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When do Teachers Strike: Between Strong Unions, Divergent Preferences and Political Opportunity in Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

Unions have played a decisive role in promoting democracy and social justice in Tunisia. In 2023, two teacher unions led a yearlong 'silent strike' of withholding student marks from administration. Based on interviews with 60 teachers, this article analyses teacher views on the unions and on ongoing protests. While unions are still considered the main defenders of public education and grievances about salaries were shared among teachers, their views on strike participation diverged based on perceived political opportunity and differences in moral and political preferences, amidst a local political and financial crisis and global pressures towards austerity and privatisation.

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Introduction

There is no more central value to teacher unions than their dedication to *public* education, rooted in their belief that education is a public good, essential to the development of an educated citizenry (Casey 2012). Yet, in May 2023, a spokesperson for an initiative called the Campaign against the Destruction of Public Education in Tunisia argued that unions were behind rising privatisation by scaring parents out of public schools through protest action that is destroying public education. While this was an extreme and shocking statement for the Tunisian public, the latest teacher protest action that began in December 2022 was a topic of heated public debate throughout the school year, within society as well as within the teaching profession. In April 2023, the courts rejected a lawsuit filed by parents against the two teacher unions for basic (Primary: years 1–6) and secondary (years 7–13) education. By July, the Ministry made limited concessions to the secondary education teacher union, while escalation continued with the primary union. Teacher salaries were a key element of union demands, as well as the regularisation of precarious teachers and inclusion in education reform efforts.

Teacher salaries, like other public sector wages in Tunisia, have seen a considerable erosion in purchasing power over the previous decades. Net teacher salaries ranged between 1400 and 1800 TND/month or 450 to 600 USD in 2023. For teachers with over 15 years of experience, gross annual salaries as a ratio of GDP/capita of 2.5 (Table 1) are lower than many middle- and low-income countries.¹ From a regional perspective, salaries in Tunisia are lower than in Morocco as a ratio of GDP/capita, but higher than in Egypt and Algeria (Table 1). The decline in real purchasing power and social status has fuelled pressures on teachers to resort to private tutoring/ informal privatisation, protest their conditions, exit the profession or seek to leave the country. The recent

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Table 1. Estimated Teacher Salaries in North Africa in USD, PPP and as a Ratio of GDP/Capita.

Average Gross Annual Teacher Salaries	In Local Currency	USD	\$ PPP	Ratio of GDP/ capita
Tunisia	28800 TND	9220	26800	2.5
Morocco	90720 MAD	9430	23380	3
Egypt	74600 EGP	4480	16440	1.2
Algeria	1268000 DZD	9380	27200	2

Notes: Author calculations based on teacher interviews and pay slips in Tunisia and latest available reports for Algeria, Egypt and Morocco (see Tashri3 2024; World Bank 2022 and CSEFRS 2021). For better international comparison, estimates refer to gross (not net/ take home) annual salaries of permanently hired (not temporary) teachers across different educational stages.

union action allows us to examine the changing perceptions and role of unions in the context of austerity, a debt crisis and the democratisation process that Tunisia has been undergoing since the 2010 Revolution that removed the regime of Ben Ali.

Tunisia represents a unique case of unionism in Africa, the Arab region and the Global South. Tunisia is the Arab country where trade unionism was the strongest and most influential in shaping the outcomes of the uprising that were part of the so-called Arab Spring (Yousfi 2017). Its famous umbrella union organisation, the Tunisian General Labour Union, commonly referred to by its French acronym: UGTT (Union générale tunisienne du travail) was co-winner of Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 for its role in Tunisia's democratic transition. Apart from the role of union cadres in mobilising during the Revolution against the former authoritarian regime, it also represented a key counterbalance to Islamist forces in the post-uprising era. The UGTT has been at the forefront of resistance to the austerity measures stipulated in an IMF agreement that has been waiting to be signed since 2022. The UGTT has received considerable media and scholarly attention. However, little research exists on sectoral unions, their relationship with the state or with the UGTT itself or how their actions are perceived among their own members.² This article discusses a unique case of teacher mobilisation, where two separate teacher unions engaged in a 'silent protest', where they withheld student marks (*hajib al-a'dad*) from school and ministry administration throughout most of the school year 2022/2023. It provides a textured analysis of the narratives of teachers in relation to four theorised drivers of participation in the strike: social identity, perceived injustice, efficacy and morality. As such, it links work on teachers and teacher unions with the literature on collective action, underlining elements that could be studied more systematically in analysing future teacher strikes. In particular, it underlines the role of (constructed) historical experiences on the determinants of strike participation, i.e. temporally extending the analysis of identity, efficacy and perceived injustice over a longer durée, and expanding notions of morality to relate not only to the perceived injustices against which protest is targeted, but also to moral considerations regarding the *implications* of the strike, as linked to national level contemporary conditions (e.g. putting pressure on an indebted government) and sector specific implications (e.g. the impact of sustained strike action on student learning and the status of public education in an era of rapid privatisation). As such it underlines the historical, strategic, political and moral considerations of collective action participants, beyond identity, efficacy and grievances.

This article is among very few peer-reviewed analyses of teacher views on unions and union action in the Arab region and in Africa, in the context of scarce research on teacher views on unions in the global South more generally. Based on interviews with 60 teachers from April to June 2023 in addition to interviews with union leaders, experts and other stakeholders, the article analyses teacher views on the defence of public education, the 2023 strike and the role of unions in the country's politics more generally. Drawing on the literature on teacher unions and collective action, the article analyses teacher narratives to uncover the layered elements (temporal, generational, political, historical) that shape the key drivers of participation in collective action: perceived injustice, social identity, efficacy and morality. The first section of the article surveys the existing literature on teacher unions, teacher views of unions and determinants of strike participation and collective action. The second section focuses on the context of the Tunisian case. The third and fourth sections lay out the methods and findings of the study.

Teacher unions, public education and collective action

Salaries, attrition rates and shortages of teachers are global issues and teacher protests have been accelerating in recent years (Bascia and Maharaj 2022). Teachers in the UK have staged a series of strikes in 2023 in a time when a record number of teachers – over 40,000, or 9 per cent of its workforce – left the profession in 2022, amidst a growing teacher shortage across Europe (Yanatma 2023). Teachers in Portugal have launched a similar strike to Tunisia's in 2023 in terms of withholding marks and threatening to boycott national examinations. In 2019 alone, millions of teachers around the world, including in Kenya, South Africa, Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia, went on strike or threatened to strike (Chambers-Ju, Beatty, and Pramana 2022b). While research on teacher unions is relatively limited, different strands of literature have addressed the role of teacher unions in the defence of public education and their impact on student learning, teacher views on unions and the factors shaping worker views towards protest and strike action.

Teacher unions consistently articulate their primary goals in terms of the protection and advancement of public education. Political critics of unions on the other hand often charge that they organise schools to their needs not those of students. However, research has shown a link between unionisation and improved student learning. This happens through a number of effects that lead to improved teaching quality and student achievement, including promoting greater professional autonomy and securing better pay, working conditions and job security, thereby attracting newcomers and reducing turnover (see Vachon and Ma 2015). Unions may also have an effect in moderating strike action by channelling demands through collective bargaining (see Hoyman, Jansa, and Bussing 2023). Teacher unions have also been instrumental in blocking a range of policies associated with the commodification and neoliberal management of education, including more flexible hiring, the use of school vouchers and the use of technology to replace teachers, which are prescriptions with questionable impact on student learning or well-being (see Frymer 2012; Battistoni 2012; Casey 2012). In the US context, without strong unions, many of these market reforms, representing massive profit potential to specific business sectors and backed by strong cohesive political coalitions, would have been implemented more widely already (Casey 2012).

Similarly, in Latin America, union resistance to market-oriented policies shaped the fate of such policy proposals (Madrid 2003; Petras 2018). Existing research on developing countries emphasises the decisive power of teacher unions in education politics, which varies in form and influence from interest groups to powerful political machines (Schneider 2022). Interest-group teacher unions are common in OECD countries and Southern Cone countries in Latin America, offer selective benefits to members, often strike, and engage in electoral politics, usually with multiple parties. In political machines, union leaders have discretion over resources, personnel, and especially individual careers (hiring, promotion and transfer), giving them leverage over members, which in turn gives leaders significant bargaining power in electoral and coalition politics (Schneider 2022). Teacher strike action is however only one option for teacher unions and is often combined with other forms of activism. As Tarlau (2019) argues, activists are most effective using contentious co-governance, combining disruption and public protest with institutional pressure to defend and further their goals, which requires technical and political skills in a wide range of areas. Chambers-Ju, Beatty, and Pramana (2022a) show how the Indonesian labour union PGRI articulated proposals, leveraged knowledge, and made claims related to the key policies adopted over the last two decades. However, it has been argued that while teachers' unions may have the power to articulate interests and shape labour policy, in many low- and middle-income countries, teacher organisations struggle to demonstrate policy expertise and professional competence in core areas related to teaching and learning (Chambers-Ju, Beatty, and Pramana 2022a). Developing policy expertise can also come with pressure to accept global reforms. Recent directions in international development assistance have sought to 'engage' unions in low-income countries on policy issues with the aim of reducing their resistance to the global agenda, sometimes referred to as GERM: the Global Education Reform Movement (see Weiner and Compton 2019). Sahlberg (2006) has identified the principal features of

GERM as increased standardisation, a narrowing of the curriculum to focus on core subjects/knowledge, the growth of high-stakes accountability and the use of corporate management practices as the key features of the new orthodoxy, characterising it as both spreading and destructive, infecting schools across the globe like an epidemic (Sahlberg 2012). GERM is not only seen as destructive of schools, but also as an ‘assault on teaching, teachers, and their unions’ (Compton and Weiner 2008).

Teacher unions, strike participation and collective action

Very little research has examined teacher views of their unions, and even less research has linked these views to perception of particular union actions. ‘There is very little research on how teachers view their unions; but the evidence that exists suggests that they run the gamut from strong anti-union sentiments through apathy to persistent and passionate union affiliation’ (Bascia 2008, 97). Studies have shown that overwhelming majorities of US teachers believe that teacher unions ably represent their common good, and that without them, their salary and teaching conditions would be considerably diminished (see Silva et al. 2008). Such satisfaction would seem like a critical asset in a profession that is facing large shortages and very high attrition rates. However, distance between unions and teachers may have been increasing in the early 2000s due to: (1) the retirement of a generation of teachers with a deep appreciation of union advocacy; (2) restrictions on collective bargaining; (3) negative commentary about unions by governments and the media; and (4) as public education and teachers have come under governmental attack, many unions have been overwhelmed by the magnitude of issues in need of addressing (Bascia 2008). These factors seriously confound teacher unions’ viability and their legitimacy as the voice of teachers (Bascia 2008, 96). Given the protest waves indicated above it seems that we are in the midst of a phase of teacher union renewal. Indeed, Bascia and Maharaj (2022) note that the past decade has seen significant changes in teacher unionism in the United States and successes that indicate a new era of union-involved teacher activism.

