

The Sans-Papiers

The New Movement of Asylum Seekers
and Immigrants without papers in France

*A Woman Draws
the First Lessons*



Madjiguène Cissé



CROSSROADS

Madjiguène Cissé

is from Dakar, Senegal, where she worked as a teacher of German. She has always worked with women, organizing literacy courses, and on health issues. She has been in France for 23 years where she earned a living in telephone marketing. She is fluent in Serere and Wolof, French, German and English. She has three children; two are with her family in Dakar and one is in Paris.

Ms Cissé is the major spokeswoman for the Sans-Papiers of St Bernard, the first and the leading collective, and for the National Co-ordination. She is widely known for her clarity and determination. She is a brilliant and engaging speaker.

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International Black Women for Wages for Housework is an autonomous organization of women in the South and the North which campaigns to get unwaged work measured, valued and paid for from military budgets, as a strategy against poverty and overwork, beginning with women and children.

Payday is an international network of men campaigning for payment for all unwaged work and organizing with and in support of the International Wages for Housework Campaign.

Both organizations have been doing support work for the Sans-Papiers movement since August 1996. They have for many years been part of the movement for the rights of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and against deportations.

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Who are the Sans-Papiers?

While the Sans-Papiers collectives now include 40 nationalities, the movement was started by over 300 African immigrants and asylum seekers who, refused leave to stay, occupied St Ambrose Church to draw attention to their situation. Who are these Africans?

In France, "African" usually refers to people from former French colonies in sub-Saharan Africa. This relatively small community was estimated in 1990 to include about 2-300,000 people of whom 40% are women. By comparison, out of a total population of 56 million in France, there are 620,000 people of Algerian origin and 580,000 of Moroccan origin. Most African Sans-Papiers are from West Africa. The three main languages spoken among them are Wolof, Soninké and Bambara.

The major migration of African people to France started in the sixties. Between 1960 and 1975, mainly men came to find jobs in France, of whom 70% stayed in Paris, often living in shared premises — unused factories, schools, warehouses. Many worked as street sweepers. From the mid-seventies, there was a movement for family reunion: women with their children joined the men in France. Others came as students or asylum seekers.

Except for an amnesty by the Socialist government in 1981 which granted the right to stay to 130,000 people, the laws have made immigration progressively harder. By 1993, the Pasqua laws severely restricted the possibility of family reunion, while a new "Nationality code" removed the automatic right to French nationality of children born in France to immigrant parents. (Similar changes were made to the immigration laws in Britain in the eighties.) The grounds for being granted asylum status also became much more selective, reducing to a trickle asylum seekers who succeeded in getting the right to stay. These new laws made many immigrants and their families illegal overnight, despite having lived in France, often for more than 10 years.

In December 1996, the new Debré Law (named after the Minister who proposed it) was introduced in Parliament in order to give police the power to search workplaces and stop cars and other vehicles for “illegal immigrants” and to speed up deportations. Although the clause which would have forced residents to inform on guests and visitors was dropped, the rest of the Bill became law in March 1997, in the face of widespread protest, including calls for civil disobedience against it. Two months later, in the June 1997 elections, Jean-Louis Debré lost his seat.

The African community in France has the least access to resources; of all immigrants, Africans are most likely to be unwaged, in casual work, or in the alternative economy which is not counted in economic statistics. For example, while 81% of Portuguese immigrants are in continuous employment, the figure is 66% for Algerians, but only 52% for Africans. African women tend to have jobs in the service industry (cleaners, carers, selling, etc.) which is particularly low-waged and insecure. As women everywhere, they also have the main responsibility for children and other caring work in the home and the community.

Racism also affects Black people in every other sphere of life: in health care, childcare, education. Police regularly stop and search Africans and other Black people on the pretext of checking their papers.

* * *

The autonomy which Ms.Cissé outlines, of Sans-Papiers from established organizations which “help immigrants”, and of women Sans-Papiers from the men in their collectives, is one of the most striking and modern characteristics of this movement. Ready to work with anybody, they have fought to establish and maintain every ounce of their political independence and control. Every grassroots movement has to confront these key issues and problems.

