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## The Maghribin migrant workers in France

Colonial expansion has been considered by the western bourgeoisie since the age of mercantilism as a precondition both for sustained industrial growth and for the maintenance of social order. In accordance with this policy, the entire Maghrib was conquered by France and transformed into an economic colony for the extraction of raw materials and a market preserve for manufactured products. The most fertile agricultural plains of North Africa were expropriated from the 'native' peasant producers and reallocated to the European settlers. By 1954, the French state had managed to expropriate, under diverse forms, 4,825,000 *hectares*\* of cultivated lands in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia for the benefit of the European settlers.

### THE ECONOMIC STRUCTURE OF THE COLONIZED MAGHRIB

The pre-colonial Maghribin economy was based, in rural areas, on agricultural activities and animal husbandry, and in the cities, on handicraft industries and trade. With the expropriation of the land from the peasantry, specifically in the Algerian case, and the thrusting of the Maghribin economy without protective tariffs into the international capitalist market, a severe economic crisis set in. In fact, with the introduction of French industrial products, the Maghribin handicraft industries were forced into decline. The

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\*1 *hectare* = 1,000 sq. metres

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decline of the indigenous economic sector coincided with a tremendous demographic increase.<sup>1</sup> The population of Algeria grew from 3.2 million in 1880 to 9.7 million in 1955. Similar trends occurred in Tunisia and Morocco.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the constant erosion of the economic base of the Maghribin population a twofold process of pauperization and proletarianization through migration set in. Where, for instance, in 1872 an Algerian peasant had at his disposal an average of 83 *ares* of cultivated soil, by 1948 this had fallen to a mere 24 *ares*.<sup>\*</sup> Hence the average annual quantity of grain per head fell from five *quintals*† in 1872, to 4.7 in 1911, 2.8 in 1936, and to less than two in 1951. As a result, the number of small peasant landowners diminished by 20 per cent while that of both permanent and seasonal labourers increased by 29 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Similar changes occurred in Tunisia and Morocco. Furthermore, the forcible removal of the Maghribin peasantry from the fertile agricultural plains to the marginal mountain slopes and semi-arid steppes, followed by a rapid population increase and the destruction of the pre-colonial collective land tenure system, caused the fragmentation of family holdings. This resulted in the generalization of microfundia whereby land holdings became too small to be cultivated even by simple pre-industrial peasant techniques.<sup>4</sup>

In the long run, the impoverished peasants and artisans had no alternative but to sell their labour power to the owners of the means of production in order to eke out a livelihood. For the peasantry proletarianization implied migration either to the colonial agricultural centres or to the cities. The urban population in Algeria grew from half a million in 1880 to 2.5 million in 1955 and 3.6 million in 1964 — with similar trends in Tunisia and Morocco. But in the Maghrib, as elsewhere in the Third World, urbanization was neither preceded nor followed by industrialization. Consequently, an increasing number of pauperized masses were driven by hunger and want across the Mediterranean and into Europe.

#### EARLY MIGRATION TO EUROPE

The emigration of Maghribin workers to western Europe was initiated by some unknown number of Algerians who first appeared in the historical records of France and Belgium after 1871.<sup>5</sup> In 1905 several thousand labourers were reported in the

\*1 *are* = 10 sq. metres

†1 *quintal* = 100 lbs.

coal mines, and in 1911 the French authorities revealed that 3,000 North Africans were working in France. The next year an official inquiry showed the existence of 5,000 migrant workers, among them 1,500 miners.<sup>6</sup> They crossed the Mediterranean in small and isolated groups. The reason for the slow development of this early migration was the administrative restrictions imposed. On the express demand of the *colons* a decree was promulgated in 1876 by the Governor General in Algeria requiring a special travel permit of Algerians going to France. On its abolition, in 1913, the movement of Algerian workers to France increased rapidly. On the eve of the First World War 30,000 North Africans were working in France; among them were many Moroccans employed in the metallurgy of Nantes and the mines of the Pas-de Calais.<sup>7</sup>

The First World War aggravated France's need for manpower. Mobilization, which affected the active working population in particular, led to a drastic decline in the French productive capacity: a solution had to be found to keep the war industries running. Hence the 'colonial reserve army' of pauperized masses was brought to work and the forced recruitment of Algerians was transformed into a 'veritable mobilization, a civil requisition that was made possible by the sovereignty of France over the territory of the colony'.<sup>8</sup> In Tunisia and Morocco, however, the French authorities resorted to voluntary recruitment. Once in France, this colonial manpower came under the direct jurisdiction of the *Conseil de Guerre* which was empowered to try them before military tribunals if they so much as refused to work. They were housed in special compounds where they were also obliged to take their meals. This operation of collective recruitment resulted in the introduction into France of 120,000 Algerians, 35,000 Moroccans, and 18,000 Tunisians.<sup>9</sup> Algeria also provided 173,000 men for the services. In fact, according to Ageron, between 1914 and 1 April 1917 alone a total of 168,678 men who were either drafted or enlisted had been sent to France. By April 1917 2.7 per cent of the Algerian population had been in the French army in France.<sup>10</sup> Tunisia and Morocco also furnished thousands of men for the French war effort.

After the armistice a large number of the mobilized men were sent back home, but many of them remained as labourers to rebuild the war-torn areas. Since France found itself depopulated and economically paralysed, the French government again resorted to the North African colonial manpower to reconstruct its economy. Between 1920 and 1924 120,000 Maghribin workers

were called to France; in 1924 alone 71,028 Algerian and 10,000 Moroccan migrant workers were *imported*. This massive out-migration from the Maghrib frightened the colonial entrepreneurs who up to then had been able to pay starvation wages to workers by maintaining a vast reserve army of lumpen-proletarianized peasants. Their pressure, as always, elicited a positive response from the colonial authorities. Thenceforth a work permit was required before emigrating. But although this brought a decrease in emigration, 71,000 Algerian workers arrived in France in 1929 alone. The 1929 economic crash, however, not only slowed down the tempo of emigration, but also forced the return to the Maghrib of labourers already in Europe. The number of registered Algerian workers fell from 65,000 in 1932 to 32,000 in 1936.<sup>11</sup> The consequences of the crisis were, of course, felt most strongly by the migrant workers, whose socio-economic and legal status was, and still is, so precarious.

The Second World War provoked far-reaching changes in the nature, form and magnitude of the trans-Mediterranean migration. Although the French Minister of Labour had requested, in January 1940, the dispatch of several thousand Algerian workers, the military debacle which resulted in the German occupation of France put a quick end to this request. With the ensuing disorganization of the French economy, 10,000 workers were laid off and repatriated in the early spring of 1940. Later the German military authorities expelled an additional 16,000. During 1943 and 1944 the French colonial authorities prohibited all migration from Algeria. After the liberation of France, however, the French *patronat* resorted again to the North African labour force to reconstruct its ruined industries, communication networks, and housing. In 1947 the Algerians were finally transformed into 'French Moslim' citizens, a new legal status which allowed them to move freely between Algeria and France. By the mid 1950s the number of Algerian workers had reached approximately 400,000.<sup>12</sup>

Ninety per cent of the Maghribin workers came from a peasant background, usually from the most densely populated and therefore the most impoverished rural areas of the Maghrib. Thus, the collective historical experience of the millions of uprooted individuals who worked in the French industrial centres was the culmination of profound socio-economic changes in the peasant communities of origin. And this inevitably led to revolutionary attitudinal changes and class consciousness in the minds of the

majority of the emerging Maghribin proletariat.

The inherent contradictions of French imperialism for their part created the objective conditions that gave rise to novel dynamic social forces which challenged the very foundations of colonialism. The nascent Maghribin proletariat came to the forefront of the anti-colonialist struggle of national liberation, both in France and North Africa, because of the merciless exploitation imposed upon it by the capitalist class. Tunisia and Morocco obtained their formal independence in 1956. But in Algeria, because of the deeply entrenched nature of French colonial interests, an eight-year war of national liberation had to be waged, resulting in the total devastation of the peasant economy. Indeed, the 2,350,000 peasants who survived various military operations were driven by force to the *Centres de Regroupements*, surrounded by barbed wire and mined fortifications. The French scorched earth policy destroyed some 8,000 villages. The livestock of the peasants was confiscated and consumed by the troops.<sup>14</sup> And when in 1962 the imprisoned peasants were released from the camps they had neither tools and draft animals, nor the funds necessary to purchase them. Migration was the only alternative to starvation.

