From Revolution to Rights: The Politics of Immigrant Activism in France (1968-1983)

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English Guide to French Acronyms and Initialisms
(By order of appearance)

Trade Unions
CGT: General Work Confederation
CFDT: French Democratic Confederation of Labor
UNEF: National Student Union Federation

Political Organizations
ENA: North African Star
FLN: National Liberation Front
MTA: Arab Workers Movement
PCF: French Communist Party
MTLD: Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties
MNA: Algerian National Movement
SFIO: French Section of the Workers International, or The Socialist Party
MCFml: French Communist Movement (Marxist-Leninist)
PSU: Unified Socialist Party
CAPR: Pederastic Revolutionary Action Committee
FHAR: Homosexual Revolutionary Action Front
MLF: Women’s Liberation Movement
LC: Communist League
GP: Proletarian Left
MRAP: Movement Against Racism, Anti-Semitism and for Peace
CDVDTI: Committee for the Defense of Life and Rights of Immigrant Workers
Images

Figure 2: “Pour l’unité avec tous les travailleurs contre le racisme,” Mouvement des travailleurs arabes, Unknown date. Image retrieved from Génériques association online database Odysée. Accessed April 2013. Translated by author. “For our rights, our dignity. For unity with all workers against racism. With the Palestinian people.”
Introduction

In late May 1968, in the midst of a crippling general strike and national protest movement that was still growing across France, a poster appeared on the streets of Paris reading, “Workers, French, Immigrants, All United.”¹ Below this message the demand “Equal Work For Equal Pay” appeared in smaller font, written in French, Italian, Spanish, Greek, Portuguese, Croatian and Arabic. This poster, produced at the prestigious School of Fine Arts, then under student occupation, was one of the roughly 700 produced during the May-June protest movement that year.² “May ‘68”, as that movement is now commonly known, began as a protest among university students before rapidly escalating into a series of spontaneous work stoppages that eventually brought the nation to a standstill and political crisis.

This particular poster, while anchored in the theme of student-worker unity so characteristic of May ‘68, was also one of several to evoke specifically the situation of France’s large immigrant labor force—a growing group that, despite making up over 5% of France’s population,³ was effectively excluded from the national political and social arena. Non French-nationals were prohibited from voting in elections, forming state-recognized associations and serving in union leadership positions. On the one hand, therefore, the poster reflects a desire to overcome these boundaries, speaking to the interest in the lives of immigrants that was part of May ’68 and the intense period of political activism that ensued. But it also beckons, the utopian effervescence of its

¹“Travailleurs français immigrés tous unis. À travail égal, salaire égal…” Atelier populaire de l’ex-Ecole des beaux-arts, May 1968. See Images, Figure 1.
creators aside, larger questions about the political participation of France’s immigrant population during May and its aftermath.

The May-June social movement was effectively squelched in June 1968 after the nation’s trade unions, led by the General Work Confederation (CGT), agreed to end the strikes in an agreement with George Pompidou’s right-wing government. The following month, in snap legislative elections, Pompidou’s party coasted to its largest victory in the history of the then ten year old Fifth Republic, and in 1969, held on to win the presidential elections. It is thus tempting to view May ‘68, as the political philosopher and public intellectual Raymond Aron famously put it a month after the movement, as a “non-event.” Or perhaps to regard it, as Michael Seidman titled his more recent book on the events, as an “imaginary revolution.”

But while a specific social movement did whither away in June 1968, this paper rests on the premise that the politics and ideology of that movement—in addition to the counter-reactions it produced in French society—continued to have a profound impact over the following decade. While avoiding either romanticizing or disparaging the still hotly-debated events of May-June 1968, this paper adopts the framework of historians like Michelle Zancirini-Fournel, Daniel Gordon and others who refer to the “‘68 years” as a specific historical sequence of French political and social life. This paper considers that period to be one of heightened political militancy, increased contestation of hierarchy and social norms, a flourishing of new forms of political organization with a preference toward direct action, and, perhaps most importantly, as the starting point for new political

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4 Confédération Générale de Travail.
movements that sought to address historically marginalized groups—women, the LGBT community, immigrants.

The years immediately following 1968 were a period during which immigrants of varying national origins living in France drew on a new host of allies, gained autonomy as political actors in their own right, and mobilized on a range of issues—they called for better working and housing conditions, spearheaded initiatives to combat racism and discrimination, and launched campaigns to obtain a more stable legal status in France. In doing so, these immigrants relied on support networks and alliances built with a new political generation of French activists: one forged by opposing the Algerian War and emboldened by the revolutionary possibilities opened up by May 1968. While the different struggles waged by immigrant activists never coalesced into a sustained movement with coordinated national reach, this paper aims to analyze these various contestations as a whole. The most prominent autonomous immigrant organization that emerged during this period—the Arab Workers Movement—was also marked politically and ideologically by the post-68 wave of contestation. This paper will examine the origins and evolution of this wave of immigrant political activism, aim to better understand its dynamics by situating it in a historical sequence, and trace its fizzling out by the end of the 1970s. When a younger generation of activists organized a now well-known national march in 1983, the March for Equality and Against Racism, this previous sequence of immigrant activism had been forgotten by both the press and the participants of this march.⁶

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While French scholars have, on balance, been relatively slow to examine immigrant-led political movements in their nation, an increasing share of historians have devoted attention to the anti-colonial nationalist movements that gained a foothold in the French Metropole in the first half of the 20th century. There has been an array of scholarship on the origins and various incarnations of Algerian nationalism in Metropolitan France, from the North African Star (ENA)\(^7\) in the 1920s to the National Liberation Front (FLN)\(^8\) in the 1950s and 60s.\(^9\) There has also been, albeit to a lesser extent, research on the anti-colonial political activism of Vietnamese immigrants living in France during the Indochina War.\(^10\)

Some attention has been given to the forms of political action taken by immigrants living in post-colonial France.\(^11\) Of this body of research, most scholarship has focused on the so-called Beurs, the children of North African immigrants to France, who in contrast to their first-generation immigrant parents, typically grew up in metropolitan France, went to French schools, and held French citizenship.\(^12\) Interest in the Beurs spiked notably after the 1983 march, which made front-page news in nearly all

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\(^7\) Étoile Nord-Africaine.  
\(^8\) Front de Libération Nationale.  
\(^11\) By “post-colonial,” I refer to the period following the completion of decolonization. France’s possessions in Indochina became independent in 1954. Its possessions in sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa were fully independent by 1960. France was fully “post-colonial” after the Evian Accords put an end to the Algerian War in 1962.  
\(^12\) The phrase “Beur” comes from French slang for arabe. This form of slang, known as verlan, involves re-arranging words by reversing the order of their syllables. See Sylvie Durmelat, ‘Petite histoire du mot beur: ou comment prendre la parole quand on vous la prête’, French Cultural Studies 9 (1998): 191-207.
of the nation’s major newspapers. Little, however—with the exception of those who mobilized for the Algerian FLN—has been written about the politics of the parents of the Beurs. It would seem that this generation of immigrants, many of whom lived in the shantytowns surrounding Paris or Marseille, held jobs in France’s then-booming industrial economy, and grappled with an uncertain legal status, constituted a “silent generation.” As Saïd Bouamama noted in his reflection on the Marche des Beurs, “Many young people who participated in the 1983 march saw themselves as the first immigrant activists. They considered themselves as the first to speak up to refuse a situation and demand justice. The parents’ generation is perceived as having suffered in silence.”

