

INTERVIEW

Mauritius: “The dynamic of the victorious struggle of the workers in the sugar industry has spread to other areas...”

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Jean Nanga: In terms of the technical structure of capitalism, Mauritius is one of the best-performing economies of Africa; in other words, it's a neoliberal “success story”. In addition, the International Labour (Office ILO) places it in the top 10 African countries as regards the minimum monthly wage. [1]

Ashok Subron: To these indices there should be added one of the most recent which puts Mauritius in 48th position out of 50 in terms of food security. We import 75 per cent of what we consume, given that the post-colonial economy, especially impelled by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) is an export-oriented economy based on cheap labour. The last food crisis (in 2008) led to quite a lot of problems and revealed the extreme vulnerability of this supposed neoliberal “success story”. We need to put things in perspective. There is no minimum wage in Mauritius; I don't know where the ILO gets these data from. The truth is that the sectoral minimum wage in the manufacturing free trade zone, for example, is around €100. The minimum wage of workers in the tourist industry is around €150 to €175. Workers in the sugar industry have a basic salary of a little over €300.

The inequalities have been increasing over the last twenty years. The Gini coefficient numbers are there to prove it. The share of the wealth generated by this economic model that goes to labour is declining. Not to mention the fact that the latest figures show household debt rising. We have here the classic characteristics of neo-liberalism; the wealth produced is cornered by the elites, local and international, the share of wages is decreasing and consumption is increasingly financed by household debt.

When they speak about the Mauritian economic model for Africa, neo-liberal ideologues naturally use it to legitimize the recipes of the IMF in Africa. But they don't talk about the social model. They don't say that education is free in Mauritius, from pre-school to university in. Even transport is free for students. They don't say that access to health care is free and universal. Surgical operations that

cannot be carried out in Mauritius are subsidized by the government. They don't say that all workers are entitled to a pension when they retire. All these measures are not mentioned because they are the antithesis of the precepts of the IMF and the World Bank. The system has developed not because of but despite the IMF and the WB, because the people, especially the workers, have resisted, socially and politically, the dismantling of the social system. If it was not for the existence of the Mauritian social system, which is the result of struggles from the early years of independence onwards, the export-oriented model based on cheap labour could never exist, because with poverty wages people could not survive. The existence of social rights is in a certain sense a form of indirect wages that has made it possible for workers to survive. That is something that the IMF does not tell our fellow Africans. Because everywhere it advocates the dismantling of social rights to education and health and the privatization of these services.

You should also know that Mauritian manufacturing industry benefited, in the mid-1980s, from the arrival of Hong Kong capital which was afraid of the colony being attached to China. That facilitated its expansion in that period. Now the Mauritian free trade zone functions through the employment of migrant workers in conditions that I can without hesitation characterize as semi-slavery.

Coming now to the tourist industry, which has become one of the pillars of the Mauritian economy; it is a very volatile industry, as we can see today with the crisis of the euro zone. The development of tourism, which I would say is uncontrolled, led to the virtual destruction of the fishing community and reduced access to public beaches to 10 per cent of the coastal zone. In this dependence on tourism, Mauritius has even qualitatively transformed the definition of tourism, because now it is the selling-off of the coastline that is under way. Combined with the policy of attracting foreign direct investment, we are seeing at present the setting up of a new form of colonial occupation. Not to mention the ecological damage that results from this type of development.

The most recent emerging economic pillars are the telephone call centres and the "seafood hub" (a pole dedicated to fishing and all the activities that are related to it or induced by it). The call centres - which employ young people under working conditions that are deregulated and therefore antisocial - have helped to design the new labour laws for all workers. And this sector is just as vulnerable as tourism and the free trade zone to the ups and downs of the world economy.

As for the fishing industry, the Republic of Mauritius has one of the biggest maritime zones in the world. Its exclusive economic zone is more than 2.3 million square kilometres, but the country barely has its own fishing vessels. For example, Mauritius signed with the European Union fishing agreements that allow vessels from the EU to fish for tuna in Mauritian waters at 4.56 rupees (€1 = 38 rupees) per kilo, while Mauritians buy a kilo of tuna for about 200 rupees. The country's fishing policy gives this right to European vessels, which fish in subsidized conditions, then sell the tuna to Mauritian processing industries which pay workers a monthly minimum wage of €200 for processing tuna. It should be noted that they are not sold on the local market, but re-exported to European markets. On the other hand, to have access to these markets, Mauritius must sign the Economic Partnership Agreements [2] and sell off social services such as telecommunications and port services. If this is not the worst kind of colonialism, it should be noted that the tuna fishers use the method of sliding seine nets, which causes great ecological damage and is condemned by environmental organizations everywhere in the world.

If we take the question of fishing it is because it is important to understand the Mauritian model: a country which has a serious problem of food security, which has a maritime zone of 2.3 million square kilometres, but which cannot ensure food security through fishing, among other things. The tuna consumed in Mauritius is... imported.

Jean Nanga: What are the main reactions to this situation you have described?

Ashok Subron: Faced with this situation the workers (fishers, small planters) the social movements and the Mauritian Left are organizing today, building on a rich tradition of social, trade-union and political struggles. Mauritius, which has known slavery, the indenture system, colonialism until 1968 (the date of independence), produced a significant labour movement which was at the heart of the fight for universal suffrage and for the independence of the country. It was the formation of the Labour Party in 1936 which created this dynamic of struggle for independence. Mauritius is one of the few African countries to have had a Labour Party in those years. In the 1970s, there was a new outbreak of intense struggles (a general strike, the Mauritian May '68) from which there emerged the Mauritian Militant Movement (MMM), a left organization which at that time advocated the nationalization of the major sectors of the economy and self-management. The failure of the MMM in power, the establishment of policies of structural adjustment, the crises, the politicking alliances, led to a long period of reflux of struggles. Over the last several years we have seen struggles on the rise again, as the structural limits of the so-called Mauritian model have become apparent and the determination of the people not to lose their social gains has been shown. Moreover, the growing inequalities, the arbitrariness of the state, especially the police, produced severe social riots in 1999.

In the trade-union field, there have been several mobilizations of workers against the new labour laws imposed by the Mauritian employers, the IMF and the World Bank and adopted in 2008 by a National Assembly dominated by the Labour Party, which long ago became a centrist formation, subject to the neoliberal logic.

We have also seen over the last few years a revival of struggles in various sectors of the working class (the sugar industry, dockers and public transport workers) which have a rich trade-union tradition. In 2010, there were ongoing strike movements in the sugar industry which signaled the return of trade-union struggles. The determination of the workers in this industry surprised many people, because it was unexpected. The action of the workers even had political echoes and resulted in a first working-class victory against the sugar oligarchy, the historical bourgeoisie resulting from the colonial period. The aim was to challenge the reform of the sugar industry, which was tailored to satisfy the interests of the oligarchy. The sugar industry, which was based on a protectionist and preferential system, began a reform aimed at adjusting to the reduction in the price of sugar and of export quotas which are guaranteed by the ACP-EU agreements. This reform was financed by the compensation paid by the European Union to Mauritius. The oligarchy used the money to finance a massive reduction in the number of permanent workers and then abusively used seasonal labour. The mobilization of permanent workers in 2010 was a response to this diversion of public funds for the implementation of the anti-working class agenda of the oligarchy. The victory of the workers in the sugar industry which took the form, among other things, of an agreement for a 20 per cent wage increase, gave confidence to workers' struggles, to trade-union struggles. In August 2012, there was a fresh confrontation between on the one hand the workers in the sugar industry, their unions - grouped in a single platform, the Joint Negotiating Panel -, and on the other, the sugar oligarchy. After having benefited from the manna of the EU, the bosses of the sugar industry wanted to call into question the principle of national collective bargaining in order to split up the workers. In this confrontation the workers and their unions even defied a court order of the Industrial Relations Tribunal which prohibited any preparation or strike action. More than 98 per cent of the workers voted for the strike, despite the ban on organizing a vote. All the media gave coverage to this industrial conflict for almost a month. Thus, after 2010, 2012 is another year of victory for workers in the sugar industry. In this old sector of the Mauritian economy, which has gone from slavery to neo-liberal globalization, class consciousness is among the highest in the country.

The dynamic of the sugar industry has spread to dockworkers, who have initiated a mobilization against the privatization of the port and the degeneration of the former trade union bureaucracy. Over the last month or two we have been witnessing the resumption of struggles in another key

area, public transport.

We should furthermore evoke the movement of young call-centre workers in 2011, which took the form of an occupation and of two hunger strikes conducted by the youth. The challenge for the Mauritian Left in the trade-union field is to unify the struggles of the traditional sectors with these new sectors.

Jean Nanga: What is involved there is the private sector. What about the public sector and the relationship between workers and unions in the private and public sectors?

Ashok Subron: Workers in the public sector are a major force, because they represent about 25 to 30 per cent of the Mauritian working class. They are the most strongly unionized workers and they dominate the leaderships of the trade-union federations and confederations in Mauritius. This even causes a certain imbalance of the representation of the working class in the trade union leaderships. It is a structural problem. In recent years, the public sector unions have stood back slightly from the major struggles, even though ideologically they are opposed to neoliberal domination and IMF policies. They are vehemently opposed to privatization, but they have not been able to prevent the disguised privatization of certain public services through the system of subcontracting of services [conceding certain services to the private sector, such as meals in public hospitals] and employment. It should be mentioned that workers in the public sector are constitutionally prohibited from being publicly active in political organizations. They may not even be candidates in regional elections. This contributes to a certain form of distancing of these public sector unions with regard to actions carried out by the private sector unions which have quite a political dimension. But the recent resurgence of struggles in the sugar industry has triggered a dynamic of reconciliation between trade unions in the private and the public sectors. For example, on 2 September this year, there was a big rally, following on the victory of the workers in the sugar industry, in which participated trade union leaders of the public sector - health, education and semi-public companies among others. The combativeness of the sugar industry and the port workers has given new life to other sectors, including the public sector. The challenge of the coming years is to consolidate this interaction around united actions and transitional demands.

