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## **THE FATE OF LABOR AFTER REGIME CHANGE:**

### **Lessons From Post-Communist Poland and Post-Apartheid South Africa For Tunisia's Nobel-Prize Winning Unions**

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#### Abstract

Wherever labor has played a significant role in bringing about regime change, there may be opportunities to join in the post-authoritarian ruling coalition in the hopes of consolidating its influence. This article examines the long-term risks and unanticipated consequences of giving in to this temptation by comparing post-communist Poland and post-apartheid South Africa, where the leading trade union federations became weaker and more divided as their political allies pushed forward with economic liberalization. Tunisia's trade unions, awarded the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize for their contribution to a stable transition after the "Arab Spring," face the risk of going down the same path should they continue to view themselves as partners of the new governing elite, which has already signaled its intention of pursuing further liberalization.

#### Keywords

labor, neoliberalism, Poland, regime change, South Africa, trade unions, Tunisia

An alliance of Tunisian workers, employers, lawyers and activists won the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday, a decision meant to honor the quest for democracy in the nation that gave birth to the Arab Spring .... The heavyweight in the quartet was the UGTT: the Tunisian General Labor Union, which wielded enormous power to call general strikes and enjoyed broad credibility in Tunisian society. -- *The Washington Post*, October 9, 2015

An ANC-Communist party leadership eager to assume political office (myself no less than others) readily accepted this devil's pact, only to be damned in the process. It has bequeathed an economy so tied in to the neoliberal global formula and market fundamentalism that there is very little room to alleviate the plight of most of our people. -- Ronnie Kasrils (2013), former ANC official and Minister of Intelligence, 2004-2008.

Isn't it a blight on postcommunist democratization that the chief losers were those who made the transformation possible? That those whose solidarity strikes had helped make capitalist democracy possible would soon find themselves working in firms whose managers tolerated neither unions nor collective bargaining, or perhaps working as 'independent contractors' without benefits ... and subject to dismissal at any time?" -- David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity* (2005, 17)

## I. Introduction

Organized labor has been experiencing mounting challenges everywhere around the world for at least a quarter century. Across post-industrial capitalist countries, the steady decline in union membership and density has been accelerating at least since the 1980s (Kapstein 1999; Schmidt 2008; Scruggs and Lange 2002; Visser 2006). In post-socialist and developing countries, even where union membership has grown, what influence and status organized labor once enjoyed as a social partner of developmental states has been eroded by the widespread adoption of structural adjustment policies and the privatization of state enterprises (Candland and Sil 2001; Greider 1997; Jose 2004; Seidman 2004; Sil 2003). Yet, these shifts do not account for the possible impact of regime change, particularly where the fall of authoritarian rulers has been hastened by working-class mobilization and has created new openings for labor incorporation in post-authoritarian settings (Caraway, Cook and Crowley 2015).

Earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, primarily in the European context, labor's participation in democratizing movements empowered leading trade unions to form coalitions with left-of-center parties in return for benefits for the working class (e.g. Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992). In the post-Cold War era, however, the political opportunities available to labor in the wake of democratic transitions it helped engineer (e.g. Collier 1999; Caraway, Cook and Crowley 2015; Seidman 1994) have been accompanied by competitive pressures on the new governing elites to embrace neoliberal reforms – including austerity and labor flexibilization (e.g. Kapstein 1999; Sil 2003). Within this context, it may well be possible for unions to play a constructive role in the new regime in pursuit of what Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (1996) have called "labor-backed adjustment." This prospect, however, must be weighed against the pitfalls of forging too tight a connection between organized labor and the new ruling elite – a connection that potentially compromises trade unions' ability to generate concerted labor action and build sustained pressure on new state and business elites.

In this article, we explore this dilemma by comparing two important historical cases - Poland after the fall of communism in 1989 and South Africa after the end of apartheid in 1994 – and distilling some cautionary notes about the challenges facing Tunisia's Nobel-prize winning trade unions after the so-called "Arab Spring." In Poland and South Africa, even though labor played a much lauded role in undermining the old regime, it was subsequently unable to leverage its alliances with the reformists in the new government to protect jobs and wages in the face of pressures for liberalization and flexibilization. Worse, over time, trade unions increasingly faced more centrifugal pressures as affiliates in different sectors had different thresholds at which they would be willing to criticize their political allies – a dynamic that ultimately led to further splintering of the labor movement. In both countries, the leading forces in the labor movement seem to have fallen into the trap of over-investing in partnering with the new ruling elites following the unseating of the old regime. In the process, however, trade unions were unable to protect their rank-and-file members amid the governing elites' embrace of neoliberal policies being encouraged by foreign investors and international financial institutions. It is still too early to make any definitive assessments of the fate awaiting Tunisia's main labor federation, the UGTT (the French acronym for the General Labor Union of Tunisia). On the one hand, the labor federation was recognized with a Nobel Prize in 2015 for its efforts to end political crises and stabilize the new regime following the toppling of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. On the other hand, UGTT is already facing a starker choice: either maintain its cooperative links with the current rulers even as they seek to impose austerity and liberalize the economy – or adopt a more militant posture to block these moves and protect the jobs and wages of its members.

In the paired comparison of our two historical cases, we are consciously selecting on the dependent variable. As Collier, Mahoney and Seawright (2004) note, no-variance designs can be useful so long as the objective is not to test hypotheses or generate a general explanatory model. Here, our modest ambition is to offer "parallel demonstrations" (Skocpol and Somers 1980) across two distinct episodes separated in time and space to illuminate the challenges that may be hidden from view when unions that helped to topple an old regime subsequently seek to act as allies or partners of the new governing coalition. Where unions leverage their initial influence into a close connection to the ruling elite, at

best they deliver short-lived pyrrhic victories while (unwittingly) eroding the assertiveness of organized labor in relation to more fundamental issues such as job security, wage levels, or labor rights. We are not suggesting that all pathways involving labor joining a post-authoritarian regime must end in this way. There is, however, a cautionary tale to be extracted from the experiences of post-communist Poland and post-apartheid South Africa for the "Arab Spring," at least in countries like Tunisia, where trade unions helped to topple and old autocratic regime and subsequently faced critical choice as to whether to join the new ruling coalition. The following three sections focus on each of the three cases we examine, Poland, South Africa and Tunisia. The conclusion takes note of the limitations of the comparative study, while laying out some general propositions worth exploring further.

