

# France: Immigrant retention centre burnt down following death of inmate

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On June 22, the biggest Administrative Retention Centre (CRA) for undocumented immigrants at Vincennes in the Val-de-Marne near Paris was gutted by fire after detainees rioted in reaction to the death of 41-year-old Tunisian Belkacem Souli from a heart attack brought on by bad conditions at the centre. Eighteen of the 273 detainees at the centre were hospitalised.

The undocumented foreign nationals at the centre are kept in inhuman conditions for weeks and months before expulsion to their country of origin or country of entry into the European Union. The Cimade charity association (Committee in aid of evacuees) described the conditions at Vincennes as “a centre which by its size and its mode of management has become a symbol of mass detention.” In a report it published last April the Cimade, the only body authorised have access to the 27 CRA establishments, reported “little space for exercise, cramped rooms, highly restricted human contact, a multitude of cameras and barbed wire.”

These conditions regularly give rise to suicide attempts, self-mutilation and fights. Several hunger strikes took place in 2006 in protest against the circumstances of immigrant arrests the previous year, during the state of emergency imposed in response to the youth riots in major urban centres in the latter part of 2005. In 2007, 35,000 immigrants passed through the CRAs. Five thousands of these were through Vincennes, which is also home to the National Police Training School.

Fifteen days before the fire, the National Commission for the Control of Retention Centres (CRAZA) wrote a report to Immigration Minister Brice Hortefeux, describing “a climate of tension and violence which reigns permanently in all the CRAs, especially Vincennes, where the slightest thing would be enough

to light the fuse.”

Hortefeux has made it a priority to deport 26,000 immigrants in 2008. This is in line with the harsh new immigration policy of the government of President Nicolas Sarkozy to limit entry to France on the basis of selection for specific jobs. This has meant the splitting up of families who can no longer be reunited. Many of these immigrant workers, including 242 children last year, have been picked up by the police in random checks and raids in schools, homes, cafés and the streets.

Two days before the Tunisian immigrant’s death, Hortefeux boasted an 80 percent increase of deportations over the same period in 2007.

Sarkozy’s ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) has made clear where it places the blame for the Vincennes fire. Its spokesman Frédéric Lefebvre said the riot was incited by the sympathizers of undocumented immigrants in the RESF humanitarian group (Education Without Borders Network), whose 30 supporters were protesting outside the detention centre at the time. “It is not acceptable that the collective organisations like RESF come making provocations outside these centres with the risk of endangering foreign detainees.”

Lefebvre demanded “the greatest firmness against these collectives carrying out this type of action in proximity to areas where they have no reason to be.... All the consequences must be drawn, including judicial ones, if the responsibility of the members of RESF is established.” The right to demonstrate is thus criminalised and the victims’ supporters become the culprits for mistreatment.

In an interview with *France Soir* (June 24), Frédéric Lefebvre compared the more “reasonable” attitude of anti-racist organisations such as SOS-Racism and

LICRA (International league against racism and anti-Semitism), both close to the Socialist Party. “They visited Vincennes a few weeks ago and they found that in general the centre was up to standard.... The differing opinion between the Cimade and that of SOS-Racism and LICRA is all there is to it.”†

RESF’s replied that “the words would be of a vulgar comedian if it were not to cover over a tragic reality: the fate reserved for the undocumented immigrants by the government policy.” For the Cimade, “it is a crude way of the government not to avoid assuming its public responsibilities.”

Leading Socialist Party parliamentary deputy Jean-Louis Bianco summed up the party’s bipartisan support for Sarkozy’s immigration policy in reaction to the Vincennes incident: “I agree with the fact that we can’t take in all the world’s impoverished people, that, when people are illegally resident, we must send them back to their country. But we must treat them humanely, and clearly this is not what happens in these retention centres.” A Socialist Party press release called for “a policy that respects the rights of foreigners ... while being efficient in managing the flow of immigrants.”

Meanwhile, 800 undocumented immigrant workers are continuing their occupation since May 2 of the CGT union offices in Paris to demand immediate legalised residence for all. This has been in opposition to the CGT position, which seeks to put pressure on the government to legalise its members who are in work. Hundreds of immigrants organised in the CGT have been on strike with occupations of the workplace in the restaurant and cleaning sectors for two months, demanding the right to be legalised. Many have worked and paid taxes in France. To date, only a few hundred workers have received temporary residency permits, while thousands are demanding to join the movement, which the CGT is holding back with its preference for case by case negotiations with the local administrative police chiefs.

The *Coordination Sans Papiers 75* (CSP75, representing undocumented immigrants) in Paris, which initiated the occupation at the CGT office, called on May 30 for a mass movement to develop its fight. “Why? On April 30 the CSP75 tried to hand in a thousand dossiers to the Paris prefecture and was refused acceptance on the pretext that these dossiers were not presented by a union.”

“Therefore the movement must be widened to all militant layers, unions, associations, students and all the collective groups of *sans papiers* ... to make the government and employers give way.”

France’s 400,000-plus undocumented and so-called illegal residents have yet to get a response in their hope for a mobilisation by the “official left” and trade union movement in defence of their right to reside in France.



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