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Tunis in the Global Radical Web: Diasporas, Transnational Anarchism, and Labor Movements (1887–1912)

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the Italian-speaking anarchists of the end of the nineteenth century and their involvement and legacy in trade union movements and strikes in Tunis during the first decade of the twentieth century. A perspective privileging the internationalist and trade-unionist activities, and their impact on that specific colonial context, avoids the dangers of a rigid ethnoscapes and methodological nationalism. Even though most of the actors of this story were considered by the states as Italian nationals, their conflictual (at least for the anarchists) nationality helps us to understand the complexity of the national-cultural belonging of subversive migrants in the Imperial Mediterranean. The ideological struggle on the subversive legacy of Giuseppe Garibaldi at the end of the nineteenth century and the conflictual relations of the trade unions with consular authorities at the beginning of the twentieth century showed an Italian-speaking internationalism in the Southern Mediterranean shore, tightly connected with the European and the American areas. Based on understudied diplomatic, colonial, and police records, this research aims at analyzing the attempts of an international working-class movement in a hierarchical colonial situation also through Italian, French, and Tunisian sources.

Keywords: Anarchism; Tunisia; labor movements; migration

A Threat from the South

Rome, March 21, 1896: Antonio Starabba Marquis of Rudini (known as Rudini) has recently become prime minister of the Kingdom of Italy after the resignation of Francesco Crispi due to military defeat in Adwa, Ethiopia. The most significant African victory of that time over a European army, it was a tremendous setback for Italian imperialist ambition and enhanced the antigovernment and anti-imperialist protests.¹ The fear of uprisings and rebellions encompassed the possible involvement of subversives from abroad, who opposed that legal order for a social revolution. On that day, Rudini forwarded a message of the General Commander of the XII Army Corps in Sicily to the consular authority in Tunis, assessing that “Tunisia could, in this case, serve as a place of preparation for the attempts of the

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anarcho-socialist party targeting Sicily in particular,” and to prevent this “it is necessary to have in Tunis a competent secret agent for the intelligence service.”² Why were the Italian authorities concerned with what was happening in Tunis? What was the role of this city in the “anarcho-socialist” network?

The forwarded message of 1896 gives us an insight into the role of Tunis in this radical web not simply as a refuge but also as a threat, a political laboratory that could take subversive strategies toward Italy. One of the aims of this paper is to assess the importance of Tunis in what Ilham Khuri-Makdisi defined as “global radicalism”³ and to contribute to the history of anarchism and labor movements in colonial North Africa. Even though a thriving international scholarship focused on radicalism in the Mediterranean during the late modern era, the Levant has received more attention⁴ than the Maghreb region, and the Tunisian area has been neglected until now from the specific analysis.⁵ Tunisia, particularly Tunis, is often quoted as a crossing point of the anarchist and radical network or as a temporary refuge for political subversives, mainly from Italy. This paper assesses the role of Tunis in the global radical web and the connection between the anarchist and labor movements.

Labor Migrations and the Formation of an Anarchist Group in a Colonial Society

Since the Early Modern era, various Italian-speaking groups settled in the Tunisian region mainly due to enslavement and commerce.⁶ During the first half of the nineteenth century and until the Italian political unification, Tunisian Beylik (Kingdom) hosted several waves of political refugees that fled from repression, like Giuseppe Garibaldi, one of the leaders of the Risorgimento movement.⁷ Just before the Italian unification of 1861, Giuseppe Mazzini considered Tunis a strategic center to conceal the weapons and a starting point for a revolutionary expedition toward Sicily.⁸ After the foundation of the new Italian state under the House of Savoy, the kingdom of liberal rule left no room for those who had fought (and continued to fight) for other political options, like democrats and republicans.⁹ The long tradition of militancy and political exile of the Italian patriots,¹⁰ closer to a social-republican option, continued after 1861 through the protests against the established social order. In Italy as well as in the Italian diasporas, Garibaldinism—defined as a specific set of political practices and traditions closer to social republican and radical ideas involving mainly Italian activists—until the 1880s was one of the main political-social bases on which the anarchist movement took root. During the '80s, a political rift divided the Italian anarcho-socialists between those who accepted the election and the representation in the Parliament and those who did not. In August 1881, three months after the French invasion of Tunisia, the Socialist Revolutionary Party was founded in Italy by Andrea Costa, who was elected in 1882 as a Member of Parliament by swearing an oath to the same state he wanted to fight. From then on, “legalist” socialists, those who participated in the elections, and anarcho-socialists went against the State and its rule split. The latter strongly opposed the “legalist” method by proposing direct ways for social insurrection. Most of them, pursued by the law, fled from Italy, diffusing their ideas through their activities and publications in the diaspora.¹¹

Meanwhile, the social distress and emigration of lower classes became one of the characterizing features of Italian societies in the second half of the nineteenth

century.¹² Along with Egypt, Tunisia was their leading African destination, especially after establishing French protection in 1881 and implementing public works such as harbors, railways, mining extraction, and agriculture exploitation.¹³ International treaties between Italy and France guaranteed the citizenship status of Italians in Tunisia. So, even though they were from a lower social status, working-class Italian immigrants had more civil and political rights and legal protection than their Tunisian counterparts.¹⁴ In addition, the average wages were higher in Tunisia than in Italy. Mine workers, fishermen, wine-growers, and bricklayers from Southern and Insular Italy came to Tunisia en masse, also thanks to the proximity of the Mediterranean shores. If in 1871 Italians in Tunisia numbered approximately 6,000, in the year of the French occupation it was almost double at 11,000;¹⁵ thirty years after, in 1911, there were approximately 88,000 Italians, 46,000 French, and 1,000,800 Tunisians.¹⁶ Italian nationals in Tunisia outnumbered the French population and every other European community, like the Maltese population, which was ca. 11,000 in 1911, and the third largest foreign European community.¹⁷

This immigrant workforce depended on their jobs: in the Northern rural districts of Enfida, Cape Bon, and Zaghouan were the peasants and wine-growers, mainly from Sicily. Mine workers from Sardinia found better working conditions in the Tunisian phosphate, zinc, and copper mines in Kasserine, Gafsa, and Sidi Bouzid. Most of them preferred the port city areas and their surroundings. The building of colonial neighborhoods and the harbor needed many workers that settled in Tunis, Sousse, and Halq al-Wadi (La Goulette) in slums called “Little Sicilies” for the origin of their inhabitants.¹⁸ These areas hosted marginalized immigrants that were considered potentially dangerous by the authorities.¹⁹ These were where subversive political groups and labor trade unions first took root.

