



Contradictions of Third-Worldist Trade Unionism

The Cases of Tunisia and Algeria

LORENZO SCALA

Sapienza Università di Roma

lorenzo.scala@uniroma1.it

ABSTRACT: This paper introduces “Third-Worldist trade unionism” as a historical-analytical category to interpret the evolution of postcolonial trade union centers after decolonization. Focusing on the Tunisian UGTT and the Algerian UGTA, it identifies recurring structural tensions affecting unions within nationalist and developmentalist regimes.

It argues that these unions were shaped by three interrelated contradictions. First, they became increasingly subordinated to political power, as ruling parties incorporated union leaderships into state structures in the name of national development. Second, their representation of workers became conditional: while formally monopolizing labor representation, they often restrained strikes when demands conflicted with productivist priorities. Third, despite rhetorical commitments to Afro-Asian and Pan-African solidarity, they failed to build an autonomous internationalist practice, weakened by Cold War alignments and state rivalries.

Through a comparative approach grounded in selected primary sources, the paper highlights union leaders’ agency and argues that their entanglement with postcolonial state-building limited both internal union democracy and transformative internationalism.

KEYWORDS: North Africa, Third-Worldism, Trade Unions, Socialism, Algeria, Tunisia.

Introduction

This paper examines what can be analytically described as a model of “Third-Worldist trade unionism” in the decades following decolonization. The term is used here in an operational sense: not to posit the existence of a coherent ideological school, but to identify a recurring configuration of tensions within trade union centers¹ that emerged in postcolonial states pursuing projects of rapid economic development, state-led modernization, and a rebalancing of their position within the international political economy. Unlike alternative labels such as “Afro-Asian,” “Non-Aligned,” or “postcolonial,” the term “Third-Worldist” highlights the paradox of an internationalist political project articulated by strongly nationalist states and union leaderships. Importantly, the term does not imply an intrinsically radical orientation: it applies to a broad spectrum of postcolonial regimes whose shared features included a dominant public sector, mobilizational developmentalism, and participation—formal or substantial—in Global South cooperation.

¹ A trade union center, or trade union confederation, refers to a national-level organization bringing together a plurality of sectoral trade unions (federations) representing different occupations as well as different regions and localities within the same country. Such a unity is generally grounded in shared political or ideological orientations. The trade union center is endowed with national governing bodies that coincide with the organization’s highest leadership, typically renewed through national congresses. These bodies are usually articulated into a deliberative instance and an executive secretariat.



The central argument of this paper is that these Third-Worldist unions displayed a set of structurally interdependent contradictions: (1) their increasing subordination to political power; (2) a representativeness of workers that was limited or conditioned by adherence to state-led developmental priorities; and (3) the inability to articulate an autonomous, genuinely internationalist practice within the workers of the broader Global South.² These dynamics weakened both the nature of unions as collective organizations of the working classes, which is the basic definition of trade union underlying this paper (Hyman 1975), and the internationalist ambitions of the Third-Worldist political project in which they were embedded.

These tensions have been noted individually in the literature, and scholars generally acknowledge that postcolonial unions in Africa and the Arab world were politically subordinated to their respective regimes.³ However, these contradictions have never been systematically related to one another. This has so far prevented scholars from fully grasping the reciprocal relations between trade unions' internal politics and their external postures, and thus from providing a dynamic and articulated account of postcolonial trade unionism in Arab and African contexts. The only work that has approached this perspective in North African studies is the edited volume *État et mouvement syndical au Maghreb* (Bouayed and Chanson-Jabeur 1990). It included insightful analyses — also by veteran UGTT and UGTA trade unionists — linking union autonomy and representativeness to the political role of labor leaders (Bouayed 1990; Baccouche 1990; Farès 1990; Gallissot 1990), as well as a contribution on inter-state solidarity, though limited to the Pan-Maghrebi and Pan-Arab levels (Sraïeb 1990).

Following these intuitions, this paper seeks to address this gap by proposing Third-Worldist trade unionism as a broad historical-analytical category. Through the discussion of the above-mentioned contradictions, this paper pursues three main objectives.

First, it aims to show how social relations shaped by colonialism influenced the ideas and practices of nationalist trade unionism during decolonization and the early decades of postcolonial development; in other words, to highlight the nexus linking colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism, and its blocking effects on postcolonial projects of emancipation, within which diverse and heterogeneous Third-Worldist agendas were articulated.

Second, it seeks to affirm the existence of a common, structural model that cuts across claims of national or regional exceptionalism.

Third, it problematizes a strand of the historiography that, while acknowledging the cooptation of Arab and African trade unions by the state, has often assumed the exclusively top-down nature of this process, thereby theorizing a de facto “end of history” for these organizations until the trade union reforms and the introduction of pluralism in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴

² The notion of internationalism has long been difficult to define (Anderson 2002), and the same ambiguity characterizes practices labeled as internationalist. Here, trade union internationalism denotes the supranational and democratic coordination of union centers to defend or extend workers' rights where shared conditions or transnational problems exceed the scope of national action. In the Afro-Asian context, such coordination would have entailed collective resistance to both neocolonial pressures and the authoritarian tendencies of postcolonial states.

³ More generally, virtually all studies dealing with Arab and African trade unionism in the 1960s and 1970s—including those cited in this paper—recognize this pattern of political subordination.

⁴ One example of this trend on a continental scope is Fonteneau, author of one of the most comprehensive



The paper will focus on two national case studies, the *Union générale du travail tunisienne* (UGTT) and the *Union générale des travailleurs algériens* (UGTA). Operating within largely comparable political and social systems during the 1960s and 1970s (Ayubi 1995), the UGTT and the UGTA are particularly well suited to addressing the issues outlined above.

First of all, both countries and both organizations can be situated within the framework of Third-Worldist trade unionism.⁵ Moreover, the historiography has often treated the UGTT and the UGTA in opposing terms: the former as a unique case of trade union autonomy and influence in the Arab world (Yousfi 2015; Yousfi 2018), the latter as a paradigmatic and not so complex example of authoritarian state cooptation (Weiss 1970; Grimaud 1978; DERSA 1982; Ġābī 2001; Merani 2021).

A joint analysis of the UGTT and the UGTA allows, on the one hand, the Tunisian case to be reinserted into a broader Arab-African pattern regardless of its specificities and, on the other, clarifies how political subordination, detachment from the workers, and ineffective internationalism were not solely the outcome of government policies, but also resulted from choices shaped by the political identities and interests of trade union leaderships.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a comparative historiographical research approach, informed by a structuralist framework. At the same time, it avoids deterministic outcomes by placing at its center the agency of the trade union leaderships of the UGTT and the UGTA, and the weight of their voluntary political choices.

The special attention to trade union leaderships is justified by the fact that the main union cadres were the ones cultivating their organizations' relations with the state and operating within the Third-Worldist arena. More specifically, the main cadres of the UGTA and the UGTT are viewed here as trade union bureaucracies. This concept has to be understood both as a group of people who, for material interests, usurp the decision-making power of the working class (Mandel 1992), whose primary interest is the preservation of the status quo (Callinicos 1995), and as a structural relationship within the union, involving an unequal division of tasks and decision-making powers (Hyman 1989).

However, we are aware of the risk of conflating the whole unions with their leadership and bureaucratic apparatuses. It is then necessary to preliminarily acknowledge the gap between union elites and rank-and-file workers, the latter typically more concerned with material demands than with political or Third-Worldist agendas. We will thus attempt to point out, when necessary, the complex positioning of postcolonial unions between state power, their social bases, and transnational political projects.

monographs on the history of trade unionism in Africa (2004). The chapter devoted to trade unionism in the first decades of statist and postcolonial development is the shortest in the volume.

