

A ministry like no other...

A year ago, in an article entitled "Refugees at the Bourse" we talked about the struggle of undocumented migrants in Paris who had occupied since May 2, 2008 the "Bourse du Travail"¹ near the Place de la République. On June 24, 2009, the strong-arms of the CGT brutally expelled the 1,300 occupants. Last week we were able to visit the new place of occupation, in Baudelique Street in the 18th arrondissement. This is a very strong movement, probably the largest seen so far in Europe. This magnificent adventure continues and is even growing in a general indifference which is frightening. We urge everyone to go to meet them and support them in every way possible.

Here is an interview with Orhan Dilber, a Turkish trade union activist who spent years in the jails of the military junta after the 1980 coup. A refugee in France, he is now a spokesman for the Collective of undocumented Turks and Kurds involved in this occupation.

This collective was formed in July 2009 when a large abandoned building belonging to the Caisse Primaire d'Assurance Maladie (CPAM)², located at 14 Baudelique Street, was occupied. This building has been baptised the "Ministry for the global regularisation of all undocumented migrants". We participated in the occupation from the start and since then our group is one of ten collectives involved in the Ministry.

Before the occupation, there was no structure or group bringing undocumented Turks and Kurds together. In the 90s, there was a group of undocumented Turks, at the time of the occupation of the Church of St. Bernard, but it was temporary. It must be said that Turks and Kurds have specific characteristics compared with other groups. The majority of undocumented migrants from Turkey are Turkish-speaking and not French-speaking as most undocumented migrants from former French colonies are.

I myself have papers, but my friends needed a French-speaking spokesperson. Of course they manage, they all have jobs, but when there are debates within the community or elections of delegates, we must have our discussions in Turkish, our common language.

Currently the Turkish and Kurdish collective includes 1,300 people. When I saw the great movement behind the occupation in Baudelique Street - the largest movement in France - I called on undocumented Turks and Kurds to get involved. There are over 3,000 people who occupy this five floor building which covers 4,300 m². There are meeting rooms, training rooms. We are proud and happy to be among the founders of this Ministry.

Who are these undocumented Turks and Kurds? Have they been in France a long time, are people still arriving from Turkey?

Some comrades have been here for over 20 years, have had no papers for dozens of years. The majority have been here for about 10 years, but others have been in France for less than a year. The explanation for the fact that no such collective existed before is that most of these people came to France for political reasons. For the Kurds, it is the nationalist repression which prompted them to seek asylum, and France is still the country with the most asylum seekers. The Turks are activists who have had problems with the state and in general they have also sought political asylum. During the 80s and 90s it was fairly easy to obtain, but now it is no longer the case because the OFPRA (French Office for Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons) decided two months ago to include Turkey (along with Serbia and Armenia) among the safe countries whose citizens cannot get asylum. But we had already noticed for over a year that most asylum applications were rejected.

¹ The usual translation « Labour Exchange » is not appropriate. In France a « Bourse du Travail » is a trade union advice bureau. They are usually large buildings with offices for the different trade unions, meeting rooms etc. They provide counselling concerning violations of labour law. Such « bourses » exist in many French cities.

² One of France's largest health insurance companies.

We realised that the situation has changed and you must now seek regularisation through work. Anyway, they all work. It is the system in France which makes them work illegally. France does not welcome these people with indulgence and generosity. It leaves undocumented migrants and asylum seekers to themselves. In other countries, there are detention camps for asylum seekers and you stay until the end of the process. Either you can stay or you have to leave. Here, when you apply for political asylum, you are told, "you have to go to the prefecture, you make your request there, here is a certificate (before it was for one year, now it's three months). You have no right to work, but you can move freely, and it is renewable." What does this mean? Go and work on the black labour market. This means, go and find your compatriots in the Turkish community who have been here for a long time, sub-contractors who work for large companies providing cheap labour thanks to undocumented workers. When they come to apply for asylum, the Turks and Kurds are immediately in contact with these networks in order to work. Since they work within their community, many comrades have been here for 20 years and do not speak French. They remain isolated.

It can't have been simple to create such a group. These are people who came for political reasons, but there have been many disputes between forces on the left, many tensions between Turks and Kurds ... Basically it's worked out pretty well?

Yes, this is exceptional. I had this experience already in Turkey where I was a trade-unionist. I saw that the different political or ideological positions disappear when you are on strike. A problem such as the lack of papers brings people together. Here in our collective there are militants of the Kurdish cause and Turkish nationalists who would be enemies if they were in Turkey. They are all facing racist policies which reject everyone together in the same way as the Malians and others. The system makes no difference with regard to their origin. Here at the Ministry, there are over 25 nationalities from five continents. Of course, the majority are Africans, but there are Hispanics, Asians, Russians, Ukrainians, etc. In the group we have never had any problems.

At the "Bourse du Travail" there were weekly events, many actions, training and language courses... What's happening at Baudelique Street?

Here it's even better than at the "Bourse". Activities are much richer because we have so much space. The particularity of this occupation is that it has been the longest. If you consider it to be the continuation of the one at the "Bourse", it's been almost two years. We were used to occupy churches for several months. This occupation is very massive with more than 3,000 people, all the time. Usually when we speak of an occupation, it is about occupying and not moving. Here we continue to mobilise every week together, it is both massive and mobile. Every Wednesday we organise an event on the big boulevards of Paris and then we are heavily involved in other events, for example in solidarity with those who challenge privatisations, or at the rally in front of the MEDEF³...

Many volunteers provide language courses or social assistance to help people get medical help, or make representations at the Social Security... Lawyers come to help people with their files for regularisation.

Among us there are now some handymen. For example, a group gathers pieces of bikes which you can find lying about everywhere in Paris and make new bikes out of them, a little strange, but which work nevertheless, and which are distributed to those in need. These people didn't have a workshop anymore because they had been evicted by the police. Then they asked to be housed here. There is plenty of room. They started making bikes; they have not yet participated in demos with the bikes, but they plan to do so soon.

Apprentices in filmmaking give training, they show the undocumented, especially women, how to handle a camera, how to make a movie. The possibilities are enormous. That's what nourishes and enriches the

³ Main French employers organisation.

movement. We are, however, experiencing a certain isolation, because every time we go out in the streets of Paris and the media report on this, they never specify that we are the group that created the "Ministry" in Baudelique Street. We are accustomed to being manipulated by the press. It is a little similar with the unions and associations. We are invisible.

At the "Bourse" there were major conflicts with the CGT. Then it was the CGT cleaning industry section which helped launch the occupation of the CPAM building. I heard that five unions support the movement. But it would seem that this is not a very active support?

The support is weak. Sud/Solidaires have been with us since the beginning, the cleaning section of the CGT and the CNT are present, but not all the unions of course. The CGT has a firm and clear position. They are not for the overall regularisation of all the undocumented. Now they are in a movement of strike pickets⁴ and call for the regularisation of these 5500 strikers there and that's all.

What is likely to happen with the building? I read that the CPAM management wanted to kick you out of this place, but within the CPAM there were protests from employees who felt that it was not right to expel undocumented workers.

At the beginning of the occupation we immediately contacted employees of the CPAM and held a meeting with union representatives at Baudelique Street. They gave us their support, saying they would prevent the evacuation of this place because they are in solidarity with the undocumented. It is a kind of guarantee, and as we got past the month of September we are safe until March. There is already a court decision to evacuate, but it cannot be applied because of the winter truce on evictions.

You think it will be difficult to stay beyond March?

This will depend on the balance of power. This place is special because it was vacant, empty. If we occupied a place in use, we would not be able to stay longer than a few weeks. Now there are picket lines which make occupations⁵ for one or two weeks, but after they are evicted. This occupation is very special because it gives us the opportunity to organise a movement capable of developing something else. These are elements that make our movement become stronger. The press and the left are not used to this...

I have the impression that the big unions and political organisations always want to control and organise movements like that, but here they see that the undocumented are quite capable of organising themselves.

