

France: Communist Party mayor calls police on the homeless

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In the early morning hours of September 6 in the Aubervilliers municipality in north Paris, CRS riot police brutally evicted more than 80 homeless families from a public square in the Maladrerie district where they had pitched their tents opposite a local school.

Aubervilliers, a municipality of 63,000 inhabitants, is run by the French Communist Party (PCF) and its Socialist Party (PS) and Green Party allies. The PCF mayor had ordered the mainly West African squatters—all legally resident in France—expelled from their encampment. Five families evicted from their squat in municipal housing last June had launched the public protest and were soon joined by another 100 homeless. The street camp had been going for two months.

The police tore down the tents after the municipality took out an injunction for “disturbance of the peace.” The excuse invoked by the Stalinist leaders of the town council was the proximity of the protest to the Joliot-Curie school. Deputy Mayor Lucien Marest claimed, “The occupation of this space in front of the school was a problem for the children, for the parents, at the beginning of the new school year.”

After the first eviction failed, the squatters regrouped and reinstalled their camp, but were forcibly evicted again during the night of September 7/8. The protesters were supported in their efforts by the DAL association (*Droit au Logement*—Right to Housing). The DAL reported squatters being assaulted and a woman three-months pregnant was hospitalized. Jean-Baptiste Eyraud, DAL president, commented, “We do not say the Communist municipality must be responsible on its own for re-housing. We would just like it to take the lead, not to expel [people], but to get progress in negotiations.”

The attack on the most vulnerable section of the population by the municipality and police hit the headlines when the secretary of state for human rights in Nicolas Sarkozy’s right-wing government (UMP—Union for a Popular Movement), Rama Yade, appeared on the scene after the attack to bring her “support” because she “could not remain indifferent to the appeals for help” from groups helping the squatters. Prime Minister François Fillon immediately castigated her initiative, saying that “in future, this type of action should be the subject of consultation with her government colleagues,” whilst

excusing her action as a “blunder, resulting from her inexperience.” However, he did not regret the presence of Yade in the government. Rama Yade, the 31-year-old daughter of a Senegalese bourgeois family, had joined the right-wing UMP because of the “charisma” of President Sarkozy, she said.

Ms. Yade tried to make political capital out of the squatters’ plight by pointing out the PCF’s reactionary position regarding the homeless. The PCF “was in no position to moralise and preach to us [the government] on housing,” she said. Whatever her sympathy for the squatters, the Stalinist town council denounced Yade for staging a politically motivated “provocation” and affirmed that her “declared support for the squatters is a questioning of a judicial decision taken by an independent judge” (*Libération*, 7 September 2007).

The Aubervilliers municipality has tried to divert attention from its trampling on the rights of the homeless by referring to local conditions and citing its housing record. Forty percent of its housing stock is low-cost municipal apartments (HLM), compared to 2 percent in Neuilly-sur-Seine, Sarkozy’s bourgeois town. This is in spite of the law requiring all municipalities to reserve 20 percent of construction for low-cost housing.

The PCF council then refers to the 3,800 people on the housing list, who are, according to them, being cheated by squatters refusing to wait their turn. The deputy-mayor, Lucien Marest, explained, “There is the question of the method of distributing social housing. It is done according to the democratic procedure, in relation to the order of names on the list under the responsibility of the prefecture [central government office] and the town hall. Over the last few years, however, a mafia network locates the social housing that tenants have just vacated, which are empty for the period it takes to do repairs before welcoming new tenants. In exchange for 500 to 1,700 euros, they smash down the doors and install families. The latter then demand to stay. But in Aubervilliers, 3,000 people are on the waiting list. If we gave in to these methods, it would be the law of the jungle. And this would be to the disadvantage of the poorest people” (*L’Humanité*, 8 September 2007).

The Stalinist Communist Party newspaper *L’Humanité* reports without comment these smears that the squatters are

linked to the mafia. This is nothing new in the annals of Stalinism. The fight for the democratic rights of all workers, squatters included, is subordinated in these municipalities to outdoing the ruling UMP as upholders of “republican” law and order. Their aim is to set those who suffer silently against those who dare challenge the status quo.

In any event, those who are patiently waiting for the state to re-house them could be in for new disappointments. It appears that the new law, which purports to give the right to all homeless people to force local government to house them on pain of legal action, is about to be watered down.

The Right to Housing bill (*Droit au Logement Opposable*), passed six months ago, was a reaction to the hundreds of homeless who put up tents along the Canal St. Martin in Paris during the Christmas period last year. The movement launched by the “Enfants de Don Quichotte” association ended in promises for some re-housing, and the new law. The law, now being fleshed out by ministerial decrees issued by Housing Minister Christine Boutin, is “likely to be emptied of any substance” (*Le Monde*, 10 September 2007). Each demand for housing will be looked at “with regard to local circumstances.” Christophe Robert of the Abbé Pierre homeless charity warned, “If the application of the measures is adapted to the state of the rented housing market, the law is likely not to be employed for the role which was expected of it.” Robert participated in the work of the law’s monitoring committee.

The struggle of the Aubervilliers squatters was brought to an end on September 10 after an agreement was imposed on them by the Seine-St.-Denis Préfecture. It agreed to re-house the five original expelled families on condition they pay the rent “arrears” for the property in which they had squatted. An enquiry will examine the housing possibilities for 27 other families threatened with expulsion from squatted housing. The dossiers of 40 other families who participated in the squat will also be processed. These “propositions” were conditional on “the families being legal residents and the immediate evacuation of the encampment” at the Maladrerie.

The lack of decent housing is such that other desperate struggles will inevitably erupt. According to the Abbé Pierre housing charity, 3 million people are badly housed (unsanitary conditions), out of which 86,000 are homeless (2002 figures). In the meantime, this figure has been rising steeply. The number of vacant properties in France stands at 2 million, with 136,554 located in Paris alone. The demand for emergency re-housing raises the question of the requisition of unoccupied accommodation which is allowed for under a 1945 law, but has been wilfully ignored by the Socialist and Communist Party town halls, which have no desire to challenge bourgeois private ownership.

Requisition was one of the central demands of the Cachan 1,000 squatters in their fight for decent housing last year. The struggle of the some 600 homeless people, who had been evicted by force from their squat in an unused student residence

and who had taken refuge in a municipal gym, was also broken up and thwarted by a combination of councillors and activists from the “left” and housing and anti-racist pressure groups, in alliance with then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy. (See “France: Immigrant squatters pressured into accepting dispersal”)

The “left” and its allies on the so-called “far left” are distinctly embarrassed by the bad publicity of the Aubervilliers squat, which showed how the “left” in local government treats the homeless. The calling for police intervention to resolve social questions is completely in line with the present government of President Sarkozy, with its campaign to forcibly repatriate 25,000 immigrants this year.

The Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR—Revolutionary Communist League) came to the defence of the PCF municipality. Its press statement mildly reproached the Stalinists’ methods. Housing, says the LCR, “is a fundamental right for everybody, whatever their origins and nationality. If the municipalities cannot meet the demand by themselves it is intolerable that those run by PCF-PS-Green coalitions like in Aubervilliers should demand the expulsion of families as a final settlement.”

The tone was very different a month earlier when the UMP mayor of Argenteuil asked his street cleaners to apply a foul-smelling repellent substance to the emergency exit of the big Argenteuil shopping centre where a dozen or so homeless people set up camp. The LCR denounced this as a “perverse blow against democratic rights” ... “the Sarkozy right wing now spells repression plus repulsion. We are indignant at such methods, the LCR and its spokesman Olivier Besancenot demand the resignation of George Mothron [the UMP mayor] and his deputy Philippe Métezeau.” These sentiments were not extended to the call for the resignation of the Stalinist PCF mayor of Aubervilliers. The “unity of the left” is more important to the LCR than any fight to defend the democratic rights of workers.

“Left” municipalities, which for decades have overseen the shortage of decent housing, are just as guilty as the conservative UMP in denying this basic right. The Aubervilliers experience, like Cachan, proves once more that the only alternative to free-market economics in the housing sector is the mobilization of all workers for a socialist housing policy and an end to property speculation. The electoral decline of the PCF and Socialist Party reflects the growing mistrust of their pro-capitalist policies. The police expulsions ordered by the PCF and the SP will only accelerate this tendency.



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