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The CGT Campaign supporting the “Sans-Papiers” – Act II

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The beginnings of the second act

One year and a half after the first act of the CGT campaign supporting the sans papiers (April 15th 2008), the second act opened on October 12th 2009 following the same scheme but at a much bigger scale and with more experience and organization.

Indeed even if the first wave of strikes led to some improvement and to about 2,500 regularizations, it mainly brought up awareness from the public opinion and draw the attention of the governmental powers on the fact that the issue has to be taken care of. Nevertheless it was far from being enough for the *sans-papiers* and their supporters - unions and associations. 18 months later, the procedures are still very long and painful for the undocumented workers and above all, in spite of the government's promises, the regularization process has stayed the kingdom of arbitrary where prefectures keep a total control.

On the first day of the movement they were 2,300 strikers mainly coming from the building, security, cleaning and catering sectors. Two weeks later they were already 4,000 undocumented workers from about 1200 firms, sitting in about forty workplaces located in the Ile de France province – according to the CGT. On November 3rd, 350 undocumented workers from the building industry stepped up a striking action on the construction site of the tower “First” at heart of the business district La Defense. They were calmly kicked out after a few hours by the police force. ¹

Nonetheless, this second act is not a repetition of the first act and differs on three main levels.² First of all, even if CGT is still the leader of the movement, the sans papiers workers are now supported by a united union front (CGT, CFDT, FSU, Union syndicale Solidaires and UNSA) plus six associations (*Ligue des droits de l'Homme, Cimade, RESF, Femmes Egalité, Autre Monde and Droits Devants!*) - in 2008 CGT started on standalone the movement supported by two other associations. From now on these five unions and six associations have been called the *Collectif des 11* or *Les 11*, negotiated and signed letters to the government altogether as one block. This means

¹ Pelloli, Matthieu. 2009. “La tour First assiege par 350 sans-papiers.” *Le Parisien*, November 3

² Terray, Emmanuel. 2009. “Sans-papiers (Acte II).” *Liberation*, October 20

that their bargaining power has dramatically increased in efficiency since the previous movement.²

Second of all, they agreed with the undocumented workers on their demands. They are not fighting anymore to get as many workers regularized as possible as they did in April 2008; they are now engaging in a legal battle in order to obtain clear, simplified regularization criteria that would be harmonized among all prefectures. And the strategy of the *Collectif des 11* is that as long as these criteria will not be written down on a ministerial circular, they will continue strikes and sit-ins, and no applications will be submitted. Nevertheless, according to Daniel Richter from the *CFDT Yvelines*, demanding for a new circular has no point for the simple reason that the government has already released circulars previously but they are interpreted according to prefectures' willingness or even sometimes totally ignored by them.

Finally, the movement has reached the informal market that is to say isolated and temporary workers. Less and less workers are afraid to take the risk to get out of the shadow to demand papers through strikes. For some of them, this movement has grown in such a huge scale that this might be their one shot to settle their destiny. Among these new strikers, the Chinese community. Mid November 2009, they are more than 300 to have left restaurants and clothing workshop to join the *sans papiers* movement. They all come from different communities that do not speak the same dialect and struggle to learn French. So fighting for their regularization is not an easy challenge.³

The timing of the movement was favorable for the unions and quite disturbing for the government for two reasons. First the regional elections were happening on March 2010, which means that the problem would have had to be coped with as quickly as possible in order to calm down the undocumented workers actions. Second, the government had just announced the beginning of a public debate on the National French Identity. That is why immediately after the launch of the second wave of strikes, the government hastened to organize meetings to find an issue to the problem. On October 27th 2009, the Ministry of Immigration offered to synthesize in a single document what had been defined so far in the legislation from November 2007. In addition, the *Conseil D'Etat* (council of state), seized by the association Gisti (Groupement d'Information et de soutien aux immigrés), decided to invalidate the ministerial note of January 2008 that on the one hand was specifying the conditions for regularization but on the other hand was also the root of the movement insofar as its application was drastically divergent among prefectures.

³ LeMonde.fr, 2009. " Les sans-papiers chinois ont rejoint le mouvement. " www.lemonde.fr, November 20

This note had opened a breakthrough to regularization for work purpose if a worker could provide a job offer, and had define a list of 30 positions open to the non-European citizen. Nevertheless those dispositions were not explained in the Law of November 2007 that is why the *Conseil D'Etat* pointed out that the government could not ignore the law and restrict the conditions for work permit issuing. The crux of the problem lies precisely in that 30-position list because it is mainly high-qualified positions that do not match the market needs. Unions and associations demand that the 150-position list defined in the Hortefeux Law of November 2007 becomes the rule for non-European citizens.⁴ Early November marked also the launch of *Ici* (here), a free newspaper dedicated for supporting the *sans papiers* workers.

A month after the beginning of the movement, the *Collectif des 11* had already attended four times at the table of negotiations with the Ministry of Immigration. At the same time, employers and authorities were trying to “clear out” the 5,200 strikers. During the first wave of strikes, the police force could not intervene without a court order because the conflict was considered as a labor dispute at the workplace. This time, some employers used *l'ordonnance sur requête* (order upon request), which is an extraordinary procedure that does not allow the strikers to give their version of the facts. The goal is to prove that they are illegitimate squatters – for example if they are temporary workers or employed by subcontractors. Employers have recourse to evacuations by police forces such as there is no court decision. That is what happened during the sit-in of the tower First mentioned earlier. ⁵

New legal outcomes

On November 22nd and 23rd, both Minister of Labor (Xavier Darcos) and Minister of Immigration (Eric Besson) announced one after the other a reinforcement of the law targeting employers employing undocumented workers: the firms employing undocumented workers could be closed administratively. That power will fall into the *préfet's* hands. In case of a closure, all the employees including the undocumented workers will receive their wages. Moreover, contracting companies that close their eyes on undocumented workers employed by their subcontractors will be sanctioned too. Among other retaliatory measures, exonerations of social taxes could be suppressed. In addition the Ministry of Labor planned on increasing controls – in 2008, 28,000 controls were done (number of employees).⁶ Employers were of course very critical of this new legislation project, arguing that it is not the employers' role to take the place of the

⁴ Perrotte, Derek. 2009. “ Sans-papiers: la circulaire de régularisation par le travail invalidée . ” *Les Echos*, October 29

⁵ Sicot, Dominique. 2009. “ La France des invisibles est en marche. ” *L'Humanite*, November 19

⁶ Beyer, Caroline. 2009. “Darcos et Besson intraitables sur le travail des sans-papiers. ” *Le Figaro*, November 23

administration to do the necessary controls. This is not their job to become experts in fake documents.⁷ Yet such retaliatory legislation already exists. So what really justified this announcement? A political move a few months before the regional elections?

On November 24th 2009, the government (Ministry of Immigration) delivered a new ministerial circular to prefectures. The criteria for regularization – which actually are only leads, indications - did not fundamentally change: five years in France, one year of seniority in a firm plus a job offer over one year of contract, understanding at least some French. And the range of jobs for which it would be possible to get working documents was broaden: the *Direction départementale du Travail, de l'Emploi et de la Formation professionnelle (DDTEFP)* (direction of the local labor department) can show that in specific industrial sectors there is a lack of labor force that requires employers to hire an immigrant workforce. It means that the list of jobs is going to differ in time and space, according to each region. It widens the possible job range to certain sectors such as cleaning, human services or catering industry... but the agreement of the *DDTEFP* is always needed. Moreover, meanwhile the file of an undocumented worker is under examination, prefectures have to deliver a one-month temporary work authorization (renewable). The employer receives a receipt testifying that their employee has submitted an application for papers, that is to say that during this period of time the employer does not have to lay-off him anymore. But he will have to do it if the application turns out to be dismissed. In conclusion, local governments keep quite a high flexibility to interpret the law at their own convenience.⁸

According to Raymond Chauveau from the *CGT*, “there are some new positive elements in this circular, specifically on the temporary workers issue, but this is not satisfying”⁹ whereas Francine Blanche added that “negotiations with the Ministry of Immigration went as far they could and that we need now to open the dialogue with the Ministry of Labor.”¹⁰ According to unions and associations, this ministerial note is too restrictive and the questions of the Tunisians and Algerians workers and of the cleaning women working in the black market remain unsolved. Also it does not make sense to restrict regularization to workers that have been more than five years on the French territory whereas during the first wave of strikes, undocumented workers that had only been in France for three years have been regularized. On the top of that, it seems absurd and illogical to require from an immigrant to stay illegally five years on the French territory

⁷ Fouquet, Claude. 2009. “Travail illegal: les patrons critiques la methode du gouvernement.” *Les Echos*, November 24

⁸ www.questiondetrangers.com. 2009. “Nouvelle circulaire de régularisation des travailleurs sans-papiers: prudence dans l'analyse!” November 26

⁹ Van Eeckhout, Laetitia. 2009. “Les syndicats contestent les criteres de regularisation par le travail.” *Les Monde*, November 27

¹⁰ De Comarmond, Leila. 2009. “Régularisation des salariés sans papiers : Eric Besson élargit la liste des métiers.” *Les Echos*, November 18

escaping the authorities and knowing that he cannot technically prove the length of his stay if he did not get a job from the start. For example if an immigrant that has been five years in France, stayed two years underground and got a job only during the last three years, he will not be able to prove that he was on the French territory the first two years so he will have to wait two more years with an undocumented status. Finally the *Collectif des 11*, unanimous, deplored the confusion made by the government between undocumented work (black market) and the administrative situation of the undocumented workers.

This first text ends the first part of the negotiations with the government. The movement has now grown up to 6,000 striking undocumented workers from 2,100 firms. Some of them were probably temporary workers that were not currently on a short-term contract. But anyway, they were more than ever ready to last until they obtained what they want.

Massive intervention of politics and celebrities

From January 2010, VIPs started to get more and more involved in the movement. At the beginning of the year 2010, twenty personalities from the cinema, television and sport industries gave several speeches one after another in front of several *sans papiers* occupying since December 15th the building of the insurance fund dedicated to the training of employees working for the craft and building industries (FAF-SAB). In February, 151 VIPs signed a petition in support of the *sans papiers* and to protest against the 50 governmental actions taken so far to flush out strikers preventing them to use their main means of pressure: strikes and sit-ins.¹¹ Moreover, well-known French film directors such as Laurent Cantet, Agnes Jaoui or Jacques Audiard took part in the debate in shooting a 3 minutes and a half short film called “*On bosse ici! On vit ici! On reste ici!*” (“We work here! We live here! We stay here!”) about undocumented workers. This manifesto has been signed by 305 film directors and is screened on the Internet since the end of February 2010.¹² It was also released in more than 500 cinema theatres on March 10th.

Not only celebrities have been supporting the *sans-papiers* but also some politics especially from the Socialist Party (PS, left wing party) joined the movement. End of March the Mayor of Paris Bertrand Delanoë (PS) and the president of the regional council of *Ile de France* Jean-Paul Huchon (PS) tried to put pressure on the Minister of Labor so that he agrees to organize a meeting with some undocumented workers and to write a new ministerial note.¹³ Progressively all the left-wing parties have expressed their support to the movement and on June 10th, representatives of eleven parties (*PS, PCF, les Verts, Lutte ouvrière, NPA, Fédération pour une alternative sociale et écologique, les*

¹¹ 2010. “Le piquet de grève de la Rue du Regard est sous notre protection.” *L’Humanité*, February 10

¹² http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xcbvuw_on-bosse-ici-on-vit-ici-on-reste-i_news.

¹³ AFP. 2010. “Huchon et Delanoë (PS) demandent que Woerth receive les sans papiers.” *AFP*, April 1.

Alternatifs, République et Socialisme, Gauche unitaire, PCOF) wrote to the President Nicolas Sarkozy to remind him that regularizing these workers was an absolute necessity.¹⁴

The *Collectif des 11* collaborating with employers

On February 13th, 3,000 undocumented workers (according to the *CGT*) 850 (according to the police) demonstrated in front of the *Medef*¹⁵ headquarters to demand the support employers. After four months of demonstrations, this is another important tipping point for the movement. Finally some management organizations accepted to negotiate with the unions in order to define a common text including clear regularization criteria to submit for approval to the government.

A month after this demonstration, two employers' organizations *CGPME* (*Confédération générale du patronat des petites et moyennes entreprises* or General confederation of small and medium sized enterprises' employers) and *Ethic*¹⁶ (*Entreprises de taille humaine, indépendantes et de croissance* or independent growing human-sized enterprises), and several unions including the *CGT* signed a text defining a "common approach". It specifies nine cumulative criteria for regularization comprising the necessity to provide at least 12 months of employment for one or several employers, also the commitment of the employee to take French lessons in case his/her level is not sufficient. A significant number of small and medium sized enterprises do employ undocumented workers, according to them without knowing it. That is why, through this text, they request employers that decide to help their employees to get documents and that have paid contributions pertaining to these *sans papiers*, to be prevented from retroactive sanctions. The problem is that this demand goes against the government's proposal to close administratively firms employing a significant number of undocumented workers. Nevertheless, if this collaboration is an important step in the *CGT* campaign, the "common approach" is far from having a unanimous support among employers' organizations. Mainly the *Medef* did not want to say anything on the topic and big companies are afraid to see their image damaged if they admit supporting the movement that is to say if they admit being reprehensible. As for now only *Veolia Propreté* agreed to sign the document.¹⁷

¹⁴ 2010. "Un front syndical, associatif." *L'Humanité Dimanche*, June 17

¹⁵ *Medef: Mouvement des Entreprises Françaises*, Movement of the French Enterprises. *Medef* is an employers' organization representing French business leaders.

¹⁶ *Ethic* is an employers' organization that comprises several hundreds of firms. *Ethic* promotes a better integration of employees within their company through an ethic charter.

¹⁷ Vignaud, Marc. 2010. "Régularisation des travailleurs sans papiers : des patrons soutiennent les syndicats." *LePoint.fr*, March 9.

A few days after having submitted the text to the government, the ministry of Immigration failed to respond to the unions and employers' organizations, arguing that the text was not formally signed.¹⁸

Early April 2010, new employers' representatives such as members of the Federation of cleaning enterprises (*Fédération des entreprises de propriétés*) and the movement Enterprise and Progress (*Mouvement Entreprise et Progrès*) joined the 'alliance' with unions.

The Bagatelle case¹⁹

The Bagatelle case is noteworthy insofar as it brought into the light a breach of law used by employers to hire cheap workforce.

In January 2009, a self-employed status was created to respond to a need of the market and enjoyed very quickly a great success since about 320,000 self-employed 'firms' have been created so far (www.auto-entrepreneur.fr). This status aims at offering the possibility for students, employees, retired and unemployed to receive or to complete an income through working in fields such as bed & breakfast, e-commerce, human services or telecommuting. Also the procedure to create your own business is very simplified. The advantage of becoming self-employed is that it is VAT- and corporate tax- exempted for the first three years. Moreover if a self-employed person does not make any revenue, he will not have to pay any taxes. For immigrants to benefit from a self-employed status, they have to provide a valid residence permit beforehand.

On March 17th, a hundred undocumented workers supported by the CGT took over *Les Jardins de Bagatelle* (the Bagatelle Garden), an upscale restaurant located in a very wealthy neighborhood of Paris (16th district), to denounce abuses linked to the self-employed status. Indeed a few employers compel some immigrant workers to become self-employed in order to externalize partially their activities and therefore to avoid paying payroll taxes or being socially responsible for this workforce – paid vacations or job insecurity allowance in case of a short-term job contract. At *Bagatelle*, eight *sans-papiers* from Mali would have been compelled to become self-employed according to them, but the management denies this fact. Whatever the truth is, a few

¹⁸ LeMonde.fr. 2010. "Sans-papiers : fin de non-recevoir du gouvernement à la proposition syndicat-patronat" *Le Monde*, March 12.

¹⁹LaCroix. 2010. "Le statut d'auto-entrepreneur est parfois utilise pour contourner la loi." *La Croix*, March 29.

hours later the employer promised to offer these workers a long-term position and to fulfill the necessary documents for them to submit their regularization application.²⁰

Towards a final end to the conflict?

Mid-May 2010, after seven months of strike and sit-in, the government decided to reopen the debate. From now on, around the table of discussions sat the representatives of the unions and associations supporting the *sans-papiers*, the Ministry of Immigration and the Ministry of Labor as the *collectif* requested it. The main reasons for this reopening was the “common approach” submitted by both unions and some employers’ organizations but the fact that the government feared the CGT would upgrade the movement in launching more powerful actions, taking into account that the debate on the pension reform tightened the social climate in the whole country.²¹

At the close of two days of talks – on Thursdays May 14th and May 20th – the government offered to evaluate the implementation of the latest ministerial circular in observing the data of prefectures so far.

In parallel of the discussions – early June, hundreds of undocumented workers supported by CGT leaders flooded into the forecourt of the Bastille Opera. This venue embodies the symbol of freedom struggle but is also a very in sight strategic location.

On Friday June 18th, the CGT reached an agreement with the government to put an end to the *sans-papiers* campaign. The outcome of the negotiations was not a new circular but an “addendum” that will serve as a guidebook of best practices intended for prefectures. Here are the main points of this addendum:²²

- Temporary workers, which were until now excluded from all legal texts and from any possibility to pretend to get regularized for work purpose, are taken into account. As for now, it is possible to justify from a 12-month employment on a 24-month period basis in putting forward contracts of several employers.

²⁰ Bernatas, Jerome. 2010. “Paris-Neuilly Les sans-papiers occupent un restaurant chic” *Le Parisien*, March 18.

²¹ Perrotte, Derek. 2010. “Travailleurs sans-papiers: le gouvernement rouvre les discussions avec les syndicats” *Les Echos*, May 17.

²² Vincent, Elise. 2010. “Eric Besson assouplit la régularisation par le travail” *Le Monde*, June 20.

