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Guadeloupe on Strike: A New Political Chapter in the French Antilles

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On January 20 the Caribbean archipelago of Guadeloupe witnessed the launch of the largest political movement in its history. For 44 days a mass general strike brought the French overseas territory to a standstill: Schools and universities closed, major commerce was suspended, banks shut down, hotel rooms emptied, government services were discontinued, restaurants were shuttered, public transportation halted, and motorists became pedestrians as gasoline distribution was interrupted.

Huge demonstrations accompanied the strike, with as many as 100,000 people marching in the streets demanding social and economic change. After a month and a half of political deadlock, violent confrontations with the French police, and the death of a union militant, Guadeloupean activists reached an agreement with the French government on 165 demands, including a 200-euro (\$250) increase in the monthly minimum wage, measures to aid farmers and fishermen, lower bank fees, reduced airfares between the islands and France, and reduced prices on food, housing, water, gasoline, and public transportation.



Guadeloupeans marched in the thousands in what quickly became the largest political movement in the archipelago's history. (By Dominique Chomereau-Lamotte)

The strike was organized by a coalition of 48 organizations, including trade unions from a wide spectrum of industries (gasoline distribution, commerce, tourism, civil service, health care, education, and agriculture to name a few), as well as environmental groups, peasant organizations, political parties, pro-independence activists, consumer rights advocates, associations for disability rights, fair housing proponents, music and dance groups, and a wide range of other political, cultural, and civic leaders. These diverse activists came together under the name Lyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon (LKP), which can be loosely translated as the Alliance Against Profiteering (the complete list of member organizations, the coalition's full political platform, and copies of the agreements signed can be found on the LKP blog, [lkp-gwa.org](#)). In Creole, *lyannaj* refers to a coming together, or a joining of forces, for a common goal. In this case, Guadeloupean activists found themselves in *lyannaj* against the "expensive life" (*la vie chère*) that characterizes the French Caribbean and the excessive profiteering and economic exploitation they call *pwofitasyon*.

Their political agenda first took shape in December around the high cost of gasoline,

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which in recent years had reached exorbitant levels—up to about \$130 for a full tank of gas. Labor activists, particularly those in the UGTG (General Union of Guadeloupean Workers), decided to launch a movement to lower gas prices, but as other organizations joined the effort, it quickly became clear that gasoline was not the only important commodity whose price was inflated in Guadeloupe. Through a series of meetings, the collective developed a political platform that not only centered on the high cost of living but also tackled deeper problems, calling for, among other things, the development of the local fishing industry, the promotion of local cultural initiatives, an overhaul of the educational system, environmental planning, and employment initiatives. The collective eventually produced a list of 120 demands.



The LKP's well-organized security detail protects protestors from police. (By Dominique Chomereau-Lamotte)

While the LKP movement can arguably be seen as a response to the global economic crisis, its demands are rooted in Guadeloupe's particular history of economic exploitation and racial inequality. As a French overseas department, Guadeloupe enjoys relatively high salaries and standards of living compared with other Caribbean societies. It has one of the highest per capita incomes in the region, and the minimum wage is the same as in France (almost \$1,200 per

month when the strike began). However, these high salaries are accompanied by high prices on most consumer goods and services—ranging anywhere from 20% to 170% higher than the prices in mainland France. Moreover, Guadeloupe is plagued by a wider economic malaise; with an unemployment rate of 22.7%, compared with France's 8.1%, and twice the French poverty rate (12.5% versus 6.5%), the contemporary economic landscape seems bleak, particularly for local youth (the unemployment rate is 50% for those under 25).

Merchants argue that high transportation costs, taxes, and tariffs oblige them to charge more for imported goods. Local political activists answer that the high prices are also the product of a larger racial and economic history. A small white minority, commonly referred to as the *békés*, monopolize Guadeloupe's economy through their control of the import-export industry and most major retail operations. These elites are seen as the direct descendants, in both biological and economic terms, of the area's colonial-era plantation owners and slaveholders. In fact, it was partly the fear that independence from France would only consolidate the *békés'* economic dominance that led many in the region, including intellectuals like Aimé Césaire, to turn to the political project of French incorporation. But that quickly proved disappointing: After Guadeloupe's integration into the French Republic in 1946, the local economy collapsed, unemployment skyrocketed, islanders left in massive numbers, and dependence on the French state deepened—even as the economic dominance of the *béké* class remained as strong as ever.



The LKP grouped together an incredibly diverse set of social sectors. (By Dominique Chomereau-Lamotte)

The LKP members I spoke to said the movement was united in its critique of Guadeloupean society, but its activists do not have a common political solution. Some of the organizations in the collective are known for their pro-independence ideology, but others do not share it; in fact some of the organizations claim to have no political leanings at all, save for their opposition to high prices. This is a distinguishing feature of this new movement. Unlike previous generations of pro-

independence or pro-autonomy political projects, the LKP does not imagine itself as a political organization advancing a specific political project.

The initial goal of the movement was conjunctural: to bring together a variety of organizational struggles in the context of a shared campaign in order to strengthen the work of each individual organization, and not necessarily to create a new institutional apparatus. But the LKP soon became larger than the activists involved could have imagined, partly in response to a local thirst for political and social change.

Despite the absence of an official political agenda for the movement, its platform was seen by many as a demand for more local sovereignty and autonomy, though not necessarily outright independence. The LKP itself does not advocate for greater autonomy, yet during the course of the strike, a popular chant emerged as the official slogan of the movement: "Guadeloupe belongs to us, Guadeloupe does not belong to you, you can't do what you please in our country!" (*La Gwadeloup sé tan nou, la Gwadeloup sé pa ta yo, yo pé ké fè sa yo vlé, adan péyi an nou!*) Originally a protest chant created by Jacky Richard, a local bank worker, "Guadeloupe Belongs to Us" was set to music by the group Akyo and quickly became a massive hit. During the time of the strike, the song seemed to echo out of every corner in Guadeloupe: It was shouted by thousands of demonstrators during protests, sung by children on the playground, blasted out of car radios and open windows, and its lyrics were emblazoned upon thousands of T-shirts sold out of the trunks of cars.

The slogan's ambiguity might explain its popularity, for it is unclear how the lines of belonging are drawn here: Who exactly constitutes "us" and "you"? And what are the implications of ownership or belonging in this context? This ambiguity speaks to a particular political agenda, one distinct from the political projects of incorporation and independence. As Raymond Gamma, an LKP spokesperson, told me: "We are trying to invent a new form of collective organization. Maybe we will find it within the French collectivity—not being French while at the same time being in the French ensemble [collective]. I don't know. What I do know is that we are creating something that no one can imagine except us."

On January 25, after nearly a week of social paralysis, the French state, locally represented by the prefect, Nicolas Desforges, agreed to meet with the LKP leadership. The ensuing three-day negotiations included local employers, LKP leaders, French government bureaucrats, and local politicians, who decided to broadcast the meetings live on Guadeloupe's TV and radio stations, presumably to highlight their own role in the affair. However, the broadcast unexpectedly resulted in even wider sympathy for the LKP. "For three days we were able to see with our own eyes the incompetence of the French state, the shamelessness of the employers, the uselessness of the politicians, and the fierceness of the LKP," a Guadeloupe resident told me.

The main protagonist of the three-day miniseries was Elie Domota, the LKP's main spokesperson. Over the course of the negotiation sessions he delivered a powerful *J'accuse* performance, directly confronting the French state for its lack of oversight and publicly airing the corrupt practices and outrageous profits of the local employers. Viewers described the event less as a negotiation than as a public trial, with Domota imagined as the people's prosecutor, unmasking the relations of inequality that prevail in Guadeloupe. He quickly emerged as a star among the Guadeloupean public—numerous fan sites sprung up online, T-shirts with his name were seemingly mass-produced, and everywhere he went people chanted his name and asked for his autograph. The French national media also fell in love with him, devoting numerous articles and TV reports to his persona.



