

# Guadeloupe: general strike against French colonial exploitation

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Marc Lasalle in Paris reports on a massive strike wave which is gripping the French colony of Guadeloupe

Since January 20, Guadeloupe, a large island (pop. 410 000) in the Caribbean still controlled by French imperialism, has been paralysed by a massive general strike. The strike has been called and is led by Lyannaj kont pwofitasyon (LKP, alliance against the exploitation), a collective of 49 trade unions, including the powerful UGTG, and other political and cultural associations. Their demands include

- ? An immediate wage increase of € 200 for the lowest salaries
- ? An increase in the minimum wage, pensions, benefits and a minimum wage computed by a workers' commission on the basis of the actual price rises,
- ? A lowering of income taxes and all other taxes, in particular that on gasoline
- ? A freeze on rents
- ? A decrease in the price of water, transportation and communications
- ? A health plan and indemnities for all the victims of pollution caused by chlordecone, a chemical used in the banana plantations

The movement is massively popular, with regular mass meetings and demos. On January 24, 25,000 joined the demo in Point-à-Pitre, the main town. On January 30 they were 65 000 for a total population of 410 000. After four weeks of strike, the schools, the posts, the administration and the gasoline pumps are closed

Several times the workers, with the so called grève marchante (marching strike) went en masse to the Carrefour supermarkets to close them down inviting the workers to join them. In other cases, they allowed people to exit without paying for the food

The trigger of the struggle is the high cost of living. Indeed the average income is 30% lower than in France while the basic products are 40% more expensive. Unemployment is at 28 %.

However, behind all this, there is enormous accumulated anger against the colonial system. The whole economy of the island, from agriculture to tourism and supermarkets, is in the hands of a handful of powerful white families, the béké. As in many other countries of the semicolonial world, practically all the products are imported and then sold at outrageously high prices. The local agriculture production is completely devoted to large plantations for export (banana, sugar cane). The dominant families obtained their wealth in the centuries of slavery. Little has changed on the island since that time, including the arrogance of racism.

Alan Hugues-Despointes, boss of the local Carrefour supermarket chain, declared : "in the metisse families, children are of different colours and there is no harmony. I think this is not good. We (the bekés)

wanted to preserve the race. Historians speak only of the negative aspects of slavery and it is regrettable."

This is why Elie Domota, leader of UGTG and LKP spokesperson declares: "For 400 years they have been living on our backs. This must stop now." During the demo, workers sing "la Gwadeloup cé tan nou, la gwadeloup a pa ta yo, yo pé ké fai sa yo vlé a dan pays en nou" (creole for: Guadeloupe is ours, Guadeloupe does not belong to them, they won't do what they want in our country)

Rapidly the movement is spreading to other French colonies. In nearby Martinique, the strike has been going for nine days. As in Guadeloupe, molokoy (a local tortoise) operations, with bike contingents pedalling slowly in front of cars, have taken places to stop the traffic in Fort-de-France. French Guiana too has also sent a solidarity message and delegates to Guadeloupe. A movement is also being prepared in the Ile de la Réunion in the Indian Ocean, suffering from the same oppression despite being at several thousand km distance.

The French government has tried to minimise the struggle. Then it has sent a minister to negotiate and at the same time several hundred CRS armed to the teeth. It clearly fears a spread of the movement and tries to make minor concessions while avoiding any commitment to the wage increase. Indeed, this demand is clearly shared by French masses in the homeland and a concession there would open a boulevard for French TU.

What this movement underlines, is the fact that decades after the major struggles against colonialism, France has retained control of several important territories. Despite being technically part of "France", as départements d'outre-mer/overseas departments, they are in fact effectively colonies from a political and social point of view. Decolonisation has not taken place because these territories are so important for French imperialism. Kanaky in the Pacific has important nickel mines. Polynesia is crucial for the French war machine (the nuclear weapon tests were conducted here until 1995). Guyana is a perfect base for launching satellites and other space missions.

French workers should express their full solidarity to the brave strike of their comrades in Martinique and Guadeloupe. They must unconditionally support their right to self-determination, including complete independence if their peoples wish it, the expropriation of all the large agro-capitalists, supermarkets and other corporations and the right to direct the use of the islands' natural resources to raise the living standards of the local population

They must demand the immediate withdrawal of the CRS and all soldiers and police forces.

Of course, the most effective way to express this solidarity is take up demands against colonial oppression abroad, as an integral part of the developing movement against Sarkozy, including the demand- raised by the workers in the islands- for major wage increases linked to a worker's cost of living index and workers control.

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