



Trade Unionism

& National Liberation

Workers' voices against colonialism

**Friedrich
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Table of contents

Introduction: Trade unionism, a space for emancipation	4
Taieb Bouazza	6
Farhat Hached	8
Mohamed Ali El Hammi	10
Aïssat Idir	12
Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim	14
Zaki Al-Sheikh Yasin	16
Zidan Younis Mustafa Younis	18
Benyoucef Benkhedda	20
Raymond Mhlaba	22
Amílcar Cabral	24

Introduction: Trade unionism, a space for emancipation

The twentieth century was marked by the anti-colonial struggles waged by the peoples of the Global South. Defined by the sacrifices borne in the quest for freedom and independence, these movements gave rise to exceptional figures, among whom are the women and men mentioned in this booklet. Committed to their nations' social movements, the latter contributed to shaping and organizing popular demands for social dignity and national sovereignty.

Their struggle turned trade unionism into a sphere and an instrument of emancipation, rather than a mere occupational defense means. Likewise, within trade-union mobilizations, political struggles took shape as a means of challenging the colonial order. Unions stepped in, on several occasions, to carry forward political movements when these were repressed or banned by the colonial authorities; subsequently facing repression, censorship and banning, at times, bearing the cost of exile, imprisonment or their very lives.

For the leaders of these movements, the struggle to improve working conditions depended steadfastly on the quest for self-determination, each being indivisible from the other. In other words, confronting social exploitation necessarily entailed confronting colonial domination; and the demands for equitable remuneration and the recognition of workers' dignity ran parallel to the struggle for independence, sovereignty and justice.

The selected biographies aim to introduce ten prominent figures from the Arab world and Africa. Though emerging from diverse historical and social backgrounds, they were bound by the common dedication to

enhance workers' conditions and secure national independence. Besides, although geographically distant, they demonstrated an internationalist commitment to solidarity and fraternity among peoples. As early as the first half of the 20th century, transnational networks of solidarity began to emerge, as reflected in the engagement of Mohamed Ali Hammi. Leaders, such as Raymond Mhlaba and Amilcar Cabral, established ties with numerous political and trade union figures from the Arab world during their travels abroad, notably in Algeria.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung upholds and supports this international legacy of the labor movement. Since its inception, the FES has striven to promote social justice, emancipation, the enhancement of workers' rights and the establishment of democratic societies. Through this booklet, it seeks to highlight the commitment of numerous figures who embodied these values, while also bringing to light the history of trade unionism in its anti-colonial dimension.

These portraits stand, both, as a testament to the past and a wellspring of inspiration, calling upon us to reaffirm our commitment to building a more just and equitable world.



Taieb Bouazza

Taïeb Ben Bouazza was born in Jerada (in eastern Morocco). Active in trade union and labour struggles, he quickly came into conflict with the colonial authorities and, by the 1940s, had established himself as one of the leading figures in the emerging trade union movement in Morocco.

In 1948, at the age of 25, the colonial authorities banned him from staying in Jerada. Ben Bouazza had to take refuge in Casablanca, where he continued his union activism in industrial sectors such as sugar refineries, transport and cement works. He was arrested several times for his activism. In 1951, he was elected Secretary-General of the General Union of Confederated Trade Unions of the World (UGSCM). He also wrote several books, including *La naissance du syndicalisme ouvrier libre au Maroc*, published in 1992.

In 1955, he was one of the co-founders of the Moroccan Labour Union (UMT), Morocco's first trade union federation. After Morocco's independence, Taïeb Ben Bouazza, a member of the Istiqlal party, held several diplomatic positions in embassies and international organisations (UN, ILO, OAU).

Taïeb Ben Bouazza remains a major figure in Moroccan trade unionism – a pragmatic and patriotic leader who defended both workers' rights and the sovereignty and independence of his country.



Farhat Hached

(*) I love you, people

Farhat Hached was born on February 2, 1914, in El Abassia, on the island of Kerkennah in Tunisia.. Born into a family of fishermen, he became one of the most important figures in Tunisia's struggle for independence.

