spreading social tension to the neighbouring areas. Likewise, despite that the government immediately announced that state-labour negotiations would be opened, union protests peaked at the end of March, when teachers organised “the largest teachers’ protest in Moroccan history” (Buehler 2015: 100).

Nevertheless, these initial protests never developed into a radical uprising. As explained by many scholars, pre-emptive actions taken by the regime, especially socio-economic measures; intensified contact with all the relevant political and social actors; acute media campaigns to discredit the challengers; a rather moderate intervention of the security forces, especially during the first weeks and in the main urban environments; the launching of the constitutional reform process; and the specific institutional setting of the country prevented the spill-over of the 20 February movement into a cross-class uprising, making the movement vulnerable to the palace’s reform responses (Molina 2011: 437-440; Benchemsi 2012: 58; Kohstall 2015: 69). Several of these elements were also used by the regime to weaken the labour movement. After having menaced a general strike, Morocco’s five main unions accepted the quite generous concessions made by the government, deflecting in this way the growing social soul of the protests (Buehler 2015: 101). Similarly, the attempt to soften the protests and riots that occurred between February and August 2011 in the mining region of Khouribga and in other sites, such as Safi where unemployed youth blocked the transport of phosphate from and to the local chemical processing company, led the OCP to launch an impressive investment programme through which its workforce – which had shrunk over the years from 40,000 to fewer than
20,000 – would be significantly increased thanks to 5,800 new recruits (Bogaert 2015: 135). The gigantic spending program put in place by the kingdom has been successful in allowing Muhammad VI’s regime to weather the storm of the Arab uprisings. Yet, given that Morocco is not-oil rich, and its economy is largely dependent on volatile sources – workers’ remittances; foreign investment; tourism; and the like – it remains unsustainable in the medium term. As soon as budget cuts will arrive, it is likely that a new round of popular mobilization might emerge. After all, it seems that there is nothing of exceptional in Moroccan monarchy.

5. Conclusion
As underlined by Raymond Hinnebusch (2015: 22), “the neoliberalism that helped provoke the Arab uprising had actually been more damaging in Morocco than in the republics [Egypt and Tunisia]: its starting point was a more unequal society that only got more unequal”. The relative moderate protests in Muhammad VI’s kingdom and the ability of his regime to quell them have often been explained pointing to the specific institutional environment present in Morocco. Do not get me wrong, there is of true here. Yet, focusing simply on the weakness of the 20 February movement – that is, on the ‘political’ wing of the protest – the lack of a radical and militant labour movement – that is, the ‘economic’ wing of the protest – has been constantly overlooked. This article, providing a comparison among three North African countries heavily hit by neoliberal reforms, has shown that the role of the working class in a successful uprising is crucial. To be more precise, the uprising – or the mass strike, using Luxemburg’s words – is the unity of the preceding separated ‘economic’ and ‘political’ struggles. If the 20 February movement remained moderate in its requests, failing to address the monarchical form of the state and the position of Muhammad VI as a monarch, this was also the effect of the absence of a reciprocal strengthening between the two ‘wings’ of the protest movement. Unfortunately, only a few interesting studies have been dedicated to the rather docile posture of Moroccan workers throughout the 2000s, leaving open the question why this was the case. Far from providing an exhaustive explanation, this analysis has proposed some new insights.

Besides, this article has also tried to highlight another important theoretical aspect. It is certainly true that the working class cannot play a direct and proactive role in building up a new order without operating through its own organizations – that is, trade unions and labour parties. However, when the focus is turned on the process of challenging and defeating the previous existing procedures and institutions, workers can be instrumentally decisive acting either through loosely organized and scarcely centralized networks (as shown by the Egyptian case) or through mass-based labour organizations (as testified by the Tunisian events). In this regard, this article suggests that workers might have played a much more relevant role in several political transformations than has been generally assessed by previous studies. Arguably, this could be a good starting point for further analyses.
References


