

Mobilizations, victories in overseas colonies set example for French workers

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Contents

- [Martinique general strike \(...\)](#)
- [Strike movement spreads to \(...\)](#)
- [Guadeloupe strike leader \(...\)](#)

Martinique general strike ends in victory

A 38-day general strike in the Caribbean colony of Martinique ended March 14 with the signing of a protocol between the government and the February 5 Collective, a coalition of unions and other social movements named after the day the strike began. The agreement grants the coalition's key demands. About 20,000 people celebrated the historic victory in a march through the streets.

AFP reported that "the signing ceremony drew a crowd of thousands who gathered outside the island's head administrative office. They repeatedly chanted a slogan 'Matinik leve,' or 'Martinique stand up' in the local Creole language."

On the day before, thousands marched through the capital, Fort-de-France, chanting slogans directed at the *békés*, the wealthy white descendants of colonists and slave-owners who dominate Martinique's economy. Most of the island's population is descended from African slaves brought to work on its colonial-era sugar plantations.

The draft agreement, reached early in the morning of March 11, calls for a €200 (\$250 US) monthly wage increase for 47,000 low-wage earners, with smaller increases for those with higher incomes. Workers will get retroactive pay to March 1. Major business owners had already agreed to lower prices on roughly 400 basic necessities by 20 percent one month after stores reopen.

These and other terms are similar to the agreement that ended a 44-day general strike on the neighboring island of Guadeloupe on March 4. See "First Victory" in Guadeloupe general strike; Movement spreads to other French colonies.

Michel Monrose, the head of the February 5 Collective, told AFP that the Collective "reserves the right to re-launch the strike if the accords are not respected".

Strike movement spreads to La Réunion

In the Indian ocean colony of La Réunion, a coalition headed by trade unions continues to press for an accord similar to those reached in the Caribbean colonies. In recent weeks, the island of 800,000 inhabitants has seen huge demonstrations of up to 35,000 marching in support of their demands. So far, however, ongoing negotiations with representatives of the employers and French government

officials have stalled, achieving only a freeze on rents in social housing.

The coalition has called for another massive mobilization on Thursday, March 19 in solidarity with the general strike scheduled for that day in France.

At a mass rally in St-Denis on March 5, Gilles Leperlier, a leader of COSPAR, the organizing coalition, described what it is and what it wants.

“COSPAR,” he said, “is above all a genuine collective, a coalition of trade unions, political organizations and community movements, a coalition without precedent in the recent history of La Réunion. COSPAR is the Collectif des Organisations Syndicales, Politiques et Associatives de La Réunion. It was formed at La Possession on February 5, 2009, and quickly was joined by les forces vives — the bone and sinew — of Réunion society, a total of 45 organizations come together to defend a set of immediate demands and develop, consensually, a platform of demands to end La Réunion’s economic dependency and put an end to the social injustice that prevails... COSPAR belongs to the Réunionnais and to no one else!”

Leperlier noted that 52% of the population of La Réunion lives below the poverty line, and 24% of the work force is unemployed. COSPAR has advanced 62 specific demands as “an initial basis” for action. It echoes many of the demands, now won, in Guadeloupe and Martinique: an immediate €200 increase in the lowest wages and pensions, the minimum wage and student bursaries; a 20% reduction in the prices of basic consumer goods; a freeze on rents and the construction of social housing; equal wages for women; taxation of the wealthy (some 800 rich families currently pay no income taxes), etc.

“But the COSPAR sees further,” Leperlier said. “Something is developing in the Overseas Territories (France’s name for its colonies), a vast movement challenging the situations of privilege, a social and political movement that will not stop until the overseas territories have taken in hand their own destiny and put an end to the iniquity of a system that maintains them in economic dependence.”

Guadeloupe strike leader facing legal assault by French government

In Guadeloupe, where the 44-day general strike ended March 4 with a “first victory” on the major demands of the organizing coalition, the LKP, the employers’ federation MEDEF, a local branch of the one in mainland France, is attempting to renege on the settlement signed by its representatives and the French government.

Some MEDEF members left the negotiating table before the deal was signed, and are now challenging its legality. Addressing a mass rally on March 13, LKP leader Elie Domota read off a long list of major employers that had signed the final accord, and denounced French officials — including the local prefect (governor) and a cabinet minister who signed it — who are now challenging certain aspects. “The comrades were right to mobilize in their companies to demand enforcement of the accord,” he said. Some workers are still on strike in industries where the bosses have not signed.

Domota also denounced attempts by MEDEF to reinterpret the accord. The accord provided that the €200 increase on low wages would be paid on a shared basis by the employers, local government and the French state for three years, after which it would be paid in full by the bosses. The latter are now claiming the wage increase would cease after three years, despite a clear provision to the contrary!

And French officials and politicians, debating the accord in the French parliament, are now challenging the language in the preamble to the accord, which calls for a “new economic order” to end the “plantation economy” model that blocks “endogenous economic and social development”.

More seriously, Elie Domota himself has been charged by the French Attorney General for French overseas departments and territories with “fomenting provocations and promoting the use of force to extort the signing” of the accord. And he has threatened legal action against the trade union leader for “provoking discrimination, hatred and violence against a category of persons based on their ethnic origin”.

A U.S.-based solidarity group, the International Liaison Committee, explains:

This announcement of possible legal action by the French authorities came in response to a statement made by Domota to a celebration rally on Thursday, March 5 — the day after the Jacques Bino agreement was signed. (Bino was the trade unionist killed the night of Feb. 16 by bullets now widely believed to have been fired by masked government provocateurs who infiltrated one of the barricades on the outskirts of Pointe-à-Pître.)

In response to a question from the crowd as to whether the French government and the white ruling elite in Guadeloupe, the Béké, could be trusted to live up to the signed agreement and to pay the 200 euro monthly increase in the minimum wage, Domota stated: “Either they respect and implement the agreement, or they will leave Guadeloupe. ... We have to be very firm about this. We will not allow a band of Béké to re-establish slavery on our soil.”

The attack by the Attorney General against Domota is an attack against the UGTG, which was the backbone of the general strike movement. It echoes the racist diatribes in the French media against the people of Guadeloupe and the LKP Strike Collective, in particular. The media portrayed the French government as the victim of “mob violence” that had compelled the government to sign an unjust agreement under duress and in violation of all conventional labor relations.

This reference to a “mob” — a reference to the overwhelming Black majority on the island — is not only racist to the core, it shows the total contempt by the colonial authorities for the democratic aspirations of an entire people. It reveals the deep fear of the Béké, as the ATPC communiqué puts it, that their stronghold over political power and their privileges have been greatly undermined by the powerful general strike movement that swept the entire country.

The question that arises is this: Does the announcement by the Attorney General against Domota foreshadow an attempt by the French government to invalidate, through the courts, the agreement signed officially by all the concerned parties on March 4th at 8 p.m.? Given the wording of the charges, it appears that this may be the intent. We urge you to join us in demanding of the French government: “Hands Off Elie Domota! Implement the Jacques Bino Agreement!”

In France, the major trade unions have called for a day of general strike and mass mobilizations on March 19 to protest private and public sector layoffs and support demands for major increases in minimum wages, pensions and other social benefits to confront the developing economic and social crisis. A supporting statement issued by the major left parties cites the strikes and victories in the colonies as an example of the kinds of mobilizations that must be built in the metropolis.

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P.S.

* From Life on the left blog:

<http://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2009...>