

'First Victory' in Guadeloupe General Strike - Movement Spreads to Other French Colonies

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The general strike in Guadeloupe ended March 4, when an Accord was signed between the LKP Strike Collective and the local governments, the employers' federation and the French government that granted the strikers their top 20 immediate demands and provided for continued negotiations on the remaining 126 mid-term and long-term demands. The LKP, or Lihannaj Kont Pwofitasyon — Collective against super-exploitation — is a coalition of 49 unions and grassroots organizations.

The LKP Strike Collective voted to end the strike, its member unions and community groups declaring this a « First Victory » after 44 days of general strike, repeated mass demonstrations, and negotiations. Some strikes are continuing, however, where the bosses' associations have not signed the agreement on wages.

And on Saturday, March 7, 30,000 persons marched through the streets of the capital, Pointe à Pitre, to celebrate the victory achieved to this point.

The general strike began on January 20 and spread to neighbouring Martinique on February 5 as a protest against the high cost of living and, more generally, the gross inequality between the conditions of the black population and a tiny white elite, descendants of slaveholders, that controls most industry and agriculture. The two islands, each with a population of about 400,000, are officially designated overseas departments of France, and the repression of the strikers by the French government, which has flown in 2,000 gendarmes from the metropolis, has underscored their colonial oppression.

The islands, along with two other French colonies — Guyane in South America and La Réunion in the Indian Ocean, both of which are experiencing mounting unrest — have the highest unemployment rates in the European Union, double those of metropolitan France. Also, prices of basic commodities and food staples, most of them imported, are much higher.

The Guadeloupe accord on wages, reached initially on the night of February 26-27, provides for a €200 monthly increase for workers with a gross income of between €132 and €1849 per month (i.e. the minimum wage or up to 40% higher than the minimum) ; a 6% increase for those between €1849 and €2113 ; and a 3% increase for those with higher incomes. This agreement is called the « Jacques Bino Accord » in memory of the union activist who was killed during the strike. The cost of these wage increases is allocated between the employers and the French and local governments, with small business employers responsible for only a quarter of the increase.

Other concessions accepted by the bosses and the French and local governments, after lengthy and difficult negotiations, included :

- an average 6% reduction in the price of water ;
- hiring of 22 Guadeloupian teachers on the waiting list ;
- €40,000 in compensation for truckers and bus operators left out when urban and inter-city transportation was reorganized ;

- various measures to aid farmers and fishers, including the setting aside of 64,000 hectares of farmland for future use, and a grant of €350,000 for the modernization and renewal of fishing gear for full-time fishers ;
- an emergency plan for young people (jobs and training for 8,000 youth aged 16-25) ;
- lower bank service rates on certain products for individuals and small businesses ; lower interest rates on loans are still being negotiated ;
- a housing rent freeze and ban on evictions ;
- some improvements in union rights, appointment of mediators to resolve outstanding conflicts in some major industries ; and
- provisions for cultural development.

A parity commission with equal representation of unions and employers will oversee implementation of the agreements.

Leading the militant general strike, which shut down most businesses, schools, government offices and services, were the General Union of Workers of Guadeloupe (UGTG) and the various affiliates of the major French union centrals. The mass demonstrations, often mobilizing tens of thousands, were led by large disciplined contingents of marshals dressed in the LKP t-shirts. The strike collective held frequent mass meetings to report to the people on developments in the strike. A popular website included constant update reports, photos, and video presentations of speeches at the major rallies and demonstrations. [1].

The LKP platform included almost 150 demands for higher wages and improved social benefits, lower taxes and prices on necessities and transportation, construction of social housing, environmental decontamination, job training and priority hiring for Guadeloupians, an end to layoffs, worker participation in management, trade-union rights including collective agreements and occupational health and safety protection, creation of public services in strategic sectors, land reform and agricultural development, development of media and other facilities in the local language and culture, and investigation and prosecution of those responsible for the massacre of striking construction workers in May 1967, etc. Similar demands have been raised by the strikers in Martinique.

Reporting on the draft Accord at a mass meeting on the night of March 4, the 43rd day of the strike, union leader Rosan Mounien said : « From now on, things will no longer be done as before ! That's over ! We have come to realize that when we are together, we are stronger ! So there is only one thing to do : stay together ! »

The bosses and the government, he said, had overlooked the fact that « when a people arises, when it develops awareness, when it is convinced of the rightness of its actions... there is nothing that can stop it. The people sweep aside all obstacles placed in their path, like a whirlwind cleaning out all the dirt in a country. »

Asked by a French newspaper why the bosses had proved so resistant to the workers' demands, LKP leader Élie Domota said : « To them, it is out of the question that the nègres (the negroes) would rebel and demand increases in their wages. »

The underlying conditions and issues in the strike movement were indicated in the preamble to the Jacques Bino Accord that ended the general strike. It states that « the present economic and social situation existing in Guadeloupe results from the perpetuation of the model of the plantation economy. » This economy, it says, « is based on monopoly privileges and abuses of dominant positions that generate injustices » that affect « the workers and the endogenous economic actors » and block « endogenous economic and social development ». The Accord calls for an end to these

obstacles « by establishing a new economic order enhancing the status of everyone and promoting new social relationships ». (See Journal officiel de la République Française, March 7, 2009.)

LKP leader Domota told the French daily *L'Humanité* that although the strike movement had not advanced demands for institutional changes in Guadeloupe's colonial status as an « overseas department » of France, « the people of Guadeloupe are demanding more respect, more dignity, work, an end to racial discrimination, increased wages and training to ensure the future of our youth. »

The French « overseas departments or territories », said Domota, « are built on a colonial model. They are countries that want, in the future, to be recognized in full dignity, in full respect. »

The UGTG itself calls for independence of Guadeloupe. On March 8, the day after the mass victory march of 30,000, the union published on its website a resolution to this effect adopted at its 12th Congress in April 2008. [2].

In neighboring Martinique, a general strike that began February 5 around demands similar to those in Guadeloupe has also mobilized the population of some 400,000 in demonstrations of up to 25,000 in the capital, Fort-de-France. It has already produced a provisional accord with the Collectif du 5 février (an organizing committee like the LKP) that contains many of the same provisions as the one in Guadeloupe — and it includes a 20% reduction in the price of some basic consumer products. But the strike movement continues in that island.

A similar mass movement appears to be developing in another French colony, La Réunion, an island in the Indian Ocean with a population of about 800,000. A coalition of 25 trade unions, parties and other mass organizations (the Collectif des organisations syndicales, politiques et associatives de La Réunion — COSPAR) has mobilized up to 30,000 in the streets in support of a platform of 62 demands, many of them similar to those in the Caribbean colonies.

P.-S.

* From Life on the Left :

<http://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/>

Notes

[1] See http://ugtg.org/?lang=cpf_gp and also on ESSF : [Antilles](#)

[2] See translation : [Does a Guadeloupian People Exist ?](#)