⁵ Algeria represents a plain case of a national-liberation regime that invested heavily in socialist planning and Third-Worldist diplomacy (Byrne 2016; Ghetas 2018). Tunisia, despite its moderate and pro-Western foreign policy – marked by close ties with France, a pro-U.S. orientation (Murphy 2002), skepticism toward Nasserist pan-Arabism and the Palestinian armed struggle, and ambiguity toward the Vietnamese conflict (Hendrickson 2017) – nonetheless shared key structural traits of Third-Worldist statehood. Even though Bourguiba's regime faced hostility from more radical Arab republics and the Tunisian Left (Ayari 2017), it still emerged from an anti-colonial movement and underwent, during the 60s, nearly a decade of state-led socialist development under the influence of the by-then Minister of Planning (and former unionist leader) Ahmed Ben Salah, centered on agrarian cooperatives and import-substitution industrialization.



Finally, it is important to note that the general sections of this paper adopt an African rather than an Arab lens. This is merely because African labor historiography has a broader, continent-wide scope, which makes it more suitable for identifying structural patterns.

Labor historiography on the Arab world has produced several seminal studies, but only rarely has it focused specifically on trade union organizations in a comparative outlook, with a few exceptions (El Sabbagh 1988). In most cases, this scholarship has adopted a monographic approach, centered on the experiences of the workers' movement of a single country (Batatu 1979; Beinín and Lockman 1987), or has taken the form of edited volumes in which heterogeneous contributions address different subjects across diverse territorial and chronological contexts (Lockman 1994). In recent years, a growing body of work has emerged that explicitly examines Arab trade unions. Yet even in this literature, analysis remains largely monographic and, when comparative perspectives are adopted, they tend to focus primarily on the role of trade unions in the 2011 uprisings or in the subsequent processes of political transition (Beinín 2020; Anderson 2025). As a result, the trade unions of the 1960s and 1970s—two decades that were central to state-building processes in many Arab countries, even more so in North Africa—remain largely unexplored from a comparative perspective.

Moreover, in the early post-1962 years Algeria—and thus the UGTA—focused most of its diplomatic and trade union activity on the African arena rather than the Egypt-dominated Arab field. Therefore, for the comparative purposes of this work, it is more appropriate to situate the analysis within the framework of African trade unionism.

In its central sections, the article relies on a factual analysis grounded in selected primary sources. The memoirs of trade union leaders, while shaped by retrospective reinterpretations following political crises, are used to reconstruct elite subjectivities and internal divisions within union leaderships. Official UGTT and UGTA press and documentary materials, despite their ideological language and systematic self-censorship (especially in the case of the press), are treated as sources for inferring union priorities and the configuration of power relations between trade unions and the state across different periods.

The paper analyses the three contradictions first at the regional level and then in their national articulations through the Tunisian and Algerian cases.

1. The first contradiction: political subordination in the African trade union movement

Western colonialism, especially after 1885, integrated African economies into unequal exchange with European industrial centers, generating extroverted markets and weak internal productive structures. Mining and related transport and bureaucratic sectors became the core of wage labor, while most of the population remained unskilled, underemployed, or outside the wage system (Rodney 1972; Arrighi and Saul 1973). Trade unionism itself was introduced by European and Asian settlers and, in many territories, institutionalized by colonial administrations primarily as a tool of social control (Cooper 1996). At the same time though, the legalization of many African unions in the 1940s occurred in the context of a massive wave of strikes that revealed workers' bargaining power vis-à-vis the colonial powers. In the



same period, the African trade unions became deeply intertwined with the national question, which linked the labor movement to the anticolonialist struggle (Freund 2019).

It is thus possible to say that four structural features shaped African trade unionism at independence: (1) the weakness of occupationally based unionism and the rise of national, unitary centers with a potentially class-based identity (Ananaba 1979); (2) the relatively elitist social background of union cadres—often civil servants, railway workers, teachers—reflecting the limited industrial base of their countries (Fonteneau 2004); (3) the centrality of labor movements in anti-colonial struggles, which not only consolidated the nationalist ideology of union elites but also created a strong interchangeability between the latter and the leaders of nationalist parties and liberation movements (Panford 1994); (4) finally, the combination of these factors tended to produce an early politicization of unions, reinforcing—more markedly than in Europe—the separation between “political” (in this case, anti-colonial) mobilization and strictly economic claims.

These elements became of significance when most postcolonial African states began to ban union pluralism and recognize only unitary union centers headed by petty-bourgeois nationalist elites (Sandbrook and Cohen 1975). Following early examples such as Ghana and Guinea, unions underwent bureaucratization and their transformation into “mass organizations” of one-party regimes, corresponding to the first contradictory tendency identified in the introduction: the loss of political autonomy (Soussi 2019).

This co-optation was not purely imposed from above. The developmental aims of the new states—industrialization, accumulation, national integration—favored a relationship of “historical collaboration” in which unions accepted productivist roles and moderated workers’ demands in the name of national development (Kester and Britwum 2007). In Ghana, for instance, the Trade Union Congress voluntarily requested integration into Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party in 1958 (Panford 1994). Exceptions existed, since the union elites were themselves often divided and had factions advocating for union autonomy, which were frequently subjected to state repression. But in most cases, workers faced a state-employer in which union leaders – as the Tunisian and Algerian cases are going to show – were themselves integrated into governmental elites, whether directly or in a secondary and subordinated position to more prominent “sub-groups”.

1.1. The Tunisian and Algerian trade unions and political subordination

Both the UGTT and the UGTA share a set of contextual premises that help clarify the historical and socio-productive conditions under which these two North African trade union centers emerged during French colonial rule.

These premises can be summarized as follows:

(1) The economies of both Tunisia and Algeria under French colonial rule rested on a stark dualism between a highly backward rural sector – largely employing the indigenous Muslim population – and a modern, capital-intensive agricultural sector controlled by European settlers and organized in large estates. While Algeria experienced sharper rural imbalances due to the longer duration and greater intensity of settler colonialism, both societies shared a similar social structure and pattern of industrial development. From the late nineteenth century onward, colonial integration into unequal exchange produced a deep process of deindus-



trialization: mining, transportation, and public works remained the only significant growth sectors, while skilled labor was overwhelmingly European (Amin 1966; Anderson 1986; Ben-noune 1987). As a result, rapid urbanization did not coincide with an industrial revolution. At independence (1956 in Tunisia; 1962 in Algeria), the social bases for trade unionism could not be found in manufacturing or basic industry, which remained marginal.

(2) In both countries, trade union structures and practices were introduced in the early twentieth century by European workers and modelled closely on the French labor movement, particularly the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT). The main trade unions operating in colonial Tunisia and Algeria, which fostered the emergence of the first generations of native trade union activists from the early twentieth century onward, were in fact overseas branches of the CGT, organizationally dependent on the Paris center and shaped by the same political agendas, first socialist and later communist (Gallissot 2000). The racist hierarchies of the colonial order were reproduced within these organizations: leadership positions remained overwhelmingly European, especially in Algeria, where Muslims were legally barred from holding union office until the mid-twentieth century (Djabi 2005; Iqnān and Lūṣīf 2019).

The CGT and the French Communist Party maintained an ambiguous stance toward the national question and long opposed autonomous national unionism. Only with the rise of mass nationalist mobilization did CGT-affiliated structures acquire formal autonomy from the French center through conflictual processes of “Tunisification” and “Algerianization.”

In Tunisia, the nationalist *Union générale tunisienne du travail* (UGTT) was created in early 1946 in open defiance of the CGT, while the rival *Union syndicale des travailleurs de Tunisie* (USTT) was formalized later the same year (Ben Hamida 2000).

In Algeria, by contrast, the *Union générale des travailleurs algériens* (UGTA) was founded in February 1956 during the war of liberation through a joint initiative of the FLN and nationalist trade union militants, with the explicit aim of countering the Messalist-aligned⁶ *Union syndicale des travailleurs algériens* (USTA) within the broader struggle for independence (Ageron 1989).