## II. Solidarity in Poland: Anti-Communist Resistance to Enabler of Shock Therapy

Many find it puzzling that trade unions in post-communist countries proved to be weak and passive, despite the greater scope for independent labor mobilization and the concerted effort to establish tripartite institutions. In explaining this outcome, some have stressed the role of communist legacies in producing weak, coopted unions that were accustomed to collaborating with government and managerial elites in order to ensure orderly production (Cook 1995; Crowley 2004; Kubicek 2004; Ost 2000; and Ost & Crowley 2001). There is also the legacy of the early post-communist period, when newer unions sought to leapfrog unions descended from the communist era by embracing the turn to capitalism but failing to mobilize labor (Ashwin and Clarke 2003; Ost 2009). These explanations make sense given the common background conditions faced by labor in post-communist transitions. However, they tend to discount the quite different pathways through which leading unions evolved and the quite different roles some of these unions would play in the course of regime transition. The story of Poland, in particular, deviates from the prevalent narrative of post-communist labor quiescence, in part because of the crucial role played by Solidarity in undermining the communist regime and then cooperating with new ruling elites committed to shock therapy.

The distinctive trajectory of Polish labor has its roots in the troubled history of trade unionism in the communist period. The decision to pull back from agricultural collectivization in the face of protests meant that Polish farmers were never incorporated into a centralized trade union apparatus as in other communist countries. Union density in the industrial sector, however, was comparable to that in other communist countries, with union membership tied to an extensive network of social benefits for industrial workers. Even so, in comparison to other communist countries, Poland witnessed a more contentious history of autonomous labor mobilization, with workers in certain sectors and locales periodically launching major protests to demand independent representation outside of the officially sanctioned Central Council of Trade Unions (Gardawski, Mrozowicki & Czarzasty 2012; Kramer 1995). In response to major episodes of unrest, the regime usually responded with temporary concessions with the intention of subsequently reestablishing control; but, this tactic ceased to work by the late 1970s as workers became

progressively more frustrated and the demand for independent unions grew stronger (Gardawski et al. 2012; Paczyńska 2009, ch. 2). In 1980, the government signed an accord with strike committees effectively dissolving the Central Council of Trade Unions and permitting decentralized union structures that would constitute the Independent and Self-Governing Trade Union (NSZZ) Solidarity. Yet, just over a year later, in December 1981, Solidarity would be suspended and soon after declared to be an illegal body.

This move, made in conjunction with the declaration of martial law, had the unanticipated consequence of turning Solidarity unions into an underground resistance movement. Solidarity leaders turned from the bread-and-butter issues related to wages and working conditions to the politics of covert resistance. In the process, they expanded their transnational networks and secured more international funding, including from the United States' National Endowment for Democracy and the Central Intelligence Agency as well as the George Soros Open-Society Foundation (Paczyńska 2009, 54; Kubik & Ekiert 2001). In response, the government sought to undercut Solidarity by establishing in 1984 yet another regime-sponsored trade union apparatus, the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ). This body, however, would not acquire anything close to the resources or membership of other communist trade union federations. As a result of this turbulent history, by the time of the fall of communism across Eastern Europe in 1989, union density in Poland stood at just over 50 percent, as compared with 80-90 percent elsewhere in the region. More importantly, the majority of union members found themselves to be either part of a resistance movement or a relatively new official trade union created by an increasingly unpopular regime.

This situation, while it was unusual by comparison to the story of labor in other cases of post-communist transition, did not by itself create the conditions for either labor weakness or strength in Poland. What was more crucial was that Solidarity's top union leaders would become leading politicians in the new Polish government that was committed to shock therapy. Initially, the close ties between Solidarity unions and post-communist reformers gave rise to hopes for successful labor backing for liberalization (Levitsky and Way 1998; Paczyńska 2009). However, with the intensification of hyperinflation and unemployment, Solidarity's rank-and-file found itself without a voice to represent concerns over plummeting real wages and skyrocketing unemployment, while the leadership accepted the premise that high unemployment was a necessary if temporary condition for completing the dismantling of the old regime and establishing a full-blown market economy (Ost 2005, esp. chs 3-4). Paradoxically, OPZZ, although a creation of the old communist regime and expected by some to fade away, grew more relevant during the transition in part because it morphed from an official trade union into an alternative organization available to give voice to workers' discontent in the first decade of reform. Moreover, several branch and local unions left Solidarity's national organization in 1992 to form an alternative radical group, Solidarity 80, that would adopt a more militant position against the government. This was a far cry from the hope held out for Solidarity as a force that could unify the labor movement and advance the interests of the working class in the midst of efforts to push shock therapy and consolidate democracy in post-communist Poland.

With labor protests surging in 1993, Solidarity leaders came to recognize that they were losing control of the labor movement. They responded by, first, seeking to paint more radical unions as under communist influence (Ost 2005, 76), and then, deciding to support and take charge of labor protests aimed at their own allies in the government (Ekiert and Kubik 1999). Amid this instability, the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) formed by ex-communists managed to forge a coalition to lead the next government (1993-97). The new government's agenda was highly constrained by commitments on macroeconomic policy already made by the previous government to international financial institutions. But, it did set the stage for what might be called a "bipolar" system (Avdagic 2005).

For OPZZ, the new left-of-center SLD government was significant mainly as an ally to establish itself more firmly in post-communist labor politics in return for electoral support. However, in terms of substantive gains for rank-and-file union members, OPZZ had little to deliver given their new ally's continued efforts to extend market reforms and honor commitments to international financial institutions. Solidarity unions, for their part, reacted to the new government of ex-communists by reestablishing themselves as committed supporters of right-of-center parties associated with former Solidarity leaders (Ost 2005, 79). From this point on, there would be several electoral cycles where Solidarity and OPZZ union leaders regularly backed their respective political allies, even if the latter might adopt policies that were at odds with fundamental labor preferences in relation to core issues such as wages and job security. Solidarity, in particular, increasingly focused on conservative social agendas of right-wing parties, relying on its fierce anti-communism to diffuse the frustrations of workers over jobs and wages (Ost 2005, 119).

