

Goods and money cross borders freely, but when people try to do the same they face repression. In the global economy, the migrant is the ultimate subversive. On 23 August 1996 the French police broke down the doors of the Church of St Bernard in Paris with axes, throwing tear gas canisters inside. They evicted the building occupied by 300 immigrants who were conducting a 50 day hunger strike for recognition of their rights. This was the second church from which the group had been evicted. On 18 March 1996, three hundred foreigners 'sans papiers' (without papers) had occupied the Church of St Ambroise, also in Paris. Women, children, and men together, refusing the label of 'illegals', had decided to live in dignity and in the open in France. "Whenever we go out to work, we are hunted down like animals and denied our dignity; we are stopped by police, often simply for the colour of our face, although we have committed no crime," explains Ababacar Diop, spokesperson for the Sans-Papiers of St Bernard.

At first, their demands were not political. They wanted 'papers for all', that is, general regularization in France. But the French state responded with the forcible eviction from St Ambroise. The Sans-Papiers then moved from place to place, housed here by a Parisian gymnasium, there by a theatre in Vincennes.

As the State dug its heels in and popular support for the Sans-Papiers grew, with up to 2,000 visitors a day coming to St Bernard church, it became a political movement, highlighting the inhumane situations that undocumented immigrants experience in France, and demanding the repeal of laws which restricted further the right of foreigners to reside in or even visit the country.

The origins of current movements for the rights of asylum seekers and immigrants that form a key part of the anticapitalist movement – the No Borders network, the border camps, and most directly the German 'Kein mensch ist illegal' (no one is illegal) initiative – all grew from the seeds of inspiration sown by the Sans-Papiers.

The *Sans-Papiers*: a woman draws the first lessons

by Madjiguène Cissé

Where do we come from, we *Sans-Papiers* of St Bernard? It is a question we are often asked, and a pertinent one. We didn't immediately realize ourselves how relevant this question was. But, as soon as we tried to carry out a 'site inspection' [of all of the migrants seeking refuge in the church], the answer was very illuminating: we are all from former French colonies, most of us from West-African countries, Mali, Senegal, Guinea, and Mauritania. But there are also among us several Mahgreb people (Tunisians, Moroccans and Algerians); there is one man from Zaire and a couple who are Haitians.

So it's not an accident that we all find ourselves in France: our countries have had a relationship with France for centuries. There are among us many Soninké [who live in the east of Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso] and it is often said that the Soninké 'are a travelling people' who come together in the Empire of Mali and who were scattered across five or six different countries: that might also explain why they always feel the need to go beyond national borders. And of course, as soon as there is any question of leaving our country, most of the time in order to find work, it's natural that we turn to France. It's the country we know, the one whose language we have learned, whose culture we have integrated a little.

The time of neocolonialism

We hear, including from French government sources, that the solution would be to eradicate the causes of immigration; to help developing countries, in such a way that the people of these countries can find the jobs they need where they are. It's a good idea. But it is not at all what France is doing in Africa. French governments have never really aimed at their former colonies becoming truly independent. On the contrary, France has put in place more subtle forms of domination and exploitation. In Senegal, French investments are not made in the sectors which could help us but only in those which are already profitable.

Structural adjustment policies, which are little by little strangling our countries provide the background: we are lent money on condition that we fit into the Western, neoliberal model of 'development'. Of course this doesn't work; little by little our countries find themselves in considerable debt. And the governments cannot repay the interest of the debt and at the same time finance a policy of development, even if they wanted to.

I say even if they wanted to. Clearly there are corrupt

African leaders who divert the aid money and fill their own pockets. Quite simply, we must add that they do this before the eyes and with the full knowledge of their French advisers, even with their collusion. In a way, it's a small tip for 'good and loyal services'.

For France has never stopped being there, advising African leaders and suggesting to them which policies they should implement. For decades now we have been living in a neocolonial situation while passing for independent countries.

