

For a Free Guiana - The Postwar French Union and the Present Struggle

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French Guiana has taken to the streets to protest decades of underinvestment and neglect.

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In March, French Guyanese unions and associations organized a collective called Pou La Gwiyan dékolé, which means “for the separation of Guiana” in Guyanese Creole. Since then, the activists have planned demonstrations, blocked roads, shut down cities and maritime trade, organized a general strike, and held marches that brought together a wide swath of the population, from high school students and lawyers to peasants, farmers, and indigenous people.

They presented a forty-page memorandum to ministers that listed their demands, covering health care, education, agriculture, development, and security. They denounced how successive French governments have treated Guiana, citing the area’s dilapidated infrastructure, the lack of security and development, the increasing inequality and discrimination, and the general disrespect. Demonstrators repeatedly shouted “Determined!” and “*Nou bon ké sa*” (“We have had enough!”). They carried the Guyanese flag and sang for their country: Guiana.

The collective’s success has been remarkable. The roadblocks, sit-ins, marches, and citywide shutdown in the capital Cayenne drew thousands of people, remaining entirely peaceful. Spokespeople for the collective kept the crowd informed during talks with the government. On April 2, they rejected the government’s offer to disburse a little more than €1 billion; the following day, the prime minister declared the collective’s demand for €2.5 billion was “unrealistic.”

Pou La Gwiyan dékolé vowed to continue, and on April 4, thousands walked toward Kourou, the European aerospace base. They organized a sit-in at the entrance, and thirty people — including the elected officials the collective had previously excluded — occupied the site. The next day, the government reiterated its €1.086 billion offer.

The occupation ended in the wake of the state’s disappointing response. Activists expressed their frustration, denounced the continued lack of respect from the government, and spoke of Guyanese unity and of hardening the movement. On Thursday, the collective maintained its roadblocks and began discussing new strategies.

In May, France will elect a new president, and a new parliament will come in June. But Pou La Gwiyan dékolé refuses to be held hostage by French politics. At every roadblock, in every march and demonstration, they shout what has become their motto: “Determined!”

The movement has raised familiar questions: what kind of republic claims the motto “Liberty,

Equality, Fraternity” while still ruling over so many former colonies? What kind of imperial power is now being deployed? Many politicians in continental France repeat the cliché that these areas are “forgotten territory,” a phrase that implies amnesia. Instead, shouldn’t we discuss the political choices that have created both forgetfulness and dependency?

When news from one of France’s thirteen inhabited overseas territories reaches Paris, the French media responds with surprise, the public with ignorance, and the politicians with tired old promises to better remember these regions. These responses have played essential roles in reconfiguring the French republican space, turning what’s left of the French empire into a mutilated map of imperial control.

The Guyanese resistance movement is developing new strategies for winning self-determination. Whether or not they succeed in bringing much-needed democracy and development to Guiana remains to be seen, but their struggle can help us understand how France’s colonial history continues to shape the lives of its subjects all over the world.

The Postwar French Union

Despite the fact that Paris still governs territories in the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean, and South America, people living in continental France share the conviction that, after 1962, their country turned its back on any form of colonialism. The overseas territories have disappeared from consciousness, and this veil of ignorance has stopped the French from wondering why so many supposedly decolonized areas still live under imperial rule.

Remembering the existence of these regions triggers one of two responses. Some claim they have “love and undying affection” for the territories and their populations, while others turn to the familiar discourse of dependency, describing their fellow citizens as lazy, bitter, inconsequential, and unrealistic.

On both sides, facts remain vague. Activists must always repeat geographical, social, and political information; French citizens seem incapable of accumulating this knowledge, no matter how many times they hear it. Their ignorance, however, doesn’t really matter: truth can always be approximated when overseas societies are concerned.

To understand the Guyanese collective’s discontent, we must rapidly retrace the French state’s reconfiguration during the twentieth century. After World War II — as racism was universally condemned, decolonization movements were growing, and the very nature of capital was transforming — France revised its official vocabulary, renounced its imperial practices, and suggested partnership — rather than rule — to its former colonies. They called the new configuration the French Union, linking continental France — now called the “Hexagon” — to its former colonies as equal partners, with Paris as the guide.