In Tunis, among Italian immigrants, a thriving group of anarchists settled in the last decades of the nineteenth century.²⁰ They were involved in associations that were aligned most closely with their social agenda, like free medical visits to workers by anarchist doctors.²¹ Anarchists’ strong participation in the international voluntary association Croce Verde (“Green Cross”) in 1895 is noteworthy. This association offered free transport to hospitals in Tunis²² for ill and wounded persons without the money to hire an ambulance. Their main political activity in those years was to spread their ideas through newspapers and booklets and to support the anarchist movement worldwide.

It is thanks to this production that it is possible to define the nature, the connections, and the ideas of this group that defined itself as the “Communist-Anarchist Group of Tunis” in the newspaper *L’Operaio* (*The Worker*, from the sixteenth issue it added the subtitle “Press service of the anarchists of Tunis and Sicily”).²³ The founder of the newspaper and leading member of this group was Nicolò Converti, an anarchist doctor from Calabria that settled in Tunis in 1887 after a period of political exile in Bastia and Marseille.²⁴ This analysis focuses mainly on two newspapers: *L’Operaio* and *La Protesta Umana* (*The Human Protest*) (both directed by Converti) because they were the only Tunis-based anarchist newspapers at the end of the nineteenth century, as far as I know, whose copies are still available. The first newspaper, *L’Operaio*, stated clearly on its front page the political orientation of the Italian-speaking anarchist group of Tunis: “We will fight against the

system of oppression, human exploitation (...) against the State, against the principle of authority, for anarchy, for freedom against patriotic selfishness, for human solidarity....”²⁵ The main contributors to the newspaper were members of the Italian-speaking anarchist group of Tunis, with the founder, Doctor Converti, in the leading role, signing the articles with his name. Other contributors remained anonymous, and the main topics concerned news from the international anarchist movement and political theory. The Tunisian-Sicilian subtitle of the newspaper was motivated by the column “From Marsala” written by an anonymous contributor dedicated to the local politics of that town and the column “Local issues” that informed the public about Tunis-based activities and news. The funding sources of the newspaper came from selling copies, support from the local “Communist-Anarchist Group,” and donations from restaurants, shops, and popular hotels. The published correspondence demonstrates the worldwide interest in and diffusion of this newspaper. In the September 11, 1888, issue the anarchist group of Montevideo in Uruguay addressed to *L’Operaio* directly and announced the creation of an anarchist group “among the French- Spanish- and Italian-speaking proletarians,” stating its “pact of solidarity with all other anarchist groups in the world.”²⁶ The news about a strike in Barcelona and Madrid, a famine in Montenegro,²⁷ or an anarchist political meeting in Marseille²⁸ all show the degree of international connection of the Tunis-based group thanks to and through the circulation of news, contributions, and texts within the anarchist international network. Some contributions were translated articles from other anarchist newspapers, confirming Benedict Anderson’s analysis of the high degree of globalization of the anarchist movement in those years.²⁹ Notably, the Tunis-based newspaper was also sold in Italy, as demonstrated by the price-lowering of the copies in Italy due to the request of “several comrades.” Based on issue number 10, *L’Operaio* cost 2 cents in Tunisia, 5 in Italy, and 10 in other countries.³⁰

Even though the group had a strong connection and interest in international news and issues, it was not the same in regards to the local political situation that was often limited to the Italian-speaking group and its relation with the authorities. The political analysis of this anarchist group settled within Tunisian society did not consider the colonial situation in which it lived. Surprisingly, most of the anti-imperialist considerations of this Tunis-based anarchist group found in the pages of *L’Operaio* concerned the Italian colonial wars in East Africa. In November 1887, in the column dedicated to the “local issues,” an article criticized the Italian bourgeoisie of Tunis that supported the national colonial ambition: “Fatherland is hate, slaughter and war (...) we suggest to those who oppose us and praise the extreme and supreme sacrifices that the fatherland is doing in the Abyssinian War, to enroll as volunteers in Africa to oppress in the name of the fatherland, others fatherland.”³¹ Even though the anti-imperialist position of the group emerges in several contributions, the lack of interest in the social and political condition of the colonized Tunisians is outstanding. In contrast with its internationalist interest, a Western- and Italian-centric approach shaped the Tunis-based anarchist group.

Only at the beginning of the twentieth century did some Tunis-based anarchists start to focus on the local social conditions. Until then, as an expression of Italian-speaking subversives, no articles were written in Arabic. Even the French

articles from France or Algeria were often translated into Italian. In addition, the main topic emerging from the local issues column concerns more political and ideological matters than social ones. Between local production and the interest in the global frame, the regional framework of the Tunisian colonial society was blurred. This blurring toward the segmented society of colonial Tunisia was a sort of by-product of the hierarchical system of the French Protectorate. In the wake of studies on anarchism in the Mashreq area, especially Egypt,³² it is possible to say that in the Tunisian case, the anarchist militants from European countries were unintentional “bearers of colonial privileges.” Their linguistic, political, and cultural background, coupled with national legal boundaries of citizenship that shaped the hierarchical colonial society, created “this aporia [that] prevented political collaboration with the local population.”³³ The Western bias of the anarchist group in Tunis also appears in the few connections and circulations, of people and news, with Egypt, the other country in Mediterranean Africa with a thriving Italian community where anarchists were numerous. The anarchists in Tunis looked more at what was happening in France, Spain, and the United States than in Egypt or the Maghreb area. The same can be said for those based in Egypt toward Tunisia.³⁴ Algeria rarely appeared in *L’Operaio*: once as a place of origin of a certain “Raymond J.” author of an article about an anarchist critic of fatherland and patriotism that has no references to the local situation; another time with news on an earthquake in Oran.³⁵

In addition, more than the colonial authority, the main political enemy of the Tunis-based group was the European upper class and mostly the national one.