Elie Domota, a labor union leader, became the public face of the LKP resistance. (By Dominique Chomereau-Lamotte)

Despite the media attention and the massive local support, the negotiations ended after three days, when Desforges left the negotiation table, presumably uncomfortable with the "public hearing" style of the events. But since the televised negotiations had only strengthened support for the movement, the LKP was able to respond to the prefect's

departure with increased mass demonstrations.

As the French state stalled, Guadeloupeans took to the streets in record numbers: First 20,000, then 40,000, then 65,000 demonstrators marched in the streets in support of the LKP. In addition to the mass demonstrations, there were also incidents of violence, particularly at night, when many young demonstrators set fire to cars and trash bins and vandalized businesses and public offices.

On February 4, after two weeks of ongoing conflict, Overseas Minister Yves Jégo arrived in Guadeloupe and sat down to negotiate with LKP representatives. This time the negotiations were not televised, but the LKP's support continued. Demonstrators rallied outside the prefecture in Basse Terre, where the negotiations were held, setting up drumming circles where they danced and sang through the night and into the wee hours of the morning. The music of the drums spilled into the negotiation room, where LKP representatives carefully detailed the economic situation in the overseas departments for the seemingly naive Jégo.

Finally, on February 8, after a 20-hour negotiating session that ended at 8 a.m., the LKP negotiators believed an agreement had been reached. But that afternoon, as LKP representatives and local elected officials were on their way to sign a finalized agreement, they learned that Jégo was on a plane back to France, having signed nothing. Before making any deals, Jégo later said, he had to consult the Parisian government.

With both the prefect and the overseas minister having abandoned negotiations, the tension in Guadeloupe reached an all-time high. Meanwhile, the French national newspaper *Le Monde* published a report detailing corruption and illegal practices at the Guadeloupean oil refinery, backing many of the LKP's claims during the negotiation sessions and its insistence on the absurdity of local gasoline prices. In addition, the popular French TV channel Canal Plus aired a documentary titled *Les derniers maîtres de la Martinique* (The Last Masters of Martinique) about the *békés*, featuring candid, racist commentary by local Antillean elites. Both the documentary, which was widely viewed in the French Caribbean, and the *Le Monde* report strengthened support for the movement, and once again Guadeloupeans took to the streets—this time reaching 100,000 demonstrators, nearly a quarter of the territory's population. At the same time the strike spread to Martinique, where a coalition called the February 5th Collective declared a strike of their own around similar issues.



Impromptu barricades became focal points of resistance and solidarity. (By Dominique Chomereau-Lamotte)

After almost a month of peaceful protest, Domota declared that the movement had “walked enough” and was now going to change its methods. The following morning, barricades blocking major thoroughfares sprang up across the territory, and for the week of February 16–21, Guadeloupe came to a complete halt. The barricades, assembled out of palm branches, old tires, and emptied cars, served as both a political symbol and a site of political

action. People stood guard at the barricades, often receiving visitors who would come to offer support and solidarity. One LKP supporter, who was involved in the barricades in the town of Gosier, told me that the most important aspect of the barricades was the relationships of solidarity and *partage* (sharing) that were developed. Neighbors would come daily to bring food, coffee, and cigarettes to the protesters. They would spend time with them on the barricade, talking about the recent events, the goals of the movement, and the actions to come.

Although the barricades were a community space during the day, at night the violence would escalate, as bands of disaffected youth took over from the demonstrators (particularly in Pointe-à-Pitre and surrounding urban areas). Often wearing ski masks, groups of mostly young men fired shots into the air and set fire to barricades, cars, garbage containers, and even local businesses. Some joined the barricades as a form of protest, but others sought to profit by either charging people to pass through the barricades or by looting local stores. This type of protest is not uncommon in the French Antilles, where labor conflicts are often accompanied by “unofficial” violent actions at

night. Nor is it uncommon in French society more widely, as evidenced by the Parisian riots of 2005. But in this case the French state responded in a particularly confrontational way, deploying hundreds of gendarmes to the region.

