

Guinea: general strikes show workers can and must take power!

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Four general strikes of 60 days in total during the past year have posed point blank the question: who rules society? The workers have defied martial law and faced down army terror tactics, leading the Guinean masses against the misrule of President Lansana Conte and his cronies.

More than a 100 people have been killed and nearly 2,000 arrested, banks, shops and government buildings have stood idle along with gold and bauxite mines remain idle. Guinea is one of the world's biggest producers of aluminium. Cities and towns throughout the country, which has a population of 10 million countries, witnessed a people's uprising against Conte's 23 years of rule.

But the workers have been poorly served by their leaders. The three main federations, the National Confederation of Guinean Workers, the United Trade Union of Guinean Workers and the National Organization of Free Unions of Guinea, went out on general strike for the third time in a year on the 10 January and again in February over Conte's backtracking on promises he had given. Eventually they got what they had asked for: a change of prime minister and promises of a new government. But Conte remains in power, the army has had its wages doubled since the strikes, and there is no agreement about what the new government should do.

Police and army were used against the strikers most brutally. On 21 January, riot police attacked 30,000 people marching on parliament and killed more than 30 people. The next day all three leaders of the trade union federations were arrested and many other activists were rounded up or intimidated when presidential guards, led by Conte's son, attacked a union meeting.

But despite all this repression, on 23 January, Conte was forced to release the trade unionists and sue for peace. He also promised to reduce the price of fuel and rice (the staple food and appoint a new prime minister. For these limited reforms, the trade union leaders called off the strike. Despite being beaten, threatened and arrested during the strike they had also been negotiating with the government and even with the army about keeping the peace!

And of course, Conte took advantage of this breathing space. He refused to pay workers for the days they were on strike (one of the strikers demands), handed out money to his presidential guard and police supporters, hired out ex-Liberian rebels, and merely reshuffled his cabinet. On 9 February, he made one of his cronies, Eugene Camara, the new prime minister.

The reaction was immediate: protests throughout the capital including students trashing the presidential motorcade, and demonstrations spreading throughout the country with attacks on police and torching of government buildings. The general strike was renewed the next day.

Conte declared martial law and a curfew on the 12 February. All political meetings and demonstrations were banned ? 300 were arrested on one day alone in February.

One soldier said: "The boss made reference to President Lansana Conte and gave us the order to shoot anyone provocative, so whoever provokes me, I will shoot him without any hesitation."

But even in the face of this, the strike remained solid. With pressure from outside Conte again appointed another prime minister, this time Lansana Kouyate, a former UN official.

This decade has seen a worsening economic and social situation in Guinea. There were price rises throughout the decade while wages have stagnated. In 2004 there were riots over the price of rice in Conakry. In early 2005 teachers went on an all out strike for a week. In November 2005, unions organised a 48-hour general strike for better wages, including a minimum wage, and pensions. There were two more general strikes in March and June of 2006. One day in June saw 11 students shot dead by riot police.

The role of the working class

The year long struggle of the working class and poor has shown one of the major truths of revolutionary Marxism, that the working class is the only class in society that can unite and lead the peasantry and petit bourgeoisie and poor in struggle to end their exploitation. Even the weak bourgeois parties such as the Rally for the Guinean People and the Union of Republican Forces have supported the strike. In fact the URF leader said in January: "We have supported the unions, which have taken all the responsibility for saving the republic and given the word ordering the general unlimited strike."

The problem is that whilst working class and its trade unions united society in devastatingly effective action, after a major victory over the corrupt old regime, they have immediately retired from the political field and handed over to "normal" capitalist politicians. The general strikes galvanised society against the government of Conte but the outcome is just another set of bourgeois politicians who will rule in favour of the UN and World Bank, which is in effect what they have now done with the appointment of the new prime minister. They too will rapidly be corrupted, resort to ever more dictatorial regimes, give a pretext for a military coup, in short the old cycle will resume. This shows the incapacity of trade unions to lead the workers in struggle the moment it turns into a real class struggle, i.e. a political one. To resolve its problems the working class, the rural and urban poor need political power. Power means the ability to use armed force to oust the corrupt politicians and army chiefs for good and put weapons in the hands of a mass workers militia.

To be able to do this; to take general strikes forward to power for the workers, urban poor and peasants, a revolutionary workers' party must be built.

The task of building such a party must, given their record of militant struggle, begin in the trade unions. It must be won to a programme of class struggle, the fight for political power and the construction of socialism.

The dangers of building a cross-class party can be seen in Zimbabwe. The Movement for Democratic Change was formed out of the workers struggle in 1995-7 but was quickly co-opted by the NGOs (particularly the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, a German NGO linked to the German SPD and the Socialist International), white farmers and the multinationals. Its programme in 2000 espoused neo-liberal reforms, attacks on welfare and education and in effect defended the white farmers. Today, Mugabe has the country in his grip and opposition to his rule is smashed up or imprisoned. Why? Because the MDC refused to base itself upon the working class and its power in strikes, occupations and demonstrations and its ability to lead the rest of society. Rather, the MDC based itself on outside imperialist pressure, the white farmers lobby, law court rulings and "democratic public opinion." All of them proved broken reed when it came to getting rid of Mugabe. Worse they allowed Mugabe to pose once again as the freedom fighter

against imperialism and the white settlers who had bled Southern Rhodesia-Zimbabwe dry for so long.

The four general strikes in Guinea have shown that Conte is losing power. But the trade union leaders, along with the imperialists and regional powers such as Nigeria, have kept him in power, and left the capitalist system intact.

A change of prime minister will not solve the problems of Guinea. These are low wages, unemployment, high prices, and poverty. Guinea is exploited and held back from development by the world system of imperialist exploitation. Workers must use the developing crisis to build a workers party that fights for socialism and smashes capitalism. They must do so as part of a movement within the region, the continent and the world.

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