It is true that Solidarity was able to negotiate with the new left-of-center government to expand its role in the actual implementation of privatization. In the process, Solidarity leaders managed to slow the process down and had the opportunity to negotiate the terms for the dismissals of large numbers of employees. For some (e.g. Levitsky and Way 1998; Paczyńska 2009), this was treated as evidence of Solidarity's continuing influence in the post-communist transition. Yet, participating in the privatization process did not address the crucial problem of mass layoffs, which were accepted as an unavoidable consequence of the shift to a market economy. As a result, the workforce had to contend with sustained double-digit unemployment from 1995 to 2005 (peaking at 20 percent in 2002), with EU accession ultimately relieving the stress by permitting a large out-migration of Poles to other European countries, most notably Britain. Yet, among those who remain employed, the percentage of workers ending up on fixed-term (temporary) contracts climbed to 27 percent, the highest in the EU, while the percentage covered by collective agreements fell to just 15 percent, the lowest among post-communist EU Members (Sil 2017). Moreover, with a shrinking workforce that could not see what unions were actually doing to protect their jobs and wages, it is not surprising that union membership declined from over 6 million in 1990 to under 2 million by 2010, while union density fell to under 15 percent during that same period (OECD 2017).

The decline in union membership, though steep, need not mean unions cannot promote workers' interests if there is a possibility for uniting members in favor of, or in opposition to, laws or policies championed by a government. After all, with the end of communism, when many large state enterprises had automatic dues check-offs, one would

expect an initially steep drop in membership. However, when the vast majority of that membership ends up being split between two trade union centers that cooperate more with competing political allies than with each other, the scope for exercising labor power is severely reduced. Solidarity and OPZZ jointly accounted for two-thirds of all union members, but independently, neither could claim to represent more than one-third of those members (Carley 2009). Solidarity repeatedly allied with politicians committed to an expansive program of liberalization and privatization and saw its own membership base cut down to under 500,000 – a far cry from the 10 million it could have claimed on the eve of initiating its underground resistance to the communist regime.

More importantly, until recently, neither of the two largest national centers were ready to coordinate with the other even where both were clearly dissatisfied with some legislation or social policy that was detrimental to their rank-and-file. Particularly around the time of elections, while OPZZ lined up behind left-of-center politicians who were sympathetic to the social protection of employees, Solidarity found itself focusing less on the issues of job security or stagnant wages and more on the social or cultural issues being trumpeted by right-wing politicians. This was most evident in their failure to combine forces to thwart revisions of the Polish Labor Code (originally inherited from the communist era) that ended up dramatically boosting employer flexibility at the expense of long-term job security and trade union rights at the workplace (Sil 2017).<sup>1</sup>

In retrospect, the union-party ties constructed by Solidarity's trade union activists and political elites are not terribly surprising in view of the role Solidarity played in bringing about regime change and then embracing market reforms as a sign of its commitment to anti-communism. These ties, however, had the unexpected consequence of splintering and shrinking organized labor, which in turn prevented concerted efforts to forestall a host of laws and policies that would limit trade union rights, reduce employment protection in the private sector, and dilute the enforcement of labor standards. Despite its much-heralded role in bringing about the end of communism and shaping the new regime at the outset, Solidarity proved unable to leverage its relationship with the new ruling elite into support for pro-worker legislation. Of course, the specific choices of individual Solidarity leaders cannot be faulted much since, after all, they were coping with a great deal of uncertainty in an environment where supporting market reforms was politically equivalent to resistance to the ideals, institutions and policies associated with communism. Even so, it is possible to trace a direct path from the close relationship Solidarity trade unions initially enjoyed with political elites committed to shock therapy to the subsequent splintering and emasculation of the labor movement.

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<sup>1</sup> This may be contrasted to the case of the Czech Republic, where efforts to dilute a similar Labor Code drew more concerted opposition from organized labor which managed to get both the reformed Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party to support their positions during negotiations with the government. As a result, the revised Czech Labor Code, though still improving the options for employers, retained many more worker friendly provisions, including limits on fixed-term contracts, more collective bargaining coverage, and more secure trade union participation in the workplace (Sil 2017).

### III. COSATU in South Africa: Anti-Apartheid Struggle to Uncertainty and Fragmentation

The issue of whether and how to fuse labor activism with anti-apartheid resistance predates the end of apartheid by nearly four decades. Formed in 1955, the South African Trade Union Council (SACTU) was the first body to attempt to organize the Black workforce while backing the efforts of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) to challenge the apartheid system. After a crackdown by the regime during the 1960s forced many SACTU activists into detention or exile (Southall and Webster 2010), trade unionists intensified their efforts in the 1970s to mobilize Black workers in the struggle against the regime while reaching out to the international trade union movement for support (Friedman 1987; Sithole and Ndolovu 2006). These activists explicitly linked the mobilization of the working class to the ANC's political struggle against apartheid, viewing non-racial unions as essentially uncommitted to the national democratic revolution (Seidman 1994, 145).

Not all trade union bodies subscribed to this view, however. By the end of the 1970s, several non-racial unions had united to form the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), which sought to focus more narrowly on economic goals of workers while staying out of the political struggle to dismantle apartheid (Sithole and Ndolovu 2006; see also Friedman 1987). But, by 1985, with the struggle against apartheid intensifying, the differences between Black and non-racial unions would be set aside with the formation of COSATU, the Confederation of South African Trade Unions, which aimed to simultaneously resolve workplace issues, promote shop floor democracy, and actively support the national liberation struggle being led by the ANC and SACP (Southall and Webster 2010, 138).

With the end of apartheid, COSATU emerged as the largest trade union federation in South Africa, representing nearly two-thirds of the unionized workforce. COSATU, the ANC and SACP established a "triple alliance" to jointly lead a liberated, unified South Africa. Starting with the 1994 national election, COSATU officials committed to mobilizing electoral support for the ANC and SACP. For its part, the ANC publicly embraced COSATU's position as the leading force in the labor movement and applauded the role of labor in the liberation struggle; in fact, the ANC Youth League's Political Education Manual characterized the working class as "the motive force of the National Democratic Revolution."<sup>2</sup> For COSATU, this signified the possibility of significant influence within the new government, with some officials securing positions within various ministries or finding their way on to the ANC's party lists for parliamentary seats. Other top COSATU officials occupied seats on the National Economic Development and Labor Council (NEDLAC), the tripartite body created to manage social dialogue between state, business and labor (Southall and Webster 2010, 141).