Jean Nanga: What is the participation of women in this trade-union dynamic?

Ashok Subron: In Mauritius, women have played an important role in struggles. From the time of slavery, at the time of the big strikes in the sugar fields during the colonial period and in the early 1970s, and during the student revolt. There have been in recent years a lot of sporadic street actions which they are the driving force. Against sackings or non-payment of wages, for example. However, for the moment they do not yet participate consistently in the trade unions. The latest figures show that women form more than 35 per cent of the Mauritian working class, public and private sectors combined. In the public sector it is nearly 50 per cent. This place of women is not reflected in trade union structures- nor is it, moreover, in political structures. So in terms of representation of women, Mauritius is quite far from the average in Africa in general and the sub-region of Southern Africa in particular. Moreover, in the trade-union sector, there are structural factors that contribute to this under-representation. In the private sector, in areas where women are more numerous, such as the free trade zone, the call centres, the seafood hub, delivery services and hotels, the rate of unionization is very low. This is one of the big challenges for the trade union Left.

Jean Nanga: Does communalism, which has a significant impact in Mauritian society, have an influence on the unity of the working class, on trade-union unity in general?

Ashok Subron: The communalist or communitarian phenomenon in Mauritius is a legacy of the history of the way the country was populated, from the time of slavery, the indenture system and

colonization: the Mauritian bourgeoisie consisted originally of French settlers, the slaves were mostly from the mainland and the workers involved in the sugarcane fields (coolies) mainly came from India, after the abolition of slavery (in 1835). Which means that the struggle of the oppressed in Mauritius has been always been closely linked to the fight against ethnic divisions. It is this articulation that was the founding base of the great movements of emancipation of the 1930s and 40s and the 1970s... It was the unification of the working class which contributed to and promoted the big class struggles in the 1930s and 1940s. During the process of independence in the 1950s and 1960s, the traditional bourgeoisie and the other emerging elites distilled communalist consciousness in their race for control of political and economic power. This provoked serious ethnic conflicts on the eve of independence, causing many deaths. These tragic events led to a new awakening of the people, especially of the working class, and gave birth to the MMM with its founding slogan: "Class struggle, not the struggle between races". As in the 1930s and 1940s, the trade-union struggles that followed consolidated workers' unity, the unity of the working class and the people. But the degeneration, once in power, of the MMM - which embodied anti-communalism - encouraged in the 1980s a new rise in communalist consciousness. Today the renewed struggles in the above-mentioned sectors, combined with the action of the ecosocialist Left is in the process of recreating the conditions that will make it possible for communalist consciousness to be supplanted by class consciousness and civic consciousness.

Jean Nanga: Where is the Mauritian Left today?

Ashok Subron: The Mauritian Left at present consists of three extra-parliamentary anti-capitalist organizations, which have considerable influence in the country. These are Lalit, the May First Movement, led by Jack Bizlal, and Rezistans ek Alternativ. Lalit is the result of a split in the MMM in the 1980s, the May First Movement is a fusion between the OMT/FNAS (linked to the Fourth International) and other currents known as nationalist, while Resistanz ek Alternativ, of which I am a member, and which defines itself as ecosocialist left, is the result of a split from Lalit in 2004. The action initiated by Rezistans ek Alternativ during the 2005 elections, challenging the communalist element in the electoral system, generated a significant dynamic of popular support. This action was broadened out at the last elections in 2010, which saw a unification of the forces of the anti-capitalist left, including Resistans ek Alternativ and the May First Movement, along with left trade unionists, activists of social movements, fishermen, small planters, environmentalist activists, women's movements, and particularly youth movements. A platform which took the name of Platform for a New Constitution and a New Republic came out of this initiative.