Existing research gives few clues as to which factors impact teacher views on unions.

Teachers’ opinions and actions about the value of what their union has to offer are rooted in their own ‘common sense’, which we can see as a product of complex sets of personal and local factors that, taken together, produce particular occupational, social, political, intellectual, and economic needs and values. (Bascia 2008, 97)

Existing research provides an understanding of what teachers want: occupational advocacy, economic sufficiency, participation in decision making, professional development and learning opportunities, and the articulation and promotion of a positive professional identity (Bascia 2008). A recent review of work on teacher satisfaction in developing countries also points to a host of teacher needs, including conducive working conditions, promotional opportunities, fair remuneration, support from headteachers, colleagues and the community, teacher empowerment, and friendships (Sahito and Vaisanen 2019). Union action and teacher support to such actions also have political and wider oppositional elements. They are not only driven by dissatisfaction, a sense of injustice or declining purchasing power, but often relate to further grievances with ruling parties or about the state of education. Demanding a salary increase often symbolically stands in for teachers’ frustration with policy directions and their concerns about not being treated respectfully (Bascia 2004; Carlson 1992). The fact that, legally, unions can only negotiate about salary, benefits, and working conditions means that other issues and concerns get funnelled through these particular and narrow channels.

Even less research studies teacher views on engaging in strike action or their views on ongoing strikes. One recent study on the recent wave of teacher strikes in the US has argued that declining resources for both teachers and students and restrictive collective bargaining laws, among other legal-political factors, catalyzed statewide teacher mobilisation (Hoyman, Jansa, and Bussing

2023). However, existing research on strike action participation beyond education gives clues about employee decisions to strike. For example, previous research has shown that workers tend to go on strike when they exhibit a high degree of reliance on a collective advocacy group and are accustomed to the trade union's right to represent their interests vis-à-vis their employer (Akkerman, Born, and Torenvlied 2013). In the case of recent worker strikes, work dissatisfaction, reliance on trade unions, and having a permanent position impacted decisions around participation in strike action (Apicella and Hildebrandt 2019). Other research underlines that the perceived success of the strike, as well as commitment to its goals explain a large part of participation (Cologna, Hoogenboom, and Brick 2021). The views of other relevant parties about the strike, like the wider public or colleagues, also affect decisions to participate (Kravitz et al. 1990). Other studies point to race, income, and occupational distinctions as influential for strike behaviour (Dixon and Roscigno 2003). Nonetheless, scholars have underlined that prevailing understandings of labour protest and strikes take as their focus stable democratic settings, and pointed to the importance of cross-sectoral demonstration effects and of understanding strikes as parts of a wider universe of contentious politics patterned by state-level signals of opportunity and shifts in economic conditions (Barrie and Ketchley 2018). As such, the literature points to a myriad of structural conditions, limitations and opportunities as well as individual level correlates of strike participation.

These arguments find their echoes beyond research on unions in the wider literature on collective action. Three key elements are widely seen as driving participation in collective action. Perceived injustice, social identity and group efficacy (the perception that a group is able to accomplish its goals) directly affect participation in collective actions (Bandura 2000). Relatedly, precedent and previous successes matter. Positive or successful outcomes of small-scale collective actions strengthen motivation for large-scale acts of protest, by increasing feelings of shared group identity, efficacy and empowerment (Burrows et al. 2022). Some scholars afford a special place to morality: a sense of violated moral standards or principles of what is right, in informing collective action and argue that violated moral convictions can unite the disadvantaged and advantaged in a joint struggle for social change (van Zomeren 2013). Martijan van Zomeren (2013) therefore refers to four motivations for undertaking collective action: identity, morality, emotion and efficacy. Here, the perception of injustice must animate strong emotions (especially anger) that propel actors to collective action; and it is emotion, indignation in particular, rather than perceived injustice or grievance per se, that motivates collective action.

There remains significant ambiguity as to how each of these motivators can be defined and measured and how far they can help us appreciate structural and political dynamics. For example, in relation to efficacy, it might not be group efficacy – the belief that my group can accomplish its goals – that is important in decisions to participate, but rather ‘participatory efficacy’: the belief that my participation can make a difference to achieving those goals (Shuman et al. 2023). Group identity could refer to many levels of identification and emotion is notoriously difficult to capture and assess through interviews or surveys. On the other hand, the emphasis on emotion (as opposed to perceived injustice) allows for accounting for emotions like fear of repression (being arrested for voicing certain opinions or supporting a labour strike) in decisions to strike that are relevant for less established democracies. Furthermore, this literature affords little space for structural, political and contextual considerations, and mainly references democratic contexts. While efficacy references beliefs about own abilities, it is the notion of perceived political opportunity that allows for addressing assessments of chances of success, which is an essential element of the cost-benefit analysis of mobilisation. The literature on mobilisation emphasises that collective action is best approached dynamically in relation to structural, discursive and perceived opportunity structures in terms of mechanisms and processes rather than conditions and correlations (Giugni 2011). The emphasis on dynamics and process implies attention to temporal elements, interactions over time and contestations over meaning.