Initially, the alliance seemed to work well for all parties. The ANC won a landslide victory in 1994, as Nelson Mandela became President. Meanwhile, between 1991 and 1999,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ancyl.org.za/docs/political/2009/NDR%20Presentationb.pdf>

COSATU's membership grew from 1.2 million to 1.75 million workers (Naidoo 1999; cf. Buhlungu 2010, 90). In internal surveys, more than 80 percent of COSATU members saw the triple alliance as the best way for protecting the interests of the working class (Khunou 2012, 179; Maree 2012, 69). However, as in Poland, the ANC government would soon turn its attention to boosting economic growth via neoliberal policies that labor had little say over. In 1996, the Ministry of Finance announced a program for Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), premised on business-driven program of economic growth. With few specific policies laid out, what most concerned COSATU officials at the outset was the process through which the government had rolled out GEAR – that is to say, without even a pretense of consulting with COSATU (Buhlungu and Ellis 2012). Nevertheless, most COSATU leaders still held a certain nostalgia for the ANC-led liberation struggle and anticipated being able to work on concrete policy issues with the ANC through the mechanisms for tripartite consultation (NEDLAC). This stance bore a striking resemblance to Solidarity's backing of leaders committed to shock therapy, driven in part by the shared memory of anti-communist resistance and in part by the hope that unions would still exert some influence in the course of implementing reforms.

Under Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki (1999-2008), the sense of camaraderie between COSATU and the ANC began to fray. In the 2004 elections, the ANC secured two-thirds of the seats in Parliament, and Mbeki's government saw this as a mandate to move forward more decisively with the implementation of GEAR. There was a concerted effort to scale back regulations on the private sector, attract more foreign investment and expedite integration into the global economy. Under these conditions, the tripartite body NEDLAC – which COSATU leaders had counted on as a forum for exercising influence – was either limited to working out technical details of specific policies or generated vague agreements that both state and business treated as non-binding (Cherry 2006, Khunou 2012). This shift in NEDLAC's functioning was not unlike the "illusory corporatism" Ost (2000) has documented in post-communist settings where labor came to be only symbolically incorporated while the government moved forward rapidly with neoliberal reforms. Not surprisingly, Mbeki's embrace of the business community and his push for further liberalization led to growing anxiety within COSATU about the utility of the triple alliance. Newer COSATU activists, in particular, came to be sorely disappointed that, apart from a few officials in the Ministry of Labor, former COSATU leaders who had entered government did little to support trade union positions or advocate for workers (Buhlungu 2010, 174; see also Harvey 2015). COSATU's internal surveys indicate that the percentage of members voting for the ANC declined from 75 percent in 1994 to 57 percent in 2008, while the percent believing that workers benefited from the triple alliance declined from 83 percent in 1994 to 61 percent in 2008 (Maree 2012, 68-9; Khunou 2012, ).

Supporters of the alliance would get a temporary boost thanks to Mbeki's ouster at the ANC's famous national conference in Polokwane in 2007. At that conference, more left-leaning factions spoke out against Mbeki's program for neo-liberal market reforms and threw their support behind a new ANC chairperson, Jacob Zuma (Buhlungu and Ellis 2012, 268-9). Zuma, a former member of the Communist Party, was viewed as a strong ally of the working class, and his rise was seen by many as a sign of good times ahead for COSATU and the triple alliance. Following the 2009 elections, however, Zuma made clear that there would be no major shift in economic policy and no change in the level of influence labor

could expect in government policymaking (Pillay 2008). Top COSATU officials still backed the triple alliance, accepting an "implicit bargain" whereby COSATU could still support ANC's macro-economic policy debates so long as it could exercise influence at least on policies and regulations specifically pertaining to labor relations.<sup>3</sup> But, for others, such a bargain, even if accepted as such by the ANC, was meaningless given the growing gap between rank-and-file workers lacking social protection and the growing number of union leaders who began to see their jobs as careers and behaved more as middle-class professionals with ties to management. These cooperative unionists, along with government officials focused on economic reforms, came to be increasingly criticized by more militant elements of COSATU for concealing growing class divisions and marginalizing labor activists who interfered with the push for growth and liberalization (Khunou 2012).

The declining unity and influence of COSATU coincides with a marked rise in labor militancy throughout the Zuma period. Although most union stewards did not officially endorse violence, frustrations over police brutality and the use of scab workers gave rise to growing anger and sparked violent confrontations on a scale not seen since the mobilization against apartheid (van Holdt 2012). Some sectors were especially prone to militancy, most notably the platinum sector where falling commodity prices worldwide triggered sharp conflicts between company executives concerned about falling share prices and mineworkers angry about stagnant wages and poor working and living conditions (Chinguno 2015). Nowhere was this militancy more on display than at the Lonmin mines in Marikana where, on August 16, 2012, 34 mineworkers were killed by local police following a lengthy wildcat strike that had already seen 10 other fatalities. This event made international news and sent Lonmin's shares plunging. For workers, it undercut the credibility of the largest trade union organization at the mineshafts, the National Union of Mineworkers (a major affiliate of COSATU). Within a year, an alternative non-COSATU union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) would become the new majority union throughout the platinum belt, dealing a significant blow to one the largest and oldest federations within COSATU.

At the national level, too, COSATU began to face intensifying criticisms from the two next largest national labor federations, the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) and the Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA).<sup>4</sup> These two federations, which combine to account for over one million workers, went after different elements within COSATU. NACTU, the more radical of the two, attacked COSATU officials for being too cozy with a regime committed to business-driven growth. FEDUSA, on the other hand, went after COSATU's most outspoken critics of the government, seeing them as irresponsibly

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<sup>3</sup> Professor Stephen Friedman, Director of Center for the Study of Democracy, University of Johannesburg, personal communication (25 November 2013).

