

Guadeloupe general strike isolated by French trade unions

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A general strike against rising living costs has been in progress on the French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe since January 20. Forty-seven trade unions, associations and political parties under the umbrella organization LKP—The Committee against Extreme Exploitation (*lyiannaj kont pwofitasyon* in local dialect)—have brought economic activity to a standstill.

A massive demonstration of 25,000 out of a total population of 410,000 took place on January 24 in the capital Pointe-à-Pitre. All shops, supermarkets, schools and public services were closed.

Although the fight against the increasing cost of living affects all of France's citizens and Guadeloupe is officially part of the French Republic, the traditional labour organizations in metropolitan France have isolated and ignored the struggle and media coverage has been rare and superficial.

The demands of the strikers led by the majority trade union, the UGTG (General Union of Guadeloupean Workers), have centred on the price of basic necessities. They call for an immediate reduction of 50 centimes on car fuel, a lowering of prices of transport and water, a rent freeze, an increase of €200 in the minimum wage, permanent contracts for all temporary workers and the right to education and training for youth and workers. One demand calls for priority to be given to Guadeloupeans in key employment posts and an end to racism in employment. The development of local production to satisfy the population's needs and an end to taxes on fertilizers and cattle feed also figure among the total of 146 demands advanced by the strikers.

Guadeloupe, an archipelago 600 kms from the Dominican Republic and 7,000 from mainland France, has been a colony since 1812. In spite of its integration into the French state in 1946, it has, like all other French possessions, remained economically backward.

The effects of the world recession have been felt earlier in this already deprived island community. Guadeloupe constitutes a recognized region of France whose local

council is run by the French Socialist Party (PS) and is the 97th French Department. According to 2007 figures, unemployment is well over 23 percent and prices for all basic necessities are 30 to 60 percent more expensive than in France. Only rum, bananas and cigarettes are relatively cheaper.

Guadeloupe belongs to the group of the 13 poorest regions in Europe with a GDP of only 55.8 percent of the European average.

Yves Jégo, President Nicolas Sarkozy's secretary of state for overseas territories, was rushed to Guadeloupe the weekend of January 31-February 1 to calm things down and negotiate a way out before the social explosion links up with mainland France. On the neighbouring French island of Martinique, 12 trade unions launched a one-day general strike call for February 5 against the decrease in purchasing power, which has especially affected the 70,000 people on the island living below the poverty line.

Jégo announced several measures in an attempt to placate strikers and break the cohesion of the Guadeloupean strike. "We have succeeded after three days of negotiations in obtaining a clear commitment from supermarket chains to reduce 100 items of basic necessity by 30 percent in 60 supermarkets until the end of the year," he said. A rent freeze was announced and the minimum social welfare payment (RSA) for those actively engaged in work will be implemented this year instead of next.

The negotiations are ongoing and the reaction by the LKP strike committee is to maintain the strike. However, Jégo has succeeded in reopening the 115 service stations after promising the owners to limit any new installations affecting their profitability. Road blockades and demonstrations closed service stations last December and obtained a reduction of 31 centimes per litre on petrol.

While the strike has been solid and peacefully run (40,000 attended a January 25 carnival to support the strike), the French government has sent extra CRS riot police to intervene wherever and whenever it sees fit. Memories are still fresh in Guadeloupe of the 100 people shot to death by

the CRS during a demonstration in 1967.

Yves Jego arrived on the island commenting, “Guadeloupe has lived through an exceptional two weeks and the usual avenues of resolving a conflict have not produced a solution,” he said. “I am well aware,” Jego added, that “we need to give a response to the LKP collective which will give them satisfaction.” UGTG leader Elie Domata was quoted by Radio Télé-Guadeloupe as welcoming Jego’s decision, which “gave the impression of having heard and understood that Guadeloupe is on the edge of an explosion and social chaos.” The Socialist Party president of the regional council, Victorin Lurel, hoped Jego had come “armed with solutions.”

In this tense situation, Domata issued an open letter to French trade unions and “left” political parties, calling for international solidarity. This call has fallen on deaf ears. While issuing vague messages of “solidarity” in press statements, none of these parties or trade union leaders has called for strikes, sympathetic actions or protests of any kind.

The French Communist Party (PCF) called for “transparent and global negotiations,” stating that “it is urgent the government commits itself.” The main CGT union, which is close to the PCF, remarked that “it is examining the way in which to get the powers that be to find urgent responses to the Guadeloupean workers’ demands.”

Alain Krivine of the LCR/NAP (Revolutionary Communist League/New Anti-Capitalist Party) wrote in *Rouge*: “This united general strike is an example for all those who are fighting here for an extended ‘everyone together’ (*tous ensemble*) against the isolation and dispersing of resistance ... and the best way to help it, which helps us so much, is to multiply our efforts to ensure the success of the protest strike on the 29 [in France].” Such empty remarks are a cover for the silence of the trade leaders; no demands have been made for urgent action to come to the aid of Guadeloupean strikers. In the name of unity, Krivine has no public comment to make which might embarrass his party’s relations with the trade union bureaucracy.

In the same edition of *Rouge*, an interview appears with Patrice Gonot, the leader of the Cercasol party, the LCR’s new NPA party’s sister organisation in Guadeloupe. He is also active in the CTU union (United Workers Centre). After citing the strikers’ demands, Gonot states: “There have been united meetings in all the towns. All our resentments are put to one side, because it is the future of Guadeloupe which is at stake.” The working class and its political independence is relegated to the future of “Guadeloupe,” which includes the propertied classes.

Gonot makes clear that for Cercasol the demands are negotiable: “We are conscious that our platform of demands

is enormous. There are the short term, long term and intermediate goals.” Gonot makes no mention of the need for solidarity action in France and the treacherous role of the trade unions, but blithely concludes, “Everyone, including the bosses, admits that there is a problem in Guadeloupe. But the questions posed go beyond the Guadeloupean framework. We realize that the local powers are incapable of answering questions that the Guadeloupean people pose.”

The Socialist Party’s national bureau issued a press statement which completely distorts the strike’s aims. It expresses no support for the strike, but arrogantly asserts the demands to be its own. It claims its document proposing to stimulate the French economy by helping business and banks, as well as proposals for insignificant minimum wage increases, have been adopted by the strikers. The PS holds the presidency of the devolved Guadeloupe regional council, which bears part of the responsibility for the current degradation of workers’ living standards, inflicting as it does at every turn the politics of the Sarkozy government on the French population generally. The SP controls 22 of France’s 24 regional councils.

The “left” establishment, whether in Guadeloupe or metropolitan France, is duping workers and handing the initiative to Sarkozy’s right-wing government to foist the consequences of the economic crisis onto the backs of the working class.

In order to satisfy all of the Guadeloupean workers’ legitimate demands, the unity of the working class must be forged on the basis of socialist internationalism. The current bourgeois regimes should be replaced with workers’ governments, which would reorganize the economy under the democratic control of the working class for the satisfaction of social needs of the vast majority.



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