

France: Police-state measures against immigrants provoke resistance

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French government measures to recruit networks of informers in the public services to aid the police hounding of illegal immigrants, or *sans papiers*, and which oblige staff to become “police auxiliaries,” are creating alarm and resistance among these workers. Simultaneously, the criminalization of those giving aid and assistance to *sans papiers* is advancing rapidly.

The French state stepped up its attack on immigrants after the minister of immigration and national identity, Brice Hortefeux, fell behind on the target for deportations. By the end of November 2007, “only” 18,600 people had been deported, falling behind on the goal of 25,000 for the year. The final total for 2007 is officially 23,186 expulsions, and the target of 25,000 has again been set for 2008.

An earlier decree on May 11, 2007, applying an immigration law passed in July 2006, requires staff working for the ANPE national employment agency and the UNIDIC national unemployment benefit organisation to systematically send, every day, copies of immigrant job and benefit applicants’ residence permits to the local *préfecture* (national law enforcement agency).

Previously, it was the task of employers, not ANPE staff, to verify the legal status of employees. Now, benefit office staff cannot give allowances due to unemployed immigrant workers without the authorisation of the *préfecture*.

Requiring the staff who process job applications to carry out discriminatory practices, such as setting up special files for foreign workers and making copies of their ID documents, contravenes Convention 97 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Unions representing the work inspectorate have made an indefinite strike call to staff working for “the work inspection services in all the departments of France and its overseas territories as soon as they are requested to participate in actions involving the monitoring of

foreigners’ illegal work.” The purpose of the action would be to protest against tasks imposed on them by the government for the purpose of deporting *sans papiers*.

However, the trade unions in France have shown themselves unable to defend the interests of any French workers. In November, the unions played a critical role in the betrayal of the French rail strike, which was quickly followed by a revolt of immigrants in the Parisian suburbs. The French unions made no attempt to come to the defence of the immigrant youth, who rioted following the deaths of two teenage boys in a collision with a police car.

The revolt of immigrant youth was followed by a wave of repression and arrests. The only response of the French state to the poor social conditions faced by immigrant workers is the stepped-up use of the police, and it is within this context that the new repressive measures must be seen.

The lack of any determined or concerted action by the unions, none of which support the right of all immigrants to enjoy full citizenship in France, against the increasingly restrictive and discriminatory immigration policies of successive French governments (of both the right and the “left”) since the war, rules out any credence in the effectiveness of their protests. None of them have exposed or mobilised against the anti-immigrant policies of the Socialist Party and the Plural Left Government of Lionel Jospin (1997-2002), a coalition of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Greens.

One of the more sinister elements of the new anti-immigrant measures is the setting up of *groupes de référents* (referral groups) answering to the PAF (Border Patrol Police) in public and social service departments. These referral groups will effectively involve the covert surveillance of immigrants, public service workers and humanitarian support groups and, by extension, the whole population. There is also a draft bill enabling the police to

introduce spyware into computers used by *sans papiers* aid organisations.

Last year, the Haute-Garonne department in southwest France set up a referral group on identity fraud for its staff and in the social services. Staff at several agencies, including those that administer social security and health benefits, are expected “to participate in training organised by the PAF frontier police,” according to a memo from the local government.

An extension into state enterprises and public services (education, health, municipal government) is also planned. An Haute-Garonne *préfecture* memo makes clear that the aim is to set up a network on the pretext of a “struggle against fraud committed by foreign nationals.”

Government employees, who never saw their job as assisting in the police surveillance and repression of foreigners, are expected to aid in the identification of undocumented immigrants. Targeted immigrants include those under an expulsion order, those suspected of housing fraud, and those engaged in the “cover-up” of illegal situations.

The “struggle against fraud” in Haute-Garonne is a pretext for covert surveillance that breaks the rules of confidentiality. It sets up a system for the exchange of information between all the administrative services. The police will receive information from the whole of the staff of government and public services in the department.

A memo, dated October 10, 2007, circulated by the state *Direction de la réglementation et des libertés publiques* (Administration of Regulation and Public Freedoms), on the pretext of efficiency, seeks the extension of the files to a national level.

A petition circulated by the staff unions in the social and municipal services notes that the procedure “flouts ... the obligation of professional secrecy on government workers, which protects the clients of the public services from the passing on of confidential information.”

These developments come after a series of legislative measures that massively increase the repressive powers of the state: the Perben II law, the anti-terror law and the law on the prevention of delinquency, the Equal Opportunities law and several immigration laws, all of which give increasingly vast powers and duties of surveillance to municipal and local officials over their populations.

An article posted December 22 on the *Rue89* site gives an account of a bill to be placed before parliament in January giving greatly enhanced powers of electronic surveillance to the police: the Law of Orientation and Programming of Internal Security.

Contacted by journalists, the Ministry of the Interior was tight-lipped on details. However, some information has been leaked revealing that “the police would be authorised to use ‘connection keys’ in computers, not only against the criminal underworld, but also against those helping an undocumented immigrant to get into the country and to stay,” *Rue89* reported. These electronic spies can monitor emails and Skype conversations and other computer communications.

The article warns that the legislation is not just directed at “people smugglers” but threatens “associations like RESF [Education Without Borders Network], which help and sometimes hide the undocumented parents of schoolchildren.”

The vice-president of the Group for Information and Support for Immigrants, Stephane Maugendre, points out, “There is a tendency towards the general criminalisation of support for *sans papiers*.” He adds: “This measure would be one more step. Now, the law on helping illegal immigrants to stay is so vast that it involves as much the uncle who has his nephew to stay for a few days, the little people smuggler, and the voluntary associations which aid the *sans papiers* as it does the big traffickers in immigrants.”

He stressed that if, up to now, no parent associated with RESF has yet been prosecuted, the pressure is mounting.

The aim of this obsessive offensive against immigrants is to create a climate of terror that will dissuade all but the “chosen” immigrants—whose qualifications will be useful to French capitalism—from trying to get to France. It also creates a layer of second-class citizens with precarious residence rights who can be used as a scapegoat for the social problems created by the right-wing policies of President Nicolas Sarkozy.

What emerges most clearly is that any attack on the most vulnerable sections of the working class and the youth undermines the rights of all and should be opposed by the entire working class.



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