<sup>4</sup> NACTU was formed in 1986 by labor activists who were closer to the Black Consciousness Movement (identified with Steven Biko) than to the ANC. FEDUSA was formed in 1997 as an explicitly non-racial union representing service sector workers and civil employees. Along with COSATU, both are members of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).

hampering economic growth. Much more detrimental to the unity of the labor movement, however, was COSATU's own inability to halt deepening internal divisions over the question of whether to continue backing the ruling ANC. Sharp public spats between prominent COSATU leaders and the subsequent ouster or defection of several major federations signified just how fragmented COSATU had become (Satgar and Southall 2015).

The most emblematic battle in this regard was the tumultuous departure of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), headed by Zwelinizima Vavi, COSATU's former General Secretary and once a key ally of Zuma. Vavi's stated readiness to scale back COSATU's support for the ANC at the 2014 elections sparked intense debates and mutual recriminations that ultimately led to the ouster of Vavi and his NUMSA federation as well as the subsequent exit of several other federations allied with Vavi. NUMSA would become the core of a new trade union federation launched by Vavi in 2016, while COSATU's total membership, though still larger than that of the next two federations combined, would see a sharp drop in membership, not to mention in its status within the labor movement. This episode is perhaps the clearest indication of the extent of fragmentation that has taken place within organized labor, while Vavi himself has become the most significant public symbol of the growing frustration in the labor movement over COSATU's continued backing of the ANC (Harvey 2015).

Whether these latest developments hasten the break-up of the triple alliance or rejuvenate the labor movement remains to be seen. What is clear is that some twenty years following the fall of apartheid, despite some modest improvements in living standards, Black workers have not fared nearly as well as COSATU leaders had expected after the end of apartheid. Gini coefficients, as recorded by the World Bank, show an *increase* in inequality, rising from 59.3 in 1993 to 63.4 in 2011.<sup>5</sup> Total unemployment stands at about 25 percent, but the rate is more than four times higher among Blacks than Whites. And, the gap in mean household incomes between Black households and those of Whites or Colored (Indian) groups has increased by nearly 75 percent since 1994 (*The Economist*, 2013). It is not clear that the plight of Black workers, a key group in the struggle against apartheid, would have been significantly different had COSATU leaders made a different set of choices after the end of apartheid. But, as in the case of Solidarity in Poland, COSATU appears to have fallen into the trap of over-investing in political ties to the new ruling elite following their struggle against the old regime, but without ensuring that it would be able to advocate for the social protection of workers in the new era.

#### IV. Organized Labor and the "Arab Spring" in Tunisia: UGTT at a Crossroads

The UGTT, once closely tied to the old regime, joined protests against the decades-long rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali mostly at the insistence of local unions and rank-and-file members (Angrist 2013). With the fall of Ben Ali's government, violent confrontations

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<sup>5</sup> <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=ZA>

between Islamists and secularists created a new opportunity for the UGTT to gain status and recognition. Its proposal for a "national dialogue" was hailed domestically and internationally as the key to the consolidation and stabilization of the new regime, leading to a share of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize. The "national dialogue" served as a vital second-track to constitutional negotiations (Hartshorn 2017). As with Solidarity in Poland and COSATU in South Africa, UGTT was poised to play a leading role as part of a new ruling elite in a new, more democratic Tunisia. At present, it is still too early to tell whether UGTT's fate will come to resemble that of COSATU in South Africa and Solidarity in Poland over the coming decade. As the country wrestles with neoliberal reforms and austerity measures, UGTT leaders may yet choose to distance themselves from the new regime and take on the unfamiliar role of pressing the government from below to secure concessions for workers. If they do not do so, however, the UGTT's fate can be partially anticipated from the experiences of COSATU and Solidarity as laid out above.

The UGTT initially emerged under French colonial rule in Tunisia. Its rank-and-file formed the vanguard of the independence movement in the 1940s and 1950s, and its leadership took several high positions in the first independent government (White 2001). Under Habib Bourgiba's more populist authoritarian regime in the 1960s, the UGTT exerted less independent influence but remained significant given the regime's reliance on corporatism and cooperative unionism to ensure labor quiescence. As the country moved from a more socialist economy based on import-substitution towards reforms, a social pact negotiated in 1977 collapsed as rank-and-file workers forced union leaders to call a general strike in 1978. Leftist leaders of the union were also instrumental in organizing protests against a subsidy reform that resulted in bread riots in 1984. While these moments of militancy kept alive UGTT's image as a defender of workers, its ties to the regime also limited its actual ability to shape the overall direction of economic policy, not unlike trade unions in communist Poland. And, those union leaders who could not be coopted often ended up imprisoned or exiled, as happened after the 1984 protests.

Following the bloodless palace coup that brought Ben Ali to power in 1987, things got much worse for the UGTT. While many had hoped for a democratic opening, Ben Ali quickly established a highly centralized, tightly controlled regime. The UGTT, the strongest civil society actor in the country, was seen as a threat and had its board purged and replaced by regime loyalists. The latter staunchly supported the government adoption of a structural adjustment program that would scale back the number of state owned enterprises and public sector jobs in the country. In effect, the Ben Ali regime's vision of development relied on a growing middle class, with material wealth increasingly concentrated in the coastal regions of the country. This concentration of wealth was associated with crony capitalism as relatives of key regime officials received lucrative contracts and gained near monopolies in certain sectors. In this environment, the UGTT not only had little voice in policy but also saw its membership and density drop. The UGTT was also pressured to explicitly reject Islamist members, who had attempted to make some advances in the organization prior to the coup. While individuals with Islamist political views certainly continued working within the organization, these sentiments were not expressed openly. The organization remained alienated from the growing Islamist and religious movements within the country, an alienation which would spill over into hostility following the 2010-2011 uprising.