Disputing over Garibaldi’s Legacy in a Diasporic Colonial Space

The claim on Garibaldi’s ideological heritage³⁶ was a conflict over which the political divisions of expatriate Italian groups in Tunis clashed. The figure of Garibaldi was then declined according to the different political attachments: republican, democrat, and internationalist, or national hero, patriot, and symbol of the unification? Thus, it is no coincidence that Garibaldi’s legacy made it onto the front page of one of the first anarchist newspapers in Tunisia. On November 20, 1887, *L’Operaio* published an article entitled “Profanazione” (“Profanation”), which accused the Italian upper class in Tunisia of corrupting the Garibaldian ideal. The kindergarten of Tunis—dedicated to Garibaldi—was slow to see the light of day, “but the bourgeoisie has other things in mind than to think of institutes where the sons of the people can be educated, albeit poorly. On the contrary, don’t you see that the Collegio Convitto, which the worker’s son will never be able to access because he will never be able to spend hundreds of francs, was established in a few months, as if by magic.”³⁷

The criticism was not only about the slowness of the construction of the kindergarten but also about the declared intention by the consular authority to include Catholic religious education in this school: “A little decency, gentlemen! Such a procedure is a profanation of the name of Garibaldi, and it sabotages the will of those who, inspired by the principles of the Popular General, wanted such establishment (...) that should never be used except for purely secular uses.”

However, the “popular general” was dead, and, in his memory, the new Italian national state wished to build an image of a national hero, purified of the more

controversial aspects and in the service of the kingdom. The local Italian upper class played an essential role through national associations, schools, and institutions (like banks, libraries, and hospitals) to spread bourgeois and patriotic values to the expatriated lower class. The most important of these associations was the *Camera di Commercio*, representing the businessmen and big landowners that sponsored the leading Italian newspaper of Tunisia *L'Unione (The Union)*.³⁸ The article criticized the memorial occupation that the consular authorities, *L'Unione*, and the Italian upper class were applying to the image of the general. The anarchists claimed the image of Garibaldi in the radical and subversive political way through their newspaper and the associations they participated in, like the "Society of the Garibaldians" of Tunis. Founded in the '80s, it regrouped all the militants, former fighters, and supporters of Garibaldi red-skirts troops, linked at the beginning to the social and republican option of the Italian unification process. The participation of anarchists in this association confirmed the persistence of the subversive legacy in the world of Garibaldinism. The dividing memory of Garibaldi's legacy soon created other occasions of conflict among those in Tunis who, for different reasons, claimed to be followers of the general. The commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the "Hero of the Two Worlds" death in 1892 brought out the contradictions of his political heritage. The proposal of the Society of the Garibaldians to place a commemorative plaque "on the pediment of the school dedicated to Garibaldi"³⁹ was well-received within the Italian collective, which supported the initiative with fundraising. A conflict arose over who should attend the plaque unveiling ceremony on the anniversary, June 2nd. The Society of the Garibaldians in Tunis did not want the participation of the Italian consul or the execution of the Italian royal march.⁴⁰ The politicization of the figure of Garibaldi risked triggering political and social cleavages among Italians in Tunis. At the same time, the consular authority and notables wanted to celebrate him as a symbol of national unity.

Giulio Castelnuovo, a member of the Italian upper class of Tunis, contacted the son of the general, Menotti, to defuse the conflict. On May 30, 1892, Menotti replied with a telegram of total support for the "national" understanding of Garibaldi's figure: "The commemoration of the 2nd of June assumed a national character even within the Italian borders, it seems to me even more necessary to keep it abroad. I, therefore, ask friends and companions to keep it that way. Greetings, M. Garibaldi."⁴¹ Following Menotti's message, the Garibaldians in Tunis could hardly have objected to such legitimation from a member of the Garibaldi family. The marginalization of the radical side of the Garibaldians of Tunis in 1892 was followed, between 1893 and 1894, by their estrangement from the association, which rallied around the national framework—a merging of the Society of Garibaldians with the veterans aimed at neutralizing its radical political orientation.⁴² A French police report informed the political disapproval of those Garibaldians that left the new society.⁴³

Anarchists moved away from the Garibaldian association, but their numbers and activities continue to haunt police forces in Tunisia, France and Italy. During the repression in 1893 of the Sicilian peasant and worker movement known as *Fasci Siciliani* (1889–1894) that asked for land reform and social justice, several militants fled from Italy. Italian authorities feared that Tunis could become a haven for rebels. It is no coincidence that the arrests of the most influential leaders of this social

