

# Guadeloupe and Martinique strikes victorious

Inspiring victories for workers in the Caribbean

Friday 20 March 2009, by [LAFORGE François](#) (Date first published: 20 March 2009).

GENERAL STRIKES in two French colonies in the Caribbean have won sweeping victories—and emboldened workers in France and beyond.

On March 4, a 44-day general strike in Guadeloupe ended with an agreement granting 20 immediate demands of workers and making significant progress on dozens more medium- and long-term demands. Workers in Martinique also won their key demands after a 38-day general strike that ended March 14.

The workers of Guadeloupe and Martinique are descended from African slaves, and their strikes were waged over a combination of economic demands, such as increases in the minimum wage and lower prices for consumer goods, as well as political demands, such as equal rights for Creole speakers.

In Guadeloupe, the general strike was led by the LKP (Liyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon, which means League Against Profiteering in Creole), a coalition of 49 unions and other organizations. The Jacques Binot agreement, named after a striker killed by French riot police on February 16, was signed by the LKP, employers, the local government and the French state.

Some provisions of the far-reaching deal include a 200 euro increase for workers making up to 140 percent of the minimum wage of 1,321 euros per month, plus smaller but still significant raises for better-paid workers; a 5 to 10 percent decrease in the prices of 100 basic staples; a 20 percent decrease in the price of student meals and public transportation costs; a moratorium on all foreclosures, evictions and utility cutoffs; a plan to create jobs for 8,000 youth; creation of a 50,000-hectare nature preserve; and a commitment to establish Creole as an official language on par with French.

In a country with 30 percent unemployment and deep poverty, news of the victory led to spontaneous celebrations in the streets.

Predictably, the Beké, the white elite who are descendants of slaveholders and French colonists, and who still dominate the economy of Guadeloupe, were less enthusiastic and immediately sought to wriggle out of various aspects of the signed agreement. According to a press release by the International Liaison Committee, a U.S.-based group that helped build solidarity with the strikes in Guadeloupe and Martinique:

*"The scorn and racism of the colonialist power and of the white ruling class elite on the island, the Beké, comes through loud and clear.*

How dare [member of the French government] Péresse use the term “mob” to describe a valiant, organized, peaceful (despite all the provocations by a 5,000-strong contingent of French Riot Police, the CRS) and disciplined people—the overwhelming majority of whom are Black—who were able to

withstand the hardships of 44 days of a general strike, with the creation of soup kitchens, agricultural procurement committees, self-defense committees, picket lines, cultural committees, and barricades."

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THE SITUATION in Martinique is similar. Strikers there paralyzed economic activity for more than two months by setting up roadblocks. Chanting "Matinik leve" (Creole for "Martinique, stand up"), some 20,000 people filled the streets to celebrate news of the victory.

Similar to the terms in Guadeloupe, the strike won a 200 euro wage increase for low-wage workers, smaller raises for better paid workers, and a 20 percent price decrease for some 400 staples, one month after stores reopen.

Strike leaders in both countries see these agreements as initial victories, and they have declared their willingness to resume actions if they feel that their respective employers and governments are dragging their feet in implementing workers' demands.

Reverberations from these general strikes and the victories they scored are already being felt, both in France and other French colonies.

Workers in France staged their second one-day general strike in seven weeks on Thursday, and the wage hikes and other gains won by their brothers and sisters in the Caribbean emboldened French workers to hold out for more.

Meanwhile, according to the *Bullet*, a Canadian socialist newsletter:

*"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."*

These general strikes—in the Caribbean as well as in France—should serve as an inspiration to workers everywhere who are facing assaults on their wages and living conditions.

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## **P.S.**

\* From Socialist Worker:

<http://socialistworker.org/2009/03/...>