#### POST-INDEPENDENCE MIGRATION

The post-colonial states of the Maghrib have not yet resolved the basic problems created by colonialism, namely economic underdevelopment aggravated by a demographic 'explosion'. By 1966 Algeria's population had reached 12,093,000, Morocco's 12,820,000 and Tunisia's 4,458,000. But the outflow of Maghribin workers to western Europe not only followed its pre-independence course, but showed a dramatic increase after 1962 – reaching in France a figure of over a million by 1973 (around 800,000 of whom came from Algeria).<sup>15</sup>

The primordial causes underlying this emigration are deeply rooted in the colonial socio-economic structures and the phenomenon will not vanish until the sources nourishing the continuation of the dependency-dominance relationships between the former colonies and the 'metropolis' are eradicated. Unfortunately, neo-colonial relations between France and the Maghrib have been maintained and consolidated since independence. In the decade between 1963 and 1972, only Algeria has managed to establish a balance of payments surplus, thanks to its oil revenue. France, however, has maintained its position as the

most important market for Maghribin exports and the primary source of imports.<sup>16</sup>

This current state of affairs is conducive neither to economic development nor to politico-economic independence. The North African countries are still exporting raw materials and labour power in order to import industrial equipment and manufactured consumer goods. Algeria is the only country that has made some real attempts at industrialization, but its path to 'modernization' has favoured a capital intensive and labour-saving developmental approach. This techno-bureaucratic policy has led to increasing external financial indebtedness and technological dependence, and while Algeria has continued to export its unskilled and semi-skilled manpower, it has been importing foreign technicians, engineers, doctors and teaching personnel. In a word, Algerian industrialization is not generating employment for the Algerian deruralized masses.

No North African state has up to the present carried out a thorough land reform in favour of the peasantry. In the case of Tunisia and Morocco the autochthonous landlords managed to buy a large number of hectares from the former *colons*. The new Tunisian ruling class disastrously failed to organize cooperatives in the countryside. In Morocco, the only state programmes designed to improve agricultural production were conceived by the new bureaucracy to benefit the comprador macrofundia owners. 'Socialist Algeria' did not really undertake any land reform until 1971. The experience of self-management on colonial farms abandoned by the settlers was nipped in the bud by the post-independence petty bourgeois bureaucracy who finally opted for state capitalism rather than develop, rectify and perfect worker 'autogestion'. In short, the new ruling classes in the Maghrib have so far failed to resolve the basic problems facing their people: underdevelopment, neo-colonial dependency, social inequality, obscurantism, despotism and the enslavement of women. Migration has been viewed by the French and North African governments as the only safety valve for the prosperity of the metropolitan bourgeoisie and the stability of its satellite regimes in the Maghrib.

#### THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC POSITION OF THE MAGHRIBIN WORKERS IN FRANCE

Since the French authorities require employers to hire North African migrant workers only in industrial sectors where there is a

native manpower deficit, these workers are automatically relegated to the dirtiest, most painful and risky occupational positions. The migrant workers, and especially the North Africans, are concentrated in certain basic industries: construction, metallurgy, chemicals, rubber and asbestos, and generally industries with unhealthy working conditions. According to the 1968 French Census 35.6 per cent of the foreign male migrant workers are employed in building and public works; 13.5 per cent in mechanical and electrical engineering; 9.2 per cent in agriculture, fishery, and forestry; and 8.1 per cent in commerce.<sup>17</sup> The most salient factor in these statistics is the concentration in the construction sector. The French working class has abandoned this industrial sector because of the hard working conditions, the necessity of moving around, the high rate of fatal accidents, low wages and low social status. The second distinctive characteristic is the difference in occupational patterns of various immigrant nationalities, for example, 58 per cent of the Portuguese, 41 per cent of the Italians, 37 per cent of the Algerians, and 34 per cent of the Spaniards are in construction, in contrast with only 26 per cent of the Moroccans and 13 per cent of the Poles.<sup>18</sup> Of the female workers, 29 per cent are employed in domestic services: 25.6 per cent of the Algerian women, 38.5 per cent of the Moroccan women and 19.3 per cent of the Tunisian women.

Compared to other migrant populations and to the French, the average rate of activity of the Maghribin population is among the highest. In fact, 52.5 per cent of the total Algerian population living in France is active: 70.2 per cent of the males and only 4.8 per cent of the females. Of this active population, 97.9 per cent of the men and 94.6 per cent of women, that is, a grand total of 97.6 per cent of this working population, are wage labourers. The Algerian labouring masses are essentially located in two principal regions: 43.7 per cent in Paris and its environs, 18.1 per cent in the Rhone-Alpes areas; the rest are scattered in eastern and northern France. The Tunisian and Moroccan migrants are similarly concentrated in the major industrial regions of France.<sup>19</sup>

Although the North African migrant workers have become an indispensable labour force in the basic French economic production, their socio-economic status, even compared with other other migrant nationalities, is the lowest. Their subordinate position was strikingly demonstrated in a government survey on the status of industrial and commercial workers in 1967 — which indicates a functional stratification of the migrant labourers along



nationality lines. Except for the Portuguese, all Europeans — Italians, Poles, Spaniards — enjoyed a higher socio-economic position: over 6 per cent of the total were non-manual worker employees, in addition to a high proportion of skilled manual workers. The Portuguese, though having very few non-manual workers, were represented by a fair portion of skilled workers. By contrast the Maghribin semi-skilled and unskilled workers constituted 87.2 per cent of the Algerian, 81.4 per cent of the Moroccan, and 70.3 per cent of the Tunisian labour force.<sup>20</sup>

Thus the qualitative differentiation between the occupational patterns of the migrant workers and the French workers and between the various national groups of the former, reflect qualitative differentials in wages and social status. This differential access to socio-economic positions is determined by historical factors, underdevelopment of the Maghrib, and by an official policy of the French government which enables employers to divide not only the alien workers from the native proletariat, but also the migrant labourers among themselves. This hierarchy of the the various ethnic groups along socio-economic lines corresponds to the actual degree of hostility expressed by the French population towards each of them. The Italians are the most favourably considered, the Spanish and Portuguese are more or less tolerated, 'while there is very strong prejudice towards North Africans, in particular towards Algerians'.<sup>21</sup> In a public opinion poll of the *Institut Français d'Opinion Publique* 62 per cent of the sample replied that there were too many North Africans in France, while 27 per cent found that there were too many Spaniards, although at the time the number of southern European workers far exceeded that of the Maghribins. A poll of French workers found that 71 per cent thought that there were too many North Africans and 50 per cent thought that there were too many Spaniards and Portuguese.

These surveys reveal that in addition to the objective hierarchy, there is also a division along lines of nationality. The hostile attitudes of the French workers appear to stem from the objective socio-economic positions assigned to the various nationalities of migrant workers. The gradations of hostility directed against these different groups are probably determined by historical and cultural factors. The Italians appear to be acceptable because they are assimilable; the Spaniards are fairly acceptable, and the Portuguese are unacceptable because they are socially backward. The North Africans are rejected on the grounds that they are not

only socially and economically 'underdeveloped', but also that they are culturally too different and consequently unassimilable. The 'colonial fact' appears to override all others.

#### POLITICO-ECONOMIC ADVANTAGES OF IMMIGRATION

Because of the French demographic stagnation, and its 'economic expansion' in the 1960s, the *patronat* turned to its neo-colonial reserve army to replace its shrinking native semi-skilled and unskilled labour force. As M. Massenet, the director of population in the Ministry of Labour, declared on television in 1968, 'with an active French population of 40 per cent, how could we ensure in France the standard of living of the population; ensure the retirement of the elderly, the charges of the students; ensure the social investments for children, without immigration'. Thus, the import of a labour force to 'ensure' the welfare of the French population became a vital economic necessity.

In addition to these socio-economic factors, some geo-political considerations came into play. By practising a *laissez-faire* immigration policy, the French leaders intended to pacify the social contradictions inherent in a class society. As early as 1963 Prime Minister Pompidou declared that immigration would allow France to 'create a *détente* in the labour market and resist any social pressure'<sup>22</sup> that could be exerted by the French proletariat. The deployment of migrant labour forces was of utmost strategic importance to resolve the manpower shortage, to subvert actual or potential class strife, and to exert pressure on wages so that the owners of the means of production could continue to extort exorbitant surplus value. This strategy resulted in the further worsening of working conditions in the principal productive sectors where the migrant workers were employed. Since the French workers were either given supervisory positions or transferred to more remunerative occupations possessing a higher social status, the struggle for the improvement of working conditions in the sectors of production reserved for migrant workers ceased to preoccupy the French unions. Given the racist and chauvinistic aura permeating their new industrial establishments, the migrant labourers, either ignorant of labour legislation or merely terrorized by the constant threat of deportation, often resigned themselves to perform equal work with the French workers even though they were being paid unequal wages. Deprived of basic civil rights and in most cases illiterate and

lacking class or political consciousness, the migrant workers could not expose themselves alone to the wrath of their employers and their 'law enforcement' agencies. Despite the fact that they constitute the most productive elements within the French society, they are the most exploited segment of the proletariat in Europe.

The French small-scale and archaic enterprises would not have been able to survive the tight competition imposed upon them by large industrial firms without this alien labour force. Through systematic discriminatory employment practices, financial fraud, starvation wages and all sorts of manipulations such as the constant shifts and rotations of migrant workers, these petty entrepreneurs successfully evaded wage claims, pay rises and promotions. As a result, the owners of these firms managed to squeeze enough surplus labour to compete with the highly concentrated and 'rationalized', 'modern' firms. The larger firms for their part came to base their whole short-run and long-run industrial planning on an alien work force whose forced obedience yielded profits without the risk of social unrest or class war. Besides, emigration from the former French colonies played a stabilizing role in freezing social struggle there. Political pressure stimulated by unemployment, itself a consequence of economic neo-colonialism, was lifted by the emigration of pauperized masses. At the same time, the shortage of native manpower, a vulnerable economic weakness, has been astutely turned into a powerful political mechanism that permits the French ruling class to channel, through migration, the frustrations and energies of the migrant workers, in such a way as to reinforce its neo-colonial relations with the Maghrib.

The import of a predominantly male alien labour force from these Third World countries is not accompanied by any serious attempt to create an adequate social infrastructure, housing facilities, medical care and other necessary services. Besides, a migrant worker does not cost the host society anything prior to his entry into its labour market: the charges of his upbringing and basic education have already been paid by the exporting society, and his fitness for work is certified by a French doctor even before he leaves the Maghrib. Indeed, according to the French demographer, Alfred Sauvy, 'the total cost for the country of a young man to the age of 18, that is, to the level of simple qualification, amounts to 9 or 10 years of work'.<sup>23</sup> Thus, one of the major benefits of immigration for the receiving country lies in

the fact that all the basic social costs up to the working age have been assumed by the countries of emigration.

But as soon as migrant labourers start working in France they are compelled to pay full social security on an equal footing with the French workers, even though they receive in return unequal benefits. It has been calculated that a migrant worker leaves behind him up to 20 per cent of his wage in social security.<sup>24</sup> All North African migrant workers whose dependants are left in the Maghrib receive only 60 per cent or less of their family allowance. 'Many lose even the benefit of this allowance either due to sheer ignorance or because they are rebuked by tedious administrative difficulties.'<sup>25</sup> The profits derived from the utilization of the Maghribin labourers are enormous. In 1966 a French civil servant, Yves Chaigneau, put the Algerian workers' contribution to French economic production at a figure of 2.3-3.5 billion old francs. Deducting the wages paid to these workers, and the social benefits and aid given at that time to Algeria by France, he was able to determine that the balance of profit made by the French capitalists amounted to no less than 1.5 billion old francs per year.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, contemporary migration as a political and economic strategy allows the French bourgeoisie to 'use' the migrant workers as an efficient means to increase the rate of profit, to pacify the fundamental social contradictions inherent in a capitalist society, and to reinforce its neo-colonial hold on the formerly colonized societies. The 'nationalist' regimes have found an outlet for their redundant manpower and the French *patronat* is provided with a reserve army which is imported only under the express condition that its finished products will be ensured of the neo-colonial market outlets. Once in France, the Maghribin workers are subjected to merciless exploitation, discrimination and humiliation. Their mere presence threatens a large segment of the French proletariat to the extent that the 'foreigners' appear 'to come here to take our bread'. Thus, these transplanted workers see themselves sinking into a hostile environment. All the costs of this politico-economic containment policy are paid in migrant workers' sweat, blood, health, and mental and material misery.

