

January 2009 : account of the situation of undocumented migrants in Calais



On an official visit to Calais on the 27th of January the new Immigration Secretary Besson gave the same old refrain as his predecessors'. Subjects such as insecurity, the illegal practices of the refugee smugglers or the suffering of local people were used again to justify a total absurdity, the project to make the area 'impervious' to illegal immigrants. It was a useless visit because, in spite of the way the migrants are hounded, they keep on reaching England. In order to avoid systematic manhunts and more and more violent aggressions, they do not stay in the surroundings of Calais now but move to different places all along the coast between Roscoff and Holland.

Calais's complex situation started long before the Red Cross had to close down its camp for refugees in Sangatte. The first 'refugees' arrived from Poland in 1994. Then in 1997, there were about forty Czech Romanians who were rejected from England. Later, there was the series of imperialistic wars that the western nations waged in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. They forced thousands of people to leave their countries. After having gone a long way, many of them came up against the difficulty of crossing of the channel.

But these military conflicts are not the only reasons. In the space of fifteen years more than one hundred various nationalities came to the surroundings of Calais. All the regions they came from were not devastated by fights. But the problem of work and the international dimension of the labour market has also deeply influenced the process of immigration. That is why so many people have tried to reach England clandestinely. It is not so much because of the 'odd jobs' advertised there as it is often claimed, but for the fact that there are many sectors of the industry in the UK where legal conditions of hiring are close to those of illegal work.

Gradually, France, Britain, Belgium and Holland got themselves an incredible set of laws, technologies and police forces to defend their borders in spite of basic rights and international conventions protecting the refugees. Through the cooperation between nations and by using conventions, agreements and the international filing on migrants, European countries are helping these four countries to

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set up a machine of war aiming at the exiled people who are already weakened by their conditions of living and the hardships of their migration.

The security apparatus

In addition to that international cooperation, a powerful security apparatus is used to make the crossing of the border through the usual ways impossible. Calais and its surroundings are gradually turning into a combination of areas closed by walls, stockades and wire fences. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry got their own security service and the harbour is now enclosed by walls and electrified barbed-wire fences. Moreover, it has been equipped with an alarm system, fibre optic technology and heat-seeking cameras. In Coquelles, Eurotunnel has set up 280 cameras, infrared detectors as well as 40 km of barbed-wire fences around an area closely watched over by 360 security agents...

Also part of the border controls are done by private societies. The vehicles are scanned with military equipment belonging to the British army. They scan the inside of trailers with heartbeat and breath detectors. (...) So Calais offers a lucrative market for security companies. Its security budget amounts to 12 million euros per year.

But the systematic use of these controls has directly negative effects regarding the economic aspect : it slows down the transit of goods and passengers (10 million people per year) between France and England. And even if it is harder to cross the Channel, it is still possible to do it since the authorities cannot control or stop the thousands of lorries which pass through the border every day.

Out on the field

Currently, between 500 and 700 people are waiting their turn to cross the Channel. The struggle for survival is extremely difficult. Grouped into different nationalities, they hide themselves around the city, in the woods, by the dunes, in encampments made of plastic covers that they call "jungle". Others stay in squats in the city. They suffer from various health problems which are difficult to handle because they are only dealt with by volunteers of local associations. Moreover, the state constantly harasses them. Its goal is clear : make sure that nobody can see these men and women in the

city-centre and its surroundings. For this purpose, in Calais more than 500 policemen are said to deal currently with the action against undocumented migrants. Police interventions happen at any time. Sometimes they happen where meals are served by the associations and look like real roundups. Sometimes they happen at night, and the encampments can be completely destroyed. The use of violence is frequent : the personal belongings, the clothes are sometimes burnt or policemen urinate on them. There were times when the policemen marked the migrants' skins with ink, which painfully reminds of Nazi extermination camps.

The arrests always end up at the immigration

former communist mayor of Calais said : 'I recognize the work that has been done by Mr Sarkozy and Mr Blunkett, but it is a shame they have waited for so long...' Then when he saw that all the immigrants rejected by the British State arrived in the city, he changed his mind. While talking to representatives from the local associations who were asking for the setting up of a place with showers and toilets for the refugees, he told them : 'I regret that the cause of refugees has been led astray by idiots and I weigh my words... I am not in favour of the opening of such a place supported by the city.' (And you call that a communist !)

Since then the UMP party (right-wing) has been elected in Calais. The mayor Natacha Bouchart wants to clean the place in her particular fashion since she considers that the undocumented immigrants are 'responsible for constant damages' and 'put dirt everywhere they go'. If the former communist municipality always refused to meet the representatives of the local associations, Bouchart invites them at her table. She has created a 'council for immigrants' that she has at her disposal and of course immigrants are not invited. She has understood how to put these representatives to sleep just with words since they have been complaining for so long that they were not listened. The subsidies granted to the main two associations have increased and promises of financing toilets were evoked. And already some say it is an 'advance'...

Currently, you have to wait for several weeks, sometimes for several months before you can reach the beaches of England. So groups of immigrants go to settle elsewhere. Further into the land, about thirty or forty kilometers from the coast. The lorries can go there more quickly. Is Calais becoming less central ?

By La Mouette enragée, published in Courant alternatif, n°187, february 2009, and in the leaflet 'De Sangatte à Coquelles - Situation et interventions (1999-2004)'

NB : *Nomade* has done a few small changes and cut a few passages to make the original text shorter.

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detention centre in Coquelles where you can mostly find people who are likely to be deported. On border police premises, behind the detention centre, you can even find a branch of the county court of Boulogne-sur-Mer. But the protests against that way of making justice 'on a production line' did not change anything. In a few steps, you can go from your cell to the court room, from the courtroom to the charter plane.

Calais town hall and associations

Locally, former and current municipalities share the same desire to hide away the undocumented immigrants. When the camp for refugees closed down in Sangatte, at first the