

Algerian women rally for equality

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Baya Benyahia from the new Algerian women's group FAUED spoke to Workers' Liberty
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THE SITUATION of women has not changed on the legal level. Since 1984 there has been a Family Code which means that a woman does not have the same rights as a man, for example she is not the legal guardian of her children after a divorce even if she has custody of them. The legal guardian is always a man. The woman cannot keep the family home.

Fundamentalist ideology has had increasing influence since the 1970s. It has recruited from people's dissatisfaction with the government.

Now the threats are becoming more physical. Many women have to wear the veil at work or in the streets. The fundamentalists demand the abolition of mixed workplaces and mixed schools. Fewer young girls go to school; fewer women go out to work. According to the ILO, only 4.2 per cent of women now go out to work.

In the universities, groups of fundamentalist students threaten women. Some women continue to study, veiled; others have quit.

It is still possible to go on the streets without a veil. In Algiers, you find young women wearing mini-skirts and shorts as a reaction against the fundamentalists.

The fundamentalists are stronger in the big cities than in the countryside, because of the economic difficulties. They recruit especially among young men who feel obliged to support their families but cannot find work.

Some women support the fundamentalists, too, and often these are educated women who think they will get a say in the future if they go along with the fundamentalists, and refuse to believe that the fundamentalists will use violence.

A lot of poorer women wear the veil for reasons of prudence, without necessarily being fundamentalists. Housewives will go to the mosque so that their family will behave better towards them. And lots of young people go to the mosque because of the housing crisis. They live with their whole family in one or two rooms, and they do not want to be at home all the time. They go to the mosque because it is cheap and warm and there are people to talk to. And then the political activists latch



Attacked by the fundamentalists for not wearing the veil, this woman student dies later in hospital

on to them.

Algeria has an economic crisis, and a very large proportion of young people in the population. Those are the root problems.

The opposition includes two branches of the Algerian Communist Party, who are oriented to the old official "socialist" policies. Ben Bella's party, the MDA, wants to be simultaneously Islamicist and liberal, and to some extent it reproduces the old ideology of the FLN [the old ruling party]. The RCD stands for a specific Berber cultural identity [against oppression by Algeria's Arab majority], and has also rallied some non-Berber intellectuals. The FFS [Socialist Forces Front], also "Berberist", does not, I think, have much of an activist base left in Algeria: a lot of its activists are in exile.

It has been difficult to unite democrats both against the fundamentalists and against a regime which people no longer want. There were women's demonstrations against the Family Code, but then all attempts at unity would fall under the domination of one party or another.

Our movement comes from the idea of bringing together women from different parties and associations on the principle of equal rights. The founding meeting was on 8 March 1995. Ten per cent of the women there were in veils.

What about Algerian immigrants in France? A lot of them reckon that they have more than enough problems to deal with in France. They are very frightened of being contaminated by what is going on in Algeria. Some feel troubled by what is going in Algeria, but do not know what to do about it. In the meantime, they have to struggle in France against the fascists.

In the short term, I can see no perspec-

tive in Algeria. Only an economic and social perspective for the young people who cannot find jobs and livelihoods can offer a way forward. The IMF will do nothing but make the situation worse.

An economic programme should demand that the corrupt and predatory state ceases to have a monopoly over all activity. It should call for equal rights. But I think jobs for all are not possible with the current set-up in industry. Small businesses must be allowed to develop, under control, but not control for the profit of a tiny handful of people. We must get rid of the old nomenklatura and have an economic programme.

World capitalism is offering no alternatives. It is not possible to go on like this. In Europe, too, social exclusion and unemployment are being created. We can only deal with these problems together.

Fascism recruits from people's hatred of outsiders, and so does fundamentalism. But the USA has a position which is not against the fundamentalist movements. The fundamentalists are heavily supported by Saudi Arabia, which is the USA's ally. These are groups which do not close the door on capitalism.

I do not think the fundamentalists can take power yet, but if the situation continues, certainly repression will not deal with the problem. More and more young people are growing up socially excluded and need to believe that one day things will be different. But no opposition party proposes a clear economic programme. ■

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