

Algeria's Trade Unions: A History

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Algerian workers had their first experiences of trade unions during the colonial period, under the aegis of the French unions established in Algeria, and amongst émigré workers in France.

The first General Confederation of Labour (CGT) trade union sections in Algeria were created from 1898, exclusively for the benefit of the settlers, because the Indigenous Code in force prohibited Algerians from joining any association or organisation.

Not being subject to this Indigenous Code in metropolitan France, Algerian workers increasingly joined the CGT.

Many union leaders emerged from this working-class population, essentially made up of industrial workers, and union action was thus strengthened despite the fact of colonialism. The arrival of the Popular Front in power in France and the repeal of the Code strengthened union action to the benefit of indigenous workers in Algeria.

The latter joined the CGT in force, and the CGT Algiers section grew to a record number of over 250,000 members.

However, with the end of the Second World War and the tragic events of May 8, 1945 (where tens of thousands of Algerian civilians were massacred by French colonial authorities and settler militias), which the CGT had been careful not to condemn openly, a break with the French unions occurred.

Within the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (MTLD) thoughts moved towards the need to found an Algerian national trade union, and the CGT Algiers membership dropped to 80,000.

A few years later, losing momentum in Algeria, the CGT decided to create an Algerian trade union organisation, with an Algerian leadership, with the creation in June 1954 of the General Union of Algerian Trade Unions (UGSA), which now demanded equal rights between Algerian and French workers.

After the start of the revolution the UGSA adopted nationalist revolutionary demands, realizing that the problem was not only economic and social, but political. In retaliation, Governor General Robert Lacoste dissolved the UGSA in 1956.

The outbreak of the revolution of November 1, 1954 also revealed big disagreements within the national movement, disagreements which extended into the union field.

The Messalists (followers of Messali El Hadj, considered the father of Algerian nationalism) created the Union of Algerian Workers (USTA) on February 20, 1956, followed four days later by the National Liberation Front (FLN) which announced the creation of the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA).

The history of the Algerian postindependence trade union movement is intimately linked to that of the UGTA. Born during the Algerian revolution to mobilise workers for the national cause under the political leadership of the FLN, the UGTA had a nationalist identity more than a class identity.

In the aftermath of independence, it sought to maintain its autonomy vis-à-vis the state and the power struggles of the time, while supporting official social and economic measures. But at the 1969 Congress, the government forcibly parachuted in a leadership and annexed the national union to the party-state, making it an official "mass organisation".

The UGTA became the privileged instrument of the regime to carry out its various political campaigns. Many union leaders were co-opted to become state and party officials.

However, this takeover did not prevent workers from carrying out major strikes in the years 1977 to 1982 and winning victories. But the state intervened to put an end to this rise in struggle which also called into question the power of the bureaucracy and the single party.

It instituted the famous articles 120 and 121, which required prior membership of the party to access positions of responsibility at the level of the state apparatus and mass organisations. Admittedly, the adoption of these two articles in the early 1980s contributed to the weakening of the national union and several officials were ejected, including the communists.

However, workers' strikes were on the rise, especially as the country was heading for a deep economic and social crisis around the mid-1980s. The period 1983-1986 saw 3,528 strikes in the public sector, against 2,298 in the private sector, a total of 5,826 strikes combined.

Timeline

1954 - Algerian War of Independence launched by the FLN (National Liberation Front) on 1 November.

1962 - Algeria wins its independence.

1963 - Ahmed Ben Bella elected as the first president of Algeria.

1965 - Colonel Houari Boumedienne overthrows Ben Bella, establishing a military one-party regime (the FLN).

1988 - Widespread rioting takes place against austerity and food shortages.

1989 - New political parties are allowed, including the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front).

1991 - The FIS wins the first round of the general elections, and looks certain to win the second round.

1992 - The Army cancels the second round of elections and declares a state of emergency. Ten years of civil war follow.

1999 - Abdelaziz Bouteflika elected president after all opposition candidates withdraw, claiming vote rigging

The workers' strikes of 1988, which led to the bloody revolts of October and the advent of union pluralism, fundamentally changed the Algerian union scene. Far from becoming autonomous, the national union maintained its course and became increasingly bureaucratic.

Over the years, the UGTA turned its back on the aspirations of workers and supported the economic policies of successive governments. Any attempt at workers' resistance was systematically repressed by the union bureaucracy.

The promulgation of Law 90-14 in 1990 allowed trade union pluralism. As a result, around fifty autonomous unions were created, thus transforming the trade union structure in Algeria. Almost all of these unions were established in the public sector. This pluralism benefited officials and civil/public servants rather than industrial workers.

Public servants took advantage of pluralism to form autonomous unions and leave the structures of the UGTA in which they no longer felt at home. In fact the proliferation of these so-called "autonomous" unions also expressed the tendency of these middle classes wishing to renegotiate their status in the face of the structural adjustment plans imposed by the IMF on the one hand, and the lack of freedom within the historical national union (UGTA) on the other.

