

France: Union thugs, police evict undocumented workers from union hall

Pierre Mabut, Antoine Lerougetel
16 July 2009

The eviction by trade union thugs and CRS riot police of hundreds of undocumented workers from their occupation of Paris' Trade Union Hall (*La Bourse du travail*) starkly illustrates the collaboration of the trade unions and the state against the working class.

Undocumented *sans papiers* workers occupied the *Bourse du travail* on May 2 of last year, hoping to force the CGT trade union (General Confederation of Labour, close to the Stalinist French Communist Party) to negotiate their regularisation with the government. Their initial action, led by the CSP 75 Sans-Papiers Coordination group, testified to growing distrust and hostility of broad layers of the working class towards the union bureaucracy. The CGT's ultimate reaction confirms the necessity to politically sharpen and clarify this hostility.

On June 24 a commando team sent by the CGT attacked and evicted the *sans papiers* from the *Bourse du travail*. The attack was coordinated with CRS riot police, who assisted the forced eviction and then surrounded the 600 or more *sans papiers* who set up camp on the pavement outside.

A statement issued by the National Coordination of Sans Papiers after the attack said, "About a hundred goons of the CGT security service wearing masks and armed with iron bars, clubs and tear gas forced their way into the Trade Union Hall at 11:30...attacking those present, particularly women and children and threw them outside [the building]." The CGT took advantage of the absence of most of the occupants, who had left earlier in the morning for a regular weekly protest at the local *préfecture* to demand residence permits.

The CSP 75 organisers of the occupation said, "Twenty-three people were injured, gassed, and clubbed, among whom were five women and one child."

The initial resistance of the occupiers to the CGT attack

using tear gas was followed up by a police intervention—with the approval of Paris Town Hall, which owns of the property. The thousand or more *sans papiers*, who stayed on the street in shifts so they could meet their work commitments, were surrounded by dozens of riot police vans.

After 17 days on the pavement outside the *Bourse du travail*, the CSP 75 members were finally forced to abandon their 14-month struggle to force the unions to back their demands for the right to live and work in France. On July 12 they voted to accept the government's offer: in exchange for leaving the street, they received a guarantee that the state would examine 300 of their 1,174 applications for residence rights within two months.

The initial eviction decision was taken by the Administrative Commission of the Trade Union Hall, consisting of the seven trade unions with offices in the building. Its secretary Edgar Fisson had, in turn, been in contact with the office of Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoë (of the Socialist Party), which wanted to retake the building. CSP 75's spokesman Sissoko said, "When they [the police] intervened right at the end, the superintendent told me that town hall had told the *préfecture* [i.e., the police] to put an end to the occupation."

Pascale Boistard, in charge of "integration" in the mayor's office, explained, "Politically, we did not support this occupation. Given the repeated attacks of the government against workers' rights, we think this occupation was very unwelcome, because it prevented the unions from working."

CGT Paris District Secretary Patrick Picard issued a statement justifying the attack: "After having tried to negotiate in vain for months, we decided to put an end to an occupation which had become a squat." On the day of the eviction, Picard told the press, "The Paris trade union movement decided to remove these women and men from the impasse they were in, and without recourse to the

police.”

Picard’s suggestion that the CGT acted independently from the authorities lacks any credibility. As one CSP 75 supporter commented to *Libération*, “The police allowing a group of hooded and masked men armed with metal bars to quietly walk away is quite extraordinary.”

The CGT’s collaboration with the CRS in expelling the *sans papiers* is a serious warning of the trade union bureaucracy’s hostility to independent action by the working class.

The CGT’s relations with the state are hardly new. Especially during the current administration of conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy, its organization of toothless, one-day protests has played a key role in allowing the government to pass massive pension cuts and bank bailouts over massive popular opposition, in exchange for a “Common Position” agreement giving the CGT access to more trade union and state-funded positions. As the world economic crisis deepens social tensions, moreover, the CGT’s collaboration with the state is assuming more repressive and authoritarian forms.

The predicament of the *sans papiers* is, first of all, a testament to the enormously unfavourable political environment created by the national-opportunist orientation of the existing organisations. Despite the determination of the *sans papiers*, they could not single-handedly defeat the powerful institutions arrayed against them: the state and—as is now quite clear—the CGT.

When CSP 75 decided to occupy the hall last year, the CGT was leading a series of strikes in the Paris area, notably in high-profile restaurants, for the legalisation of undocumented workers. This concerned essentially the catering and building trades, in which the CGT says it arranged 2,000 legalisations in the Paris area since February 2008. Then-Minister of Immigration and National Identity Brice Hortefeux designated the CGT as the favoured intermediary to negotiate the legalisation of some workers in priority industries.

The CGT strikes had a cynical and cosmetic character. The 2,000 legalisations are among an estimated 400,000 *sans papiers* in France. Moreover, many of the legalisations it obtained are for short-term residency permits, some for as little as three months, and are only valid as long as their employers require their services.

To the extent the *sans papiers* oriented to the CGT and negotiations with the state, they were set up for defeat. Hortefeux and Sarkozy had no intention of giving in to them, a move that would have far-reaching political consequences. First of all, it would have encouraged other

sans papiers to struggle for their rights, with unpredictable social and economic consequences.

Moreover, such a concession to immigrants would have potentially spelled disaster for Sarkozy’s electoral support—which is based on coded, anti-immigrant appeals to the neo-fascist National Front vote.

The bankruptcy of existing nationalist perspectives is underscored by the treachery of human rights organisations and “far left” parties, who have endorsed the repression of the *sans papiers*.

Libération reported on July 13: “After an internal discussion, the League for the Rights of Man (LDH) took up no position on the eviction, and it even refused to go to two ‘mediation’ meetings organised by RESF [Education without Borders Network]. Attac [the anti-globalisation organisation], the PCF [Communist Party] and Lutte Ouvrière also withdrew from the discussions July 1, because the members of the CSP 75 did not want ‘reconciliation’ with the Paris CGT.”

CSP 75 leaders assert that, since their eviction, “no association had shown up at the camp” in the street.

One “far left” party, the New Anti-Capitalist Party, issued a remarkable statement in support of the repression, writing, “On the whole, NPA members considered that such an occupation, which hindered the functioning of the trade union movement, could not allow [the occupiers] to build a balance of power with the government and the *préfecture* of police in order to get their residence papers.”

Such a statement speaks volumes on the orientation of these organisations that are widely described, by sheer political inertia, as being on the “left.” In fact, in the struggle for power between the workers, on the one hand, and the state with its trade unions and police on the other, they have chosen to side with the latter.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact