

Mass strike movement in Guinea

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The West African country of Guinea has been hit by general strikes in January and February, as well as mass demonstrations protesting against the despotic rule of President Lansana Conté.

The corrupt and wealthy clique around Conté has held on to power for the last 20 years with military support and Western backing. Most of the population live in extreme poverty, with an average income of less than one dollar a day in what is one of the poorest countries in the world. Yet Guinea is rich in minerals and important to the West for that reason.

It has a third of the world's bauxite (aluminium ore) deposits and is a top exporter in joint operations with the corporations Alcoa and Alcan. Guinea's largest bauxite company, in which Alcoa is a partner, was said to be losing \$1 million a day when hit by the strike action. Guinea also has vast deposits of iron, gold and diamonds. According to the *Financial Times*, BHP Billiton, the huge mining corporation, is close to making an investment deal worth \$1 billion.

In the last year the economy has sharply declined. The International Monetary Fund is refusing debt relief until there is more secure political rule, so half the country's income, \$240 million a year, goes to debt repayments. Without the European Union sending aid in December, after previously withdrawing it over "governance issues," the army could not have been paid and the government would have collapsed. Inflation is running at 35 percent and a disastrous fall in living standards has fuelled the growing movement against Conté.

The first 18 days of strike action in January were sparked off when Conté released two leading figures from prison. Mamadou Syllah is Guinea's wealthiest businessman and a personal friend of Conté. Fodé Soumah is deputy governor of the central bank. Both had been accused of corruption involving millions of dollars.

Conté is now seriously ill, suffering diabetes and memory lapses, and is said to be increasingly erratic in his behaviour. Reports suggest that the circle around him, including his wives, is riven with factions contending to maintain their political and financial interests after he dies.

As the strike spread a mass demonstration took place on January 22, the biggest ever held in Guinea's history. The Conté clique mobilised the army. *Africa Confidential* reported that Conté met senior officers and promised them several million dollars of public funds. His security forces, backed by a contingent of troops sent from neighbouring Guinea Bissau, fired on the protesters killing at least 60 and wounding hundreds of others.

The strike was called off when Conté agreed to union demands to lower the prices of rice and fuel and to appoint a new "consensus" prime minister who would devolve some power away from the presidential clique. New elections would be organised in the next three years. When Conté reneged on the agreement and appointed his own close supporter as prime minister, more demonstrations were called and 23 protesters were shot dead by the presidential guard and anti-riot police.

A further general strike was called, martial law was imposed and a period of bloody repression began. Human Rights Watch accused troops of serious abuses, including rape, armed robbery, lootings and beatings in house-to-house searches. In all at least 120 unarmed people have now been killed by state forces, though with the limited press coverage it is likely that the numbers are far higher.

Union leaders called off the second strike at the end of February, after Conté agreed to appoint a new prime minister, Lansana Kouyate, a former United Nations diplomat. Kouyate was deemed an acceptable choice by union leaders, opposition politicians and religious

organisations. The unions are now calling for Conté to step down.

Conté only agreed to the appointment after a series of meetings with top officials from ECOWAS, the West African regional body, as well as the UN Secretary General's special representative for West Africa. This intervention on behalf of the United States and Western governments was led by General Ibrahim Babangida of Nigeria. The choice of Babangida, the last of the generals to rule over Nigeria before transition to civilian rule in 1994, was significant. The former dictator, with plenty of experience in institutionalised corruption and human rights abuses, was taking a message from the West to the Conté clique to avoid a bloody conflict that could destabilise the whole of West Africa.

The Brussels-based International Crisis Group has pointed out the danger posed to Western governments by the situation in Guinea: "Its internal instability remains a source of immediate concern for the whole region as Guinea is at risk of becoming West Africa's next failed state." Over the last seven years there have been large-scale UN interventions in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Ivory Coast as Britain, the US and France respectively have sought to maintain their imperialist interests in the region. These countries all collapsed into civil war as their economies—dependent on commodity exports to the West—declined under increasing IMF demands and corrupt Western-backed regimes. Warlords with militias often made up of child soldiers looted the populations and fought for control of the resources.

The forest region of Guinea is now full of the remnants of various rebel factions fleeing the UN interventions and awash with arms. If the army seized control in a coup, the situation could quickly descend into civil war that would spread into the surrounding countries.

Western governments are hoping that Kouyate will be able to facilitate some sharing of power between the clique around Conté and opposition political groupings and thereby prevent a military takeover. There are 14 opposition parties that have come together to oppose Conté. They are divided mainly on tribal and regional lines—Conté has always been skilled at fostering such rivalries. Foremost among them are former World Bank official Mamadou Ba and Alpha Condé, jailed in 2000

for allegedly attempting a coup, then allowed to stay in exile in France. Apart from calling for "democratic change" they put forward no definite programme. They are pro-Western and if put in power would accept IMF demands for "good governance," which would involve privatisation and free-market measures.

In this attempt at transition to more stable rule a particularly treacherous role is being played by the trades unions. At every stage they have worked to dissipate the enormous anger that has built up throughout the population. Last year they called strikes in February and June then called them off when Conté appeared to make concessions, despite protesters being shot. Their only demands are for price curbs on basic fuel and rice; otherwise they have kept the mass movement tied to bourgeois opposition politicians. There is no suggestion of threatening the profits of the mining corporations or debt repayments to Western banks. No doubt because of the role of the unions, the *Financial Times* reports that international mining companies are "bullish" about making further investments in Guinea despite the current unrest.



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