

France: Undocumented immigrants strike wins support

Ajay Prakash
2 May 2008

From April 15, nearly a thousand *sans papiers* [undocumented immigrants] in the cleaning, construction, retail, security and restaurant industries have been on strike in Ile-de-France (Greater Paris Region), occupying the headquarters of more than a dozen companies and demanding immediate legalisation.

These actions represent both a resistance to tougher immigration policies and social polarisation as well as protest over the dramatic food price rises in a context of government austerity reforms reducing social welfare benefits.

The prolonged and growing indefinite strikes and occupations of workplaces that have spread all over France by *sans papiers* to demand the legalisation of their status has alarmed the CGT (General Confederation of Labour), which is handling the dispute.

The CGT, which is closely allied with the French Communist Party (PCF), has greatly undermined the movement by dropping the key demand for mass legalisation, opting instead for case-by-case negotiation with local *préfets* (administrative police chiefs). This sabotage has taken place as the strike spread to a number of workplaces and has begun to gather momentum and win support from students, workers and anti-racist organisations.

Since April 28, several dozen *sans papiers*, including children, have been occupying Saint-Paul de Nanterre church near Paris, demanding the legalisation of 62 immigrants.

As the strike was growing, a delegation led by the CGT was received April 21 by Minister of Immigration Brice Hortefeux, who had stressed that the five *préfectures* (local police administrations) affected by the strike would only consider the workers' demands "case by case."

"It is up to the local police chief (*préfet*) to decide on a case-by-case basis," the minister's cabinet director said. "There will be no global negotiations."

After the meeting, the CGT announced "a way out of the crisis" and accepted the government position of legalisation case by case. CGT National Secretary Francine Blanche declared: "We have made significant progress, we have perhaps found a solution."

A CGT official told the press that she "was attentive to the situation and clearly felt that things could rapidly escalate and that new occupations could take place." She reported that since the beginning of the movement the CGT had received many calls from workers wanting to be legalized and that she has "an enormous dossier which deals with Euro Disney," referring to the theme park.

Bruno Gagne, CGT secretary in Montpellier in the south of

France, told *Libération* April 25. "Some undocumented workers were declared by employers but had false papers... We are asking for the legalisation of all without hitting too hard those employers who play the game.... We wish to find a compromise so that everyone comes out winning."

In Lyon, Mohamed Brahmi, the CGT delegate in charge of the issue, remarked that the movement among these workers was taking on "an unimaginable dimension." "Since the movement started in Paris, dozens and dozens have contacted us," he said.

"They come from Mali, Senegal and Algeria ... mostly in the construction, hotel and cleaning sectors.... It appears that certain temporary agencies specialise in employing undocumented workers. They can't be ignorant of this. They take advantage of it."

Abdoulaye from Mali has been a construction worker in Lyon for years, paying income tax but without any wage increases. Another worker, Dramane, said, "I work on resurfacing roads but on my paycheque I'm declared as a builder's assistant. Therefore, I earn €8.5 an hour instead of €11.50." Most of the Malian workers have worked five years in construction through temporary agencies without any wage increases.

It is worth noting that the CGT has for many years encouraged agency work, the most notably with Manpower. The CGT was the first union to sign a deal with Manpower in 1972 recognising temporary agency work, two years before it became legal in France. Since this time, the floodgates have been opened to a massive abuse of insecure employment. There were 700,000 temporary workers in 2007, a 4.3 percent increase over the previous year.

The CGT, on request from the Immigration Ministry, has submitted more than 800 applications for legalisation at five *préfectures* (Paris, Essonne, Hauts-de-Seine, Seine-Saint-Denis, Val-de-Marne) for a case-by-case review.

Strengthened by the compromise of the CGT, Immigration Minister Hortefeux told *Le Figaro* on April 24, "In no event, and I say this without any ambiguity, will there be any mass legalisation. Spain and Italy did this a few years back and since gave up this policy. There is no room for improvisation, or excesses... The law that I had voted in parliament allows for the legalisation in individual cases in economic sectors which experience a serious shortage of labour."

An April 24 editorial in *Le Monde* points out that "it is obvious that beyond the 600 cases to be regularised at present as proposed

by the CGT, there are thousands of jobs, probably tens of thousands, which are involved. The president of the Guild of Hotel Employers association, André Daguin—who does not appear to be a dangerous leftist—has he not evoked the necessity to ‘legalise 50,000 workers’?”