(3) The founders of both the UGTT and the UGTA shared broadly similar social backgrounds, at least in terms of their occupational profiles. In the early years of the UGTT, its leading figures included transport workers (Farhat Hached, Bachir Ben Brahim), municipal employees (Habib Achour, Mohamed Kraïem), postal workers (Ahmed Tlili), health-sector employees (Abdelaziz Bouraoui), and teachers (Ahmed Ben Salah). Several of these cadres – most notably Hached and Achour – had previously been active within the CGT, and some had been members of Bourguiba’s Neo-Destour even before the party’s historic alliance with the UGTT at the November 1955 Neo-Destour congress. Ahmed Ben Salah, in particular, had been a prominent figure in the Destourian youth movement.⁷

As for the founders of the UGTA, they belonged to essentially the same occupational strata: transport workers (Boualem Bourouiba), municipal employees (Ahmed Zitouni), postal workers (Rebbah Slimane), health-sector employees (Attalah Benaïssa), teachers (Hassen Bourouiba, Tahar Gaïd), dockworkers (Rabah Djermane, Mayouf Hannachi), hydrocarbon workers (Mohamed Abib), and accountants (Aïssat Idir). All of these cadres had previously been active

⁶ From Messali Hadj, the main leader of Algerian nationalism from the 1920s and the 1940s who became an open adversary of the FLN during the war of national liberation.

⁷ Biographical information on Tunisian trade union cadres comes from Bessis 1985.



within the CGT - later transferring to the UGSA in the period between its creation and the birth of the UGTA - and by the outbreak of the war of national liberation they were already recognized militants of the Algerian nationalist movement.⁸

Most notably, Aïssat Idir, Boualem Bourouiba, Attalah Benaïssa, and Rabah Djermane served, between the late 1940s and the early 1950s, on the central committee for social and labor affairs of the PPA-MTL (the Algerian People's Party-Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Freedoms, both founded by Messali Hadj). Within both this structure and the UGSA, these militants engaged in political work aimed at subordinating immediate social demands to the overarching objective of anticolonial liberation (Bourouiba 1998).

Both Tunisian and Algerian trade union leaders broadly conformed to the two main traits that characterized African union cadres engaged in decolonization: a social origin ranging from the more privileged and skilled segments of the indigenous working class to the administrative or intellectual petty bourgeoisie; and a "total and unconditional" nationalist orientation, an expression cited by Hacène Merani to describe the ideological outlook of the UGTA's founders (Merani 2021).

The main point of divergence between the UGTT and the UGTA lies in the role each organization played in its respective national liberation struggle, an element that profoundly shaped the position the two unions would later occupy within the postcolonial political order and their subsequent relationship with state power.

As mentioned, the UGTT emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War out of internal tensions within the Tunisian trade union milieu. Although the national question was central to its founders, the organization was created independently of the Neo-Destour and of the political forces that composed the broader nationalist movement.

The social composition of the Neo-Destour - whose leaders came largely from the urban bourgeoisie of the Sahel or from indigenous landed elites in the interior - limited the party's connection to the subaltern classes and its capacity to mobilize them (Emmecey, Santucci and Michel 1975). By contrast, the UGTT, rooted early in the popular masses, quickly proved to be an indispensable ally in the struggle for independence.

In 1952, when Neo-Destour leader Habib Bourguiba was arrested by the French authorities, the UGTT temporarily stepped into the leadership of the nationalist movement, a role it maintained until the assassination of its founder secretary-general Farhat Hached in December of that year, likely at the hands of the French secret services. The union's central position in the national arena was then consolidated at the Neo-Destour congress held in Sfax in November 1955, one year before independence. At that gathering, Bourguiba was able to defeat his rival Salah Ben Youssef largely thanks to the decisive support of the UGTT (Yousfi 2018).

This alliance was formalized through the incorporation of key union cadres into the Neo-Destour political committee and through the party's endorsement of the socioeconomic program advanced by Ahmed Ben Salah's secretariat, particularly as elaborated during the UGTT's sixth congress (September 1956). The economic and social report presented on that occasion reflected Ben Salah's broader vision: a rejection of "exploitative capitalism" as inadequate for Tunisia's development, and a call for a socialist, state-led model centered on the expropriation of former colonial lands, the establishment of agricultural cooperatives, and a

⁸ Biographical information on Algerian trade union cadres comes from Gallissot, ed. 2006.



strategy of decentralized industrialization extending even to the most marginalized regions of the south-central interior (Al-Mansouri 2021).

Ben Salah's model, shaped by his technocratic background and nationalist outlook, was an interclass, populist socialism in which the trade union was expected to renounce contentious action in the name of social harmony. His limited conception of union autonomy was evident in his proposal to Bourguiba to merge the UGTT and the Neo-Destour into a single vanguard organization (Bellin 2002).

Fearing that the UGTT—then counting roughly 180,000 members—might overshadow the party, Bourguiba rejected the proposal and removed Ben Salah from the union in 1956. Exploiting personal rivalries and the presence of cadres politically loyal to the Neo-Destour, he later ousted Ahmed Tlili in 1963 and Habib Achour in 1965, installing leaderships formally distinct from the party but subordinate in practice, tasked with mediating and disseminating state policies among the working classes (Camau and Geisser 2003).

Throughout the 1960s, successive UGTT leaderships renounced claimant action, discouraged strikes, and accepted a multi-year wage freeze—reflecting not only coercion but also the senior cadres' own endorsement of the regime's statist development pact. The socialist agenda initially articulated within the UGTT was implemented as official state policy once former union leader Ben Salah was appointed minister of Finance, Economy, and Planning and placed in charge of the ten-year development program (*Perspectives décennales de développement*, 1962–1971), becoming the main architect of Tunisia's state-led economic transformation (al-Manṣūrī 2018).

On the Algerian side, the UGTA was founded slightly more than a year after the outbreak of the war of national liberation, one of the most violent and socially transformative anticolonial struggles on the African continent and in the broader non-European world. Although nationalist trade unionists linked to the PPA-MTLD⁹ had long advocated within the UGSA-CGT¹⁰ for the creation of a national union center, the UGTA ultimately emerged from an FLN initiative, conceived from the outset as a “mass organization” of the armed liberation movement (Bouchama 2014).

The union's potential influence during the decolonization process was immediately curtailed by severe repression. In May 1956, a French roundup in Algiers led to the arrest of dozens of union cadres – 250 across the country – and decapitated the UGTA's entire national secretariat. Aïssat Idir, the organization's first secretary-general, was tortured to death, apparently in the months preceding July 1959 (Bourouiba 1998).

Yet the specific dynamics of the Algerian liberation struggle also shaped the possibilities and limits of union mobilization as a method of anticolonial action. The leaders of the FLN were, on average, very young men with at most a secondary education, drawn largely from modest social backgrounds—primarily the working-class and petty-bourgeois strata of small towns—and shaped by a radical political orientation. This radicalism reflected both the extreme violence of colonial social relations in Algeria and the prior militancy many had

⁹ *Parti du peuple algérien* and *Mouvement pour le triomphe des libertés démocratiques*, both headed by Messali Hadj in different periods of time.

¹⁰ The Algerian branch of the CGT, founded in the summer of 1954 as an autonomous entity from the mainland in order to prevent the emergence of an exclusively nationalist trade union.



acquired within the PPA-MTLD, whose egalitarian populism differed markedly from the political orientations of Tunisia's Neo-Destour (Stora 1989).

The FLN, in essence, did not experience the same degree of social detachment from the popular classes as other nationalist movements. The militarization of the anti-colonial struggle and the shift of armed operations to the countryside after 1956–57 facilitated the broad enlistment and mobilization of the peasantry.

By contrast, the UGTA became a significant socio-political actor only later, once the FLN entered a phase of factional fragmentation, particularly during the fratricidal confrontation of summer 1962 between the main institutional expressions of the Algerian Revolution: the National Popular Army, the Political Bureau, and the Provisional Government of the Algerian Revolution.

