

Immigrants' occupation of CGT hall in Paris under immense pressure from unions

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The occupation of the Paris CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union hall, the *Bourse du travail*, by some 800 undocumented immigrants organised by the Paris *Coordination des sans-papiers 75* (CSP75) is in its tenth week. The protesters are demanding the support of the trade union for their applications for residence rights in France.

The CGT, which is close to the Stalinist Communist Party, has only been prepared to take up the case of *sans papiers* workers who belong to its ranks. The Paris *préfecture* insists that all applications be forwarded through the CGT, making the union a kind of intermediary between the government and the undocumented.

The CGT's refusal to take up the case of undocumented workers represented by the CSP75, after the Paris *préfecture* told the latter to go through the union, left them in an impasse, which they attempted to break out of by occupying the *Bourse du Travail*.

For the first three weeks of the occupation, which began May 2, the CGT kept the occupiers in isolation, telling aid organisations to boycott the movement. The CGT even persuaded the mayor of the 13th arrondissement, where the *Bourse* is situated, to go back on his promise to provide milk and other essential supplies for children.

When approached by one of four hunger strikers amongst the occupiers, the medical aid organisation *Médecins du monde* told him that they would first have to go through the CGT before the organisation's doctors would treat the strikers.

CSP75 delegates recognise that up until May 28 the only left-wing organisation that had supported their struggle was the WSWs.

The so-called "far left" organisation, the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire*, which hopes to obtain CGT support for its launch this year of the "New Anti-capitalist Party," was one of the staunchest defenders of the Stalinist-led union. The LCR's weekly *Rouge* immediately came to the aid of the CGT bureaucrats and attacked "the damaging occupation of the *Bourse de travail* by *Coordination 75*", accusing it of being responsible for "the poison of division."

An LCR statement on its web site implies that CSP75's action is helping the Sarkozy government: "The government has perhaps found a way of dividing and neutralising the movement."

The LCR has since participated in the conspiracy of silence in the media about the occupation. Meanwhile it offers uncritical praise to the campaign for legalisation through strikes and

occupations of workplaces by *sans-papiers* workers organised by the CGT, largely in collaboration with employers who rely on these workers for their businesses to function profitably: hotels, restaurants, cleaning services, construction.

The highly restrictive immigration laws enacted by President Nicolas Sarkozy's administration since his election in May 2007 created a situation where business owners, who had been employing illegal immigrants without scrutinising their documentation too closely, were obliged to submit the residence permits of their employees to the police and risk prosecution or the loss of their workforce.

Le Monde on July 4 explained the solution that was found: "A way out was finally to be opened up with an amendment to the 20 November 2007 law concerning the control of immigration, submitted by a supporter of Mr. Sarkozy, the UMP [ruling Union for a Popular Movement] deputy for Hauts-de-Seine, Frédéric Lefebvre, ... permitting an employer ... having employed an illegal immigrant unawares, to approach the *préfecture* to ask for his legalisation. ... It led to the 7 January circular ... The principle of legalisation by employment was made law."

Lefebvre, a lobbyist for big business, was hardly acting out of humanitarian motives in proposing his amendment allowing legalisation by employment. He demonstrated his extreme antipathy to immigrants when he used the tragic death of the *sans-papier* 41-year-old Tunisian Belkacem Souli from a heart attack, brought on by the bad conditions of his detention at the Vincennes retention centre, to witch-hunt immigrant support organisations. In reaction to the death inmates had burned down the building. Lefebvre demanded that "all the consequences be drawn out, including from a legal point of view, if the responsibility of organisations like the RESF [Education Without Borders Network] were established."

The grossly discriminatory arrangement created by the Lefebvre amendment places the interests of employers above any other human criteria, such as the danger for an immigrant of returning to the country of origin, reuniting of families, educational needs, and health.

The CGT seized on this opportunity to launch a recruitment drive that enabled the union to increase its influence over the approximately 400,000 *sans-papiers* living in France and to help the government manage the social and political crisis provoked by its drive to eject 25,000 illegal immigrants in 2008.