What we know about teachers and teacher unions can help us see this literature in different light. Perceived injustice and emotions about it can relate to any aspect of what teachers value or need. In

terms of social identity, strong group identification among teachers as well as the positioning of teachers vis-à-vis their unions should both matter to their decisions to take part in collective action. Group identity can also be mediated by the strong generational differences among teachers. Teacher identification with unions could be shaped by the political legacy and role of unions and their current role and image as well as the convergence of teacher political and ideological views from those of the unions. Perceptions of efficacy could relate to prior patterns of participation and the previous successes secured by teacher unions, recent successes by other unions. Finally, moral standards such as equal pay for equal work can particularly inform solidarity of permanent teachers with less advantaged temporary teachers. Moral and principled stances may also deter teachers from actions (like prolonged protest) that may have negative implications for student learning and motivation, widening inequalities among students, fuelling privatisation and undermining the image and stature of public education. Views of others may have special significance for teachers due to sustained and personal relations with those dependent on their work (students and families). These are elements that can shape the perceived political opportunity and teacher cost–benefit analysis in relation to strike participation. We have also seen that teacher protest can be a means to signal dissatisfaction and not only to achieve announced demands. Protest participation can represent a symbolic gesture of defiance to unpopular leaders or a gesture of loyalty to oppositional forces calling for the protest and a show of power and solidarity. This article uses the research in the Tunisian context to assess how the existing bodies of literature can help explain teacher narratives on strike action, especially in resource-constrained global South contexts and outside of established democracies.

Education and unions in post-revolution Tunisia

Tunisia is currently facing a dire economic situation, one of the highest public sector wage bills in the world, endemic corruption, and rising inflation, growing deficits, and persistently high rates of unemployment, particularly among college-educated youth. Though Tunisia has not yet consolidated its democracy, during the past decade the Tunisian government and people achieved several successes including crafting a pluralistic and liberal constitution, holding free and fair local and national elections, fostering a vibrant civil society and media climate, and developing political institutions based on inclusivity (Yerkes 2022). Tunisia's interior regions were an important wellspring of the discontent that toppled the former regime and continue to be a magnet for protesters, underscoring how readily regional wealth disparities can foment nation-altering unrest, on employment access, service provision, land and water access, and pollution (Meddeb 2020). Since July 2021, the democratically elected President Kais Saied, who has been described as a populist leader with no political party or governing experience, gradually rolled back many of the democratic gains by dissolving parliament, invalidating the constitution, dismantling the Supreme Judicial Council and carrying out a number of political arrests (Yerkes 2022).

Parallel to these political transformations, the education sector had been suffering in terms of staffing and performance. The recent wave of teacher protest follows a period of declining achievement, caused by waves of austerity and precarisation in the education sector. The increase in minimally paid and precariously employed deputy teachers (*nuwwab*), and their deployment in disadvantaged areas in the foundational primary stage, has been long identified as a weakness of the system and a key target of reform by the unions (White Book 2016, 62–63). Deputy teachers are paid less than half the corresponding regular teacher salary, are only paid for 9 months per year and do not have the same rights to social insurance. News sources indicate that there are currently between 12,000 and 17,000 precariously employed 'deputy teachers' (*mu'alimun nuwwab*), representing close to 10% of teachers. The Ministry resorted to precarious hiring due to budgetary constraints, including agreements with the IMF to reduce the wage bill as part of debt repayment arrangements. It also asserts that it has little scope for making other improvements in the sector, as wages take up 95% of its budget.

While it is common to hear that strikes are affecting student achievement, learning had already been declining among students before the recent wave of protests starting in 2014/ 2015 and was exacerbated by COVID-19 school closures. According to the latest 2015 PISA results for Tunisia, over two thirds of Tunisian students do not meet basic proficiency levels placing them at risk of exclusion, displaying deterioration in the previous decade in all subjects with a sharp decline in reading (World Bank 2016).³ Privatisation had also been rapidly accelerating over the past decade. Enrolment in private schools is highest in the primary stage and has risen from 2% in 2010 to 8% in 2021, doubling from 2 to 4% over the three years 2011–2014 and doubling again over the 5 years between 2015 and 2021, at a slower rate, from 4% to 8% (UIS 2022).

It has been argued that democratisation in the developing and post-communist world has yielded limited gains for labour, not only due to the decreased capacity of unions to secure benefits due to economic crisis and globalisation, but also as to how legacies from the predemocratic era limit and enhance organised labour's power in new democracies (Caraway, Cook, and Crowley 2015). However, the case of Tunisia might be an exception in this regard. Since the Revolution, unions remained cohesive, unified, and influential, as workers enjoyed multiple raises, including an increase to the minimum wage and an unprecedented influence over the government (Hartshorn 2018). Starting with its role as the cornerstone of the nationalist movement in the colonial era, the UGTT has always had a key place in Tunisian politics: not so much as a labour union but as an organisation that has always linked social struggles to political and national demands (Yousfi 2017). In the post-uprising context, it took centre stage in discussions to establish broad-based mechanisms for managing the transition (Yousfi 2017). Hartshorn and Sil (2019) have argued that wherever leading trade union federations have played a significant role in bringing about regime change and joined in the post-authoritarian ruling coalition in the hopes of consolidating their influence, they became weaker and more divided as their political allies pushed forward with economic liberalisation. Tunisian unions may face the risk of going down the same path should they continue to view themselves as partners of the new governing elite (Hartshorn and Sil 2019).

Teacher unions and the recent protest wave

Like other postcolonial regimes, deals struck in Tunisia in the 1950s and 1960s created compliant unions that were 'corporatized' to aggregate and channel the demands of their members in specific way, but the years before the Revolution saw a rending of the corporatist pact that maintained labour peace followed by a wave of labour militancy (Hartshorn 2018). The Tunisian Teachers Syndicate was established in 1972 with five syndicates, then united in 1983. Teachers are considered a strong base in the general union (UGTT) and have a long history in trade union work. The UGTT has about one million members from the public and private sector from a population of 12 million. While union membership is in fact optional, it is almost universal at about 97%, as the number of those involved in the union is estimated at about 150 thousand members, while the total number of teachers is 153,400 in the 2020/2021 (Mamari 2023). In describing the background of the teacher's movement, I rely on insights shared by interviewed teachers and other interviewees, including union leadership, former minister and other experts as well as news reporting.

Teacher unions have always been strong and enjoyed power separately from the UGTT. Since its beginnings, the relationship of teacher unions with syndicate centralism was governed by a conflict-unity relationship. Before 2011, the closer the centralised union leadership became with the ruling regime, the more it entered a conflict relationship with the secondary education syndicate in particular, and the more it diverged from power, the relationship was characterised by encounter and unity. This dynamic may have persisted in the current context post constitutional coup. The head of the primary education union: elected in 2018 and reconfirmed in 2022, is a leading figure of the leftist political party (Unified Democratic Patriots Party/*Wataad*). The head of the secondary

education union is from a political current that has been supportive of the current President, which arguably facilitated the resolution of the conflict with the government.

Teacher unions were instrumental in a number of salary increases over the previous decade. Various institutions relating to teacher recruitment also became more transparent in terms of announced vacancies, the ranking of teachers based on points that allow them to transfer from one position to the other or for temporary teacher to become regularised. The national qualification examination to become a teacher became more transparent and remains very competitive with less than 5% of applicants passing the exam. Several teachers reported that before the Revolution, success in this examination was bought through corruption (at the price of 7000 dinars) or handed out through clientelist connections. However, the examination had not been held for over 6 years because of the freeze on hiring and the resort to precarious hiring formulas, despite the existence of shortages (estimated 6000 shortages in the secondary stage and a total of 15,000 positions). As in many other contexts, labour gains are often compensated for through other budget cuts or hardly catch up with inflation rates.

The 2023 protest action is the fourth in a series of teacher protests since the Revolution. With the beginning of the academic year 2014/2015, teachers implemented a number of strikes that forced the ministry and the government to sign an agreement, granting the teachers exceptional professional promotions, wage increases to be paid progressively, in addition to defining mechanisms to involve teachers in reforming the educational system. In 2017, teachers launched a number of movements, sit-ins and strikes in front of the ministry, which forced the prime minister to dismiss the Minister of Education. Teachers returned to action and limited strikes in the beginning of the academic year 2017/2018, culminating into a national crisis in the spring of 2018, after an open-ended strike that lasted 8 days. The union was forced to back down in exchange for a promise to continue negotiating through the summer months. However, the academic year 2018/2019 started without any progress in processing the negotiation and union action did not escalate during the pandemic. In parallel, protests by precariously employed deputy teachers, who are not union members, have continued periodically throughout the previous years since 2016. In 2020 for example, deputy teachers staged several protests and engaged in one-day boycott of classes. These protests continued throughout the academic year 2022/2023 in parallel to the union action. Recent graduates of institutes of education, who are also not union members, held protests for the expedition or regularisation of their employment to fill existing teacher shortages. Since the constitutional coup of 25 July 2021, the UGTT and unions in general have been operating under the threat of political exclusion as the new president seeks to exclude intermediary civil society institutions in favour of a direct relationship with the people.

In the beginning of the 2022/2023 school year, the unions demanded holding dialogue sessions with the Ministry in order to discuss all professional demands with little satisfactory response. On 2 December 2022, the Secondary Education Syndicate announced its decision to withhold exam marks from the administration. The Basic Education Syndicate (Primary Schools) followed on 8 December 2022. The intention was not to disrupt the learning process for students through strike action like previous years, but to continue all classes and to provide marks to students on individual assignments and exams, without officialising them by making them available to the administration to be calculated into a total for all subjects. In June 2023, towards the end of the school year, the Ministry reached an agreement with the secondary education union, which included a small raise effective in 2026. While this was indeed a concession, there was bitter lament among teachers on social media of the small and deferred value of the increases. The agreement included an increase of 300 dinars to be disbursed in three instalments of 100 TND (USD 32 or about 6% of current salaries) in the years 2026, 2027 and 2028, as well as other commitments.⁴

The primary teachers' union was also offered a similar agreement, which it rejected. Official statement accused the protesting teachers of lack of national loyalty and of undermining the interests of students, their learning, motivation and their efforts throughout the year. Many teachers defected under pressure and threats of salary deductions and according to the Ministry the

overwhelming majority of teachers in fact submitted their marks. However, even a small proportion of marks withheld jeopardises the process, as neither the administrations of schools nor the Ministry can know the exact number of successful students, nor the ranking of the students, which is especially critical for families aspiring to enrol their children in Model Schools accepting the highest achieving students. In July, the crisis escalated as the Minister, himself a former unionist, described the inability of students to formally obtain their grades as ‘a crime against the Tunisian people’ and issued punitive measures against protesting teachers, depriving 17 thousand primary education teachers of one month of pay and removing 350 school principals from their positions. The primary teacher union charged that these actions were illegal and responded with mass resignations, sit-ins in regional headquarters and threats of the boycott of the next academic year. Notably, UGTT, the umbrella union organisation was not publicly supportive of the silent strike and eventually offered limited support: in mediating between them and the Ministry and co-signing the deal agreement brokered between the secondary stage union and the Ministry. In the current context after 25 July, the UGTT is already considered as part of the critics of the current President, many of whom had been arrested in recent months. Taking a hard-line may have made them targets of direct repression or of popular discontent. The retraction of liberties and democratic institutions therefore played a role in the apparent divisions within the labour movement. Disillusionment with democracy and the defence of freedoms among Tunisians (Ridge 2022) arguably played a role in dampening support for the unions among teachers, as well as support for the protest among the public.

