

Tunis, 18 July 2019



# اتحاد الأساتذة الجامعيين الباحثين التونسيين: «إجابة»

## Tunisian University Teachers and Researchers Union “IJABA”

**Liberties in Tunisia are at Risk: Keep your Hands off Public University, Keep your Hands off the University Teacher**

Dear Madame/ Dear Sir,

Tunisian university teachers have been struggling for two years now to preserve the status of public university as a hub for science and knowledge; to stop the waves of thousands of skilful and competent employees from leaving the country; and to restore the value of the PhD certificate and its holders.

Last year (2018) the ministry overlooked the progressive actions taken by university teachers that lasted for four months and a half but then, in just about three weeks, accepted to start the negotiations and thus the 7<sup>th</sup> of June, 2018 accord was reached. Under this accord, university teachers accepted many serious abdications for the sake of students and for the country as well.

This year, and after months of continual deferment, the ministry totally renounced the commitment that it had signed with the Tunisian University Teachers and Researchers Union “IJABA” and has thus repudiated all its engagements while at the same time refusing to negotiate. University teachers have accordingly started to move since November 2018 by wearing red protest armbands and then announcing a cyclical three-day strike, then a second three-day strike and organizing three national sit-ins that gathered thousands of university teachers each. Despite all these actions taken, the ministry refused to start any form of dialogue and chose instead to produce false claims and data about these actions and subject university teachers to a series of illegal and repressive measures. It was not enough for the ministry to continuously harass and threaten them via the Minister’s media interviews, but it has also:

- cut the salaries of university teachers for three months, starting for March, and depriving them and their families from any form of social security and insurance, thus disrespecting some of the most basic and universal rights of human beings.
- Tried to humiliate and defeat them during the sit-in that lasted for 63 days under open skies by deploying hundreds of security officers against them.
- Spread fake news and false accusations in media campaigns led by the minister who used all possible bad words and unethical expressions to describe the university teachers and their struggle.

Teachers have resisted all this for 63 days and then went out in the streets in a historical march that comprised more than 5000 university teachers and that allowed them to get their salaries back. They then opened the door wide open for the minister and the Tunisian University Teachers and Researchers Union “IJABA” officially invited him for a serious dialogue by mid-May 2019. But the minister won’t accept this invitation until after two weeks, by the first week of June. Yet, and after more than 50 hours of negotiations with the ministerial committee, it was clear that the ministry was far from being serious in its dialogue and wanted, instead, to gain more time and ridicule and belittle the group of negotiators sent by “IJABA”. At the end, the ministry decided to close all the doors that might lead to a way out and retreated from the last session that was planned in June 2019 under false and unconvincing pretexts.

The minister and his team have, since then, started to run at their fastest to destroy and repress every single protest movement by university teachers and threaten and reduce to silence every patriotic voice that sought to protect our public university. Some of the measures they have taken include:

- The publication of an extract from the proceedings of a meeting with university rectors that puts the credibility of our educational certifications at risk so as to ensure a forceful closure of the academic year and put an end to the final exams without taking into consideration the fact that the extract was rejected by most departments and scientific councils in most universities. These were threatened that anyone who refuses to apply the regulations inside the extract will be punished.
- Targeting directors and deans with direct threats and measures taken against them in case they refused to apply it. They have thus appointed committees from the ministry and sent them to different institutions to make sure the illegal measures of the extract were applied, thus overlooking the role of the elected committees and utterly reinstalling dictatorship again. They also did not shun from humiliating and threatening the elected directors and deans and blackmail them with the

promise of opening new specialities in their institutions and the threat of closing down some specialities in case they refused.

- Sending official letters to tens of university teachers who were on strike, heads of departments, directors and deans to threaten them. These were sent in the form of interrogations, and this is an unprecedented measure that has never been taken against university teachers before. These teachers demanded nothing but the application of an agreement that had been signed a year ago with the ministry. Some of the issues that teachers have been interrogated about include:

- ✓ Posts on Facebook in which university teachers expressed their refusal of the illegal measures taken in the extract published by the ministry and that the minister wanted to apply by force. These measures are not simply illegal but are in stark contradiction with the legal texts included in the Official Journal of the Republic of Tunisia that organize exams at Tunisian universities and the passage from one level to the other.
- ✓ Legal warning messages submitted by the representatives of our Union that remind directors and deans of the legal texts and warn them against the application of any illegal measure included in the extract.
- ✓ The publication of some university teachers' opinions after department meetings as regards the supremacy of the law and the need to respect it.
- ✓ The publication of some information concerning the meetings of groups of teachers who gathered to call on the minister to preserve the credibility of our educational certification system and the need to respect the legal texts that organize examination in Tunisian universities.

These interrogations falsely accuse the university teachers to whom they have been sent of defamation, disrespect of dignity, disrespect of professional secrets and of the director at work, and they were sent to also threaten the teachers on strike with punishment and prison.