Ahmed Ben Bella, who secured the triumph of his Political Bureau with the backing of the Frontier Army, opened his first government with a marked distrust toward the newly reconstituted UGTA—particularly in light of the union's cautious neutrality during the quasi-civil war that followed independence (Bourouiba 2012).

Yet, looking ahead, the UGTA was also becoming an increasingly valuable ally for the emerging postcolonial state. UGTA militants had played a key role in coordinating the spontaneous occupations carried out by industrial and agricultural wage workers, together with peasant groups, on factories and land formerly owned by European settlers. These occupations formed the basis of Algeria's distinctive and complex experiment with workers' self-management—an experiment in which the UGTA assumed an important, if often difficult to operationalize, coordinating and supervisory function (Clegg 1971).

Overall, the UGTA initially asserted its intention to remain autonomous from the FLN, which was already being projected - through the Tripoli Program of May 1962 - as the single party of revolutionary Algeria. Ben Bella and his allies temporarily and tactically conceded to the demands of the autonomist union cadres on 10 December 1962, when the FLN and the UGTA reached an agreement - whose validity was called into question almost immediately - in which the FLN pledged to respect the union's organizational and decision-making autonomy, albeit within a framework of close coordination.¹¹

The regime's true intentions became clear at the first official UGTA congress in Algiers in January 1963. In his opening address, Ben Bella argued that while trade union autonomy had been necessary during the liberation war, it was now incompatible with national development. He warned against "*ouvriériste*" tendencies that risked turning industrial workers into a privileged minority, a position echoed by FLN leader Mohammed Khider and labor minister Bachir Boumaza.¹²

This line was contested by the UGTA cadre Boualem Bourouiba, who defended union autonomy and criticized the prioritization of FLN cells over genuine trade union activity. The congress was ultimately resolved through a coup de force: FLN militants admitted hundreds of unemployed workers and peasants into the site of the conference, preventing many delegates from entering and enabling the violent overthrow of the provisional leadership. The government then imposed a new secretariat.¹³

¹¹ *L'Humanité*, December 13, 1962.

¹² *El Chaab*, January 18, 1963.

¹³ This episode is well known and is reported in the same terms by all contemporary accounts, including those



While this episode seems to exemplify the co-optation of a rebellious, autonomist union by an authoritarian state, it is important to recall that the delegates had been nearly evenly divided from the outset between supporters of the Political Bureau and advocates of union autonomy. The new secretariat itself, composed largely of staunch supporters of the Political Bureau and Ben Bella's self-styled radical socialism, included several foundational figures of Algerian trade unionism and UGTA itself such as Rabah Djermane, Mohamed Flissi, Safi Bou-dissa, Mohamed Tahar Chafai and Cheik Benghazi (Bourouiba 2012).

The deep political heterogeneity and internal divisions within the post-independence leadership of the UGTA, repeatedly emphasized by the embittered Bourouiba, are also confirmed in the memoir-monograph by Abdelmajid Azzi—former ALN combatant and member of the union's National Executive Commission (1969) and National Secretariat (1973)—who similarly characterizes the trade union elite of the 1970s (Azzi 2012).

The UGTA thus settled into a subordinate role vis-à-vis the state, functioning increasingly as a “supervisory” union charged with carrying out the socialist education of workers, accelerating the Algerianization of the labor force and industrial cadres, and adopting a “political and managerial” rather than an “economic and claimant” orientation.¹⁴ In practice, this meant preventing strikes in the socialist sector through union mediation, and moderating them when they occurred in the private sector—while still upholding the notion of the strike as the workers’ “ultimate weapon.”¹⁵

Despite the UGTA's domestication, 1964 was marked by considerable social unrest—often spontaneous and contrary to government directives. The need for more disciplined labor relations temporarily increased the union's bargaining leverage vis-à-vis a regime that did not yet fully control the political landscape.

Some scholars have interpreted the UGTA's second congress (March 1965) as reflecting, at least in part, a brief phase of more favorable power relations for the union (Ottaway and Ottaway 1970).

In practice, however, the gains were limited. The new secretariat did include figures less subordinate to the FLN - such as the returning Boualem Bourouiba and the new secretary-general, Mouloud Oumeziane - but this fell well short of grassroots expectations. A major point of contention was the proposal advanced by the radical Algiers central local union (UL) for a gradual restructuring of the economy based on “workers’ control” of enterprises¹⁶ which the congress's organizing committee dismissed as deviationist.¹⁷ Overall, the congress defined itself as a “congress of responsibility and management,” reaffirming that the working class

of Algerian trade union leaders and foreign delegations. Even representatives of the CGT, who were highly sympathetic to the Ben Bella government, were taken aback by the extralegal conduct of the congress; see ACFDT, CP/11/53, “Notes de Caspard, délégué de la CFTC (secteur international) au congrès de l'UGTA”.

¹⁴ In the UGTA press of the 1963-1965 period, examples of this line are countless. As examples, we can cite *Révolution et travail*, Nov. 26, 1964 (about union education) and *Révolution et travail*, March 25, 1965 (statements by FLN leader Hocine Zahouane).

¹⁵ About the conception on strikes, see the editorial of *Révolution et travail*, January 20, 1965.

¹⁶ Archives de La Contemporaine (ALC), Fonds Michel Raptis, FARES 341, UGTA, “Projet de programme sur le contrôle ouvrier”, undated; FARES 341, *2e Congrès UGTA: enrichissements aux textes de la commission préparatoire par un groupe des militants*, March 10, 1965.

¹⁷ *Cahiers El Jarida, Organe du Parti de la révolution socialiste*, 2, December 1978, p. 12.



bore a special responsibility toward the national development project of the revolutionary leadership.¹⁸

The UGTA shifted back toward a more confrontational, claimant stance only after the military coup of 19 June 1965, when defense minister and army chief Houari Boumedienne overthrew Ben Bella, dissolved the National Assembly, and established the National Council of the Revolution (NCR), largely composed of military personnel.

Rather than in opposition to yet another antidemocratic turn in Algerian politics, the UGTA at first questioned its alignment with the military *pouvoir* because the new regime appeared intent on shelving Ben Bella's self-management-oriented socialism and reducing the union's role as a socialist mobilizing force. After a few days of hesitation following the coup of 19 June though, Mouloud Oumeziane met with Houari Boumedienne and pledged the union's support for the military's "corrective movement."

At the same time, the UGTA's press organ, *Révolution et travail*—which resumed publication in September 1965, three months after Ben Bella's overthrow—distanced itself both from militants of the former Communist Party of Algeria (PCA) and from the FLN's radical left grouped in the *Organisation de résistance populaire* (ORP), who denounced and actively resisted the coup. Boumedienne's explicit intention to restructure Algerian socialism around state companies modeled on French state-capitalist enterprises, while marginalizing the self-managed sector, soon strained the UGTA's cooperation with the National Council of the Revolution (CNR). *Révolution et travail* began openly criticizing the return of several nationalized industries to their former owners and denouncing the emergence of a "bureaucratic bourgeoisie" within the state.¹⁹ As a result, the government banned the union newspaper, which was not published for the entirety of 1966. That same year, tensions intensified between the UGTA's sections and the Ministry of Energy and Industry, headed by technocrat Abdessalam Belaïd, Boumedienne's protégé and the architect of Algeria's new heavy industrialization strategy.²⁰

The UGTA's desire to obtain greater decision-making authority over labor relations likely contributed to the regime's decision, in February 1969, to ban the Algiers regional union and all local unions in the capital. These organizations were known for their radicalism and for drafting alternative statutes for national corporations and self-managed enterprises.²¹ Indicatively, their activities earned the Algiers central local union accusations of indiscipline and anti-party behavior.²²

The UGTA's third national congress was not organized by the union's national secretariat, but by an *ad hoc* committee chaired by Kaïd Ahmed, a landowner within Boumedienne's inner circle who had been appointed head of the FLN in March 1968. Held in May 1969, the congress

¹⁸ UGTA, *Deuxième congrès UGTA. Ensemble des textes adoptés*. Alger: Maison du Peuple, March 23-28, 1965.

¹⁹ See, for example, the articles denouncing the return of the Norcolor paint and dye factory to its former colonial owner, which appeared in *Révolution et travail*, September 10, 1965, or against the formation of a bureaucratic bourgeoisie in national societies, in *Révolution et travail*, August 17, 1967.

²⁰ Archives du Parti Communiste de France (APCF), 261J7/433, UGTA, "Circulaire d'information n° 707 du Secrétaire Général de l'UGTA Mouloud Oumeziane concernant le conflit entre le Ministère de l'Industrie et les responsables syndicaux", undated (presumably 1967).

²¹ UGTA, UL Alger-Centre, "Travaux préparatoires des 21 et 22 juillet 1967", "Conférence préparatoire de la Conférence régionale du secteur industriel socialiste (SIS)", July 21 and 22, 1967.

²² *El Moudjahid*, February I, 1969.



elected Abdelkader Benikous, previously responsible for the teachers' federation, as secretary-general. It also incorporated into the union's statutes the by-then official status of the UGTA as a "mass organization of the FLN."²³

This marked the culmination of the Algerian regime's domestication of the union, achieved, as in the Tunisian case, in relation to a complex political actor oscillating between autonomist and conflictual tendencies on the one hand, and adherence to the state socialist agenda on the other. Ultimately, the autonomist current remained marginal, while most union cadres were organically integrated and subordinate to the political element of the regime.

This configuration persisted into the 1980s. The UGTA's support for Chadli Benjedid "liberalizing" governments does not contradict this pattern: until 1986–88, Benjedid's reforms primarily reshaped economic institutions while leaving intact the "social" dimension of the state to which the UGTA remained ideologically attached. Chadli's government also deepened the promotion of UGTA officials into the party and administrative apparatus - most notably within the Ministry of Labor - further consolidating a mechanism of self-cooptation that reinforced the union's political alignment (Ġābī 2001).

2. The second contradiction: the unrepresentativeness of African trade unions

The subordination of trade unions to dominant parties unfolded within a broader framework of statist economies, where governments grounded their political legitimacy partly – if not primarily – on the top-down promotion of labor as the counterpart to capital in a highly conflictual dualism. This often translated into relatively high wages or into wage restraint compensated through social benefits provided outside formal labor relations.

Aligning with governmental agendas also brought clear advantages to national trade union centers: monopolies over workers' representation, compulsory membership, and the collection of union dues directly enforced by the state (Britwum and Dakhli 2019).

Yet developmentalist ideology also entailed restricting collective bargaining and, above all, limiting the right to strike, sometimes banning it entirely in public and nationalized sectors. In most cases, national union centers adapted to this framework: they refrained from channeling rank-and-file demands (and often stigmatized them politically) even while continuing to advocate for improvements in workers' material conditions. This stance was perfectly consistent with the hostility to class-struggle perspectives characteristic of the various strands of African and Arab socialism that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, especially where state-sponsored union monopolism reached its peak (Benot 1969; Tibi 1990).

As a result, trade unions not only lost autonomy but were also deprived of any leading role in political and economic life. They increasingly came to be conceived as "transmission belts" for ruling-party policies and as "schools" tasked with providing workers with a socialist education. In this sense, the post-independence conception of unions in African statist regimes often resembled – or was directly modeled on – the Soviet experience (Allen 2021).

²³ FLN-UGTA, "Documents du 3^{ème} Congrès de l'UGTA", May 5-9, 1969, p. 33.



The transformation of national trade union leaderships into mobilizing forces organically tied to the productivist needs of the state, and their distance from class-struggle perspectives and workers' partial interests, corresponds to the second contradictory and antinomical tendency identified in the introduction: the limited representativeness of trade unions vis-à-vis the working classes.

2.1. The Tunisian and Algerian trade unions in the face of the social upheavals of the '70s

While the co-optation of the 1960s illustrates the first contradiction of Third-Worldist trade unionism – i.e. political subordination – the stance of the UGTT and the UGTA toward workers' demands in the 1970s more clearly reflects the second: the conditional nature of union representativeness. In Tunisia, this shift followed the abandonment of Ben Salah's cooperativist experiment in the early 1970s (Borsali 2008).

Appointed prime minister in 1970, Hédi Nouria introduced a liberal turn centered on foreign investment incentives and privatization, notably through the 1972 investment code. While these reforms produced short-term growth and new industrial sectors, they also led to rising foreign debt and increased social inequality by the end of the decade (Yousfi 2018). The state's retreat from social spending and its embrace of market mechanisms thus broke the earlier social pact centered on labor protection, weakening the alliance between the regime and the UGTT, whose leadership had previously endorsed the statist-socialist agenda of the PSD (*Parti socialiste destourien*).

Meanwhile, the workforce employed in the newly emerging sectors of the early 1970s – young, educated, and politicized – launched a series of spontaneous strikes beginning in 1973, often without approval from the national leadership. Their main demands centered on wage increases and the reversal of unfair dismissals. In early 1977, these tensions produced a “social contract” between the UGTT and the government, intended to guarantee workplace stability during the next development plan (1978–1982). In exchange for an increase in the minimum wage, the union committed itself to ensuring high productivity levels in sectors under its “responsibility.” Yet a large portion of the union rank-and-file rejected the pact's legitimacy, and two major strikes erupted later that year: one in the textile sector of Ksar Hellal (1,200 workers) and another in the Gafsa mining basin (13,000 workers) (Bellin 2002).

The UGTT's national leadership, pressed by spontaneous mobilizations from below and already opposed to the government's liberal turn, decided to issue an ultimatum demanding that the authorities meet the union's core claims. The government responded instead with intimidation and outright repression: party organizations and police units carried out raids on UGTT premises, harassed union officials, and targeted activists, as is also attested by the memoirs of Achour himself (1987) and of his comrade Sadok Allouche (2016). In reaction, Habib Achour, then the union's secretary-general, was forced by local union bodies – under threat of losing all legitimacy – to resign from the PSD's political bureau and called a general strike for 22 January 1978. On 26 January – the day of the strike – state repression descended heavily on the union. A curfew was declared, Achour and the entire UGTT executive committee were arrested, and dozens (if not hundreds) of workers and union militants were killed by party militias and security forces (Huwārī 2024).



Shortly afterward, the government imposed a new leadership on the UGTT through an extraordinary congress convened entirely outside the legal framework of the union's statutes and which was ironically called the "Congress of Clarity and Transparency" (24–25 November 1978). The early 1980s were marked first by the "puppet" secretariat of Ubayd al-Tijani, and then by a period of internal conflict between the independentist faction led by the newly amnestied Achour and the government-aligned faction headed by Taïeb Baccouche. The internal split weakened the trade union confederation, which in 1985–1986 reverted to full state control. This led to a prolonged crisis in the UGTT, increasingly viewed by Tunisian workers as unrepresentative and far from their realities (Huwārī 2024).

Algeria, too - though on a more limited scale - experienced social tensions during the same period, primarily reflected in growing worker disengagement from their union.

It is important to note that the sources allowing for a relatively detailed reconstruction of social unrest in Algeria in the late 1970s consist primarily of publications produced by the radical left Algerian opposition,²⁴ which paid close attention to trade union affairs. While the militant nature of these sources—and thus their political and moral judgments on the events—must be taken into account, the information they provide remains valuable, particularly when read in relation to the near-total silence of the official trade union press, which limited itself to attributing the strikes to a "lack of understanding" of the "main documents of the Revolution."²⁵

Unlike Tunisia, the Algerian crisis unfolded within a phase of fully consolidated state socialism. Following the 1971 nationalization of hydrocarbons and the 1973 oil boom, the Boumedienne regime sharply expanded revenues, heavy industrial investment, and social spending, including the establishment of a free national health-care system. Yet the productivist development model also entailed austerity in the sphere of consumption.²⁶ By 1977, official discourse centered on the "battle for management and production." In a speech before the National Assembly on 31 March, delivered alongside Fidel Castro, Boumedienne proclaimed the advent of an "era of austerity" and framed labor discipline, productivity, and sanctions against waste as national imperatives. The UGTA leadership, still headed by Abdelkader Benikous, organized compulsory nationwide meetings to disseminate the new line²⁷ and, in late April, issued an appeal urging workers to conduct the "battle for production" in a harmonious manner²⁸ within the framework of the GSE.²⁹ These were not merely propaganda slogans, but the medium-term blueprint through which Boumedienne and his labor minister, Amir, sought to launch a new phase of labor discipline. The program envisaged longer working

²⁴ In this case, a group called *Comité de liaison des trotskystes algériens* (CLTA). For further information on the CLTA, see Simon 2008.