Materials and methods

Over a period of ten weeks, I interviewed 60 teachers, inside and outside their educational institutions in addition to attending classes, as part of a larger study of education, equity and diversity in the post-uprising Middle East. I identified respondents through snowballing and existing networks. The sample was diverse in terms of gender, geographical location, educational stage taught, socioeconomic profile of school, time in service and employment status. In terms of gender, respondents were almost equally divided between female (31) and male (29). In terms of regional diversity, I conducted interviews in coastal and inland areas across the Tunisian Republic: in Kairouan, Sili-ana, Tunis, Monastir and Sfax. I interviewed 23 primary teachers and 37 secondary stage teachers. In terms of socioeconomic profile of schools, I met with teachers in rural, urban, advantaged and highly disadvantaged schools. Sfax has ranked as the highest performer since independence, while Kairouan usually ranks near the bottom of national assessment results. Monastir is a coastal and privileged state, while Sili-ana is a more rural governorate in the Northwest. Tunis, the capital has a range of highly privileged and highly underprivileged schools, and my interviews ranged the middle and lower range but not the most advantaged schools. However, most teachers had taught in more than one governorate and in rural as well as urban locations, as part of their appointments and based on available vacancies, so they tended to have direct experiences of regional differences between schools.

In terms of generation, about two-thirds of respondents (39) had over 10 years of experience in education and many of them had over 20 years, which reflects the profile of the teaching profession, especially because of the freeze on hiring in recent years due to austerity measures. One-third of respondents joined the profession after the Revolution (especially with a small wave of formal appointments in 2019). Their profile is additionally distinct as they have completed more advanced qualification programs and were screened through a highly competitive national qualification exam before their appointment as teachers. I also interviewed two temporary teachers.

In extended semi-structured interviews, I asked teachers explicitly about the ongoing protests as well as their views on the unions. I asked teachers about ‘who defends public education’ in the country, as well as their views on how well the system supports equity and promotes common values of citizenship and belonging. I also asked about their trajectories in education, their years in services and their appointment in different regional locations. I have also reviewed ongoing

media coverage of the protests and consulted the Facebook pages of interviewees who explicitly directed me to them, the public posts of others as well as the pages of the key spokespersons of the unions, NGOs and ministry officials. Apart from teachers, in the longer period from September 2022 to June 2023, I interviewed a former minister of education, two leading union officials, two NGO officials working on education issues, a university professor working on education, one current Ministry official and one international organisation programme leader. These non-teacher interviews inform the analysis but are not systematically drawn upon here.

Teacher views on the unions and the 2023 strike

A number of key findings emerge from the interviews.

Dissatisfaction with teacher pay and other grievances

As a key grievance fuelling the protest action, dissatisfaction with pay was rampant among respondents. Teacher pay was compared to its historical levels as well as rising living expenses. Older teachers especially compared the real value of their pay to the postcolonial era where a teacher's salary allowed them to build a house, support many other family members and be called upon to help settle local disputes, in sense becoming local notables. Nowadays, as one teacher put it, 'most teachers are indebted to the banks (e.g. car loan) and half of their salary goes to debt repayment and the rest hardly covers rent and basic necessities'. Younger teachers often commented that their salary was very meagre, even when they were without dependents and additional responsibilities. As one teacher in rural Siliana noted, I live with my parents, but my salary is not sufficient. Several teachers recounted spending over half of their salaries on transportation in their early years of work where they are typically posted in remote areas to which they do not wish to move. Teachers also notably compared their salaries to other public sector workers who are better paid like university professors and doctors as well as those with lower educational qualifications like novice police officers or other government employees whose work is not as taxing as teaching. Temporary teachers were especially disadvantaged as they had neither sufficient income nor job security.

Additionally, several moral and principled considerations were cited by teachers. Teachers often emphasised the plight of temporary teachers and some recounted their participation in the strike mainly in terms of solidarity with temporary colleagues so that they can obtain permanent contracts. Others underlined the stated demands of the unions to promote and take part in wider education reform. Teachers often mentioned that the union demands were already agreed upon in previous agreements with the government/ministry and expressed indignation and frustration that such agreements were not honoured. Initial support for the strike action was also justified in terms of representing the least harm to students as they receive their grades on individual assignments, which they or their parents can independently add them up.

Unions as the key defenders of public education

The unions are the only element that defends education. The ministry does not ... We are convinced of what we are fighting for. We are the ones who spend and sacrifice. There are massive attacks to demonize teachers, but they are the only ones who share with you the education of your children ... If education is expensive, ignorance is even more expensive.

Like this teacher in rural Siliana, many teachers cited the unions in their reflections on the question of who defends public education in Tunisia. Some teachers began by stating the no one defends education, that public education has been abandoned by the state since the 1990s, or that there is an undeclared direction towards privatization. When asked however about specific social forces, individuals or entities, most cited the unions, as well as teachers in general or all patriotic people.

The role of the unions in securing recent gains was often highlighted, for example in terms of considerable pay raises (from 900 TND in 2014 to 1600 TND in 2023).

There were of course teachers who did not identify with the unions, did not underline their legacy or considered them too docile. For example, while identifying the union as a key defender of public education, a history teacher in Tunis argued that the union is soft, has not made gains compared to other sectors, noting that it ‘fell short of our aspirations’, is no longer the heart of UGTT and that the strike is meaningless. According to one novice French teacher, concern with public education is absent from all political discourses and unions should have fought harder: I am not with the union, I have no confidence in politics, and they should have escalated further. She noted her own struggle to obtain her teaching appointment and her group’s unwavering commitment to continue striking until their demands are met. According to another French teacher in Monastir, ‘I had always followed the unions decisions, but they did not speak with us, explain to us why they are doing this’. In her school, teachers made an early collective decision not to take part in the strike, but they tried to support a precarious colleague (to whom salary increases would not apply). She noted: ‘I do not care for the demands, but we are defending deputy teachers in a precarious position’.

Participation in union action: loyalty, politics and clientelism

The role of unions in anti-colonial independence struggle, their role in the Revolution against the dictatorship, in the transition phase ‘to prevent civil war’, as a counter power to Islamists, and the gains made by teachers over the past years were all cited as reasons to be loyal to the unions and to join in the collective action. As a primary teacher who is a non-active unionist, put it:

The UGTT derives its power from its history of struggle against colonialism in leading the nationalist movement when its leaders were in exile and representing a refuge for opposition figures under post-colonial dictatorship. It is a political player par excellence. The teachers’ union created real gains for teachers despite the failings, with which I am dissatisfied, including the current leadership extending its own tenure contrary to existing internal regulation.

As a teacher in a disadvantaged school in Tunis noted, ‘we follow the directives of the union, even if we do not agree. I have hope that there might be a change for the better’. As one teacher in Kairouan put it, ‘even if there are deviations and mistakes (*inhiriat wa mazaliq*), we do not depart from the union line’.

While older generations of teachers appeared more likely to value loyalty to the union, some respondents, especially younger teachers, felt that the struggle does not concern them or referred to it with disdain as a political game at the leadership level. As a novice Islamic Sciences teacher in Kairouan put it, ‘union leadership plays games with us in a struggle between personalities. I do not care. I pay attention to my work and that’s it’. A young philosophy teacher in Tunis also remarked that the unions and the ministry are pragmatists, and the strike is not worth discussing or analysing.

The most recurrent critique of the unions revolved around corrupt or clientelist practices. Respondents referred to nepotism in hiring practices that lead to inefficiencies and may have increased inequality. For example, a former teacher and principal in a central school explained that he had eleven administrators, while he only needed four and that they were transferred with the help of the union and that this would never have happened before the Revolution. A former teacher and regional administrator explained that transfers are always from the countryside to the city aided by the unions. The strength of the unions and the weakness of the state/administration or ministry was often cited as a reason. A former teacher and current inspector in rural Sili-ana explained that he had entered the UGTT after a hunger strike under the former regime and left it in 2012 because it no longer defended sectors, but rather individuals, even if he noted that corruption in the unions is not beyond repair. Respondents also lamented the union’s defence of

teachers ‘even if they make mistakes’. According to one teacher, the unions defend teachers even if they belong to a rival political trend, like the Salafis, but represent a significant voter base. Other key ‘failings’ with which they were ‘dissatisfied’, as one teacher put it, related to UGTT undemocratic move of extending its own tenure in violation of Article 20 of its bylaws.

Reservations about the 2023 silent strike

A common reservation about the strike was the idea that in the context of a national crisis and foreign debt negotiations, the timing was inappropriate for making additional demands. For example, while expressing a strong sense of belonging to the labour movement, a teacher in Kairouan criticised the timing and utility of the strike in light of the severe economic crisis. He noted that ‘achieving demands will come through development ... now there are simply no resources to meet those demands. He argued that syndicate work had become chaotic and this ‘gave the media a gift to launch campaigns against the public school’. He noted that after the Revolution, union work became the main obstacle (*mu’atil*) to development, citing the decline in the income from phosphate production because of such action. ‘I am the son of the UGTT. I was a unionist and will die a unionist and will side with workers to get their rights ... we all have needs, but development comes first not strikes’. Another teacher noted that there’s a bad financial situation, and unannounced austerity policies and that conditions were not improved by strikes, instead the status of teachers and their pay is in decline. The idea is that ‘we have to be patient and rational’, as stated by another teacher.

Citing the context of a debt crisis and bailout negotiations, where the President of the country, who has a 70% approval rating, has been vowing not to bow to foreign pressures and IMF austerity measures, many teachers found it, as one teacher put it, ‘not the right time’ to make demands in a country that ‘considers it a triumph that it actually paid its public employees’. As another teacher explained, salary ‘demands increased after the revolution, even when UGTT leadership was not in agreement, but ‘it could not contain or rationalize (*tu’aqlin*)’ those demands and that ‘there was a demonstration effect’ as such demands were met by ‘weak governments’ in order ‘to preserve social peace’. She predicted that in the end there will be no achievement, which will undermine syndicate work and its credibility.

Several teachers also mentioned that strikes over the past years had led parents to move their children to private schools. A teacher working in both private and public schools indicated feeling the injustice of withholding marks in the public track, while delivering them in the private and defected early from the strike. Another teacher in the suburbs of Tunis noted that one should not instrumentalise students and that she was never convinced of strikes. One temporary teacher noted that she was not convinced from the start as withholding marks, as it affects the morale of students: ‘I did not like the financial demands, even if I am in need. My country is getting in debt so that I can receive an extra 300 dinars?’ Another former teacher and principal in Tunis said that he had not taken part in the silent protest, despite the legitimacy of the demands and would have wished for the adoption of another form of struggle as this format transfers negative feelings to students, makes them feel like pawns and violates their right to education. In some cases, teachers who were bitterly critical of the President’s undemocratic measures or referred to the dangers of his populism also considered the decision to strike misguided.

