

France: Immigrant hunger strikers in a critical condition

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As of this writing, a hunger strike by seven squatters evicted from a disused student residence on the Cachan university campus in the south of Paris is in its 38th day. The hunger strikers, immigrants who are demanding legal residence in France and decent housing, began their action August 22. According to a statement issued earlier this week by Doctor Patrice Muller, “They are entering a critical phase. They are extremely weak and are in danger of incurring irreversible muscular and neurological damage.”

The hunger strikers are part of a group of over 200 people, largely African immigrants, who have taken temporary refuge in a gymnasium made available to them by the Cachan municipality. They had been forcibly evicted by CRS riot police from the former student residence where over 600 people had been living.

Many of the squatters, known as the “Cachan Thousand,” are French nationals and at least half have legal residence status. They are the victims of a housing crisis in the Paris region and throughout France which hits the poorest and the most vulnerable hardest. Legal immigrants are badly affected by the housing shortage, but the fate of undocumented immigrants is even worse.

A woman with tuberculosis is among the people crammed into the gymnasium, and two children have been diagnosed with chicken pox. There has also been an outbreak of diarrhoea. The Val-de-Marne department authorities have offered to accommodate pregnant women and mothers with young children in a centre in Créteil to avoid their becoming infected.

Fidèle Niétima, spokesperson for the Cachan Thousand, was wary of the offer. “It’s another pretext to pull the wool over people’s eyes,” she said. “Before, at the squat, it was the fire risk. Today, at the gymnasium, it’s tuberculosis and then chicken pox.”

World Socialist Web Site reporters visited the gymnasium last week. Inside they saw women and infants sitting on mattresses. Clothes, suitcases, plastic bags, fluffy toys filled every space. Most women can’t sleep because the children cry at night. Babies sleep in pushchairs. Women come and go with babies strapped to their backs. There are only five toilets. Some men were outside on the top of the steps taking shelter under sheeting.

The Val-de-Marne department council provides 100 meals at noon and in the evening. The people there say it is not sufficient. Soumahoro Issoufou, a Cachan Thousand delegate, said, “Today we are practically in the street because the gymnasium is no place to live. We have to put up with it because we have no choice, because of our concern to protect the children amongst us.”

Salim said: “I’m trying to find my few belongings taken by the authorities when we were evicted. I haven’t found them yet. [Gaullist Minister of the Interior] Sarkozy is encouraging hatred. What I want is the country which gave birth to Victor Hugo, Balzac, Pasteur, etc.... not one governed by a nobody. Let him give me back my things. I want to go back home.”

One of the hunger strikers, Togola Seydou, wrapped in a blanket, read out an open letter addressed to President Jacques Chirac asking for their normalization: “We are not dangerous, we are in danger. We are not criminals, nor lazy, nor thieves, nor taking advantage. We are men, women, children in a world without ears, without eyes, without reason, without hands.”

Salim Z, another hunger striker, declared, “For my part, I’m not putting my life in danger for documents but rather to protest to the state and the authorities and call for more humanity because I have no other way to oppose this human distress. I’m crying out against destitution so that the “top people,” those great gentlemen who are in power, act responsibly and bring an end to this tragic situation which dishonours France. We ask for the hope for life in freedom and we have had enough of hiding like murderers.”

Rouane Otmame, a Moroccan, said, “Our demand is normalization of all the Cachan sans papiers (undocumented immigrants) and for the re-housing of the families.”

Sarkozy has stated that the evictees are responsible for their own plight because they were persuaded by “associations politically influenced by the far left [who] advised the families of African origin evicted from the Cachan squat... to refuse the proposals for rehousing proposed by the préfecture.”

One of the people from the gymnasium explained, “We refused the prefecture’s offer, which was to put us in hotels and to kick us out ten days after... then back into the street. People were arrested in their hotels, then it was the retention centre. You can’t cook in a hotel and we certainly don’t have the means to go to a restaurant twice a day. Also, these places are very far from workplaces, and that creates difficulty for our jobs and our income.”

There have been many demonstrations of support for the evicted Cachan squatters and those taking refuge in the gymnasium, part of a movement in support of the rights of undocumented immigrant children and their families. Volunteers have brought supplies and helped with problems.