Having been discouraged from attending their own meetings at the beginning of their movement, about 100 of the women from different collectives now meet regularly and

independently. It was crucial, they said, for women to have an independent voice, particularly since in many collectives husbands and single men are the majority. The women were very conscious that they have done the work of keeping the movement together from the first church occupation over a year ago to the present.

It is clear from Ms Cissé's article that women's autonomy from the men has ensured the Sans-Papiers' autonomy from their support network. The Sans-Papiers autonomy has changed the power relations between immigrants and their supporters. A French man, a supporter, gives an incisive picture of the new relationship.

"It is quite extraordinary to see how organizations, starting with mine . . . , have been completely wrong-footed. The authority 'these foreigners' have taken to speak about their own problems and to organize their own fight has embarrassed the organizations . . . It's funny to hear organizations say, for example, 'When the St Bernard people are evicted, the organizations should take them in.' But the answer I heard yesterday was: 'But we won't be able to do our work in our premises if some foreigners are there.' As if having some foreigners in struggle on your premises was not to work in defense of immigrants rights.

*"Immigrants have gained power in relation to their allies. Or rather, now they will have allies, where before they were the allies of those who defended them."**

From victim to protagonist, from "illegal" to "without papers, but not without rights" — the Sans-Papiers are breaking new ground for anti-racist and anti-sexist movements everywhere.

It is important to note that this new direction is being provided by African immigrants, and women in particular. Africa's contribution to the welfare of societies worldwide and

* Jean-Pierre Alaux (Groupe d'information et de Solidarité avec les travailleurs étrangers) interviewed on the documentary video *La Ballade des Sans-Papiers*.

to movements for social change, is hidden by the one-dimensional picture of starvation and warfare presented by media, academics and governments: We never heard until Ms Cissé's article of May '68 in Senegal. We rarely hear that the devastation is created by a world economic order which keeps Africa at the bottom. Nor do we hear that entire communities and countries are dependent on women's horrendous back-breaking work. African women do 60-90% of the agricultural work, and produce 80% of the food consumed on that continent, most of it by unwaged work. It is not accidental that in our international campaign to get unwaged work recognised as work, African women have been the clearest, using UN commitments to value unwaged work as a lever for aid, tools and technical equipment, land, inheritance rights, and other resources.

* * *

In January 1997, out of the 324 Africans who had occupied St Bernard Church on 18 March, 103 had received temporary papers, 19 had been deported, two were in jail, one had died of cancer. The others are still fighting for their papers. Over one year after the movement started at St Ambroise Church, the African Sans-Papiers of St Bernard are still providing the main impetus.

There are now 24 collectives in France, Sans-Papiers collectives in Spain and Italy, and ongoing dialogue among undocumented immigrants across Europe.

Sara Callaway

Black Women for Wages for Housework, London

Benoit Martin

Payday men's network, London

11 June 1997

The Sans-Papiers movement – a chronology

In November and December 1995, a series of strikes, occupations and demonstrations by public sector workers and students delayed or destroyed various government plans to increase national insurance contributions and cut the education budget. On 5 December alone, 800,000 people took the streets across France, and for several weeks most public transport came to a halt. This movement paved the way for the lorry drivers' general strike in November 1996 which paralysed France for two weeks and succeeded in lowering the age of retirement from 60 to 55 and in abolishing unpaid overtime. It was in this climate that the Sans-Papiers movement was born and spread.

