

## "Guadeloupe: Obscure Key to World Crisis"

Guadeloupe is a tiny island in the Caribbean, the size of greater London or the state of Iowa in the United States. It has a population of about 400,000 persons. The world press hardly ever mentions it. Since January 20, it has been the site of an ongoing general strike, which has managed to get 10% of its population actually marching in the streets, which must be a world record. The strike has been called by Liyannaj Kont Profitasyon (LKP), whose name translates from Creole as "Collective Against 'Profitization' (or outrageous profit)."

The LKP is a collective of 31 trade unions, political parties, and cultural associations, who represent just about the entire civil society. The leadership comes from the UGTG, an independent local trade union that received a majority of the votes in the last trade-union elections (in an official French system called *élections prud'hommes*).

The LKP issued a list of 126 demands addressed to four groups - three levels of the French state (the national government, the region, and the department) plus the employers. Most of these demands concerned economic matters. But as the French minister in charge of dealing with overseas zones of France, Yves Jégo, said, beyond these economic demands there is a "societal" crisis. This is a polite way of saying that the strike is not merely about bread and butter. It is also a profoundly anticolonial movement. And it is this combination that makes what is going on in this small and obscure part of the world a key to the world crisis in which we all find ourselves.

Guadeloupe may be obscure today but it has been an important locus of the capitalist world-economy since 1493, when Columbus first set foot there. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it became one of the principal centers of world sugar production, one of France's prized sources of wealth along with Haiti. Of course, the sugar plantations used slave labor imported from Africa, the indigenous population having been wiped out.

In 1763, when France and Great Britain were negotiating the Treaty of Paris that ended the Seven Years' War, one major question was the fate of French Canada and Guadeloupe. The British had seized both from France during the war, but it was agreed that they could keep only one of them, whichever they preferred. At the time, both countries considered tiny Guadeloupe a rich prize, a major source of world wealth. Canada, by contrast, suffered from Voltaire's depreciation of it as "quelques arpents de neige" (a few acres of snow).

It was precisely because Guadeloupe was so valuable that Great Britain decided to keep Canada. The sugar planters in the British West Indies did not want the competition. In addition, the British government wanted to economize on troops in Canada, which they felt they could do if the French no longer had a foothold.

The French Revolution brought turmoil to France's possessions in the Caribbean, and notably in Haiti and Guadeloupe. In both territories, there were slave uprisings. In both territories, the French plantation owners panicked, especially once the French ended slavery in 1794. The plantation owners turned to the British to save them. In both territories, the French ousted the British, quashed the rebellions, and in the process reinstated slavery. Unlike Haiti, however, Guadeloupe remained a French colony. Business as usual.

Then came 1848 and another revolution in France. And another end to slavery, whose great

protagonist was Victor Schoelcher, a minister of the provisional government. Like Lincoln in 1863 in the United States, Schoelcher abolished slavery by decree, because he knew that he could not win a vote in the legislature. This time, however, the juridical abolition of slavery was not repealed, even though the provisional government of which Schoelcher was a minister was replaced by a much more conservative government.

Slavery was outlawed in Guadeloupe (as elsewhere) but for almost a century after that very little changed in the economy. The plantations still produced sugar, the White owners still garnered the profits, and the former slaves were still very poorly paid. To make it worse, their miserable pay had become too expensive for the plantation owners and they were partly replaced by new Asian imported labor. Unemployment became rampant, and has remained so to this day.

After 1945, in the wake of the anticolonial movements everywhere, the French government incorporated Guadeloupe as an overseas department, presumably the equal of every metropolitan department. But economically, they were more dependent than ever on the largesse of Paris. Sugar had exhausted the land and the new base of the economy became the tourist trade. The people of Guadeloupe lived in an economy in which their pay was far below metropolitan French standards but the cost of living was far higher, because of the control of imports and exports by a few large White-owned quasi-monopolies.

This is what caused the double explosion - against "profitization" and against what is still perceived as *de facto* slavery. What do the people of Guadeloupe want? Their very first demand on the list was for another 200 euros monthly to those receiving the minimum wage plus the old-age pensioners. Given the strength of the strike, it seems they may get the 200 euros, despite the ferocious opposition of the large-scale employers. They are being asked to contribute 50 of the 200 euros and have offered 10. The French government will probably force the employers to join in meeting this demand, although probably not the long list of other demands.

But what about the "societal" crisis? One historic mode of pursuing the anticolonial quest for dignity has been to demand formal independence. In Guadeloupe, the popular movements have been reticent to make this demand. They have seen the limited real power of the independent states around the world and above all those nearby. The fate of Haiti is not attractive. But they do want a profound social transformation - the end of the social and economic power of the small White minority, a practical form of equalization.

If one links economic demands with "societal" demands in the midst of a world economic disaster, one is launching a powerful whirlwind. It is one that a few nationalizations of a few banks in a few wealthy countries will do nothing to stop. So far, Guadeloupe (and elsewhere) have been relatively peaceful in their protests. But whirlwinds have a way of becoming far more severe.

by Immanuel Wallerstein