movement—Giuseppe Garibaldi Bosco, Nicola Barbato, and Bernardino Verro—occurred at the port of Palermo before they embarked on a steamship directed to Tunis.⁴⁴ The French services noticed since 1894, during the first police repressions against the Sicilian movement, that Tunisia was a destination for political refugees close to socialism and anarchism.⁴⁵ On the anarchist watchlist produced in 1897 by the police, out of sixteen anarchists established in Tunis, four were French and twelve Italians.⁴⁶ On another list of “individuals to watch as having anarchist views,” there are thirty-one individuals: twenty-four Italians, four French, two Swiss, and one Spanish.⁴⁷ The anarchist activities in Tunis were concerned mainly with the publication of newspapers, political reviews, and support for solidarity campaigns. The Tunis anarchist cell was part of a transregional network that united the Mediterranean and Atlantic region, from Sicily to the United States, as demonstrated by its supporting role during the repression of the Sicilian social movement in 1896: “comrades residing in Tunis did all they could and at that time was sent to Italy, on several occasions, administered to comrades who had come here as well as to those who had escaped from Sicily, the sum of 2,763.8 fr. (...) Then we received money from New York and Patterson.”⁴⁸ In addition, Tunisia’s proximity to Italian places of detention for political crimes, such as the Aegadian or Pelagian Islands, made this anarchist cell very active in assisting and helping refugees and escapees. On May 28, 1896, six anarchist prisoners fled the Favignana (Western Sicily) island to Tunisia. French police responding to calls from Italians worked to arrest them before they could join their companions in Tunis.⁴⁹ With more success in 1899, Errico Malatesta escaped from Lampedusa and reached Tunis; the escape would have been organized directly by Converti, who welcomed Malatesta for a few days before he set sail again for Malta.⁵⁰ The Italian anarchists of Tunisia remained closely linked to the social struggles in Italy at the end of the century. In the column “From Marsala” of *L’Operaio*’ and other articles, Italian political debate and anarchist activities in Italy had a privileged place. Also, the *La Protesta Umana* focused on the Italian situation, as demonstrated by the political analysis of social movements in Sicilian hinterlands,⁵¹ and the condition of political detainees in Tuscan prisons.⁵²

This interest in Italian matters did not betray their international and Western-centered perspective, as demonstrated by their protests in Tunis against the execution of the “Chicago martyrs”⁵³ and of Francisco Ferrer, the anarchist pedagogue condemned to death after a mock trial for inspiring the 1909 uprising in Barcelona.⁵⁴ The Tunis-based anarchist group was fully integrated into the transnational solidarity campaigns, even though with a Western bias, that involved several anarchist, libertarian, and progressist groups worldwide.⁵⁵

Strike Organization in a Colonial Context

Since the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial economy and labor migration significantly modified Tunisian society.⁵⁶ Since the implementation of the French Protectorate in 1881, national categories greatly affected the workers’ wages. The job position and payroll reflected the political hierarchy of the colonial inequality system.⁵⁷ The top-class employees and managers of the local administration had to comply with French rule, especially if they were not from the colonizer group (French) or

the colonized one (Tunisian). In 1889, the Tunisian Arabic newspaper *al Hadira* (*The Metropolis*) reported that some Italian employees in the top ranks of Tunisian administration were obliged by French rule to obtain French citizenship to keep their jobs.⁵⁸ The assimilation of European foreigners was part of the French imperial project to underpin its colonial rule through demographical growth.⁵⁹ It is noteworthy that a European could not acquire Tunisian nationality.⁶⁰ Assimilating and excluding foreigners secured the top ranks of the Tunisian administration to French and Tunisian employees, but it did not mean equal salaries for all. French employees settled in colonial space benefited from a bonus pay award of a third of the metropolitan wage, the “*tiers colonial*” (“colonial third”).

The unequal wage system based on national and colonial categories involved all sectors of the colonial labor market: French people earned more than Italians, and the latter more than Tunisians. This unequal colonial wage system was denounced in 1907 by the Tunisian reformist newspaper *Le Tunisien: organe des intérêts indigènes* (*The Tunisian: newspaper of Indigenous interests*) that affirmed that a Tunisian worker earned roughly 40 percent less than a French worker with the same job. The unequal income structured by national categories affected the local working class, mainly composed of the foreign workforce. According to Abdeljalil Zaouche, Tunisian politician and member of the “Young Tunisians” party, the Tunisians employed in 1907 in public works made up about 5 percent of the staff, which was thus primarily made up of foreign workforce from Italy.⁶¹ Zaouche accused the Public Works Direction of the Protectorate of preferring a foreign workforce, mainly Sicilians and Sardinians, to a Tunisian one, who was hired in “negligible proportions,” even in unskilled works.⁶² The insular Italian workforce was cheaper than the French and more accustomed to European working methods than Tunisian workers, especially in the building, wine-growing, and mining sectors.⁶³ This cheap workforce benefited from the Tunisian labor market: a Sicilian bricklayer earned 5 to 6 francs per day in Tunisia, an unskilled worker 2.5 to 3 francs, double or triple what he earned in his homeland.⁶⁴ Better wages did not mean a lack of social distress among the immigrant workforce. Public unrest among the workers was high, and the celebration of May 1, 1904 was the occasion to put into practice some of the theories enounced until then in the radical circles.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the rise of local trade unions among the immigrant workforce in Tunis, thanks to the initial involvement of anarchist activists. These unions demanded the application of the French law of 1884 in Tunisia on the legalization of trade unions. The French colonial authority did not apply this law because trade unions made up mainly of foreigners would have been severe threats to the stability of the French Protectorate.⁶⁵ Some months before, in January, a decree abolished the mandatory deposit for the publication of newspapers, and that encouraged the publication of political papers.⁶⁶ A bilingual Italian French sheet titled *I° Maggio / I^{er} Mai* was published for the occasion. The newspaper aimed to encourage workers to unite in trade unions while demanding the 1884 law be enforced. On the first page, two articles, one in Italian, “Towards the organization” by Stefano Colosio (on the anarchists’ list from the French police in 1897)⁶⁷ and one, anonymous, in French, stated the absolute need to create trade unions. The goal of this sheet was to frame the struggle of “the workers of Tunis” within “the

countless ranks of the International Working Class which is rising to conquer the future.”⁶⁸

