

Guadeloupe, labor protest

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Guadeloupe came under the authority of the French crown in 1674 and, with the exception of a few brief British takeovers, has remained under French control until the present day. However, despite its seeming stability as a French territory, its place in the French nation has always been ambiguous, fluctuating, and often violently contested.

French citizenship was originally granted to Guadeloupean residents in 1848 following the abolition of slavery. Yet, this was at best a partial or “colonial citizenship” in that they did not possess the full spectrum of rights and responsibilities as citizens of mainland France. In 1946 political elites in the French Antilles sought to remedy the social and economic disparities in the region by promoting greater integration

into the French nation. Thus, at a time when the colonial territories throughout Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean were being swept into the global tide of decolonization through political independence, politicians in the French Antilles sought to strengthen, rather than break, their ties to the colonial center by fully integrating the Antilles into the French nation as “overseas departments.”

The political project of departmentalization, as conceptualized by its main proponent Aimé Césaire, was born out of the conviction that the lingering economic disparities and structural inequalities that plagued the French Antilles could only be resolved through full political integration into the French nation. However, this move coincided with major shifts in the global market for tropical exports that radically transformed the local economy. As a result, under departmentalization, agricultural production slowly gave way to a service-based economy, centered on tourism, commerce, French imports, a bloated government bureaucracy, and an ever-increasing dependency on French welfare and government subsidies. The collapse of the agricultural economy led to skyrocketing unemployment rates, increased rural-to-urban migration, and significant social unrest, including numerous labor strikes, most notably among agricultural workers. Many of these strikes and protests became the targets of government repression, as in the February 14, 1952 labor strike at the Gardel sugar mill in the town of Le Moule, during which French military police opened fire on striking workers resulting in four deaths and over a dozen injuries.

During this period, the French government sought to calm rising dissatisfactions through the promotion of migration to the French mainland. This led to the creation of an Office for the Development of Migrations from the Overseas Departments (Bureau des migrations intéressant les Départements d’Outre-mer, BUMIDOM), which during its operations from 1963 to 1981 successfully recruited more than 84,000 Antillean workers to mainland France. The establishment of the BUMIDOM responded to numerous objectives, including the stabilization of the political and economic climate in the Antilles, and the demographic control of the *oultre-mer* populations. In addition, Antillean immigrants provided a cheap labor force, particularly for poorly remunerated jobs in the public sector.

Many of these immigrant workers became actively involved with local labor unions and civic associations. Initially, these activists were concerned with improving the reception and training of migrants arriving in France. However, over time, greater emphasis was placed on improving work conditions back home in order to put an end to organized migration from the Caribbean, and specifically to put an end to the BUMIDOM, which became a symbol of the unfulfilled promises of integration. In fact, the BUMIDOM offices were seized by Antillean activists in May of 1968.

As Antillean migrants increasingly headed to the metropole in search of education and employment opportunities, there was also a notable influx of mainland French citizens (locally referred to as *métropolitains*) to the Caribbean overseas departments. These French transplants filled positions as top administrators, civil servants, technocrats, and *cadres* in the enlarged government bureaucracy. The influx of French bureaucrats, combined with the massive migration of Antillean workers, led Aimé Césaire to describe the situation as a form of “genocide by substitution.”

The increasing dissatisfaction of local political elites with the results of departmentalization led to the rise of a new anti-colonial movement in the French Antilles. From the 1960s to the 1980s Guadeloupe experienced a strong nationalist wave that included numerous bombings, riots, and other forms of social protest. This movement was fueled by the militancy of both Antillean workers and students in mainland France. University students in particular were significantly influenced by the struggles for decolonization in the former French colonies, the rise of pan-Africanism, the Cuban and Algerian Revolutions, and the political climate leading up to the May 1968 movement in France. These students came together under new or reinvigorated student associations such as the General Association of Guadeloupean Students (Association Générale des Etudiants Guadeloupéens, AGEG). From the AGEG numerous organizations sprouted, including the Front Antillo-Guyannais (FAG) in 1961 and the Groupe d’Organisation Nationale de la Guadeloupe (GONG) in 1963.

These groups consisted of only a handful of leaders (mostly former AGEG members), but their propaganda campaign against the French presence in the Antilles, and their efforts to

build a mass movement, quickly caught the attention of the French government. In May of 1967, during a GONG-supported labor strike among urban construction workers, national police opened fire on demonstrators leading to three days of racial violence, rioting, and police repression which left numerous Guadeloupeans dead. The exact number of deaths is unknown; at the time French police claimed only seven deaths, while militants claimed that over 45 died in the three-day massacre. In the days that followed, numerous activists and militants were arrested and charged with treason. In 1968, 18 activists were tried for political crimes before the Court of State Security (Cour de Sécurité) in mainland France. Several of them were sentenced to stiff prison sentences for their presumed involvement in the nationalist struggle.

