

France: Socialist mayor threatens to evict homeless immigrants by force

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Jean-Yves Le Bouillonnet, the Socialist Party deputy mayor of Cachan in the south Paris suburbs, told the press on September 1 that he “will not hesitate” to take legal measures to forcibly evict some 200 people that have taken refuge in a gymnasium after previously being evicted from a squat.

“I am trying to find a solution through dialogue,” he stated, “but the possibility of seeking a court order exists and I will not hesitate to use it if I see that the situation remains unresolved, if I am prevented from restoring the gymnasium to its functions or if the sanitary situation demands it.” Monday was the start of the school year and the hall is normally used by school pupils.

The squatters are immigrants. They took refuge in the gymnasium at the invitation of Le Bouillonnet after being evicted from an abandoned five-storey former student residence, Building F, on the university campus of the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Cachan. A massive force of 500 CRS (Compagnies Republicaines de Securite) riot police was deployed against the squatters on August 17, on the orders of Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy. Many men had left for work, leaving the women and the children. Using a ram to break down doors, the police evicted 508 people, including 141 children.

The deputy mayor explained that he had agreed to temporarily accommodate the families and children in the gymnasium “because they had been in the street for two days in the rain.”

Le Bouillonnet and the Socialist Party have not made the brutal clearing of Building F the centre of a campaign against Sarkozy’s policy of forced evictions from dilapidated buildings, started in the aftermath of the Vincent Auriol, Paris-Opéra hotel and other fires in Paris, which killed some 50 immigrant workers and children last year. Nor have they seen it as the occasion to oppose the draconian immigration laws passed this year. Instead, they have fallen into line with Sarkozy, the president of the ruling Gaullist UMP (Union for a People’s Movement) and candidate for the 2007 presidential elections.

The Socialist Party could have sought mass backing for the requisition of empty property to solve the immediate situation, a key demand of the homeless. This is provided for under a 1948 law applying to emergency situations like the Cachan

squat. But, as was revealed with the Vincent Auriol fire last year, the Socialist Party and its Communist and Green allies are unwilling and incapable of challenging the property speculators who are busy exploiting skyrocketing house prices.

The homeless support association DAL (Right to Housing) reports that speculation in property has led to 409,491 dwellings lying vacant in the Ile de France region around Paris. In Paris itself, the figure went from 20,000 in 1962 to a staggering 136,554—a full 10.1 percent of Paris’s total housing stock. The situation has worsened since then.

As of November 30, 2001, 152,532 Parisians—7.5 percent of the population—were living in extremely overcrowded conditions. There were 100,239 applications for council housing in Paris, of which 89,831 were in the priority category. But only 8,000 to 10,000 dwellings were allocated yearly. DAL reports a distinct discrimination against immigrant families.

This is the background to the situation of the Cachan squat, following 25 years in which the Socialist Party and its Communist and Green allies have often occupied presidential and governmental office.

Paris and many of its suburban towns, including Cachan, are administered by combinations of these parties. Building F had been inhabited by homeless immigrants since 2001. Known as the largest squat in France, they called themselves “les Mille de Cachan”—the Cachan Thousand. Many were from the Ivory Coast, Mali and Senegal and included 200 children in their numbers. They were crammed into 300 small student rooms (9 metres square) with improvised wiring and poor sanitation.

In 2004 the local student accommodation agency won a court order to evacuate and demolish the building to make way for a car park. However, officials feared mass resistance if they forced an eviction.

A helper from a local women’s support group, Mariama Diallo, quoted in the *Guardian*, gives a good idea of the desperation that led people to set up home in a building so unfit for human habitation. She said that conditions inside the squat “tested the limits of human endurance.... When I come out, I scrub myself but I can still feel fleas. The place has never been fumigated. You can’t breathe from the smell of damp, leaks and decaying building. It’s nauseating. I see children covered in rashes, kids with allergies or asthma, but what can their

parents do?”

One of the victims of the eviction told the press, “We weren’t living in such a building for pleasure ... We were obliged to be there because we could not find accommodation.”

