

Detained immigrants on hunger strike in France: “We refuse to be treated as sub-humans”

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4 January 2008

Undocumented immigrants (*sans-papiers*) have been staging protests since December 20 against their conditions of arrest and detention at the administrative detention centre in Mesnil-Amelot (Seine-et-Marne) near Paris. Many are on a hunger strike, demanding to be treated as “human beings,” not “numbers.”

After at first denying the existence of the protest, the authorities were forced to admit, according to Philippe Portal, a senior police authority official, that “half the detainees were refusing to eat their meals” and that “a spontaneous gathering” had indeed taken place.

A spokesman for the protesters, Benjamin Badikadila, told the media January 1 that 80 percent of more than 100 detainees were intending to continue their demonstrations. The protests spread to two other CRA centres in the area over the weekend, one of which was broken up by riot police.

The protest is being supported by the *sans papiers* solidarity group RESF (Education Without Borders Network). On New Year’s Day, RESF organised a demonstration of some 60 people outside the Mesnil-Amelot centre with the participation of several show business personalities.

One detainee told the press that December 30-31, for the second consecutive night, “The police, at around midnight, surrounded the detainees who were in the yard refusing to go to their rooms [and] shouting ‘Freedom.’” There were fifty policemen with helmets and batons. According to another detainee, some of the protesters were injured as they were forced back to their rooms. The immigrants said that they had been disturbed by eight or ten head counts the previous night.

According to RESF, “Every night there are incidents ... police brutality, moving the ‘ringleaders,’ the speeding up of deportations—the government spares no effort to stifle the movement.”

The detained *sans papiers* have brandished slogans such as

“No to arbitrary treatment,” “No to humiliation,” “France: the country of the Rights of Man,” “Immigration enriches.” They display messages opposing conditions of arrest and detention that are “shameful” and “rip whole families apart.”

An emergency appeal issued by the hunger strikers December 27 explained that the government’s target of 25,000 deportations by January 1, 2008 meant that “the police are expelling everybody and anybody.” Denouncing the practices of police traps at administrative offices when immigrants go to put their papers in order and police round-ups, the appeal declares: “We refuse to be treated as sub-humans and appeal to all those supporters who still think that we are human beings to say ‘stop’ to this racist policy.” The appeal points out that the undocumented immigrants are “not trouble-makers, but workers wanting to live decently.”

It signs off, “I, Abou N’adinor, my companions in misfortune, Nabil, Paul and all the others, call on you to express your disagreement with the Apartheid policy of your country,” and demands the “the immediate closure of retention centres; documentation for all; the right of freedom of movement and residence; an immediate halt to all deportations.”

The hunger strikers asked to be called at the retention centre so they could inform people of their situation, and requested supporters to bring cigarettes and phone cards.

Thousand of illegal immigrants, subject to expulsion orders, are detained in retention centres without basic living conditions or rights, awaiting deportation back to their countries of origin. Not only are adults detained, but also, illegally, children.

The mention of “police traps” by the hunger strikers refers to illegal practices used by local *préfectures* (national law enforcement agencies) in the hunt for *sans-papiers*. For example, undocumented immigrants are summoned to the *préfecture* for administrative procedures to legalise their residence. On arrival they are arrested by waiting border

police, eager to meet their annual target of 25,000 deportations. This year, despite considerable efforts, they have barely achieved 21,000.

One immigrant, a mathematics teacher arrested December 15 after living in France for six years and working for a private tutoring firm, told *Le Monde* that he regretted “having been too honest ... I submitted my legalisation dossier ... I hid nothing from them, I submitted my passport, my salary slips, tax receipts, the names of the children who have passed the *baccalauréat* with my help ... For, like everyone else, I work and pay taxes. My case has been dismissed. And even before being summoned to the administrative tribunal for my appeal, the police summoned me to have my dossier re-examined. But it was a trap: I was arrested ... We are just numbers.”

Repressive police activities have sharply increased since the right-wing Gaullist government of President Nicolas Sarkozy came to power in May 2007. Life has become a nightmare for *sans papiers* who fear to go out and are in constant fear of arrest.

Most of the *sans-papiers* detained at the Mesnil-Amelot detention centre have been living in France for many years, several of them from 10 to 15 years. Didier Inowlocki of CIMADE (Inter-Movement Committee for Evacuees), a Christian humanitarian organisation, the only body entitled to intervene on behalf of the detainees at Mesnil-Amelot, said that several *sans papiers* had told him they were on hunger strike, and that two of them were refusing to drink. However, the *préfecture* denied the information and claimed there “is no hunger strike at the centre.” Inowlocki confirmed that “when a protest movement starts the immigrants leading it are moved to another centre to break up the group.”

An editorial on CIMADE’s web site declares that “Retention is, in principle, a departure from the law, which allows the Administration to detain a foreigner due to be deported in places outside the prison service.” It further notes that the lengthening of the maximum retention period (from 12 to 32 days), the increase in the number and size of the retention centres and the quotas for deportation fixed by the government “have transformed the nature of these arrangements. *Retention has been slipping little by little into the logic of internment, transforming these centres into camps.*” (Emphasis added).

A film-makers’ support group for undocumented immigrants has produced a documentary film, with the help of the RESF and a number of teachers. The film introduces us to some of the children of the undocumented.

The latter speak about their daily anxiety. Here are some of their words: “We live in lodging houses, furnished flats, rooms into which we are crammed. Every day we are

frightened. We are scared that our parents might be arrested by the police when they are going to work, when they take the metro. We have one fear, that they are put in prison, that our families are split up and that they send us back to countries which we don’t know. We have this on our minds all the time.” (Watch: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYP1Y6TsOO4>)

A December 30 government decree establishes for police use a database—the Eloï index—of undocumented immigrants subject to a deportation order. It authorises recording the identity of the immigrant’s parents and children, the language spoken, the state of the deportation proceedings or the “need for special surveillance concerning public order.” The address and identity of anyone putting up an immigrant under house arrest can also be recorded.

Before being amended, the decree authorised keeping data even on individuals *visiting* those held in administrative detention.

Jean-Pierre Dubois of the League for the Rights of Man, while pleased that certain data was no longer to be kept for three years, expressed concern about the situation of foreigners’ children: “Why would it be necessary to keep this data for three years, if not to facilitate the hunting down of children in the schools?”

Pierre Henri, an official of the *Terre d’Asile* (Land of Asylum) association, noted that the database was in line with “a Big Brother and Bogeyman philosophy, which tends to make immigration an eternal confrontational issue,” casting foreigners as delinquents.

The Sarkozy government faces popular opposition to its arrest of thousands of *sans-papiers*. However, the complicity of the trade unions and the official “left” is assisting Sarkozy in implementing his programme of attacks on workers’ rights and living conditions. Increasing poverty and social inequality, under conditions where the so-called left parties offer no way out of the crisis, breed various forms of social backwardness, including xenophobia and racism, which divide immigrant from native-born workers. Moreover, with new and wider social explosions inevitable in France, the new wave of repression against immigrants is a prelude to attacks on the entire working class.



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