The internationalist perspective was even more clearly stated in an article in French entitled “Fatherland,” in which the writer accused patriotic and national ideology as a bourgeois tool to weaken the cause of the working class, especially in Tunisia, where colonial hierarchy divided the workers into different national and colonial categories.⁶⁹ The French police considered this sheet and the public lecture of Converti to be the causes of the Tunisian labor unrest.⁷⁰ The sheet, distributed on May 1st, a Sunday, had immediate results. On Monday morning, three thousand construction workers went on strike in Tunis. That same evening all the construction workers of Tunis went on strike, and the day after, other workers joined the protest, including carpenters, joiners, blacksmiths, shoemakers, painters, pasta workers, and bakers. If the strike began among the foreign construction workers, the protest quickly gained the support of the local population: “A multitude of kids, workers with no job, people with no confession, Europeans and natives, have traveled the city seeking to debauch the workers still working either in the building sites or in the workshops.”⁷¹ The police reporting on the “native” participation allows us to consider this strike as a challenge toward colonial categories that had blocked previous European and Tunisian political collaboration of this kind. The situation soon became explosive because the convergence of demands and struggles made the French authority fear a destabilization of the colonial power. French authority acknowledged the political meaning of the strike, highlighting the involvement of anarchist activists, such as Colosio and Converti, in the protest.⁷²

The news of the strike in Tunis spread quickly. The protest united the demands of different categories of workers gained momentum, and thus became more effective. Grombalia, a rural village 40 km southeast of Tunis, followed the example of the capital. On May 5th, there was a scheduled visit of the French Resident-General but “the strikers and the bands of the unemployed who accompany them, Italians for the most part, propose, on the advice of M. Doctor Converti, who seems to be their leader, to go and reach him (...) when the train arrives, this evening.”⁷³ The following day, in Tunis, the strikers demonstrated on the central Avenue de Carthage, near the municipality building.⁷⁴ The police dispersed the demonstration and arrested some workers. Despite this, the strike continued, and the proprietors tried to find agreements with the workers. A strike committee of workers requested arbitration from the resident-general to end the strike and grant the requested salary increases. The first to sign these demands was Giuseppe Natoli, born in Halq al-Wadi (La Goulette, north of Tunis) in 1882, the son of a Sicilian and a Maltese (Vincenza Ellul), booked as an anarchist by the Italian services,⁷⁵ and one of the protagonists of the construction workers’ movement in Tunisia in the following years.⁷⁶ The most prolonged and difficult negotiations concerned the wages of the bricklayers, who’d spearheaded the strike. The trade union question concerned Italians, both on the side of the workers and the side of the proprietors. The strike’s objective was to improve wage conditions and working hours in the construction sites of Italian entrepreneurs in Tunisia. A part of the worker assembly refused an agreement between the worker delegates and proprietors, accusing their delegates of being bribed by the proprietors.⁷⁷ On May 8th, the movement divided, and those who accepted the agreements returned to work.

The intransigent strikers, isolated and delegitimized, capitulated on May 10th and ended the strike.

If the first strike seemed to have been a success for the nascent workers' movement in Tunisia,⁷⁸ once the strike ended and worker solidarity weakened, the proprietors applied the previous wage conditions again. For this reason, the same year, in August, three months after the great strike of May, another one was launched in Tunis, in the worker district of Little Sicily.⁷⁹ Organizers of this new strike were Giuseppe Natoli and Nicolò Converti, again against the proprietors who did not respect the May agreements: Rey and Di Vittorio.⁸⁰ This time, the strike only concerned young workers between twelve and fifteen years old who did not receive the agreed wages. The young workers were trying to spark a strike like the one in May by extending it to other categories of workers. Faced with the older workers of construction sites refusing to support their strike, the young strikers threw stones at the workers and the police.⁸¹ Italian proprietors denied the accusation, declaring their respect for the agreements reached in May. *La Dépêche Tunisienne* accused the jobbers (intermediaries who supplied the labor to the entrepreneurs) of not paying the workers the agreed upon wages.⁸² Natoli sent a telegram to the Confederation of Labor in Paris to inform it of this event. This document, intercepted by the police, was seen as proof of the existence of an "illegally constituted association of the Tunis masons' union. (...) This attempt to strike (...) indicates that we are facing the only international socialist group and of a pure Italian movement towards which it is necessary to take a definitive attitude because of subsequent complications which are to be feared...."⁸³ The young workers' strike was thus repressed within a few hours because of its isolation from the workers' solidarity. Natoli was prosecuted for violating the decree on associations. Four years later, the Italian-speaking review of bricklayers in Tunis celebrated the events of May 1904 as the founding act of the workers' movement.⁸⁴

Miners, Bricklayers, and the Rise of Trade Unions

Although Natoli was acquitted,⁸⁵ the worker movement in Tunisia had a stop that lasted three years. The associative form of a newspaper became the most suitable structure to avoid violating the Protectorate laws and regrouping the workers. After years of silence, 1907 saw the publication of two Italian-speaking working newspapers *Il Minatore* (*The Miner*) and then *La Voce del Muratore* (*The Voice of the Bricklayer*). These newspapers brought together the workers of the same professional sector. They provided information on abuses and workers' issues in the Tunisian Protectorate and also beyond, in Algerian and even Moroccan mine sites. These worker newspapers, in addition, organized and supported protest actions. A characteristic of these hybrid associative structures was their interest at the beginning in more strictly economic issues and less in ideological political questions.

Converti, one of the significant anarchist activists who played an essential role in the radical press during the end of the nineteenth century and in the strikes of 1904, did not participate in these workers' associations. The leaders of this phase of the worker movement in Tunisia were Ferdinando Montuori, for *Il Minatore*, and above all, Giuseppe Natoli, for *La Voce del Muratore*. These associations claimed a

rigid working-class composition; their press organs declared it explicitly through their sub-heading: “newspapers of grouping and defense for the workers,” specifying the “newspaper of all the workers of the mine” (*Il Minatore*); and “newspaper of the bricklayers and similar workers of Tunis” (*La Voce del Muratore*). *Il Minatore*, edited by Ferdinando Montuori, was a weekly publication from January 27 to August 25, 1907.⁸⁶ Creating an Italian-speaking newspaper for workers in Tunisian mines (also reaching the Algerian and Moroccan ones) had an associative goal. The newspaper aimed to create a mutual aid society: the weekly publication should pave the way for worker solidarity. On July 15, 1907, in the newspaper’s offices at Sidi Kadous Street in Tunis, the first meeting of the Mutual Aid Society among the Miners occurred. The company was constituted according to the French law for mutual aid societies as of July 24, 1867, and the founding members were all from Sardinia.⁸⁷ Even though Article III of the statute declared a strict social composition assessing that “the company is made up of workers, admitting people from other social strata could become dangerous,” the political orientation of the society and the newspaper was not so rigid. The newspaper published articles and letters from workers whose political opinions encompassed anarchist-revolutionary and progressive-moderate orientation. Montuori, the newspaper editor, and the society’s leader, supported philanthropic socialism, rejecting the violent aspects of anarcho-syndicalism or revolutionary socialism.⁸⁸ On July 7th, *Il Minatore* celebrated the anniversary of Garibaldi’s birth. Like in 1892, in 1907, the image of Garibaldi in Tunis became again a conflicting “place of memory”⁸⁹ thanks to the resurgence of his radical legacy through the Sardinian-Tunisian worker society. The article accused “official Italy” of commemorating the General hypocritically and remembering Garibaldi as “anti-religious” and internationalist, “condemned to death by the current Savoyard Monarchy.”⁹⁰

Il Minatore’s publishing life was relatively short: eight months, from January to August, totaling in twenty-seven issues. However, in June, another trade union newspaper was published in Tunis: *La Voce del Muratore*. If in *Il Minatore*, the regional composition was largely Sardinian, in *La Voce del Muratore*, the Sicilians were the most represented group. It was aimed primarily at construction workers, but soon it became a political reference point for the Italian-speaking working class of Tunisia. On October 17, 1907, the newspaper denounced the exploitation practiced by the jobbers, defined as “leeches,” on “our poor comrades” miners at Kalâat Djerda (now Kalâat Khasba), a mining town close to the Algerian border.⁹¹ When a strike of miners began there in December 1907, in Tunis, *La Voce del Muratore*, thanks to its hybrid structure as a trade union and as a newspaper, helped the strikers through its articles. Nine thousand posters were plastered on the walls of Tunis to publicize the poor working conditions of the miners, their strike, and their reasons. That day, two thousand workers gathered at the Labor Exchange Headquarters. The president of the trade union-newspaper, Giuseppe Natoli, referring to the miner strike, urged workers’ solidarity.⁹² *La Voce del Muratore* took the lead in the labor social movement. Other worker groups could participate in the network of workers’ solidarity. The newspaper published an inquiry into the condition of seamstresses, urging them to set up a trade union to fight against the exploitation of employers, which forced them to work fifteen to sixteen hours per day for “inhuman and

criminal wages (...) is it a salary? Is it not criminal to attack the health of seamstresses in this way even though the wages would have been fair?"⁹³ This inquiry could lead to an interesting analysis of the role of female workers in labor activism. Unluckily, finding other information concerning a seamstress union was impossible in the current state of research. A negotiation between workers and mine owners led to some success concerning the amelioration of wage conditions.

Working-class Reconfigurations

During the great strike of 1904, Natoli collaborated with Converti; in 1907 and during the following years, Converti was silent while Natoli, president of the trade union, was several times publicly celebrated by the workers. The isolation of the dean of anarchism in Tunisia appears in an article entitled "To those watered-down anarchists in Tunis."⁹⁴ The violent criticism was addressed to Converti, and described as "some anarchist doctors (...) who do not even know what the word 'worker' means." These "anarchist doctors" were said to have criticized the worker association for having accepted an agreement with the bosses. Furthermore, the article referred to the strike of 1904, accusing these "watered-down anarchists" of pushing the movement into violent actions that caused police repression and, therefore, the end of the movement. On his side, Giuseppe Natoli set up a workers' organization with 893 members in Tunis. During a presidential society election in 1907, Natoli was elected with 780 votes out of 781 actual voters.⁹⁵ In the following year, in 1908, at the elections, Natoli was confirmed with 805 votes out of 816.⁹⁶

However, his plebiscitary success among the workers attracted enemies. After the election of 1908, Natoli resigned from his position. Anonymous letters accusing Natoli of being subversive were sent to his employer, who threatened him with dismissal. During the following months, the trade union showed an apparent decline in worker participation and membership enrollment. If, since its foundation, the newspaper/trade union was financed only by private donations from worker-members during its declining phase, we can note a new kind of donor: Biagio Di Vittorio and Giuseppe Rey, proprietors against which the workers went on strike on 1904 and 1908, were now donating to *La Voce del Muratore*. The soft approach of the new editorial line toward strikes and social struggles could be the result of these new sponsors.

Nevertheless, the social peace did not last even a year. On August 12, 1908, in Tunis, pasta workers organized a strike to improve their wage conditions. This strike, led by Natoli, paved the way for creating a workers' cooperative to produce pasta. During a public meeting at the Labor Exchange Headquarters, the workers deliberated that the commission for this initiative should be made up of five Tunisians, five French, and five Italians.⁹⁷ The opposition of the bosses and the authority to both the demands of the strikers and the workers' cooperatives thwarted these initiatives. The pasta cooperative could not hire all the workers, and mutual aid funds were insufficient to meet the strikers' needs. On August 28, 1908, unbeknownst to Natoli—who advocated the continuation of the strike and the strengthening of the cooperative project toward other production sectors—a delegation of workers accepted the wage

conditions proposed by the proprietors.⁹⁸ On November 15, 1908, a new president, Giuseppe Sorrentino, was elected with a majority out of seventy-eight voters.

