

General strike shakes France's Caribbean colonies - An Introduction

Sunday 1 March 2009, by [FIDLER Richard](#) (Date first published: 26 February 2009).

February 26, 2009 — Life on the Left — The general strike in two French colonies in the Caribbean is firm, with no end in sight. It began in Guadeloupe on January 20 and spread to neighbouring Martinique on February 5 as a protest against the high cost of living and, more generally, the gross inequality between the conditions of the black population and a tiny white elite, descendants of slaveholders, who control most industry and agriculture.

The two islands, each with a population of about 400,000, are officially designated overseas departments of France, and the repression of the strikers by the French government, which has flown in more than a thousand gendarmes from the metropolis, has underscored their colonial oppression.

The islands, along with two other French colonies — French Guiana in South America and La Réunion in the Indian Ocean, both of which are experiencing mounting unrest — have the highest unemployment rates in the European Union, double those of metropolitan France. Also, prices of basic commodities and food staples, most of them imported, are much higher.

The strike in Guadeloupe is led by a coalition of about fifty organisations under the aegis of the General Union of the Workers of Guadeloupe (UGTG): Lihannaj Kont Pwofitasyon (LKP) in the local creole, or the Collective Against Super-exploitation. It has issued a platform of almost 150 demands for higher wages and improved social benefits, lower taxes and prices on necessities and transportation, construction of social housing, environmental decontamination, job training and priority hiring for Guadeloupians, no more layoffs, workers' participation in management, trade union rights including collective agreements and occupational health and safety protection, creation of public services in strategic sectors, land reform and agricultural development, development of media and other facilities in the local language and culture, and investigation and prosecution of those responsible for the massacre of striking construction workers in May 1967, etc. Similar demands have been raised by the strikers in Martinique.

In response to the strike, the French government sent a junior minister, Yves Jégo, to Guadeloupe. He proposed a deal to increase the salaries of 45,000 workers but was suddenly recalled by Paris. He returned a few days later after massive protest demonstrations across the island, but continued government resistance to its demands has forced the LKP to suspend negotiations.

The strike has closed the airport, gas stations, schools, banks, government offices and the tourist industry. It has so far claimed one victim: Jacques Bino, a tax agent and union member who was shot, apparently by provocateurs. Dozens of demonstrators have been arrested, including leaders of the LKP, although most have since been released.

On February 16, the LKP issued a call to the international workers' and democratic movement for solidarity with the strike. But the strike has received little attention in the international media, especially outside France. A notable, albeit modest exception in Canada is the publication of a number of articles on the strike in the current issue of the on-line Quebec publication Presse-toi-à-gauche. I have translated the introductory article, by Dimitris Fasfalis [[1](#)].

The mass trade union movement in France has given only lukewarm support to the strikers in the

country's Caribbean colonies. An initial demonstration of support in Paris was held February 16, at the initiative of some left-wing organisations including the Nouveau parti anticapitaliste (NPA, New Anti-Capitalist Party), a broadly based new party to the left of the French Socialist Party and the Communist Party of France (PCF). It attracted many young protesters from the immigrant communities, many chanting in the Creole language. A second solidarity action has been called for February 28 by Caribbean associations in France, with the support of some union and political organisations. The NPA has sent its leading spokesperson, Olivier Besancenot, to the Caribbean colonies to report firsthand on the mobilisations. [2]

One of the organisations in France expressing the strongest support for the Caribbean strikers is the Sans Papiers, an organisation of immigrants who lack the documentation to become full French citizens. I have translated its message of solidarity, below. It draws special attention to the anti-imperialist, anticolonial implications of the strike movement, as does the PTàG article by Fasfalis.

For further information on this inspiring strike movement — one of the first such mass actions in response to the developing global economic and social crisis — readers may wish to consult some of these links:

Official web site of the General Union of the Workers of Guadeloupe (mainly in Creole and French):

http://ugtg.org/?lang=cpf_gp

2009 French Caribbean general strikes (wikipedia, updated daily):

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_French_Caribbean_general_strikes

Carib Creole One news:

<http://www.caribcreole1.com/breves.php>

Photos of the mass protests and other activities:

<http://photos.ugtg.org/index.php?c...>

And also (ESS addition):

LKP: <http://www.lkp-gwa.org/>

ESSF relevant French section: [Antilles](#)

NPA website (in French) with a number of videos:

<http://www.npa2009.org/>

P.S.

* * From Links - International Journal of Socialist Renewal:

<http://links.org.au/node/924>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF: [Guadeloupe: A people arise](#)

[2] See on ESSF an NPA statement translated into English : [Let's do it, like the workers of Guadeloupe and Martinique!](#) and, in French, reports from Besancenot's trip: [Olivier Besancenot en Guadeloupe - Carnet de bord](#)