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Antilles

Martinique and Guadeloupe still in turmoil

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Like Guyane [French Guiana], which we will not deal with here, these two French colonial territories in the Americas are causing concern in the so-called “national” media.

Repeated crises and system crisis

The turbulence affecting them follows an increasingly frequent rhythm. This reflects the systemic crisis of the colonial system that rages here under a sophisticated camouflage. These “old colonies” known as “outremers” in the vocabulary of yesteryear, are called “ultrapерipheral regions” by the technocrats (only Europe can be THE centre!).

The crisis is based on the exhaustion of the economic model inherited from the slave period: “sugar islands,” then bananas for the European market. This system is no longer profitable even if it supports the big Béké planters skilled in capturing subsidies. [1] The broadening of the social base of the system was nevertheless achieved, following “departmentalization,” by the constitution of an administrative petty bourgeoisie, the pillar of a specific mode of consumption. The resulting economic and social dependence is only a reflection of extreme political dependence.

Recent decades have seen boosted tourism activity, given a new impetus to the production of top of the range rum and established a still meagre agri-food sector. These economic novelties and social changes have shown their limits and contradictions: unemployment is exploding. The cost of living is soaring. An annual average of 3,000 young people has left the country in the recent period. Delinquency is increasing against a backdrop of drug trafficking.

The resulting popular anger is mixed with a feeling of powerlessness for which “Politics” has become the symbol. The structuring of the political landscape has been affected.

Assimilation (the name given to the transformation of the colonies into “Overseas Departments” conducted in a climate of popular euphoria in 1946 under the aegis of Aimé Césaire and the Communist Party of which he was a leader) quickly entered into crisis giving rise to a passionate cleavage between the “departmentalist” right and the “autonomist” left. To the left of this a “pro-independence far left” emerged in the 1960s and especially the 1970s. The difficulties faced by anti-colonialists in winning strong popular support led to “adaptations” which were mostly unacknowledged.

The domination of the left during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s by the autonomist current, the PCM (Parti communiste martiniquais - Martinican Communist Party) and PPM (Parti progressiste martiniquais - Martinican Progressive Party) led by Aimé Césaire following his break with the Communists was ended in the 1990s by a “patriotic camp” which was rapidly hegemonized by the MIM (Mouvement independantiste martiniquais - Martinican Independence Movement) led by Alfred Marie-Jeanne, whose electoral orientation took him to the head of the Regional Council (1998) and then of the Territorial Collectivity of Martinique (2015): his main opponent being the PPM.

The PPM/MIM electoral rivalry led the latter to a “management alliance” with the very official right thanks to which it remained “in power” from 2015 to 2020, before being dislodged again (following the parenthesis of 2010-2015) by the PPM and allies (also including known elements of the local right). Some separatist organizations have lined up behind the electoral locomotive of Alfred Marie-Jeanne such as the CNCP (Conseil national des comités populaires - National Council of Popular Committees) and one of its splits, the Palima (Parti de la libération de la Martinique-Martinique Liberation Party), but also the autonomist PCM which is only the shadow of what it was in our history.

Other radical currents (the PKLS, Parti Kominis pou libérasyon ek sosyalism, a pro-independence split from the PCM and the CNCP- comités populaires, another split from the original CNCP) are outside the institutions and more linked to the anti-colonialist protest.

The Groupe Révolution Socialiste (GRS – Socialist Revolution Group), the section of the Fourth International in the Antilles, has gone from the propagandism and ideological struggles of its beginnings to a significant intervention in the trade union, feminist, and decolonial mass movement where its responsibilities are recognized.

Combat Ouvrier, an organization of Lutte Ouvrière in the Antilles, concentrates its forces on trade union work where it leads the CGT (Confédération générale des travailleurs - General Confederation of Workers) of Martinique and Guadeloupe.

Martinique, Guadeloupe: same fight but with differences

The strongest differences between the popular movements of Martinique and Guadeloupe result from the bifurcation following the 1967 massacre in Guadeloupe. The resulting rejection of colonialism has reached a stronger mass dimension than in Martinique. We saw this in 2009. We see it again today. The hegemony of the UGTG (Union générale des travailleurs guadeloupéens - General Union of Guadeloupean Workers), which represents a kind of revolutionary syndicalism with nationalist and class content, facilitates unitary cohesion and leads to a much clearer break in Guadeloupe between social movement and global political representation. Oppositional political expressions as in Martinique outside the more traditional fields are therefore less strong in Guadeloupe.

Challenges in Martinique for the anti-colonialist and workers' movement

The electoralist turn of the MIM, initiated after its first entry into the Regional Council and accentuated with the taking of control of this institution, led to its unvarnished confrontation with colonial and capitalist realities. Like the left after Mitterrand's victory, its adherence to neoliberal management made it incapable of finding any solution to the problems plaguing the country and explaining its election. Colonial absolutism did not diminish in any way. The stigmatization of "Politics" became widespread. Inability to solve the problems of everyday life, nepotism, corruption became common accusations, increasing the old abstentionist background of the politics of the "old colonies."

The more radical left was kept out of the institutions by an electoral system with an eligibility threshold of 10% to block the way to small formations and a consequent bonus granted to the "winner". Its indisputable militant dynamism has not allowed it to overcome the feeling of global powerlessness stoked by its legendary divisions. It is therefore also affected by the rise of new oppositional forces.

Strengths and contradictions - a new protest movement

Very much attached to the question of symbols, this nationalist movement with an ethnic Africanist connotation stood out in the denunciation of the Békés and the role of some of them in the poisoning of the Antilles with chlordecone, in

the demand for reparations for this crime, in the battle to eradicate all slave symbols persisting in the public space, in the breaking of statues of Victor Schoelcher then of Empress Joséphine and Belain Desnambuc and today in opposition to government health policy with a strong impregnation of antivax culture.

Nearly half a century of the retreat of Marxist thought means that the legitimate aspirations of this activism, its courage, its just desire to critically assess all that exists, are not enough to pose the strategic and tactical problems of the struggle for emancipation in the light of the immensely rich lessons of the struggles for social transformation of yesterday and today. It is therefore also affected by old demons, the drama of egos and a certain complacency.

The urgency is there!

Impatience is not a good advisor, but it is legitimate. Because the urgency is there. For decades, some of the most perceptive observers of Caribbean realities (Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant among others) have evoked the risk of our disappearance as a people under the combined effect of historical, economic, social, cultural and demographic factors.

To ward off these dark omens, it is vital to restore revolutionary politics to its former glory. It teaches us to be wary of fatalistic predictions that deny the role of the political initiative of the masses.

History is not an endless chain of obscure plots. It is a matter of social classes and their struggles and therefore of changing power relations, conjunctures, deep impulses and conscious choices at each moment. One of the tasks of the Martinican moment is to build in the fusion of the experiences and energy of the working masses and activist generations the political subject capable of attacking without delay the dominant system and its henchmen.

Marxists must respond to this urgency without distorting by sweetening the emancipatory project. By waving the autonomist rattle as a diversion, the Minister for the Colonies indirectly shows that he is well aware of the historical task of the last colonies today. The autonomy and independence of our lands is an obvious horizon. This would be enough for the happiness of some nationalist fractions. But emancipation would only be a caricature of itself, if decolonization did not mean the conquest of power by the working masses who are the heart and blood of the Caribbean nations.

This task would undoubtedly be a whim if the proletariat and the peoples of the last colonies did not work for a common struggle that was both decolonial and anti-capitalist with the internationalist support of the workers of the metropolis in whose interest it is.

Recent weeks

The past few weeks show that the system is, if not at a standstill, at least deeply troubled. The arrest and immediate release of Élie Domota, a key figure in Guadeloupe's mobilization against compulsory vaccination obligation and the health (or vaccine?) pass during a peaceful demonstration is an example of this panic. The government combines brutal pressure with tactical retreats.

There was already the pressure that led to four Martinican activists being imprisoned for simple demonstrations on the public highway. And after dispatching the GIGN and the Raid [élite police units] to control the mobilization, the

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strike, the blockades and some looters, in Martinique it has three times postponed the deadline for sanctions against medical staff and others who are unvaccinated.

It has announced that the transformation of the health pass into a vaccination pass would be postponed for the colonies in order to avoid unrest. The fact is that it faces mistrust of its vaccine policy far beyond what it imagined. The majority opinion considers the vaccine as an “experimental injunction” if not a poison for genocidal purposes. The explanation for this mistrust is not to be found mainly in the muted propaganda of evangelical sects active from the United States to Brazil. Nor does it only come from the chaotic and, in our country, colonial management of the crisis. Nor even just the scandal of chlordecone, a colonial state crime that Macron had to partially acknowledge. Mistrust has its roots in the depths of a story made up of lies, the first being the negation of our humanity in the slave trade and slavery.

In such a context, our comrades have followed a very difficult line. Firmly opposing compulsory vaccination and the health pass, participating in the fight against the government’s recourse to force, opposing the sanctions programmed against the opponents of vaccines without the slightest complacency towards the lies abundantly disseminated by the extreme right which have never been so widely circulated in our territories.

The year 2022 begins under very special auspices. Will the government succeed in carrying through its social murder of thousands of unvaccinated people by threatening continuity of care in a hospital system already much more dilapidated than that in the “metropolis”? As we write in our leaflets: the die has not yet been cast! Protests continued between Christmas and New Year's Day. The Antilles are holding their breath.

31 December 2021

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[1] Béké is a Creole term used to refer to a descendant of the early European, usually French, settlers in the French Antilles.