

Guadeloupe: A people arise

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February 24, 2009 — For more than a month now, Guadeloupe has been providing a tremendous lesson in social resistance to the local bosses and the French government. Its people have responded to the growing insecurity with an historically unprecedented general strike. What is behind this mobilization? The answer would seem to lie in the capacity of the social movement to embody the peoples' aspirations for emancipation.

The aspiration for human dignity

The scope of this revolt, in the first place, refutes those who would dismiss it as the action of a few agitators seeking notoriety. The call for the general strike, issued last January 20, has been met by a massive mobilisation of the population in the streets. On February 18 alone, between 60,000 and 80,000 demonstrated in Le Moule, a town in the east of the island, to commemorate the assassination of five sugar cane workers by the repressive forces in 1957. That's a demonstration of 13 to 17 per cent of the island's total population of 460,000. Imagine what it would mean if five million demonstrators gathered day after day in Ottawa to demand higher wages.

Initially a challenge to the price of gasoline, the social movement is demanding measures to fight the high cost of living and social squalor. Key demands include: an immediate increase in wages, pensions and social benefits of 200 euros [about \$320 Canadian]; price controls on essential goods; an end to prices set artificially higher than those in France; social housing; jobs for youths; adequate social services, etc. Not surprisingly, the 149 demands of the movement are popular in a population with an "official" unemployment rate of 22.7% (the actual level is estimated at close to 40%) and twice the rate of poverty in mainland France...

Rejection of colonial domination

Apart from expressing the people's aspirations for emancipation, the revolt in Guadeloupe also draws its strength from an anticolonial consciousness that is shared and fueled by a long tradition of contestation. Faced with the columns of cops hastily dispatched by Paris to repress the movement, the demonstrators chant in Creole: "Guadeloupe is ours, Guadeloupe is not theirs, they shall not do what they want in our country." Discrimination in hiring, monopolisation of positions of responsibility by the French, monopoly rents extorted by the companies owned by the békés (the minority descendants of the French colonists), the government's repressive response — Guadeloupe looks more like a colony than a department belonging to a Republic with the motto of "Liberal, Equality, Fraternity". This neocolonial reality is bitterly denounced by the current movement. And this political consciousness is a major asset, for the ruling classes of the metropolis have precious little control over the situation, or ability to give a veneer of legitimacy to their domination.

A united and fighting collective

Lastly, the general strike fully embodies the meaning of the Creole word "lyannaj": to win over, to bring together, to unite in solidarity, unity and strong attachment. The Collective against super-exploitation (Lyannaj kont prwofitasyon, or LKP), which is leading the social movement, includes 49 organisations (associations and unions) and its spokesperson Elie Domota is proof of a leadership

committed to speaking truth to the metropolitan power and the local business class. Asked by the French daily *Libération*, on February 17, if he would continue to call for mobilization, Domota answered:

“Yes, for we have no choice. Yves Jégo [French overseas secretary of state] says everything is settled, but he has lied to us and the government is not keeping its word or respecting its undertakings. The only thing that interests us is the signing of our draft agreement with the government and the bosses on February 8, which provides for an increase of 200 euros for the lowest wages. But since no one is listening to us, we are forced to be in the street... For four weeks, the government has been chartering planeloads of cops to casser du nègre — break the niggers. I remain open to dialogue, but today the government has chosen repression and the Guadeloupians are going to resist.”

It is not hard to understand why the “Guadeloupe” case upsets the Elysée [the French presidency]. The French government and bosses fear that Guadeloupe will become an example for the workers in the metropolis. And that fear is warranted, for Martinique and La Réunion are showing that this type of movement is highly contagious, particular in a time of crisis and after a quarter century of neoliberal offensive.

P.S.

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* Translated by Richard Fidler from Presse-toi-à-gauche,

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