

# French union campaign on undocumented workers ends in expulsions, few legalisations

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A fraudulent campaign led by the Stalinist CGT (General Confederation of Labour) trade union, supposedly for the legalisation of undocumented immigrant workers, or *sans-papiers*, has resulted in expulsion orders for 450 of them, according to a report in *Les Echos* on March 31.

The CGT campaign was based on an acceptance of restrictions to access to residence rights, which make it impossible for all but a tiny proportion of France's *sans-papiers* to live and work legally in France. By accepting the government's doctrine of "legalisation through work," the CGT left unchallenged the state's criminalisation of the remaining 400,000 *sans-papiers* residing in France.

The CGT's campaign was worked out in advance with employers, as it supported only the legalisation of *sans-papiers* whose employers vouch for them. The CGT recruited *sans-papiers* with jobs on the basis of an agreement that, if they went on strike with the backing of the union and their employers, the union would negotiate their legalisation applications.

One of the necessary documents in the worker's application dossier was an official union certification that he or she was a striker. A CGT circular to *sans-papiers* strikers, dated December 3, 2009 states "*Sans-papiers* workers must keep the original of their CERFA forms [applications for the authorisation to employ a foreign worker] filled in by the employer: a copy of these forms will be kept centrally by the 11 organisations with a photocopy of the striker's card."

After two years of negotiations with the government and sporadic strike movements involving up to 6,000 *sans-papiers* workers, their hopes were dashed. Only 200 one-year legalisations were "won," out of the 3,916 applications that the CGT presented.

A particularly pernicious factor of the CGT's

procedure is that, in order to make an application, the clandestine workers have to reveal their identity and address. They are thus easy pickings for the police, who have instructions to meet a target of deporting 28,000 illegal immigrants in 2011.

The CGT intervened on the *sans-papiers* issue to defuse popular sympathy for the *sans-papiers* and opposition to the anti-immigrant policies of the government. In May 2006 a demonstration of 20,000 in Paris demanded legalisation for all *sans-papiers* and was supported by many youth. They saw this struggle as a continuation of the mass mobilisations earlier in the year against the CPE (first job contract), which aimed to strip youth of job security.

School and university students and teachers protested arrests and deportations of their classmates and their *sans-papiers* parents.

In 2008 the CGT formed an alliance with the main union confederations and civil rights, anti-racist and immigrant support organisations in a "Group of 11." The state appointed the CGT as the only official negotiator with the government to represent *sans-papiers'* applications for legalisation.

A letter, dated October 1, 2009, sent to Prime Minister François Fillon by the CGT on behalf of the group did not oppose the draconian conditions for legalisation inscribed in article 40 of the law of November 20, 2007. It merely asked Fillon to issue instructions for them to be applied equitably and to "define better and simplified criteria, to be applied throughout the country. It must guarantee equality of treatment for each worker wherever they are working and within a workplace. It must define a legalisation procedure that is sure and standardised in any locality."

The group made an agreement with the government on June 18, 2010 that the strikers' applications for

residence and work permits, if submitted by March 31, 2011, would be studied by state officials. *Le Monde* wrote: “Therefore, in June, a tacit agreement was negotiated between the CGT and the ministry for the applications of these 'strikers' should be treated with ‘special indulgence.’”

As the outcome of the campaign has shown, there was no “indulgence” shown to the *sans-papiers* workers.

In fact, the CGT isolated and betrayed the *sans-papiers*’ struggle, in line with its syndicalist and pro-capitalist perspective of negotiating wages and conditions on a national basis. This gives the union bureaucracy a prime interest in the profitability of the national economy. The huge class tensions and trade rivalries produced by the global economic crisis have made the unions the enforcers of the bourgeoisie’s “national interest” by policing austerity.

In the most recent period, this has taken the form of repeated cuts to pensions and social services, negotiated between President Nicolas Sarkozy and the CGT. At the same time, Sarkozy turned increasingly to neo-fascist attacks on immigrants in order to divide the working class, waging class war on the workers at home and imperialist war in Afghanistan, and now Libya and the Ivory Coast.

The Stalinist Communist Party (PCF) and the CGT have long had a chauvinist policy in favour of the restriction of immigration since the 1970s and have claimed to fight unemployment by national protectionism, designed to boost French capitalism. In 1970, they launched the campaign of “Buy French and produce French.” That is, they were solidifying an alliance with French employers against foreign companies and their workers.

The CGT's deal with the government in 2008 brought it into conflict with *sans-papiers* groups, particularly the Paris-based *Collectif de sans-papiers 75* (CSP75).

Representing 2,000 *sans-papiers* in the Paris area, the CSP75 objected to the CGT’s exclusive relationship with the government. It occupied a CGT union hall, the *Bourse du travail* in May 2008. The CSP75’s statement explained: “CSP75 cannot accept the exclusive role, which appears to have been granted to the CGT, of filing applications collectively at the *préfectures* of the Paris region.”

The group of 11, including the CIMADE immigrant

aid organisations, the RESF (Education Without Borders Network), the LDH (League for Human Rights) and *Droits devant*—backed by the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the LCR (forerunner of the New Anti-capitalist Party, NPA) of Olivier Besancenot and *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO, Workers' Struggle)—all condemned the CSP75's occupation.

These organizations backed the CGT in an increasingly virulent campaign, closely coordinated with the state and police forces, directed against the workers. They did not protest when CSP75 members manning a stall at the PCF newspaper's fair, the *Fête de l'Humanité*, were assaulted on September 12, 2008 by CGT thugs. CGT officials told them: “We will do everything we can to block your applications.”

On June 24, 2009 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* on the pavement outside. The eviction had the approval of the Paris town hall and its Socialist Party mayor, Bernard Delanoë.

The NPA has, at every turn, supported the CGT's actions against the *sans-papiers*. It not only made no protest at the brutal eviction, but issued a statement justifying it: “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.”

With this statement, in line with the views of the entire ex-left political establishment, the NPA made this point crystal clear: it will tolerate no interference by the working class in unions’ suppression of the class struggle and its collaboration with the agencies of the state.



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