

Petition

Appeal for the immediate release of USTKE trade unionists in Kanaky

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By Collectif Solidarité Kanaky, translation and introduction for *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* by Annolies Truman.

August 12, 2009 — On August 6, a general strike in Kanaky (or the French overseas territory of New Caledonia) was called off after an accord between the trade union confederation USTKE (Federation of Unions of Kanak Workers and the Exploited) and Air Caledonia was finally signed by the airline.

The signing of the accord, which had been negotiated on June 11, put an end to 10 days of demonstrations, roadblocks and violent confrontations with police, motivated as much by a desire for independence and decolonisation, as by the issue of industrial justice.

The conflict originated with the unfair dismissal of an Air Caledonia employee in March for “betraying commercial confidentiality” for telling her mother that her father had taken a flight with his mistress.

It accelerated on May 28 with the arrest of twenty-eight unionists at a press conference at Noumea Airport during a day of action called by USTKE to support the striking airline workers. The mobile police and the National Police Intervention Group intervened, pushing the demonstrators onto the tarmac. Twenty-eight of them took refuge in an empty plane to protect themselves against a stream of tear gas. Despite the fact that there were no planes in circulation at the time and it was the police action which disrupted the demonstration, the twenty-eight were charged with “hindering the flight of an aircraft”.

Tensions reached a new high on June 29 when the USTKE unionists were given prison sentences. According to USTKE, the judgement targeted the leadership of the union, particularly the president, Gérard Jodar, and the general secretary of the construction union, Michel Safoka, both now serving one year prison sentences.

With the airline dragging its feet on signing the accord, USTKE launched a call for a general strike on July 27. Workers and residents responded with numerous actions, growing in intensity. On August 5 in the working class suburb of Montravel, 1500 youths threw stones at a truck convoy coming from Noumea’s port with a police escort, forcing it to turn back. In the Saint Louis tribal area, a policeman was shot in the thigh during a confrontation between youth and the police.

The conflict has drawn on deep discontent at the social inequalities between indigenous Kanaks and neighbouring Islanders on the one hand, and French settlers and residents on the other. According

to the August 7 France 2 Telejournal, a quarter of the population in Kanaky is living below the poverty threshold, 4 times more than on the French mainland. Many young people are unemployed. A young Kanak interviewed complained that those who come from Europe get a job within two to three months, whereas many locals, especially youth, are unemployed.

Since USTKE formed the political party Parti Travailleiste (PT, Kanaky Labour Party), it has been criticising the co-option of the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS), the pro-independence liberation of the 1980s. The PT's radical pro-independence stance resonates with the dispossessed and explains the intensity of recent events.

Fearing a return to the insurrectional climate of the 1980s, the conservative president of the government of the French overseas territory, Philippe Gomes, intervened to persuade Air Caledonia to sign the accord. The recent events in Kanaky mirror the general strikes held earlier in the year in other French overseas territories, such as Guadeloupe and Martinique, where unionists highlighted the inequalities suffered by the islands with regard to France and their barely disguised colonial status, and won significant concessions.

Marie-Pierre Goyetche, USTKE's general secretary, told the French newspaper Liberation on August 7 that the union had suspended the general strike, but would continue to mobilise until its leaders were released. The newspaper Humanite quotes the union as promising "a second phase of mobilisation", with a day of action called for August 22, three days before the appeal hearing of the six imprisoned union leaders.

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By Collectif Solidarité Kanaky

On June 29, 2009, in Noumea, Kanaky [also known by its colonial name of New Caledonia -- Kanaky is a colony of France] twenty-eight members of USTKE (Federation of Unions of Kanak Workers and the Exploited) were given prison sentences. Six of them, whose committal orders were read out in court, are now serving time at Camp Est, a prison which is already overpopulated. The judgement targeted the leadership of the union, particularly the president Gérard Jodar, sentenced to one year's imprisonment, and the general secretary of the construction union, Michel Safoka, also given one year.

The official grounds for the guilty verdict are "hindering the flight of an aircraft". On Thursday May 28, a day of action organised by USTKE, during a protest outside Noumea Airport to support Air Caledonia workers who had been fighting for two months against a wrongful dismissal, mobile police and the GIPN (Intervention Group of the National Police) pushed the unionists onto the tarmac. Twenty-eight of them took refuge in an empty plane to protect themselves against a stream of tear gas. At the time of the police intervention, there were no planes in circulation and it was the very action of the police which disrupted the demonstration.

The verdict is a political verdict against the pro-independence union federation. Those in power are trying to muzzle the territory's foremost organisation for defending the rights of all workers, whether they be Kanak [the Indigenous people of Kanaky] or of other origins. In this far-away colony where there are no industrial tribunals, employees are often forced to lead long conflicts to assert

their rights, faced with arrogant bosses who mock their dignity.

We refuse to accept either the growing criminalisation of union action or unionists' imprisonment.

We demand the immediate release of the USTKE unionists and their leaders.

To sign this petition, please send your name, town, country and organisation (and position if you hold one) to: contact solidaritekanaky.org. Visit Collectif Solidarité Kanaky's website.

<http://solidaritekanaky.org>

contact solidaritekanaky.org

P.S.

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