

French working class, migrants, racism and the building of French national ideology

Prag, 2009

The theme of our debate today is quite large, so you can understand I won't be able to touch all the topics concerned by the title of this speech¹. Each word of the title of this debate could be the theme of a very long discussion.

What is the working class?

What are the meaning and scale of migrations today?

What is racism?

To start with, I'll give you some basic data which may be useful for our discussion.

France is a country of 64 million inhabitants today. Among these 64 million roughly 28 million, so a bit less than half of the population, are considered as potentially "active".

At least 14 million people can be included in the working class as opposed to the 150,000 capitalists who hire more than 10 people.

So today, France is an industrially advanced country, where the majority of the labor force works in the services sector or in the industry.

But this phenomenon is quite recent, historically speaking, because French farmers, countrymen, and craftsmen have resisted very strongly to the industrialization process.

This is why migrations have played an important **economic, social and political role in France, for 150 years**.

Why have migrations been so important in French history?

Three main reasons can be pointed out:

1. French social structure was particularly favorable to the small property and this tendency was confirmed by **the 1789 French revolution which increased the number of small farmers**, thanks to the dismantling of part of the big estates. As they wanted to keep their land, the farmers started, from the end of the late 18th-century to "produce" fewer children, in order not to be obliged to split the land they owned or they had gained after the Revolution;

2. **Farmers and countrymen refused to come and work in the factories**; some sectors like the textile industry developed the practice of giving work to farmers living in the countryside, but this "cottage or domestic industry" could not work for the mines, and the big production units of the textile or metal industry; some farmers accepted to work part of the year in a factory, and the rest of the year on their land; but this did not fit either the necessities of a growing capitalist industry;

3. **The state wanted to use the farmers and countrymen as a force to preserve law and order and social conservatism**. This was especially true of Napoleon III who reigned during the second part of the 19th century, that is between 1851 and 1870. But that was also all the case of all successive Republican regimes from 1870 until the 1950s.

So, for the three reasons I just mentioned, French capitalists, bourgeois politicians, and the state accepted to "import" migrants, or accepted the legal or illegal arrival of migrants very early in French history of capitalism. This is why today 12 million people, among the 64 million, have a foreign parent or grandparent.

From **which countries did these migrants come?**

– First, at the beginning of the 18th century, a significant amount of qualified workers came from Germany, Swiss and England,

¹ I am deeply indebted to Gérard Noiriel's ideas and hypotheses, especially in his master work: *Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme en France (XIX^e-XX^e siècle)*, Fayard.

- then, a bit later, non-qualified workers came from Europe (Spain, Italy, Poland);
- then after the First World War workers came from North and West Africa – from the French colonial empire,
- later Portuguese came (especially in the early 1960s) and also workers from other parts of the world which belonged to the French colonial Empire (like Vietnam) or did not belong to it (like China, and Turkey).

And this process still goes on today.

So what should be clear from the very start of our discussion, is that

1. It's impossible to separate French national history from the history of migrations. Such a point of view is not linked to the fact that migrants have always been the poor and innocent “victims” of “bad” or “greedy” bosses – which they have obviously been. Migrants played a central role in the definition of French national identity, French Republic, French colonial Empire, French school system, etc.

In 1851 the French state started collecting data about the foreign population living in France: 381,000 foreigners lived in a country of 38 million inhabitants. And it's between 1880 and 1900 that the immigration “problem” irrupted in the public debate.

2. It's difficult to talk of migrations in a very general way. A German craftsman arriving in France in the 1830s was not in the same situation as an Italian farmer arriving in 1850, a Russian Jew trying to escape anti-Semitism in 1890, an Algerian soldier of the French Empire arriving in 1914, a Christian Senegalese working in the French navy in 1920, a Vietnamese student arriving in 1929, or a Muslim Malian teacher coming in 2009.

Not only because obviously these periods are different but because each national group has had its own tools, associations, ways of dealing with xenophobia and racism and ways of struggling (or not struggling) alongside French workers.

I'll try now to explain how historically the themes of our debate have been interacting, and have been interwoven for the last 130 years.

A) The creation of the Third Republic in 1870 is the starting point if we want to study this close relationship between migrants and the consolidation of class alliances enabling the French nation-state to maintain law and order.

The Third Republic, from the beginning, wanted to integrate the workers and peasants in order to create a national consensus. It wanted to evade a second Paris Commune: the bourgeoisie could not forget that France had known four revolutions in a century: in 1789, 1830, 1848 and 1870. To accomplish this aim, to impose social peace, the ruling political elite was going to develop all the necessary means of communication: the railways, postal services, roads, etc. But it also developed the education system: in 1872 there were 43 % of illiterates, against only 10 % in 1914. This gives you an idea of the efforts which were mobilized by the French state.

The French Republican primary school, free and compulsory for all children, was useful for the capitalist class: it taught pupils to love the fatherland, to hate the Prussians (the Germans), and to believe that European civilization was superior to the mores of the “savages” living in the French colonial empire.

The development of the press played a significant role both in constructing a public opinion (and therefore often manipulating it) and in feeding nationalist, anti-Semitic or racist prejudices. In the late 19th century, newspapers started using ordinary events (domestic fights, crimes, aggressions, murders) to play on the fear of delinquency, to promote the necessity of a strong state, to condemn so-called marginal people, “nomads” (workers who wanted to change of boss often), farm workers looking for a job, gypsies, and all those who, for a reason or another, did not want to have their life controlled by the state.

When the newspapers dealt with politics it was only through the denunciation of a “corrupted” politician. They pretended to defend the interests of the “cheated” elector, or the “robbed” tax payer. The press forged new popular mentalities and these techniques are still used today.

The working-class press and socialist parties started to present their own vision of society and this created a definite dividing line between the wage-earners and non-wage-earners, between the workers and the small bosses, something which was not so common in the first stages of the manufacture system, especially between qualified workers and small bosses.

The traditional petty bourgeoisie, the shopkeepers, and craftsmen felt threatened by the development of capitalism (because of the appearance of numerous general stores) and they were especially

frightened by the Socialist movement. So they created their own professional associations which were going to play an important political role.

The capitalist class also organized itself better and created important bosses associations at that time.

The end of the 19th century is also a period which sees the birth of a new category of intellectuals: the experts. The complexity of the management of the public affairs and the intervention of the state in economic and social problems required the help of specialists. And these specialists will play a decisive role in the definition of migration policies, especially after the First World War. They were the ones who both **discovered the crisis of French birth rate and promoted the “importation” of foreign workers as a solution.** They refused to use racial or ethnical criteria (at least as openly as reactionaries like Gobineau or Drumont did) and pretended to define more scientific norms, therefore making a small difference with purely biological racist theories and being more faithful to the dominant Republican universalist rhetoric.

Between 1886 and 1914, 1,2 million foreigners came to live in France, 2/3 of them being Belgians and Italians. The Italians remained the first foreign community in France until the 1950s. New minorities also appeared like the Russians and the Algerians, at that period.

All these foreign workers answered to the lack of manpower in the chemical industry, building industry, mines, metal industry, docks, etc. They enabled a section of French farmers and countrymen, who otherwise would have been obliged to go and work in factories, to get easier municipal and local state jobs.

This “foreign presence” on French soil often provoked conflicts: local demonstrations against Belgian or Italian workers, physical fights and even strikes for the expulsion of foreigners in sectors like the mines, building industry, etc.

These conflicts and events were used by the press which promoted the fear of the “foreign spy,” denounced political criminality (that was a time when some anarchists threw bombs and murdered kings). The newspapers also denounced social criminality (the so-called “nomads”).

The political rhetoric in favor of law and order used these local incidents, as the journals presented the foreigner as a spy, an anarchist, a criminal, a traitor and somebody who was stealing jobs from the French. The newspapers also ridiculed the colonized people and to the aggressor/victim rhetoric (used to describe the relation between foreigners and French nationals inside society) they added the civilized/savage opposition, to describe France’s positive role in the colonies, and the relationship between the French colonizers and the colonized “natives.”

In this situation, the Left was not courageous and principled enough to defend foreign workers because it would have meant fighting a strong working-class nationalism, so the Socialists more and more struggled to “protect the national workforce.” They were not courageous and principled enough to oppose colonialism in countries like Algeria or in Sub-Saharan Africa.