He began his trade union involvement in 1930, working for the Sahel Transport Company based in Sousse. He founded a local union affiliated with the French General Confederation of Labour (CGT). In the 1940s, he left the organization when it proved unable to address the independence demands of Tunisian workers.

In 1946, Farhat Hached helped found the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), becoming its secretary-general. The UGTT quickly became a pillar of the Tunisian national movement. It reflected Hached's vision that the emancipation of workers was inseparable from the liberation of the country. The UGTT also helped internationalize Tunisia's struggle by joining the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in 1951.

On December 5, 1952, Farhat Hached was assassinated near Radès by the Main Rouge, a terrorist organization linked to the French secret services. His death sparked a huge wave of emotion and protest around the world.

Today, Farhat Hached is considered a national hero and a martyr for the trade union and anti-colonial cause. His actions helped make the UGTT a central institution in Tunisian political life, playing a key role both before and after independence.



Mohamed Ali El Hammi

Mohamed Ali Hammi was born on October 15, 1890, in El Hamma, in southeastern Tunisia. After his mother's death, he moved to Tunis with his father at the age of 12, taking on modest and precarious jobs such as courier, driver, and porter.

In Tunis, he became friends with Tahar Haddad, who was also from El Hamma. They shared both intellectual and political convictions. Mohamed Ali Hammi's anti-colonial commitment began as early as 1911, when he supported the anti-Italian revolt in Tripoli.

In 1920, he left for Berlin to study economics at the Friedrich-Wilhelm University. While there, he attended the "Orient Club," where anti-colonial figures from the Muslim world would meet.

Upon returning to Tunis in 1924, equipped with his economic expertise, he launched an agricultural cooperative that connected producers directly with consumers. This initiative provided vulnerable populations with an alternative to the traditional colonial-controlled distribution networks.

On December 3, 1924, together with several colleagues, he founded the first Tunisian trade union, the General Confederation of Tunisian Workers (CGTT), and was appointed its secretary-general. As a result of his activities, the colonial authorities repressed him and forced him into exile.

This marked the beginning of a period shrouded in mystery. He traveled to Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, where he worked as a driver. He died on May 10, 1928, in a car accident at Ouadi El Monjiba. His body was repatriated to Tunisia on April 6, 1968, with full official honours.



Aïssat Idir

Aïssat Idir (1915–1959) was a central figure in Algerian trade unionism and a martyr of the anti-colonial struggle. Born in Kabylie, he grew up in a relatively well-off family that enabled him to attend school. After studying in Tizi Ouzou and then Tunis, he trained in accounting and completed his military service.

In 1939, he began working at the Maison-Blanche Air Industrial Workshops in Algiers, where he became chief accountant. Faced with racial discrimination, he joined the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and also became active in the MTLD (Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties), coordinating its Trade Union Commission. His work aimed to unite Algerian workers beyond political divisions, focusing on anti-colonialism. At the same time, he contributed to nationalist newspapers such as *L'Algérie Libre*, where he defended workers' rights.

Inspired by the Tunisian and Moroccan experiences, he worked toward establishing an independent Algerian trade union movement. On February 24, 1956, in coordination with the National Liberation Front (FLN), he founded the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA), becoming its first Secretary General. The UGTA soon became a key part of the struggle for independence.

Arrested several times, he was handed over to French paratroopers, where he was subjected to inhumane treatment. He died in Algiers on July 26, 1959, at the age of 44. His life symbolizes the connection between the trade union struggle and the national liberation movement: for him, the social emancipation of workers could only be achieved in a free and independent Algeria.



Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim

Born in 1929 in Omdurman into an educated family, **Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim** became involved early on in promoting education and women's rights. While still in high school, she founded the newspaper Elra'edda ("The Pioneer") and organized a strike to keep science education available for girls. At the age of 14, she founded the Intellectual Women's Association, laying the foundations for a Sudanese feminism rooted in anti-colonialism.