²⁵ *Révolution et travail* N°333, September 20, 1977

²⁶ *El Moudjahid*, April 1 and 2, 1977.

²⁷ *El Moudjahid*, April 4, 1977.

²⁸ *El Moudjahid*, April 27, 1977.

²⁹ "*Gestion socialiste des entreprises*", a particular system of workers' representation within the public (socialist) sector of the economy, at the level of the production unit (unit workers' assemblies) and the enterprise (enterprise workers' assemblies), designed to associate workers with the management of factories and national companies in the management of the national economy, and in general to establish labor relations as non-conflictual as possible. The GSE was put into practice mainly after 1974.



hours, a productivity-based wage grid, and new labor legislation that would later take shape as the General Workers' Statute.³⁰

In this context, dockworkers in Algiers felt the pressure more acutely than most categories. The port, managed by the public-sector enterprise SONAMA, was now required to operate continuously in two seven-hour shifts to prevent congestion. Poor safety conditions led to several fatal accidents; nevertheless, the press persisted in accusing dockworkers of absenteeism and "anti-socialist" behavior. At the very moment when the UGTA endorsed the creation of a "commission for the battle of production," the port workers launched a strike on 8 May. Their demands included general wage increases, reduced working hours, overtime pay, a new rights framework, improved safety and hygiene conditions, better transportation, and paid leave.

The reaction was immediate. Both the local GSE structures and, above all, the UGTA leadership condemned the strike. On 10 May, clashes with the police left two workers dead, and security forces occupied the port. Yet even their presence failed to restore order.³¹ A thousand dockworkers then convened a General Assembly at the Bologhine port on 14 May, only to be attacked by police forces. Taking refuge in the *Maison du peuple*, the UGTA headquarters, they eventually received emissaries sent by Boumedienne, who signaled his willingness to negotiate and to meet most of their demands.

But the wave of unrest did not end there. At the end of July, railway workers launched a strike, and on 1 August the employees of the RSTA (the Algiers Transport Company) followed suit with essentially the same demands as the dockworkers, threatening to paralyze the entire capital. The solidarity shown by Algiers' inhabitants and the strikers' logistical advantage made repression too risky: a heavy-handed response could have triggered a general strike across the working class. As a result, Boumedienne went personally to the central depot in Fougereux to promise that the government would meet the strikers' demands.³²

Although the UGTA continued, at least symbolically, to represent an institution to which workers could look – as illustrated by the Algiers dockworkers seeking refuge from repression in the union's own headquarters – its leadership adopted a stance sharply at odds with the social behavior of its rank and file. During the crisis, Benikous and the other national secretaries did not even attempt to mediate between the strikers and the state, perhaps aware that the workers would reject any intervention on their part. In September and October, Benikous reiterated the national executive commission's condemnation of all the strikes that had taken place over the summer, arguing that they played into the hands of the "enemies of the socialist revolution." He also denounced any form of worker mobilization conducted outside the UGTA and attempted once again to rally the workforce around the "battle for management and production."³³

This did not prevent Boumedienne from blaming the UGTA's national leadership for its inability to anticipate or contain the wave of unrest,³⁴ and from replacing almost the entire executive at the union's Fifth National Congress in May 1978. While the new leadership in-

³⁰ *El Moudjahid*, April 29 and 30, 1977.

³¹ *Supplément à Tribune Algerienne* n°11, September 1977.

³² *Supplément à Tribune Algerienne* n°11, September 1977.

³³ *Révolution et travail* N°333, September 20, 1977; *Révolution et travail* N° 334, October 5, 1977.

³⁴ *El Moudjahid*, September 27, 1977.



stalled in 1978 can indeed be interpreted as Boumedienne's attempt to rebuild ties with the working class (several of its members were former PCA cadres), under Chadli Benjedid the UGTA was "restructured" in 1982 and turned even more decisively into a political, monopolistic and bureaucratic apparatus (Nuwaysir and Hātī 2017).

The Algerian case thus reveals an almost complete alienation of the UGTA leadership from the social mobilizations of 1977, arguably the most significant since 1962. Although the union continued to denounce the most blatant forms of bureaucratic and technocratic excess within public-sector enterprises, it did so strictly within the ideological vocabulary of state socialism and never dared to challenge the foundations of Boumedienne's economic nationalism.

The Tunisian case is more complex. It is true that the fierce and bloody confrontation of 1978 placed the UGTT in direct political opposition to the state, a situation unmatched by any African or Arab union in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet this rupture was rooted in the regime's abandonment of a statist socioeconomic project that had, in many respects, been shaped by the UGTT itself. For its part, the union viewed the PSD's pro-capitalist turn with deep suspicion. Moreover, the strikes of 1973–1976 were often spontaneous and launched without authorization from the central leadership, which was widely criticized for the 1977 "social contract." Only sustained pressure from below, combined with the collapse of the previous development model, pushed the UGTT's leaders to openly confront the government and to support workers' mobilizations.

This does not diminish the historical significance of the UGTT leadership's opposition, nor the political and personal costs they incurred because of it. But it does justify characterizing the Tunisian union of the 1970s as offering an absent, partial, or otherwise conditional representation of the working classes.

3. The third contradiction: the lack of internationalist practices among African trade unions

As for the third contradictory tendency—namely, the inability of postcolonial unions to establish a genuinely internationalist trade union practice—it relates directly to their "Third-Worldist" dimension and emerges clearly in the contradictions that structured relations between African union centers and global trade union internationals. The prevailing historical pattern was the failure of African unions to establish unified Pan-African organizational structures. Instead, they reproduced in their own interactions the political rivalries of their respective states, as well as the regional blocs – military, diplomatic, or ideological – that characterized the Cold War's internationalization on the continent.

Of course, struggles for hegemony between liberal and communist currents had already appeared within African trade unionism before the late 1940s, largely mediated by European union cadres and institutional models imported from the metropolises. Yet the postcolonial translation of these tensions carried far greater weight (Bellucci 2020).

The major dividing line among African unions in the 1960s centered on international affiliation. In 1949, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) – founded after World War II as a unified structure – split after most Western unions (except the Italian CGIL and French



CGT) withdrew, citing growing communist and Soviet influence. That same year, these unions formed the anti-communist International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), within which the U.S. AFL (and later AFL-CIO) exercised overwhelming influence in line with Washington's foreign policy priorities (Godfried 1987).

A direct confrontation between WFTU and ICFTU ensued, with significant repercussions in Africa. During the early 1950s, several newly independent African unions joined the ICFTU's African regional organization, AFRO, founded in Accra in 1959. At the same time, the UGTAN (*Union générale des travailleurs d'Afrique noire*) emerged from a 1957 conference of radical Francophone African unionists in Cotonou. UGTAN placed anti-colonial struggle at its center and adopted non-affiliation to any international body as a principle, intended to safeguard Pan-Africanist autonomy. After gaining the key affiliation of the Ghanaian TUC – the first major English-speaking union from an influential and radical independent state – UGTAN was harshly repressed by French authorities in West Africa on the eve of Guinea's independence.

Nevertheless, in May 1961, radical union forces organized in Casablanca the inaugural conference of the Pan-African Federation of Trade Unions (AATUF). The meeting was boycotted by conservative states of the so-called Brazzaville group and by moderate Anglophone countries such as Nigeria and Liberia. After a third of the delegates withdrew, leaders from Morocco, Algeria, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, and the United Arab Republic founded the AATUF, which immediately adopted a confrontational posture toward both pro-neocolonial African governments and the AFRO-ICFTU unions aligned with them. The latter responded by accusing AATUF of being unrepresentative and government-controlled – although the real cleavage between AATUF and AFRO-ICFTU was never about pluralism – and defended their right to international affiliation. In 1962, these unions founded the African Trade Union Confederation (ATUC) in Dakar (Busch 1983).

The AATUF-ATUC antagonism reproduced, within the trade union sphere, the political rupture that emerged in 1963 between the progressive and conservative Casablanca and Monrovia groups, during the creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Throughout the 1960s, this conflict prevented any genuine unity or effective political coordination among African unions. Moreover, AATUF itself was weakened by its growing dependence on the WFTU and by internal rivalries between Black African and North African union cadres, particularly from Ghana, Morocco, and the UAR (Agyeman 2003). According to the online archives of the African Union, the conflict between AATUF and ATUC was ultimately resolved from above, through the intervention of OAU bodies such as the Economic and Social Commission, the Council of Ministers, and the Meetings of Ministers of Labor, all direct expressions of member-state governments. The decisive role of state ministers reflected the fact that, given the mobilization potential of continent-wide or regional trade union coordination in areas such as vocational training and production, African governments saw trade union unity not as an internal matter for the unions themselves, but as a political issue of higher strategic importance.³⁵

The 1969 joint declaration in which AATUF and ATUC agreed on the need to achieve trade union unity “from within the labor movement” might suggest that the rapprochement process had been taken out of the hands of activists seeking greater autonomy and placed under

³⁵ OUA, Council of Ministers, *Nineteenth Ordinary Session, All-African Trade Union Unity*, Rabat, June 1972, GM/457.



the control of African governments.³⁶ In practice, several joint meetings were held between ministers and union leaders, yet in these settings the two groups consistently spoke and acted in unison. Moreover, despite the official nature of the meeting minutes, it is possible to see that OAU organs didn't refrain from complaining about the limited participation of union executives in the unification process: key leaders were frequently absent from major meetings or delegated their presence to lower-ranking cadres.³⁷ Even when trade union leaders did participate, what stands out is that overcoming the AATUF-ATUC divide was treated almost entirely as an organizational and bureaucratic issue. A 1972 Council of Ministers report, for example, reduced the disagreement between the two confederations to the question of international affiliation.³⁸ This was probably accurate, since African unions – whether aligned with AATUF or ATUC – fulfilled essentially the same social functions within their respective national contexts. But it also reveals that union principles, and the broader relationships among unions, states, and working classes, were never at stake in the negotiations between the two organizations.

In 1973 then, AATUF and ATUC finally merged to form the Organization of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU). Debates on international affiliation were postponed until the next congress, held in Tripoli in 1976, in order to expedite the achievement of a formal – and largely fictitious – unity. In reality, the issue remained unresolved, as many unions continued to maintain their affiliation with the ICFTU. The limited effectiveness of OATUU was apparent from the outset, for two main reasons:

- 1) Its organizational structure was out of reach for the union's workers: leadership positions were assigned by ministers of OAU member states rather than elected internally by the unions belonging to the new confederation.
- 2) OATUU became fully integrated into the developmentalist agendas of member states: it functioned as a coordinating body among trade union centers that were themselves increasingly detached from the combative aspirations of their working classes. Its activities largely consisted of organizing all-African seminars on "political education" and vocational training, reflecting its primary purpose of facilitating economic development. As one of its early programmatic statements put it: "As we have always maintained, it is through education that we can inculcate Pan-African Philosophy in the minds of the African workers and also attain a high rate of productivity in the continent [...] OATUU has worked hard trying to harmonize the relationship between trade unions and governments to work together for the harmonious development of their respective states. In many cases we have succeeded, and trade unionists are now partners with their governments in development."³⁹

³⁶ OUA, Council of Ministers, *Fourteenth Ordinary Session, All-African Trade Union Unity, Addis Ababa, February/March 1970, CM/316 (Part 2)*.

³⁷ OUA, Council of Ministers, *Twenty-First Ordinary Session, All-African Trade Union Unity, Addis Ababa, 17-21 May 1973, CM/514, p. 5*.

³⁸ OUA, Council of Ministers, *Nineteenth Ordinary Session, All-African Trade Union Unity, Rabat, June 1972, GM/457*.

³⁹ OUA, Council of Ministers, *Thirtieth Ordinary Session, Consideration of Application for Subvention by OATUU, February 1978, CM/854, p. 26*.



3.1. The Tunisian and Algerian unions and inter-African internationalism

International trade union affiliation provides a useful lens through which to assess both the penetration of Cold War ideological dynamics into African labor movements and, above all, the actual efficacy of the programmatic internationalism claimed by anti-colonial unions.

From its founding congress in 1946, the UGTT applied for membership in the WFTU, at a time when the liberal and anti-communist split that would erupt in London in 1949 had not yet occurred, and when a fragile form of global trade union unity still survived. For Tunisian nationalist trade unionism, affiliation with an international confederation offered a potential source of support for the struggle for independence. Yet the Tunisian CGT (renamed USTT in 1946 and nominally autonomous from the Paris center) opposed both the creation of the UGTT and its request to join the WFTU. The WFTU sided with the CGT due to ideological affinity and admitted the new USTT in 1947 in place of the nationalist UGTT (Beling 1965).

Opportunistically, UGTT's application was accepted only in the days following the London split. Its stay within the WFTU, however, was brief. At the WFTU's second congress (Milan, 1949), the leadership appointed the secretary of the still-existing USTT as the federation's North African representative. A little over a year later, the UGTT announced its decision to sever relations with the WFTU. In 1951, it joined the newly formed ICFTU, a confederation that Farhat Hached personally found far more congenial than the pro-Soviet WFTU (Beling 1965).

The UGTA also joined the ICFTU, sending an Algerian delegation to Brussels in April 1956. According to Boualem Bourouiba, the UGTA's founders were fully aware of the ICFTU's alignment with U.S. foreign policy but chose it for realism. They preferred it to the WFTU in order to deflect right-wing accusations of being communists; because they knew the WFTU would in any case support the Algerian anti-colonial struggle; and because both the UGTT and the UMT (*Union Marocaine du Travail*) were already affiliated with the ICFTU (Bourouiba 1998). These two trade union centers not only provided material assistance to Algerian refugees in their respective countries but also played a crucial role in organizing training courses for future Algerian union cadres. Together with the UGTA, they were key actors in an effort to build inter-Maghrebi trade union unity, fruitless in the long run but articulated through major congresses held in Casablanca (1956), Tangier (1957), Casablanca again (1960), and Sfax (1961) (Zihānī 2021).

One year after independence, and only a few months after the UGTA's first congress, Rabah Djermene announced the Algerian union's withdrawal from the ICFTU (July 1963), citing the growing incompatibility between Algeria's socialist, revolutionary, and monolithic political direction and the ICFTU's doctrine of "free trade unions".⁴⁰ Despite the material and diplomatic assistance, relations between the ICFTU and the UGTA were strained even during the war of liberation, mostly because of the UGTA's continued and fruitful collaboration with the WFTU and the trade unions of the socialist bloc (Bazzallāh and Lītīm 2020).

Even more so, the break with the ICFTU was also consistent with the Pan-African principle of non-affiliation (understood as a Third-Worldist posture of equidistance from both Cold War blocs) adopted by several radical unions at the Casablanca Conference of May 1961, which had founded the Pan-African Confederation of Trade Unions (AATUF). At that meeting, the UGTA's unofficial foreign representative, Abdelkader Maachou, could not openly denounce the ICFTU, since the confederation was, at the time, actively promoting the Algerian nationalist

⁴⁰ *Le Peuple*, July 26, 1963, and *Alger républicain*, July 26, 1963.



cause on the international stage while the war of liberation was still underway. Nevertheless, he voiced support for African continental unity, for the completion of the anti-colonial struggle, and for the future participation of workers in the economic management of postcolonial states.⁴¹ The 1963 decision to leave the ICFTU thus confirmed the UGTA's internationalist stance: a refusal to join internationals dominated either by former colonial powers or by the emerging superpowers of the Cold War.

The UGTT, by contrast, adopted a markedly different stance. Rather than embracing Pan-African non-affiliation, it prioritized what its leaders defined as Tunisia's "national interests," which aligned closely with the material advantages derived from maintaining open and friendly relations with the ICFTU and the AFL-CIO. Even before the Casablanca Conference, tensions had already emerged between the UGTT and the Guinean union UGTAN, whose leader, Seydou Diallo, accused Ahmed Tlili – the UGTT's then secretary-general – of seeking to undermine African trade union unity by promoting the creation of a continental federation aligned with the ICFTU.⁴²

Already by February 1960, Ahmed Tlili was openly positioning himself in favor of remaining within the ICFTU. He opposed the creation of a unitary African trade union center—an idea that, in his view, presupposed the existence of a corresponding unitary African state—and instead proposed holding periodic inter-union meetings, which he referred to as "conferences of African trade unions."⁴³ In November 1960, Tunis hosted the ICFTU's regional conference, attended by all African states except Ghana and Guinea, the only two not affiliated with the confederation. On that occasion, the UGTT cautioned other African unions about the danger of isolation, especially financial isolation—an argument that, for many, proved persuasive enough to justify remaining within the ICFTU framework.⁴⁴

At the Casablanca Conference in May 1961, Ahmed Tlili – while formally endorsing Mahjoub Ben Seddik's orientation report⁴⁵ – worked to prevent the adoption of binding, common resolutions. He stressed the ideological and operational divergences among African unions and argued that only a minimal common denominator could realistically unite them. Tlili then insisted, with clear strategic intent, on the inviolability of trade union freedom of decision and action—something that, he argued, could not be compromised either by the temporary lack of class consciousness among African workers or by appeals to international solidarity. Non-alignment with the global blocs, he maintained, did not mean isolation; the UGTT would continue to commit itself to "free trade unionism" through its membership in the ICFTU.⁴⁶

The UGTT was among the unions that withdrew from the final sessions of the congress and refused to join the AATUF, whereas the UGTA, from 1963 onward, began working within

⁴¹ APCF, 261J7/334, FR/27, "Intervention de l'Union generale des travailleurs algeriens 'U.G.T.A.' par le camarade A. Maachou", Casablanca, May 26, 1961.

⁴² *Le Figaro*, April 15, 1960.

⁴³ UGTT, "Positions de l'UGTT à l'égard du mouvement syndical africain", Tunis, 1960.

⁴⁴ *Le Figaro*, November 18, 1960.

⁴⁵ At the time, secretary general of the UMT and chairman of the congress preparatory committee, then president of the AATUF. See Ben Seddik's text, hinging on the independence and unity of trade unions, rejection of corporatism, international solidarity of workers, and workers' participation in economic planning, in *1er Congrès Syndical Panafricain, Rapport de doctrine et d'orientation*, présenté par Mahjoub ben Seddik, Casablanca, May 1961.

⁴⁶ APCF, 261J7/334, FR/29, "Intervention de l'Union Generale Tunisienne du Travail", Casablanca, May 26, 1961.



the latter and even secured the election of Algerian vice-presidents. By contrast, the UGTT became one of the founding members of the rival, pro-Western ATUC, established in Dakar in January 1962, where Ahmed Tlili was elected president. Throughout the rest of the 1960s, the ATUC continued to defend its right to direct international affiliation and to attack the AATUF—often on rather tenuous grounds, given that many ATUC unions accusing the Guinean, Ghanaian, Malian, Algerian, or Egyptian centers of being state-controlled could hardly claim genuine autonomy themselves (the UGTT of the 1960s least of all) (Agyeman 2003).

The UGTT's stance toward the 1961 Casablanca Conference and the subsequent AATUF-ATUC conflict illustrates how, for reasons tied to Tunisia's foreign policy, Tunisian trade unionism chose to boycott what could have been the most concrete experiment in internationalist trade union coordination available at the time in the African context. This is shown, for example, by the AATUF's continent-wide mobilization in the summer of 1967 against Israeli aggression in the Arab Middle East, a rare and genuine attempt to coordinate action between African (including sub-Saharan) and Arab trade unions.⁴⁷ For that matter, however, the unions within the AATUF were themselves politically subordinated to one-party regimes, and it was precisely this subordination that led them to accept – more or less willingly – a purely formal and bureaucratic unification with the ATUC in 1973, one devoid of any meaningful internationalist practice.

The UGTA fully belonged to this dynamic. More than many other centers, it invested significant effort in formally overcoming the AATUF-ATUC divide. It is no coincidence that in Algiers, in March 1969, the two Pan-African confederations finally agreed on the steps toward unity. The founding of the OATUU was even scheduled to take place in Algiers in 1973, before the choice was set aside: the Algerian capital, as the seat of an AATUF member state, was deemed politically partial and thus unsuitable as a neutral host.⁴⁸

For different reasons, then, both the UGTT and the UGTA ultimately proved unable to theorize or sustain a coherent internationalist trade union practice. Their trajectories are all the more revealing given that, despite belonging to two neighboring North African countries involved in overlapping regional and continental integration projects, the two centers positioned themselves on opposite sides of the Cold War's international alignments.

Conclusions

A reductive argument might claim that the second and third contradictions we examined simply flowed from the first: politically subordinated unions were naturally neither internally representative nor externally solidaristic. Yet the evidence presented here points to a more layered configuration. Political subordination is indeed the most visible and perhaps the most consequential factor over time, but each contradiction retains its own relative autonomy and interacts with the others in recursive ways.

The UGTT's and UGTA's adherence to a monolithic, managerial model of unionism progressively distanced their leaders from their social bases. The outlook of top union cadres

⁴⁷ *Révolution et travail*, June 24, 1967.

⁴⁸ OUA, Council of Ministers, *Twenty-First Ordinary Session, All-African Trade Union Unity*, Addis Ababa, 17-21 May 1973, CM/514, p. 8.



increasingly converged with that of political elites, reinforcing unequal relations that favored the latter. At the same time, attempts to articulate common frameworks for labor action at the continental or Afro-Asian level remained limited to ideological formation or, more often, professional training. The absence of a substantive internationalist practice narrowed the unions' analytical horizon and prevented them from identifying problems shared across African and Arab social formations and political regimes—conditions that further reproduced political subordination and non-representativeness. These dynamics suggest that more than state cooptation was at work. The deeper continuity lay in the voluntary political and ideological alignment of many union leaders with state-centered developmental agendas.

At the heart of the issue lay, in short, the weight of nationalism in shaping labor politics. In this respect, the UGTT and the UGTA—despite sharply divergent trajectories (the former a semi-rival of state power, the latter one of its pillars)—shared a striking structural feature in their early postcolonial decades. The nationalist and populist ideology that had proved indispensable during the anti-colonial struggle became, after independence, a generator of structural contradictions. It constrained the emergence of identities alternative to the national one, particularly class-based and supranational forms of identification, especially at the level of union leadership.

As shown throughout this paper, this trajectory was far from exceptional: it echoed developments across many African and Arab unions in the 1960s and 1970s. The argument, however, extends beyond historical comparison and maintains an enduring political significance even in the new millennium. The influence of nationalism on the political horizons of social emancipation remains a critical analytical problem, particularly in a moment when the process of decolonization has yet to wholly unfold across the Arab world.

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⁴⁹ For details on primary sources found therein and elsewhere, see footnotes.



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