

Demands for state repression of “insurrectionary” Guadeloupe and Martinique general strikes

Antoine Lerougetel
16 February 2009

General strikes in the Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, French overseas territories, have now lasted almost four weeks and two weeks, respectively.

The influential business daily *Les Echos* suggested last week that mass protests and strikes in the French possessions should be repressed. The newspaper, owned by Bernard Arnaud, the richest man in France and a close friend of President Nicolas Sarkozy, editorialised February 10 that “in a Guadeloupe in a permanent state of pre-insurrection, the form and extent of the movement...suggests the imposition of respect for the authority of the [French] Republic.”

Police reinforcements have been sent to both islands.

Demonstrations have taken place mobilising up to 100,000 of Guadeloupe's 500,000 inhabitants and 25,000 of Martinique's population of 400,000.

Expressing the refusal of workers to shoulder the burden of the worsening economic crisis, the strikes are of serious concern to the Sarkozy government, which is presently bailing out French banks and big business with billions in taxpayers' money.

The government's refusal to meet the demand for a monthly 200-euro rise in wages and social benefits for the 45,000 lowest-paid, private sector workers has only deepened and hardened the resolve of the strikers in Guadeloupe. On February 8 the minister for France's overseas possessions, Yves Jégo, was called back to Paris. He spoke of “the exceptional situation in Guadeloupe, of an insurrectionary nature.”

On his return to the Caribbean, Jégo repeatedly insisted, “It is not for the state to determine the money of wages, nor the money for negotiation.”

In metropolitan France on January 29 over 3 million workers and youth struck and demonstrated against the cost of living, unemployment and in defence of the social services. The trade unions restricted the protest to one day in part to isolate the mass movement in the Caribbean, as well

as the ongoing strike movement in the universities against government reforms and staff cuts.

The political elite are terrified that the movement in the Caribbean will spread to metropolitan France. *Le Monde* February 10, under the headline “Guadeloupe, the government fears contagion,” commented that the general strike “aroused the most strongly felt anxiety at the top of the state. Prior to the social meeting on February 18 [between the government, the unions and the employers] summoned by Nicolas Sarkozy, the government dreads that the measures in favour of purchasing power which might be agreed in the islands could be used, in metropolitan France, as a reference point by the trade unions.”

The defeated Socialist Party candidate for the 2007 presidential elections, Ségolène Royal, expressed her worries on RMC radio that the social crisis in the French West Indies was “perhaps a forerunner of what may happen” in metropolitan France.

This fear is shared by the trade union bureaucracies. The CGT (close to the Communist Party) in a February 10 statement on its Web site, refers to the demand for the “rise of 200 euros for low wages, pensions and social security benefits,” but gives no clear support for the demand and makes no call for a united struggle against austerity. It merely calls “for the vigilance of all about the government's behaviour and responses to these conflicts.”

François Chérèque of the CFDT (close to the Socialist Party) warned of “a dangerous spiral” if the demands of the French trade unions were not met as a result of the gathering of “social partners” February 18. He called on the government to make a 200-euro one-off payment to the low-paid in the Caribbean islands. The Socialist and Communist Parties in their statements don't even mention the 200-euro-a-month demand. Vincent Peillon of the SP reproached Sarkozy for his lack of “the art of governing.” None of these organisations has proposed any solidarity action.

What unites the French and Caribbean workers and youth

is the attempt of big business to make them pay for the deepening recession. France has seen a sharp increase in its trade deficit, a record 55.7 billion euros (\$71.23 billion) in 2008, up from 40 billion euros in 2007. Despite a 7-billion euro stimulus plan for Citroën-Peugeot and Renault, the auto companies have just announced job cuts of 11,000 and 9,000 and the need to drive down labour costs.

Les Echos editorial expressed its relief that Jégo had been hauled back to Paris on the afternoon of February 8 before he "made an irreversible" mistake and agreed to the 200-euro wage rise for the 45,000 workers. The editorial insisted that "what is at stake in this conflict is the capacity of the executive to apply, in Paris as well as Pointe-à-Pitre [the capital of Guadeloupe], a single and similar stimulus programme by investment. For, undoubtedly, an important general rise in wages—economic nonsense given the fragile situation of businesses—would immediately spread across the sea and would give the unions a cast-iron claim at the social conference on February 18."

The cost of living revolt in the French Caribbean began with the setting up of road blocks last November in French Guiana, the former French colony, now also a department of France, on the South American mainland. Local businessmen and French ex-patriots demanded a decrease in the cost of petrol at 1.77 euro a litre. Eleven days later, Jégo brokered a 50 centimes drop in the price of petrol whereby the provider, the SARA subsidiary of Total, reduced prices by 30 centimes and public funds provided a 20-centimes subsidy. This was a raid on the public purse by a company that has just announced an all-time record yearly profit for any French company of 14 billion euros.

The movement in Guadeloupe started in a similar way January 20. But it quickly became a mass movement of workers and the poor against a cost of living that is over 30 percent higher than in metropolitan France in one of the poorest regions in the European Union. Guadeloupe has an unemployment rate of 25 percent, rising to 50 percent for the 15-24 age group, with or without qualifications.

The leadership of the Guadeloupe movement, the LKP (Liyannaj Kont pwofitasyon—United against the Profiteers) is a collective of 48 cultural and social associations, left nationalist groups and trade unions, dominated by the UGTG (General Union of Guadeloupe Workers). The UGTG was set up as part of a nationalist upsurge in the aftermath of the brutal suppression in 1967 of a popular movement for wage rises, led by a strike of building workers, in which over 80 people were killed by the French police. It has become the main trade union in Guadeloupe, receiving 52 percent of the vote in the 2008 elections of representatives on the industrial tribunals (*prud'hommes*). Its general secretary Elie Demota is the LKP's main spokesman.

The leaflet put out by the LKP for last Saturday's demonstration, posted without comment on the site of the New Anti-capitalist Party of Oliver Besancenot, makes no mention of the world economic crisis that drives French imperialism to attack the rights and living standards of workers at home and abroad. Nor does it make the link with the struggles in metropolitan France. It makes appeals to the memory of slavery, only abolished in 1848, and attacks the old slave-owning families, who still dominate the local economy along with trans-national energy companies such as Total, the banks and the French supermarket chains. But it then goes on to suggest a policy of unity between the working class and local business interests. It declares, "The Guadeloupe bosses, conscious of the role they have to play in the economy of the country, have decided to rebel against the organisations supposed to represent them (MEDEF, CPGME) [the main French employers associations] and organise themselves so as to find solutions to respond to their employees' demands."

Rather than turn to the French working class, the LKP appeals to the Sarkozy government "to oblige the bosses to put their hands in their pockets to raise the workers' wages."

Elements of the "pre-agreement," reneged on by the government but defended by the LKP as a basis for resolving the conflict, involve employers being compensated for conceding wage rises with exemptions from paying taxes and social security contributions.

A statement issued by the NPA and the nine other left organisations, signatories of a previous January 29 declaration against Sarkozy's austerity policies, calling for a demonstration in Paris today, is not even signed by the Communist and Socialist parties. The leaflet makes no call for such a united struggle and no criticism of the complicity of the trade unions and the parliamentary left with the government against the Caribbean workers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact