

# French Guiana An analysis of the present stage of the biggest popular movement

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## Guiana: a French colony

### 1. A trading-post economy

Since its colonization in the seventeenth century, the colonial economic structure of Guiana has not varied. It is still characterized today by appropriation of the territory's wealth and a commercial monopoly. The Guianan wealth most exploited by France is the Guiana Space Centre (CSG), which was built in Guiana for its geographical position, the absence of seismic or volcanic risks and the political stability of the colony. For the year 2017 alone, CNES (a state-owned group that operates the CSG) announced an order book of 5.3 billion euros, representing 140 per cent of GDP in Guiana! Concerning trade, the French monopoly is organized by the Martinican *béké* (descendants of settlers and large landowners). Thus, regional trade with Brazil, Surinam and Latin America is non-existent. Everything is imported by containers directly from French ports and everything passes through the distribution groups of the *béké*. [1]

### 2. Endogenous underdevelopment

As in all colonies, the economic domination of the metropolis is accompanied by endogenous underdevelopment. This underdevelopment can be seen in economic, demographic, health and educational statistics. In this country of 250,000 inhabitants the population has doubled every 20 years since the 1950s. This population growth is driven by a high birth-rate accompanied by a largely positive balance of migration. This migratory attraction is linked in particular to the special status of this South American country, which is part of the European Union. To accompany demographic development, the investments of France ought to be massive, but they are not. Thus, the unemployment rate is over 20 per cent, more than 40 per cent of the active population are unemployed, and the poverty rate is over 60 per cent (using French reference calculations).

As for educational statistics, the situation is no better; more than 2,000 children between the ages of 6 and 16 are not in school due to lack of space in the schools. Today it would be necessary to open 500 primary school classes, five in middle schools and ten in high schools to make up for the structural backlog!

In terms of health, the situation is catastrophic; the life expectancy at birth of a man is three years lower than France. A study by the Regional Health Agency showed that because of the structural

problems, between 2005 and 2007 58 per cent of deaths in Guiana would have been avoided in France. The number of beds per inhabitant is almost half that in France. Many medical specialties are not developed on the territory, obliging Guianans to go to France or the Antilles for treatment. Lastly there is no teaching hospital, which makes it impossible to train the necessary skilled medical personnel and leaves Guiana totally dependent on external personnel.

Finally, Guiana is the most violent of the territories administered by France, with the highest per capita homicide rate (42 homicides in 2016). However, Guiana is also the territory that has the highest concentration of French soldiers in the world, one soldier for every 117 inhabitants. On top of the soldiers, we must add the 950 policemen and gendarmes spread over the territory. This makes French Guiana the most militarized French territory!

### **3. The question of land and the indigenous peoples**

Other problems specific to the colonial question are to be found in Guiana, such as the problem of land tenure or the question of indigenous peoples. More than 90 per cent of the territory belongs to the French state. This creates enormous difficulties for any economic or structural development. For example, in order to build a high school, it is absolutely essential to go through a phase of retrocession of the land from the state to the local authorities. Moreover, the Guianan Space Centre, which occupies an area as big as the island of Réunion, has never paid a single cent in local taxes.

For their part, the indigenous peoples are confronted, for constitutional reasons, with France's categorical refusal to recognize their right to collective property and to transfer back to them the territories they have occupied for hundreds of years. To this we can add massive and disturbing waves of suicide among young Amerindians.

These land-related problems alone bring to light the total incompatibility of the status of Guiana as an overseas department.

## **Analysis of the present movement**

It is still difficult to make a detailed and thoroughly pertinent analysis of the situation of this movement, in particular because of the very many relationships of forces that confront it. We will nevertheless try to provide a history of the movement, introducing the main actors

### **1. Pact for the Future**

During his visit to Guiana in 2013, François Hollande pledged to implement a Pact for the Future for French Guiana. The aim of this pact was to reduce structural delays over a period of ten years, in particular by an investment by the state of 600 million euros. However, following negotiations in December 2016, the President of the Territorial Collectivity of Guiana (CTG), Rodolphe Alexandre, refused to sign it. Under the pressure of local employers, the President of the CTG asked for an increased sum of 2 billion euros and the retrocession of 200,000 hectares of territory.