This paper, on the contrary, aims to demonstrate that the “parents’ generation” was, in fact, politically active—and not only those from North Africa. In the aftermath of May 1968, immigrants of different nationalities—Portuguese, Algerians, Tunisians, Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans—began to mobilize around immigrant-specific issues in France and not only as foreign nationals in the name of issues that related to their countries of origin. Foreign workers played a significant role in the factory strikes of 1968 and the wave of strikes that ensued in the “68 years.” Immigrant activists launched campaigns against discrimination and poor housing conditions, and in response to restrictions on their visas and work permits, they went on hunger strikes in 1972 and 1973. Notably, workers of Arab origin also formed an autonomous organization, the Arab Workers’ Movement (MTA). This wave of activism, while it never fully coalesced into

13 Bouamama, 24. Translated by author. “De nombreux jeunes qui participent à la marche de 83 sont persuadés d’être les premiers militants issus de l’immigration. Ils se considèrent comme les premiers à prendre la parole pour refuser une situation et exiger justice. La génération des parents est perçue comme ayant souffert dans le silence.”
14 Mouvement des travailleurs arabes.
a centralized national movement, ultimately marked a major development in the history of immigration in France—and one that is unfortunately too often ignored.

Among those who subscribe to the notion of the “68 years,” there is no clear consensus on when this historical sequence came to a close. Various interpretations have attempted to use a range of different events as symbolic endpoints. Some consider the death of Pierre Overney in 1972 as an appropriate ending point. The funeral for this young Maoist activist, shot outside the gates of a Renault factory on the outskirts of Paris while distributing flyers to workers, brought tens of thousands to the streets of Paris, but failed to provoke the more substantial revolt some were anticipating.\(^{15}\) Jacques Rancière, a former pupil of Louis Althusser, the widely influential Marxist philosopher, seems to have considered sometime around 1974 as the vague fizzling out point.\(^{16}\) Others might consider the 1980 funeral of Jean-Paul Sartre, the philosopher and long-time public intellectual, himself on the streets of Paris in May ‘68, as an appropriate end.\(^{17}\) Phillippe Artières and Michelle Zancirini Fournel’s 800-page-plus volume, which considers the “1968 years” to begin with the end of the Algerian War in 1962, deems the period to end in 1981.\(^{18}\) In May of that year, the Socialist Party’s candidate captured the Presidency for the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic. While François Mitterand’s victory was a victory for the Left, it also signified the end of a more radical left imbued in the Marxist language of class struggle and revolutionary anti-capitalism. By this time, most


\(^{17}\) Kristin Ross, *May 68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 42. Ross refers to Sartre’s funeral as the last of the “exemplary gauchiste funeral rituals in the streets of Paris.”

prominent French intellectuals had abandoned the dominant Marxist tradition in favor of a more rights-based liberal approach to politics.19

I have chosen to extend my analysis up until 1983, to incorporate an analysis of the Marche des Beurs. On a basic level, it is appropriate to frame a study of immigrant political activism with two large public displays. This approach also allows for a closer examination of how immigrant political demands, once mostly grounded in the revolutionary class-based discourse of the ’68 years, were transformed into a rights-based approach with a different set of allies in French society.

This work does not argue in favor of any sort of positivist chronology that suggests a form of progressive continuity between the two political events, memorializing the passing of the torch from one generation of immigrants to their children. In fact, on the contrary, the history of immigrant political action from 1968 to 1983 is, on the whole, one of marginalization, of largely unsuccessful encounters between different political groups, and is, generally speaking, marked by a failure of the varying political struggles to achieve the different demands they sought. While there were a variety of different mostly micro-struggles, they never fully coalesced into one. There is also a major inter-generational gap in historical memory about immigrant political activism—a topic that this paper will address in its final chapter and conclusion. Lastly, it is critical to keep in mind that those immigrants who were politically active were a minority.

Nonetheless, there is value in accounting for these past actions, even if, in any final analysis, they were ultimately confined to the marginality of French politics. On a basic level, it is important to fill in a critical gap in the history of immigrant activism in

France. But there is also another important objective. In the introduction to their recent volume on immigrant activism in France, Ahmed Boubeker and Abdellali Hajjat offer a poignant explanation of their compilation of seemingly disparate, small-scale political struggles of immigrants in France—an approach which, they note, owes much to the German theorist Walter Benjamin’s long dialectical view of history. These words from Boubeker and Hajjat’s introduction captures the spirit of this paper as well, which in analyzing fragmented moments of revolt in a still roughly understood past, necessarily looks forward:

“...The history of the oppressed is a scattered history precisely because it registers itself in bursts, moments of revolt, lines of rupture … To find in current events the living trace of a forgotten past is the combat of the true inheritor who recognizes himself or herself in what happened long ago, not to commemorate it with tears or to draw misplaced vanity, but from fidelity to the hope of the memory of the vanquished, to give a chance again to what seemed lost without hope of return.”

As previously noted, the subjects of this study have received, on the whole, relatively little historical scholarship. The participation of immigrant workers and students in the May-June protest movement has been largely ignored, with Daniel Gordon providing the most complete research to date. In his foundational work on the subjects, Gordon also pinpoints 1968 as the starting point for the development of anti-racist politics in France, and traces its evolution up the 1983 Marche des Beurs. In many

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ways, this paper aims to contribute to that larger task of re-thinking the post-68 period as a critical moment in the history of immigration. While this work shares Gordon’s emphasis on ‘68 as a critical moment for the development of immigrant politics in France, it differs from Gordon’s publication in both the nature and scope of its argumentation. Less of a social history with an ample chronological view, this thesis attempts to more precisely emphasize the importance of leftist networks in fostering immigrant activism in the aftermath of 1968. Moreover, this work aims to more closely relate the MTA to its political and ideological roots in the 1968 movement, and has drawn on additional sources and political actions to bolster these perspectives. In addition to Gordon’s research on immigrant activism in France, Adbellali Hajjat has authored a series of articles on the Arab Workers Movement, and Rabah Aissaoui has done an excellent comparison of the MTA to the early 20th century Algerian nationalist organization, ENA. Laure Pitti has also done impressive work on the participation of foreign workers in the wave of workplace contestation that followed 1968. This paper, in addition to drawing on primary sources, relies to a degree on the prior work done by these researchers.

