



► Background note: Labour relations and COVID-19

October 2020¹

Negotiated income support and job security in Tunisia

► Industrial relations in Tunisia

Tunisia ratified the [ILO Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 \(No. 87\)](#) and the [Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 \(No. 98\)](#), both in 1957. The principal employers' organization in Tunisia is the [Tunisian Confederation of Industry and Trade and Handicrafts \(UTICA\)](#), which represents about 150,000 private companies from all sectors of activity (except for the

tourism, banking and financial sectors). The [Tunisian General Labor Union \(UGTT\)](#) representing about 1 million workers is the largest trade union organization in Tunisia and is organized at the national inter-professional level. Every year, UTICA negotiates terms and conditions of employment and work for workers in Tunisia's private sector with the UGTT and the Tunisian government.

► Responses to COVID-19 in Tunisia

The Tunisian Government successively [adopted a series of measures since March 2020](#) to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As a result, the Tunisian economy was completely shut down with only essential services being allowed to operate. A general quarantine order was in place until 3 May 2020. From 4 May 2020 critical businesses (food, agriculture, health, utilities and state infrastructure) were expected to be fully

operational with certain exceptions.² Manufacturing and construction companies were expected to continue operations, limiting the workforce to 50 per cent of personnel normally deployed until 24 May 2020, increasing to 75 per cent between 24 May 2020 and 4 June 2020 and 100 per cent thereafter. From 24 May 2020 onwards, markets, restaurants and cafes were to reopen.

► Negotiated agreement to support companies and secure jobs and incomes in Tunisia

In response to the COVID-19 crisis the social partners negotiated an agreement with the Ministry of Labour to support companies, secure incomes and protect employment across the private sector. It was signed by UGTT and UTICA and the Ministry of Social Affairs on 14 April 2020. The agreement was preceded by a number of meetings between the social partners (UGTT and UTICA) and also with representatives of the government that brought all the partners together. For example, UTICA issued a [statement](#), immediately after the signing, appreciating the agreement as an embodiment of social solidarity in Tunisia in this difficult situation.

Following this agreement, the salaries of about 1.5 million private sector workers were paid during COVID-19-related closures in April 2020. The pact covered workers in a broad cross-section of the economy including, inter alia, agricultural, maritime fishing, construction, metal, garment and shoe manufacturing, and transportation sectors. The agreement was backed by a decree – Decree-Law of the Head of Government n° 2020-4 of 14 April 2020 – enacting exceptional and provisional social measures to support companies and protect their employees harmed by the repercussions of the implementation of total containment measures to prevent the spread of the COVID-19.

¹ This note was compiled in May 2020. Often additional details will be accessible through the provided sources.

² Including shopping centres, hairdressers, fitness clubs, beauty salons, shoe and clothing shops, which were not expected to re-open until 11 May 2020

According to the agreement, workers received 100 percent of their salaries in April 2020. The government paid an exceptional aid of DT200 (ca. USD70) per worker, with the remaining salary paid by employers for April 2020. To enjoy the exceptional compensation of DT200 for the month of April, companies were required to be affiliated to the [National Social Security Fund](#) (CNSS) and register their employees with salaries declared to the Fund for the fourth quarter of 2019 or the first quarter of 2020. The agreement provided employers

the opportunity to declare employees who were not yet registered with the CNSS within 30 days, without late penalties. This regulation may have positive side-effects on the formalization of jobs in the country.

The text of the agreement is available in [Arabic](#). Some [newspapers](#) and [websites](#) of workers' organizations have translated parts of the provisions into French and English.

► Enforcement mechanisms and controversies around the agreement

Compliance with the provisions of the agreement was reported as generally high. However, some employers were alleged not to have fully adhered to the agreement, and the UGTT declared that it would react in cases where full salaries were not paid in April 2020. While the UGTT commended UTICA for its commitment discussions emerged regarding the interpretation of the agreement, specifically considering whether wages paid for time not worked since March would

be deducted from the [employees' annual leave](#) or be considered as loans to be paid later by working overtime. The UGTT issued a [statement](#) in which it stated that wages to be paid are not supposed to be advances or loans while acknowledging the historically difficult circumstances during the COVID-19 crisis and the relationship between the social partners.

► How did the agreement come about?

The agreement was preceded, enabled and accompanied by several meetings of the Secretary General of the UGTT with the President of the Government, the President of the Republic and the President of the Assembly of People's Representatives as well as the establishment of a tripartite committee to monitor the situation in the private sector and support companies and workers. Trade unions from different

sectors and regions worked to ensure payment of wages and the provision of decent and safe conditions of work. Moreover, an agreement between the Secretary General of the UGTT and the governor of the Central Bank of Tunisia led to a decision by the Head of State to exempt all employees and marginalized sectors from the monthly repayment of bank loans for three months.

► Key effects of the agreement and outlook

Workers in Tunisian companies affected by the general containment measures received their full April wages under the agreement. This was particularly important as private sector workers do not have access to extensive social protection in Tunisia. The guaranteed income during the pandemic enabled workers to stay at home and support public health objectives.

Supplementing the agreement from 14 April 2020, an [agreement for the payment of the April wages of hotel employees](#) was signed between the [Tunisian Hotel Federation](#)

(FTH), the UGTT, and the [Ministry of Tourism and Handicrafts](#). This sector was heavily impacted by the discontinuation of all tourist activities due to COVID-19. The agreement stipulated that the State would pay an exceptional contribution of DT200, while employers paid 65 percent of the employees' actual salaries (equivalent to 17 working days).

From 4 May 2020 the containment policies in Tunisia were successively lifted, economic activities resumed and workers began returning to their jobs.

► Access to further information

- [Text of the agreement in Arabic.](#)
- [Information by the Solidaritycenter on the concluded agreement.](#)

Contact details

ILO for Asia and the Pacific
UN Building, Rajdamnern Nok Av. 2
Bangkok 10200
Thailand

T: + 662 288 1234
E: bangkok@ilo.org
www.ilo.org/collectivebargaining