- As regards the human service sector and mainly women (cleaning women, baby-sitters...) that did not benefit from regular contract and were therefore working in the black market, these workers will have the opportunity to get a work permit if they can provide one or several job offers amounting for more than 20 hours a week and for more than minimum wages.

- The government finally admitted after evaluation that regularization procedure was malfunctioning. That is why the Minister of Immigration Eric Besson promised to implement a follow up on all the applications that will be submitted to local governments in creating a steering (supervising) committee composed of government, unions and employers representatives.

- One of the main evolutions is the possibility for all applications supported by unions to be directly submitted to the *DDTEFP* of the workplace and avoiding going through a prefecture's decision, that is to say that the application would go through a decision-making organ dependent on the Ministry of Labor and not on the Ministry of immigration as it used to be. Nevertheless it might exclude employees from small and medium sized enterprises that are not reached or that does not want to be part of a trade union.²³

According to the *CGT*, this addendum constitutes a positive and serious agreement that offers satisfying progress even if some union leaders think that the government struggles to follow through its logic. Raymond Chauveau explains that the ambiguity remains as regards the fact that the length of stay on the French territory is still considered as a criterion for regularization.²⁴

Moreover, since the beginning of the conflict, the tangle of legal texts forms a “funnel” on a legal value level: the more recent the text, the less legally valuable it is. So isn't it another weak move from the government? Is it really guaranteeing a harmonization of the application process? The other problem is that Algerians and Tunisians are still not part of the agreement and remains dependent on their own bilateral agreements – on some levels more favorable nonetheless.

²³ www.questiondetrangers.com

²⁴ *LeMonde.fr*. 2010. “Satisfaits, les travailleurs sans-papiers quittent la place de la Bastille.” *Le Monde*, June 19.

Nevertheless, on the Bastille Opera stairs we could encounter scenes of jubilation and victory. The same day at night, the *sans-papiers* workers cleared the place.²⁵

The CGT and the *sans-papiers* workers: conclusion

Throughout the conflict, *CGT* has been leader from the beginning until the end and organized most of picket lines. The union had at its disposal a budget of 160,000 Euros (about \$206,000) collected through donations on several occasions.²⁶ The money helped the strikers throughout the campaign. Indeed they could last for such a long time thanks to solidarity coming from the public, unions and associations altogether. Through this campaign the *sans-papiers* were considered not as undocumented immigrants but as workers that are fighting for their rights. Their main weapon: the strike. Beforehand the *sans papiers* were protesting through church occupations and hunger strikes. Thanks to their partnership with the *CGT*, they discovered their struggle could fall under the labor and employment laws and that they could be therefore legally protected.

Since the beginning of the *sans-papiers* campaign, the issue has become totally part of the *CGT* strategy. For the occasion of the 49th national convention of the *CGT* that occurred in *Nantes* from December 7th to December 11th, the head of the union Bernard Thibault reminded all the union representatives to maintain their support to the *sans-papiers* workers' cause. Francine Blanche underlined that this type of labor conflict is extraordinary and has never been seen previously. It is the first globalized labor conflict on the French territory.²⁷

Nonetheless it has not always been the case. At first the issue had been under debate and was carried by a small group of active members within the union. Some thought the problems of regular workers should be coped with before all, but progressively it became part of the *CGT* strategy at the national level. The limit of this strategy is that most of the departmental units of the *CGT* all over France were not able to integrate this issue into their local strategy because of a lack of material, knowledge and human resources. That is why the movement was geographically circumscribed to Ile-de-France, the Paris area.

For the *CGT*, that campaign has had significant advantages even if the union had some disagreements with *sans-papiers* associations in the past – cf. *The CGT Campaign supporting the Sans-Papiers (Summer 2009)*. The undocumented workers represent an important pool of new members

²⁵Barbier, Marie. 2010. "Les sans-papiers font plier le gouvernement." *L'Humanite*, June 21.

²⁶ Vincent, Elise. 2010. "Régularisation des travailleurs sans papiers : un conflit aux enjeux multiples et complexes." *Le Monde*, May 30

²⁷ Sicot, Dominique. 2009. "Après avoir rendu hommage à la lutte des travailleurs sans-papiers, Bernard Thibault..." *L'Humanité Dimanche*, December 17

and not any members. Mainly, the movement of the *sans-papiers* allowed the CGT to reach key sectors that were difficult to access before, according to René Mouriaux. Finally there are members that are ready to fight for their rights, members that bound together to help each other – indeed regularized workers often went on strike to support the ones that were still waiting for their work permit, and this social bond is vital.²⁸

²⁸ Barbier, Marie. 2010. “La CGT et les sans papiers: un mariage d’amour et de raison.” *L’Humanité* *Dimanche*, June 28

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