On May 28, the CGT, faced with the determination of the

occupiers of their headquarters, changed tactics and invited the CSP75 delegates to a meeting with a joint union committee (*intersyndicale*) composed of representatives of the CGT, the CFDT (French Democratic Federation of Labour, close to the Socialist Party), the FSU (the largest government workers union, mainly organising public education staff) and the smaller FO (Workers Power) and SUD (Solidarity—Unity—Democracy) union confederations.

A statement signed by CSP75 delegates Sissoko, Dabo, Djibril and others, published in the *Journal of the Occupied Bourse du Travail* June 28, reports that this meeting was followed by others, which included immigrant defence organisations such as MRAP (Movement against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples), GISTI (Immigrants Information and Support Group), UCIJ (United Against Disposable Immigration), LDH (League for the Rights of Man) and RESF, all of which had observed the CGT boycott and had made no previous approaches to CSP75.

These organisations proceeded to put enormous pressure on the leaders of CSP75 to agree to leave the CGT premises and to be ‘flexible’ in relation to their key demands and the principles of CSP75: the legalisation of all *sans-papiers* and the rejection of case-by-case selection by the authorities of applicants deemed fit to live in France.

The CSP75 delegates’ statement points out: “The unions wanted to deal with all our applications in the context of employment, but this is not possible to all the occupiers of the *Bourse*, there are also unemployed women, there are children, sick people.”

The statement also revealed that, under pressure from the unions and on request from the *prefecture*, dangerous concessions were made. During the meetings between the *intersyndicale* and the aid organisations held since May 28, “With the aim of a universal submission of applications, a list of categories classifying *sans-papiers* by profession, but also by legal and social status ... was agreed upon.”

In return for the CGT and other unions participating in a July 2 submission of residence applications at the Paris *préfecture* (police authority), the CSP75 delegates agreed to allow the CGT to return to their offices in the first and third floor of the *Bourse*. They also, faced with the refusal of the *préfecture* to take all their applications at once, were obliged to hand in only the applications on which employers had vouched for their willingness to employ the given applicant.

The CGT, in their determination to keep the CSP75 isolated, did not mobilise the hundreds of *sans-papiers* strikers that they are organising in the Paris region, nor other sections of workers which they represent, on July 2.

The CSP75 delegates point out: “Besides, there are the other *sans-papiers*. The ones without work, like housewives, children, the elderly. And then again, there are those who, although they work, can’t produce work documents or pay slips, because they have always worked, often for decades, in illegal situations, in the most terrible conditions of exploitation.”

The delegates express their desire to bring together all the *sans-papier* collectives in France and to build up a position of strength against the government capable of giving them independence. “The whole movement of the *sans-papiers* must no longer depend

upon the say-so of the aid organisations and the trade unions, it must find its own way, rely on itself and its own strength.”

The Socialist Party, Communist Party, the CGT and the rest of the official left have been indifferent to the plight of undocumented and, for that matter, documented immigrants for decades. This “left,” which is nothing more than an appendage of the French establishment, is a defender of the profit system and national-chauvinist to the core. When in government, the left parties have imposed anti-immigrant regulations and continue, in opposition, to maintain them in their election programmes and public statements.

It was under a left government that the retention centres were set up because the Socialist Party, just like the UMP, has a policy of selective immigration.

Left to themselves the *sans papiers* groups have taken to occupations of churches and other public buildings and have frequently resorted to hunger strikes to appeal to the moral conscience of the authorities.

As this writer pointed out at the June 28 meeting at the *Bourse du Travail*, this assumes that the authorities have a moral conscience. Instead, the powers that be have an ever more urgent political agenda, under conditions of the current economic crisis: the destruction of democratic and social rights to make the French and European bourgeoisie competitive in the globalised world market. A humanitarian moral conscience is a luxury the ruling elite cannot afford, as *sans-papiers* support organisations have increasingly been finding out throughout the country in the past months.

It is impossible for movements like the CSP75 to achieve independence from these props of capitalism without breaking from a perspective of putting pressure on the government and the ruling elite; otherwise, however distasteful, they will be obliged to remain under the wing of the unions and the other organisations.

They must turn to the working class of France and Europe. The attack on immigrants’ rights is an integral part of the offensive by big business on the living standards and working conditions of all workers throughout Europe. The *sans-papiers* can only do this by proposing a joint struggle on a socialist perspective against the entire regressive programme of European capitalism.



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