In 1952, she co-founded the Sudan Women's Union (SWU), which she chaired from 1956 onwards. A fierce activist she campaigned for equal pay, maternity leave, women's access to all professions, and the eradication of illiteracy. Convinced that Islam was not incompatible with equality, she studied the Qur'an in order to refute fundamentalist arguments.

In 1954, she became editor-in-chief of Sawt al-Mara ("Voice of Women"), and in 1965, following the October Revolution that granted women the right to vote, she was elected to parliament — the first woman ever to hold a seat in the Sudanese legislature. Her efforts led, in 1968, to major reforms: equal pay, university access for girls, and the recognition of maternity leave.

Widowed after her husband — a trade unionist — was executed by the Nimeiri regime in 1971, she endured repression and exile in London, where she continued her activism against fundamentalism and in favor of democracy. Recipient of the United Nations Human Rights Prize (1993) and the Ibn Rushd Prize (2006), she remains a leading figure of Arab and African feminism. She passed away in 2017 in London, leaving behind the legacy of a pioneer who linked women's emancipation with social justice and democracy.



Zaki Al-Sheikh Yasin

Zaki Al-Sheikh Yasin, born in Nablus in 1910, began his trade union activism in 1942 with the Palestine Arab Workers' Society. After the Nakba of 1948, he actively participated in rebuilding the Society's branches in the West Bank, making Nablus the headquarters of the Council of Workers' Unions.

When the Society became the Jordanian Workers' Association, Zaki moved to Amman. From his modest home on Muhajireen Street, he encouraged workers to join trade unions. In 1952, together with Husni Al-Khufash and Mustafa Ali Askalan, he raised funds and rented an office for the Association — which was soon shut down by the authorities, along with its branches in the West Bank.

Despite these obstacles, Zaki continued his efforts among construction workers. After the 1953 trade union law was passed, he secured the official registration of the Construction Workers' Union on January 7, 1954, becoming its president. The executive committee also included Naim Belibla, Hani Suleiman, Wajeeh Sidqi, Saadi Al-Hudhud, and Muhammad Ali Al-Araj.

Shortly after, discussions began to create a General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions. Zaki played a central role in convincing Zidan Younis to serve as its president. The Federation was officially registered in July 1954, with Zaki as vice-president while continuing to lead the Construction Workers' Union.

From March 28, 1958, to April 14, 1960, he led the Federation as Second Secretary General, succeeding Zidan Younis, who had been forced into exile during the political crisis that followed the dismissal of Sulaiman Al-Nabulsi's government and the imposition of martial law.



Zidan Younis Mustafa Younis

Zidan Younis Mustafa Younis was born in 1921 in the village of Arara, south of Haifa, Palestine. In 1942, he joined the Palestine Arab Workers Society in Haifa and became a trade union supervisor at the “Sebna” factory.

After the 1948 war and forced exile, he sought refuge in Jordan, where he worked at the Arab East Tobacco and Cigarette Factory. His trade union experience caught the attention of leaders such as Zaki Al-Sheikh Yasin, Mustafa Askalan, and Naim Al-Khufash, who invited him to lead the emerging General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions. On February 28, 1954, the Tobacco Workers’ Union decided to expand its executive committee, allowing Zidan to join.

On May 1, 1954, six unions came together to request the official registration of the General Federation from the government. This was formalized on May 26. Zidan Younis was appointed as the Federation’s executive secretary, a role he held until 1957. At the same time, Zidan played a key role in the creation of the Arab Trade Union Confederation. Formed on March 24, 1957, with the participation of five Arab countries, the Confederation elected Zidan as its first deputy secretary, recognizing his pivotal contributions.

In April 1957, when Sulaiman Al-Nabulsi’s government fell and martial law was imposed, Zidan was in Damascus. He chose not to return to Jordan. After a brief stay in Syria, he moved to Kuwait, where he continued his work until his death. Zidan Younis’s life represents a lifelong commitment to defending workers’ rights. His contribution to both Jordanian and Arab trade union movements was crucial, and he remains a key figure in the history of labor activism in the region.



Benyoucef Benkhedda

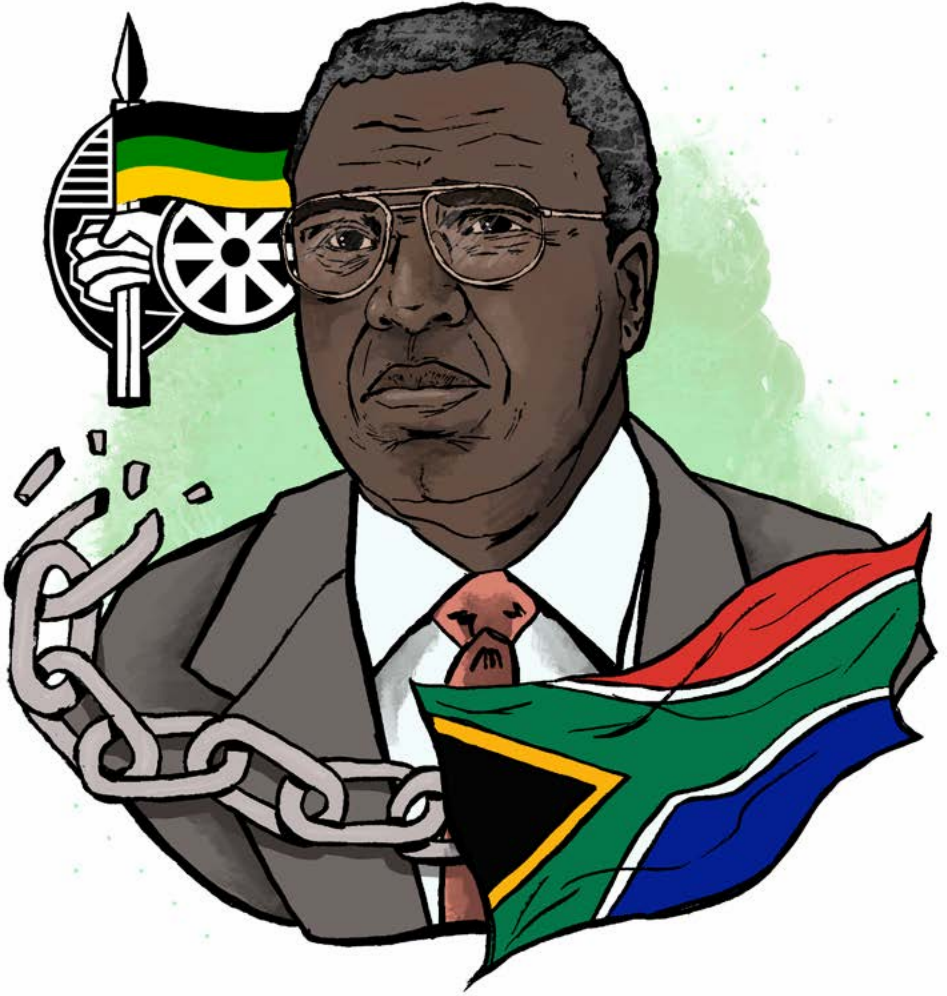
(*) Qasaman (the oath, we pledge): Algerian national anthem.

Born on February 23, 1920, in Berrouaghia, a town south of Algiers, into a family of magistrates, **Benyoucef Benkhedda** received a dual education in both French and Quranic studies before pursuing pharmacy in Algiers. He became involved in the nationalist movement at an early age alongside Saad Dahlab and Mohammed Lamine Debaghine, campaigning for the Algerian People's Party (PPA) and then Messali Hadj's Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (MTLD), where he quickly rose through the ranks. Arrested in 1943 for refusing conscription, he continued his clandestine activities after his release and contributed to the publication of *La Nation algérienne* and *El Maghreb el Arabi*.

As a member of the MTLD central committee (1947–1954), he opposed Messali's leadership and aligned himself with activists preparing for the armed struggle. Arrested after the outbreak of war, he was released in 1955 and joined Ramdane Abane in the leadership of the FLN (National Liberation Front) in Algiers. Benkhedda played a crucial role: supporting the creation of the MTLD in 1956, organizing the Soummam Congress, and helping to structure the political direction of the independence movement.

