

France: LCR backs the CGT against undocumented workers

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Hundreds of undocumented workers, *sans papiers*, have been occupying the building of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) in central Paris since May 2. They are demanding that the union support their applications for residence rights.

The CGT, which is close to the Stalinist Communist Party, is only prepared to take up the case of *sans papiers* workers who are members of the union. The Paris *préfecture*, on the other hand, insists that all applications be forwarded through the CGT, making the union a kind of intermediary between the government and the *sans-papiers*. The CGT's refusal to take up the case of undocumented workers represented by the central Paris *sans papiers* coordinating committee, CSP 75, leaves them in an impasse.

The CGT's abandonment of these workers has received the support of the "far left" LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire) of Olivier Besancenot.

The CGT has presented a file of some 900 of its members' requests for residence rights to the Paris *préfecture*, with the agreement that these will be processed "positively" on a case-by-case basis. This means that they will be subject to the government's strict conditions for granting legalisation and arbitrary selection by the *préfet*, the local representative of the state. This has been preceded by strikes and occupations throughout the Paris region since April 15 by more than a thousand *sans-papiers* workers, led by the CGT and the civil rights organisation *Droits Devant*. In many cases, these strikes had the support of the employers, who desperately need these workers.

Having had their own file of some 1,000 applications rejected by the *préfecture*, which told them to work through the CGT, CSP 75 asked the union to submit their file, too. When the union refused to do so, up to 300 hundred CSP 75 members occupied the CGT building in Paris's 3rd arrondissement on May 2, accusing the union of having "taken the *sans-papier* movement hostage." They asserted that they will stay until the CGT agrees to represent them too.

The CSP 75 rejects the deal between the CGT and the French state, which excludes the mass of the undocumented immigrants, making the CGT the only recognised intermediary for the *sans papiers*. The CSP's May 15 statement says: "CSP 75 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 statement reports that there are now, on the 12th day of the

occupation, *sans papiers* and their supporters occupying the building. It calls for a national strike of all *sans papiers* workers on May 16 and a rally at the trade union hall *La Bourse du Travail*, 85 rue Charlot, Paris.

It recalls that "this building has been the site of the historic struggle of ALL workers" and asks the CGT for "support and help" in the strike and occupation movement of thousands of *sans papiers*. The statement stresses that their movement represents a struggle "against the destruction of labour rights and workers' rights" in general.

It continues: "We demand the legalisation of all *sans papier* workers, male and female, refugees and unemployed, and to be received by Mr. [Brice] Hortefeux [Minister of Immigration] and Mr. [Michel] Gaudin [Paris chief of police] with the support of the CGT, the closure of retention centres [for immigrants with expulsion orders pending deportation], the repeal of the xenophobic immigration laws, and an end to round-ups and police checks based on skin colour, the repeal of the discriminatory and illegal ANAEM tax paid [by employers] for the employment of every foreigner!"

In an interview to LCI TV channel on May 8, Christian Khalifa, a Paris region CGT official, ignored the *préfecture*'s rejection of the CSP 75's applications and—in a classical example of trade-union narrowness—refused to defend these workers: "We aren't taking anyone hostage! We're not stopping anyone carrying out actions in favour of the *sans-papiers*. But the CGT can't take up all the applications for legalisation of the *sans-papiers*. We are a trade union organisation, not a *sans-papiers* association. Our action is carried out in the workplaces...we carry out coordinated and thought-out actions. Occupying our premises is not the right way, even less so during the very active period we're in, with the May 15 and May 22 actions to prepare."

Not only the Paris *préfecture*, but also Prime Minister François Fillon treats the CGT as intermediary in dealing with the *sans-papiers*. Fillon addressed a letter to CGT general secretary Bernard Thibault, complaining about "the great number of uncompleted application papers" and "the too frequent absence of an employer's promise to employ" the applicant. He admonishes "the trade unions and *sans papiers* support organisations" for deficiencies in the development of a dialogue "to find the best solution possible for the workers concerned."

Article 40 of the November 20, 2007, law and a January 7, 2008,

government circular give the possibility of legalisation on request by an employer, on condition that the worker is working in a sector “*en tension*” (where it is hard to recruit labour). Minister of Immigration and National Identity Hortefeux made it clear that legalisations would be “limited to a few hundred strictly in conformity with these rules.”