#### THE CAUSE AND FUNCTION OF RACISM

The emergence of racism itself as a sociological phenomenon was brought about by colonialism. Its primary function is aimed at the reduction of the non-capitalist peoples to a subhuman species so

that their subjugation and systematic exploitation become not only justified but desirable. Racism as an ideology is the offspring of colonialist practices. The armies of the western bourgeoisie overseas resorted to wars of extermination because in the

tropical countries [they] wanted cheap labour and markets and slaves; in temperate countries they wanted the land to occupy as settlers . . . . The natives were regarded as outside the pale of humanity, without religion, law, or morals. Bounties were placed on their heads and they could be freely kidnapped and massacred. They had no redress but to strike back and so to bring upon themselves merciless reprisals. Even these presently became impossible and the native remnants were herded onto reserves or became hopeless slaves in the mines or on the plantations. Those natives were alone fortunate who lived in countries that could not readily be exploited by Europe's traders or settled by her colonists.<sup>27</sup>

The proclamation of 'white' superiority over the colonized masses had been formulated during the age of colonialism to rationalize the dispossession of the Third World. As Ashley Montagu put it, 'indeed, even if the idea of "race" had not already been available, the imperialists would have been forced to invent it. It was the most useful ideological instrument of all, even more valuable than the machine gun.'<sup>28</sup>

Prior to 1945 the currents of migration emanated from Europe to the colonies. The colonial societies that were erected on the ruins of the colonized peoples' social systems gave rise to, stimulated, and provided an ideal milieu for the dissemination and application of racial theorizings. With the reversal of the migratory patterns in the post Second World War period and an increasing number of pauperized masses being attracted to the European cities, in which racist mythologies were already deeply rooted, racial discrimination and hostility began to develop to the point where racism became as overtly expressed as in the former colonies themselves.

On decolonization, the repatriated settlers brought the virus of racism to the metropolitan country. In fact, the more violent the conflict of decolonization (e.g., Algeria), the more virulent the racism and xenophobia directed against immigrants from that colony. Racism as a sociological phenomenon, however, is a by-product of capitalist praxis — and its prevalence in France predates the arrival of the deracinated proletarians.

The entire life of the Maghribin workers, due undoubtedly to their historical experience of French colonialism and their determined resistance to it, is marked and profoundly affected by

racism: discriminated against in housing, scorned in public transport and other public places, despised by petty officialdom, brutalized by the police. The result of this generalized prejudice against them plays a determinant role in maintaining their subordinate position. Systematic social discrimination entails unequal opportunity, preventing any discriminated against ethnic group from ameliorating its standard of living. ' "The Algerians are dirty and they like to be crowded together"; on the faith of which no French landlord would rent to them. It follows that the Algerians find only uncomfortable lodgings which are degraded and in too small a number. They consequently must live in overcrowded conditions. The Algerians are therefore effectively dirty and they actually live in overcrowded conditions.'<sup>29</sup> Thus in a racist environment, through a circular process of reasoning, the victim of discrimination is driven into a cul-de-sac.