Paris recognized that it needed its colonies. Their resources would be essential for postwar reconstruction, and their association maintained France’s status as a global power. While the state invested money in roads, ports, and other infrastructure, it did little to end dependence, asymmetrical power, or racism. In France’s first postwar program of development (1947–1954), it claimed that development was impossible in parts of its old empire: Réunion, Guadeloupe, Guiana, and Martinique (which became departments in 1946), Mayotte, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia. To make sure this analysis came true, the state implemented two policies: emigration and birth control.

During the 1950s, France implemented these politics of “impossible development.” It destroyed local industry, increasing unemployment and dependency. Thousands of young people went to France every year to work in factories or low-level public-sector jobs where they confronted metropolitan forms of discrimination. At home, black and poor women underwent forced abortion, sterilization, and contraception [1].

The state repressed anticolonial and labor movements; the French police, army, and private militias beat, arrested, and murdered resistance leaders. The state systematically rejected, repressed, and condemned demands for autonomy or independence and subdued non-European languages, religions, and cultures. Electoral fraud guaranteed loyal conservatives stayed in power. France relentlessly put forward two messages: “The future is elsewhere” and “There is no alternative to dependency.”

At the end of the 1950s, France had preserved its union, but the war in Algeria demanded a second reconfiguration of the French Republic. Now, France would be fully European — just the “Hexagon” — and leave its colonialism in the past.

Nevertheless, not a year passed without riots, strikes, and demonstrations against censorship and fraud. People rose up in Martinique in 1959, on Reunion Island in 1962, 1991, and 2012, in Gadeloupe in 1967, and in New Caledonia in 1988, proving that pacification never fully succeeded. The government programs launched in response to these struggles, intended to weaken inequality and assuage discontent, did not produce economic development. Instead, they aimed at maintaining French control and giving capital new places to exploit.

By 1999, the rate of poverty in all overseas territories was higher than in any French region. Almost half of young people under twenty-five had no diploma (compared to a fifth in France); in Guiana, 50 percent of the population left school at the primary level. In Martinique, the percent of children living under the poverty level is almost double that of France’s (13 percent to 8 percent respectively), while in Guiana, 32 percent — four times the number in the Hexagon — could not afford their basic needs.

Despite this rampant poverty, the cost of living soared, rising between 12 and 30 percent higher than in Paris, at least in part because over 80 percent of produce is imported from France. (Even coffee grown in Brazil must travel to France before coming back to South America). Meanwhile, nuclear tests, the use of pesticides banned in Europe, nickel mining as well as illegal gold mining, and European-style infrastructure ravaged the land and the population’s health.

In all overseas territories, racism divided the population. Jails were overpopulated; black and indigenous populations were kept at the bottom of society. State civil servants — who tend to be white men from France — receive higher salaries than they would in France and pay less in taxes. These local bureaucrats led strikes in the early 1950s to win these colonial privileges: higher salaries, fewer taxes, and other financial perks, like a trip for their family to the “mother country.” They presented their demands as reparation for colonialism, but their benefits have created enduring asymmetry between the local population and middle-class civil servants.

Land ownership is everywhere contentious, the result of centuries of colonialism. Descendants of slaveowners were allowed to keep their land after the abolition of slavery in 1848, when they received it as compensation for the loss of their enslaved property. Freed people had no access to land, and the French state enforced land rights that dispossessed native people, bolstered big landowners’ privileges, and favored white settlers. In Guiana, the state owns 80 percent of the land and pays no property taxes. In 2017, unemployment, dependency, illiteracy, and underdevelopment continue to define overseas territories.

Politicians in the Hexagon regularly complain that overseas territories “cost” the French people. The benefits offered to French multinationals and the fact that public money gets recycled into French business rather than into local industry belies these claims. Even for the French state, continued ownership of these lands pays dividends. The overseas territories ensure its status as a global maritime power, guarantee its presence in all regional institutions, provide land for military bases, satellite surveillance, and scientific research, and open new markets for French products.

Put simply, far from forgetting about its overseas territories, the French state has conceived its spatial configuration and economy with them in mind. Paris has worked to maintain dependency while granting some rights of deliberation and decision to the local population after intense struggle. This limited local power has put local councils in charge of development, freeing continental France from any responsibility.

Colonial racism persists, but the state is not the sole culprit. The French left and progressive movements have not successfully decolonized. In 1956, Aimé Césaire resigned from the French Communist Party, citing the fact that colonial racism inevitably contaminates the colonizing society with a belief in European superiority, making them unable to understand the demands of colonized peoples. His insight is still relevant.

Further, the state’s policies could not have been implemented without local proponents, who brandished their status as European citizens and those associated privileges against their indigenous neighbors. Not just civil servants, this group also includes social workers, teachers, political leaders, and artists.

More recently, xenophobia has increased in the overseas territories. In Mayotte, Reunion, the Antilles, and in Guiana, locals associate new migrants with increased criminality, with taking advantage of social benefits and not working, with being not “like us.” In Mayotte, “foreigners” — often fellow Comorians — are expelled in greater numbers than in France; Mahorais have even organized the destruction of their homes. In other words, the local fabrication of consent cannot be ignored. In Guiana, while some members of the Pou La Gwiann dékolé collective have asked for harder sentences and even the expulsion of foreign prisoners, they have never denounced or attacked migrants.

Guiana the World

The Guyanese movement represents a historical moment. The collective’s capacity to mobilize, organize, and react to developing events has been impressive. By refusing to include elected officials, by communicating the results of negotiations to the crowd, by allowing media into most of their meetings, and by speaking in Guyanese Creole, the Pou La Gwiann dékolé members are inventing a new form of deliberation and intervention.

The collective includes a number of indigenous peoples and Bushinenge (maroon communities). The group that dominates the collective — the “five hundred brothers” — formed to protest the rising murder rate and demand the expulsion of non-Guyanese prisoners as well as the construction of more jails, tribunals, and police stations. They immediately attracted media attention, as their leaders speak eloquently about the situation in Guiana and have so far maintained unity among the collective’s different groups.

Some of their questions, however, remain not only unanswered but also unasked: What causes criminality? What position does the collective take toward migrants and their Guiana-born children, who are French citizens? What politics of crime prevention do they imagine? More police officers

and more deportations will not erase the seven-hundred-kilometer border with Brazil or the five-hundred-kilometer border with Suriname or the increased poverty capitalism has produced. While there is obviously a “Franco-Guyanese” problem, emancipation must also be imagined with the regional and global context in mind. French overseas territories do not exist in a vacuum nor in exclusive relation to France. Regional and global politics and economics must be considered.

On April 2, members of the collective added a new item to their demands: a discussion of Guiana’s administrative status. With this, the old question reappeared: how should the French republic relate to its overseas territories? Demands for autonomy or independence in the 1960s and 1970s were brutally repressed, and the possibility of imagining another administrative frame was foreclosed. Nevertheless, the subsequent enforcement of cultural hegemony and pacification did not erase the memories of these struggles.

Anticolonial movements in that period made use of iconic fighters — maroons, rebels, and revolutionary artists — whose memories were reactivated through songs and poems. The current movement also relies on revolutionary and vernacular references, such as praising the spirits of two essential elements: earth and water. They also present their struggle in the context of past movements. During the Tuesday March to Kourou, the protesters inaugurated a monument celebrating Martin Luther King Jr (who was assassinated that day in 1968) and in honor of John Carlos and Tommie Smith (who raised their fists at the 1968 Olympic Games).

The media tends to only pay attention to racial discrimination in continental France, but the political, social, and cultural movements in overseas territories, from the early years of decolonization to today, make the French republic’s colonialism visible. Although historically and culturally situated all over the globe, France’s remaining colonies belong to the Global South, all linked to a European state with a long imperial past and a violent history of decolonization.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 4.19.17:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/04/guiana-protests-colonization-france-racism/>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/34518309-le-ventre-des-femmes>