

General strike declared in French Guyana

By Kumaran Ira
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A few weeks before the French presidential elections, French Guyana is paralyzed by a general strike. Strikes and road blockades have been ongoing for a week in this French overseas department in South America, bordering Brazil, based on demands on health, education, economy, security and housing.

Protests by health care, transport and energy workers are demanding jobs, pay increases and improvements to the quality of public services. After a week of strikes and demonstrations, largely launched independently of the union bureaucracy, the 37 unions gathered in the Union of Guyanese Workers (UTG) union federation voted to hold a general strike starting today.

At the same time, significant protest movements are mobilizing farmers and agricultural labourers in solidarity with the workers. In recent days, they have set up dozens of roadblocks that control strategic intersections in several cities, including the entrances to the cities of Cayenne, Kourou, Rémire-Montjoly and Saint-Laurent du Maroni.

A dozen roadblocks and strike action are paralyzing the Cayenne airport. A Paris-Cayenne Air France flight had to head back to Paris after four hours flight time when the General Directorate of Civil Aviation (DGAC) radioed that it could not land in Cayenne airport due to a shortage of staff.

Striking electricity workers, Kourou hospital workers, and workers of the Endel corporation have blockaded the entrance to the Guyana space centre in Kourou. They were thus able to prevent the launching of the Ariane 5 rocket, the heart of Guyana's economy, scheduled for March 21. "Due to a social movement, it was impossible to carry out the transfer operations of the launcher of the Final Assembly Structure (BAF) towards the launch area scheduled for today," Ariane-Space declared in a statement.

Strikers also blocked the commercial port, the local authorities, the police prefecture and major roadways.

Farmers are blockading the Agricultural Directorate's buildings. Guyana's schools, junior high schools and high schools have been closed by the authorities "until further notice." University students are reportedly joining the protests.

The strike reflects deep social anger that is building among workers and oppressed social layers after five years of austerity under the Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande. In this department of 200,000 people, 22 percent of workers (18,000 people) are jobless. Youth aged 15 to 24, who make up 46 percent of the unemployed, are the worst hit.

Speaking to France-Info, Senator for Guyana Antoine Karam said there was in Guyana "more insecurity than in the major cities inside France itself." He added, "nearly 30 percent of the population does not have access to either drinkable water or to electricity, but on the other hand we have a space station."

He also pointed to "murder, and armed robbery" in Guyana, claiming, "People will carry out murder for 20 euros, a jewel or a mobile phone."

Guyanese people underscored their deep disappointment with the Hollande administration and the French government. Hollande promised a Pact for the Future of Guyana, which is still not signed.

Maud, 29, a teacher at Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni, told RMC: "Everyone has had it. People feel that no one ever talks about them, but that the situation is truly catastrophic. The Guyanese people have the impression that they have been abandoned by metropolitan France. They do not feel they are treated equally as compared to other departments."

A month before the presidential elections, which are taking place amid explosive social anger in France, the PS government will seek to rapidly end the strike in the overseas department, before it triggers solidarity protests and strikes inside metropolitan France.

On Saturday, the PS government sent an inter-ministerial mission composed of high-ranking administrators to try to find a compromise.

“I call for healing, I call for calm, I call for dialogue, because nothing can ever be built through disorder and confrontation,” declared French Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve. “We have taken measures so that dialogue can begin in Guyana, and so that we can take the measures that should be taken as quickly as possible.”

Speaking to AFP, Overseas Territories Minister Ericka Bareigts called for the ending of the blockades: “The situation is still tense. We do not have unscheduled blockades, but the situation remains complicated.” She said the inter-ministerial mission should examine protesters’ demands “in the short and medium term.”

Workers in struggle can give no confidence either to Hollande’s ministers or to the union bureaucracies negotiating with them. A class gulf separates the trade unions from the workers. Far from leading the struggle, the unions called a strike a week after the movement had begun, posturing as a friend of the movement all the better to strangle it. All the unions fear a confrontation between the working class in Guyana and across France and the deeply unpopular PS government, which the unions defend.

The delegation from Paris will try to make the smallest possible concessions to end the movement with proposals for a few administrative measures. At the same time, the security forces will try to penetrate and intervene in the movement to sow demoralization and stir up divisions, and possibly to provoke fights in order to justify police repression.

As the protests began, members of the newly created “500 Brothers” collective marched in the streets of Cayenne, dressed in black and wearing ski masks. This organization, whose identity is not clearly established, advances right-wing demands for a struggle against delinquency and advocates “the eradication of squatters” and “maintaining a unit of mobile military police as back-up.” Their spokesman is Mickaël Mancée, whom several press reports have described as a “policemen currently available for service.”

“If we did not shock people, no one would ever have heard anything about us,” Mancée replied to a question from journalists who were comparing his organization

to a paramilitary militia. *Vice* speaking to Mancée said, “A dead thief is a thief who does not steal anymore” and threatened that “if petty criminals want war, we will wage it.”

Aiming to end the movement, the PS government plans to rely on the unions to do what is needed to isolate and ultimately strangle the strike, possibly after extended negotiations. Despite the enormous social anger against austerity and the state of emergency in mainland France, the Guyanese unions are not calling for solidarity actions from workers there. They are doing everything they can to isolate strikers in Guyana, block a political struggle against Hollande, and thus force workers to accept the result of their negotiations with the PS.

This offers nothing to the workers, who can only defend their interests by taking their struggle out of the hands of the unions. Unemployment and poverty are not temporary ills due to administrative mismanagement, but the result of the bankruptcy of capitalism after a decade of deep economic crisis and of the PS’ reactionary policies. The only way forward is to appeal on a socialist and revolutionary perspective to the working class, both in France and across Latin America, for support and solidarity action in a struggle against the PS government.

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