

Trade union approach to undocumented workers

**A comparison between France and UK
2000 to 2017**

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Context : Undoc workers

The issue of undocumented workers has become sensitive for trade unions in Europe:

- During the 2000s, the vulnerability of these workers increased due to the further hardening of national policies with regard to labour immigration, especially with the introduction of quotas.
- After the massive arrival of refugees in Europe in 2015, the number of undocumented immigrants has increased considerably (Pew research Center), especially in Germany and the UK.

Research questions

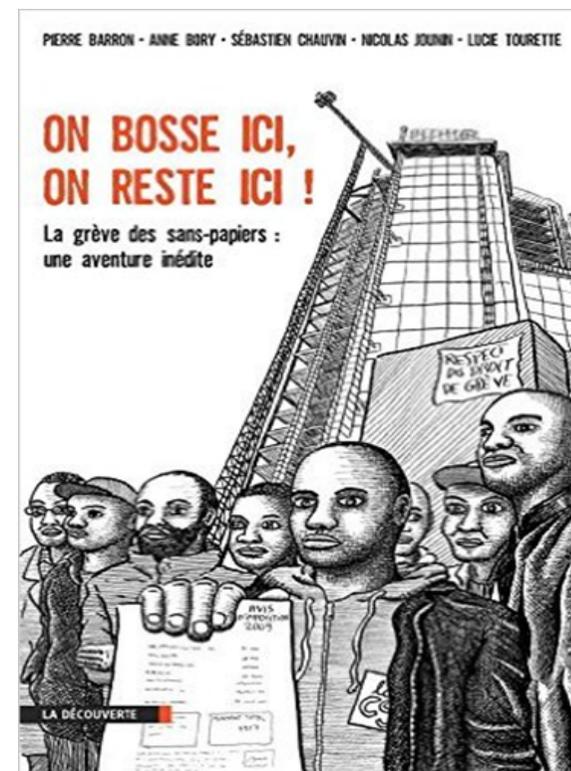
- We have worked on two large immigration countries, France and UK, where the issue of undocumented workers is treated very differently by trade unions:
 - In France, the mobilization for the rights of "undocumented workers" has been at the heart of trade union action in favour of immigrant workers for more than twenty years.
 - In the United Kingdom, the trade unions do not address the issue of undocumented workers as such and their union mobilization is more aimed at the integration of ethnic communities (Filipino).
- To what extent can this difference in treatment of undocumented workers be attributed to cultural differences (discussion of the model by Connolly & alii, 2014)?
- Does the inclusion of undocumented workers have an effect on the level of integration of immigrant workers into trade unions?

The « Sans papiers » in France



The *sans papiers* movement : Origins

- 1990s – Undoc Immigrant-led occupations of public spaces and hunger strikes with little union involvement
- 2006 – Modeluxe strike in Massy. Undoc immigrants from this Laundry gained CGT's support.
- 2008-2010 – CGT led large-scale regularisation campaigns known as "*Sans Papiers movement*"
 - 2008 – La Grande Armée, La Tour d'Argent, KFC...after 15 months 2,500 regularisations
 - 2009 – second act of the campaign and the *Collectif des 11*...in 2010 a ministerial circular with new criteria for regularisation was sent to prefectures
- Since 2010 – 10,000-12,000 regularisations



The *sans papiers*: from street to desk

- From 2012, CGT ‘permanences des travailleurs *sans papiers*’:
 - Service driven (but with broader political aims)
 - Direct support for immigrants to obtain work permits
 - Membership in exchange for taking on case for regularisation
- As long as workers don’t have a permanent job, they remain member of the “immigrants workers” unit ; then they can join their company trade union.
- Some integration of *sans papiers* workers at the level of the confederation and at the regional level, but low integration in workplace unions



Questions and issues

Several issues emerged from the new surgery:

- Debates about the best way to organise “Sans Papiers”. A specific organisation directly managed from the confederation seems appropriate although in contradiction with the universalist tradition.
- How far the CGT should engage with servicing ? In the light of the regularisation criteria, it appeared appropriate that the CGT tackled languages issues. Free language classes for members were envisaged.

UK: Filipino workers at Unison



The Migrant workers participation project

- Migrant Worker Participation Project set up in 2007. Aim to develop migrant worker networks: gather together isolated groups of members to enable them to support each other and become active within Unison's structures.
- No distinction made between undoc and regular immigrants, but the project focused on ethnic groups : Filipino and Polish.
- Positive trade union lobbying campaigns around immigration policy to restrict work permits for Filipino care workers and nurses in 2007 and 2015.
 - For nursing, paramedics and essential health care jobs being retained on the Shortage Occupation List (SOL),
 - For the removal of the 35k salary requirement for non-EU migrants for permanent residency
 - For the right to stay