### **2. The relationship of forces of Rodolphe Alexandre, associated with socio-professional sectors and the MEDEF**

The visit of Ségolène Royale on March 15<sup>th</sup> was the signal for the start of the mobilization. Thus, the minister was welcomed by a mobilization of "socio-professionals" (road haulage managers among others), the CGPME (association of small and medium-sized enterprises) and the main employers' association, the MEDEF. For the occasion, they put up a blockade in front of the entrance to the

Territorial Collectivity of Guiana, as well as another one in front of the commercial port, which was due to see the arrival of cement-mixer lorries for the construction of the Ariane 5 launch pad, against the interests of local road haulage firms. In the course of a pathetically staged scene, Ségolène managed to unblock the situation by calling her ex-partner and President, François Hollande. In two minutes everything was settled, the government undertaking to immediately release 150 million euros to close the budget of the CTG and to retrocede 200,000 hectares of land.

### **3. The irruption of the “500 Brothers”**

Everything could have or should have stopped there, but a grain of sand got into the machine, in the form of the collective of “500 brothers against delinquency”. This collective had begun to attract attention a week previously by reacting to a homicide in a neighbourhood of Cayenne. Their specialty is to organize lightning actions, dressed in black and wearing hoods. Although it is extremely difficult, even today, to say who makes up this collective, we can note that its demands are reactionary and partly xenophobic. Indeed, many of their demands go in the direction of having more police, evicting squats and deporting migrants who are supposedly responsible for violence. However, as soon as they had organized themselves they questioned the role of the French state for its inability to restore order. So we have there a nationalist and reactionary discourse.

This collective invited itself to the party. While blocking the entrances of the consulates of Surinam and Haiti to demand that their nationals held in prison in Guiana be deported immediately, they disembarked, hooded, at the CTG in the midst of an international gathering of 25 Caribbean states, the United States and France, the latter represented by Ségolène Royal. They challenged the minister by asking that she take their security demands into account and then withdrew. That same evening, the minister cut short her visit to Guiana and returned to Paris. At the same time, farmers joined the battle by occupying the headquarters of the Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry in Cayenne. Was it due to the surprise effect of the incursion of the “500 brothers”, or in solidarity with their reactionary demands, or even waiting for the official signing of the Pact of the Future? The employers maintained their blockades.

Lastly, it should be noted that in the confrontation with reality on the ground, the spokespersons of the collective of the “500 brothers” had to modify their discourse and their actions. When the blockades were set up, they served as mediators with young people from working-class neighborhoods, who were setting up “unofficial” blockades, in order to avoid confrontation with the police. They even succeeded in getting some of these young people to join the main pickets. Moreover, during the march on March 28<sup>th</sup> and during the negotiations on March 30<sup>th</sup>, they took on the role of a stewarding force by making contact with the forces of repression. It is probably these actions and the fact that they have so far never used violence that makes them so popular.

### **4. The workers get involved in the struggle**

Taking advantage of this climate of defiance, workers threw themselves into the movement. On March 20<sup>th</sup>, workers at EDF (who are in dispute with their local management), ENDEL (who are calling for the reopening of wage negotiations) and the Medical-Surgical Centre of Kourou (who are fighting against the sale of the hospital to private predators) decided to block the launch of the Ariane rocket scheduled for the next day. A blockade was set up in front of the Guianan Space Centre and the population and some elected representatives quickly joined in. ENDEL workers, who are the only ones able to carry the rocket onto its launching range, succeeded, by a strike in which 80 per cent of the workforce participated, in postponing and then cancelling the launch. In the wake of this, negotiations were reopened and they obtained a substantial salary increase. From March 21<sup>st</sup>, the day initially planned for the launch, the town of Kourou was totally blocked; no one was able to get in or out.

