

Not wanted after the voyage: The politics of immigration in France and Canada

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It's a Tuesday evening in Paris, and in the predominantly immigrant neighbourhood of Belleville, people from all corners of the world are crowding into the metro station. Tension is high tonight; for many, this ride home could be their last in France.

Outside the turnstiles of the metro, a small group of people have gathered to call out warnings to those entering the station. "Attention sans-papiers! There are police in the metro!" Down on the platform, a unit of French police officers are doing a random check of people's immigration documents. Those who are in the country illegally can be swept up right away, put in detention, and then eventually deported. These immigration sweeps in public places have become a common occurrence in France over the last year, and for many undocumented migrants in French President Nicolas Sarkozy's republic, the country is no longer seen as the terre d'accueil, or "land of welcome" it has so long promoted itself to be.

Meanwhile, here in Canada, migrants may not be undergoing such horrific experiences on as large of a scale, but the threat of being snatched up by police in the subway, a hardware store, or even at home is still an everyday reality for many. Particularly in light of the Conservative government's recent changes to the Canadian Immigration Act, an examination of the politics of immigration in France has real bearing on the future of immigration in this country as well.

Nicolas Sarkozy rose to power in May 2007 on a platform of tightening immigration controls. Migration has been a hot button issue in France for the last few years, especially since the riots in the working class, immigrant suburbs of Paris in late 2005. For weeks, youth in these suburbs burnt cars and engaged in running battles with riot police following the deaths of two youth of colour during a police chase. For some, the riots were an indication of the failures of youth from immigrant families to integrate into French society, while for others they represented a very clear reaction to the ongoing poverty, unemployment, discrimination and police brutality that their communities face. In France, the unemployment level amongst immigrant families is three times the national average.

Sarkozy's rise to power reflects a troubling triumph of divisive, xenophobic politics in France. During the riots of 2005, Sarkozy, who was minister of the interior at the time, famously declared that the youth rioters were "scum" (racaille), and that they should be cleaned off the streets with a kärcher, a high-powered cleaning machine. And in December 2006, while still minister of the interior, Sarkozy announced a target to deport 25,000 undocumented people per year from the country. So when he was voted in as president of the republic six

months later and maintained this objective, many were saying that Sarkozy had already declared war on France's sans-papiers (undocumented migrants).

Sarkozy has described what he sees as the two trends of immigration happening in France: "suffered immigration," in which France can't choose its migrants (referring to those who cross the country's borders illegally), and "chosen immigration," when France decides who to let in and who to reject. He wants to move away from the former while using the latter to boost the French economy. France's recently introduced regularization program, for instance, favours highly skilled (and mostly white) immigrants from the newest member-states of the European Union (mainly Romanians, Poles, and Bulgarians) over non-white immigrants from French-speaking countries in northern or western Africa.

The flip side to this kind of regularization program is that those who are already living in the country without papers and who fall outside the criteria for being regularized are faced with little chance of ever gaining legal status, leaving them dangerously open to economic exploitation, human trafficking and worse. In effect, the gates to the country are being slammed in their faces – when they're already halfway in.

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Surplus humanity

Brice Hortefeux, the French minister responsible for immigration, told the magazine *Jeune Afrique* that the French government is enforcing Sarkozy's quota of 25,000 deportations to "indicate to other countries that to come to France, you need a proper visa."

The quota of 25,000 deportations per year has translated into massive police actions in many big cities in France. In recent years, large police roundups targeting undocumented migrants have occurred in metro stations, train stations, apartment buildings, and even city streets. During such an event, the police tactic is to seal off an area in question, demand to inspect everyone's identification and immigration papers, and then immediately arrest and detain those who are in the country illegally.

In some cases, these police raids on migrants have even become deadly. In one case last year, a Chinese woman died after falling out of a window while trying to escape a police raid in Paris. And on February 12, John Maïna, a young Kenyan immigrant living in the city of Meudon, committed suicide before his impending deportation.

Many migrant groups have begun using the French term *rafle* (roundup, raid) to describe these police operations. The term has powerful historic connotations, referring to the mass roundups of French Jews during the Vichy regime of World War II. While the end result may be different, many argue that the police tactics have not changed.

Pierre Cordolier – a member of the Tlemcen Committee, a group devoted to popular education about the Vichy regime in Paris – says that little has changed in how the French government views illegal immigrants since the Second World War. Cordolier explains the similarities in the language used to justify deportations then and now.

"There was an official motive which was outlined [under the Vichy regime] – 'In surplus in the national economy,'" Cordolier explains. "'Surplus in the national economy' means we don't need you, you're worth nothing to us, and we don't want you anymore. Today, people

don't say 'surplus in the national economy'; however, they think it. They say 'suffered immigration,' which is a totally different term, but completely identical in meaning."

In the face of this growing repression, strong displays of popular resistance have emerged across the country. Migrant justice groups, rallying around the simple idea that human rights transcend one's citizenship, that France's motto of "liberty, equality, fraternity" applies to all, not just to holders of French citizenship, have taken to the streets in protest. Some groups, such as the 9ème Collectif des Sans-Papiers in Paris, have even organized a hotline to alert people about where and when the raids are happening.

"People today are living in fear and in agony," says Bahija Benkouba of the 9ème Collectif. "At their homes they are afraid the police will come find them. [The situation is the same] at their workplaces, because it's also a target of the government to go into their workplaces, to arrest and round up people. In homes, in metros, anywhere."