It's exactly like that. I note that the French left wants to do everything for others, but by acting themselves, sacrificing for the undocumented. But they cannot accept that undocumented migrants are beginning to organise. That is why collectives of undocumented migrants are not known, recognised, visible. The GISTI, Cimade⁶, the League of Human Rights, and humanitarian organisations are nevertheless present to help us. At the beginning, the LHR did not come, but they have since Martine Aubry⁷ started speaking of the undocumented in the run-up to the forthcoming regional elections.

Have things progressed as far as regularisations are concerned? Djibril, a spokesman at the "Bourse" said that about a hundred people had been regularised there. Has this continued?

After the evacuation of the "Bourse", for over a month the expelled occupants camped out on the Boulevard du Temple. Negotiations were held with the Prefecture of Police which said that if we stopped

⁴ Today, over 5.000 sans papiers are on strike in the Paris area, supported by the CGT. This strike affects 1800 firms and temporary agencies.

⁵ This refers to the CGT-supported strikes in the Paris area, mostly in restaurants.

⁶ GISTI is a group which supports immigrants, especially through legal advice. The Cimade is also an organisation strongly involved in support for migrants. It in particular has access to detention centres.

⁷ Leader of the French Socialist Party.

this occupation in the street, they would examine 300 cases. But there haven't been 300 regularisations, perhaps half as many. The police said it felt fooled because we left the boulevard but we went somewhere else and we continue to claim the overall regularisation of all undocumented migrants.

Apart from that, there have been no regularisations. As we kept on demonstrating in front of his ministry, we were received twice by the Cabinet of Eric Besson⁸. We must first finish with these 300 cases they have promised. Then we want all prefectures to recognise the collective undocumented as interlocutors for monitoring files. Of course the government insists on the implementation of the "case by case" policy instead of an overall unconditional regularisation of all undocumented migrants. What interests us is first of all to break the ice, because collectives are not recognised. After so many years of mobilisations, we must leave traces, obtain official recognition.

At the same time, it is also about acknowledging the problem of "isolated workers", because the CGT only defends workers in workplaces where there are several undocumented migrants, in larger companies ... At the "Bourse" and at Baudelique Street there are above all people working alone or in small businesses.

They are not considered to be workers. That is the problem. At the heart of our movement are workers on the black labour market. During the heat wave, I remember that the Health Minister said that if the elderly were not being looked after by us, the losses would have been double. There were already 15,000 dead in ten days. It is not only caring for the elderly, but also for sick people, for children ... France needs the undocumented workers. You get money from the state when you have children in order to increase the population, but what are you supposed to do? Work and have children? You need nannies...

For the continuation of your movement, there is a date soon which will be important, I think...

Since the creation of the Ministry, although this has not been very visible to French people, the undocumented in other regions have seen that it works. So there have been meetings with the groups from other cities. We have decided to hold a big demonstration of undocumented people on January 9th in Paris, starting from Baudelique Street. We are of course demanding an overall regularisation, but we know that it will not happen at once. Moreover, when we are regularised, what does that mean? We will always be workers, former undocumented, but still exploited foreigners. There will always be problems. So a structured organisation is very important, because even after regularisation we will need solidarity, an organisation in order to obtain our rights at work, decent wages, safe working conditions, etc.

At the same time we are developing relationships with unions. We are no longer foreigners isolated from the class struggle in France, but we're in it. With the movement of the undocumented we are preparing for the future too. I think the future of the undocumented is also the future of French workers. We always forget this. The French think they are here just out of generosity, solidarity, they see themselves as supporters, but why do they support us? Is it for charity? No, it is for themselves. When there are undocumented workers working illegally, it means that the coffers of insurance companies and pension funds are increasingly empty. They will tell you that you have to work until the age of 70, even later, as they cannot pay pensions because they do not collect the contributions from the undocumented. And at the same time this forces down wages. There are privatisations, sub-contractors, so it's not just the problem of the undocumented, but that of all workers, of the French workers, who must be here with us, not to support us, but to fight for their own interests.

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⁸ Minister of Immigration, Integration, National Identity, Solidarity and Development