## **5. A general upsurge, Guiana is blocked!**

From March 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> the “500 brothers” converged on Kourou. At the meeting of the Extraordinary Council of the trade-union confederation Workers’ Union of Guiana (UTG) on the evening of March 22<sup>nd</sup>, it was decided to support the movement, with a first day of mobilization scheduled for March 24<sup>th</sup>. The UTG structure of education will vote the strike as of March 22 as of March 27<sup>th</sup>. But during the night everything accelerated; the coordinating committee of Kourou, joined by the “500 brothers” and the socio-professionals, decided to block the country. On the morning of March 23<sup>rd</sup>, all roads were closed by roadblocks. Blockades were also established in front of the Prefecture and on the road leading to the airport. The Rectorate quickly announced the closure of all school buildings for security reasons and the following day the students and the teachers’ unions in their turn put up a blockade in front of the Rectorate.

## **6. The role of Radio Pèyi as a vehicle for mobilization**

As soon as the blockades were set up, Radio Pèyi (belonging to the RTL group) became the voice of the mobilization. All their programmes were interrupted and the radio broadcasts covered the social movement 24 hours a day. Correspondents were in place on each blockade; the evolution of the social situation was reported in real time; all the listeners were able to speak out on air, all day long; political personalities, especially independents, were invited to speak, sometimes for several hours non-stop. Radio Pèyi became “Radio Barricade” and allowed the entire population to get a feeling of the movement. Besides, all the blockades were joined by thousands of anonymous people who spent the day there, the evening, even the night. As from March 24<sup>th</sup> there were approximately 4,000 people every night on the blockades of Suzini and Crique Fouillé.

## **7. The march of the elected representatives**

On March 24<sup>th</sup>, all the Guianan elected representatives came together to march behind the Guianan flag from the town centre of Kourou to the picket at the Guiana Space Centre. In the overseas territories, elected representatives are widely considered to play the role of mediators between the French state and the population. This role was moreover entirely assumed by the parliamentarians (two deputies and two senators) who tried in vain to open negotiations between the collective Pou Lagwiyan Dékolé (“For Guiana taking off”) and the inter-ministerial delegation. The march of the elected representatives wearing the tricolour scarf and holding the Guianan flag as a banner was an extremely strong symbolic moment. In fact, this flag flies over hardly any town halls, no more, moreover, than that of the CTG. Besides, let us not forget that this movement was born thanks to the region’s president in spite of himself, when, by mobilizing his political support, he tried to come out of the situation with a good image by asking for the renegotiation of an improved Pact for a Better Future!

## **8. The intervention of the CTG and the general strike**

On March 25<sup>th</sup>, during the UTG National Council, 37 unions present voted for an unlimited general strike as from March 27<sup>th</sup>. The mobilization then moved on to another stage. Although the economic blockades were not necessarily superior to what already existed (almost the entire economy was at a standstill as early as March 24<sup>th</sup>), the internal relationship of forces in the mobilization shifted, social demands becoming paramount over ones based on security. However, the historical trade-union confederation of Guiana has been in internal crisis for several years and it is difficult to know if it has today a real possibility of organizing an economic blockade.

## **9. The setting up of Pou Lagwiyan Dékolé and the coming together of popular demands**

As of March 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, the challenge was to be able to unify all the different forms of discontent in a common platform of demands. An intense process of negotiation began from March 23<sup>rd</sup>, with a first meeting of the coordinating committee. Thus 19 collectives, trade-union and professional organizations came together in the Pou Lagwiyann Dékolé Committee. Seven themes of demands were chosen: education, health, insecurity, land, energy, the economy and indigenous peoples. In the space of four days, a first platform of demands was drawn up, after consultation with all the parties concerned. At the same time, many popular demands were emerging, and other collectives were forming and joining the committee. As of March 28<sup>th</sup>, 39 collectives, trade unions and professional organizations were party to Pou Lagwiyann Dékolé. Popular discontent was such that it was difficult to complete the list of grievances before the ministers arrived on March 29<sup>th</sup>.

