

Martinique: The time of anti-capitalist and anti-colonial contestation

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In Martinique, the general strike launched on February 5 by the Intersyndical (inter-union coordination) immediately took on, by its scale and its ongoing dynamic, just as in Guadeloupe, a political dimension of challenging the injustice, the exploitation and the oppression that exist in Martinique society. On the evening of the immense success of Thursday 5 February, (there were more than 20,000 demonstrators in the streets of the capital, Fort-de-France), the Intersyndical took the decision to transform itself into the “February 5 Collective” so as to be able to broaden itself out to all the forces from different movements and associations which had spontaneously joined the movement.

This broadening was done in somewhat the same way and following the example of the “Lyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon” (Collective Against Exploitation), which had brought together, two months earlier, all the trade-union and progressive organizations, and also the cultural associations, of Guadeloupe for a general strike against the high cost of living, against oppression and exploitation.

A full-scale social explosion

The social movement which has developed since February 5 is exceptional in the recent history of workers' struggles in this country. This exceptional character comes from the force that it is unleashing, from the scale of the demonstrations. Since the powerful social mobilizations that took place from October 1973 to February 1974, (that was 35 years ago!), such a tidal wave had not submerged the streets of the capital and other towns. This unitary, radical and prolonged movement is an example of resistance. The demonstrations, the road blocks around commercial, artisanal and industrial zones, the blockades of the big supermarkets, are paralyzing all the economic sectors of the island, as well as transport. For the people engaged in the struggle, it is a question, by acting in this way, of imposing a reduction in the prices of essential products, energy: water, fuel, the telephone, rents, taxes, banking rates; an increase of at least 200 euros for low-paid workers, for pensioners, for those living on minimum social benefits; a minimum level of income for young people; jobs for everyone in Martinique, through a very serious decline in unemployment and through putting a stop to lay-offs.

The population, by its determination, imposed a tripartite meeting between the February 5 Collective and the representatives of the government, local authorities and employers, to discuss measures that would make it possible for the population to break out of the poverty that is a

consequence of the high cost of living in Martinique. So for more than a month, several demonstrations mobilizing thousands of people have taken place to demand that this tripartite meeting stop dragging its feet, because of the delaying tactics of the employers and their various evasions and blockages, which they hope will provoke the lassitude of the population, the stagnation of the conflict and general discouragement. In spite of privations which are very hard to put up with and the propaganda of the employers and the French government, the lamentations about economic chaos, the intimidations and provocations, the population actively supports the movement. This strike movement is revealing the determination of the population to resist liberal policies and the capitalist system which wants to make the workers and the popular masses pay for the crisis.

The workers on the front line

The movement initiated by February 5, 2009 has for the last month demonstrated its power, affirmed a conquering spirit, released an exciting energy of thousands of young people, women, workers, unemployed. In fact, the working class of Martinique in all its components (regular workers, those engaged in precarious and temporary work, the unemployed, those living on the minimum income benefit, white collar workers, industrial workers), by responding to the call of the trade unions for the general strike of February 5, has drawn the rest of the population into this ongoing movement. This combat, placed from the start under the impulsion of the workers and their trade unions, interests the majority of the layers of the population, because the cost of living also affects small artisans, small planters, the middle classes, the increasingly impoverished liberal professions, etc. It has been demonstrated that it is the organized and united workers' movement which can best pose all the problems of the people, which can propose and impose solutions. That means imposing decisions on the profiteers, those who control the import-export business, those who own the majority of the shopping malls, those who possess financial wealth, those who employ, lay off and underpay workers. Unquestionably, the power of this ongoing general strike movement, like the even more spectacular one in Guadeloupe, comes from having been able to draw other layers of the population into the mobilization, but also from the adoption of two unifying demands: a reduction of 20 per cent in the price of essential products and an across-the-board pay increase, for all those on low wages, of 354 euros (since brought down to 250 euros, of which 200 euros is to be paid immediately).

Young people take part in the explosion

The majority of the strikers and demonstrators did not experience the great mobilizations of 35 years ago. But it is not astonishing that the young people - whose unemployment rate borders on 50 per cent for those under 28, reaching 70 per cent in the popular quarters of Fort-de-France, such as Lamentin and Schoelcher - feel concerned by this movement which has something to say to them. Many of them come out of the school system without any diploma, or with diplomas which are good for nothing. Since the minimum income benefit is only applicable to those over 25, those under 25 suffer from lack of autonomy because they have no income, and in most case from the lack of housing accommodation. Such is the lot of these young compatriots whom the colonial system deprives of having any dreams and of course any project. Systematic stigmatization, social rejection, discrimination because of their appearance: that is what is offered to them by leaders who are quick to trot out their law-and-order discourse at the first occasion and who make a great display of the whole arsenal of police and judicial repression.