During 1908, the decline of the bricklayers' trade union was accompanied by internal opposition to the political orientation of the union,⁹⁹ as the newspaper's policy increasingly rallied the consulate and colonial authorities.¹⁰⁰ If the newspaper's editorial line complained of a weakening of the corporation due to a lack of participation of the workers, at the same time it accused the subversive formations among them. In June 1909, the newspaper announced a change and a reorganization of the corporation, which seemed to be oriented more toward groups that had until then been in the minority. Paolo Mineo was elected president of the workers' union, replacing Giuseppe Sorrentino. During 1910, there was a radicalization of the political orientations of the newspaper. If in past issues, during 1909, some articles praised the Italian consul, in 1910, they were increasingly critical of the authorities. These political shifts could be explained by the dire condition of the immigrant workforce in those years in Tunisia. The Tunisian workforce was increasingly present in the national labor market, as demonstrated by the revindication of Zaouche in *Le Tunisien*. Job competition, coupled with a decrease in wages, pushed some Italian immigrant workers toward political radicalization. Meanwhile, Italian authorities tried to condition all Italian workers' groups to put them under consular control. On November 27, 1910, the front page of *La Voce del Muratore* publicly accused the proprietor Biagio Di Vittorio of not paying enough wages to his workers. If the accusation was violent and threatening, the conclusion was a declaration of war: "The time of words has passed. Today we need strong, direct actions; this is our final decision!"¹⁰¹ Such a change of direction appears even more evident if we compare the May 13, 1909, issue, full of praise for the Italian consul during his visit to Sfax, with the December 12, 1910, issue. The Italian consul Archimede Bottesini initially supported an initiative organized by *La Voce del Muratore*, then withdrew. From the title of the article—"The consul is not, and cannot be, a friend of the workers"—we can understand the political change that had taken place in the newspaper: "When Mr. Bottesini knew that the flag was red, ordered his people not to support our initiative except on one condition: the flag should be tricolor! Of course not, very illustrious Mr. Consul! We are neither under your orders nor want to be for our dignity. We must not submit the actions of our worker conscience to your whims or orders! (...) Our flag will be red, and it will signal our revolt against the injustices of the bourgeoisie of which you are the worthy representative! And we won't say more!"¹⁰² The Italian national flag, under which the consul and the local Italian bourgeoisie wanted to identify the Italian population of the regency, had to face the internationalist political affiliation of the "red flag," which denied the national categories to claim social class affiliations.

The conflicts over the myth of Garibaldi, and the refusal of the tricolor flag as a symbol of consular and national authorities, can be inscribed in a common framework of redefining a collective imagination.¹⁰³ The corporations created spaces of sociability among workers mainly from the same region (Sardinia for the miners, Sicily for the construction workers). The wage demands united the emigrant workers through the media, written in Italian. The vast majority of Italian workers were dialect-speaking and a large part were illiterate. How could it spread trade union

news and organize a strike through a newspaper if most workers could not read? A twofold answer to this question comes from the pages of *La Voce del Muratore*. Not only did the newspaper promote learning Italian, but it explicitly invited those who could to read aloud the news and foster other comrades to learn. The illiteracy question was tackled through self-organized workers' instruction. It is pretty difficult to assess the efficacy of this strategy. Still, the various correspondence letters published in the newspaper from different parts of Tunisia, written in imperfect Italian, suggest that a literacy-acquiring process was slowly taking place in those years.

On the one hand, the workers' protests stimulate the association through professional categories. On the other, they do so through the Italian language, thus creating a common bond with other Italian-speaking communities. For example, the Sicilian bricklayers supported and helped the Sardinian miners' strike of 1907, thanks to their newspaper. The Italian language became a unifying element for the diasporic, Italian-speaking groups that emigrated to Tunisia.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion: Greetings from Tripoli

Al-Khums (northwestern Libya), October 29, 1912: eleven days before Italy and the Ottoman Empire signed a peace treaty ending the war (1911–1912) and recognizing Italian rule in Libya. On that day, an enthusiastic postcard is sent to the Italian consul in Tunis praising the colonial occupation of Tripolitania. The sender, Antonino Casubolo, from Favignana, was known by the Italian services for his past anarchist militancy. Accused of attempted regicide in 1904, he was wanted in New York and New Orleans and finally arrested in Palermo in 1910. After being acquitted for lack of evidence, he settled in Tunisia at Halq al-Wadi and joined the local Worker Society. In October, he moved to Tripolitania, to al-Khums.

The Italo-Turkish War of 1911 did not receive the same political opposition as the Italian-Ethiopian War of 1896. Instead of anti-imperialist protests, the colonial war found just lukewarm disapproval from the Italian Socialist Party.¹⁰⁵ During 1911–1912, Tunis, instead of being a haven for radical refugees or a laboratory of transnational radicalism, was a place of riots between Italians and Tunisians, stemming from the colonial labor market and the war in Tripoli.¹⁰⁶ The decline of the internationalist labor movement was confirmed by the end of *La Voce del Muratore*, which stopped its publications in 1911.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, in 1912, Tunis harbor welcomed a colonialist manifestation in honor of the departure of Italian settlers from Tunis to Tripoli and Benghazi as workers for the military occupation. Among those who waved to the Italians of Tunis leaving for Libya were several workers and Giuseppe Malleo, the spokesperson of the Italian Worker Society.¹⁰⁸

The general decline of the internationalist and radical press in Tunisia in 1911 was due to the colonial system that divided the working class through a racial hierarchy. The wage differences between French, foreign European, and native workers weakened the attempts at international trade unions, enhancing national and colonial categories. In addition, Italian imperialist propaganda seduced its national working class—at home and abroad—proposing a colonialist solution to social issues: in Libya, the workers would have found the prosperity lacking at home and sought more abroad.¹⁰⁹ However, imperialist lies had very short legs. The Italian workers who

left Tunis for Tripoli and Benghazi in 1912 returned to Tunis in 1913 due to lack of employment and the expensive cost of living on the occupied shore.