The gendarmes arrested more than 50 demonstrators, according to news reports, and roughed up many of them, including Alex Lollia, an LKP delegate and the head of the multi-industry Confederation of United Workers, who was hospitalized after a confrontation at a barricade. Both professional and amateur journalists closely documented these clashes, and the images of the stark opposition between heavily armed French troops and unarmed local protesters stoked the fires even more.



As the protests radicalized, the police repression increased. (By Dominique Chomereau-Lamotte)

On the night of February 17, after Lollia was hospitalized, the violence reached a new level, resulting in the death of Jacques Bino, an LKP supporter and union militant. Bino was on his way home from an LKP meeting when he found himself heading toward a flaming barricade. As he began to turn his car around, he was fatally shot in the chest. According to the authorities, the shot came from young protesters on the barricades who mistook Bino for a police officer. But many in Guadeloupe question this official story and suspect foul play. The investigation into his death is still ongoing, but many feel that the truth will never be known. During my visit in March, I was repeatedly told: "This is our Kennedy assassination."

Many believe that Bino was murdered to either weaken or discredit the movement. But his death actually served to rally supporters even more. His funeral turned into a massive demonstration as about 25,000 mourners crowded into the small town of Petit Canal to pay him tribute. The death captured the attention of the media once again, and this time even the French president took notice. On February 19 Nicolas Sarkozy met with Antillean elected officials in Paris and offered a public address to the Antillean population, which was broadcast on RFO, the French overseas TV network. He promised to solve the crisis and recognized the need for France to rethink its relationship with its overseas departments. However, in Guadeloupe most remained skeptical and dissatisfied with Sarkozy's statement. That it was transmitted on the overseas network, rather than a French national network, was taken as a sign that the Antilles continue to be regarded as marginal to the French nation.

Soon after Sarkozy's address, LKP leaders returned to the negotiating table with a new set of mediators from mainland France. The powerful economic elite in Guadeloupe, represented by the local chapter of the French business association MEDEF, refused to reach an agreement. However, over the course of the strike a new employer organization had emerged: the UCEG, which represents smaller, local Guadeloupean business owners, many of whom have also long struggled against the economic monopoly of the white elites. Along with local elected officials, these business owners were able to reach an "inter-professional agreement" that would grant a raise of 200 euros to the lowest-paid workers. On February 26 the LKP delegation, local employers' associations, and local elected officials officially signed this agreement—which was called the Jacques Bino Accord.



The prefect declared the general strike over, but in fact it continued until March 4, when a final 165-point agreement was signed. At this point the LKP called for a suspension of the general strike; schools and banks reopened, and many Guadeloupeans returned to work. However, smaller strikes and negotiations



Domota signs a deal with government representatives. (By Dominique Chomereau-Lamotte)

continued, as workers sought to implement the Bino accord in their workplaces. LKP delegates continue to negotiate several of the other elements of the

agreement, including a finalized list of reduced-price grocery items. Meanwhile, an agreement was reached in Martinique on March 11, but a new movement erupted on the French island of Réunion, in the Indian Ocean, and a general strike was declared in France for March 19—fueling fears that the Antillean crisis might spread through the rest of the Republic.

Although labor strikes are common in the French Antilles, the wide impact, mass support, and broad agenda of the LKP strike was unique in Guadeloupe's history. For many, this episode marks the beginning of a new chapter of political and social activism in the French Antilles. Although the LKP was originally conceived as an ephemeral alliance, the massive support that the movement received during its month and a half of uprising have obliged it to take shape as a new political actor. The movement's leaders are now in the process of institutionalizing the LKP, though it remains unclear what form this will take. It is uncertain what the long-term impact of the movement will be and how it will affect the socioeconomic future of Guadeloupe, but one thing is clear, as the new slogan on T-shirts and banners in post-strike Guadeloupe asserts: "Nothing will ever be like it was before!"

Yarimar Bonilla teaches anthropology at the University of Virginia. She is currently writing an ethnography of contemporary labor movements and battles over collective memory in Guadeloupe.

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