

## Paris's illegal immigrants fight to live openly

Paris – Dieneba Ninae is hiding in plain sight, like the hundreds of other undocumented immigrants who have taken over a four-storey government office building in the centre of Paris.

The 50-year-old Mauritanian woman lives like a refugee. She has two bulging plastic sacks of clothes, a space heater, some blankets and a mattress on the floor of a room she shares with seven people, including a baby who cries through the night.

“We just want to be regularized,” says Ms. Ninae, who moved into the building a few months ago after nearly four years of living in France illegally. “We want to live openly, to have our own place, to have our own job, to feel free to move and travel.”

Migrants lugging bedding and battered suitcases moved into the building five months ago after being evicted from a union hall where they had been camped for more than a year. The state health insurance agency, which owns the 4,800-square-metre building, immediately went to court to have them evicted. It won, but the decision is under appeal.

Judging from the number of rooms crammed with mattresses, as many as 500 people may be staying in what has become France's biggest unconcealed squat. They prepare meals in a communal kitchen, share supplies donated by charities, organize themselves into cleaning squads and troop out regularly to street demonstrations to demand legal-resident status.

The squatters, most of them from West Africa, are part of a new and highly organized campaign by migrants and their advocates to legalize the estimated 400,000 undocumented workers in France. According to unions, nearly 5,000 illegal migrants have taken the risk of joining strikes and sit-ins at construction sites, restaurants and other businesses around the country.

The people living in the cavernous office building on Rue Baudelique, in the 18th arrondissement of the capital, call themselves an independent collective fighting for people who do not work in unionized companies. But in occupying a building in central Paris, they have adopted a time-worn tactic of the French labour movement – all but guaranteed to make their fight visible and make the authorities uncomfortable.

“When you make noise, they listen to you,” said Djibril Diaby, one of the organizers of the live-in protest movement. “That's how it is in France. If you do nothing, nothing happens. If you fight, they respond.”

France is one of the few European countries that systematically gives legal residency to undocumented migrants, provided they can prove they have lived and worked in the country for at least five years and have put down roots.

Thousands of approvals are granted each year. But immigrant groups have complained that the regularization rules are not applied uniformly across France's 100 administrative departments, where each prefect has the power to decide whether an illegal immigrant meets the conditions for getting papers.

The situation has become more confused under President Nicolas Sarkozy, who created tension among the immigrant associations by asking one of the main labour unions to screen applicants. The Minister of Immigration, Eric Besson, said recently that he would consider legalizing up to 1,000 union-backed undocumented workers, but only in trades and cities with proven labour shortages. A more comprehensive amnesty, he said, is out of the question, despite the Paris mayor's complaint that the widening protests are disrupting the city's economy.

The Rue Baudelique squat, meanwhile, has become a commune of permanent political action.

The building is on a side street in the Goutte-d'Or district, a working-class neighborhood that was the setting for the 19th-century novels of Émile Zola and is now swiftly being gentrified.

Groups of men sit on salvaged chairs, having cigarettes and cups of tea, on the drafty ground floor, once a loading bay. The dank passageways have improvised street names like Resistance Place, Deportation Boulevard and Impasse of Liberalism. The building is still supplied with electricity and some rooms have heaters and televisions.

French volunteers, some of them retired schoolteachers, come in the evenings to teach French, philosophy and immigration law. The Green party and a Trotskyite anti-capitalism party have pledged support. Regular resident assemblies are convened. Alcohol is banned. Anyone who gets into a fight is

thrown out by the immigrants who have been selected as security guards.



Mr. Diaby, who came to France from Senegal in 1989, said he does not expect a blanket amnesty for illegal immigrants. But to keep the existing system of regularization on track, he added, illegal immigrants have to make a show of force.

“If there's a big mobilization,” he said, “the authorities can't do whatever they like.”

*Illegal immigrants seeking legal residency in France demonstrate at a government building they have occupied in central Paris.*

*Pierre Verdy/AFP AFP*

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