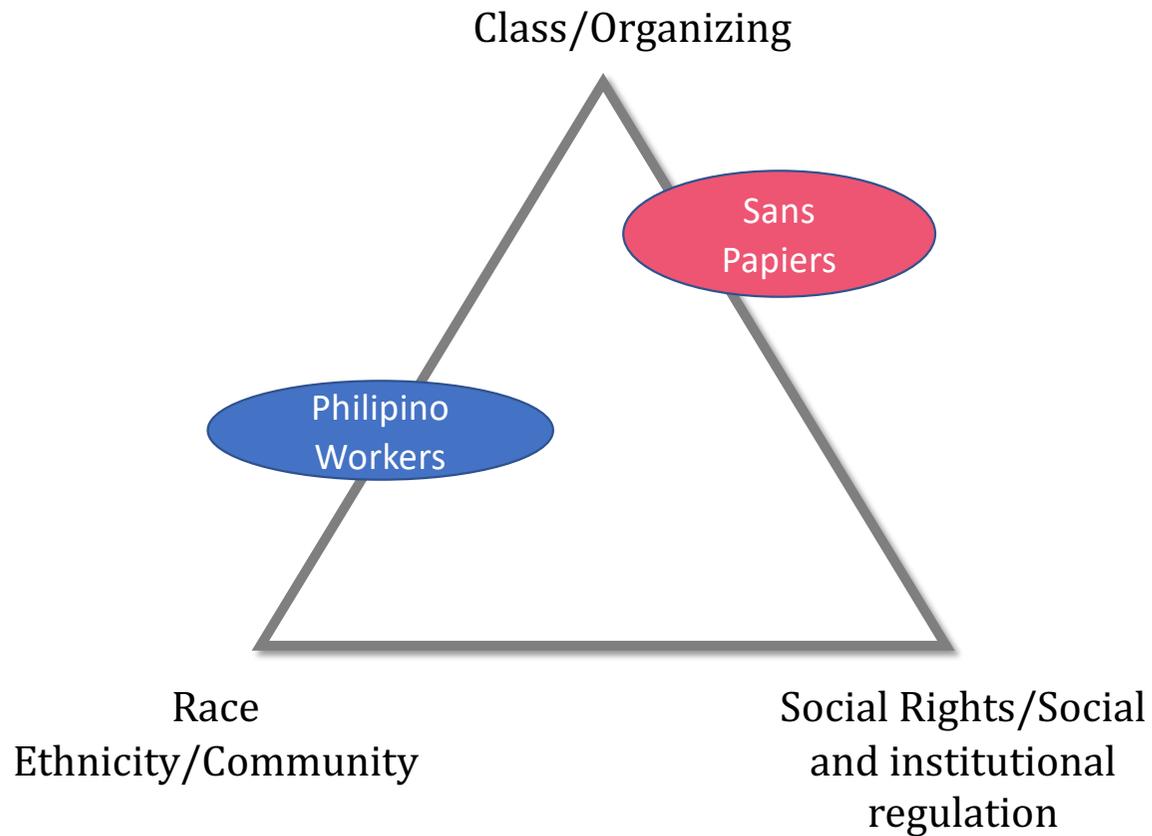
Unison and Filipino Activist Network (FAN): A shift from separation to integration?

- The FAN has been deemed a success story:
 - in terms of informal migrant worker self-organising.
 - In terms of achieving results: the 35k salary requirement for non-EU migrants was removed
- As a result of the strength of organising among these workers there has been a level of integration of Filipino workers within the structures of UNISON.
- However, active involvement of Filipino workers in the structures was limited due to structural barriers and 'hitting bureaucracy'
- Lack of support for formalised self-organised group of migrant workers and tensions with existing self-organised groups in the union (issues in relation to trade union rule book for setting up new groups)

Questions and issues

- Recognition of limitations of self-organising and separate structures, from past experiences
- However, issues around lack of acknowledgement of specific interest affecting particular migrant workers
- Dual strategy of FAN has been to work both within the community when the activists 'hit bureaucracy' within the union and try to integrate into the union through existing power structures and using the network for training and support

Discussion 1 : different national TU strategies? (Connolly & alii)



Discussion 2 : a better integration of migrant workers within trade unions ?

- In both countries, emergence of recognized trade union leaders: through FAN in the UK and through the “sans papiers” movement in France.
- In both countries, setting up (linguistic) training for immigrant activists and reflection on their place in the trade union organization.
- Despite everything, the obstacles to integration remain strong in both cases: language barrier, lack of confidence and competition with national workers, assignment to responsibilities limited to the representation of one's own group.

Conclusion

- The centering of trade union action around the issue of undocumented workers reflects a universalist approach to the defense of employee rights which is specific to France.
- The issue of "undocumented" workers is not ignored in the UK, but it is subordinated to action targeting specific ethnic groups.
- Whether or not trade union action is focused on this most vulnerable segment of immigrant workers, the “undocumented”, appears to have little effect on the level of integration of immigrant workers into union structures.

Thank you for your attention !