If the colonial wage system and the imperialist propaganda weakened temporarily in 1911–1912, at the time of the radical labor movement in Tunisia, the decline did not last long. The tight connection between anarchism, diaspora, and the rising labor movement in Tunisia informed the political attitudes of the worker unions. Despite the colonial system, the involvement of Tunisians in the strikes during the 1910s showed that the worker protest practices spread beyond the diasporic community, temporarily crossing colonial boundaries. In 1921, a meeting took place in Tunis about the constitution of a tram-driver union composed of Tunisians, French, and Italians. On that occasion, the anarchist doctor Nicolò Converti suggested, without success, the seizing by force of the trams of “as it has been done in Italy.”¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, the attempts to create transnational trade unions did not match the colonial hierarchical system or the will of colonized workers. Even though French trade unions in Tunisia became more critical during the '20s, ruled by French workers and Italians as adherents, the Tunisian workforce was marginalized. The colonial labor system could be dismantled only by the most oppressed group, the local workers. In 1924, the very first Tunisian national syndicate named *Confédération Générale des travailleurs tunisiens* was founded by Mohammed Ali el-Hammi.¹¹¹

Tunis played an essential role in transnational radical circulations in the following years. This paper demonstrated the connection between diasporas, anarchism, and labor movements (assessing their bias within the colonial society) and the place of Tunis in the global radical network. Colonial regimes attracted foreign workforce and subversives that challenged that social and political system, albeit with many limits and without success. Nonetheless, this analysis confirms that colonial spaces were unwillingly political laboratories of global radicalism. After the setback of transnational radical activities during the Italo-Turkish war and the Great War (1914–1918), Tunis became once again one of the knots of this radical network up to the '40s, performing its role as an outstanding haven and laboratory for anarchists, anti-colonial militants, and during the '30s, a center of the antifascist movement.¹¹²

Notes

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4. Anthony Gorman, “‘Diverse in Race, Religion and Nationality... but United in Aspirations of Civil Progress’: The Anarchist Movement In Egypt 1860–1940,” in *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870-1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution*, eds. Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt (Leiden, 2010), 3–32; Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean*; Costantino Paonessa, “Anarchismo e Colonialismo: gli Anarchici Italiani in Egitto (1860-1914),” *Studi Storici* 2 (2017); Lucia Carminati, “Alexandria 1898: Nodes, Networks, and Scales in Nineteenth Century Egypt and the Mediterranean,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59, 1 (2017): 127–53; Costantino Paonessa, ed., *Italian Subalterns in Egypt between Emigration and Colonialism (1861-1937)* (Louvain, 2021).

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12. Enzo Ciconte, *Classi pericolose. Una storia sociale della povertà dall'età moderna a oggi* (Bari, 2022); Donna R. Gabaccia, "Worker Internationalism and Italian Labour Migration 1870-1914," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 45 (1994): 63-79.
13. Francesca Fauri, "L'emigrazione italiana nell'Africa mediterranea 1876-1914," *Italia Contemporanea* 277 (2015): 34-62; Federico Cresti, "Comunità proletarie italiane nell'Africa mediterranea tra XIX secolo e periodo fascista," *Mediterranea. Ricerche Storiche* 5, 12 (2008): 189-214.
14. Mary Dewhurst Lewis, "Geographies of Power: the Tunisian Civic Order, Jurisdictional Politics and Imperial Rivalry in the Mediterranean, 1881-1935," *The Journal of Modern History* 80, 4 (2008): 791-830.
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18. Daniela Melfa, "Regards italiens sur les Petites Siciles de Tunisie," *Revue de l'IBLA* 70 (2007): 3-27; Cristophe Giudice, "Diaspora italienne et identités urbaines à Tunis XIXe-XXe siècles," *Diasporas. Circulations, migrations, histoire* 28 (2016): 85-104.
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21. *L'Operaio*, Tunis, "Cose locali," November 20, 1887. All translations are mine.
22. Tunisian National Archives (here after ANT), Fonds du Protectorat, Série E, carton 621, dossier 14/0210, 1895-1896, f. "Société Internationale 'La Croix Verte,'" rapport de police, Tunis, February 23, 1895.
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26. *L'Operaio*, "Gruppo anarchico di Montevideo," September 11, 1888.
27. *L'Operaio*, January 23, 1888.
28. *L'Operaio*, "Comizio di Marsiglia," June 20, 1888.
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32. Paonessa, "Anarchismo e Colonialismo."
33. Galián, *Colonialism*, 158.
34. Concerning the comparison between the Egyptian and Tunisian cases: Abel Solans, "L'exil des Italiens en Tunisie et en Égypte (1870-1940): pris entre l'internationalisme, le transnationalisme et le colonialisme," PhD in progress, SciencesPo Paris (2021).
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41. Ivi, télégramme de Menotti, Tunis, May 30, 1892.
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44. Salvatore Francesco Romano, *Storia dei Fasci siciliani* (Rome, 1959), 481–82; Santi Fedele, *Nicola Barbato: un milite dell'ideale* (Taranto, 2003), 24; De Luca Francesco, *Prigionie e processi: una pagina di storia siciliana: ricordi del 1894* (Catania, 1907), 23–27.
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77. CADN, Protectorat Français de Tunisie, Tunis, May 7, 1904; "Rapport du capitaine commandant au Résident Général," Tunis, May 9, 1904.

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