During the years 1889/1893, the French state decided to count and register better the presence of foreigners in France but also to establish a link between their right to stay and the fact of having a job.

An important debate was launched about French nationality: the 1870 defeat against Germany underlined the necessity of having a universal draft system and enough troops to fight any neighboring state. In 1914, Germany had 65 million inhabitants while the French population remained almost the same between 1850 and 1940, not more than 38 to 40 million inhabitants. Therefore the French state accepted that one million foreigners become French before 1914.

Discriminatory measures were nevertheless taken, even by Socialist municipalities, to limit the numbers of foreign workers employed by companies hired for public markets. Several laws forebode foreigners to be trade union delegates, to create associations, etc. A new specialized police service was formed to register and watch the foreigners. Special foreigners files were created. As an MP declared at that time, “a well-organized, well-regulated society can’t ignore the nationality of its members.”

The Dreyfus affair in 1898 (Dreyfus was a French Jewish captain condemned to a life prison sentence for being a German spy – an accusation which was totally forged) played an important role in the political transformation of religious anti-Semitism into a new form of racism. The mobilization of the nationalist Right and the anti-Semitic Far Right against Dreyfus was huge and lasted for years. It’s only in the 21st century, almost a century after his death, that Dreyfus was finally reinstated in the French military forces. The old Christian anti-Semitism was a religious one. When it became a political ideology, during the Dreyfus Affair, it assimilated the Jew to a foreigner, a man without a fatherland, a cosmopolitan banker, a “nomad,” etc.

B) The First World War marks a second essential transformation in the history of migrations:

the Republican state decides to control the migrations and puts an end to its former liberalism. It's no more the journalists and politicians who play the first role, and shape public opinion, but it's the migration and population specialists.

In 1914, 45,000 foreigners are arrested and thrown into "concentration camps," many foreigners are attacked in the streets, shops owned by foreigners are looted by angry mobs, etc.

The Socialist minister Albert Thomas decides to impose a strict selection of foreign manpower. He decides that mass immigration is vital for the French war economy.

225,000 colonial people are brought to work in France during the First World War. And 480,000 "Natives" are recruited as soldiers for French imperialism. "Natives," in other words colonized people, did not have citizen rights in the French Empire, even in Algeria which was considered as a part of France. "Natives" were attracted by all sorts of fake promises, including to give them the French nationality when the war would be over.

This arrival of around 700,000 colonized people in France was the first massive contact in continental France between the "Whites," the "Blacks," the "Arabs" and the "Yellows" as they were named at that time. Colonial workers were obliged to stay in military camps, controlled by supervisors who often belonged to the colonial troops.

Even if some movements were organized by French workers against their new colonial colleagues, what seemed to preoccupy the cops and state bureaucrats was more the "insolence" of these "native" workers and the fact that they participated in several strikes in common with French workers. At that time, the French official national ideology was very hostile to the mixing of so-called races ("métissage" in French) and some politicians started to regret the arrival of these workers as romances and love stories flourished with French women...

The special Identity Card created in 1917 for the foreigners became the basis of the whole migration control system. The difference between legal and illegal immigration introduced in 1893 in the law was then institutionalized.

The bosses of the big industries, who were first hostile to the state control and its regulation of the labor market, discovered it oriented the migrant flows according to their needs. One must add the state allowed them also to freely and massively recruit for the agriculture and heavy industries through the services of a special private company which went abroad to recruit workers.

A debate started among the French experts about the virtues and flaws of "European" and "non-European" migrants. Apart from the traditional hidden racist arguments, there were also two more political ones:

- French colons wanted "their" underpaid workers back,
- and the presence of colonial people on the continent could give them "bad" ideas.

So a special North African police force was created to "help" and watch them.

Between the First World War and the Second World War a huge state bureaucracy developed in all the ministries in order to manage the migration flows.

(The debate about assimilation continued and it's funny to note that, in the 1920s, the Left criticized the state for having favored Polish religious and national culture in the immigration in order to produce scabs. A good example of the traps of multiculturalism!)

The lawyers, the doctors, the health specialists, all wanted to have their word in the discussion about the role of migrations. And most of them talked about "inferior races," uncivilized, primitive foreigners, which could never be assimilated.