Every second Tuesday for more than a year, hundreds of people have been gathering to protest the mass roundups, and on April 5, 2008, tens of thousands of people marched in cities across France to demand a regularization for all undocumented people in the country. While many undocumented migrants are reluctant to protest their treatment for fear of deportation, others feel that being public and vocal about the desperation of their situation is their only hope.

Mourad, a sans-papiers migrant from Algeria, is a tireless organizer for the rights of others in his situation, and can frequently be seen with a megaphone in hand at demonstrations in Paris. He has been living in the French capital for seven years, "When French people see us in the streets," he says, "it shows that we are here. We demonstrate to have rights like everyone, to live in dignity like other French people. To demand these rights, we demonstrate. They have to hear our message."

Another manifestation of that resistance has been the Réseau Éducation Sans Frontières, a national network formed in 2004 that brings together parents, teachers, school administrators, and other activists who provide advocacy for sans-papiers children who are facing deportation with their families. This dynamic and vocal network brings together people from various political affiliations, including many who might not have previously considered themselves activists, but who have been shocked into action by the recent wave of deportations in France. As a result, on several occasions they have been successful in quickly mobilizing thousands of people to prevent the deportation of migrant families.

"People to wash dishes and make sandwiches"

In Canada, this logic and language of "chosen immigration" is beginning to take a foothold as well. On June 9, the federal Conservatives passed an amendment to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act entitled Bill C-50. The amendment was actually tacked onto the Conservatives' budget implementation bill, a tactic that opposition groups have denounced as a sneaky way of making such sweeping changes to Canada's immigration system. The minority Conservative government was able to pass the bill because it was put forth as a matter of confidence, meaning the opposition parties would have triggered an election if they had voted down the bill. With Liberal leader Stephane Dion's undesirably low popularity levels, this was not a risk the Grits were willing to face. The bill passed by a vote of 121-95.

Among other changes, Bill C-50 gives discretionary power to the minister of citizenship and

immigration to arbitrarily reject immigration applicants, even though those same applicants might have otherwise been admitted under Canada's point-system criteria. Moreover, it effectively allows the immigration minister to set quotas on the category of persons who can enter Canada, including quotas based on one's country of origin.

Recently, grassroots groups opposed to the bill held a pan-Canadian week of action against C-50 from May 31 to June 7. The week included popular education events and protests at Immigration Minister Diane Finley's speaking events in Vancouver and Montreal.

"Even if you fit into all the criteria – let's say that you can come to study or visit in Canada, you fit all the regulations, rules, and laws – the visa office could still deny you without really having to tell you why. And no, you cannot appeal it, and that is grossly unfair," says Olivia Chow, the NDP's immigration critic and MP for the Trinity-Spadina riding in Toronto.

An additional power given to the minister under the proposed changes is that of deciding the order in which new applications are processed, regardless of when they were made. This means prioritizing immigration applicants based on one's ability to fulfill the needs of the Canadian job market, "whether it's people to wash dishes and make sandwiches," Finley recently explained, "or whether it's the highly skilled engineers."

In a statement released on May 1 by Solidarity Across Borders, a Montreal network of migrant justice groups, the group points out, "this unprecedented modification of [the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act] would risk putting in place covert equivalents of the explicitly racist immigration policy that characterized much of Canadian history, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923, the Order in Council of 1911 prohibiting the landing of 'any immigrant belonging to the Negro race,' that of 1923 excluding 'any immigrant of any Asiatic race,' or the 'none is too many' rule applied to Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi-occupied Europe during the Second World War."

Restrictive measures on immigration policies, whether they be in France or Canada, tend to ignore the realities of worldwide migration, particularly the human rights of refugees and the real potential for exploitation and abuse of people made vulnerable by being denied legal status. Such measures treat migrants not as people, but as economic units—people who are coming here simply to make a quick buck. While jobs might be one of the "pull" factors for migrants to come to Canada or France, the "push" factors that cause these people to leave their homes can be far more powerful. These can include natural or man-made disasters, wars, occupations, indigenous land expropriation or natural resource extraction. So when Sarkozy speaks of "chosen immigration," or when the Conservatives introduce immigration measures such as Bill C-50, they offer a very one-sided and cynical view of immigration trends. If we removed the idea of "choice" from the equation, we would see a situation in which migrants are forced to flee their countries of origin, only to come up against closed borders and denial of status in the Global North.

If we add to that the fact that many of the "push" factors that create migration are at least partially the fault of the wealthier destination countries (for example, French colonization in Algeria, or Canadian mining projects in Latin America), then the idea of countries like Canada or France talking about "choosing" who and who not to let in seems irresponsible at best. This is perhaps why more and more people in the migrant justice movements in North America have taken up the slogan, "We didn't cross your borders. Your borders crossed us."

The mass roundups in France have demonstrated that the outcome of quotas and "chosen

immigration” is a violent one that results in the decimation of families, livelihoods, and communities. And while borders may be tightened and policies tweaked, migration to Europe or North America – be it “legal” or “illegal” – will not stop, and criminalizing the problem will only make things worse.

One basic yet foundational demand that many migrant communities in France and in Canada are making is “papers for all,” meaning a regularization program for all non-status people already living within those countries. In tangible, practical terms, that would mean that these migrants, many of whom have lived among us for years and contribute in innumerable ways to our society, would be able to access health services, go to work, ride the metro, or go to school without living in constant fear of being picked up by the police and deported. It would mean living in dignity. But until that demand of “status for all” is met, and countries like Canada and France start addressing the root causes of why people have to flee their home countries in the first place, that ride home on the metro will continue to fill people with fear.

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