In response, Thibault, on Europe 1 radio, far from demanding the legalisation of all *sans papiers*, even those signed up to his union, merely asked the government “to speed up the processing of applications” and for a meeting “so that the criteria established for the legalisation of these *sans papiers* should be the same for all *départements*.”

Khalifa and Thibault are here repudiating a fundamental principle of solidarity: that it is a central task of the working class to defend the weakest sections of society, being aware that the ruling class starts with the most vulnerable in order to attack the democratic rights of all. The suppression of the rights of the *sans papiers* is part of the attempt to create a reserve army of cowed workers without rights, completely at the mercy of the employer, to drive down the general level of wages and conditions.

It is quite clear that the government is utilising the CGT and *Droits Devant* as its agents to deal with the growing struggle of the *sans papiers*, to split up their struggle and keep it separate from that of the rest of the working class. This role is ever more openly being played by the CGT and other unions wherever workers struggle for their independent interests, as was shown in the transport and energy workers struggle in defence of their pensions in October and December of last year.

The Stalinist Communist Party and the CGT have 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.” In 1979, the CP adopted a policy of stopping immigration. Instead of mobilising the working class in defence of the rights of all workers, they entered into an alliance with the employers against foreign companies and their workers.

In 1980, there was the infamous episode of the “Vitry bulldozers,” when the Stalinist mayor of Vitry had an immigrant workers’ hostel situated in his municipality knocked down, claiming that excessive numbers of immigrants concentrated in the CP-run municipalities created problems.

The embrace by the French left of policies of the restriction of immigration, along with the inevitable oppressive police apparatus this requires, for a long time obliged the *sans-papiers* to turn to the tactic of occupations of churches and appeals to the clergy and the traditional role of these buildings as sanctuaries. The memory is still vivid in France of axe-wielding CRS riot police on the August 22, 1996, smashing down the doors of the St. Bernard church in Paris to evict immigrants taking refuge there, including pregnant mothers, babies and children. The CRS was sent there by Gaullist Prime Minister Alain Juppé. The outrage felt by millions of French people contributed to the defeat of the Gaullists in the 1997 general election.

The current movement of the *sans papiers* represents a turn to the French working class. The principled statement issued by CSP

75 on May 15 warns that the suppression of the democratic rights of immigrants threatens the rights of all workers.

The fact that the *préfecture* has issued residence papers, many of them for a very short period, to only a handful of *sans-papiers* whose employers have stated their need for their labour, is being presented by the CGT as a great victory.

This is endorsed by the May 9 edition of the LCR weekly *Rouge* which claims that “The series of strikes and occupations, launched April 15 by several hundreds of *sans papier* workers has opened a magnificent breach in Sarkozy and Minister of National Identity Brice Hortefeux’s policy. The involvement of the trade union movement, notably the CGT, is a major element.”

Rouge rushes to the aid of the CGT bureaucrats and attacks “the damaging occupation of the Paris Union Hall by *Coordination 75*” and accuses it of being responsible for “the poison of division.”

A statement issued by the LCR on its web site entitled “The *sans-papiers* movement: the LCR’s position” implies that *Coordination 75*’s action is helping the government: “The government has perhaps found a way of dividing and neutralising the movement.”

The LCR does not expose the CGT’s abandonment of elementary workers’ solidarity and the defence of democratic rights and is acting as a fig leaf for the trade union bureaucracy. This exposes the fact that its posturing as a main opponent of racism and defender of the *sans-papiers* is a fraud. As in every other field—the defence of the public sector special pensions, the struggles of the high school and university students—the LCR and the new “anti-capitalist party” it intends to build serve as a cover for the right-wing labour bureaucracies.

The WSWs calls on the working class to come to the aid of all immigrants and to fight for their full citizenship rights. This involves building a party in the working class fighting for the interests of all workers, regardless of their origins.

Only the mobilisation of all sections of the working class behind the demands of the *sans-papiers* for full citizens rights, as part of a fight against Sarkozy and the European Union’s anti-immigration policies can defend and extend these rights.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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