In 1970 the French journalist, Jean Lacouture, published a series of articles devoted to the manifestation of racism in France and other European countries.<sup>30</sup> A wave of letters to the editor ensued. One started by warning against 'the invasion [of France] by races of inferior men, such as the niggers or Berbers' and 'the dangerous admixture with the white superior races of Europe which has established the entire "civilization".'<sup>31</sup> Another correspondent concluded by stressing that there is an 'increasing number of niggers and Arabs whose sole contact with the French is repulsive, niggers that do not have a human shape; North African negroids that carry on their faces all the stigma of degenerate races, unassimilable multitudes which constitute a mortal peril for France.'<sup>32</sup> The Arab labourers in France are thus targets of discrimination and racial abuse. To the increasing racist hysteria and violence, the migrant workers in general, and the North African labourers in particular, have responded by class struggle, despite the constant deportations of their alleged leaders by Marcellin, the French interior minister, who declared that 'expulsions are motivated by the crimes' committed by the foreign workers because they

did not respect political neutrality . . . . These figures [according to him about one per thousand were deported in 1972] demonstrate that France despite protests and criticisms remains the best country where foreigners are provided with the most liberal welcoming conditions [sic]. This said, I shall continue to expel all foreigners who disturb the public order.<sup>33</sup>

The next day, 7 June 1973, the Parisian daily newspaper *L'Aurore*

lauded M. Marcellin's policy of systematic deportation.

### 'THEY HAVE BEGUN TO FIGHT'

On 19 January 1971, in a factory in Lyon, a Maghribin worker was smashed to pieces by the chain of a worn-out machine in the workshop. This defective mechanism was supposed to have been removed for safety reasons a long time before this accident had occurred. The chain of the machine was so weak that it had broken. On the specific order of the management, the chain was hidden and replaced by a new one in order to avoid their responsibility for this fatal accident. The workers were threatened that if any one of them dared to give the investigators a different version to that of the management, they would be fired. However, when the police showed up in the factory a worker defied the management, not only giving the true explanation of the cause of his companion's death, but also showing the investigators the location of the broken chain. In protest against their working conditions the Maghribin workers struck for six hours. A second strike was organized on 9 February 1972. It lasted twenty-two days and shook the whole working-class movement and the French *patronat*. Thereafter, the migrant workers 'have begun to fight for their rights — striking for better wages and working conditions, protesting scandalous rent for rotten quarters'.<sup>34</sup>

In 1973 the combativeness of the migrant workers increased in proportion to the aggression directed against them by fascist groups.

One of the most dramatic expressions of this new militancy was the long and effective strike started in the spring of 1973 by some 370 assembly line workers . . . [mostly Algerians] at the Renault automobile plant outside Paris. The main demand was 'equal pay for equal work'. The workers were protesting not only ruthless working conditions, but also the fact that they were getting paid substantially less than the French workers doing similar tasks.

This started as a spontaneous wildcat strike which was immediately joined by 12,000 semi-skilled workers, 9,000 of them migrants. It was supervised by an ad hoc 'struggle committee' of labourers. This confrontation with the French ruling class resulted in a partial victory for the Renault workers.

But its real significance lay in the fact that it showed the immigrants finally emerging from their long political passivity and isolation. This new activism has also been demonstrated in struggles in many slum tenements . . . .

immigrant workers have organized rent strikes, refusing to pay the exorbitant rents demanded for tiny unheated, overcrowded rooms, or else banding together to fight arbitrary evictions. Many of these actions have been successful in at least extracting small concessions or thwarting outrageous cases of discrimination.

In opposition to the ongoing struggle for survival organized spontaneously by the Maghribin workers and others, a neo-fascist movement called *Ordre Nouveau*, whose leaders 'boast their support for the Nazis during World War II', mounted a vicious racist campaign. But despite this, Marcellin allowed a provocative meeting to be held by the *Ordre Nouveau* in Paris on 21 June 1973. Actually, the authorization of this meeting was in violation of the letter and spirit of a new French law against 'racist propaganda' passed in Parliament in 1972. The *Ligue Communiste* mounted a counter-demonstration against the racist hysterics of the *Ordre Nouveau*. This resulted in the dissolution of the *Ligue Communiste* by the French government and the imprisonment of its leader, Alain Krivine. Despite the anti-racist propaganda law, racist newspapers such as *Minute* still continued to publish, without legal repercussions, denunciations against:

the waves of syphilis-bearing, rape-prone undesirables. On June 23 – just two days after the *Ordre Nouveau* rally – shots were fired from speeding cars into several Algerian cafes in the Paris suburbs. On July 3, in Vitry . . . three racists murdered a Portuguese worker, then attacked an Algerian. In the southern resort city of Nice, on August 2, two Algerian workers were badly wounded in a fight with the owner of the building in which they lived. Racial violence erupted in the city of Toulon, where the municipal council declared a 'state of emergency' on August 10.

