

French government threatens to shut firms employing illegal immigrants

Antoine Lerougetel
5 December 2009

The French government's November 22 announcement of draconian regulations against undocumented immigrants (*sans-papiers*) lays the legal basis for intensified attacks against hundreds of thousands of workers, as well as the firms that employ them. Between 200,000 and 400,000 *sans-papiers* live in France, largely working the worst-paid jobs in construction, restaurant and service industries.

The minister of immigration and national identity, Eric Besson, and Labour Minister Xavier Darcos announced the new regulations in separate statements.

Darcos announced that *préfets* (regional law-enforcement chiefs) would receive powers to shut down firms employing illegal immigrants. He added that the government will “reinforce inspections and apply sanctions hitting the wallets and the image of the firms in order to act as a deterrent.”

Besson told France 5 TV that it will be “a complete arsenal” against abuses, including “the administrative closure of establishments employing illegal foreigners” or “inelegibility for any offers of contracts for all firms,” public or private having employed *sans-papiers*. Increased fines and demands for the “reimbursement of public aid” will be imposed on offending enterprises.

With stunning cynicism, Besson tried to present the regulations as motivated by concern for *sans-papiers*: “If foreigners are exploited on our soil by mafia networks, it's also because there are employers and exploiters on our soil who take advantage of their situation.”

He said he would inform *préfets* of three conditions required for a *sans papier* to obtain a residence permit: presence in France for over five years, having declared to the authorities a request for residence rights at least a year previously, and working in a sector with difficulties recruiting labour. He set a quota of a mere 1,000 workers who could fulfill these extremely restrictive conditions.

This reactionary measure is the latest of many attacks

by the ruling class on immigrants and ethnic and religious minorities. In France, these include the state-organised “debate” on national identity and the parliamentary commission to ban the burqa. Similar events are taking place throughout Europe, with the recent Swiss referendum banning mosque minarets as a prime example.

These are driven by two imperatives of European imperialism: firstly, to create the ideological climate to escalate its unpopular, neo-colonial military intervention alongside the US in Afghanistan; secondly, to whip up racist sentiment and divide the working class as mass anger intensifies over rising unemployment, and government policies of social austerity and war.

On November 30 *Le Monde* interviewed Claude Dilain, the Socialist Party (*Parti socialiste*, PS) mayor of Clichy-sous-Bois, where in the autumn of 2005 the deaths of two immigrant youth fleeing police sparked rioting in urban ghettos throughout France and a three-month state of emergency. These areas, known “sensitive urban zones,” are home to 4.5 million people; 33.1 percent live below the poverty line of €908 a month and the unemployment rate is 17 percent—41 percent for males aged 15 to 24.

Dilain explained: “Anger affects not only the youth, those who were at the fore in the 2005 riots, but it has spread now to adults, in particular the over-30s who have a diploma, have got married, have children, but have become unemployed with the crisis. In 2005, there was a theoretical debate as to whether what was involved was a riot or a social revolt. Today, in some cases, I sense that we have moved to the stage of social revolt and it's dangerous.”

Rising social tensions are intersecting with the toxic political dynamic underlying the 2007 election of President Nicolas Sarkozy, on a law-and-order platform appealing to anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment. Sarkozy won a large section of the neo-fascist vote and became the first French president to greet the leader of the

neo-fascist National Front (*Front National*, FN), Jean-Marie Le Pen, to the Elysée presidential palace.

Forecasts now show that in the March 2010 regional elections the FN might win enough votes to weaken Sarkozy's UMP (*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*). Sarkozy's ministers are responding with measures appealing to the neo-fascist vote.

The state can nakedly encourage the worst political moods, because they are certain they will face no meaningful political opposition from the trade unions or so-called “left” parties, which are thoroughly bankrupt.

The attitude towards the *sans-papiers* of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), close to the French Communist Party (*Parti Communiste Français*, PCF) is a prime example. After Sarkozy passed a law in 2007 banning the employment of *sans-papiers*, the CGT worked with employers dependent on *sans papier* labour, largely in the cleaning, catering, and building trades, calling for modification of the law.

When in April 2008, a group of *sans-papiers* occupied the CGT's trade union hall in Paris demanding regularisation, however, the CGT refused to take up their cases. Christian Khalifa, a Paris region CGT official, cynically told LCI TV: “We are a trade union organisation, not a *sans-papiers* association. Our action is carried out in the workplaces.” The entire “left”—the PCF, the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (predecessor of the *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*, NPA, of Olivier Besancenot), the PS and various immigrant-support and anti-racist groups—came out in support of the CGT.

This was simply the prelude to direct collaboration with state security forces against the workers. On June 24 this year, a commando team sent by the CGT, in coordination with CRS riot police, attacked and evicted the remaining 600 *sans-papiers* from the trade union hall.

The reaction of these groups to the current regulations is of a piece with the attack on the *sans-papiers* in the Paris trade union hall.

The CGT sent a letter to prime minister François Fillon, signed by five trade union federations and six human rights associations including the CIMADE, the only association allowed to intervene in immigrant detention centres, RESF (Education Without Borders Network) and the LDH (Human Rights League). It declares that “our trade union and social organisations are involved in the legalisation of female and male *sans-papiers*.” It calls for an official circular to be issued to the *préfets* “with

improved criteria” and “a standardised procedure for legalisation.”

In fact, of course, this would be the standardised procedure for *refusing* residence rights for the vast majority of *sans-papiers*. Besson himself had no difficulty in declaring his support for the letter's call for the harmonisation of procedures.

The NPA did not issue its own statement, instead reposting a statement by Alain Pojolat of the UCIJ—United Against Throw-away Immigration, an “umbrella collective for 70 associations, parties and unions.” With cynical light-mindedness, Pojolat dismisses the new regulations as an empty threat.

He writes: “Xavier Darcos, the minister of labour, is 'threatening' to close enterprises who hire *sans-papiers* labour. Such a decision, if it were being seriously contemplated, would lead to the paralysis of a large part of the economy and the immediate closure of hundreds of building, cleaning and catering businesses.”

Such comments testify only to the boundless complacency of these ex-left layers. The goal of Darcos and Besson is not to destroy the French economy, but to poison the political atmosphere and give the state the necessary weapons to move aggressively against working class opposition. In this, the state's ability to publicly single out and close firms employing *sans-papiers* would be an immense asset.

More broadly, however, there is an objective logic to the state's assumption of extraordinary powers and its encouragement of fascist sentiments. Under the impulse of a social and political crisis, a desperate government might well carry these measures far beyond what its members originally intended.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact