

France: Immigrant squatters pressured into accepting dispersal

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10 October 2006

On October 5, at the Cachan town hall in south Paris, the representatives of several hundred immigrant squatters, most of who had been living in a municipal gymnasium for 48 days, were pressured into an agreement that will disperse them without meeting their demands. The mainly African immigrants were evicted on August 17 from a university student residence in Cachan. Of the 30 squatters' delegates at the meeting, three voted against the agreement and six abstained.

The *sans papiers* (undocumented immigrants) amongst them will be separated from those legally resident in France. Their struggle with the local and national government to win residence rights and decent housing has been thwarted and the *sans papiers* placed in danger.

An important element in forcing the hand of the squatters' representatives was the fate of six hunger strikers, by then in the 42nd day of their hunger strike. With two in hospital, doctors had warned that their vital organs were in a critical state. The hunger strike has now been called off.

Negotiations took place with representatives of Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy and mediators from the organisations LICRA (Ligue contre le racisme et l'antisémitisme—League against Racism and Anti-Semitism) and SOS Racisme. Also involved was the Socialist Party mayor of Cachan, Jean-Yves Lebouillonec.

Le Figaro (October 6) stated that "for the first time since the beginning of the crisis the former squatters... have agreed to be housed in several places," adding that for the *sans papiers*, "there is no guarantee of normalization."

Sarkozy, the main contender for the presidential nomination for the ruling Gaullist UMP (Union for a People's Movement) in the 2007 elections, declared himself satisfied with the outcome. It is fully in line with his goal of stepping up the pace of deportations of undocumented immigrants to 25,000 this year.

The government has merely given assurances to the *sans papiers* that, while their dossiers are being re-examined, they will not be arrested. One of Sarkozy's counsellors stated, "We have made no commitment, the law will be applied."

Most of the application dossiers have already been treated many times and those who could be normalized "have already been selected out," he added.

Hours before the meeting, the squatters' spokesperson Fidèle Nitiéma had said of previous government proposals, "They want to send us packing to different places in order to break up the movement."

Until their dossiers have been re-examined, the 158 identified *sans papiers* will be dispersed to four residences run by the state financed NGO specialising in asylum seekers, France Terre d'AsileMarne, and to hotels.

For the evicted squatters legally residing in France, 120 places in hostels in Paris are to be provided provisionally, awaiting the promised allocation of permanent council housing in various Val-de-Marne communes by the end of December.

The CROUS (Ministry of Education student housing organisation) obtained a court order in 2004 for the eviction of the some 1,000 people squatting at that time in its disused student residence. It was gradually being cleared when the brutal eviction of the remaining 500-600 people by the CRS riot police took place on August 17.

Exhausted after 49 days of taking refuge in an overcrowded gymnasium, concerned for the health of the children, and fearing the death of the six hunger strikers, the delegates were browbeaten into submission.

The hunger strike was itself an act of desperation brought about by the failure of the "left" parties to mobilise the working class in defence of the squatters. President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin were forced to intervene in order to engineer an agreement before they had deaths on their hands, but they did so on the government's terms. Safie Ba, a delegate for the women, in explaining the decision to accept the government's proposition, said, "We did not want there to be a death."

On September 1, when it was clear that the squatters would not leave the gymnasium that the Cachan municipality had put at their disposal two weeks before, Mayor Le Bouillonec threatened to seek a court order for

eviction. He was forced to abandon this threat by popular opposition, so instead he proposed alternative accommodation in a disused office block owned by the Atomic Energy Commission.

The various “left” parties then concentrated all their efforts on shadow boxing with Sarkozy’s state representative, the préfet Bernard Tomasino, demanding that they be allowed to remove the squatters to the office block in the nearby commune. Tomasino revealed in a recorded telephone conversation that the Socialist and Communist Party mayors and councillors did, in fact, have alternative accommodation under their jurisdiction in at least two empty buildings—the Collège de Vallenton and the Centre Cherioux.

As a hunger strikers’ leaflet put it, “We are the victims of a political game which in no way respects human rights.”

The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR—Revolutionary Communist League) played a leading role in the Cachan squatters’ campaign. But its demands for “a house, residence papers, a school for all” were made subordinate to the LCR’s political alliances with forces within the Socialist Party—and with the Communist Party—which played a central role in ensuring the isolation of the squatters.

A key role in railroading the squatters’ delegates into accepting Thursday’s protocol was played by the two supposedly “independent” mediators appointed by Sarkozy. One mediator, Patrick Gaubert, the president of LICRA, is also a deputy of the European Parliament, allied to the ruling Gaullist UMP. Gaubert takes a special interest in the European Union’s measures against illegal immigration.

An article on his web site reports that Gaubert led a delegation of European deputies to the Canary Islands and called for the beefing up of the European anti-immigrant task force Frontex for “the protection of the outer frontiers” of the European Union. From 1993 to 1995, he had responsibilities in the government of Prime Minister Edouard Balladur, a mentor of Sarkozy, and worked with the hard-line law-and-order minister of the interior, Charles Pasqua.

The other mediator, Dominique Sopo, president of SOS Racisme, has had a long association with the Socialist Party and with Malik Boutih, the former president of the association, who takes a leading role in elaborating the party’s immigration policy. Its programme for the 2007 elections called for controlled immigration limited to those deemed economically useful.

Le Figaro wrote of Sopo’s role, “The families were mistrustful of the authorities. He convinced them to accept a case-by-case solution and to stop the hunger strike when the minister of the interior asked him to mediate.”

Though Gaubert and Sopo were officially designated as mediators only on October 4, they had been working unofficially for more than two weeks with the squatters’ representatives and had been in regular contact with Sarkozy’s staff.

The “left” parties and rights groups most closely involved with the squatters’ movement have all portrayed the agreement as a victory. SP Mayor Lebouillonnet commented, “The state agreed to understand their distrust.”

The Communist Party president of the Val-de-Marne department council, Christian Favier, declared, “Reason . . . seemed to have prevailed. I can only rejoice at that.” The CP’s web site proclaimed “a victory for the mobilisation” and “another failure for the minister [Sarkozy].” The LCR said that its mobilisation in defence of immigrants “is beginning to bear fruit” and that “this proves that it is possible to force the government to retreat.”

Richard Moyon of RESF (Réseaud d’Education sans Frontière—Network for Education Without Borders) said, “[T]he minister has eaten his hat on the Cachan affair.” DAL (Droit au Logement—the Right to a Home) asserted “at this stage the balance sheet of the struggle of the Cachan Thousand is positive . . . some of the evicted will be normalized.”

Jean-Louis Borloo, minister of social cohesion, labour and housing, and a supporter of Sarkozy’s bid for the UMP presidential nomination, praised these associations in very revealing terms. He said they were “very useful organisations for our country... They act also as barometers of the situation . . . The main point is that a solution has been found.”



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