Workers played a crucial role in the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime. Even before the "Arab Spring," local protests broke out in 2008 in Gafsa, an interior region with a high concentration of phosphate-manufacturing companies (Chomiak and Entelis 2011). A coalition of unionists and unemployed workers sought to push back against the impoverishment and economic decline of the interior regions (relative to the coastal regions), while criticizing the regime for its corruption and the heavy hand of the security services. The UGTT's central leadership was taken by surprise, and was targeted by local union activists who complained that union leaders in the capital, Tunis, were essentially complicit in the mistreatment and exploitation of workers at a government-owned Gafsa phosphate company (Gelvin 2015, 60). When a similar set of complaints in other regions exploded into a national uprising in 2010, the UGTT faced an even bigger challenge. Its central leadership sought to preserve whatever diminished influence it retained, while rank-and-file members were joining, often leading, the growing number of protests and strikes. After Ben Ali fled to exile, the remaining officials of the old regime sought to retain power by appointing several UGTT leaders to cabinet ministries. By then, however, most of the UGTT membership, and certainly the rank-and-file, had committed to wholesale regime change, and those UGTT leaders who had been brought into the government quickly tendered their resignations.

Thus, the UGTT entered the post-Ben Ali era in a weak and divided state, facing competing pressures, both internally and externally. The country faced a variety of more or less institutionalized movements with a variety of goals (Antonakis-Nashif 2016). More militant rank-and-file members wanted to transform the country's economic program, calling for increased development in the neglected interior as well as a greater voice in the union itself. Veteran leaders hoped to regain the UGTT's post-independence glory, with greater voice in economic and social policy. In particular, they backed a secular form of government, along with greater legal protections for union and workers' rights as well as an end to labor flexibilization policies that had hollowed the federation out from the inside. These were not necessarily incompatible visions, but the common focus on immediate wage increases served to provide a common focal point as UGTT set out to build unity and carve out a role for itself in the negotiations to set up a new government.

The internal divisions within the UGTT were somewhat mitigated by the disposition of international forces active in labor politics in Tunisia and throughout North Africa. The UGTT was a founding member of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and was often lauded as the most independent of the Arab unions even during the days of authoritarian cooptation. Trainings and capacity building workshops sponsored by the Worker's Bureau of the International Labor Organization (ILO) focused on making the union a better bargaining partner for government and business, as opposed to promoting competing confederations as they had in other Arab countries (Hartshorn 2018). The UGTT enjoyed strong support from international labor activists, though this support focused on strengthening rather than fracturing the union, or creating competing institutions.

During the first post-revolutionary election, UGTT leaders gave serious thought to organizing itself as a political party or directly allying with an existing party. They bypassed this option, in part due to internal debates (during which the examples of Poland and Brazil

were explicitly discussed) about the risks of politicization and the primary role of the federation in national politics. In the end, the UGTT officially remained neutral in the October 2011 elections for the new National Constitutional Assembly. Members were free to vote as they saw fit, and the union encouraged participation without endorsing a candidate. The election, however, yielded unexpected outcomes. A plurality of votes was won by the Party of the Ennahda Movement, the country's formerly outlawed Islamist party. Non-Islamist votes were fractured between several populist and center-left parties. A ruling coalition of Ennahda and the center-left parties *Congrès pour la République* (CPR) and *Forum démocratique pour le travail et les libertés* (known by its Arabic name Ettakatol) emerged, taking the positions of Prime Minister, President of the Republic, and President of the NCA respectively.

As the new assembly was being set up, UGTT had to cope with Islamists in their own ranks. At the federation's December 2011 National Congress, Islamist members quit the UGTT. The new Executive Bureau consisted of old-line bureaucrats and more leftist members. The institution focused on the tasks of carrying out internal reform, protecting the nation during its transition, and pursuing a more equitable distribution of resources in the country. This coincided with an explosion of labor strikes and protests in the face of pent-up economic frustrations and the Ennahda-led government's focus on tax cuts for small businesses. The government's program called for regional and international economic integration, with an emphasis on boosting exports. The government also opened negotiations with the International Monetary Fund for a loan to restructure debt. The role of the state in relation to employment was focused entirely on training and reducing barriers to business, with the expectation that the private sector would provide more than a half million jobs in the years after the revolution. Ennahda's electoral program had over a dozen mentions of the establishment of Islamic financial institutions, but just one passing mention of wages. With little attention being devoted to job and income security, the rift between the new neoliberal Islamist elite and the leftist and center-left labor movement grew wider.

The following two years saw the new regime struggle with fears that Tunisia could degenerate into all-out conflict, as happened in Egypt. First, a new centrist political power emerged in the form of *Nidaa Tounes* (Call of Tunis). Headed by Beji Caid Essebsi, an octogenarian elder statesman with a long career in public service, who had once been a lawyer for trade unionists and enjoyed support among some UGTT old-line bureaucrats. The international community hailed the UGTT's guiding role in the transition, and international dignitaries, including the Director General of the International Labor Organization were on hand for the signing of a "social pact" between the government, the UGTT, and the country's employer's association. While this agreement, and successful wage negotiations, were hailed as major accomplishments, strikes and protests continued as comprehensive economic reforms and promised projects in the interior region stalled. Despite the difficulty in implementing the components of the "social pact" in the face of continued neoliberal and free-market focused governance, the détente between employers and the UGTT would be important later in the year.

In 2013, Tunisia's transition was rocked by assassinations of key leaders. In February, Chokri Belaid, a leftist leader who had been popular with trade unionists in the

country, was assassinated on his way to the New Constitutional Assembly. This was followed just five months later by the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi. Ennahda's role in the security services and its encouragement of Islamist preachers led many secular and leftist politicians to blame the Islamist party for the assassinations. For its part, the UGTT held a national strike as well as sit-in at the National Constitutional Assembly, while other leftist forces joined forces to create a new Popular Front that included social democrats, communists, Nasserists, and Arab Nationalists. The work of the assembly collapsed as anti-Ennahda politicians withdrew and refused to continue their work. Many of the smaller parties gathered under Essebsi's Nidaa Tounes banner, creating a strong centrist block in the Assembly.

