

GENERAL STRIKE THE EXAMPLE OF GUINEA IN 2024

The facts

February 26th marked the start of a general protest movement in Guinea led by the country's thirteen trade union centres. The scale of the strike was reminiscent of the major trade union protests in February 2007 against the authoritarian regime of President Lansana Conté, which, according to various NGOs, resulted in 186 deaths. The strike was also the first general strike under the CNRD, the Comité Général du Rassemblement pour le Développement, the transitional military junta proclaimed after the coup of 5 September 2021.

The protest movement lasted three days and ended on 28 February 2024 after the release of the head of a press union, a condition considered to be a prerequisite for any discussion, but there were many protests against the junta's policies. This indefinite strike was a crystallisation of the various demands and widespread discontent of the Guinean population.

Context

The Republic of Guinea, with an estimated population of 14,448,353 in 2024. Its capital is in Conakry. The country is currently governed by a military junta. The National Transitional Council serves as parliament, and the President of the transition is Mamadi Doumbouya.



Map from the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs

Sékou Jamal Pendessa is a Guinean journalist and trade unionist. A committed activist, he is the secretary general of the Guinean press professionals' union, the SPPG. Because of his struggle to defend press freedom, his opposition to media censorship and, in particular, his role in the organization of the 'Déferlement sur Conakry' demonstration, he was arrested on 19 January 2024 for undermining the security of the regime. Sentenced a few days later to six months in prison, he was finally released on 28 February 2024.

CHRONOLOGY OF A STRUGGLE



THE ROOTS OF A GENERAL 'FED-UP' FEELING

At the end of December 2023, Guinea suffered the biggest industrial disaster in its history: a powerful explosion destroyed the country's main oil depot. In addition to the huge number of deaths, there was a crisis in oil supplies and a sharp rise in inflation, intensifying Guinea's economic crisis. Another problem emphasizes the crisis: in a context of high inflation, the lack of public policy created major inequalities. At the end of January, a protocol was signed between the junta and the economic sector to impose price ceilings on certain primary products, but this measure was nevertheless accompanied by a

rise in the average price of these products. Another latent criticism of the ruling junta is the censorship of the media and social networks. Since the beginning of 2023, television programmes have been censored, the broadcasting of certain radio programmes suspended and internet connections interrupted, according to NGOs - notably Amnesty International and Ablogui.

- In short, there are clear demands for greater political transparency in the country, for an end of
- the authoritarian political power management, and for effective public policies to fight inflation and the economic crisis in general.

Against a backdrop of general discontent, the arrest of Sékou Jamal Pendessa on 19 January 2024 served as trigger for the protest movement. The dissolution of the transitional government on 19 February 2024 was not enough to calm the movement triggered by his arrest.

^① *Amnesty International, Guinea: Trade unionist Sekou Jamal Pendessa must be released.*



Participant in a demonstration, calling for a 'transitional government'



Michel Pépé Balamou, during a conference at the Syndicat national de l'éducation, April 2021

For Michel Pépé Balamou, General Secretary of the National Education Union (SNE) and member of the National Negotiating Coalition for the trade unions, 'beyond the trade unions, you will see widespread discontent on the ground among all workers, the entire Guinean population, over the impoverishment in which they find themselves, but also the high cost of living, the increase in the price of basic necessities, without prior consultation with the trade unions'.

DW, The Guinean junta confronts the trade unions ②

LAUNCHING AND SPREADING THE GENERAL STRIKE

On 22 February 2024, in a very tense social climate, the thirteen Guinean trade union centres met to organise an unlimited general strike. The unions, supported by the main parties and civil society organisations, agreed to launch the strike four days later, on 26 February 2024. The organisations then called on their supporters 'to scrupulously observe the strike call until the various points set out in the notice have been resolved'.

The Guinean trade union movement's press release was published on various social networks, and the call was heard throughout the country. It sets out five demands on which the trade union centres have reached agreement.

The five demands adopted by the trade union centres:

1. The immediate and unconditional release of the Secretary General of the Guinean Press Professionals' Union (SPPG);
2. Lower prices for basic foodstuffs;
3. Full application of the tripartite protocol agreement signed on 15 November 2023 (an agreement between the government, the trade union movement and employers on the monetary value of the wage index point);
4. Full application of the education sector memorandum of understanding signed on 27 October 2023;
5. Lifting Internet restrictions and freeing up the media.

CONSEQUENCES AND RESOLUTION OF THE CRISIS

On 26th of February, the unlimited general strike was officially launched. For three days, shops, banks and schools in the capital remained closed across a large part of the country. The country's administration was paralysed, and essential services such as hospitals and petrol stations provided only a minimum service.

The ruling military had never before been confronted with a movement on such a scale, involving the entire Guinean population. With rallies and demonstrations banned, the general protest turned into a complete shutdown of the country: the trade unions simply asked workers to stay at home. Spontaneous demonstrations were nevertheless violently repressed in the north of Conakry, resulting in two deaths and more than a dozen injuries.

THE JUNTA'S RESPONSE

On 27 February, on the second day of the general strike, the head of the junta appointed a new prime minister eight days after dissolving the previous government.

Faced with this unprecedented scale of social unrest, the ruling junta bowed to the trade union centres. On 29 February, the general strike was suspended after the release of journalist Sékou Jamal Pendessa. This came after a press release from the Guinean trade union movement, which stated : *'We inform public, private, and informal authorities of our readiness to resume negotiations tomorrow, Thursday. To this end, the Guinean trade union movement is suspending the general and indefinite strike called on Monday, 26 February'*.

- ③ For Sékou Jamal Pendessa, his release represents 'a victory for democracy, for justice against injustice, for justice against arbitrariness. (...) The fight against dictatorship continues and we will fight harder so that the authorities know that they do not have the right of life and death over the population'.

- ③ *AFP, In Guinea, the general strike is suspended after the release of a trade union leader, translated from French*

CONCLUSION

The coordination of the country's various trade union centers in organizing a general strike was effective, meeting the Guinean population's main short-term demands. This movement was supported by the country's trade union centers but, more importantly, was followed by a significant part of the Guinean population, who recognized the importance of backing this protest. Without resorting to violence, this general strike exemplified the effectiveness of civil society movements. In a country where freedom of opinion is stifled and the opposition is repressed, unified action and direct political opposition can make a significant impact.

OPERATIONAL TEACHING

Cooperation between the various trade union centres,

- Be clear on the main demands and make them jointly: the trade union centres have agreed on five main short-term demands. This made for great clarity in the mobilisation. The strikers and demonstrators knew why they were mobilising and the leaders knew what they had to accept to break the deadlock.

Ensuring broad popular support

- A successful general strike requires support from more than just workers, often involving civil society, political parties or consumer associations. In this way, the movement benefited from broad popular support, particularly through street demonstrations and media support, which increased the pressure on the government.

Riding the socio-economic wave

- When workers and the general public perceive that the economic situation is unsustainable, they are more inclined to support the strike: the rising cost of living and difficult working conditions have exacerbated frustrations, creating a climate conducive to mass mobilisation.

Publicising the movement

- Media coverage of the movement is crucial to raise public awareness and highlighting the demands. The local media played a key role in exposing press abuse, with a special joint edition organised by the Hadafa, FIM and Evasion groups.

SOURCES

- AFP, 26/02/2024, 'Guinée : Conakry à l'arrêt pour le début de la grève générale' ;
- AFP, 29/02/2024, 'En Guinée, la grève générale suspendue après la remise en liberté d'un responsable syndical' ;
- Amnesty international, 23/01/2024, 'Guinée : le syndicaliste Sekou Jamal Pendessa doit être libéré' ;
- Sandrine BLANCHARD, DW, 26/02/2024, 'La junte guinéenne confrontée aux syndicats' ;
- Matthias RAYNAL, RFI, 22/02/2024, 'Les centrales syndicales s'accord pour une grève générale'.