

French Guiana strikers reject PS government's offer

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The French Overseas and Interior ministers, Ericka Bareigts and Matthias Fekl, arrived in French Guiana this weekend, as France's Socialist Party (PS) government tried to end the general strike that has lasted for over a week in this overseas department of France in South America. Talks between a delegation of 50 people led by the "Make Guiana Take Off" collective and the two ministers began on Saturday.

Immediately on arrival in Guiana, on the balcony of the police prefecture, Bareigts declared, "After so many years, the honor falls to me to give, beyond my small person, beyond the authority I have, my excuses to the Guyanese people."

Bareigts and Fekl supposedly made 30 promises involving over €1 billion over five to 10 years, according to the investments being considered. "The government has listened to and understood the aspirations and the demands of the Guyanese people," declared Fekl, before he left Saturday to return to metropolitan France.

The promises involve €85 million on health, including €60 million to modernize the hospital center in Cayenne and re-balance its treasury since, according to Bareigts, it is no longer able to pay its bills. For education, there is supposedly €400 million, including €60 million for the construction of new junior or senior high schools. On the problem of the lack of housing, the state claimed it would give up 200,000 hectares of land in order to allow for the construction of new housing, and in particular rent-controlled housing.

Nevertheless, the "Make Guiana Take Off" collective rejected the measures proposed by the ministers, stating that these measures did not respond to the Guianese people's demands. What is taking place is "the biggest protest ever organized" in French Guiana, police officials state. They have counted 8,000 protesters in Cayenne and 3,500 at Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni, the two largest cities of the department, whose total population is only 250,000.

Above all, given the election calendar and the reactionary policies of the PS, which led a savage policy of austerity and police repression against working people, none of its promises are credible. Bareigts's promises will be immediately placed in question, as soon as the new government comes in after the presidential elections on May 7.

Le Monde described a "total lack of understanding between, on the one hand, a movement that, while it is very pacific, feels that it expresses a historic ambition, and a government whose days are numbered." At the same time, the newspaper, which is politically close to the PS government, insisted that the PS cannot "go beyond what is possible," that is, significantly improve living conditions in French Guiana.

What the PS government did agree to, however, as police prefect Martin Jaeger underlined, was to send "25 policemen and 23 paramilitary police to reinforce the national and paramilitary police. In addition, the deployment of a squad of mobile guards in Cayenne is to be made permanent."

Paris is desperate to rapidly end the Guianese general strike before it provokes broader solidarity struggles in metropolitan France. The PS has imposed a state of emergency, giving police virtually unlimited authority, that it used to repress workers and youth who were demonstrating in particular during protests against the reactionary PS labor law. Nonetheless, the first solidarity protest for the Guianese strikers was held yesterday in Paris. Some 100 people reportedly attended.

The balance sheet of the struggle against the labor law underscores that Guianese workers must take their struggle out of the hands of the unions and develop a broader political struggle, both in metropolitan France and in overseas territories, against the PS and the entire ruling class. It would be politically suicidal to leave the union bureaucracies in control of the struggle. They are hostile

to the mobilization of the workers against the PS, which they support and which they helped get elected in 2012 by calling for a PS vote.

The trade union federations mobilized no opposition to PS austerity measures prior to the labor law protest, which they were compelled to organize—as in the current strike in Guiana—only because explosive political anger was building against the law, above all among youth. However, they never had any intention of organizing a political struggle to bring down the PS government and the reactionary state of emergency it has imposed.

Above all, everything indicates that the trade unions and the various collectives allied to them are secretly negotiating with the state, behind workers' backs, to try to strangle the struggle.

The prefect of Guiana, who has been trying to end the strikes since the first blockades went up, has made clear he is semi-officially in contact with “a collective.” He declared, “Despite notification that we should not prematurely talk to the inter-ministerial delegation, I am in contact with many representatives of the social, health, agricultural, and economic world. These people consider that it is useful to lay out their concerns, but they want to remain discreet, until they get a green light to move closer to us.”

These semi-official contacts with the prefect and the enthusiastic support for Bareigts underscore the role played by forces in and around the collectives that are claiming to direct the general strike. Far from defending workers' aspirations, they are discussing with the PS how to end the strike, so that they would be left only with crumbs, despite their broad mobilization.

Guianese workers can expect nothing from negotiations between the collectives and the state, which is preparing to boost the strength of police units tasked with repressing their struggles, either under the PS government or the government that will follow it.



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