It was in the subsequent efforts to restore order and stability that the UGTT began to be more active, visible, and influential. UGTT called for a "national dialogue" to move the country forward, and took the lead in hosting a series of meetings. The National Dialogue formed a second-track for discussions on both matters of governance and constitutional articles. The UGTT expanded this dialogue to include the national employer's federation (known by the French acronym, UTICA), the national lawyers' guild, and the national human rights league. This so-called Quartet increased the legitimacy and importance of the meetings, which was soon producing a series of national agreements. This included drafting a new Tunisian Constitution, which was ratified in January 2014 after last-minute negotiations with leaders of Ennahda and the UGTT. The UGTT, together with the other members of the Quartet went on to receive, the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts to avert a national catastrophe. Presidential elections in Fall 2014 brought Beji Caid Essebsi to the presidency, and his Nidaa Tounes party won 37.6 percent of the vote (with Ennahda dropping to second with by 27.8 percent). The leftist Popular Front, who had many supporters among the rank-and-file and fought for constitutional articles on the right to strike and right to employment came in a respectable fourth place in the election, insuring them some voice in the opposition. Nidaa Tounes formed a reluctant coalition government with Ennahda, despite deep tensions within and between these competing blocs.

The conclusion of the constitutional process should have been a moment of victory for the UGTT. Its prerogatives were written into the Constitution. It negotiated increases to the minimum wage with the government and national employers' association. It received copious praise from the international community while regaining some of its former glory from the time of the struggle for independence. Yet, since the end of 2014, labor unrest has been on the rise, and UGTT's commitment to social dialogue has been difficult to sustain. According to the Minister of Social Affairs, the first half of 2015 saw a dramatic increase in the number of strikes from the previous year, despite an eventual leveling off later in the year. Furthermore, reports from the UGTT suggest that while less strikes are approved, more are carried out in an unapproved manner. A crippling transit strike, led partly by unionists outside the UGTT, hit the capital in early 2015, followed by a teacher's strike followed in May. Habib Essid, the technocratic Prime Minister at the time with close ties to Nidaa Tounes, called for "labor peace," going so far as to say that strikes diminished the fight against terrorism (Ryan, 2015). After the Essid government gave way to a new government under Youssef Chahed, the government repeatedly called for labor peace and trade union support while pushing even harder for policies focused on austerity and liberalization to meet conditions attached to loans from international lenders. UGTT

continued to criticize these policies and became particularly militant in resisting calls for greater austerity and cutbacks in government jobs. While this turn of events hardly confirmed the role of "peacemaker" for which the UGTT (together with other civil society actors) gained international recognition through the Nobel Prize, it also represented a fairly typical confrontation between unions seeking to protect jobs and incomes of their rank-and-file members and governments pressing forward with neoliberal reforms under difficult conditions.

The threat of terrorism has recently added greater moral pressure on the UGTT to refrain from militancy and work more closely with the governing coalition in the interest of national stability. In 2016, in the wake of two terrorist attacks by militants claiming loyalty to the so-called Islamic State, the governing elites called for a "national unity government." President Essebsi specifically called for one particular entity to formally enter the government to ensure that a draft of new economic reforms would succeed: the UGTT. For the ruling coalition of Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, this approach makes sense: to bring in one of the most legitimate civil society actors in the country and to make them share the burden of "necessary" neoliberal reforms in the interest of the long-term stability and prosperity of the country. To date, the UGTT has refused and has thereby avoided started down the path that Solidarity and COSATU.

The pressure to "join" the government came to a fever pitch in mid-2016, when the President called for a new grand pact to unite forces inside the country. Called the "Carthage Agreement" it laid out in broad strokes a plan to reform the economy and fight terrorism. It was preceded by a cabinet reshuffle, which saw yet another technocratic, business-minded professional in the position of Prime Minister. This time however, the new Cabinet included several familiar faces with long profiles in trade unionism. Despite this, the UGTT denied it had "joined" the government, even after singing the Carthage Agreement. In over a dozen interviews carried out during the UGTT's National Congress in January 2017, UGTT leadership was clear that the union must preserve its independence and not "join" the government in any formal way. Despite this, rank-and-file members remain concerned.

In addition to simply resisting the calls to "join" the government in some formal way, the UGTT could choose to put forward its own socio-economic policies. Tunisian political parties since the revolution have been largely ideologically vacant. Nidaa Tounes is a "big-tent secular" party with factions within itself the run the gamut from social democratic, to centrist, to business-oriented neoliberal. Ennahda is somewhat more coherent, but similarly has contradictory policies, occupying an "Islamist center" despite its rejection of the Islamist moniker, preferring the term "Muslim Democrats." By putting forward its own socio-economic proposals, and staking the vote of its membership on embracing them, the UGTT could encourage Nidaa Tounes to adopt more forward-looking economic policies, or encourage the Popular Front to moderate to compete for its votes. Whether the union could actually mobilize around issues to get its members to vote however, remains to be seen.

Neoliberal reforms in Tunisia include a mix of conventional policy proposals (labor flexibilization and privatization, notably) and a strong fixation on the idea that Tunisian capital is "frozen" because of the revolution. This preoccupation led to the drafting of an

amnesty bill. Finally passed in 2017, the bill skirted the institutions and transitional justice called for in the Constitution, and replaced them with a pardon if regime-affiliated business leaders would repatriate ill-gotten money. The most optimistic projections suggest that billions of dollars will flow in the economy, but little evidence of this exists. While the UGTT stopped short of endorsing this capitulation to business interests, its unwillingness to condemn it is a break from a strong commitment to transitional justice (Editorial – The UGTT Promises To Support The Law on Reconciliation). While the UGTT’s acceptance of an amnesty law, and drift towards "joining" the government is not as profound as that found in other instances, the pattern is reminiscent of other labor movements’ slide to collaboration with forces they once opposed.

## VI. Conclusion

Forming a coalition with the new ruling elite may be appealing to trade unionists following a post-authoritarian transition they helped bring about (whether for reasons of status, political influence, or social harmony). Such a move, however, carries with it a risk of organized labor becoming more fragmented and marginalized over time if once-exalted union leaders come to be identified with policies that threaten jobs, wages, and labor rights and standards. That risk may have been lower in Europe in the immediate post-World War II era of "embedded liberalism" (Ruggie 1982). In the post-Cold War era, however, where a new ruling elite after regime change finds itself pressed to embrace neoliberal reforms, organized labor’s prospects for defending the interests of the working class depend on eschewing a formal role as part of governing elite and being willing to exert pressure on their former allies by mobilizing its rank-and-file members to offer/withhold support for the new leaders. This is not a recipe for rapid growth or balanced budgets; but if the job of unions is to ensure maximum social protection for workers, then that job becomes impossible to pursue without the leverage afforded by the threat of industrial action. That leverage, in turn, is difficult to muster when labor is identified with policies leading to an erosion of social protection for the workforce.

While this argument may be logically compelling, we are well aware that it cannot be validated through the three cases we have considered above. Indeed, the two historical cases – Solidarity in Poland and COSATU in South Africa - have been selected not to explain variation in the dependent variable but to illuminate a common dilemma in two distinct contexts. And, the third case, UGTT in Tunisia, is a story that has only just begun to unfold. For our argument to be refashioned as a more broadly portable hypothesis, further research is required across a wider range of cases. First, it would be worth considering the other side of the coin: situations where, following a regime change, organized labor parts ways with the new ruling elite and uses its autonomy to shift alliances and strategies in order to negotiate more worker-friendly outcomes with state and business. Such cases are not easy to find in the developing world, but they do exist (see note 1) and deserve more careful analysis. Second, it would be useful to expand the comparative study to include cases that could potentially falsify the claims advanced above– that is, cases where unions

*do* join the new ruling coalition and leverage their position to influence social policy and better protect workers in the midst of liberalization. Indeed, with the passage of time, the UGTT itself might well end up on one of these other two tracks. On the one hand, it could choose to create more distance from the current political elite and focus more on mobilizing protest against policies that threaten the rights and livelihoods of workers. On the other, it could demonstrate that, as part of the ruling coalition, it ended up thwarting policies that might be pernicious for its rank-and-file membership. In either scenario, a future comparative study of these same three cases – and perhaps one or two others – would need to be designed so as to generate broader inferences about the conditions under which labor's decision to form an alliance with a post-authoritarian elite does or does not bear fruit over the long term.

At the same time, in an era when developing and post-socialist economies have been facing mounting global pressures for further liberalization and flexibilization (Sil 2003), the cases examined above do not appear to be outliers. Rather, their experiences and challenges combine to illustrate the unanticipated long-term consequences of strong alliances between organized labor and new ruling elites in the immediate aftermath of regime change. It is not a coincidence that, for at least the first twenty years since the fall of communism, Solidarity's early backing of candidates committed to shock therapy made it difficult for the union to stem the loss of influence as unemployment rose, membership declined, and inter-union competition mounted. The same challenge faced COSATU which, after two decades of loyally backing candidates from the ANC, became increasingly divided and frustrated, unable to either prevent further liberalization, improve the employment prospects and living standards of Black workers, or even ensure social protection for their own rank-and-file members. In Tunisia, UGTT has thus far resisted efforts to elicit a full-blown commitment to join in a unity government that is pushing hard to continue neoliberal reforms amid a deepening economic crisis. But, given its reputation as a responsible and cooperative social partner – a reputation reinforced by winning a share of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize – there is still a chance that some in the UGTT may think that tighter connections to the new ruling elite are the key to labor's influence. If this were to happen, then there is a risk that UGTT would be embarking on the very paths chosen by Solidarity in 1989 and COSATU in 1994, with a very real possibility of finding its current size, unity and reputation eroding over time. If, however, the UGTT can steadfastly maintain its autonomy vis-a-vis reformists in the government, it may be able to use its clout among workers to press harder for more labor-friendly variants of economic and social policy.

Three practical suggestions emerge for other trade union centers in a similar position in post-authoritarian settings. First, organized labor needs to do whatever it can to maintain a federation that is not going to splinter. If union membership is growing, then this can only be leveraged where organized labor is not fragmented. South Africa's labor movement, despite a significant increase in total union members in the first decade after the end of apartheid, was unable to convert this membership into political clout except insofar as it delivered votes to the ANC. In cases where union membership is declining, the negative political impact of this can be mitigated by unifying members under a single umbrella and concentrating organizational resources. In Poland, which saw union density drop from over 50 percent in 1990 to under 20 percent by 2005, the two largest

federations backed competing political coalitions and failed to combine forces to ensure the interests and social protection of labor. It is going to be incumbent upon the UGTT to refrain from being "too pragmatic" in the sense of signing on to policies that will lead to defections or dissension within its own ranks.

Second, while it is important for labor to be politically connected in order to exert influence, this cannot be through official alliances with leaders pressured to, or charged with, pushing neoliberal reforms. Some degree of autonomy is necessary so as to be able to eschew responsibility for policies that hurt unions' rank-and-file members and to maintain the possibility of some leverage – via the threat of industrial action – over state and business. In democratic settings, the promise of delivering the "labor vote" to a given party can yield leverage, but not if the victorious party has a massive electoral advantage already over other parties (as in the case of the ANC party-state in South Africa) or does not have the leeway to reciprocate in the form of adopting worker-friendly economic and social policy (as in the case for the push for shock therapy in Poland). Under these conditions, only by threatening to withhold electoral support or coordinating labor action that would worry businesses and foreign investors can organized labor stand a chance of negotiating with elected officials charged with pursuing market reforms.

Finally, while trade unions in new regims need to heed their rank-and-file members' immediate concerns over jobs and wages, they must be careful not to pursue short-term objectives while accepting policies, laws, or institutions that have long-term consequences for labor's collective ability to protect workers and coordinate industrial action. In Poland, for example, Solidarity accepted a seat at the table to discuss specific steps to implement privatization but, in the process, accepted the assumption that downsizing – and thus mass layoffs – was unavoidable in newly privatized enterprises. In South Africa, COSATU's officials stood by the ANC for over two decades in hopes of being a genuine partner even as new policies (such as GEAR) steadily undermined the significance of the institutions (such as NEDLAC) where they expected to make their impact felt on labor issues. In essence, it is as much a mistake to ignore the bread and butter issues that workers are anxious about as to ignore political battles over laws and policies that could fundamentally undercut the long-term prospects for concerted labor action or effective collective bargaining. These latter battles do not trump everyday worries over job security, wages and social benefits. They do, however, have a greater cumulative effect on labor's ability to resist or influence the policies of the new regimes it helped to create.

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