In fact, the various battles fought by these "white collar" unions have been suppressed by UGTA's bureaucracy, particularly in the national education sector. These organisations have shown great union fighting spirit in recent years, around issues of wages, status and the defense of union freedom.

Since the legalisation of trade union pluralism, Algeria has some 70 autonomous professional unions, divided between the public and private sectors, in addition to the employers' confederations.

On the economic and social scene three actors make up the tripartite social dialogue in Algeria: the government, the bosses and the union social partner represented only by the UGTA, excluding the autonomous trade union formations.

Indeed, the emergence of autonomous unions has affected the balance of power, since government circles had become used to deciding for workers and their union representatives.

Despite trade union pluralism, the UGTA has preserved its exclusive advantages, including participation in the board meetings of social organisations. The state, which has recognised the right to create autonomous unions, has continued to exclude them and impose the UGTA as the sole representative of workers during the tripartite social dialogues.

Despite the promulgation of the constitution of February 23, 1989 which enshrines political, civil society and union pluralism, the authorities have for years categorically refused any request for the approval of certain autonomous unions or the building of union confederations, thus violating existing laws and international conventions. Dozens of unions have emerged and received approval, with no notable change in the treatment of union work by public authorities and employers.

Many unions still complain about obstacles to the free exercise of the right to organise and the repression and the criminalisation of trade union action. For years, the government and the employers have used an abuse of justice to break up strikes and protest movements of employees.

A phenomenon that has become recurrent in all sectors of activity, not only the autonomous unions but also certain combative sectors of the UGTA, is that in several cases they are victims of legal proceedings, suspensions or unfair dismissal.

This practice has become "structural" among public authorities and employers (public and private). The private sector does not recognise union work, or the union as a partner. It is as if Algeria were returning to an era of savage capitalism, and in some cases a tacit alliance between private employers and the state regarding certain anti-union practices.

In addition to this arsenal, the government has resorted to the “cloning” of unions in order to create confusion and splits and thus put a brake on the organisational strategy and independence of the functioning of these unions. This “cloning” has allowed the creation of “puppet” unions prepared to support the government and abandon workers’ demands.

Within the UGTA, when a federation or a company trade union becomes troublesome, a reorganisation of leadership takes place or recourse is made to the iron hand of the trade union bureaucracy. Several union leaders have been prosecuted, even expelled from the union for having organised protests or made a speech which did not follow the line of the UGTA leadership.

It is true that social laws require the state as employer to open the doors of social dialogue in all socio-professional conflicts.

However, on the ground, autonomous unions have major difficulties in getting involved, especially during the annual tripartite social dialogue. The state still continues to privilege the relationship with the UGTA. This is one way to prevent union pluralism from taking shape and capitalising on its achievements.

The management of conflicts with the world of labour or negotiation depends in reality on the balance of power on the ground and on the capacity of union actors to mobilise workers in the sector to which they belong.

In fact, the attitude of the public authorities on this question is to proceed first by the threat of sanction, disinformation and then negotiation. But in sectoral negotiation, so far, the autonomous unions have not been invited to participate in the tripartite negotiations that the government organises annually.

Only the UGTA and the employers’ organisations are admitted to these private meetings. Yet the representativeness of the autonomous trade unions is self-evident, particularly in the public service sector which has millions of employees.

The latest release from the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, which invites all union organisations to submit the information needed to assess the representativeness of their union organisation, is part of this exclusionary approach. Besides, certain ministries continue to receive union delegates from their respective departments, notably in national education and public health.

This state of affairs shows once again that the public authorities do not want a “partner” union, but union structures serving the politico-economic choices advocated by the state at central level. Thus, any hint of union autonomy or questioning, even partial, of these political choices is resisted.

The financial upturn in the 2000s represented a major turning point and opened a long cycle of union protests that affected all sectors of activity. Wage demands were the common factor and the trigger for these protest movements, particularly from 2002-2003. Despite the intensity of union struggles, they remained defensive in nature.

In March 2002, the hydrocarbon sector was paralysed by a strike of UGTA members against the liberal project concerning an amendment to the hydrocarbon law (Khelil Law) which was pro-business and pro-privatisation. Subsequently, a general strike in 2003 further paralysed the country, with the call by the UGTA leadership for the rejection of the hydrocarbons bill and a program of privatisation.

The refusal of the National Federation of Education Workers (FNTE-UGTA) to respond positively in 2002 to the will of its union base to carry out a fight to the end, around their claims concerning the

system of allowances and bonuses, led the workers of the sector to engage in struggle in 2003, outside the UGTA.

Three general strikes by secondary school teachers were launched by the Coordination of Algiers High Schools (CLA) which declared a general strike from May 17 to June 25, 2003.

