

Independence, Dependencies and Inter-dependencies: Contextualizing Labour Voice in the French Pacific Territories

Capacity Building in the Asia Pacific

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Factory in Moorea, twin island of Tahiti



Tahitian Trade Union's HQ



Research Background

- No literature on Caledonian and French Polynesian IR in English speaking journals
- Not much (if anything) in French mainstream metropolitan IR literature either
- Too exotic to matter?
- Ethnographic and language barriers
- The French 'screen'

Determinants of Colonial Subordination

- **New Caledonia, The Curse of Wealth:**
 - 25% of world reserve of nickel – GDP per capita > NZ – Billions of investments in mining developments
 - Long standing labour history linked to the mining and metal industry
- **Tahiti, The Cage of Beauty:**
 - Who would complain to live in 'Paradise'?
 - Fireworks in Paradise, 1966-1996: over 180 A Bombs
 - Paradise almost entirely subsidised by France, in economic disarray and huge health bill

Anti-Colonial Labour and Political Forces

- **New Caledonia:**
 - USTKE (Kanak and Exploited Workers Unions)
 - FLNKS and Labour Party
 - Militant and strongly organised
 - The 'Events' (1980s) and the Politics of a 'Common Destiny'
 - Referendum on self determination to come 2014
- **Tahiti:**
 - O Oe To Oe Rima (pro independence)
 - OTAHI
 - Leader of Tavini Huiraatira (Polynesian Liberation Front), President of the Territorial Government
 - Independence being very controversial among Polynesians, yet Polynesia is now on the UN list of people to be decolonized

Comparing Apple with Oranges?

Contextualised Comparison: 'Sticking points' (e.g.: *vie chère*; territorial administration) & 'Fault lines' (ethnographic differences; degree of industrialisation and economic autonomy)

A difficult, controversial yet fundamental question

- Unions being a voice of emancipation, a vector of social cohesion/partnership or a vehicle of colonial subordination?
- Indigenous led trade unions of foremost importance

Focus on New Caledonia

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]