It is not for nothing that there is still a French military base in Dakar (and another one in Gabon). It was the French army which quelled the Bangui riot a few months ago. It must be said that even after the colonial period, they have had a solid tradition in these matters. It is they who took charge of repressing the movement of the youth and of the trade unions in May 1968. That's an episode little known in France: but our May movement in Senegal lasted five months, from February to June. And if the French army hadn't intervened, it is probable that power would have been overturned under the combined pressure of the

companies, investment, tourist resorts, and good humanitarian intentions from our countries. Leave us to confront ourselves and face our own cultural values. Leave us to pursue our own indigenous road of self-development. It shall be hard and long. But it will be our own choices to determine it. And we will never find ourselves worse off than we are today."

>> **July 9** >> Sixty-seven workers at a local McDonald's

in a suburb of Paris, France pull a surprise strike, closing the store down during its busiest period. Their demands: "Respect of our right to engage in union activity, paid vacations, the right to choose our own delegates and recognition of our personal needs." Less than 24 hours after the strike begins, a contract is signed between management and the General Confederation of Workers (CGT) union. A few days

later, McDonald's workers in the town of Ullis walk out. In Nantes, McDonald's workers prepare a week of action with CGT trade unionists.

>> **July 12** >> Four thousand United Rubber Workers in five states of the US walk out, beginning a bitter strike against Bridgestone/Firestone, the world's largest tyre manufacturer, which leads to a lock-out lasting 27 months. The workers respond to slashes in wages and

National Union of Senegalese Workers and the youth movement. The French army doesn't care in the least about 'eradicating the causes of immigration'. They are there to protect the very real economic interests which are at the same time the interests of French neocolonialism and of the African bourgeoisies.

Democracy and autonomy

The struggle has taught us many, many things. It has taught us first of all to be autonomous. That has not always been easy. There were organizations which came to support us and which were used to helping immigrants in struggle. They were also used to acting as the relay between immigrants in struggle and the authorities, and therefore more or less to manage the struggle. They would tell us, "Right, we the organizations have made an appointment to explain this or that;" and we had to say, "But we can explain it very well ourselves." Their automatic response is not to get people to be autonomous, but to speak for them.

If we had not taken our autonomy, we would not be here today. Because there really have been many organizations telling us that we could never win, that we could not win over public opinion because people were not ready to hear what we had to say.

We can see the results today: From ACT UP to the Festival of Cinema in Douarnenez, we've won a wide range of support, including in the most remote parts of France. Little by little masses of people have understood that our struggle was raising questions which go beyond the regularization of

"We are only just starting ... The struggle of the *Sans-Papiers* has to go beyond obtaining our papers and must address the underlying questions, not only in France but also, especially, in our countries of origin.... What is the purpose of migration policies? Should frontiers be open?" – Ababacar Diop, *Sans-Papiers*

the *Sans-Papiers*. New questions have gradually emerged: "Do you agree to live in a France where fundamental human rights are trampled on? Do you agree to live in a France where democratic liberties are not respected?" And we have also learned that if we really wanted to be autonomous, we had to learn about democracy. We had to make our own decisions, get them acknowledged as truly representative of us, not allow them to be called into question from the outside, respect them ourselves and therefore learn to make others respect them, and to implement them ourselves. We have learned that in six months. Without the struggle we would not have learned it in ten years.

It has not been easy. It was not obvious at the beginning that we needed general meetings; it was not obvious that women had to take part in them; it was not obvious that delegates had to be chosen. Let's take, for example, the role

of the families, which the press has helped to highlight. At the beginning, when the 'families' got together, it was mainly the 'heads of the families' who tended to express their views. There was an *esprit de chef* (leader spirit) like the head of a region or the village headman in Africa.

Now the reference to 'families' has become more a reference to the family, the African family, very extended, flexible, boy cousin, girl cousin...

Even at this stage, problems still remained. For example, there was a proposal to elect a president. The idea was that we give ourselves a 'head of the family' (a man of course) who would be above the college of delegates, and who would eventually have all powers bestowed on him. Fortunately, this did not happen.

So we elected delegates. At first, we elected ten of them. Today we are no more than five. Each time there is a problem there is in effect a general meeting, and it happens that some *Sans-Papiers* say: we don't want such and such a delegate any more; they're not doing their job. Thus of the ten delegates elected at the beginning of the movement, only two of us are left.

The role of women

Women have played an extremely important role in this struggle. And it was not obvious that this was going to happen. At the beginning it seemed to be taken for granted that women would not participate in general meetings: it wasn't necessary, since the husbands were there! Not only did women not have the right to speak; they didn't even have the right to listen to what was being said at general meetings.

Two or three women began by imposing their presence at general meetings. Then they spoke. The third stage was to have women's meetings. Then the men were really puzzled; they saw us as scheming, plotting, up to no good; they used to hang around our meetings to try and find out what we were saying. In fact, these meetings gave great strength to the women, and enabled them to play an important role in the direction of the struggle. When we were in the 15th *arrondissement*, at Catholic Aid, and the priest of SOS-Racisme suggested that we submit our case files to the Ministry and that we go home, the men were ready to do that, because they trusted the priest. It was the women who didn't want to.

They decided that they were not going home and they

benefits, and a threatened implementation of around-the-clock production with seven-day weeks and 12-hour shifts. Imaginative actions take place, including demonstrations at car races, a protest camp outside the corporate HQ, international solidarity-building campaigns launched in Japan and Europe, and a successful boycott campaign. The company eventually agrees a deal and reinstates all strikers

who were discharged.

>> **July 20** >> One million Turkish workers stage a one-day strike to protest cutbacks ordered by the World Bank and private lending sources. The government threatens arrests, but is overwhelmed by the sheer size of the walkout.

>> **August 6-9** >> The Zapatistas organize the National Democratic Convention, held in rebel territory

in a newly built convention centre called Aguascalientes, in honour of the 1914 site of the constitutional convention during the Mexican revolution. Over 6,000 people representing a broad range of civil society come from across the country to join the Zapatistas in planning what the government is refusing to discuss or negotiate – a fundamental reform to the Mexican state that would ensure democracy, justice, and a peace with

gave me the job of finding premises. I managed to find an offer of shelter at the Womens' Centre (which just celebrated its tenth anniversary) but it was not mixed; it was only for women. The women didn't need long to think about it. Since you want to go home, they said to the men, we'll take the belongings, we'll take the children, and we'll move into the Womens' Centre. Then the men told us that meanwhile they had been thinking that we should all stay together and that they would find a place big enough for everybody. In fact, each time the movement ran out of steam, the women met and worked out initiatives which relaunched the struggle.

Thus, there was the womens' march on 11 May, at the time when we were in Pajol [a disused railway site made available to the *Sans-Papiers* by the rail workers' trade union CFDT] and when the media were no longer reporting about the struggle. The march unblocked the situation in relation to the press. On 25 June there was the occupation of the town hall of the 18th *arrondissement* by the women who hadn't 'warned anyone': it is no accident that the next day the Ministry gave us the first results on the cases we had submitted.

It has to be said that the fighting spirit of women has a long history in Senegal. It was mainly the Senegalese women who spearheaded the protests against the rigging of elections in 1988. For three months, again from February to June, there were demonstrations almost every day. A National Coordination of women of the opposition was set up, and it was this Coordination which took the initiative most of the time, and organized most of the demonstrations.

In fact, the Senegalese women don't only have a tradition of struggle, we also have a tradition of self-organization. It is in some way linked to our education: as women, we are used to managing on our own from a very early age. Because back home, it is the woman who is in charge of the home, who is in charge of the compound [the plot of land on which several families live together]. Little girls from the age of eight look after their younger brothers, go to market, cook. And they have a very important role in forging links with the other families in the compound.

The spokeswoman and the mobile phone

When I was arrested after the police had invaded St Bernard, two events seemed significant to me.

The first is the way I was stripped by policewomen in front of my daughter. It was obvious that their aim was to humiliate me, to break me. So I stripped amid sarcastic comments and questionable jokes. "She's not being that clever any more, the spokeswoman", or "You're not supposed to wear a bra inside out." (A man wouldn't have thought of that.) But the nature of the mocking, the sarcastic comments and the jibes also said much about the state of mind of the police: "Aha! The spokeswoman doesn't have her mobile phone any more." The mobile phone had become the symbol of the modernity to which as a foreigner, as an African, as a Black woman, as a Negro, I had no right: "They've hardly come down from the trees, and they already have mobiles in their hands."

The second one was that I was immediately taken to

court, even though I had a perfectly valid leave to stay. It was obviously another attempt to break the symbol represented by an African woman chosen to be the spokeswoman of her comrades in struggle. And for this, they were prepared to commit many illegalities: they did not themselves respect the laws which they praised so much.

During that whole period, we had many identities to re-establish. For example, our identity as workers. So after St Bernard we insisted on holding our press conference at the *Bourse du Travail* [trade union office] to make people understand that we are not only foreigners, but that we're also workers, men and women who work in France.

The purpose of the attacks against us is of course to casualize us. But we're not the only ones threatened with casualization: many French workers are in this position. Therefore we were keen to signal this 'shared social fate' by where we held our press conference. I must add that our relations with trade unions are now very good. A system of sponsorship has been set up: the *Sans-Papiers* of St Bernard have been shared out among the various trade unions which take care of them, and invite them to speak in their

workplaces. For us, the involvement of the trade unions is fundamental to our struggle.

We have also become aware of the importance of our struggle through the support that we immediately found in our home countries (at least from the people; the governments were in less of a hurry). We believe that the struggle, in Senegal and elsewhere, against structural adjustment programmes, and our struggle here, is one and the same struggle. Coordination is not easy from 4,400 miles away, but we must constantly ensure that we are making the connections between our different battles.

Integration and respect

In France up until now our fate as immigrants was: either take part in the Republic's process of integration, or be deported like cattle. At the heart of this approach was the notion that we are 'underground', which has a very strong negative charge. A person who is underground is someone who hides, who conceals themselves, and if you conceal yourself it must be because after all you have something to hide. The French person who thinks that they must oppose

dignity and social justice. In the opening ceremony, Subcomandante Marcos expresses the wishes of the Zapatistas, saying: "We hope that the horizon will open up so that we will not be necessary anymore, we the dead since always, who have to die again in order to live. We hope... to disappear in the same way we appeared, one morning, without a face, without future. To return to the depths of history, of the dream, of the

mountains..."

>> **September** >> Italy's infamous Tute Bianche [white overalls] movement is born, when the neofascist mayor of Milan orders the eviction of the squatted social centre, Leoncavallo, saying: "From now on, squatters will be nothing more than ghosts wandering about in the city!" Activists respond humorously, dressing in ghostly white overalls and

taking to the streets; riots ensue, and the squat is saved. The white overalls, symbols of the invisibility of those excluded from capitalism, spread across the world, from Finland to Mexico.

>> **September 21** >> Doctors in 25 Bangladesh government hospitals walk out over demands for higher wages, promotions and new employment, virtually paralyzing the public health sector.

people who are underground, illegal immigration, etc. always has at their side an immigrant friend they've known for a long time.

The immigrant you reject is always the one you don't know. We have made ourselves visible to say that we are here, to say that we are not in hiding but we're just human beings. We are here and we have been here a long time. We have been living and working in this country for many years and we pay our taxes. In the files of the St Bernard people you will find wage slips, income tax declarations, old documents giving leave to stay. There are also passports and visas issued by the consulates of our countries of origin.

At the beginning of our struggle, they tried to label us as people who are underground. But they couldn't: the authorities of this country have known us for a long time. Now we feel that we have taken a step forward: even the media no longer talks about people who are underground, but of *Sans-Papiers*. The fact that we've been seen on TV, that we've been interviewed in the press, I think that has helped people to understand that we've been here for years, that we haven't killed anyone, and that we are simply demanding the piece of paper which is our right, so that we can live decent lives.

In my view, our struggle also says a number of things about the difference between the model of French integration and the model which respects our founding cultures. I think that we have understood, and maybe helped others to understand, that it isn't a question of one model or the other, but of finding a balance between the

“We are now at a crossroads.

Immigrants have been designated as scapegoats for every crisis in France and in the rest of Europe. By attacking immigrants, the French government is drawing closer to the policy of the National Front [extreme right-wing party] against a background of racism and xenophobia.”

– Ababacar Diop, *Sans-Papiers*

two. I have understood this by also thinking about my origins, about the culture of my ethnic group. I am from the Serere ethnic group. My first name is typically Wolof, and it's a Tiado first name. In Africa, the majority of first names are either Christian or Muslim. When you are a Christian, you are called either Paul or John, and when you are a Muslim, you are called Ali or Mohammed. A Tiado first name is the first name of someone who is neither Christian nor Muslim. We have resisted all attempts to convert us, whether to Christianity or to Islam. Our resistance is legendary. We are non-conformists. But our experience has also taught us how to live in a pluralist society.

When you want to live in a country there is a basic

minimum, not only of rules to abide by but also of the effort you have to make: to learn the language, to fit into the social and institutional fabric of the society, and not to be satisfied with community education structures for the children but for them to go to the state schools of the country in which their parents live and work. On the other hand, there must be in this country a minimum of respect for our cultures of origin.

Nobody forces French people who have lived in Senegal for a long time to dress like the Senegalese. And it is not because we live in a country where women are keen to wear trousers that we must decree that women who put on their African cloth and who wear the scarf cannot integrate. A bottom line must be firmly established on both sides: a minimum of will to integrate, a minimum of respect for our cultures of origin. As soon as these two pillars are firmly established, everyone can find their own balance: it will not necessarily be the same for each person. But balance will be found along this middle way which can be reached largely by consensus.

Madjiguène Cissé is the spokeswoman of *Sans-Papiers*. In 1998 *Sans-Papiers* and Madjiguène Cissé received the prestigious Carl-von-Ossietzky Medal from the International Federation of Human Rights League (German section), in recognition of their “public-spirited courage” in campaigning for the rights of immigrants and refugees. Her book, *Parole de Sans-Papiers*, was first published in France in 1999. She now lives in Dakar, Senegal.

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Resources:

» **Sans-Papiers** : www.bok.net/pajol

>> September 29 >> A nationwide strike is held in India called by the National Platform of Mass Organizations in protest against the structural adjustment programmes (SAP) of the World Bank and the signing of GATT (WTO). The strike affects functioning of banks, financial institutions, and public sector units across the country, and is the eighth in a series of protests against SAPs during the previous two years.

>> October 2 >> Bolivian workers fight back against World Bank-ordered ‘reforms,’ which require that the country cuts wages of public workers and privatize the national phone system. The resulting general strike, hunger strikes, and road and rail blockades result in the government declaring a state of siege. After 23 days, the government agrees to wage demands, and backs down from privatization.

>> October 2-4 >> Eleven people scale overhead beams of a conference centre in Madrid, Spain, and shower thousands of dark-suited delegates below with fake dollar bills that say “50 Years of Destruction” during the opening ceremonies of the IMF/World Bank’s 50th anniversary meetings. The financial institutions face their biggest demonstrations since they were run out of town a day early in Berlin in 1988. Outside the