

French Union Evicts Africans

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The French CGT union's racist expulsion of African immigrants from its offices reveals deep contradictions inside the labor movement.

On Wednesday, June 24, a terrible event took place in Paris: Hundreds of Africans sans papiers (undocumented immigrants) who had occupied the Bourse de Travail for over a year were evicted and pushed onto the street with their belongings. These workers had taken refuge in the Bourse du Travail, a union-run employment service, because they have no work permits and hope to secure legalization.

The General Confederation of Labor (CGT), a union with historical ties to the Communist Party, used a strong-arm squad to evict the Africans, 800 of whom had occupied its office at the Bourse since 2008. The CGT goons, who were wearing masks and orange armbands, set off tear gas canisters, forcing everyone onto the streets during the middle of the day, when the number of occupiers was at a minimum because most were attending their weekly public demonstration.

The Africans had been occupying the CGT offices in an attempt to pressure France's most powerful union to secure work and residence permits for 1,300 Africans sans papiers. The CGT evicted them in

obvious collusion with the police, hundreds of whom came to the scene within minutes, along with many, many paddy wagons.

Nissim-Sabat, who witnessed these events while traveling in France, had to leave because the police threw up a blockade around the workers who were sitting on the ground in front of the building. It was a sight both awful and moving, as she reported at the time: "Though I wept when I saw the conditions which they were forced to endure, they comported themselves with great dignity. They kept their surroundings as clean as possible under the circumstances and made no move whatsoever that would suggest self-pity." Her photos accompany this report.

After the outrage of June 24, some 400 of the expelled African workers began to camp on the street in front of the Bourse du Travail.

Enduring both heat and rain, they refused to break up their group because that would have made them even more vulnerable to arrest or deportation. They also pointed out to all who would listen that they were already "working and paying taxes." It goes without saying that these workers, like so many others including Chinese immigrants, are more vulnerable to superexploitation because they have no legal standing.

Finally, on July 9, after two weeks camped out on the street, the sans papiers received an offer from the government. The French state promised to consider favorably the legalization of 300 of the sans papiers if they would disband their street encampment. The workers

accepted this offer and promised end their encampment in the coming days. This significant albeit limited victory has come at a tremendous cost.

Besides the determination and organized resistance of the sans papiers themselves, another factor in their limited victory was the support of other groups. While the CGT continued to defend its racist expulsion of the Africans, hundreds of others from pro-immigrant and other leftist groups held a demonstration of support for the evicted Africans on June 29. The eviction has also been widely discussed in the press. As for the **CGT**, when accessed on July 12 the homepage of its website had no mention of the expulsion of the sans papiers. Interestingly it carried a single photo of a labor demonstration, showing only white workers.

The shocking June 24 attack on immigrant workers by the CGT, a leftist trade union, comes at a time when class resistance to capital in France has been growing. In the last few months, a number of factories have been occupied, with the bosses sequestered, as workers protested layoffs. The May Day demonstrations this year brought around a million workers onto the streets in various demonstrations across France, a turnout not seen in many years. Eleven days before the eviction of the Africans by the CGT, on June 13, some 100,000 workers demonstrated across France again, demanding jobs and social support for the unemployed.

This is what makes the June 24 eviction so revealing, for it points to a deep contradiction among the forces opposed to capital. While the CGT and other unions give lip service to supporting immigrants, and while they do assist some immigrants, especially if they are union members, this leaves large swathes of the most oppressed sectors of the working classes out in the cold. As Karl Marx wrote at a similar juncture, that of white labor and slavery in the U.S.: "In the United States of America, every independent workers' movement was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin." (*Capital*, Vol. I, p. 414, Fowkes trans.)

This lesson has been confirmed over and over again in the decades since Marx issued it, not only in France, but also in the U.S. and other countries. The French unions, especially the CGT, are ignoring it today at their peril. Seemingly they are doing so in the hope of conciliating white workers, fearing a backlash were they to give greater support to African immigrant workers.

Unfortunately such rank opportunism serves to cut off organized labor from the most oppressed layers of French society, not only from immigrants but also from minority youth. These youth, usually born in France but descended from immigrants, face terrible police harassment as well as many forms of racism and economic deprivation. In response, they have staged a whole series of anti-police revolts in the suburban ghettos of Paris and other cities, most notably in 2005. It is from these sectors of the working classes that

one can find those most determined to tear up existing society by its roots.

Photos. Credit: usmarxisthumanists.org