Only the French Communist Party had a radical language for a few years, both hailing anticolonialism and defending migrant miners, farm workers, building workers, etc. But the Communist Party did not attract a significant layer of migrants. It did not see their presence on French soil as a long-term phenomenon and it had a Republican or Marxist perspective, with a deep assimilationist trend, quite common in those years.

During the 1920s, 2 million foreigners plus 100,000 colonial workers (mainly Algerians) settled in France, making of France the first country in the world for its immigration rate.

In 1924, a new law was passed by the Left to protect "national labor" and foreigners who were fired and stayed in France without a job had to pay fines.

In 1927, a new law about naturalization was adopted because of the population deficit. But the rights of the newly naturalized French remained restricted (one had, for example, to wait three years, instead of ten before the new law, to be allowed to work in the public service). The Socialist Party (SFIO) approved it.

In 1932, a law was passed which defined quotas of foreigners in each industrial branch.

The years 1931-1932 marked the beginning of the consequences of the 1929 crisis, with a certain delay. Let's recall that, in 1931, 70% of the foreigners were factory workers.

A strong difference appeared between the bosses of the big factories who were in favor of migration and the small petty bourgeoisie who was hostile to it.

The petty bourgeois who were hostile to migrations ignored the fact that the war had introduced Taylorism in the factories and forced foreign workers to work in the agriculture and heavy industry, sectors which were not appreciated by Franco-French workers. The qualified part of the French working class benefitted from this system, was integrated into the Republican state, supported by the Socialist Party and its trade union, the CGT.

The years 1934-1939 saw the development of strong xenophobic feelings in the popular classes hit by the crisis.

Meanwhile, the state repression had invented more and more sophisticated tools to control the migrants. In 1935, the central foreigners archives regrouped 1,6 million files. It was the biggest foreigners archive in the world.

450,000 foreign workers left France and unemployment rose very quickly. The state expelled many undocumented foreigners, including migrants who were married to French women. Between 1931 and 1936 140,000 Polish workers were expelled.

To defend themselves and survive, many foreigners tried to stay in France and created small businesses. But this provoked a stronger rejection against them. This new competition radicalized and pushed to the right the shopkeepers and the craftsmen, but also the doctors and the lawyers. The law and medicine students even organized demonstrations against foreigners to "protect" their (future) jobs.

1936 saw an important general strike mobilizing 1,8 million workers. The teachers, postmen, railway workers, workers of the state sector, in general, did not participate in the movement, even if they were the most syndicalized. It's where the labor force was less qualified, among the sectors employing a high proportion of migrants (heavy industry, mechanical construction, textile) that one saw the biggest mobilizations. But the trade unions and the Left did not especially care about migrants rights and discriminations against foreigners.

In October 1937, the Left government (which did not include the Communist Party) restored administrative controls to limit Algerian immigration; the Popular Front did not even have a secretary of state in charge of migrations and adopted no positive measures in favor of the naturalized foreigners who were discriminated. And the Left government trusted the advice of the "expert" Georges Mauco, a demographer who had the same hidden racist prejudices as his right-wing predecessors.

The social measures of the Popular front (which were very limited and torn by force to the Left by the factory occupations of June 1936) provoked the anger and fear of the shopkeepers, craftsmen, professionals and landowners. Hardly hit by the crisis, having the impression that the social laws of the Popular Front were going to cancel, or at least reduce, the hierarchy between the different social groups, the French petty bourgeoisie felt afraid, bitter and humiliated.

The different Far Right groups tried to attract their attention, especially the royalists from "L'Action française," a Catholic anti-Semitic movement. "L'Action française" combined the defense of Catholicism with the idea that the Left was sold to foreign powers, and that the Jews were a "race" without fatherland which was a source of dissension between nations (it's interesting to note that exactly the same argument is used today against Israel, a "threat to world peace" according to modern "anti-Zionists").

The year 1938, with the coming world war, saw the growth of the "5th column" myth, the column which was "obviously" supposed to recruit foreign workers. New laws were adopted against undocumented workers and imposed them fines and even jail sentences. Associations and newspapers created by migrants and refugees were forbidden.

In 1940, 300,000 Spanish people (among the 500,000 who had crossed the frontier) went back to Spain and 200,000 Italians, that is a fourth of them, went back to Italy.