Thirty-five years have passed since 1974, which means that more half of the population had not yet been born then, or was less than 10 years old, and so had not shared the last experiences of the popular movement. However the young people spontaneously found the road of struggle alongside those who were more experienced. With such enthusiasm! With such impetuosity! With such impatience! But also with such generosity! Because we should not hold the mass of young people

responsible for the regrettable and counter-productive incidents which have taken place and which serve very well the propaganda of those who want to criminalise strike action. These young people experienced as a terrible affront the Canal+ broadcast which gave an echo to the discourse of some of the most antiquated, most arrogant and most racist *békés* [1]. Its pride in its identity was outraged and it intends to make it known. As a result initiatives of all kinds blossomed: for example the young specialists and whizz-kids of audio-visual and the Internet who launched the initiative, much appreciated by the public, of the “TV Otonom Mawon” along with some artists and journalists who are sympathizers of the movement. For four weeks there has been a free TV station, established on the Boulevard de la Levée, right in the heart of the demonstrations, and open to all those who wanted to express their thirst to live in another kind of world. It was a question for these young women and these young people of “*ribat jé kat la*” (redistributing the cards).

Women take the movement forward

The demonstrators are in their very great majority female. Women are the most involved, the most visible in the demonstrations and blockades. But it is not just a question of the weight of numbers, there is also the fact that their visibility comes from them speaking out and from the demands that they express. Who is concerned by precarious work? By imposed part-time work? By underpaid work? Who is concerned by the inequalities in the working environment, both when they are hired and when it is a question of promotion and remuneration? Who is concerned by earning a living from selling goods from a little stall at the roadside, on the pavement around the city centre or around the market? Who is concerned by the structure of the single-parent family, with having difficulty making ends meet faced with high rents, with high prices for essential products and for transport? Who is concerned by sexual harassment, moral harassment and violence at work? And in a social movement, who raises the question of a better life? Who is concerned by marital violence, by new kinds of relations between men and women? These problems have already existed for a long time but they came to maturity with the movement of February 5. This is the fruit of the work of the feminists of the Union of the Women of Martinique (UFM), who in this movement, by holding almost daily forums, by publishing leaflets, by regular demonstrations, including a particularly successful March 8 demonstration, have contributed to making women become aware of their strength and their ability to make things move. Women have always been the spearhead of social movements in Martinique: what is new is that now they know it and are consequently making their influence felt.

The intellectuals and the artists get involved

The movement has seen many intellectuals and academics taking a stand, both in Guadeloupe and in Martinique. Since the exchange of ideas does not recognise the separation that their sea-bound character imposes, discussions are taking place between intellectuals from the two islands. The discussion pages in the written press, on Internet sites and in the radical West-Indian weekly magazines, newsletters such as *Madin' Art*, *Creole Carib One*, satellite television channels such as Canal 10, A1 Guadeloupe and KMT, served to greatly multiply discussions and to make ideas, positions and proposals widely known. In this effervescence, there was something of everything; good, less good and frankly bad. But the radical public is perfectly capable of separating the wheat from the chaff. However, in Martinique the “Manifesto for very necessary products” signed by Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau, as well as the standpoint of the poet Monchoachi de Lakouzémi with his incisive text “*jé a bout kon yé la*”, should give matter for discussion to all those who want to seize the opportunity to question their ideas and to position themselves in a different way for the period to come.

The guest columns in the press of the Socialist Revolution Group (GRS), the Internet site of our organization, the quasi-daily leaflets that we have distributed have also served to inject our proposals into the debate. People are rediscovering the poems of Joby Bernabé demanding respect

for his people. They are filled with enthusiasm when they hear the words of Nico Gernet and his group "Tambou Bo Kannal" who make thousands of demonstrators vibrate as they greet the song "tambou libération, tambou révolution, tambou neg mawon". It is the same for other singers, other visual artists, other film-makers, etc.

The movement draws in many social layers

One is struck by the involvement of all the layers of society in this social explosion. In addition to the old people, the pensioners concerned by the derisory minimum pensions, in addition to professional bodies such as that of lawyers, we have seen, especially in the first weeks, artisans, small farmers, small shopkeepers, independent transporters, small employers. But very quickly, elements of incomprehension appeared and these categories were less and less visible, even though some of them are still present in the mobilizations. It is true that these various categories were much more worried by the problems of the cost of living than by the issue of pay rises.