Frozen due to the earthquake that struck the Boumerdes region in May 2003, this strike movement resumed at a national level, this time at the joint call of the CLA and the National Autonomous Council of Teachers of Secondary and Technical Education (CNAPEST) on September 27, 28 and 29 of the same year.

The teachers demanded a 100 percent increase in their salaries, a revaluation of the salary scales, the creation of permanent posts and retirement after 25 years of effective service. This fight lasted three months and ended with a considerable achievement at the time, namely a 30 per cent salary increase. Faced with government threats of being struck off, several education unions affiliated to the UGTA threatened to go on strike if the government carried out its threats against striking teachers affiliated to the CLA and CNAPEST.

On the UGTA side, several strikes were carried out in the Autumn of 2003 and then in 2005 and 2010 by workers in the economic sector: ports, customs, SNTF (rail), SNVI (trucks and buses) and brick factories, to demand wage increases and defense of their industries

These strike movements were generally launched without the approval of the leadership of the UGTA, especially after the signing of the economic and social pact between the UGTA and the Algerian Government in 2006, which had instituted a four-year social truce. The signing of this pact did not prevent certain combative sectors of the UGTA from waging major union struggles, such as in the industrial zone of Rouiba, which has so far maintained a certain fighting spirit.

This stage was also marked by the struggles of civil servants who were at the forefront and which gradually expanded, despite the various economic and social pacts signed between the Government, the UGTA and the employers' federations, in all public service sectors: education, health, public administration, civil protection, veterinary surgeons...

In 2011, in the wake of the revolutionary process in the Arab world, the country experienced an extension of the struggles of workers affecting several sectors of the country's activity: resident physicians, general practitioners and public health specialists, psychologists, midwives, nurses, teachers, educational assistants, public service workers, postal workers, railway workers, oil workers, steel workers, dockers, lawyers and clerks, municipal guards, radio journalists, Air Algérie airline crew, national education workers, customs, banks etc.

The main common demand remained a salary increase and the adoption of a specific status. However, this dynamic weakened in the second half of 2011, but rebounded in 2016 with another round of union protests and major demonstrations, such as the May 1st march in the city of Béjaïa, in the northeast of the country.

We can say that from 2002 to the present day, autonomous unions have gained visibility and representativeness in other socio-professional categories, as was the case in national education, following the cyclical strikes of 2003 and 2007.

These unions have in fact recorded a very large number of workers joining. We have thus noted that the autonomous sectoral unions representing the middle strata adopted radical discourse and means of struggle worthy of the proletarian workers' struggles.

The proletarianisation of intellectual work as well as the changes in power alliances which have been increasingly based on parasitic classes, have pushed this social class towards more radicalism, including among university teachers.

The process of going beyond sectoral unionism took time to materialise on the ground. Autonomous unions have come a long way since the experience of the National Committee of Trade Union Freedoms (CNLS) in 2004, a grouping of autonomous unions that has operated with the aim of defending union freedoms in Algeria.

There have been several attempts to organise unions in order to set up sectoral union coordinations or union confederations, but these experiences did not last because of certain administrative blockages and certain trade unionists' desire for leadership.

However, in recent years, there has been a qualitative advance in the demands in the autonomous unions. They have challenged the finance laws, rejected the undermining of Algerian workers' achievements in terms of retirement, and denounced the preliminary draft of the Labour Code. They have moved on from just bonus claims for this or that sector. This development has accelerated another process, that of creating a unity around a new union confederation in Algeria in 2018.

The Confederation of Algerian Trade Unions (CSA) brings together 13 autonomous unions from different sectors, including five unions in the education sector. These are: The National Autonomous Council of Teachers of Secondary and Technical Education (CNAPEST), the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), the National Autonomous Syndicate of Secondary and Technical Teachers (SNAPEST), the Council of Algerian High Schools (CLA) and the National Union of Workers in Education and Training (SATEF).

The CSA is also composed of the National Union of Public Health Practitioners (SNPSP), the National Union of Veterinarians, the National Council of Higher Education Teachers (CNES), the National Union of Vocational Training Workers (SNTFP), the Union of Postal Workers, the National Union of Aircraft Maintenance Technicians (SNTMA) and the National Union of Imams.

Indeed, this Confederation is the result of lengthy solidarity work between the member unions. The process dates back to the beginning of 2010, when several united actions took place on the ground, including strikes, marches and rallies.

For the moment, this Confederation brings together only the leadership of the 13 unions which make it up, in a pyramidal structure. Regional meetings have been held in several Wilayas (regions) across the country to consolidate the construction of the Trade Union Confederation.

This will be laborious because of certain objective constraints, notably the internal struggles between union leaders at the national and local levels. In fact, this bureaucratic phenomenon affects not only the UGTA but also the autonomous unions. If not contained, this bureaucracy could be a brake on the enlargement of the Confederation.

Translated by Shelagh Smith

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