The widespread animosity against the migrant workers degenerated into barbarous acts of violence and murder after 25 August 1973, when a mentally disturbed Algerian labourer, whose brain had been damaged earlier as a result of a fight with some French fascists, killed a bus driver in Marseilles. This event triggered the French reactionary press into launching an hysterical campaign against Third World migrant workers in general and the Algerian workers in particular, because of the latter's significant role in the struggle for the improvement of the alien labourers' working and living conditions. The major southern French newspaper, *Le Meridional*, led the anti-Algerian crusade in the following terms: 'we have had enough of Algerian thieves, Algerian thugs, Algerian braggarts, Algerian trouble-makers, Algerian syphilitics, Algerian rapists, Algerian pimps, Algerian lunatics,



Algerian killers.' The committee for the Defence of Marseilles was set up by the local members of the *Ordre Nouveau* to foment criminal acts against the North African labourers, and to denounce the 'brown threat'. 'The Algerian [who killed the bus driver] was nearly lynched, and the local press used the tragedy to whip up anti-Algerian fury throughout the region, where many former *colons* live and memories of the Algerian war are vivid.' This isolated crime provided the French fascist groups with a pretext for action. From 26 August to 29 September 1973 twelve Algerian workers were assassinated. On 14 December a bomb was put in the Algerian Consulate in Marseilles in the room where workers wait while their identification cards and various other papers are processed. It killed four people and wounded a hundred. As a direct result, the Algerian government decided to cut off the flow of the 25,000 annual contingent of emigrant workers to France. (This was not the only time that the fascists organized mass murder: in 1971, when Algeria nationalized French oil interests, twenty-one migrant workers were killed throughout France.) The French police have never made a single arrest in connection with these crimes.

At any rate, the North African workers responded to the 1973 racist hysteria against them by taking steps to defend themselves. The Movement of Arab Workers succeeded in organizing many strikes and massive street demonstrations throughout the industrial centres of France in Autumn 1973 and after. The Movement is a clandestine pan-Maghribin organization that has spread quickly among the North African workers because it represents their aspirations. In protest against the assassinations, it organized a nation-wide strike and demonstration.

[This] day was highlighted by a meeting of thousands of Arab workers in front of the Paris mosque, following a massive walkout of immigrants from the construction sites and factories in the Paris area. For the first time, production was halted at the Citroen plant when Arab workers there, joined by other immigrants, put down their tools and marched out en masse. Cafes and restaurants in Arab neighbourhoods were closed for the day.

The growing racist hostility against the Arab migrant workers in France forced many of them to envisage a return home should employment be made available. An Algerian worker, the father of five children, who has been working in eastern France since 1962, wrote a letter to the personnel director of an Algerian state industrial organization, on 3 September 1973, requesting a job as an aid-mechanic. His letter revealed both the eagerness of these

migrant workers to return home and their psychological stress in France. 'We are fortifying the hand that is oppressing us', the worker concluded. But the director, replying two months later, turned down the request on the grounds that 'in order to be reintegrated into our factory you must possess the following qualifications: a certificate of primary education, and a certificate of professional training in general mechanics.' In a word, 'no employment'.

In the final analysis, it is the North African societies that must change along revolutionary lines whereby not only the collectivization of the means of production, but also of labour power itself, will be carried out. The remnants of colonial structures must be destroyed and replaced by genuinely egalitarian socio-economic structures that would guarantee a popular participatory democracy as well as channel, in a meaningful way, the energies of the masses for the construction of just societies in the Maghrib.

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