1996

MARCH

- 18 324 Africans, including over 80 women and 100 children, having got nowhere in their individual efforts to get leave to stay, decide to occupy St Ambroise Church in Paris. Some are asylum seekers, some are immigrants who have been made "illegal" by new immigration laws. All are under threat of deportation.
- 19 Delegates are selected representing various countries of origin. The first press release is signed the "Collective of Africans from St Ambroise".
- 20 A meeting held in the office of Médecins du Monde, gathers 20 representatives of the voluntary sector and three from the St Ambroise Collective.
- 22 Eviction from St Ambroise Church. They occupy Gymnasium Japy, a sports centre.
- 24 Eviction from Japy. Community groups and trade unions offer temporary housing. The Africans reject the label "clandestins" (in hiding) and call themselves "Sans-Papiers" (without papers).
- 25 The Sans-Papiers elect Madjiguène Cissé as a delegate. A meeting of the Sans-Papiers and voluntary organizations is called. Each organization wants to send two or three representatives which would restrict the Sans-Papiers represented as the room is small. Madjiguène Cissé changes the terms by de-

- clarifying that: “the Sans-Papiers will lead the discussion, and only one representative from each voluntary organization can attend.”
- 26 Sans-Papiers stay in run-down barracks lent by Secours Catholique. In the evening, a priest announces that they will only work with SOS-Racisme, that the Sans-Papiers can no longer use their premises, and that the Sans-Papiers should leave their applications and documents with Secours Catholique and go home. While the men consider going home, the women decide to look for another place, and are offered space in a Women’s Centre where men would be excluded. The men then decide to find premises where they can all stay together.
- 29 Sans-Papiers are invited to stay at Theatre La Cartoucherie on the outskirts of Paris.

APRIL

- 6 Ariane Mnouchkine, head of the Theatre, brings together academics, writers, high ranking civil servants, etc., to form the College of Mediators. Although they have the support of the general meeting of the Sans-Papiers, their aim is not regularization for all but for each case to be looked at individually.
- 10 Sans-Papiers move to unused warehouses on rue Pajol.
- 15 In Versailles, near Paris, eight immigrant parents of French children begin a hunger strike in the cathedral to demand regularisation. They will win their leave to stay a few weeks later.
- 29 The College of Mediators, after meetings with the Sans-Papiers, draw up 10 criteria – people should have the right to stay if they are:
- a parent of French children;
 - a spouse or known cohabitant of a French person;
 - a spouse and child of a foreigner who has the right to stay;
 - a parent of children born in France;
 - refused the right of asylum but entered France before 1 January 1993;
 - a close relative of someone living in France (parent, sister, brother);
 - a person whose return would stop the medical treatment of a serious physical or mental illness;
 - a person whose return would expose them to serious risks;
 - a student currently in a recognised university;
 - well integrated into French society, but deprived of leave to stay.

MAY

- 2 A hunger strike by 13 women and 43 men begins at rue Pajol. It will end on 22 May.

- 5 In Colombes (a suburb of Paris), a collective of Sans-Papiers is set up.
- 6 In St Denis, near Paris, 50 families (many of whom are immigrants with French children) hold a press conference to demand regularisation.
- 9 In Toulouse, six immigrant parents of French children begin a hunger strike.
- 11 1,000 people participate in a march called by the women of St Ambroise "against all racist and sexist laws". Their leaflet says: "Besides problems with regularisation, women are the victims of illiteracy, and therefore lack of qualifications, and therefore lack of autonomy." They demand freedom of movement for all women and men, legal status for women in their own right, discrimination against women to be considered grounds for asylum, the right to jobs and refugee status for women. When they arrive at Matignon (the seat of government), they are barred by many police. The demonstrators demand that a delegation be received, but even after a sit-in of some hours, they are refused.

JUNE

- 7 In the city of Lille, parents of French children begin a hunger strike. A network of organizations against the Pasqua laws which made thousands of immigrants illegal overnight join the delegation of the hunger strikers to meet with the authorities.
- 15 In Paris, 10,000 people march against the Pasqua laws. Other demonstrations are held in Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon, Rouen, Marseilles, Nancy.
- 18 100 families in the 13th arrondissement, a borough of Paris, form a "Collective for the Right to Live as Families".
- 25 Women occupy the town hall of the 18th arrondissement in Paris to press the government for a response to the College of Mediators' 10 criteria.
- 26 The government gives the right to stay to 22 out of 205 Sans-Papiers chosen at random.
- 28 The African Sans-Papiers occupy St Bernard Church.

JULY

- 5 10 men start a hunger strike in the church.
- 8 In Lille, 13 Sans-Papiers are granted leave to stay. Other Sans-Papiers start a new hunger strike. The number of Sans-Papiers continues to grow and soon after, they form a Committee of Sans-Papiers autonomous from the network against the Pasqua laws (see 7 June).

- 20 First meeting in Paris of the National Co-ordination of the Sans-Papiers, the co-ordinating body for all the Sans-Papiers collectives in France. One of their aims is to help other collectives to form and to spread the movement. The Sans-Papiers decide that only Sans-Papiers can be delegates to the National Co-ordination

AUGUST

- 1 President Chirac announces that the right to stay will be granted case by case, ruling out the possibility of general regularisation demanded by the Sans-Papiers.
- 12 Police break into St Bernard Church and forcibly transfer the hunger strikers to hospital. By evening, all the strikers have got themselves back inside the church.
- 16 Solidarity evenings begin to protect the Sans-Papiers' sanctuary — several hundred supporters do all-night vigils every night.
- 17 First meeting of the Third Collective of Sans-Papiers in Paris. There are now three collectives active in Paris: the St Bernard Collective, the Collective for the Right to Live in the Family and the Third Collective, which now has over 1,200 people from 40 different nationalities, including Chinese and Turkish people. Six trade unions of Air France workers announce they will not allow the planes they work on to be used for deportations.
- 23 1,500 police armed with truncheons, axes and tear gas break into St Bernard Church and violently evict the Sans-Papiers and their supporters. The police separate Black people from white, and women from men and round up all the Sans-Papiers. (Madjiguène Cissé is arrested and strip-searched — see p17. She will be released the next day.) That evening in Paris, 20,000 pour into the streets in protest at the eviction, and later, 3000 clash with the police in front of the Vincennes Detention Centre where many Sans-Papiers are being held.
- 25 The African Sans-Papiers regroup at Theatre La Cartoucherie. The hunger strikers detained in Vincennes stop their strike and are freed a few days later.
- 28 Most Sans-Papiers from St Bernard are released from detention and join a 15,000-strong march in Paris. Others march in Marseilles, Bordeaux and Toulouse.
- 31 First showing of the documentary video *La Ballade des Sans-Papiers* at La Cartoucherie.

SEPTEMBER

- 3 In Lille, the Sans-Papiers Committee occupies trade union premises and is criticized for doing so by the network against the Pasqua laws.
- 13 The St Bernard Collective moves into a disused trade union premises at Faubourg-Poissonnière where they remain to date.
- 28 National Demonstration in Paris of 20,000.

OCTOBER

- 1 The Third Collective presents a statement to the government proposing three criteria for regularization:
 - evidence that someone is integrated into French society
 - when refusal would lead to serious risk to life and health
 - when refusal would lead to couples having to split up and in other ways making family life difficult or impossible.
- 2 First in a series of caravans organized by the Sans-Papiers of St Bernard which travels across France to publicize their movement and gather support.
- 10 In Lille, 31 Sans-Papiers start a hunger strike.
- 29 Sans-Papiers from the Third Collective and their supporters occupy an immigration office; 44 are arrested, 42 are released the same evening. Five Turkish and Kurdish people are deported.

NOVEMBER

- 20 Sans-Papiers women organize a gathering and send a delegation to UNICEF on the International Day of the Rights of Children, spelling out how the government violates the UN Convention of the right of children to be with their parents and to have access to health care and education.
- 30 National demonstration of 3,000 in Paris.

DECEMBER

- 20 In Hautes-Seine, outside Paris, four women – two Algerians, one Tunisian, and one from Cameroon – start a hunger strike. After three weeks, three win temporary papers and a full-time nursery place for the daughter of one of the women.

1997

JANUARY

- 2 For the first time the press refer to the women as “Sans-Papières”, women-without-papers. The Sans-Papières begin a

weekly demonstration in front of l'Elysée, the equivalent of Downing St. or the White House. They call themselves "Les folles de mars" (the mad women of March — the month when their movement was launched) recalling the mothers of the disappeared in Argentina whom the military government called the "mad women of May" because they held weekly demonstrations in May Square.

- 11 In Lille, after participating in a women's conference, Sans-Papiers form an autonomous group within the Lille collective.
- 14 In Lille, 18 Sans-Papiers from Laos, Gambia and Senegal begin a hunger strike.
- 18 National demonstration called by the Sans-Papiers against the Debré Law — the immigration Bill which would further speed up deportations.

FEBRUARY

- 5 The Sans-Papiers and Sans-Papières of St Bernard are arrested while attempting to give a letter to President Chirac's daughter, who had commented that their movement was "one of the most important events of 1996". All are later released.
- 12 A petition launched by 66 film directors calls for civil disobedience against the Debré Law. A series of other petitions follows, signed by 55,000 people including celebrities such as actresses Catherine Deneuve, Isabelle Adjani and Emmanuelle Béart, as well as people from all walks of life.
- 22 150,000 march in Paris against the Debré Law. Other demonstrations take place in Marseilles, Bordeaux, Lyon and Caen.
The Third Collective occupies the Church of St Jean Baptiste de Belleville with the support of the priest and the Sans-Papiers of St Bernard. They are evicted the following morning.
- 25 30,000 demonstrate in front of the French Parliament against the Debré Law. Clashes with the police.
- 27 Riot on board a deportation charter flight to Mali; 77 deportees confront 47 police, two of whom are seriously injured.

MARCH

- 9 Caravan of the National Co-ordination begins a tour of Brittany.
- 17 In Lille, nine African and South-east Asian Sans-Papiers stop their hunger strike after 61 days; 20 get temporary papers, among them one hunger striker. The other hunger strikers are allowed to stay on compassionate grounds.
- 18 To mark the first anniversary of the Sans-Papiers, 500 gather in

front of St Ambroise Church.

- 19 Camara Sema, a delegate who had represented the hunger strikers of St Bernard, is deported to Mali.
- 20 A delegation of Sans-Papiers from Spain participates in a public meeting in Paris.
- 21 London Première of *The Ballad of the Sans-Papiers* with English sub-titles, and launch of the first edition of the English translation of Madjiguène Cissé's article *The Sans-Papiers: A Woman Draws the First Lessons*. The article is also available in German, Italian and Spanish on the Sans-Papiers website.
- 26 Première of a three-minute film in which Madjiguène Cissé reads the Manifesto of the Sans-Papiers (see p22). The film is shown in 300 French cinemas and at the Cannes Film Festival.

APRIL

- 23 30 women occupy the City Hall where Jacques Toubon, who is the mayor is also Minister of Justice. Arrested, they are released after a demonstration at the police station which then goes back to City Hall. (Toubon will lose his seat in the national elections in June.)

Delegates of the National Co-ordination speak at a gathering on immigration rights in Munich, and other cities in Germany.

MAY

- 14 In Paris, 200 Sans-Papiers occupy a sports stadium, highlighting immigrant communities' contribution to French society — many were involved in building the stadium. El Hadj Momar Diop, delegate from the Third Collective to the National Co-ordination, is charged with assaulting a police officer, and sentenced to four months in jail and a 10-year ban from France on his release. A video recording of the demonstration shows that the police assaulted Momar Diop. An international campaign demands his release and regularization.
- 22 In Paris, 1,000 people participate in a candlelight march, highlighting the Sans-Papiers' refusal to "live in the shadows".

JUNE

- 2 Landslide election victory for the Left. The Right is swept out of government; Debré and other anti-immigrant politicians lose their seats. The Sans-Papiers celebrate and call for Lionel Jospin, the new Socialist Prime Minister, to keep his promises and grant global regularization to all Sans-Papiers.

A more comprehensive chronology is available on the Sans-Papiers website at: <http://www.bok.net/pajol>.

The Sans-Papiers

A woman draws the first lessons

by Madjiguène Cissé

Where do we come from, we Sans-Papiers of Saint-Bernard? It is a question we are often asked, and a pertinent one. We didn't immediately realise ourselves how relevant this question was. But, as soon as we tried to carry out a "site inspection", 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 and it is often said that the Soninké "are a travelling people". They are a great 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 neo-colonialism

We hear, including from French government sources, that the solution would be to eradicate the causes of immigration; that is to say, 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 should be promoted and developed but in those which are already profitable: TATAR tinned fish is French-owned; France Telecom, EDF-GDF (French Electricity and Gas), also invest in those sectors with a high rate of profit.

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, neo-liberal model of "development". Of course this doesn't work; thus, 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 neo-colonial 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 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 neo-colonialism 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 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 10 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",* 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, at a certain point there was a proposal to elect a president. In fact, 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 10 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; he's not doing his job. Thus of the 10 delegates elected at the beginning of the movement, only two of us are left: all the others have been replaced as we've gone along, and at the last general meeting people thought that they wanted five delegates, that that was enough since in any case these were the only ones who did the work.

* Translator's note 'Esprit de chef' versus 'esprit de corps': 'leader spirit' versus team spirit.

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 gave me the job of finding premises. I managed to find an offer of shelter at the Women's Centre (2) 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 Women's 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 women's march on 11 May, at the time when we were in Pajol, (3) 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. You often hear of the struggle of the wives of the railwaymen from Thies. In 1947 a conflict arose between the railwaymen of the Dakar-Niger Line (4) and the colonial administration. The strike was brutally suppressed, and many strikers were imprisoned in the civil prison in Dakar. The railwaymen's wives, of Malian and Senegalese origin, then organized a march from Thies to Dakar to demand the release of the imprisoned workers. In the same way, 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 Co-ordination of women of the opposition was set up, and it was this Co-ordination 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; they 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. (5) 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 Saint-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 gibes 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 Saint-Bernard we insisted on holding our press conference at the Bourse du Travail [footnote: 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 Saint-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 (6). We believe that the struggle, in Senegal and elsewhere, against structural adjustment

programmes, and our struggle here, is one and the same struggle. Co-ordination is not easy from 7,000 kilometres away, but we must constantly ensure that we are making the connections between our different battles.

Integration and respect

In France up till 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 himself, and if you conceal yourself it must be because after all you have something to hide. The French person who thinks that he must oppose people who are underground, illegal immigration, etc. . . . always has at his side an immigrant friend he's 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 Saint-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 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 integration in the Republic and the model which prioritizes respecting 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 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 so legendary that if a Serere says he is a Muslim to a Peul or to a Toucouleur, it will provoke a sceptical response: "Oh my, the Islam of Sereres. Hm . . ." In short, we are non-conformist. But our experience has also taught us 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 effort 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.

1. The Soninké live in the east of Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Guinea, the Ivory Coast and Burkina Fasso.
2. The Women's Centre — La Maison des Femmes — in Paris is a women-only meeting place which came out of the women's movement. It has just celebrated its tenth anniversary.
3. These are disused railway sites made available to the Sans-Papiers by the rail workers' trade union CFDT.
4. This is now the train that runs between Dakar and Bamako.
5. This refers to the plot of land on which several families live together.
6. At least from the people; the governments were in less of a hurry. And when Abdou Diouf, the president of Senegal, decided to speak, it was to ask for more aid for Senegal.

Manifesto of the Sans-Papiers

First published as part of a supplement of Liberation, the French daily newspaper, entitled "55,000 names against the Debré Law", 25 February 1997.

We the Sans-Papiers of France, in signing this appeal, have decided to come out of the shadows. From now on, in spite of the dangers, it is not only our faces but also our names which will be known. We declare:

Like all others without papers, we are people like everyone else. Most of us have been living among you for years. We came to France with the intention of working here and because we had been told that France was the "homeland of the Rights of Man": we could no longer bear the poverty and the oppression which was rife in our countries, we wanted our children to have full stomachs, and we dreamed of freedom.

Most of us entered France legally. We have been arbitrarily thrown into illegality both by the hardening of successive laws which enabled the authorities to stop renewing our permit to stay, and by restrictions introduced on the right to asylum which is now given only sparingly. We pay our taxes, our rent, our bills and our social security contributions – when we are allowed regular employment! When we are not unemployed or in casual employment, we work hard in the rag trade, the leather trade, the construction industry, catering, cleaning . . . We face working conditions employers impose on us which you can refuse more easily than we can, because being sans-papiers [without papers] makes us sans-droits [without rights]. We know this suits plenty of people. We produce wealth, and we enrich France with our diversity.

Sometimes we are single people who often enable our families to survive in the home country; but also, we frequently live with our partners and our children who were born in France or who came when they were very small. We have given a number of these children French names; we send them to

the State school. We have followed the road which should lead them to acquire French nationality, as plenty of French people, amongst the proudest to be French, have themselves acquired from parents or grandparents who were born abroad. We have our families, but also our friends in France.

We demand papers so that we are no longer victims of arbitrary treatment by the authorities, employers and landlords. We demand papers so that we are no longer vulnerable to informants and blackmailers. We demand papers so that we no longer suffer the humiliation of controls based on our skin, detentions, deportations, the break-up of our families, the constant fear. The prime minister of France had promised that families would not be separated: we demand that this promise finally be kept and that the principles of humanity often proclaimed by the government be implemented. We demand that the European and international conventions, to which the French Republic has subscribed, are respected.

We rely on the support of a great many French people, whose own liberties may be under threat if our rights continue to be ignored. Since the examples of Italy, Spain, Portugal and on several occasions France itself, demonstrate that global regularization is entirely possible, we demand our regularization. We are not in hiding. We have come out into the daylight.



*'March of Women of St Ambroise
for the regularization of the Sans-Papiers', 11 May 1996*



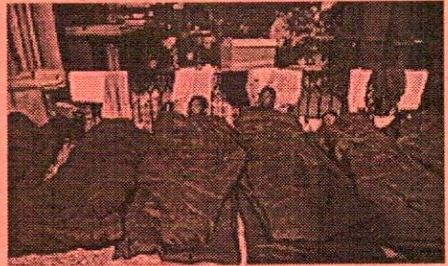


"WITHOUT PAPERS, NOT WITHOUT RIGHTS . . ."

AFRICANS GIVE DIRECTION TO THE MOVEMENT AGAINST FORTRESS EUROPE

*"If we had not taken our autonomy,
we would not be here today."*

Madjiguène Cissé



Hunger strikers in St Bernard Church, Paris 1996

A powerful introduction to the Sans-Papiers movement of undocumented asylum seekers and immigrants in France, spearheaded by African women and men. This compelling account by their major spokeswoman describes why and how the Sans-Papiers organized independently, including from immigrant welfare and other established organizations *"which told us that we could never win because people were not ready to hear what we had to say."*

Taking charge of their own movement, they gained wide-ranging support from anti-racist, women's and community groups, churches, trade unions and celebrities, and inspired immigrants of many nationalities to form Sans-Papiers collectives. Ms Cissé shows how the Sans-Papiers' success has depended on women — the Sans-Papières — taking their autonomy from men. *"Each time the movement ran out of steam, the women met and worked out initiatives which relaunched the struggle."*

Combining their experience in the ex-colonies and as immigrants in the old imperial centre, the Sans-Papiers are giving new direction to the movement opposing all laws against immigrants, the rise of racism and nazism, casualisation and cuts, which are at the heart of Fortress Europe. *"The struggle, in Senegal and elsewhere, against structural adjustment programmes, and our struggle here, is one and the same. Co-ordination is not easy from 7,000 km away, but we must constantly ensure that we are making the connections."*

Also includes the Sans-Papiers Manifesto, a chronology of major events from the first church occupation in March 1996 to the present, and other information.