

France: Police attack defenders of immigrant school children

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On March 20, police assaulted a group of people seeking to prevent the arrest of an undocumented Chinese immigrant who had come to collect his grandsons from the Rampal infant school in the Belleville district of Paris. The police attack has provoked a wave of revulsion amongst teachers, parents and the working class population in the community and throughout France.

The afternoon before police had stopped a young undocumented Chinese woman who had come to the school for her niece. After a half-hour argument, the school's headmistress, Valérie Boukobza, managed to win her release, although not before police searched the woman. Residents and protesters were thus alerted to the police presence in the area.

The following day police officers were making identity checks in the vicinity of the Rampal school when they arrested the grandfather, a *sans papier* (person without documents), whose name was not made public. They surrounded the café where the grandfather was waiting for his grandsons to come out of school. Members of the Education without Borders Network (Réseau Education Sans Frontières—RESF) and local residents tried to place themselves between the grandfather and the police, and stood in front of the police car which had come to arrest the older man. Police responded by threatening to release dogs on the protesters and then attacking them with tear gas, near the entrance to the infant school. Videos of the incident are circulating on the Internet.

Three days later Boukobza was summoned by the police, believing she was merely being called in as a witness to the events. She was then held in custody for seven hours on suspicion of “insulting behaviour to the police and damage to property,” because she had protested the arrest of the Chinese man. A crowd of a hundred people gathered outside the police station and remained until she was released.

Boukobza categorically denied the accusations. She asserted in a statement, “What we did last Tuesday in Rue Rampal, many others would have done in the same way. It is only carrying out one’s duty to protect children and their families and engage in peaceful resistance to a form of oppression.”

The following Monday, March 26, 2,000 people participated in a demonstration in front of the Paris *rectorat* (regional office of the education ministry) at the Sorbonne. The rally was called

by the teachers’ unions, parent organisations and the RESF to protest against the detention of the headmistress and demand the dropping of all charges against her.

The *rectorat*, whose statutory job it is to give support to teachers in legal matters, washed its hands of Boukobza. It told a delegation that “as the events took place off the school premises and after school time . . . if the headmistress committed an offence, the *rectorat* is neither obliged to support nor protect her.”

A call by the teachers’ unions for a protest strike of primary schools in the Paris area closed over 80 schools on March 30, affected hundreds of others and brought many demonstrators into the streets. They demanded that no disciplinary action be taken against Boukobza by the education authority.

Since then, all charges against the headmistress have been dropped.

It should be noted that the teachers’ unions called out only teachers in the primary schools, and not those in the secondary schools, despite the fact that arrests and deportations of school and university students are taking place. RESF has reported that “17 young adult *lycée* [high school] students from Seine-Saint-Denis [a working class suburb to the north of Paris] have so far received orders to leave French territory. The *préfet* [police chief] is responding to the toughening of the law. He has violated his promise not to bother *sans papier* pupils during the school year.”

The next day, some 10,000 people—including a contingent of children from Rampal school, a large number of entire families and many teachers—participated in a demonstration in Paris. They marched to protest against “all forms of discrimination” and to defend the rights of *sans papier* families with children. The protest was called by several organisations, including the RESF, the FCPE (the main national parents association), DAL (Right to Housing) and Droits Devant (Rights Forward).

The demonstrators chanted, “Not the *sans papiers*, but Sarkozy should be kicked out;” “Sarkozy and Le Pen out, we’re here to stay;” “No arrests or expulsions! Equal educational rights for all children;” “Hands off our children! Stop the expulsions!”

The French presidential election will take place April 22. According to residents, the police have increasingly been

stopping anyone who looks “foreign” in the Belleville area. It is impossible to say whether or not this is a deliberate provocation, staged by the camp of Nicolas Sarkozy, presidential candidate of the ruling Gaullist UMP (Union for a People’s Movement) and, until a few days ago, the minister of the interior.