At an August 30 demonstration in Paris protesting the Cachan eviction one protester told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that he and his wife and three-year-old daughter had been evicted from the squat and had since been staying in the gymnasium. “I’m from the Ivory Coast and have been living in France since 2002,” he said. “My application to stay here was rejected for lack of proof, so I do not have papers. I came to France because of the war in the Ivory Coast. The authorities are inhuman and police brutality is cruel. As I am illegal I don’t have the resources to provide for my family, so I live with the help of my friends. I can’t even put my daughter in a nursery school because I have no fixed address.”

According to a *Guardian* report, only half of the squatters were asylum-seekers or illegal immigrants. The rest had legal status to remain in France, but could not find housing because of racism and discrimination. Some had jobs: a 25-year-old electrician had been living in France legally since the age of 13. He said, “I have a decent job and enough money to rent a flat. You’d think I would be able to find a roof over my head without having to live in a squat, but not in France. I experience racism every single day, in every aspect of life.”

Local officials insisted that the eviction of building F had “passed off smoothly.” However, a leaflet distributed by *Le rassemblement des collectifs des ouvriers sans papiers des foyers*, a joint organisation of people in immigrant workers hostels, gives this account of events:

“On Friday 18 August the people from the building, who had decided to stay together, gathered in front of it. They were charged by the police, who had previously entirely encircled them ... many people were struck, several had to go to hospital. Four people were injured, including a baby, a mother (with a fractured knee) and a father (broken ribs).”

It is reported that about 60 undocumented immigrants (*sans papiers*) have been arrested, including pregnant women, and they are now under threat of deportation. Three evicted Cachan squatters *sans papiers* have already been deported.

Some 200 of the evicted families are refusing offers of temporary accommodation in hotels. They see this as a means of splitting them up, while providing no permanent solution to their housing needs.

Le Bouillonnet reported that out of 352 adults that have taken refuge in the gymnasium, “190 have indicated that they are *sans papiers* and 142 are legal.” Also, “out of the 254 people who have accepted hotel accommodation, 129 accompanied by 61 children are *sans papiers* and 121 adults and 70 children are legal.”

Since the decision of Le Bouillonnet to allow the squatters to reside in the gymnasium, he and Sarkozy have been squabbling as to who is responsible for housing them.

Sarkozy declared last week, “When I had the Cachan squat cleared, incredibly, some parliamentarians mobilised against it, although there has been a court ruling since 2004 which states that it is dangerous to leave families there.... When they set up on the pavement I had the pavement cleared, and the Socialist mayor of Cachan decided to accommodate them in the gymnasium.... Well, now it’s his problem”.

Le Bouillonnet responded by requesting that the *préfecture*, which answers to the minister of the interior, reactivate its “offer of provisional hotel accommodation for people with a legal status and thus meeting the requirements of the re-housing arrangements which had been made.” The Cachan Socialist Party administration’s acceptance of the splitting of the squatters into legals and *sans papiers* without rights is confirmed by a statement from the *préfecture* reported by Le Bouillonnet: “No offer of accommodation was sought nor offered for people in an illegal situation.”

The Socialist, Communist and Green parties, who participated in Jospin’s Plural Left government (1997-2002) when the Cachan squat began, make a show of solidarity with the popular movement against Sarkozy’s Immigration Law and for the right to stay of immigrant school children and students and their families. However, the Socialist Party indignantly refutes Sarkozy’s “demagoguery accusing the Socialist Party of wanting to regularise all *sans papiers*.” An August 29 SP communiqué states: “We want a regularisation with clear criteria and objectives, as we were able to do under the government of Lionel Jospin.”

This is in line with the SP election programme, adopted in July, which calls for controlled immigration with the collaboration of transit countries. Many of today’s *sans papiers* were illegal under the Jospin government.

August 23 was the tenth anniversary of the eviction of 300 *sans papier* families and children from the Saint Bernard church under the Gaullist government of Prime Minister Alain Juppé. The images of the CRS police smashing down the doors of the church and violating its sanctuary shocked millions of French people and the memory is still vivid. The Gaullist minister of the interior at the time, Jean-Louis Debray, in the face of mass opposition, decided to regularise 20 percent of the many thousands requesting residence permits. Under Jospin, Minister of the Interior Jean-Pierre Chevènement’s immigration law raised this to only 50 percent, leaving thousands to face persecution and expulsion.



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