LKP calls off Guadeloupe general strike as walkouts spread to La Réunion

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Mass protests and strikes against high prices and low wages in the French Caribbean possessions of Guadeloupe and Martinique continue, despite the calling off of the Guadeloupe general strike by the LKP (Liyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon—United Against the Profiteers) leadership on its 45th day.

The Guadeloupe masses should reject the rotten deal the LKP has signed with the government and the employers, and should work to extend their movement to all French territories, including the mainland.

This is the only way they can consolidate and extend the temporary concessions wrung from French imperialism by their determined struggle. Above all, French workers must unite with their class brothers and sisters in the Caribbean and on the Indian Ocean island of La Réunion in a joint struggle against imperialism and in defiance of the French trade union leaders, who have done everything possible to prevent such a development.

The calling off of the Guadeloupe strike occurred even as unrest was spreading to La Réunion, located off the coast of Madagascar. An indefinite general strike is due to begin there Tuesday. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, weakened by rising opposition to his government's austerity policies, fears nothing more than the spread of similar resistance to mainland France.

The LKP is an alliance of trade unions, cultural and welfare organisations and small employers' groups. Its spokesman is Elie Domota, also the leader of the island's majority trade union, the CGTG (General Confederation of Labour of Guadeloupe).

Despite partial wage concessions granted last week in Martinique, the leadership of the movement there, the February 5 Collective, had earlier refused to call off strikes, pickets and road blocks because of a lack of agreement on price reductions.

On Friday, the police clashed with youth and workers attempting to block a bosses' back-to-work demonstration involving a go-slow motorcade, which drove provocatively into the capital Fort de France. Shots were fired, and the police report four officers slightly injured by gunfire and Molotov cocktails. They arrested 10 people. There are no figures for those injured by the police. Negotiations have now resumed, and a sell-out could take place similar to that in Guadeloupe.

All four French overseas departments, or DOMs, (the fourth is French Guiana, on the South American mainland, which had a fuel price protest last November), are characterised by unemployment rates of up to 30 percent, with youth rates nearly double that, as well as poverty wages and prices for basic necessities that are 30 percent higher than their equivalents in France.

Sarkozy's government has attempted to damp down the movement with a temporary €200 state-subsidised wage boost for private sector workers and negotiations with retailers, energy suppliers and public transport companies for price reductions.

The LKP called off the strike on the basis of a deal in which the state agreed to provide €100 of the rise for a three-year period, and local government €50 for a year. However, the large employers on the island, grouped in the Guadeloupe section of the main French big business association the MEDEF (Movement of Enterprises of France), have refused to sign.

Many of their workers staff hotels and hypermarkets. A central plank of the Guadeloupe movement is the demand for the monthly €200 pay rise to cover the 45,000 lowest-paid workers on the island. As few as 15,000 and no more than 30,000 workers are covered by the present deal.

Workers at the two vast Carrefour supermarkets, Destréland and Milenis, came out on strike on Tuesday morning, March 3. These two shopping centres belong to the group of Bernard Hayot, one of the richest *békés* (descendents of the old slave-owning families) in the West Indies and a leading member of MEDEF. The initiative for the Carrefour strike came from the workers independently of the unions. They expressed their determination to stay out until they got their €200, especially since the Martinique

MEDEF had already agreed to a similar deal.

The conflict between the capitalist successors of slave owners and the lowest-paid and most exploited workers of Guadeloupe has a historic resonance. Many of the workers are descendents of the slaves emancipated in 1848 by the French liberal bourgeoisie, led by Victor Schoelcher, and then immediately obliged to work for their former owners. The transitional arrangements devised by Schoelcher and his supporters in the parliamentary Broglie Commission in France guaranteed compensation and subsidies, not to the slaves, but to the sugar cane plantation owners, so that they could continue to exploit their workforce without interruption of the sugar trade.

The preamble to the agreement signed February 26 by the trade unions, the LKP, the government and some employers' organisations evokes this history, stating that "the present situation in Guadeloupe derives from the persistence of the plantation economic model." This has been used, by both the LKP and the unions on the mainland, to present Guadeloupe as a special case with no direct link with the workers' struggles in metropolitan France.

At mass demonstrations and strikes in France on January 29 against the government's austerity policies, occurring on the ninth day of the Guadeloupe general strike, the unions made no link between the two events. The decision of the trade unions, after the January 29 day of action, to set the next mobilisation as late as March 19 was partly dictated by the desire to prevent any possible alliance with the movement in the Caribbean or ongoing protests at France's universities.

The trade unions and the "left" in France are only too pleased to embrace the special case analysis, while supporting the LKP sellout. The Communist Party declared, "In Guadeloupe, the LKP and the population are savouring a victory which will go down in history." *Lutte Ouvrière* declared, "Lutte Ouvrière rejoices in the victory of the Guadeloupe workers, who have won most of the demands they put forward at the start of their movement, notably the 200-euro increase for the low-paid."

Similar statements have been made by the Left Party (PG) of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Olivier Besancenot of the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA).

It is certainly the case that the mass movement in the Caribbean, because of its determined and at times near-insurrectionary character, exposed the token character of the opposition to Sarkozy mounted by France's own unions. But for this reason, Maryse Dumas of the main French trade union, the Communist Party-linked CGT (General Confederation of Labour), has insisted that the Guadeloupe struggle is not transposable to metropolitan France, stating, "The salary scales are not at all the same in metropolitan France, where the wages issue is not posed in the same way."

In a similar vein, *Force Ouvrière* General Secretary Claude Mailly claimed that there were "differences of context," since in Guadeloupe there were "whiffs of colonialism" and "the need to reconstitute the economic circuits." He added that "you can't just do a cut-and-paste."

The fate of the masses and workers of the DOM is in no way separate from that of their class brothers and sisters in France and the whole of Europe, who face the same struggles against the effects of the world capitalist crisis. Nothing won in Guadeloupe or Martinique can last outside of a combined struggle with workers in France on the basis of a socialist programme. Already, at least 10,000 jobs are due to be lost in the immediate aftermath of the strike, and record business closures are being recorded.

Workers in the West Indies and throughout the world can answer the catastrophic rise in unemployment only with the socialist reorganisation of the economy under the democratic control of the working class, through a unified struggle of workers of the colonies and ex-colonies with those of the imperialist countries.

The French ruling class fears that social instability will spread to the mainland. Hence, the government's readiness to make temporary concessions in Guadeloupe and Martinique.

But this is only to better prepare a counter-offensive, both in the DOMs and in mainland France. Billions of euros have been borrowed and taken from public funds to bolster the economy and bail out the banks, sending state indebtedness far beyond the limits established by the European Union to keep the euro stable.

The budget deficit is expected to reach nearly double the Maastricht limit at 5.5 percent of GDP and the public debt to exceed its limit by some 25 percent, at up to 75 percent of GDP. A secret OECD analysis of the French economy, obtained by *Médiapart*, recommends cuts in government expenditure, tax breaks for the employers and the "loosening of legislation on sacking." It calls on the government "to act more directly" to gut the minimum wage.