The shock of the French defeat in front of Hitler's military forces stimulated xenophobia and anti-Semitism.

During the Second World War, the Vichy Regime used the police files of the French and foreign Jews to arrest and deport them (around 330,000 were listed and obliged to wear a yellow star among many other humiliations and discriminations). Almost 78,000 Jews were deported and killed during the war, including 52,000 foreign Jews. Another proof, if necessary, that foreigners were still a convenient

scapegoat and target for the French state.

During the Second World War, many political refugees (Spanish, Italians, and Germans; Communists, Socialists, and anarchists) participated in the Resistance against the Nazis but their specific role was never really recognized by the French Left, too much impregnated by its Republican form of nationalism. Most French people still ignore today that's it's a group of German Communists who started the armed resistance in France, even before De Gaulle, and at a time when the French Communist Party was still negotiating with the Germans to legally publish its daily newspaper under the Nazi occupation! The French Communist Party apparatus supported the Soviet-German Pact and woke up only when the USSR was attacked by Hitler troops in 1941.

C) After the Second World War, the migration movements started again as powerful as in the 1920s. It was necessary to reconstruct the country and its economy. But the new nationality code adopted in 1945 by all the left and rightwing parties (including the Communist Party) stated very clearly: *“Assimilation must be the basis of all the qualities of a French citizen.”* The French parties were still blind to the possibility that foreigners may both settle and not become French, or become French and refuse to be assimilated.

During the thirty years after the Second War, the proportion of foreigners reached the same rate as in 1931, 6,5 % of the population. 1,7 million foreigners arrived between 1954 and 1974. They represented the most important migration wave of France's history. French capital lacked labor force in the least attractive sectors of the labor market and migrants were a good solution to this problem. In the 1960s and 1970s, the factory line jobs were mainly attributed to foreign workers in the car industry and domestic appliances production. But the second industrial revolution, which occurred after the Second World War, took a specific turn in France. French capitalists and state chose to bet on an extensive development, based on an unqualified foreign labor force, instead of investing massively in technology and professional training. Migrants are considered as a new “reserve army” which can be fired from the factory and expelled from the country or pushed back home, if necessary. This is the model of the German “Gastarbeiter” (i.e. invited guest).

If, between the two world wars, the governmental immigration policies favored small farmers, shopkeepers and craftsmen, after the Second World War it encouraged the growth and generalization of the wage-earning system. And the massive entrance of women into the labor market gave the factory bosses a reserve of labor force which complemented its reserve of migrants.

After the Second World War, the new migrants, massively coming from the former French colonial empire (Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria) but also from Portugal, were abandoned by the rest of the working class, despite their very positive role for the French section of their class. The trade unions and Leftwing parties were not interested in putting forward specific demands for migrants.

The Algerians represented an important fraction of the migrant working class and the Algerian War (1954-1962) was a traumatic experience. They became the “internal enemy” during this period and this negative image never disappeared. It is regularly used by the Far Right or the Right, or by the media, also partly thanks to the growth of political Islam and its jihadist-terrorist fraction (Taliban, Al-Qaida, etc.).

D) The years 1972-1974 marked the appearance of a new period, in which we are still living today. In 1972 the Fontanet-Marcellin governmental circulars decided that the stay permit should now be linked to a one-year contract and to a “decent” housing, approved by the employer. Finally, in **July 1974, the government suspended any new migration of workers.** The Giscard government declared it wanted to expel 500,000 foreigners, including 300,000 Algerians. Fortunately, the initiative of this President (one of the architects, 30 years later, of the famous European Constitutional Treaty!) was considered illegal by the Constitutional Council, the highest legal authority.

All political parties were unprepared to the changes which these decisions provoked. Family reunification developed and male workers who had been regularly replaced by their brothers, cousins or neighbors, decided to settle in France. To give an example, between 1956 and 1975 around 50% of the migrants came back to their native country and did not stay in France more than 2 to 4 years.

For the last 35 years, the system invented by the French administration and parties has only produced a regular flow of undocumented people. The 1974 measures were a kind of declaration of war to the migrants, but they announced, in fact, the whole restructuration of the productive apparatus which was going to take place and which is still taking place.