The two main hotel and restaurant employers’ associations, UMIH and Synhorcat, have called for the regularization of undocumented migrants because they know how hard it is to find workers for jobs—at slave wages and conditions—which many undocumented workers have occupied for more than a decade.

Since the movement first erupted it, it has gained the support of some employers who need to keep these workers at all costs. However others, such as property developer *Cogédim*, have sought a court order for “obstruction of the right to work.” The Casa Nova shop in Seine-Saint-Denis called in private security, which evicted the strikers violently and the boss of Paris retailer *Fabbio Lucci* called in the police to clear them out.

The strikers are demanding that their cases be heard by the Labour Ministry, not the Immigration Ministry. “The word ‘worker’ is what figures in priority before that of ‘undocumented,’ explained Jean-Claude Amara of civil liberties advocates *Droits Devant* (Rights in Front).

In a live televised interview April 24, French President Nicolas Sarkozy said that any general legalisation would lead to “a catastrophe” and would “benefit immigrant traffickers.”

“You don’t become French because you do a job in a restaurant kitchen, as nice as that may be,” he said. The answer was for employers to hire legally resident unemployed immigrants. “Twenty-two percent of legal immigrants are unemployed,” Sarkozy added. “We need foreigners, we need quotas for immigration based on economics rather than family considerations.”

The Socialist Party (PS) has lined up behind Sarkozy’s immigration policy. Commenting to the press, Ségolène Royal, defeated PS presidential candidate in 2007, ruled out massive regularisation of immigrant workers and opposed restaurant employers’ calls to bring this about.

French socialist and conservative governments have long left undocumented immigration workers to be exploited by the French bourgeoisie for half the legal minimum wage (€1,280 a month). These workers are unable to claim accident/medical and social benefits from either the government or the employer, despite the vast majority of them receiving paycheques, declaring their taxes and paying into medical insurance, retirement and unemployment benefit insurance.

Since July 1, 2007, employers must check with the *préfet* the authenticity of foreign workers’ papers. The French government has unleashed massive police hunts for undocumented immigrants and demanded that all state administration bodies inform the police of any undocumented immigrants. The government set a target of 25,000 immigrants to be deported this year; 23,000 were deported last year and many more arrested in mass police round-ups.

This policy has caused many immigrants to take their own lives trying to escape police checks. Despite the economic need for immigrants, the French government sticks to its position against undocumented immigrants, insisting it would otherwise be a

setback for its tougher immigration policy. The French government is intent on implementing the common European immigration pact and establishing ‘secure’ European borders.

The government denies that the present movement is of a mass character and cancelled a meeting with the hotel/restaurant trade association Synhorcat. “In Paris there are no more than 400 requests for legalisation,” declared the Immigration Ministry. “The *préfectures* will take each case on its merits while bearing in mind the tensions existing in certain [trade] sectors.... There is no question of meeting economic needs by legalising undocumented workers. The priority is to keep to legal immigration.”

These strikes are the first in France by the most oppressed and exploited section of the French working class and have far-reaching social and political significance. A week before this strike, high school students and teachers were on strike in various schools against staff cuts. Since earlier this year France has seen several strikes against job cuts, working conditions in supermarkets and social cuts. Last year saw the strikes of rail workers to defend their pensions.

The CGT and other trade unions gave their support only in order to control each struggle and keep it on a local basis. The support for the undocumented immigrant workers among broad sections of workers is currently being prevented from developing into a mass political movement against the Sarkozy administration and the requirements of French and European big business. The betrayals of the CGT and other trade unions have encouraged the government to hunt down and deport en masse the undocumented immigrants.

The French working class should oppose the French and EU immigration policy and police-state methods used in hunting down undocumented workers, a significant number of whom prefer to take their own lives rather than face deportation.

French workers must unite with immigrants working to defend their democratic rights, jobs and living standards. A mass social problem such as immigration cannot be resolved on a case-by-case basis, which creates divisions and becomes a weapon in the hands of employers and the state.

A solution to a mass social problem requires a perspective based on socialist internationalism, and which defends the rights of all workers—documented or not—to freely circulate and work anywhere in the world.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact