

A Cross-examination of Indigenous Trade Unions Voices in the French Pacific Territories.
Regards croisés sur l'engagement anticolonial des syndicalismes autochtones dans les
territoires français du Pacifique sud

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The 'Curse of Wealth': New Caledonia is home to around (or above) an estimated quarter of the world reserve of nickel – the French call it the '*caillou*', the rock – and there is not much hope for indigenous people that multinational corporations will leave a place where there is so much to exploit. SMSP and Xstrata have recently invested US\$3.8 billions in what is to become one of the biggest nickel mining operations in the world. Overall recent mining investments reach US\$7 billions.

The 'Cage of Beauty': Polynesians have been constantly told throughout their colonial history that they were a 'blessed' people living in paradise ('*Le mythe du bon sauvage*'... from Rousseau to Gauguin) with no need to worry or complain because they had the best of what the world had to offer. For instance, such symbolic manipulation can be illustrated in the case of French nuclear experimentations. Unlike other A-bombs, the French ones were allegedly 'clean'. Today the health bill linked to past nuclear related activity is rocketing, which left Polynesians heavily dependent on medical assistance and expertise from the French government beyond the financial compensations already paid by French authorities.

Although the context of colonial dependency differs, the conditions of social discrimination are rather similar. Both islands face dramatic challenges in terms of social integration, with a clear divide between the ruling class, stemming from the French, Territorial administrations, and the 'others', including a significant proportion of urban unemployed and working poor. This has given force to a parallel campaign against the high cost of life ('*campagne contre la vie chère*') concerning those who are not reaping the benefits of being part of the politico-technocratic apparatus. Both also face a daunting problem of economic and environmental sustainability, whether because of the abundance of resources (New Caledonia) which poses the question of preservation of native habitats in the context of mining extension; or in the absence of resources (Tahiti), which heightens the dependency on welfare provisions. Further, a common issue of social exclusion and deculturation is particularly acute along the urban/rural divide (or core/periphery in the case of remote islands), and especially for young native people cut off from their traditional way of living and lured by a Western like consumption society.

Despite having to deal with common social issues (and a common colonial ruler) New Caledonian and Polynesian trade unions (including indigenous led trade unions) are acting in relative isolation from each other. Insular dynamics also evolve in isolation from English-speaking countries of the Pacific. This is less so for Kanak people gaining access to external political representation in their quest for decolonisation. This can be explained by two factors: Melanesians and Polynesians are quite distinctive peoples with exclusive cultures. The lack of English proficiency is definitely a major obstacle for both communities. Noteworthy though, both Polynesian and Kanak trade unionists were expressing concerns about indigenous Australians while being unaware of, but overwhelmingly interested in hearing about, Australian labour politics and industrial relations broadly.

In both regions, the prevalence of indigenous trade unions in the representative chessboard exacerbates internal union rivalry. The dominant, French-led, trade unions – affiliated to the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT); the USOENC (New Caledonia) and A Tia I Mua (Polynesia) – openly condemn the political orientation of indigenous (pro-independence) trade unions, i.e., the USTKE and O Oe To Oe Rima, respectively, as well as other minor French union antennas, such as, Force Ouvrière (FO). While the USOENC and A Tia I Mua are home grown trade unions, relatively autonomous and with a long standing history (the CFDT providing expert services and representative access to the ITUC), they both align themselves to the CFDT's culture of social dialogue and business unionism, away from political activism. In contrast, indigenous trade unions fully embrace a model of political unionism. In both regions, indigenous trade unions are capitalising from having their political wing in power. This occurs much more organically in New Caledonia, through the FLNKS and the Labour Party, than in Polynesia where there is a leadership competition between O Oe To Oe Rima and Oscar Temaru, the leader of Tavini Huiraatira (Polynesian Liberation Front), President of the Territorial Government (Assembly of Polynesia).

Although French-led trade unions organise indigenous and non indigenous workers with indifference to ethnicity – it must be noted for instance that the USOENC has been doing much to advance Kanak workers' status and conditions throughout its history – Polynesian and Kanak indigenous trade union organisations display a distinctive racial demarcation and, especially in the case of the USTKE, a clear political motivation. It must be noted that the racial component is central to the analysis: Polynesia is much more interracial than New Caledonia where there is a notable black white divide; multiculturalism now is the dominant feature of French Polynesia and blurs the cards of the pro-independence movement.

O Oe To Oe Rima is a relatively weak under resourced trade union (in terms of organisation and membership) compared to the USTKE, which is the second dominant union in New Caledonia after the USOENC, but its leader is particularly charismatic and the uncontested Polynesian trade union voice in the media. In a research interview I conducted with O Oe To Oe Rima he claimed that trade unionism is a way to provide traction to the struggle for independence, which is otherwise rather 'without direction'. Another Polynesian trade union (OTAHI) has been on the

rise lately (after a split from FO) and is based on an organising model. OTAHI is mostly organising low wage unqualified Tahitian workers (bus drivers, cleaners, council workers), with considerable success. OTAHI is sympathetic to the Polynesian Liberation Front but not politically branded as anti-colonial. Interestingly, my interview research suggests OTAHI's leadership recognises that, much more than the capital, the Territorial administration (the politico-bureaucratic class) is the 'enemy'. OTAHI's organising success relates to the fact that this union networks along traditional family lines (rather than occupations), which makes sense ethnographically as Polynesian societies are based on family structures and clans. Likewise, to a certain extent in New Caledonia, the Melanesian people are tribal. Hence the USTKE's slogan: 'Usines Tribus, Môme Combat' (Factories, Tribes, Same Struggle) (<http://ustke.org/>). The foundation constitution of the USTKE (drawn by former Kanak union activists) was, indeed, a definite racial and political statement explaining why Kanak workers had to create their own trade union:

Us as a People are different and the 'cultural', 'social' and 'political' distinctiveness of Kanak workers are improperly represented by existing unions (...) Before colonisation, our society was a rich civilisation, a culture based on ancestral rules which command respect; a culture that the colonial (brutal) forces wanted to break but that is still alive and standing and which is our distinctive identity (...) We are numerically superior but economically subordinated (our value systems not being the same) and we are considered as inferior beings (...) The exploitative violence of capitalism does not suit the Kanak way of life (...) We are a colonised People, our dignity has been scorned ; we seek to regain our freedom and we will carry on the struggle till we see the day of an independent and socialist Kanak country... [author's translation of extracts of the 1981 USKE foundation statement] (also see Israël 2007: 285-286).

Thirty years on, the interview conducted with one of the foundation members and co-leader of the USTKE echoed this foundation statement. While, quoting an ex- (murdered) Kanak political leader, he explained that the challenge of independence was 'to manage inter-dependencies'. 'After all', he concluded it was just 'a matter of dignity'.