The crisis which started in the mid-1970s has had all sorts of effects on the working class, both for its French section and non-French section, because this crisis corresponded to deep changes in the

production and work organization. A third industrial revolution occurred, stimulated by the pace of globalization, and which led to the constitution of two poles among the working class:

- a qualified one, including professional workers and technicians,
- and a precarious labor force, in the building industry, subcontracting sector, and various services (cleaning, private services, etc.)

It's not difficult to guess which category of the population (French or foreign) is supposed to be in each of these two categories.

I can only underline here some of these changes without coming into details:

- The crisis has deeply affected all foreign migrants but also the West Indian migrants who are both “Black” and French, and any French who does not look “Gallic,” as racism and social frustrations have found a massive political expression in the National Front and the tough Right.

- The massive appearance of women on the labor market and the disappearance of many jobs based on physical strength have had negative effects for young men. The new service jobs demanded “relational qualities” which were not especially praised in a good part of the working class.

- The school level asked by bosses became higher which handicapped young migrants or migrants' children which had difficulties at school or were discriminated for social reasons.

- New forms of management were invented to impede massive strikes (quality circles, small teams, etc.).

- Precarious forms of work were generalized (temp work agencies, short-term contracts, etc.).

- The big factories were dismantled, robots replaced the factory lines which employed a majority of migrants, and part of the factory work was given to subcontractors who now hired workers for shorter periods in smaller production units.

- The car industry and building industry eliminated 50 % of its foreign workforce; the agro-industrial sector and steel industry eliminated 25 % of its foreign workforce.

- As a consequence today 69,4 % of the migrants are employed in the tertiary sector, 12 % in the building industry, 14 % in the industry and 3,3% in the agriculture.

All these measures intensified the competition inside the working class and especially among the French and non French workers on the labor market.

The crisis which started in the mid-1970s has had consequences not only in production but also on housing.

In the council estates the French who had the financial means to buy a house, or to move to a better building, left. Only remained in the old council estates lonely women, pensioners, unemployed people, alcoholics, and French people having “social problems.” The massive arrival of new migrants in the council housing estates led to tensions between French people and “foreigners.” And these tensions were fed by the lack of investment in the maintenance of these big buildings and towers and by the ethnical management of housing (people of the same nationality were all put in the same building or on the same floor supposedly to prevent conflicts among migrants). The poor French workers or pensioners became a minority in many buildings. These groups of buildings constituted mini districts labeled as “ghettoes” (a rather inadequate word in the French context... at least for the moment). This situation pushed part of the “poor Franco-French” (what some call the “petits Blancs,” literally the “little Whites”) in the direction of the National Front or of the tough Right. This explains why many municipalities managed by the Communist Party for dozens of years are now managed by the tough Right.

In effect, the Communist Party came into deep trouble with the crisis. Its housing policy, when it managed a municipality, was to provide apartments in council housing estates for its French electoral clientele: public service employees, qualified workers, white-collar workers. This led the Communist Party in most of its municipalities to try to accept fewer migrants and to denounce the Right which welcomed much less migrants, and sometimes almost none, in its municipalities. For politicians, migrants were not interesting as voters (they could not vote) and as tax payers (they paid little or no income tax because they had the lowest wages).

These social tensions obviously pushed the state bureaucrats to intervene and propose solutions. Still thinking that a total assimilation was the solution, bureaucrats and experts saw migrants' assimilation no more as a biological or military question (linked to their supposed inferiority or lack of loyalty) as in the 19th or early 20th century, but as a social problem, linked to the difficulties of an harmonious “common life” between “ethnic communities,” the danger of “racial riots,” etc.

As the state did not want to take in charge all these tasks, new “social firemen” were created or appeared spontaneously. New actors appeared in the social field, often people with leftwing, third-

worldist, humanitarian ideas. This process was facilitated by the Left government when, in 1981, it passed a law authorizing foreigners' associations. Many local associations or NGOs pretended to solve the daily problems of migrants. They wanted

- to help adults learning how to read and write,
- to help them learning how to deal with French administration,
- to keep children busy in the working class districts so they didn't do "silly things" in the streets,
- to help children to do their homework,
- to help women to be less isolated or to resist to their husband's violence, etc.

The state, as a central agent of social control, did not let these vaguely leftwing associations do what they wanted. It blackmailed them through their financing, and wanted them to act as its private social arm. It may not have been, at the start, a conscious rational move or calculation, but, in fact, the local associations have become the private subcontractors of the traditional welfare state functions which the state did not want to ensure anymore.

Locally, the political parties which distributed money to these associations also tried to recruit and control the young social workers and animators of these associations. They wanted to use them as "social firemen" (pacifiers), electoral agents, or sometimes (not very often) as candidates to attract the votes of French/African or French/North-African voters, when these young social workers had foreign parents, as this was often the case.

The 1970s were the worst period for racist violence linked not only to the acts of small fascist groups but to conflicts inside working-class districts. At least 70 Algerians were killed between 1971 and 1977. And this did not stop afterwards. 250 foreigners were killed between 1981 and 1992 either by cops, either by angry neighbors, either by fascists.

During the early 1970s, the Far Left (to be precise the Maoists) played a decisive role: it introduced in the public debate the denunciation of foreign workers' exploitation – especially the OS (unskilled workers) working in the car industry – and of racism in France. But the Far Left and the libertarians failed both to organize a significant part of these workers and to propagate more than a humanistic ideology about racism. Strangely the Far Left's efforts rejoined the efforts of the state experts who tried to make the ruling class understand postcolonial migration was radically different from the European migrations and that racism was spreading in France.

These two ideas could be used in two different and contradictory ways. The Right could accept this analysis and reject postcolonial migration to evade "racial riots." The Left could denounce the assimilating role of the state and stigmatize "ordinary racists," meaning the average French. Both happened.

Each crisis of French capitalism has produced reactions of rejection against foreigners. But since the 1980s the pro-nationalist, law-and-order, ideology has taken a new turn.

In order to legitimize its migration policy, the Republican Right started to use many political themes raised by the Left in May 1968:

- it promoted "social action plans" and invested a lot of money in working class districts;
- it hailed the "respect" of migrant identities and cultures and even Sarkozy spoke of multiculturalism;
- it recognized the importance of Islam,
- it defended the expulsion of migrants in the name of antiracism!
- It did not hesitate to defend secularism and feminist values.
- It defended migrant women against their brutal, macho husbands.
- It argued for more "diversity" in the ruling circles of the state, of the main companies and among television journalists and programs.

All this evolution of the Right during the last 20 years has been accelerated since Sarkozy is in power, after the 2007 presidential election.

In front of this evolution of the Right, it's not a working class alternative which appeared in the 1980s and until today, but a humanitarian Left alternative. SOS Racisme was born in 1985 (and financed by the Socialist government) and the Réseau Education sans frontières (Education without frontiers network) founded in 2004. For the most militant French Left, the question was and is no more to organize foreign workers along French workers for a social revolution, but to guarantee or expand democratic rights for foreign or undocumented **individuals**.

The crisis of the welfare state, the cuts in all public services, also contributed to more nationalist and xenophobic reactions inside the popular classes, helping the growth of individualism.

The media and their new social function have also influenced public opinion through polls and sensationalistic programs about migrations, racism, foreigners, so-called riots, etc. The theme of law and order, (in French “sécurité,” security), has been massively propagated by the Right through the media and it has played a negative role for foreigners and migrants, as they are systematically associated with theft, collective rapes, lack of “good manners,” religious fanaticism, etc. From the 1982-1983 so-called “Islamic” strikes in the car industry to the 2005 so-called “migrant” riots, one has seen the repetition of the same derogatory clichés.

The National Front has been politically benefitting from the social problems created by the crisis, but also by the images propagated by the television channels and now Internet. Le Pen manages the same rhetoric as the 19th century Far Right or the 20th-century fascists but without the violent practices which used to be combined with their propaganda. So to vote Le Pen appeared as having no dramatic consequences.

Nevertheless, there were many attempts to resist to the antimigrant propaganda of the National Front and to the numerous administrative circulars, governmental laws and nationality codes which were constantly modified during the last 35 years.

The most interesting struggles and movements have been:

– the five-year Sonacotra rent strike (1974-1979) which mobilized 28,000 foreign workers living in residences for single men (often three workers or more stayed together in a small room of 9 square meters, and sometimes they even used the same bed according to their various shifts). These residences were heavily controlled by former colonial state employees or militaries, and by the “Amicales” (associations financed by the North-African states). Each residence elected its delegates, voted a list of demands, and there was a general assembly of all the tenants every 15 days. And after 5 years many demands were finally accepted, including the creation of Muslim prayer rooms in these residences;

– the creation of the MTA (Movement of Arab Workers) in 1972, in close contact to the Mao-spontaneist “Gauche prolétarienne” (Proletarian Left) and to the solidarity movement with Palestine and especially the PLO. Although the MTA only existed during 4 years, it had a very important role as it promoted the necessity of the autonomous organization of foreign workers, given the passive attitude of the French Left parties and trade unions. This positive role of the MTA must be underlined even it had a third-worldist ideology and many other political flaws. It was also the first movement to launch a (not very successful) general strike against racism in France in September 1973. This tactics was used by the Latinos in the United States in May 2006 with much more success;

– the numerous hunger strikes which started by the movement of 200 Senegalese students in solidarity against the repression in the country in 1971, and were followed by hunger strikes led by small groups of individuals all over France in 1972-1974; another wave of hunger strikes happened in more than 60 cities in 1991-1992;

– the creation of the JALB movement in 1985. These initials meant “Young Arabs of Lyon and suburbs.” It was founded after a young Arab was killed by the cops in Lyon. The JALB succeeded to organize a demonstration of 10,000 people, which is quite impressive for a town like Lyon and without the help of the trade unions or of the reformist Left. This struggle lasted three years and mobilized young inhabitants of the working class districts around legal issues and against cops’ impunity. As they had no illusions about transforming the police into a good democratic repressive force, they wanted to intimidate the cops, to oblige those who used their guns too easily to think about the legal consequences of their acts;

– the Committee against the Double Sentence was created in the mid-1980s and it defended foreign delinquents or criminals who were expelled from France after they had served their prison sentence. This double sentence was rightly considered as absurd and unjust. It took a long time but even Sarkozy was obliged to recognize this injustice during his 2007 presidential campaign, but obviously it was not followed by any concrete decisions...

– the Movement of the Immigration and Suburbs (MIB in French) was created in 1990 and has led many struggles around police murders of migrants or migrants children during so-called “terrible mistakes” (in French “bavures”), like when the cops chase young people who ride a bike or drive a car too far, and the chase ends with the death of one of the passengers, or of the driver;

– the Saint-Bernard church occupation in 1996 which was violently stopped after some months, but showed for the first time to the media and public opinion that migrants (in this case Africans) had their wives and families here;

– the creation in 1999 of the “9th Collective” which proposed a global conception of the struggle, and

tried to attract public attention by all sorts of spectacular actions and occupations.

To sum up today's position of the working class in France is rather bleak

– The divisions inside the working class have been growing for all the general and specific reasons I have mentioned. The French working class does not escape to the fragmentation to which the world working class is subjected.

– Islam has a growing and moderating influence among migrants. It was quite clear during the so-called November 2005 “riots.” Far from politicizing the social questions faced by working class suburbs’ inhabitants, Muslim religious associations kept a low profile and struggled to use the November 2005 crisis to gain more respectability and strengthen their links with bourgeois politicians. One of the main Muslim organizations linked to the Egyptian Muslim brothers even launched a *fatwa* (a religious prohibition) against the “rioters.” So we are very far from a so-called Islamist danger in France, at least in terms of social unrest.

– The only new “radical” groups which have appeared during the last five years are reactionary groups, even if they have an “anti-imperialist” and “anti-Zionist” agenda. The “Republic’s Natives” movement rightly denounces French colonialism and imperialism but offers no special perspective for the working class because it mainly regroups intellectuals, teachers and old third-worldist militants. The Kemi Seba Generation is an African ultra-reactionary and anti-White group. And the CRAN (Representative Council of Black associations) is a bourgeois pressure group which wants more “Black” generals, police officers, state secretaries and television journalists...

Despite these negative tendencies we can only hope that new political organizations will appear and draw the lessons of the preceding struggles, mistakes, and defeats. And that the whole working class will wake up and not only lead defensive battles as it’s doing for the last 30 years.

Y.C.