This period of repression led to a shift in the anti-colonial movement in the French Antilles. In response to increased persecution, nationalist activists went underground in the Guadeloupean countryside and began mobilizing agricultural workers. In the tradition of the Marxist and Maoist movements of the time, labor leaders began organizing rural peasants, carrying out literacy campaigns in the countryside, and setting up “night schools” where peasants were taught basic reading and math skills. Labor activists gained wide support from local peasants, in part because of their use of the Creole language, but also because their form of “popular” unionism differed sharply from the previous “old guard” unions that were simple extensions of national organizations in France, and thus ill equipped to address the needs of Guadeloupean workers. These efforts eventually led to the creation of the Union of Agricultural Workers (Union des Travailleurs Agricoles, UTA) in 1970, and the Union of Poor Guadeloupean Peasants (Union des Paysans Pauvres de la Guadeloupe, UPG) in 1972. Both of these unions merged together into the General Union of Guadeloupean Workers (Union Générale des Travailleurs de la Guadeloupe, UGTG) in 1973.

With the rise of this new labor movement, the nationalist current became reinvigorated once again in Guadeloupe. In 1978 labor activists and nationalists created a new political organization, the Popular Union for the Liberation of Guadeloupe (Union Populaire pour la Libération de la Guadeloupe, UPLG), which sought to bring together different factions

of the nationalist movement under the political platform of national independence, while highlighting the importance of cultural practices such as Creole language revival, and an emphasis on *gwo ka* music and dance.

While the UPLG represented a mainstream alternative for nationalist politics, during the 1980s a new series of militant and clandestine pro-independence and armed struggle groups emerged, such as the Armed Liberation Group (Groupe de Libération Armée, GLA), the Caribbean Revolutionary Alliance (Alliance Révolutionnaire Caraïbienne, ARC), and the Popular Movement for Guadeloupean Independence (Mouvement Populaire pour la Guadeloupe Indépendante, MPGI). During the early 1980s these groups claimed responsibility for over 60 bomb attacks throughout the Antilles and mainland France. Targets included hotels, department stores, airline companies, automobile clubs, banks, prisons, restaurants, police stations, and tax offices. Their movement soon became a target for state intervention. In 1984 the French government arrested Luc Reinette, the presumed leader of the MPGI, and by the end of the 1980s the French government had incarcerated or forced into exile many of the movement’s principal leaders.

During the 1990s these armed struggle movements faded away, and labor activism remained the main site of social struggle and protest. The 1990s marked the height of the labor movement’s strength in Guadeloupe as the UGTG expanded into the lucrative hotel industry, the mammoth civil service sector, and other key sectors of the economy such as communications, commerce, and the petroleum industry. These efforts were aided by the political climate of the Mitterrand government in France (1981–95) and its decentralization policies, which created a fertile ground for both labor organizing and social struggle. In addition, union membership rose dramatically during the implementation of the 35-hour work week in France (1998–2000), as workers became syndicated in order to enforce the 35-hour work week in their industries.

Today the UGTG is the largest labor union in Guadeloupe with over 6,000 members and is responsible for over 70 percent of all labor strikes on the island. It currently represents workers across a wide spectrum of labor sectors, including hotels, hospitals, gas stations, civil service, transportation, and even the fast food industry. Although the UGTG has become an

important presence in Guadeloupean politics, it is often criticized for bringing an anti-colonial ideology into the sphere of syndicalism and for becoming involved in struggles that extend beyond the workplace – such as battling for Abolition Day to become a local holiday, or going on strike to force multinational companies to sell their franchises to Guadeloupean workers rather than foreign interests.

In order to engage in these wider struggles, labor leaders have sought to foster the development of a new organization (or cultural arm) charged exclusively with issues of historical memory and cultural identity. In collaboration with a handful of politically engaged historians and university professors, in 2001 they created a new organization called NONM which was charged with expanding the politics of the UGTG beyond the sphere of syndicalism. The organization takes its name from the Creole word for “Man” or “Humanity.” Their stated goal is to *fe nonm*, which in Creole means literally to “make man.” Within the domain of union struggles this idea is often invoked in relationship to the development of an increased *political* consciousness. Labor strikes are thought to *fe nonm* on the picket line through the creation of new social relationships with fellow strikers, bosses, and the wider society. Within the context of the NONM organization, to *fe nonm* speaks to the creation of a new *historical* consciousness through an engagement with local histories of resistance and collective struggle, particularly previous histories of anti-colonial resistance, and the histories of slave revolts and Maroon communities.

As Guadeloupe enters the new millennium, the local labor movement remains an important site of social struggle. Through labor organizing, Guadeloupean activists continue to question the lingering colonial ties that link the French Antilles to mainland France, while simultaneously emphasizing local cultural practices and fostering an active engagement with previous histories of protest and resistance.

SEE ALSO: Caribbean Islands, Protests against IMF; Césaire, Aimé (1913–2008); French Guiana, Political Movements against Departmentalization; Trinidad, Labor Protests

References and Suggested Readings

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