

Martinique: 'Our economy is based on a colonial model'

written by Marcel Sellaye | November 1, 2024



For the past month, the popular movement against the high cost of living in Martinique has been gathering momentum. Marcel Sellaye, an activist in the GRS (Groupe révolution socialiste) and a former leader of the Respé (Résistance ESPoir, Émancipation) list, explains the reasons for the anger and how the movement is continuing.

How did the movement against the high cost of living come about?

There have been some impressive mobilizations by the people of the French West Indies against the high cost of living in recent years: in 2009, they were initiated by the LKP in Guadeloupe and the K5F in Martinique, then, more recently, in the context of the covid pandemic and the less spectacular one of 2021. The movement launched on 1 September 2024 by RPPRAC (Rassemblement pour la Protection des Peuples et des Ressources Afro-Caribéens - Rally for the Protection of Afro-Caribbean Peoples and Resources) specifically targets food prices, which have soared by 40% according to INSEE.

In reality, the high cost of living in the French West Indies, in this case Martinique, is entirely due to the structure of the 'Martinique economy', which has been part of the global economy since 1957 (as part of the European Common Market). The structural high cost of living is aggravated by changes in the global inflationary context.

Martinique's economy is dependent on the French market - a legacy of the colonial economic model based on the principle of exclusive trade with 'metropolitan France' to the detriment of local production. So not only are 80% of foodstuffs imported, but they also pass through the hands of fourteen intermediaries concerned about their profits!

This economic model is very costly for the population, particularly for the working and popular classes (35% of whom live below the poverty line). This market is dominated by the oligopoly GBH (Groupe Bernard Hayot), the leader in mass retailing since 1960 and whose owner is one of the 500 richest people in France. This same dependence also benefits the multinational CMA CGM (which has a monopoly on maritime transport), which contributes to the increase in the cost of purchasing products, which officially stands at around 7%.

What are the demands of the movement?

It all goes back to 2012, when measures were taken to regulate this market through a system of

permanent promotions on basic products (the Price Quality Shield). A system managed exclusively by suppliers and distributors under the benevolent eye of the state.

In 2023, in the face of ever-rising prices, a 'commission of enquiry into the cost of living in the territorial regional authorities governed by Articles 73 and 74', led by Martinique MP Johnny Hajjar (Parti Progressiste Martiniquais, a Césairist party), revealed the opacity of the system and the exorbitant margins built up by supermarkets. It was against this backdrop that the RPPRAC, whose equivalent in France would be the *Gilets jaunes*, emerged.

Launched on social networks, its ambition was to mobilize simultaneously, on 1 September, the peoples of the colonies (Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyana, Réunion) and West Indians living in France. But it is in Martinique, alongside its leaders (Rodrigue Petitot and Aude Goussard), that it is gathering the largest number of people (nearly 800 responded to the call on 1 September) and has since been leading blockades of supermarkets – in particular those belonging to the GBH group (Carrefour).

The movement has undoubtedly succeeded in highlighting this legitimate concern of the population, but it is a pity that, in the name of 'efficiency', it has sidelined the issues of low wages and pensions, health, public services and so on.

It was able to provoke several official 'negotiation' meetings on price cuts, notably at the prefecture and the Territorial Assembly. After more than a month of mobilization, the leaders officially acknowledged that they had been unsuccessful. In any case, this temporary failure has led its leaders to amend their hegemonic discourse and review their relationship with the trade union movement, which they initially claimed to do without, on the pretext in particular of its 'failure in the 2009 movement' and its responsibility for the current situation.

How have the authorities, including the French government, responded?

The government could not pretend to ignore the issue of the high cost of living, especially after the proven failure of previous measures – in which it was complicit – and especially after the publication of the report by the parliamentary commission of enquiry led by MP Hajjar.

What's more, the prefect was careful not to invite the MP to any of the meetings held in the prefecture on the subject. He was firm in his opposition to the demand for transparency made by the RPPRAC, which wanted live coverage of the debates.

He was quick to impose a curfew, following the night-time violence perpetrated on the fringes of the movement and the exchanges of fire between police and demonstrators in the popular neighborhood of Sainte-Thérèse in mid-September.

But the most significant development was the return to France of the CRS (French riot police), who had been deemed undesirable after their misdeeds in Fort-de-France in December 1959. Against a backdrop of high living costs, unemployment, forced emigration, demands for autonomy and popular urban uprisings, three young people were shot dead by the CRS.

What action is the movement planning to take in the near future?

What seemed unthinkable until then, because of the anti-union stance, happened on 28 September, at a rally organized by the CDMT (Martinique Workers' Democratic Federation) against the backdrop of a general strike called by the CGTM union at the Maison des syndicats: the 'official' meeting between the leaders of the RPPRAC and the activists and leaders of the two trade union federations, the activists of the UFM (Union des femmes de Martinique), the activists of the Respé

list (Résistance ESPoir, Émancipation) during a meeting held in the same place in front of a hundred people. The structural high cost of living is aggravated by changes in the global inflationary context.

The meeting launched at the initiative of 3 unions (CGTM, CDMT and UNSA) on 4 October was a first attempt to initiate a collective and in-depth discussion on the relationship with the RPPRAC, but also and above all to think about the reconstruction of deteriorated relationships (at the top of the inter-union organization) and to prepare a popular mobilization, commensurate with the social and environmental stakes, with a guarantee of effectiveness.

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