People in the gymnasium told stories of ordinary people from Cachan and other towns bringing food and water and washing clothes. Two mothers with new-born children were taken in by

local families. Volunteers help school pupils with homework after school, but stress that the trauma for the younger children is very great.

Pierre Derrouch, head of the office of the Val-de-Marne préfet—the local police chief—declared on September 25 that his préfecture “would not be making any other offers of emergency accommodation.”

At least 50 people evicted from the Cachan squat have been arrested. Ten have been deported and others are in retention centres. The police in the vicinity of the gymnasium constantly stop and search immigrants.

On September 16, a Mali national who had gone to collect his child from school was arrested outside the school and taken to a detention centre. The next day some twenty police used tear gas and batons against people attempting to prevent the arrest of another person from the gymnasium. Several people have been injured in such incidents.

The hunger strike has been all but ignored by the media, and there is no general awareness of the critical state of the strikers.

The web sites of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party carry statements calling for the people in the gymnasium to be moved to other accommodation, but make no reference to the hunger strikers. The latest communiqués and Internet issues of the “far left” LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire—Revolutionary Communist League) and LO (Lutte Ouvrière—Workers Struggle) also ignore the hunger strike. Only the Communist Party daily *L’Humanité*, in its September 27 edition, mentions it as a minor feature in its Current News column.

LO and the LCR make calls for all sans papiers to be normalized. They say they reject a political alliance with the Socialist Party because of its “free market,” pro-capitalist programme. Yet they consistently ally with them on protests against the government on social issues. Without this the SP would be deprived of any left credibility.

This was demonstrated when the widespread sympathy for the evicted Cachan squatters obliged the coalition partners (the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Greens) of Lionel Jospin’s Plural Left government (1997-2002), voted out of office because of its pro-capitalist policies, to call a press conference outside the gymnasium on September 25.

The Socialist Party was officially represented by former minister Jack Lang, who had voted in June for the Socialist Party programme for the 2007 elections that calls for tough immigration controls. It is widely recognised that the immigration policies of the Socialist Party and the ruling Gaullist party are virtually identical.

The Socialist Party largely agrees with Sarkozy’s new immigration law restricting immigration to those people useful to employers, as well as his policy of involving the governments of transit countries such as Senegal in the policing of migration to Europe. The leading contender for the presidential candidacy of the Socialist Party in the 2007 elections, Ségolène Royal, on a visit to Senegal this week complained that Sarkozy was stealing her ideas for restricting immigration.

Also present at the press conference were Communist Party National Secretary Marie-Georges Buffet, Noël Lamère and Alain

Lipietz of the Greens, Arlette Laguiller of LO and Olivier Besancenot of the LCR.

The group, standing in front of the gymnasium, made a united appeal for the “urgent re-housing” of the people inside. This meant moving them to a disused office block, not providing them with permanent accommodation. Laguiller and Besancenot did not embarrass their counterparts in the other parties with calls for the normalization of all sans papiers, nor did accounts of the press conference in *l’Humanité* or other media outlets make any reference to the hunger strikers.

There was no attempt to use the press conference to launch a mass campaign for the repeal of France’s racist immigration laws or a halt to the on-going campaign of Sarkozy to expel 25,000 undocumented immigrants annually.

The Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Greens have been concentrating their political efforts on campaigning in support for Joseph Rossignol, a Socialist Party sympathiser and mayor of Limeil-Brévannes, in the Val-de-Marne department, who is engaged in a legal battle with the local préfet to move the people in the gymnasium to the former offices of the Atomic Energy Commission.

The préfet had posted police officers at the entrance of the building to prevent Rossignol and a team of municipal councillors from inspecting the building and assessing the “minor work” needed to make it “habitable.”

This campaign serves to divert attention from the immigration policy of the Socialist Party and its failure to offer any solution for France’s housing crisis.

What is necessary is a complete break with the market economics of the Socialist Party and the European Union and the mobilisation of the French and European working class on a socialist perspective.

This entails a crash programme of housing construction and the requisitioning of buildings to provide for the pressing needs of the homeless and those living in crowded or substandard housing. It must be based on an internationalist policy of unity with the struggles of the peoples of the former colonies, who have been impoverished by centuries of European and American imperialist plunder, and a defense of their right to freedom of movement.



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