It should be noted that more than 16 per cent of the candidates in the last elections refused the ethnic classification imposed by the Constitution. The rejection of their candidacies by the election commission led to a protest movement which added to the initiative of Rezistans ek Alternativ in 2005. Parallel to the actions of civil disobedience initiated by Resistanz ek Alternativ, there were legal actions in international bodies to challenge this obligation for candidates to give an ethnic classification of themselves. This led in September 2012 to a great victory of the movement initiated by Rezistans ek Alternativ in 2005: the United Nations Human Rights Committee said that the obligation of the communalist or ethnic classification of candidates is a violation of article 25 of the Civil and Political Pact to which Mauritius is a signatory. The state of Mauritius now has until March 2013 to comply. In other words, it must change the Constitution. The action of Rezistans ek Alternativ and the unitary platform which emerged in 2010 opens a historic breach and creates the necessary conditions for greater post-independence constitutional changes in the Republic of Mauritius. It is in this perspective that for the 2010 platform the elimination of the element of the ethnic element in the draft of a new constitution should be articulated with the addition of new rights and freedoms, the principle of participatory democracy, the socialization of the economy, the protection of public goods, the protection of common goods, such as agricultural land, biodiversity

and marine resources, as well as the law of nature in this future Constitution. For Rezistans ek Alternativ and for the 2010 platform, the project around a new Constitution is an instrument of mobilization for social transformation and at the same time carries the aspirations for a new ecosocialist Republic. Global capitalism has reconfigured the neocolonial nation-state, which is now totally submerged in the expansion of the interests of transnational corporations. The project around a new Constitution aims at demanding a true sovereignty of the people, with the interests of workers, the oppressed, women and youth in the foreground.

Jean Nanga: What about the U.S. military presence on the island of Diego Garcia, which would normally be part of the Republic of Mauritius, unless the Chagos Archipelago, of which Diego Garcia is part, became independent?

Ashok Subron: This is a major concern of the Mauritian Left, all the more so as an important part of Mauritian territory, the Chagos Archipelago, is still under colonial occupation by the British, as part of the British Indian Ocean Territory. On the island of Diego Garcia, part of the Chagos Archipelago, there is one of the most “sophisticated” and strategic United States military bases in the world. The establishment of this base - leased to the United States by the United Kingdom since the 1960s - and the separation of this territory from the Chagos Islands is not only illegal under the Charter of the United Nations, but has led to the deportation of Chagosian populations who had lived for several generations on the whole of the archipelago.

Recent years have seen a fierce struggle of the Chagosians for the right to return to their native land. They have won the legal battle, but the British state has used colonial and authoritarian Crown Powers to block this judgement. The Chagosians have brought the matter to the European Human Rights Committee. The British, in collusion with the United States, have used all kinds of tricks to block the rights of the Chagosians and the Mauritian people on the Chagos Islands. The latest manoeuvre is the decree of a “Marine Protected Area” around the Chagos Archipelago. The Wikileaks revelations recently unmasked the conspiracy orchestrated by the United States and the United Kingdom in tandem on this issue. Wikileaks revealed their exchanges showing that the purpose of the “Marine Protected Area” was to prevent any access of the Chagosians to the archipelago. Some environmental organizations have thus realized that they had been taken in by the ecological disguise of an imperialist plot by the United States/United Kingdom tandem. The Mauritian state for its part has initiated a case before the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in order to challenge the “Marine Protected Area”. Despite this action, according to the latest information, the British are continuing to carry out their project.

But the ruling class of Mauritius, political and economic, also has a large share of responsibility in the separation of the Chagos and the installation and the continuing existence of the U.S. military base. During the negotiations between the British and Mauritian parties, on the eve of independence, the representatives of the bourgeoisie and the anti-independence Right had proposed to swap the Chagos Islands for a strong export quota of sugar to the United Kingdom. The anti-independence posture of this Right created, in terms of the balance of forces, the conditions for the exclusion of the Chagos islands from the territory of independent Mauritius. Although its closure had been one of its demands in the 1970s, the MMM of Paul Béranger, like all the right and centre parties in the country, now accepts the principle of the US military base on Chagos. It is only the sovereignty of Mauritius over Chagos that they continue to defend. Thus, with the expiration in 2016 of the lease agreement between the United States and the United Kingdom, the political class and the Mauritian economic elites want to be participants in the negotiations, without however opposing the existence of the US military base on Diego Garcia.

For the Mauritian anti-imperialist Left, including Rezistans ek Alternativ, there can be no question of separating the issue of the dismantling of the American military base from that of the sovereignty of

Mauritius over the Chagos and the right of return of the Chagosians to the Chagos Archipelago, including Diego Garcia. We intend to wage this struggle on these three dimensions, which we see as inseparable, along with the antimilitarist and social movements in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and the rest of the world. As well as all the social forces which, in Africa in particular, are opposed to the American military command for Africa (Africom). The closure of military bases, including Diego Garcia, is not only necessary from the point of view of the rights of the Mauritian and Chagosian peoples and of peace, but with the ecological and climate crisis this issue has become an imperative of survival for humankind. Military spending must be drastically reduced to make possible the preparation of an ecosocialist project for the energy, economic and social reorganization of humanity.

Interview conducted in November 2012

P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] International Labour Organization of labour, "World report on wages. Information note on Africa, 2011", December 2011.

[2] These are agreements concluded between the EU and the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific countries)