## **10. The inter-ministerial delegation and the refusal of negotiations**

The reaction of the French state was in line with the colonial experience of France. As early as March 25<sup>th</sup>, an inter-ministerial delegation composed of high-ranking officials (a prefect, a general...) who had previously occupied positions in Guiana landed. At a meeting on the night of March 24<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup>, a common position of Pou Lagwiyann Dékolé was found: there would be no meeting outside the committee with this delegation, and since this delegation did not include any minister, there would be no meeting with it. This radical position succeeded in surviving the intense work of sabotage being attempted by the inter-ministerial delegation. No one, apart from a farming union, met officially with this delegation. For their part, the ministers conducted a campaign of disinformation and contempt for the mobilization. Initially, they excluded any negotiation in Guiana and demanded the lifting of the blockades. The French media depicted the movement as being violent in order to undermine the solidarity of the population. However, since the beginning of the movement an incredible calm accompanied the mobilization. Only the use of teargas by the security forces against elected representatives on the CSG blockade at the very beginning of the movement, as well as some fires in rubbish bins during the first night of blockading are to be regretted!

## **11. The march on March 28<sup>th</sup> and the unity of a country**

The march organized on March 28<sup>th</sup> was a test of support for the movement. The mobilization of the population was exceptional. As the prefecture itself had to recognize, these were the “biggest demonstrations that had ever been organized on the territory”. More than 20,000 people gathered in Cayenne and 5,000 in Saint Laurent du Maroni. The most striking feature of these demonstrations was that all the cultural communities of Guiana were represented, marching together for the first time. Behind the Amerindians who opened the march, there were hundreds of Guianan flags, followed by Brazilian, Haitian and Dominican flags... A journalist of Radio Pèyi rightly asserted that a “nation was born” on March 28<sup>th</sup>. By its own example, this mobilization alone has shattered terrible prejudices that everyone had about the others. Even the “500 brothers” had to moderate what they said, now announcing that “we are all Guianan (Brazilians, Haitians, Surinamese, Guianan...)”. The other characteristic of this mobilization is the incredible determination that emerged from it. Not a moment passed without slogans: “Nou Gon ke sa” (“We can’t take it any more”) “Lagwiyann levee” (“Rise up, Guiana”) and speeches for several hours in front of the prefecture.

## **12. The arrival of ministers and attempts to dislocate the movement.**

At the end of the demonstration, Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve announced that he was sending the Ministers of Overseas Territories and the Interior to Guiana on the following day, March 29<sup>th</sup>. The incredible popular mobilization had forced the government to act very quickly to try to find a way out of this movement. The dispatch of the ministers was accompanied by promises of investment of up to 4 billion euros in less than 10 years. After the opening of negotiations on March 30<sup>th</sup>, the

relationship of forces in favour of the Committee was intense. Thus, with the mobilization of the population in front of the Prefecture, Pou Lagwiyann Dékolé managed to obtain the presence of the media during the first half-hour of negotiations. Soon after, the Overseas Minister, who had been particularly scornful towards the Guianan since the beginning of the movement, went out onto the balcony of the prefecture to make a public apology to the population massed in front of the building. The next 48 hours would be decisive for the movement, the socio-professionals and the employers who, finding themselves, in spite of their intentions, in a movement that was totally beyond their control, were looking for a way to get out as quickly as possible. They already announced that if they were satisfied they would lift the blockades!

Today, March 31<sup>st</sup>, the collective pulled off the exploit of putting the political representatives out of play. Thus, following a meeting between Pou Lagwiyann Dékolé and the elected representatives, it was decided that the elected representatives would not sign any document with the state until the collective had signed it. Moreover, it was stipulated that they would participate in negotiations as experts and not as negotiators. Finally, the collective has just announced that any agreement with the government will have to obtain popular approval before it can be signed. The movement is therefore moving into a second phase, marked by self-organization with a real distrust of the elected representatives.