Another remark about the strike was that it was fuelling negative media and societal portrayals of teachers, subjecting them to pressure from parents and society, without a likely proportional gain. Teachers’ willingness to continue the strike seemed to wane as it became prolonged, public critiques mounted, the school year was drawing to an end and no concessions were made by the Ministry. Interviewed towards the end of the school year, a teacher in Tunis who had long served in the union, expressed dismay at the treason narrative put forward by the media and authorities, but argued that the withholding of marks had been exhausted as an option for struggle in light of the lack of motivation among teachers and there was a need for retreat and transferring the struggle

to the following year. A teacher I interviewed after the first deal struck with the secondary union, told me the agreement was a farce and a betrayal to the struggles of teachers.

Conclusion

In the latest of a series of protest actions over the previous decade, Tunisian teacher unions selected a strategy (withholdings final marks) that reduces learning loss to students (compared to a strike) and lowers barriers of participation to teachers (compared to a physical protest). Many teachers expressed initial compliance with this ‘silent strike’ to voice their grievances and to strengthen the unions as the last remaining social-justice force in the face of a retreat of democratic transition. The unions secured limited and deferred concessions in the end, creating significant frustration among teachers. The article underlines the key logics that informed teacher views on the unions and the strikes. While criticism of the unions and their choices was voiced, the role of the unions in the defence of education and in the advancement of teacher rights and the utility of union membership were not widely challenged. This episode of contention occurred in the midst a dire financial situation and was seen as part of a political struggle to guard spaces of autonomy and representation outside of populist claims (or to undermine a popular president in a politically fragile moment, from the opposing perspective).

The narratives of teachers point to fruitful ways in which existing frameworks in the literature could be deployed and reconceptualised. Grievances with salaries, temporary hiring and other conditions were clear and the strong social identity of teachers featured prominently. Identification with the unions however varied significantly. Especially among older generations of teachers, many valued the political strength of the unions and preserving or enhancing this power was a key and sometimes decisive consideration in their decision whether to comply with leadership decisions. Perceptions of clientelism and violations of democratic procedures within the union movement undermined this identification for many, however. While efficacy of the unions in securing financial gains for teachers had been proven over the years, the likelihood of success of this particular protest was questioned in the context of spiralling national debt and rapid inflation. As such, perceptions of political opportunity featured prominently in teacher narratives.

Several moral and political preferences were referenced by teachers to both support and contest the strike. For example, many teachers were sympathetic to appeals to the national interest, as well as being sensitive to official and media accusation of lack of national loyalty and harming the nation. Moral questions were also raised in relation to the potential harm to students due to the strike, whether in undermining their morale and learning or in pushing families out of public education. The charges of corruption against the unions could also be seen as an attempt to transform themselves from an interest group to a political machine in Schneider’s (2022) sense. By gaining greater control over teaching hiring, unions were arguably trying to gain more power over teacher career paths, albeit in informal ways. However, when viewed from a moralising lens, and magnified by the media, these forms of clientelism can become a key determinant of identification with unions. Views on support for democracy and the primacy of ‘development over freedom’ also shaped identification with the unions and attitudes towards the selected collective action. Identification with the entity calling the collective action therefore has layered moral, political and ideological dimensions that shape decisions to participate. Being a highly politicised union with leadership at odds with a popular president both enhanced and undermined identification with the unions, beyond agreement on their demands. In sum, while literature has underlined moral considerations, the research points to a wider range of differences in political preferences and values that can be sharpened as an entry to capturing the reported drivers of protest participation. The duration and recurrence of protest over the previous years also impacted teacher commitment and social/parental pressure on them.

Generational, temporal, political and historical dimensions therefore structured narratives of grievance, identity, efficacy and morality driving attitudes towards this protest. However, while

perceived grievances and the emotions surrounding them were shared across interviewed teachers, the decisive factors shaping their views were centred around moral and political preferences and perceived political opportunity. Strong group identity as teachers and solidarity with temporary teachers, were common themes, while identification with the union diverged among teachers. An environment of rising nationalist and populist sentiment, teacher assessments of the realistic prospects of success of protest against a government fighting for solvency and growing media attacks, like the statement cited at the onset of this article, have all contributed to teacher views on the protest. On the other hand, despite disagreements over the timing and tools of the struggle, the historical legacy and recent political role of the unions and their defence of teachers are widely acknowledged as they continue to be seen as a central vehicle for defending public education in Tunisia.

Notes

1. In most middle and low-income countries, teacher salaries represent 2–7 times GDP per capita (Sandefur 2018), and evidence points to an average wage of 3–3.5 times per capita GDP as conducive to a productive education system (OECD 2014, 184).
2. UGTT is used only when respondents refer to the umbrella organization: the Tunisian General Labour Union (*al-itihad*), while union/unions is used to refer to teachers' syndicates (*al-naqaba/ al-naqabat*). Naqaba (or naqabat ummal) is the Arabic term used for unions, trade unions, labour unions and syndicates.
3. In terms of international comparison, student performance is more than 3 years of schooling below the OECD average (World Bank 2016).
4. Other items included an increase in the annual back-to-school bonus and reopening promotion processes. The agreement also commits to the elimination of precarious employment in the sector and the regularization of the status of deputy teachers in the database.

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Ethics statement

The research has been approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (MPI-MMG) and given the approval number: MPI-MMG/SCD/2022/12A.

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