

Undocumented workers occupy CGT union hall in Paris

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Since May 2 several hundred *sans papiers* (undocumented workers), primarily African, have been occupying a CGT (General Confederation of Labour) building in Paris. The premises of the trade union confederation, closely allied with the Stalinist French Communist Party, are in the 3rd arrondissement, near *République* métro station.

The *sans papiers* are demanding that the *préfecture* (police authority) regularize their situation and accuse the CGT of having “taken hostage” the *sans papiers*’ struggle. As one immigrant told the press: “The CGT has taken the *sans-papier* movement hostage. We are taking the union hall hostage.” They are also demanding that the CGT take up their case.

Since April 15, thousands of *sans papiers* have launched strikes and occupations in different industries such as cleaning, construction, retail, security and catering in Ile-de-France, the Paris region. The CGT and the civil rights association *Droits Devant* have taken a leading role in the strike.

The CGT, which had submitted to the Paris *préfecture* a file of 900 requests for legalization of *sans papier* members of the union, has accepted the government insistence that requests be processed case by case.

This flies in the face of the fundamental demand of the *sans papiers* movement that all undocumented immigrants should be legalised.

Case by case assessment by the authorities means acceptance that the immigrant workers’ rights and needs are subject to the draconian criteria imposed by the Sarkozy administration and his minister for immigration, Brice Hortefeux. One of these requirements is that the workers should be wanted by employers in jobs where low wages and bad conditions make it difficult to attract employees.

The agreement of the CGT and other support groups to submit this growing movement of the 400,000 *sans*

papiers in France to case by case assessment represents a de facto alliance of these organisations with the employers and the government to stifle the *sans papiers* struggle, which is an integral part of the developing revolt of the lowest paid and most exploited sections of the French working class. This revolt is also exemplified by the unprecedented strike wave of retail workers, mostly women, in the hyper-markets and chain stores.

So far, of the 900 individuals whose requests were submitted by the CGT, only 3 workers in a Neuilly restaurant have been granted legal, though temporary, residence permits.

The occupation at the CGT union was launched by the *Coordination sans papiers 75* (75 is the department number of their Paris region) after their demands were rejected by the Paris *préfecture*.

Coordination 75, which has been in existence for some ten years, is made up of four Paris *sans papiers* collectives. The largest, in the 19th arrondissement, totals 2,000 members.

Coordination 75 explains that, on April 30, on its own initiative, it tried to file about 1,000 requests for legalisation by undocumented workers at the Paris *préfecture*. “We too have our *sans papier* workers who should be legalised on the same basis as the CGT strikers,” explained Mamoudou Diallo, spokesperson of the Paris 75 coordinating committee. It had approached the CGT to take charge of its list of *sans papiers* requesting legalisation. This request was categorically rejected by CGT officials.

Coordination 75 also explains that “the aim of the occupation of the CGT offices is to denounce the secret negotiations of the CGT and the [civil rights organisation] *Droits Devant* with Hortefeux on the backs of the striking *sans papiers* workers.”

The occupiers seized on the visit of a *Libération* reporter to express their views, in an article in last

Saturday's edition. "We met with the CGT four times because we also wanted to carry out some workplace occupations," reported Sissoko Anzoume, a leader of the *Coordination 75*, "But they tried to lead us up the garden path, telling us that we had to wait until Sarkozy had spoken. And, when they had a meeting with the immigration minister's office, they didn't even inform us."

Sissoko continued: "We had done everything like the CGT. They were applications which concerned workers in *métiers en tension* [unpopular occupations or hard-to-fill positions]," as required by the January 7 government circular.

Dabo Mankama declared: "Hortefeux's office told them [the CGT] OK for the 1,000 legalisations, but in return they asked them to calm the movement down. The CGT is only concerned with *sans papiers* who have their trade union membership card."

Solange, a *SOS Support the Sans Papiers* activist said: "I'm fed up to the back teeth with it. In a meeting on Sunday, the CGT clearly told us: 'We're stopping the movement.' Obviously there's been a 'deal.' At the same time, these *sans papiers* who are emerging into the light of day, it's a real first, it's remarkable."

The *Libération* exposé received many approving emails of which the following is a typical example: "Just as it betrayed the railway workers, the CGT is once again acting as a strike breaker..."

Raymond Chaveau of the CGT told the press: "We don't agree with this occupation, because inundating the union with demands is no way to push the situation forward. It was a big provocation by the *préfecture* passing the collectives on to the CGT, making the CGT look like the antechamber of the *préfecture*. ... We want the status of the *sans papiers* strikers to be legalised ... [we want] a response from the government for the striking workers."

Note the careful limitation of the demand to just "the striking workers."

Coordination 75 representatives were due, on Monday morning, to meet the Socialist Party (PS) mayor of Paris and contender for the leadership of the party, Bertrand Delanoë, who has also stated his opposition to the occupation. The PS has recently responded on its site to the issue of the legalisation of *sans papiers* stating that "the work contract must have a preponderant place" and opposing any policy "which opens the door to any general legalisation."

On May 4, reporters from the WSWs visited the

occupied CGT premises.

A large group of *sans papiers* was gathered in front of the entrance with a big banner reading: "Targets kill. Sans-papiers in danger." This refers to the target of 25,000 expulsions of *sans papiers* for 2008, issued to *préfectures* by Hortefeux. Inside the building, many protesters were sitting on the ground, including women with their children.

They chanted slogans "Sarkozy, Fillon, Hortefeux, Alliot-Marie [minister of the interior], police, CRS [riot police] ... We're fed up with it," "Legalise all the *sans papiers*," "We don't want case-by-case legalisation."

There were stickers on the wall reading "*Sans papier* round-ups—*sans papiers* murdered"; "Round-ups by skin colour everywhere—Sarkozy the hate monger," "*Sans papiers* held in detention, beaten, repressed, insulted—enough!." Another read: "Father deported, family smashed, children in danger."

The occupiers told the WSWs, "The union refuses to carry out the struggle of all *sans papiers*. The only reason is we are not the members of the union." Karamoko pointed out: "The CGT refuses to accept us ... they expect us to be members and pay about 120 euros a year dues."

Danfakha said: "The government's policy is no mass legalisation ... Among us are people who've been living here for over 15 years. There's a problem somewhere if the government does not respect this status and legalise people who've been living here for over 10 years."

He continued: "All of us together, the CGT, *Droits Devant* and *Coordination 75*, prepared the April 15 strike. When the first picket was set up at *La Grande Armée* restaurant and it was occupied, we were not informed and we were forgotten. When we learned that there was an occupation we went to see ... We could not understand why we had been kept out of it at the last minute."

He added: "The CGT wouldn't explain to us about the meeting they had with the minister of immigration. It seemed there was an agreement on the applications filed by the CGT. There are thousands of *sans papiers* in France. I don't see how the CGT can only agree to take on 1,000 requests and pose as the defender of the rights of workers in France."



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