- One of the most seriously unprecedented measures that have been taken by the minister, and that has never been taken by any Tunisian minister before even during the dark years of dictatorship, was to suspend Dr. Hassen Mekki, an Associate Professor at the Tunisian university and the General Coordinator of the "IJABA" bureau in the National School of Engineering in Sousse, and Dr. Anis Belhaj Brahim, an Assistant

Professor and Vice Coordinator of the same bureau in the same institution and Dr Mounir Mensi an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Sciences and Monastir and the General Coordinator of IJABA's bureau in the same school. The first two colleagues have been suspended from work on the basis of some false accusations that the director the School presented against them in March 2019 with no single evidence given to prove them as for the last one, a forged accusation of breaking through the High School of Commerce in Sfax was concocted against all material and video evidences. The General Inspection Department of the ministry, under the instructions of Slim Khalbous the Tunisian minister of higher education turned a deaf ear to all the elements of evidence and proofs provided to them by the aforementioned colleagues in order to forge the charges. It is more than obvious that the minister, through these oppressive measures, openly blackmails university teachers to counter one of the noblest causes they have ever stood together to fight for, and that has been running for three years now, demanding nothing but to regain the value of public university and its teachers.

- Also, it seems that all the above-mentioned measures were not enough for the minister; so, he moved on to exercise his oppressive powers over our students, for after the students at the Faculty of Sciences in Monastir refused to sit for partial exams by force, the sanctity of their faculty was violated on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July, 2019 by police forces following the commands of a ministerial committee that was present on that day there and under the direct supervision of the Higher Education minister Slim Khalbous himself. No Tunisian faculty has witnessed something like this since the Revolution, and the result of these events was 14 student representatives who got arrested and whose colleagues have been battered and humiliated. In a very violent and savage way, students' mobile phones were confiscated. All this was because they refused to sit for partial and incomplete exams by force and stood fast against the minister's threats.
- The ministry is still broadcasting its false and unethical accusations of both teachers and students, and it does so through the different media stations that, unfortunately, works in support for the minister's political agendas.

Dear Madame, dear Sir, today university academics are in danger, they suffer from orchestrated and very offending government violence and misuse of power. Freedom of speech, human rights and moral and physical integrity of Tunisian university teachers are seriously threatened by Slim Khalbous and his team who are backed by the Tunisian head of government and the UGTT central

union which is leaving no stone unturned to bury the experience of syndicate pluralism whatever the cost is.

Based on what is mentioned above, we are here declaring that liberties in Tunisia are at risk and that this is strategically planned by a government that seeks to forcefully implement its policies through oppression, false accusations, fake news, and defamation of free activists, be they teachers or students. These serious acts of violence contradict with the Clause 31 of the Tunisian Constitution that acknowledges and guarantees the right to go on strike, and Decree number 4030 for the year 2014, dated October 3, 2014 concerning the agreement on the Code of Conduct and Work Ethics of a public sector employee that obliges state employees to disrespect all illegal orders. These acts are to be regarded as a direct threat to the rights to establish civic organizations and the right to go on strike. They represent a serious threat to the freedom of speech and can therefore be considered as acts of psychological violence against the university teachers who are on strike and their moral integrity and dignity. They are proof enough of the ministry's inability to manage crises, its abuse of its powers, and its consideration of itself above the law and above all human, universal, and constitutional rights that are usually unquestionable. The minister with full support from the head of government, clearly, wants to re-install the same dictatorial regime that Tunisians have chosen to overthrow.

It is important for us to inform the Tunisian people and all Tunisian university teachers that the Tunisian University Teachers and Researchers Union "IJABA" will assume its historical role in defending our national institutions and will never allow any party to violate the constitutional rights of any Tunisian citizen and touch the moral and personal integrity of teachers and students.

Dear Sir/ Madam, we are hereby asking you to urgently intervene to protect Tunisian university teachers and students and shield them against this strategic oppression and these illegal policies that the minister and his team are trying to implement amidst a calculated silence among public and private local mass media and cunning defamation campaigns. We have previously sent messages in more than one occasion to the three heads of the executive power in Tunisia and to the members of Parliament to protect human rights, liberties, and the right for syndicate pluralism that are guaranteed by the constitution, the law, and all the international conventions signed by the Republic of Tunisia.

We shall thus conclude by saying that no way out of any crisis can be found without serious dialogue and the respect of one's word and engagements. Certainly, oppression and violence lead nowhere and as much as we are ready to accept any serious dialogue with the ministry, as much as we are keen on rejecting any illusive and time-wasting solution that the ministry wants to propose to teachers.

Do please accept our sincere gratitude.

**General Coordinator of IJABA**  
**Dr. Nejmeddine JOUIDA**



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