In any event, Sarkozy has jumped in at every opportunity, including the recent police riot at the Gare du Nord, to stoke up anti-immigrant prejudice and divert attention from the social crisis and the right-wing government’s record, as well as from his proposed free-market, anti-welfare state and repressive policies. He had previously issued orders for the police to refrain from provocative arrests inside and in front of schools. In the face of the mass reaction he again requested the police to draw in their horns.

On Monday Sarkozy launched his new book, *Ensemble* (Together), in which he painted a picture of a “France exasperated by the challenge to the national identity by uncontrolled immigration,” and he blamed immigration, not discrimination and increasing social desperation, for civil disturbances and the urban riots in the autumn of 2005. He promised, if elected, to make legal residence in France even more difficult for immigrants, involving compulsory testing of language and cultural knowledge.

The broad support of parents and teachers for the harbouring and defence of *sans papier* families, which involves the risk of 5-year prison sentences and massive fines, reflects a profound desire within the population to fight against the police-state regime which is being built up.

According to press reports, teachers and parents in Belleville have started wearing whistles. When they sight police in groups, they blow them to alert immigrants to the cops’ presence. This hostility to official policy, which sometimes consciously links itself to the traditions of the resistance to Nazi occupation and the persecution of the Jews, finds little expression in official French “left” political life.

The Socialist Party (PS) participated in demonstrations in 2006 in favour of the *sans papier* children threatened with expulsion. PS personalities such as Bertrand Delanoë, the mayor of Paris, staged ceremonial adoptions of children, providing abundant photo opportunities. The left allies of the PS and the “far left” participants in the movements maintained a discreet silence about the party’s real policies, clearly outlined in its election programme: “We will carry out a policy of firmness in regards to illegal immigration. ... We must dissuade illegal immigration.”

Wanting to present a humanitarian face in contrast to Sarkozy’s intransigence, Socialist Party presidential candidate Ségolène Royal declared, at the height of the public outcry against the Rampal school police violence and arrests, that *sans papier* children attending schools should “be able to continue their studies” and that their “parents be able to stay in the country,” concluding that “regularisation [i.e., legal status in

France] should follow school attendance.”

This straying from SP programmatic orthodoxy was attacked immediately by the right. Within hours François Hollande, the national secretary of the SP and also Royal’s partner, yielded to their pressure and rushed to reassure them that the SP was “for a regularisation based on criteria” and that “it did not envisage automatic regularisation.” Jean-Louis Blanco, Royal’s campaign manager, asserted that “the regularisation of parents must follow their children’s school enrolment according to a case-by-case investigation” and Royal herself had to make a miserable climb-down.

Every lurch to the right by Sarkozy is scrupulously followed by the Socialist Party. Royal has taken up the challenge of national identity and insists on repetitions of the *Marseillaise*, the national anthem, at the close of meetings. She has proposed that every household should have the tricolour flag and display it on July 14, Bastille Day.

The Sarkozy camp makes no pretence about its position. In response to the Rampal school events and protests, François Baroin, Sarkozy’s replacement at the ministry of the interior, stated, “Of course, being at school accords no residential rights,” and that “there could well be expulsions” before the end of the school year in July.

Last year, in the face of a large movement against the deportation of *sans papier* children and their families, Sarkozy was forced to accept a moratorium on expulsions of these immigrants. He promised that over the summer holidays six to seven thousand families fulfilling certain criteria would be granted legal status, giving hopes to some 30,000 applicants who thought that they met the conditions and who thus revealed their whereabouts to the authorities. Most applications were rejected in the most arbitrary and unjustified way. Sarkozy’s target of 26,000 deportations of illegal immigrants in 2007 was the main priority.

The emergence of nationalism and chauvinism on both the right and “left” in the French presidential election underlines the importance of the memorial meeting in Paris on April 15 to honour Raveenthiranathan Senthil Ravee (Senthil), a Tamil Trotskyist, and his struggle for socialist internationalism. An essential element of that program is the defence of the right of workers to live, work and study wherever they wish in the world and to enjoy full democratic rights and support in the country of their choosing. Those interested in attending the meeting may click here for details.



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