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**Martinique**

# **“The high cost of living in Martinique is the consequence of the colonial system”**

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**A political, union and community activist from Martinique, he denounces the injustice of the high cost of living and economic practices inherited from colonialism in Martinique. According to him, high prices are due to local monopolies controlled by the béké caste (white Creoles descended from the first slave-owning settlers), which limit local production and impose uncontrolled profit margins. Although the general strike of 2009 made it possible to obtain some gains, such as a wage bonus and price reductions, these advances have been eroded, as large enterprises have resumed their exploitative practices.**

Pierre-Charles also criticizes the current repression of social movements in Martinique. The dispatch of the CRS 8 , a special police unit, recalls the colonial history of repression. Police violence during recent demonstrations even led the Martinique Assembly to call for their withdrawal.

As spokesperson for the collective against chlordecone, Pierre-Charles campaigns for the recognition of the health scandal and compensation for the victims [1]. He emphasizes the importance of a reparation law to address the economic, health and environmental consequences of this pollution. For him, a mobilization in France is essential in order to push the state to recognize and repair this lasting poisoning that affects all of Martinique society. Our exclusive interview.

*Can you introduce yourself and tell us what are your political commitments in the broad sense, today?*

I am Philippe Pierre-Charles, I am a political, union and community activist. Union-wise, I was the general secretary of the Martinique Democratic Workers' Centre (CDMT), which is one of the country's major union confederations. Politically, I belong to the Révolution socialiste group. And I am in various associations, including one that is involved in the fight against chlordecone and is called Lyannaj pou depolye Matinik

## **The high cost of living in Martinique is a legacy of the exclusive system**

*The high cost of living is a structural problem in Martinique. What are the root causes?*

Today, for food, the price differential with France is around 40 per cent. Overall, prices are 17 per cent higher on average.

The causes take us back to the colonial system. The colonial system restricted local production, organized everything around imports and where monopolies reigned supreme.. Local production was restricted because in the system of "exclusivity", the role of the colony was to provide materials that interested the metropolis. These were cane, sugar, cotton, etc.

This made local production very constrained. The colony was not allowed to produce a nail if the metropolis produced nails.

So there remains from this history, a certain number of very strong practices. This is why local production only

contributes to 20 per cent of the population's food. Added to this is the problem of the colonial caste that we call here the békés. They are former colonists, large landowners who reign over import-export. They make the law and set prices by reserving profit margins over which we have absolutely no control. All this combined makes the prices exorbitant.

Added to this are cyclical causes that are linked to the situation in the country. For example, the transition to the euro led to an increase in the cost of living. Then, events such as the war in Ukraine serve as pretexts for huge increases. Same thing for Covid. We end up in a situation where prices are high.

In the 1950s, there was a major strike by civil servants demanding a cost-of-living allowance. This movement resulted in a 40 per cent bonus for "metropolitan" civil servants [2]. but not for the rest of the population. The fight against the high cost of living is therefore an old battle that resurfaces regularly.

*In 2009, there was a general strike against the high cost of living that shook Martinique. What did this general strike movement achieve and what are the limits that explain why a new revolt broke out fifteen years later?*

The great strike of 2009 that shook Martinique and Guadeloupe was not only a strike against the high cost of living. It was a strike against what we called "proftasyon", that is to say against exploitation and outrageous oppression. The demands concerned the high cost of living but also low wages, public services, and a whole series of popular causes. This movement, through its power, had made it possible to win a certain number of things. In Martinique as in Guadeloupe, the social movement had created a powerful negotiating position in the face of economic and political power.

The first victory was a 200 euro increase in salaries up to 1.4 times the minimum wage. Part of it was paid by employers, part by the state and part by local authorities. The second victory was a reduction in the price of basic necessities of around 20 per cent. This concerned 2,586 products, the list of which had been published in the press. Making this reduction effective was a real social struggle. Teams of union activists went to supermarkets to check that they were applying the right prices.

We also obtained price controls for the telephone, banking services, water and electricity. For example, for water and electricity, the first quantities, necessary for life, were cheaper than the following ones. Finally, we won on new principles: such as priority hiring for natives in the civil service, particularly in education, and full recognition of the Martinican trade-union movement.

Once the social movement weakened, we lost our negotiating position. Immediately, the large retailers took advantage of this to start raising prices again. Some employers began to contest the share they had to pay of the 200 euros. Finally, the benefits of this fight were eroded by the fact that the economic actors remained the same, the large retail groups did not change, and so they put the same practices of profytasyon back in place.

## **Lessons from 2009: Victory is possible, but sustainable victory requires structural reforms**

The first lesson to be learned from 2009 is that victories are possible when there is strong mobilization. The second is that for these victories to be sustainable, we must aim for structural reforms to give the people the means to influence economic and political power.

This is a very useful lesson for today's movement . The memorandum of understanding that was signed by a certain number of actors, with the exception of the RPPRAC (Rally for the Protection of Afro-Caribbean Peoples and Resources, editor's note ), which initiated the struggle, does not contain any sure means to guarantee its application. The protocol contains affirmations of principles.

It stipulates that the state must control the profit margins of large companies, that the territorial institution will set up a price control service. But there is no mechanism for the social movement, unions, and associations to take part in this control, nor any questioning of the principle of business secrecy. It will always be impossible to see what is inside the safes of big capital. It will therefore not be possible to formulate demands for sharing wealth that are in line with the possibilities.

This business secret is a taboo subject. Large-scale distribution permits itself not to submit its accounts as required by law. One of the major demands today for a certain number of bodies such as the CDMT (is the application of the principle of opening account books.

## **Repression has punctuated all popular struggles in Martinique**

*In September, faced with this revolt, Bruno Retailleau, the new Minister of the Interior, sent the CRS8, a special unit described as "warmongering" by a prefect. How is this response, mainly repressive, the continuation of a long history of colonial repression in Martinique?*

In December 1959, a popular revolt broke out following a trivial traffic accident. The government called in the CRS. There were clashes for three nights. Three young people were killed. Even though they were not even taking part in the clashes. This triggered immense anger. A slogan appeared: "CRS out".

This movement was so powerful that even the general council (elected assembly) demanded that the CRS be re-embarked. And they won their case. Which means that Martinique has been free of CRS since 1959. The return of the CRS to Martinique imposed by Bruno Retailleau is therefore a very strong symbol.

Repression has punctuated all popular struggles in Martinique. From the beginning, the enslaved refused their condition. They revolted and were repressed. There were deaths during the insurrection that led to the abolition of slavery in 1848; when the abolition was imposed by a slave deputy, it was at the cost of blood.

Another insurrection took place in 1870, called the "Southern insurrection ", it ended in a real massacre, not only immediately but also afterwards; there were death sentences, and imprisonment in a penal colony. A real terror was installed which led to burying this revolt in popular memory for a long time.

Later, the workers' movement, which was born among the agricultural workers, paid a heavy price during strikes. In February 1900, there were eleven victims when the army opened fire on the strikers. And since then, periodically, about every ten years, there have been repressed movements, in 1923, in 1953, in 1961... Each strike of agricultural workers became the occasion for a new massacre. The last one took place in February 1974, during which two strikers were killed.

In addition to the deaths, there were also legal proceedings , also during demonstrations. The colonial system was maintained through repression. Not only that, since the government also sought to lull the population into the assimilationist dream. What we are witnessing today is therefore the continuation of this colonial repression.

The CRS who arrived in September on the orders of Bruno Retailleau did not hesitate to provoke the people manning the roadblocks. We saw gassings and beatings that were out of proportion. In Carbet, even the mayor was gassed. On Friday, October 25, a demonstration was organized by the RPPRAC and the unions of the CGTM (General Confederation of Workers of Martinique) and the CDMT.

The procession was blocked when it arrived from the headquarters of the Bernard Hayot Group (GBH), one of the main companies engaged in mass retail distribution. The demonstration had been taking place peacefully since 1.30 pm. The blocking of the cortege led to a rise in tensions, then to the tear gas and batoning of the demonstrators by the CRS. This is the reality today. This is the reason why even the assembly of the Territorial Collectivity of Martinique demanded in a motion the departure of the CRS.

## **Chlordecone, a fight for truth, justice and reparation**

*Finally, you are the spokesperson for the collective to depollute Martinique. The appeal trial for chlordecone poisoning opened on October 22 in Paris. What is the objective of this collective, for which you are the spokesperson? Why is this qualification of poisoning essential in this trial and what are the impacts, the effects of chlordecone poisoning in Martinique?*

The fight over the chlordecone issue is a multifaceted fight with three essential objectives. First, the truth. Up until now, there have been grey areas. We need scientific truth, we need research to develop.

Secondly, justice. It is not normal that a series of crimes of this type remain absolutely unpunished, without any penalty, as if there were no perpetrators. Emmanuel Macron once said that there was no state responsibility but a collective responsibility. The fact remains that nothing happened to the people who spread this product that was known to be harmful, dangerous, and probably carcinogenic. They are not even clearly named by the government.

The third part is that of compensation. It concerns the farm workers who are the first victims of this tragedy. But also the population which is largely impacted, with the explosion of cases of prostate cancer, endometriosis, and other diseases that we have not yet documented. But we already know that a series of diseases result from this.

Chlordecone has been recognized as an occupational disease but until now, there are only barely a hundred employees or families of farm workers who are compensated and in a very insufficient way.

We are demanding much broader compensation for all economic victims since the land, the water, the coastal sea, everything is poisoned. So all the jobs that are linked to these areas are affected and what exists as a means of reparation is practically non-existent.

Our collective is fighting for all three of these objectives. On the legal front, a series of associations have managed to file complaints since 2006-2007, even before the existence of Lyannaj pou depolye Matinik. When we saw the risk of dismissal, we launched a campaign to constitute civil parties for the population. Our collective is part of a broader movement, Gaoulé Kont chlordécone.

We managed to bring together 800 people who have joined as civil parties and who are therefore engaged in legal actions today. We are at a particular stage. In order to win their case, the lawyers have asked preliminary questions of constitutionality (QPC) to have it recognized that this constitutes poisoning even if there is no intention to kill.

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The purpose of the trial on October 22 was to plead these QPCs. We await the result. If the questions are accepted, this will mean that the case will go before the Court of Cassation, which will decide whether or not to refer it to the Constitutional Council, which will say whether there is reason to review the existing case law on poisoning.

The complaint that was filed against the dismissal will only be examined following this process. It may therefore take time.

October 22 was also an important date in our fight since for the first time, there was a gathering in front of the court that brought together a hundred people. However, we are convinced that it is essential that we are joined by the workers', democratic and progressive movement in France.

[3]

As long as the state has the impression that this is a matter that only concerns the "colonial stables", it will always have contempt for our mobilization. We hope that popular mobilization grows throughout the country. We are convinced that this is necessary for us to win our case.

And we will also ultimately need a law that addresses the issue of reparations. Our collective's demand is for a programme law. That is to say, not something cobbled together but a law that sets up a real reparation plan that takes into account all the economic, social, societal, scientific, medical and health aspects that this chlordecone problem poses.

It is a vast combat. It is rare for Guadeloupe and Martinique to mobilize over such a long period on the same problem. This proves that this problem is serious. All the efforts that have been made to create a diversion have never succeeded. Today, it is an essential fight for all Guadeloupeans and Martinicans.

*November 11 , 2024*

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[1] Chlordecone is a highly toxic pesticide, which has been widely used in agriculture in Martinique and Guadeloupe

[2] “Metropolitan”civil servants are those directly employed by the French state.

[3] <https://twitter.com/jlmelenchon/status/1472313740246855683>