Where the great earthquake has come from

Everything did not erupt suddenly, like a storm in a clear blue sky. For a long time we have been fighting in the Antilles against lay-offs in the building sector, in agriculture, commerce, industry, the hotel trade. But often they were compartmentalised struggles, fought sector by sector or even company by company, farm by farm, even hotel by hotel. It is a long time ago that the alarm was sounded on the issue of ecology. The question of the 50 geometrical steps and the dilapidation of the coastal patrimony, poisoning by chloredecone, the wasting of water, as demonstrated by the Grande Rivière affair, were fights largely conducted by ecologists, (and especially those from Assaupamar, whom we find on the front line today) with the sympathy of public opinion. For a long time there have been demonstrations against the lack of social housing. For a long time we have fought against repression and the many iniquities of a biased judicial system which strikes hard at those who are weakest and those who cannot make their voices heard. It was obvious that there was widespread discontent, but the defensive struggles, even when they were not defeats, did not give the signal for a generalized fight.

To take an eloquent example, let us go back to one of these sectors about which there was a lot of talk at the end of the year 2008: the hotel trade, whose workers (mostly women) saw that their situation was worsening.

The crisis that the hotel trade is going through does not fall from the sky... The choice that was made by the tourist industry, in its original conception, was not part of a global perspective of development. Never, at the beginning of the 1960s, was the policy on tourism thought out and conceived of as a locomotive pulling other sectors (agriculture, fishing, craft industries, cultural and patrimonial activities ...). Today we are faced with a real disaster and the weeping and wailing of those who accuse the social movement of destroying the economy will not succeed in making us believe that it is the strikers who created the situation that we will describe, and which their trade unions, including the Democratic Workers' Confederation of Martinique (CDMT), have unceasingly combated.

At Sainte Anne, in the south of the island, the Caritan site is being sold in separate lots, bungalow by bungalow; the site is being degraded because the joint owners do not have the means of paying for good maintenance or for a capable trustee. There are few tourists in what remains of the hotel, where service is poor and which will soon close. Still in Sainte Anne, Anchorage has just gone into receivership and is already being sold bit by bit; there will be fewer tourists because there is no one to welcome them to a place that is next to one of the most beautiful beaches in the country. We

could be delighted about this and say that we will be able to better protect the environment. That will not be the case, because this splitting up among joint owners who are eager to make a return on their investment will encourage the building of concrete structures on the site and especially the addition of shacks so as to pack in more holiday makers. We can say good-bye to well cut lawns, massive flower beds, shaded hedges, country paths, landscaped car parks! Here come asphalt car parks, fences that block your view, tiled patios, houses fitted up with barbed wire and noisy alarms to keep out intruders and thieves! The whole set-up will look like Alcatraz!

At Trois Ilets, the former Méridien Hotel, which had hosted the meeting between Giscard and Ford in 1976, became, after many disappointing experiences, the Kalenda. On the pretext of repairing it the new owners cynically demolished the principal structure and made, in a Machiavelian fashion, the whole complex unusable. If nobody does anything to stop them, they, will transform the site into luxury residences, with direct access to the beach and with an idyllic view over the bay of Fort-de-France. It is a well thought out plan, since it involves the prolongation of the highly profitable operation carried out on the Pointe de Lazaret, a historic military patrimony. We can see today that allowing it to fall into disrepair was quite intentional, in order to facilitate selling it off to greedy and thoroughly unprincipled promoters.

At Saint Marie, the Primerève Hotel, renamed in 2003 Domaine de Sainte Marie, which was supposed to redynamise the North-Atlantic, has begun the transformation of its rooms into tourist residences, with of course a “social plan”: a circumlocution which translates as lay-offs.

At Basse-Pointe, the Leyritz residence is closed and is falling into ruins. Its superb park has been left neglected and infested by weeds. It is an essential element of the architectural heritage of our Martinique. It was the other prestigious place where the Giscard-Ford meeting took place. It was the scene of an excellent jazz festival (“Jazz at the Plantation”) which only lasted for three or four seasons, with the participation of Dee Dee Bridgewater and other major artists from the United States and the Caribbean. There too, there are some people who would like to engage in property speculation.

To turn to Carbet and other places, is it worth going into details about the case of Marouba, which was saved from being dismantled by a long and vigorous trade-union struggle, not without sacrifices. What can we say about the way the Lido was chopped up, the Anse Collat transformed temporarily (?) into a health care centre, about the Victoria at the Didier crossroads, demolished and replaced by luxury apartments, about the Vieux Moulin which was replaced by a residential blockhouse? And the list is not complete. Without wanting to be a Cassandra, there are rumours that there will soon be redundancies in some important structures, such as for example Framissima Batelière.

There were trade-union protests and struggles in opposition to the operations of property speculation related to the various laws on tax exemption, against the laying off of hundreds of people, against the auctioning off of Martinique by property sharks, against the destruction of our ecological, architectural, historical and military heritage. The CDMT sent round a petition for the defence of employment in the hotel trade. The confederation demanded that those in charge of local and regional government (communes, regroupments of communes, the department and the region) take the problem in hand. The impression we had at the beginning of the year 2009 was that nothing about this situation was going to change. Hope came from the mobilizations that took place, first of all in Guyana at the end of November 2008, then in Guadeloupe, with the initiative taken in December to create the LKP. Would the working classes of the Antilles and Guyana move on to offensive struggles?

Today and tomorrow

Tens of thousands of the people of Martinique who have occupied the streets for over a month already will not simply leave a free hand to those opposite (the employers and the government) so that they can continue their “pwofitasyon”(exploitation) just as before.

The mobilization of Saturday March 7, 33 days after the beginning of the conflict, which was massive and determined, was an answer to the provocation of the day before, when employers sought to test the capacity of the population to resist their attacks. Tractors, trucks and trailers cannot overcome a population. They had some mercenaries who were paid well to drive the tractors while they paraded in their four by fours, but it was the other side (the members of the Collective and the population, all together) that had the numbers and they protected the city. This mobilization of Saturday March 7 was also an affirmation that thousands of Martinique workers were demanding that the movement lead to concrete results.

After a month of hard sacrifices, of privations and of mobilization, the objectives have not entirely been attained or guaranteed on wages, on jobs, on minimum social benefits, in spite of the serious progress that has been made. Those opposite will have to understand clearly that even if the movement decides to change form, it will not change its objectives, except in the direction of a deepening, even of a hardening.

This certainty is the first and the greatest victory of the movement. The mobilized people has become very conscious of its strength. It has massively developed its understanding of society, of what is at stake, of its conflicts, of the forces that are present and the work that has to be done to get the country out of the rut it is in and the weakest out of dire poverty.

As we approach the conclusion of the first phase of the struggle, while the balance sheet is acceptable, it must be stated frankly that the struggle continues and even that in certain respects it is only beginning.

Beyond trade-union demands

The emergence of the LKP and the February 5 Collective gave fresh hope to all those who wanted their struggles to lead to significant retreats by the employers and the colonial government. It has been demonstrated that only popular struggles make things move, make the employers retreat, block the government's attacks. By doing this, this movement is embracing more than trade-union demands. It is bearing witness to all the popular aspirations, all the aspirations of society.

The affirmation of our dignity and our pride in our identity in the face of the racist contempt of some of the more retarded representatives of the béké caste.

The aspiration for a Martinique in which ecological development would have an essential place.

The affirmation of the combat for equality between men and women, to build a Martinique without sexist oppression.

The attachment to Martinican cultural creation, through valorising for the people its music, its painting, its traditional arts, its Creole language.

All of that explains this massive presence of young people, women, artists, ecological activists, academics. All of that explains the very strong adhesion of the Martinican people to this movement. All of that explains the multiplicity of groups which, after having marched in the morning,

congregate all afternoon and until late in the evening and the night around the Prefecture, at the Trade Union House, in the car park and in front of the hall of the Atrium to discuss, play and dance the bèlè, hold forums, give their points of view, approving or critical, on the discussions and negotiations in progress. This is a public that is new, young and female. Blasé and over-hasty observers of Martinican society could not suspect that it would erupt onto the social scene and would thus engage in “politics” in the real sense of the term, i.e. would take it upon itself to give its opinion, but especially to act on the course of events by taking its destiny in its own hands.

It is clear that a new generation has entered the arena and is serving its apprenticeship.

Maintain our course

This popular resistance, which has lasted for more than a month, is a considerable achievement. It will be necessary to maintain our course on the demands of the movement, while adapting them to the relationship of forces, to the way the negotiations develop, to the situation on the 34th day of the strike. It is clear that it is becoming possible to obtain a reduction of prices on a large number of the products that are necessary for the satisfaction of the needs of the mass of the population and to win a significant increase in the income (wages, pensions, minimum social benefits) of the popular masses and above all of the most underprivileged.

It is possible to win against the capitalists and the state, and that is what is making them furious. The people has started to move. It has said “enough”!

As we approach the conclusion of the first phase of the struggle, while the balance sheet is considered to be acceptable, strikers and demonstrators are convinced that the struggle continues and even that in certain respects it is only beginning. The new phase, which will be one of vigilance for the implementation of the agreements, of opposition to repression, will have to count just as much on the mobilization of the activists.

But it is already necessary to look further and to prepare to “redistribute the cards”.

Because for things to really change, it is not a question of replacing béké profiteers by Black profiteers! “It is necessary to knock sense into the heads of all these Niggers who believe that making the revolution consists of taking the place of the White, and of playing the White in place of the White”. Thus spoke Aimé Césaire, through the mouth of King Christophe [2].

Yes, the moment has come to work for a real social transformation which puts the interests of the mass of the population above capitalist logic.

Impose a new political set-up

The popular movement is a powerful challenge to all the official political programmes. The struggle must serve to make a clean sweep of the past and start again.

The people has spoken, but it is only a small beginning. Many plans have been made “for the people”, but not by the people, nor even with the people. We have seen how ill at ease have been those elected representatives who had not taken the measure of the extent of popular anger and who wanted after a few days to get everyone to go back home. This struggle must serve to radically change the relationship between the elected representatives and the people, to change the conception of what an elected representative should be, to change the conception of how democracy should operate.

A new mystification has been announced: Sarkozy's extraordinary conference. However what is urgent is to organise an extraordinary conference of the people, of its authentic organizations, without the supervision of the dominant economic forces (békés and others), without paternalist sponsorship by anyone.

It is up to the workers' and people's organizations to implement such a perspective, which will be nothing other than the political expression of the social uprising of today. To give such a prolongation to the strike action of thousands and thousands of ordinary people is to be faithful to the spirit of what is happening at this moment.

The GRS in the movement

The GRS, whose members have been fighting daily for decades for the people to stand up as they are doing today, is very much at home in this social insurrection and is playing a full part in it. Those of our members who have responsible positions in the trade unions and in the women's movement are very involved in the Collective.

As of January 21, the GRS held a public meeting with a hundred participants on the question of the change of status [3] and issued a call for solidarity with the general strike movement that had been launched the day before by the LKP in Guadeloupe.

On January 25, that is 5 days after the beginning of the strike in Guadeloupe, the GRS addressed a letter to all the left and anti-colonialist organizations of Martinique, proposing a united initiative in solidarity with the struggle of the people of Guadeloupe.

On February 2, eleven organizations answered the call and held a rally, with a public meeting on the Place Abbé Gregoire des Terres Sainville. They greeted the arrival of an activist of the LKP as well as messages from the comrades of the New Anti-capitalist Party of the island of Reunion and from Olivier Besancenot (who was still at that time spokesperson of the LCR).

From February 5 onwards, the GRS has produced practically every day a leaflet analysing the course of events, as well as two issues of its newspaper.

On February 13, there was a public meeting of the GRS on the social situation in Guadeloupe on the 25th day of the strike there and the 8th day of the strike in Martinique. At the same time, the Collective was holding its first public meeting, so we decided to cut our own meeting short and invite people to go to it.

On February 21, , Olivier Besancenot came to Martinique at the invitation of the GRS. He was interviewed by Télé Otonom Mawon, as was Alex Lollia from Guadeloupe. He took part in the meeting of the Collective in François.

On February 22, there was a big meeting of the GRS, with 1500 participants in the Aimé Césaire floral park in Fort-de-France, with the participation of the February 5 Collective and of Olivier Besancenot. Later Olivier Besancenot addressed a large crowd of strikers at the Trade Union House.

On February 26 the GRS launched an appeal "to lay the bases for a new party of anti-colonialist, anti-capitalist, feminist, ecologist, internationalist and democratic forces, who really want to act for a radical transformation of society". The appeal declared: "This party must be born from the coming together, from the fusion of all those who, even though they do not have the same origins and ideological traditions, share solid common values (as outlined above) and are in agreement on the great tasks to be achieved in the new period that is opening up. Yes, we are candidates for building, with those who are willing to do it, this essential political instrument".

In any case, after February 2009, nothing will ever be the same again in the Antilles!

Fort de France, March 9, 2009.

Shortly after this article was written, on March 11, the negotiations between the February 5 Collective and representatives of the Martinique employers were concluded by an agreement which represented a victory for the Collective and for the workers and people of Martinique on the key demands concerning reductions in the prices of essential products and increases for those on low incomes.

P.S.

* Translation from the French by International Viewpoint.

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Footnotes

[1] “Béké” is the popular (and pejorative) name for the members of the White minority in Martinique, numbering about 3,000 (in a population of over 400,000). These descendants of slave-owners still control much of the economy of the island.

[2] Aime Cesaire (1913-2008) was a Martinican poet, author and political figure. He played a key role in the affirmation of an Afro-Martinican identity and was an influence on Frantz Fanon, whose teacher he was.

[3] From Martinique’s situation as an “overseas department” of the French Republic.