After being exiled to Tunis in 1957, he became Minister of Social Affairs in the first Provisional Government of the Algerian Revolution (GPRA) in 1958, where he oversaw trade union and social issues. In August 1961, he took over from Ferhat Abbas as president of the GPRA and led the crucial Évian negotiations, which led to the ceasefire and Algeria's independence in 1962.

After the summer crisis of 1962, which saw the rise of the Ben Bella-Boumédiène faction, Benkhedda was removed from power and gradually withdrew from political life. He returned to his profession as a pharmacist in Algiers, where he continued his work until his passing. Benyoucef Benkhedda, who passed away on February 4, 2003, remains the forgotten president of independence, the man who led Algeria to Évian.



Raymond Mhlaba

Born in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, into a modest family, **Raymond Mhlaba** started working as a laundry worker. It was in the laundry workers' union that he first got involved in activism, quickly connecting social justice with the fight against colonialism. In 1943, he joined the South African Communist Party, and the following year, the African National Congress (ANC), convinced that workers' freedom was inseparable from the end of apartheid.

Mhlaba started working at a laundry in Port Elizabeth after leaving school in 1942. The terrible conditions at the laundry pushed him to join the union, and by 1943, he became the leader of the Laundry Workers' Union for non-Europeans.

In 1952, Mhlaba was arrested during the "Defiance Campaign" against segregation laws, becoming the first ANC member to be imprisoned. Determined to keep fighting, he traveled to China to receive military training. Upon his return, he played a key role in the creation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the ANC's armed wing, which organized the resistance against the racist regime.

Hunted by the police, he was arrested alongside Nelson Mandela and other comrades during the Rivonia Trial (1963-1964). Sentenced to life imprisonment, he spent 26 years in Robben Island prison, sharing the struggle with Mandela, Govan Mbeki and Walter Sisulu.

Released in 1989, Mhlaba immediately returned to politics. He was elected to Parliament after the first democratic elections in 1994 and became the first Premier of the Eastern Cape province. He later served as the leader of the South African Communist Party.

Known as "Oom Ray" or "Tata Raymond," he remained a respected figure in the anti-colonial and workers' rights movements. Up until his death in 2005, Raymond Mhlaba embodied the inseparable link between social justice and national freedom, remembered as a "hero among heroes" according to Nelson Mandela.



Amílcar Cabral

Born in Bafatá, Portuguese Guinea into a family from Cape Verde, **Amílcar Cabral** was deeply affected by famines and colonial injustices from an early age. After studying agronomy in Lisbon, he became involved in African student activism, founding the Centro de Estudos Africanos in 1951 and aligning himself with the circles of Négritude and anti-colonialism.

On his return to Guinea, he observed social realities during an agricultural census, which gave him a detailed understanding of rural structures. In 1956, he co-founded the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), becoming its Secretary-General. After the Pidjiguiti massacre in 1959, he shifted the movement's focus to the countryside and began preparing for armed struggle, which was launched in 1963.

As both a theorist and a practitioner, Cabral emphasized the “concrete analysis of the concrete situation,” the centrality of the peasantry, and the ideological fight against elitist tendencies. His famous concept of “class suicide” highlighted the need for the small bourgeoisie to fully identify with the working masses in order to avoid the seizure of power after independence.

Through his speeches, notably *The Weapon of Theory* (1966), Cabral universalised Marxism by adapting it to African realities, linking national liberation and social transformation. In the liberated areas of Guinea-Bissau, he experimented with democratic organisation, education, health and popular participation, making culture a real instrument of resistance and emancipation.

Assassinated in Conakry on January 20, 1973, just months before Guinea-Bissau's independence, Cabral remains one of the great intellectual and revolutionary figures of the Third World. His legacy combines anti-colonial struggle, intellectual rigor, and a commitment to social justice.

