

# France - Undocumented migrant workers on strike: “We work here, we live here, and we’re not going anywhere!”

Monday 4 November 2019, by [BUTTERLY Luke](#) (Date first published: 30 October 2019).

**On the 1<sup>st</sup> October, undocumented migrant workers at 12 companies in Paris went on strike. The strikes called for improvements to pay and the exploitative conditions of work, but the unifying call across all sites, though, was that they be given the right to live and work legally in France. Luke Butterly reports on the organising campaign, and the struggles of undocumented workers in Paris.**

On Tuesday 1 October, around 140 workers launched simultaneous strikes at 12 companies across Paris. Cooks, waiters, cleaners, and other workers – all undocumented migrants – carried out pickets, occupations and protests, calling for fair and equal treatment at work. Their demands ranged from safer working conditions, equal pay, unpaid overtime, and an end to harassment and unfair dismissals. Workers spoke to the press about working 11 hours a day, six days a week – while only being paid for half these hours.

The unifying call across all sites, though, was that they be given the right to live and work legally in France.

...

The strikers, originally from Mali, Senegal, Mauritania, Togo, and Ghana, sought to claim their position among the ‘workers of France’. A banner hanging above a picketed KFC on Place d’Italie read, “We work here, we live here, we’re not going anywhere! Regularisation of undocumented workers!”

In an action coordinated by the CGT, one of France’s largest trade unions, the targets ranged from independent retailers, outsourcing and temping agencies, and multinational giants. Union representatives claimed the action had been a year in the planning, and workers said they were prepared to keep the ‘indefinite’ strike going as long as needed. “We here, maybe for days, months if we have to”, [said](#) delegate Mohamada Dango.

Yet the coordination of the strikes proved powerful. Despite intimidation from employers and two pickets being [evacuated](#) by the police, within a week all but one of the pickets had been lifted with the workers’ demands having been met.

**“Working under someone else’s name”.**

Working is one way that people can regularise their immigration status in France. Almost 8,000 residence permits were [issued](#) in 2018 as part of the regularisation of employees.

Many undocumented migrants (*'sans-papiers'*) in France use fake or expired residence permit to secure employment, while many others borrow or rent a real one from someone else.

Many of the workers in this strike are officially employed under such an 'alias' – using the identity of someone who has permission to live and work in France.

"A brother made me a photocopy of his residence permit, health insurance card, and proof of address", [says](#) Mamadou Niakte. With these, his boss drew him up a contract, and he works under the name 'Diaby'.

While illegal working is not uncommon in France, neither is their exploitation by employers. Many workers say they can even be fired for demanding back pay or taking sick leave (even as a result of an accident on the job).

But working under someone else's name this poses difficulties, [according](#) to Françoise Carrasse from CISPM, the international coalition of undocumented migrants. An employer also needs to draw up a form admitting the employee's real identity, and it is at this point that workers are particularly vulnerable. "We do not dare to ask because we are afraid of being fired" [says](#) Moussa Diakite, a demolition worker on strike in the suburbs.

In France, employers thus play an important role in facilitating or frustrating the process by which undocumented workers can regularise their immigration status in the country. Unions have criticised this way of working, as they feel it is in the company's interest to keep their workers undocumented.

A lack of papers also makes it harder to get safe and secure accommodation. Working illegally also means that while they pay towards pensions and social security funds, they can't access these when they fall on times of need.

Ultimately, "We ask for regularization to work in dignity," [said](#) Dango Makansira, a 31-year old chef taking part in the strike.

### **These strikes have a history....**

Support for the strike came from those who had gone before. "Ten years ago, I was like you. I was in fear", said Boubacar Doucouré to those on strike at KFC.

Doucouré was active in similar large-scale strikes in 2008/9, which resulted in him having his immigration status regularised after seven years working in the fast food industry. "Many undocumented workers will emerge from the shadows", he said of this strike.

The coordinated strike has historically been one of the most effective tools in obtaining mass regularisation.

In 1980, seventeen undocumented textile workers originally from Turkey went on hunger strike, and successfully fought for the regularisation of their immigration status, as well as better working conditions in their factory. Again with the support of their trade union (the CFDT), mass demonstrations eventually led to the regularisation of 3,000 Turkish workers.

*(Police closing the area around St Bernard church, at the demonstration commemorating the occupation this August. Credit: Marina Belney )*

Along with workplace strikes, occupations - often of churches - have been a key element in the fight for migrant rights. From the 1972 occupation of a church in Valance by Tunisian migrants to the pivotal occupation of the St-Bernard church in Paris in 1996, then and since then they have played important roles.

2008 and 2009 [saw](#) undocumented workers successfully mobilise, resulting in 4,000 residence cards being issued. Last year, 163 workers were regularised after going on strike.

**“They say they’re unaware. I don’t buy it.”**

While most of the pickets ended within days, sometimes the fight takes longer.

Since mid-June, over 40 undocumented workers at Chronopost, a whole-owned subsidiary of the French postal service, have been on strike.

Workers say they are protesting against conditions such as unsafe conditions, being underpaid for night work, having their bathroom breaks monitored, and dealing with threats from management.

“They take advantage of the fact that we are not in order to exploit us, and they know very well that we cannot say anything,” [according](#) to Mohamed, who says he was threatened with being fired when he wanted to go home after injuring himself on the job.

Characteristic of the precarious working arrangements in place in many countries, Chronopost, which is a subsidiary La Poste, in turn uses an additional subcontractor (Derichebourg), which itself subcontracts the recruitment of its employees to a temporary agency. A ‘cascade of subcontracting’ helps to hide responsibility, according the union reps supporting the strike.

All the companies said they obeyed the law, and indeed that they do not hire undocumented employees.

Yet Amadou Forfana, spokesman for the strikers, [says](#) that there are two or three people employed using the same ID. “Yet they (Chronopost) say they’re unaware. I don’t buy it.”

*(Protest of Chronopost workers. Credit: Collectif des Travailleurs SansPapiers de Vitry-sur-Seine)*

**“At this rate, it will take 50 years”**

Another point of overlap between traditional areas of union struggle and the reality for migrants in France has been impact of public services cutbacks.

The lack of appointments to speak with an immigration officer at prefectures (departmental administration centres), was the focus of three protests that took place on Wednesday 9 October.

Undocumented and precarious migrants, trade unionist, migrant rights charities, and elected officials all protested against the impossibility of securing an appointment, and called for more resources and additional staff.

“At this rate, it will take 50 years” to get through the caseload, [said](#) a member from a migrant support group. The system is also becoming increasingly digitised, making it harder for those without internet access or fluent French to navigate the system.

These delays can have serious consequences. Not being able to get an appointment in time can mean that even people with valid residence permits can be pushed into situations of illegality if their

documents expire without being renewed.

“When I arrived, I got a temporary residence permit that allowed me start working as a housekeeper”, [said](#) ‘Mrs C’, who has two young children born in France. Seeing the deadline for getting her card renewed fast approaching, she spent months at the prefecture trying to get an appointment. “It was impossible. I thought I was going crazy!” In the end, austerity made her ‘illegal’, and without a valid residence permit, she lost her job.

This is a particularly important point for the trade unions, who worry that after successful strikes, the form signed by their employers could be out of date by the time the worker gets an appointment. Jean-Albert Guidou of the CGT [argued](#) that this system served to help employers to keep their workers in precarious positions.

### **An integral part of the working class**

The public statements from the undocumented workers and their trade union have been unequivocal, [stating](#) that these workers are “an integral part of the working class of this country and we must not be ignored or despised.”

They appealed for solidarity from the rest of the workforce, stating, “Our fight is yours, it is the fight of all workers, for better working conditions!”, and illustrated how the regularisation of workers increases wages and conditions across the board.

“The undocumented worker strikes have given many useful things to labour movement”, including establishing temping agencies as a legitimate place of strike, [according](#) to Guidou of the CGT. The union claims more than [10,000 undocumented workers](#) among their membership.

The CGT statement released on the first day of their strike stated that “A public immigration policy cannot be limited to political asylum.”

To do otherwise would be to ‘deny reality’, according to [Marilyne Poulain](#), a CGT representative working with undocumented workers. “Entire parts of the economy would not work without immigrant workers.”

*(Workers and union reps on a picket. Credit: l’Union Régionale CGT Île de France.)*

### **Macron sets out his priorities**

The message from the unions - that undocumented migrants are part of, rather than in conflict with, the working class of France - thus had particular resonance in light of recent noises coming from the French government.

President Emmanuel Macron’s hardening line on immigration is sometimes seen as counter to his ‘liberal’ image. Yet when understood this way - as an attack on worker’s rights - there is precedent, not least during [his controversial term as Minister of Economy](#) from 2014 to 2016.

In terms of immigration, a cornerstone of Macron’s first half of his term as president was the 2018 immigration act, which critics say limits the scope of asylum cases, speeds up deportations, and extends the maximum duration a person could be detained from 45 to 90 days.

The run up to the successful passing of this legislation saw opposition from within Macron’s own party, and staff at the immigration court [went on strike](#). This level of division was no small feat in a

country where, as sociologist Jane Freedman has argued, there is often a 'consensus' between the parliamentary Left and Right to take a hard-line in immigration politics.

Now entering the second half of his term, Macron had promised a 'no holds barred' debate on immigration, stating that the question for his La République En Marche party was "whether we want to be a bourgeois party or not." "The bourgeoisie doesn't have a problem with [immigration]", he [said](#), because "they never come across it." However, "the working classes live it", and were forced to 'endure' it. He appealed for his party to represent the 'masses'.

(While racism and anti-migrant sentiment is indeed high in France, "when [asked](#) to identify their top political priorities, people ranked environmental protection first, followed by the future of the welfare state and questions linked to purchasing power, such as wages and taxes.")

Issues discussed included the introduction of quotas, reduction of the support asylum seekers received (currently around £6 per day), and overall to make sure that France is not 'too attractive.

A key focus was on a form of state medical assistance ('AME'). Created in 2000, today over 300,000 people in irregular immigration situations avail of this cover. While the total amount spent on this support [accounts](#) for only 0.5% of the total health budget, it has been a constant source of ire for the right and far right.

At the debate, the health minister [announced](#) a "plan to fight against fraud". Yet in 2018, the National Fund for Health Insurance (CNAM) identified only 38 cases of fraud. Indeed, Doctors of the World [report](#) that as registering for AME can be a bureaucratic 'obstacle course', there is likely a higher number of people not getting who should, than getting it shouldn't it.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of left-wing La France Insoumise, criticise the principle of the immigration debate, saying the French government has "chosen to make the immigrant the scapegoat of the country's problems".

## **The fight continues**

While 11 of the 12 pickets were lifted in just over a week, one employer is still holding out.

Twenty-seven employees of interim agency Cervus are still on strike, 28 days later. Union reps [say](#) that they have faced police raids, intimidation and even death threats from the employer. Undocumented workers of the other pickets came to support their colleagues and to put pressure on the management.

Boubakar, who is raising funds to support the strike, is undeterred. "We will stay there until the end", he says.

## **Luke Butterly**

---

**P.S.**

Verso Books, 30 October 2019:

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4472-we-work-here-we-live-here-and-we-re-not-going-anywhere>

[Luke Butterly](#) is an Irish writer living in London. His work focuses on the politics of immigration in Ireland and Britain.