### **What are the perspectives for this movement?**

As a revolutionary activist, the first concern must be to keep this movement alive after the departure of the ministers. In fact, if the movement survives the visit of these two ministers then other questions will arise. Since the French state is currently in a period of power vacuum, the failure of the negotiations would mean that it will be the next government that will have to solve the Guianan problem. This absence of interlocutor will open up "the field of possibilities" and will put the question of the status of Guiana at the centre of what is at stake!

To do this, three themes have to be developed:

- Strengthen the self-organization of the blockades and the pickets. In fact, the blockades must no longer depend on the lorries of the transporters which block the traffic. Committees for the organization of blockades must be organized everywhere and alternative solutions must be thought of (blockades consisting of private vehicles, for example).
- Organize democratic control over the strike. The negotiations must be subject to popular control. General assemblies must be organized on each picket to take decisions on the continuation of the movement. To facilitate this organization, each workplace involved in the struggle could position itself on a blockade to organize this democratic life. Finally, Radio Pèyi could serve as a coordinator thanks to its technical means, so that all the decisions that are taken can converge.
- Highlight the reality of the class struggle and neutralize the bosses. It is almost impossible for the employers to continue this mobilization and it is necessary to prepare already for their withdrawal. Again, actions can be considered with, for example, the blocking of enterprises that seek to abandon the movement. This attempt by the bosses to withdraw must also be an opportunity to highlight the reality of the class struggle, which is illustrated by the opposition between different class interests.

Finally, we must think about the means that we will use to impose the demands concerning status as an essential element of this movement. Should we insist on demands that are incompatible with the status of an overseas department, such as demands concerning land or those of the indigenous peoples, or should we focus rather on the more political problems of institutional governance and

local democracy? This is a subject of debate among the various revolutionary activists involved in the movement.

**Adrien Guilleau**

Cayenne, March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2017

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### **A balance of power with the State**

Supported by all the mobilized population, the collective *Pou Lagwi Yann dékolé* refused on 2 April the promise of a billion euros from the French government. "One billion proposed over 10 years, it is only 100 million per year (...). We are calm because the 2.5 billion is a fair medium, a justice, compared to what needs to be done to ensure that Guiana emerges from this major crisis," said Davy Rimane, UTG lighting and one of the spokespersons of the collective. And he added: "The debt to suppliers of the Cayenne hospital is 39 million euros, but the state puts 20 million on the table." The same observation for education. The government also refuses the creation of a special status for Guiana. "The limits of the current administrative organization still do not allow for the expected efficiency in the implementation of public policies both local and national," justifies the collective. The community, composed of an assembly, an executive council and specific councils, could make decisions in the areas of spatial planning, environmental management, local taxation or primary education.

On 3 April, Bernard Cazeneuve (Prime Minister) called the collective's request "unrealistic". "The state has decided to leave us the crumbs and this time we have been told no. We are entering into a power struggle with the State, the state must realize that the Guyanese people do not demobilize," comments the collective.

The general strike continues. On April 3, Guiana experienced a dead city day at the call of the collective. On 4 April, in the village Saramaca de Kourou - "where the rocket takes off, but we have no light", as one resident summarized - tens of thousands of Guianans should gather. Collective representatives have warned, the Ariane rocket will remain on the ground as long as Guiana does not take off.

In Guiana, a whole population is mobilized against the concrete policy of capital. Solidarity!

(Jan Malewski, 3 April, 2017)

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**P.S.**

\* Translation IVP. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org>

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**Footnotes**

[1] The three former colonies known as the Guianas are now Suriname (Dutch Guiana), Guyana (British Guiana), and Guiana for the French colony and now overseas department of France, the residents are known as Guianans. Martinican, from Martinique of one the French-speaking islands in the West Indies (Antilles in French), and also a French department.