Chapter 1 begins with a general overview of France’s immigrant population in order to understand the subordinate position immigrants occupied in French society—in particular those former colonial subjects hailing from both North and sub-Saharan Africa.

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It also aims to illustrate the political exclusion that foreigners faced in France during the post-war period.

Chapter 2 focuses on the origins of a new political generation in France—the so-called *gauchistes* who were so pivotal in the 1968 movement and the various counter-hegemonic political contestations in France in the years that followed. It also charts the development of the May 1968 protest movement, examining immigrant participation in the strikes, and the ways in which French-born activists attempted to outreach to this foreign population. It aims to demonstrate one of the most crucial legacies of the 1968 movement—the breakdown of the French Communist Party (PCF)’s longstanding hegemony over the political Left. May ’68 ultimately opened up political and ideological space for new political demands to be heard, including those of immigrants.

Chapter 3 analyzes the wave of immigrant political contestation that took place in the aftermath of 1968. By relying on networks with *gauchiste* groups and new French-born sympathizers, immigrants mobilized on a variety of issues specific to the immigrant condition: poor housing conditions, poor working conditions, discrimination and racism, and their precarious legal status.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Arab Workers Movement, the first autonomous post-colonial immigrant organization in French history. It analyzes the double-edged

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24 “Leftist,” which, in the French context, referred to someone who subscribed to one of a variety of different revolutionary political ideologies (anarchism, Trotskyism, Maoism, situationism) that challenged the hegemony of the French Communist Party on the political Left. The word “leftist” first appeared in Lenin’s 1920 work *Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*, which criticized communist parties for engaging in what he saw as counterproductive and unnecessarily radical tactics. Starting in 1968, the French Communist Party used the word *gauchiste* to deride revolutionaries and organizations that rejected the party line, but the label was often embraced by those activists.

25 *Parti communiste français.*

26 Abdellali Hajjat and Rabah Aissaoui have both previously made this claim.
ideology of the MTA, which was grounded in both an Arab identity and a trans-national worker identity. It illustrates the ways in which the emancipatory politics of ’68 echoed through the MTA’s ideology and its practice. In particular, the chapter examines the MTA’s “general strike” in 1973, which called on French nationals and non-French nationals to abstain from work in order to protest a wave of racially motivated violence against Arabs.

Chapter 5 focuses on the impact of the post-68 wave of contestation in French society, and the increasing problematization and politicization of immigration. The institutions of the political mainstream—on balance, previously unconcerned with the issue of immigration—began addressing immigrant concerns. By the end of the 1970s, immigration had become a major national political issue, but the politics of immigrant activism had shifted dramatically. The vast majority of the gauchiste groups faded into irrelevance or disbanded. Meanwhile, intellectuals and the political parties of the Left were abandoning the language of class struggle. Many of the former radicals active in May ‘68 began to, as Jacques Rancière puts it, “read all of revolutionary history as the appetite for the power of master thinkers.”

The 1983 Marche des Beurs was thus born in a radically transformed national political context, with a generation of politically active immigrants unable to transmit their experiences and memories to the next. The gauchistes, who had been so active in ’68 and the years that followed, were replaced by a new set of more moderate, liberal French sympathizers.

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Chapter 1: The Immigrant Condition in Post-War France

In 1968, France was at the peak of what has come to be known as Les Trente Glorieuses,\textsuperscript{28} the roughly thirty-year period of economic growth that followed World War II and tapered off after the 1973 economic crisis. Coined by French demographer Jean Fourastié, the phrase refers to a period of high productivity, rising wages for workers, stable economic growth, and the growth of an effective redistributive social safety net.\textsuperscript{29} France was, of course, not alone in reaping the benefits of capitalism’s post-war spike and managing a relatively shared prosperity. In the Anglophone world, this period is often known, in perhaps slightly less grandiose terms, as the “post-war boom.”

The post-war period in France was also an era marked by a substantial increase in immigration, as the state sought to recruit more labor for the expanding economy while addressing a national demographic gap. In May 1945, President Charles de Gaulle, then head of the provisional post-war government, had declared that the “lack of men” and the weakness of French birth rates were the “profound cause of our misfortunes.”\textsuperscript{30} These twin pressures, combined with the process of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, turned France into a booming destination for immigrant workers. In 1946, there were about 1,744,000 foreigners living in France, making up 4.4% of the total population.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{28} Literally translated as “The Glorious Thirty.” A reference to Les Trois Glorieuses, “the glorious three,” the three-day uprising against the reign of Charles X in 1830.
\textsuperscript{30} Patrick Weil, La France et ses étrangers (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 69.
1968, that figure had spiked to roughly 2,664,000, or 5.3% of the total population. It would continue to grow in the following years, reaching 6.8% by 1982.\(^{32}\)

In the immediacy of liberation, the state codified an official immigration policy, but it ultimately remained very limited in practice. In November 1945, the provisional government created the National Office of Immigration (ONI)\(^{33}\), charged with overseeing the recruitment of immigrants to France. That 1945 ordinance specified three types of visas: one-year, three-year, or ten-year.\(^{34}\) However, the officially sanctioned process—which required companies wishing to recruit foreign labor to notify the ONI, which would then oversee recruitment arrangements in the country of departure—was systematically sidestepped by both employers and immigrant workers. The vast majority of immigrants to France arrived without formal approval from the ONI, and regularized their situation after finding employment and obtaining the necessary residency permits. As a result of the staggering demand for labor in France’s booming economy, the government tacitly endorsed this system.\(^{35}\)

Reaching France and then finding employment was relatively easy in this context—however confusing or alienating life in France ultimately may have been. As a migrant from Tunisia recounted of his experience: “One day I heard people talking about France: there’s more work there than one needs. As soon as you get off the boat, they hire

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\(^{32}\) “Recensements de la population de 1962 à 1999: Tableau rétrospectif départemental - Population totale par nationalité,” *Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques.*

\(^{33}\) *Office nationale de l’immigration.*

\(^{34}\) Ordinance 45-268 of November 2, 1945 relative to the conditions of entry and stay of foreigners in France.

you to work. People make a lot of money.”³⁶ After traveling to Marseille on a boat, this anonymous immigrant boarded a train for Paris, where he met up with his brother. Shortly thereafter, he obtained a 10-year visa at the police prefecture, and eight days later, the immigrant eventually found employment with other North Africans at a construction site in the suburbs of Paris—before ultimately opting for a job at a nearby factory about a month later.

Indeed, most of the companies recruiting immigrant workers were based in the steadily growing construction and metallurgy industries. By 1972, those respective industries employed 27% and 15% of the immigrant labor force.³⁷ In a corresponding development, the majority of the foreign workers who arrived in France in the 1950s and 60s filled jobs with the lowest-pay grades. In the French employment classification system, the two lowest-paid categories, often filled by foreign workers, were known formally as “laborer” (manoeuvre) and, in the irony of Fordist jargon, “specialized worker” (ouvrier spécialisé, or more commonly, OS). Moreover, as the sociologist of immigration Abdelmalek Sayad notes, the term OS, which was strictly speaking a technical definition, eventually became a social one—deeply intertwined with the condition of the immigrant worker in France.³⁸ The OS workers, as this paper will show, played an instrumental role in the 1968 strikes and in the strikes that continued well into the 1970s.

Indeed, at this time, immigrant identity was deeply connected to worker identity. Providing labor was the primary function of immigrants; it was, by and large, how they were identified by French society and how they identified themselves. As a 28-year old male immigrant from Algeria put it, “A foreigner, an immigrant is meant to be working; if an immigrant isn’t working, why not? What use is he? What is he doing here?”39 Tellingly, much of the literature from this period often refers to “immigrant workers” or “foreign workers.” It was not until the 1980s, long after the post-war boom had subsided and unemployment had become a fixture of the French economy, that the marker “worker” was eventually detached from “immigrant.”

While the politics of immigration in France are ultimately inseparable from the nation’s colonial past, and specifically, the case of Algeria, it is important to note that during the immediate post-war period, non-Europeans did not yet make up a majority of the foreign population. This point was not reached until 1982.40 In 1968, by contrast, the largest foreign population living in metropolitan France hailed from Spain (about 600,000), followed by Italy (565,000). Algerians, meanwhile, made up roughly 473,000, Portuguese almost 300,000, and Moroccans and Tunisians made up smaller portions each under 100,000.41

At the same time, though, the trend of increased immigration from outside of Europe, and particularly North Africa, had clearly established itself, with immigration from Europe on the decline. Among the countries of the Maghreb, the largest emigration to Metropolitan France came from Algeria, itself a part of the French Republic until

39 Sayad, La double absence, 77. Translated by author. “Un étranger, un immigré, c’est fait pour travailler; un immigré qui travaille pas c’est pourquoi? A quoi ça sert? Qu’est-ce qu’il fout ici?”
40 Hargreaves, Immigration In Post-War France, 4.
1962. The reasons for this migration were economic in nature, linked to Algeria’s underdevelopment as a colonial holding, but the process was facilitated by easy access between both regions. In 1946, a French statute allowed the so-called “Muslim” inhabitants of Algeria—that is, the territory’s non-European population—to move freely between the colony and the French Metropole. In 1947, the conditional attribution of French citizenship to the non-European population of Algeria—which had been deprived of that right ever since the French conquest of 1830—also served to facilitate and boost Algerian emigration to France. When Algeria was granted independence in 1962 after a grueling eight-year war with France, the Evian Accords maintained free access between both countries. Meanwhile, Morocco and Tunisia, which both obtained independence from France in 1956, also benefited from similar agreements with France in 1963.\(^4^2\)

It is important to stress that not all foreign workers were alike in terms of working and living conditions. A glance at employment statistics from 1968 reveals that North Africans and sub-Saharan Africans—that is, by and large, those immigrants hailing from France’s former colonies—took up more low-paying positions than most of their European counterparts. While 35% of Italians and 22% of Spaniards were classified as *ouvriers professionels*—performing some kind of skilled labor—only 8.5% of Tunisian workers held such positions, and an even smaller proportion of the Algerian population did. The exception to this general trend were the Portuguese, who worked as OS or *manoeuvres* at rates similar to immigrants from North Africa.\(^4^3\)

When immigrants arrived in France, the living conditions for many were often far from optimal. Most emblematic of this era were the infamous *bidonvilles*, the dilapidated


shantytowns that sprung up around a handful of large urban areas to house the influx of immigrant workers. In 1962, one out of every four migrants who eschewed the formal ONI process ended up in a shanty town. By 1965, that figure was up to one out of every two.\footnote{Yvan Gastaut, “Les bidonvilles: lieux d’exclusion et de marginalité en France durant les trente glorieuses,” Cahiers de la Méditerranée 69 (2004), accessed December 9, 2012, \url{http://edlm.revues.org/829?lang=en}.} The shantytowns, which housed mostly Portuguese and North African workers, were effectively outside the administrative purview of the state, and marked by a general level of squalor. Remarks from the former adjunct mayor of Champigny-sur-Marne, site of the largest shantytown in France, capture the state’s laissez-faire attitude during this period: “We were prepared to have them work, but we weren’t prepared to house them. And for housing, we told them very simply that there was empty land nearby and that they sort themselves out.”\footnote{“Les bidonvilles de Champigny-sur-Marne,” YouTube video, 5:12, posted by DemainTV, September 7, 2009. Translated by author. “On avait prévu de les faire travailler, mais on n’avait pas prévu de les loger. Et le logement, on leur disait tout simplement qu’il y avait un terrain vague à coté et qu’ils se débrouillent.”}

According to a 1966 government study, three regions accounted for nearly all of the 255 shantytowns in France—Paris and the surrounding area (62%), the southern region of Provence, which included the city of Marseille (19%) and the mining region of the North (8%). 75,000 people in total lived in shantytowns, with a few densely-populated locations sticking out: the Portuguese-majority Champigny-sur-Marne (15,000), the largely Algerian-inhabited Nanterre (10,000) in the outskirts of Paris, and the shantytown in the Mediterranean port city of Marseille (8,000).\footnote{Gastaut, “Les bidonvilles: lieux d’exclusion et de marginalité en France durant les trente glorieuses.”}

A good descriptive window into daily life in the shantytowns comes from the genre of \textit{Beur} literature, memoirs written by the children of first-generation North
African immigrants. In *Vivre au Paradis*, the Algerian writer Brahim Benaïcha describes, in 1960, arriving to the Nanterre shantytown with his family in order to move in with his father:

“In front of us were strange stilted homes. They had no particular form. If, in the city, the houses seemed to respect some order, here it’s disorder. We stood there, mouths gaping open. What could this be? There were shacks, wet to the nails in water and mud. Chimneys billowed smoke like a horrible cry for help. With a hesitant step, we moved into a thin alley. There were planks here and there to walk without dirtying one’s shoes. But these planks were just an illusion. Once you put your foot on them, it would disappear into the mud.”

Another smaller segment of the immigrant population lived in the state-run hostels, initially set up by the SONACOTRA association in 1956 as an alternative to the shantytowns and to house the growing Algerian immigrant population in the context of the Algerian War. The Sonacotra hostels constituted the French state’s first attempt to address the housing situation of post-war immigrants. The population of immigrants living in these hostels, largely Algerians and soon other non-Europeans, grew slowly after a 1964 law decreed the gradual elimination of the shantytowns.

The political participation of immigrants in French society was limited by three key legal barriers. Non-French citizens could not vote in elections—a barrier that still

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48 Société nationale de construction de logements pour les travailleurs algériens or the National Society of Housing Construction for Algerian Workers.

exists to this day. On a practical level, this meant that issues of concern for immigrants—for instance, the housing crisis—did not at this time seriously factor into the electoral programs of the main political parties. Secondly, foreigners could not form any state-recognized associations or head any such associations. And lastly, while foreigners were allowed to vote in trade union elections at their workplaces, they could not serve any leadership positions within the unions, such as shop stewards at their places of employment.

The latter is deeply significant, for, as previously noted, so long as immigrants were living in France, they both were defined as and identified themselves as workers. And yet, they were, objectively speaking, barred from taking part in the most basic unit of workplace organization in the same fashion as their French counterparts. Importantly though, the divide between immigrant workers and the trade unions extended beyond mere legal limits to participation in the union structure.

In general, immigration was an object of discomfort for the trade unions—the growing foreign population was regarded as a malleable labor force that helped drive down the wages of French workers in the interests of employers. In this context, trade unions often bargained in favor of maintaining wage differentials between skilled and unskilled workers, thus downplaying the basic economic interests of many of the lower-paid immigrant workers. It is also important to note that the activity of labor unions was confined largely to bargaining over wages, and given the practice of maintaining differentials between low-paid and high-paid workers, it is unsurprising that some

52 Gordon, *Immigrants & Intellectuals*, 43-44.
immigrant workers did not see trade unions as working in their interests. By 1968, therefore, the unionization rate for French workers was roughly three to four times more than the rate among foreign workers.\textsuperscript{53}

As an anonymous 38-year old Algerian OS remarked, “Arabs don’t join because the French don’t care, they don’t consult Arabs. So the Arab says, better that I leave! In any case, whether they stand up or not, whether they complain or not, it’s exactly the same.”\textsuperscript{54} Whether or not his particular frustrations were necessarily representative of the immigrant population at large, his bitter criticism of the union bureaucracy’s complicity with French racism echoes the critiques of a newly radicalizing sector of the immigrant population that would become politically active in the aftermath of 1968.

Beyond the tenuous relationship between immigrants and the trade unions, some immigrant workers also sensed a more general level of exclusion from French workers, as other testimonies from this era reveal. When asked by a TV crew in 1969 if he had any French friends at his job, a Portuguese worker in the automobile industry responded with nervous laughter:

“I have friends. I can’t say the contrary. But there are also French who don’t understand our problems. Even at Renault. In front of us, they talk to us smiling, but then they talk a little behind our back ...They don’t understand our problems that well. We come here because there’s poverty back home. We have to come to France to eat.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{53} Bernard Granotier, \textit{Les travailleurs immigrés en France} (Paris: François Maspero, 1970) 250-251. In 1970, Granotier estimated the unionization rate among French workers to be between 20 to 25 percent, while that of immigrant workers to be between 5 and 8 percent.

\textsuperscript{54} Minces, \textit{Les travailleurs étrangers en France}, 351. Translated by author. “Les Arabes n’y adhèrent pas, parce que les Français s’en foutent, ils ne conseillent pas les Arabes. Alors l’Arabe se dit: il vaut mieux que je parte! De toute façon, qu’ils réclament ou pas, qu’ils se plaignent ou non, c’est exactement pareil.”

In addition to these legal and social factors that encouraged the political exclusion of immigrants in France, it is also important to keep in mind the persistence of what Abdelmalek Sayad termed the “myth of return”—the notion that the emigrant is planning on staying in France only temporarily, and that after achieving some basic monetary objectives, will return to his or her country of origin at a hypothetical future date. This notion affected both the scope and the kinds of political involvement of foreigners living in France. In other words, the politics that initially took root among foreigners living in France remained anchored in the nationalist anti-colonial movements. As previously mentioned, there was a movement among Vietnamese nationals in the 1950s to support their nation’s burgeoning independence movement. There was also, more prominently, a substantial presence of the Algerian nationalist movement—a case of particular relevance because of its sheer magnitude and its lasting effects on French political life.

Algerian nationalism has deep origins in Metropolitan France. Led by Messali Hadj, the pro-independence North African Star was formed in 1926 by Algerian workers living in the mining towns of the North and in Paris. After World War II, the Hadj-led Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (MTLD) became the most prominent Algerian nationalist organization, with a large network of supporters in France. According to the FLN member-turned-historian Mohamed Harbi, 7,000 of the 20,000 MTLD’s members in the early 1950s lived in France. When the newly-created FLN, rival of the former MTLD, which had split to form the National Algerian

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*parlent un peu contre nous... On ne comprend pas bien notre [sic] problèmes. Nous venons ici parce qu’il y a la misère chez nous. Nous sommes obligés à venir ici en France pour manger."

57 *Mouvement pour le triomphe des libertés démocratiques.*
Movement (MNA)—began its armed insurrection in Algeria in 1954, it was very much a marginal organization in both Algeria and Metropolitan France.

Nevertheless the FLN gained support among Algerians living in both Algeria and Metropolitan France as the war continued. While the armed independence movement remained confined to the Maghreb, a peaceful pro-independence movement took hold in the Metropole. In 1957, the National Liberation Front called for an eight-day strike in France, which was widely supported by the Algerian population. Meanwhile, to help support the war effort, thousands of Algerians living in France helped raise funds for the FLN. Moreover, thousands of Algerians had also participated in the demonstrations of October 17, 1961 and February 1962—both marked by major police repression, and together included the deaths of hundreds of demonstrators.

The pro-FLN movement was significant because, for one, it marked the first political engagement of a significant chunk of the immigrant population in France, even if those involved were mobilizing primarily as Algerian nationals, and not specifically as “immigrants” or in the name of issues facing much of the immigration population. The FLN’s independence struggle was to remain an important point of reference for politically engaged North Africans living in France—not only those Algerians who were actually involved. Indeed, the struggle for Algerian independence was later cited by new immigrant activists who became politically active in 1968 and its aftermath.

The pro-FLN movement in France is also significant because it marked the first major interaction in the post-war era between a section of the immigrant population and the French left—then dominated almost entirely by the French Communist Party. The

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59 *Mouvement national algérien.*
experience of protesting the French government’s war in Algeria was a foundational experience for a new generation of French activists.61 As the following chapter will show, this experience introduced many French activists to the repression of the French state, led to a newfound interest in the plight of the “Third World,” and served to cement disillusion with the Communist Party for not opposing the war effort strongly enough. In short, it was a major political coming of age for many of the so-called gauchistes, the radical leftists so present in May 68 and in the new political movements that followed.

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Chapter 2: Encounters and Aspirations in May ’68

A New Political Generation

There is, of course, no one central figure to May 1968: the protagonists of the event were the millions of workers on strike, the young radicals that took to the streets for daily demonstrations, the leaders of the Communist Party that sought to capitalize on the events for the party’s political advantage, and the De Gaulle government that sought desperately to put an end to the crisis. But the media, in 1968 and later, have often honed in on Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the anarchist-leaning student leader known as “Danny the Red.” This is less a reflection of his actual role in the events then it is an acknowledgement that the German-born Cohn-Bendit, the exuberant red-haired revolutionary, incarnated the emergence of a new political force in France. Commonly referred to as gauchisme, or “leftism,” this force was as hostile to the French Communist Party as it was to the government it sought to overthrow.

The gauchiste groups erupted onto the French political scene in 1968—present at nearly all the demonstrations with their supporters—and would continue to shape the myriad political movements that continued after May. Although these Maoist, Trotskyist and anarchist groups became more visible in May after gaining new sympathizers and helping to encourage many of the demonstrations, most of them had actually been formed in the early 1960s. In contrast to the Moscow-allied French Communist Party, whose activity was primarily focused on the national electoral arena and accepted the basic legitimacy of the French state, the non-electoral gauchistes were staunchly anti-Soviet and had international revolution on their minds.

While the *gauchiste* groups had different political traditions and analyses, there are some key points of convergence. Many of the groups’ founding members had come of age politically during their participation in the movement opposing the Algerian War. The experience of witnessing the dominant parties of the left—notably, the supposedly anti-imperialist Communist Party—fail to adequately oppose the war had served to radicalize a generation of young activists. So too had the experience of protesting the war in Metropolitan France, which was marked by a series of repressive police responses. These experiences had provoked many to form and join a number of smaller alternative groups to the left of the PCF. As Cornelius Castoriadis—himself a member of the Marxist anti-Stalinist group *Socialisme et barbarie*—remarked in 1963, “Algeria was the occasion, the catalyst for an opposition in search of itself, becoming more and more conscious of itself.”

Among these radical leftists, the French Communist Party, like the Soviet Union, was regarded as having long abandoned its founding mission of revolution in favor of reformism; the PCF had become “bureaucratic” (the Trotskyist term) or “revisionist” (the

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64 The Socialist Party (known by its acronym SFIO) staunchly supported the war effort, with the party’s general secretary Guy Mollet serving as prime minister and overseeing the French government’s attempts to squelch the FLN insurrection. The Communist Party, nominally anti-imperialist, wavered repeatedly on the question of Algeria. In 1956, its members voted in favor of the “special powers” bill that gave the Mollet government emergency powers to “re-establish order” in French Algeria. However, the PCF later organized protests against the Algerian War.

65 Ross, *May 68 and its Afterlives*, 39-48. On October 17, 1961, a pro-FLN demonstration in Paris was attacked by police forces, resulting in the deaths of over 100 Algerians. On February 8, 1962, police forces killed 9 French demonstrators at the Charonne metro station.

Maoist term). In both cases, there was a sense that the PCF had been corrupted by its own electoral aspirations and was too closely tied to the French state.

The Maoist groups, and Maoist-influenced activists, in particular, saw the French state as being founded on colonialism and drew attention to French and Western imperialism. Drawing inspiration from Maoist China—less so from the actual policies than what they interpreted as the mass revolutionary fervor and challenge to Party hegemony represented by the Cultural Revolution—these activists sought to unite French workers to what they saw as a growing worldwide revolutionary movement emanating from the Third World. The manifesto issued from the founding Congress of the Marxist-Leninist French Communist Movement (MCFml) in 1966 noted that the movement opposing the war in Vietnam was vital to the revolutionary struggle in France for it was the “best means to accentuate the contradictions of imperialism and to demonstrate a practical solidarity to the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America.” Moreover, it noted, “this is the reason why the French proletariat associates its unanimous cry with that of the peoples of the world: ‘Yankees assassins’ ‘US Go Home.’” However politically unrealistic or naïve that perspective may have been, especially given the weakness of the anti-Vietnam war movement in France, it is clear that these activists saw their struggle as part of a larger global one.

Ahead of that same 1966 Congress, a Maoist paper published an analysis of the class structure in France, criticizing ”a certain chauvinism in some proletarian circles in

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68 Kessel, 193.
France” in response to the growing number of immigrant workers. Among these French workers, there was a “misrecognition of the mass problems faced by our North African, Spanish Portuguese and Italian comrades.”70 The French working class was being led astray by a Communist Party and union movement that was far too embedded in the state apparatus. French workers needed to be radicalized and see immigrant workers as their allies, not as competitors driving down their wages. Ultimately, then, the class struggle in France needed to be connected to the ongoing revolutionary struggles and national liberation movements of the Third World.

For all of this talk though, the Maoists ultimately had very little contact with the foreign population hailing from the Third World in France—and for that matter, most workers in France before 1968. This is parodied in Jean-Luc Godard’s 1967 experimental film La Chinoise, which documents a group of mostly middle class French youth who form a revolutionary cell. Most of the group’s time is spent in a room plastered with Maoist propaganda, populated by Mao’s Little Red Books, where members read and give each other lessons on China, Vietnam and Marxist theory.71 Some Maoists, known as the établis or the “established” took up jobs in the factories, as documented by Robert Linhart’s L’Établi. In this memoir, the radicalized middle-class philosophy student recounts finding employment working alongside many immigrants at a Citroën factory, where he found quickly the class solidarity was lacking, and his political propaganda had a very limited audience.72

70 “Contribution à l’analyse des classes en France” from L’Humanité nouvelle, n. 18, May 1966, in Kessel, 167. Translated by author. “méconnaissance des problèmes de masse qui se posent pour nos camarades nord-africains, espagnols ou portugais, voire italiens.”
71 La Chinoise, dir. by Jean-Luc Godard (1967; Koch Entertainment; 2008 dvd).
However, where all of these groups—Maoists, Trotskyists, anarchists and others—did have more of an established presence was at universities. It is no surprise that the May-June movement ultimately began on a college campus. And when the early demonstrations picked up steam in Paris’s Latin Quarter, these small bands of revolutionaries were joined by thousands of other mostly young sympathizers and allies. These two groups, one politicized during the Algerian War, the other in May ‘68, ultimately composed what Daniel Bertaux, Danièle Linhart (Robert Linhart’s daughter) and Beatrix Le Wita have labeled the “generation of ’68.” These activists would remain politically active on a number of fronts in the years that followed. They would also, in contrast to the Communist Party, extend their wide-ranging critiques of oppression to different areas of French society, encompassing the plight of immigrants.

Before delving into the ways in which immigrant political demands were articulated in May, and how this generation of demonstrators outreached to immigrants during the movement, it is important to briefly outline the events of May themselves.

**Immigrant Workers On Strike & The May-June Movement**

In March 1968, a group of students at the University of Nanterre, miles from the eponymous shantytown, occupied a building on campus in order to protest the Vietnam War. After a series of increasingly confrontational protests on campus led by the March 22 Movement and its spokesperson Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the administration decided to shut down the university on May 2. Writing in the Communist Party’s organ *L’Humanité* the following day, the PCF’s George Marchais lambasted the “pseudo-revolutionaries” at

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Nanterre who needed to be “unmasked” for “objectively serving the interests of Gaullist power and great capitalist monopolies.”

The events at Nanterre triggered a protest the following day at the Sorbonne, the historic university located in the Latin Quarter of Paris. As several hundred students assembled in the university’s courtyard, calling for an indefinite occupation, a large police force moved in to evacuate the gathering and arrested hundreds of participants. Courses at the Sorbonne were subsequently cancelled indefinitely. These events triggered the main national student union, the National Student Union Federation (UNEF), to call for a strike, which was then followed by a few thousand students. After several nights of demonstrations, all centered in Paris and mostly in the Latin Quarter, the Ministry of Education announced its intentions to keep the Sorbonne closed. That night, thousands took to the streets in the Latin Quarter, facing off against riot police in several hours of violent street clashes that became known as the “Night of the Barricades.” Echoing the practices of Parisian revolutionaries from 1830, 1848 and 1871, many of the demonstrators tore up cobblestones from the streets to build makeshift barricades or to heave at the police.

In response to the police response that night, hundreds of students re-occupied the Sorbonne. Meanwhile, in solidarity against the police response, France’s trade unions, including the CGT and CFDT, mobilized for a one-day general strike on May 13. This strike brought roughly one million out to the streets of Paris. While the action was intended to be a finite one-day strike, a number of factories across France remained on strike. Over the course of the following week, a wave of strikes and factory occupations

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75 *L’Union Nationale des Étudiants de la France.*
spread across the nation. The nation’s largest factories, many of which were concentrated in the automobile industry, were all affected. Important for symbolic reasons, the 30,000-strong Renault factory in the Parisian suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt, the “fortress” of the French working class, was occupied by its workers, with red flags flying above it.\footnote{The physically imposing factory, which sat on the Ile Seguin in the middle of the Seine, was the largest in France at the time. The plant symbolized both the productivity of the French automobile industry and the political power of the nation’s trade union movement.}

By May 21, ten million people, over 20% of the nation, were on strike.

By this point, the student revolt had clearly ballooned into a national political crisis. On May 25, the government began talks with trade union leaders, reaching a settlement in the so-called Grenelle Accords—an agreement that boosted the national minimum wage in an exchange for an end to the strikes. However, the deal was not immediately heeded by the millions of workers who remained on strike. At this moment, deposing the de Gaulle government seemed a realistic possibility. On May 27, a crowd of over 30,000 people, which included leaders from the relatively small Unified Socialist Party (PSU)\footnote{Parti socialiste uniﬁé.} and other gauchiste supporters, gathered in a stadium in Paris to discuss the possibility of a left-wing government taking power. Meanwhile, President de Gaulle—without the knowledge of his own Prime Minister Georges Pompidou—fled to French military headquarters in Germany in order to shore up military support for a crackdown if necessary.

After returning from Baden-Baden, de Gaulle delivered a sternly worded speech on May 30 announcing his intentions to remain in office, calling for the nation to return to work, and, in accordance with his constitutional authority, the dissolution of the National Assembly. The following day, elections were announced, to be held in June. On
May 31, over a hundred thousand de Gaulle supporters took to the Champs-Elysées with French flags, singing the Marseillaise. The strikes and factory occupations largely dissipated over the following week, with a few notable exceptions holding out until late June.

Later in June, the Interior Ministry banned eleven left-wing groups, including the March 22 movement and an array of Maoist and Trotskyist groups. About a week later, police stormed the emblematic occupations at the Sorbonne and the Odéon Theatre. And on June 27, the first round of legislative elections took place, with the right winning its largest majority in the history of the Fifth Republic.\(^\text{78}\)

The settlement of the Grenelle Accords, which was eventually passed in legislative form in December 1969, did not include any benefits for immigrant workers. In fact, immigrant-specific issues do not even appear to be given much attention at all in the negotiations.\(^\text{79}\) Despite this, evidence suggests that the participation of foreign workers, like French workers, in the wave of strikes and factory occupations was substantial.\(^\text{80}\) There were also a handful of cases in which immigrant workers advanced their own concerns as part of the various lists of demands formulated by striking workers at different workplaces.

Alain Geismar and Serge July, future co-founders of the now mainstream daily newspaper *Libération* and both Maoists at the time, argued in 1969 that immigrant

\(^{78}\) The descriptions of these events are a part of any detailed account of the movement. In particular, the author relied on the detailed timeline provided in “Beauty Is In The Street: A Visual Record of the Paris Uprising” edited by Johan Kugelberg with Philippe Vermès, (London: Four Corners Books, 2011), 77-81.

\(^{79}\) Gordon, 92.

\(^{80}\) See Gordon, *Immigrants & Intellectuals*, 56-88, for a more detailed account of immigrant participation in the movement. I have chosen to limit my analysis toward a number of key instances in which immigrant workers articulated their “specific” issues.
workers initiated the strike at the Citroen factory in the Parisian neighborhood of Javel.\textsuperscript{81} This is likely an exaggeration, but it is clear that immigrant workers participated heavily once the strike took hold after May 20.\textsuperscript{82} Three days after the strike began at Javel, a group of workers from a different Citroen factory in nearby Choisy, writing in the Maoist newspaper \textit{La Cause du Peuple}, noted how striking workers had included a call for a permanent work permit as part of their demands: “[Immigrant workers] are in solidarity with the struggle. They expressed themselves like us on the posters that we stuck to the walls of our factory. The walls of Citroën are covered with large panels. Everyone, Arab, Spanish, Portuguese, Yugoslavs, Vietnamese and French, explained themselves freely on the demands.”\textsuperscript{83}

Meanwhile, at the Renault factory in Boulogne-Billancourt, a group of immigrant workers designed a platform that went above and beyond the CGT leadership’s demands. The immigrant list of demands, which was composed on or around May 25, reflects the range of concerns facing foreign workers: an end to discrimination in hiring and promotion, an end to restrictions on serving leadership positions in unions, better housing conditions, the creation of one across-the-board work permit, the attribution of work permits on the site of employment, and a major revamping of the government program

\textsuperscript{82} Gordon, \textit{Immigrants & Intellectuals}, 58. Geismar and July offer little evidence for their claim, while Gordon cites a number of different sources.
\textsuperscript{83} “Citroën est occupé! Le drapeau rouge flotte!” \textit{La cause du peuple}, 23 May 1968, 4. Translated by author. “Eux aussi sont solidaires dans la lutte. Ils se sont exprimé [sic] comme nous sur les affiches que nous avons collées sur les murs de notre usine. Les murs de Citroën sont recouverts de grands panneaux. Tout le monde, arabes, espagnols, portugais, yugoslaves, vietnamiens et français, s’est expliqué librement sur les revendications.”
that funded the maintenance of hostels.\textsuperscript{84} Ultimately, none of these demands were satisfied. The settlement the CGT leadership put up for vote in June and that was eventually accepted ignored all of these issues.\textsuperscript{85} Meanwhile, at the Renault factory in the Norman city of Cléon, which was first occupied on May 13, workers made four key demands—one of which was clearly indicative of the 400 immigrant workers in the factory: the transformation of provisional work contracts into permanent contracts.\textsuperscript{86}

Despite the participation of many immigrant workers in the strikes, other foreigners hesitated to take part in the demonstrations. This was largely due to the fact that as the movement grew, the French government took to simply deporting foreigners suspected of being involved. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, for instance, was famously arrested and deported on May 22. And he was not alone.

In October 1968, the general secretary for the police to the Interior Ministry noted that between May 24 and August 12, 246 foreigners had been deported for “having been mixed with the events that troubled public order in May and June in Paris and outside.” Of those deported, a disproportionate amount was Algerian.\textsuperscript{87} Another figure from the Interior Ministry shows that out of 2974 people arrested over the course of the events, 481 were foreign. That is, while foreigners made up one-nineteenth of the French population, they made up one-sixth of those arrested—\textsuperscript{88}which suggests that police were specifically on the lookout for foreign-looking demonstrators. The very real threat of arrest and subsequent deportation explains the deeply ironic note that appeared at the

\textsuperscript{85} “Liste des revendications satisfaites à la Régie… ,” \textit{Action}, 18 June 1968, 3.
\textsuperscript{86} “Cléon: Tout y a commencé,” \textit{Tribune socialiste}, 10 May 1968, 15.
\textsuperscript{87} Vigna, “Les ouvriers immigrés dans les grèves de mai-juin 68,” 93.
\textsuperscript{88} Gordon, \textit{Immigrants & Intellectuals}, 80.
bottom of a poster calling for a demonstration demanding an end to the deportation of foreigners: “It is recommended that foreigners not participate.”

The greatest apprehension among foreigners seemed to have been concentrated in the Portuguese workers living in the Parisian shantytowns—largely because the deeply conservative and authoritarian Portuguese government played an active role in encouraging immigrants to return to Portugal. The Portuguese government went so far as to send cars to shantytowns outside of Paris in order to collect immigrants to bring back to Portugal.89 As one Portuguese immigrant put it: “We didn’t know anything about politics. We were simply scared of finding ourselves in prison.”90 It was not only Portuguese immigrants who feared the worst; for other foreigners too, it simply wasn’t worth the risk to participate in the strike. A June 1968 article in Le Monde noted that thousands of immigrants had returned to their countries of origin in order to flee the events.91

Expanding the Subjects of an Emancipatory Politics

The events of May 1968 were essentially driven by two movements that never fully coalesced: the demonstrations and the workplace actions. This is not to suggest they were unrelated, but the actual working relationship and coordination between these two groups was ephemeral at best—something that even the Maoists July and Geismar acknowledged in their optimistically titled analysis of the events Toward The Civil War. There were a few brief physical convergences, most notably the May 13 general strike,

where the CGT and PCF leadership marched with thousands of workers and youth in the Latin Quarter. Moreover, thousands of leftists were present when riot police violently broke up the final factory occupation at a Renault factory in Flins in late June. Several leftists were killed by the police during those events—the only people who died as a result of the protest movement. But all in all, these two large movements never converged.

Nevertheless, the most central theme of May was perhaps that of student-worker unity. The goal for many of the students, youth and radicalized workers who regularly partook in the demonstrations was to link the student protests to the millions of workers on strike. On the one hand, this reflected a kind of a traditional Marxist-inspired analysis: although students and young people had played a critical role in provoking the movement, the possibility for revolution ultimately hinged on the capacity for the proletariat to emancipate itself through collective struggle. There was therefore a certain idealization of the figure of the worker, as evidenced by the emblematic posters produced at the student-occupied École des Beaux Arts, the slogans at May’s many demonstrations, or the myriad discussions at the occupied Sorbonne or general assemblies at the Odéon theatre.

And yet, in spite of a vigorous fidelity toward the historical category of the worker, one of the critical undercurrents and ultimate legacies of May was the proliferation of critiques that challenged dynamics of oppression in society at large. These critiques, while often grounded in calls for worker unity, power and emancipation prescribed by the Marxist tradition, brought attention to new political subjects whose specific forms of oppression transcended classical Marxist explanations of exploitation
and alienation. Reflecting on May, the political philosopher and activist Michel Foucault remarked on “the discovery or emergence of new political objects; of an entire series of domains of existence, of corners of society, of recesses of life that had been totally forgotten or completely disqualified by political thought.”⁹² Indeed, critiques of heretofore ignored objects and subjects of political discourse—issues like women, gender, gays and lesbians, mental health and psychiatric institutions, foreigners and immigrants, prisoners, and the environment—emerged with the creation of several hundred “action committees” formed at the occupied Sorbonne, the discussions and assemblies at the occupied Sorbonne and Odéon theatres, and even in the posters produced at the École des Beaux Arts. The roots of many of these “new” social movements can all be traced back to May.⁹³

Many of the posters produced at the École des Beaux Arts were centered on the theme of student-worker unity, parodied General de Gaulle, and criticized the police. Others offered damning critiques of a range of issues like consumer society, the press, and militarism. But there were also at least nine posters that either addressed or were directed at immigrant workers. These posters offer a good lens into how a cross-section of radical French youth was conceptualizing immigrant-specific issues.

Of these, the most common theme was French and immigrant worker unity. Two of the posters carrying that message were written solely in French. Another one included that message written in only Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic. Yet another included that

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message in French, followed by the demand “Equal Work, Equal Pay,” which was then written in Italian, Spanish, Greek, Portuguese, Serbo-Croat and Arabic. Two more posters addressed the practice of the police arresting and deporting foreigners who participated in demonstrations; one declared “Stop the expulsion of foreign comrades,” and the other, displaying an image of shackled feet, “Immigration, Exploitation, Deportation, Prison.” In a similar vein, there was the bolder declaration of internationalism: “Borders = Repression.” While these posters acknowledged that foreign workers faced issues French-born workers did not—unequal pay at the workplace, and the risk of deportation—immigrants were conceived, first and foremost, as workers.

An analysis of the several hundred different action committees created at the Sorbonne provides another good lens into how radicals took up a range of different causes during May. The day after the Sorbonne was occupied, students and their allies formed 250 different action committees to tackle different issues. The idea was that these would serve as an outlet for those students who weren’t members of unions or political parties but who “wanted to act.” By the end of the month, there were over 460 in the Parisian region alone. These committees focused on a range of issues: sometimes they were focused on geographic area or on rallying support for a specific workplace on strike, sometimes on broader issues like “cultural agitation” or “the abolishment of salary work and the destitution of the university.” Others focused on organizing specific

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94 See Images, Figure 1.
95 Kugelberg, 190-201.
98 Ross, May 68 and its Afterlives, 76.
political subjects, like the Pederastic Revolutionary Action Committee (CAPR), precursor to the Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action (FHAR), or the Maghrebin Action Committee.

At a typical week at the Sorbonne during the months of May and June 1968, there were meetings being held by at least nine different immigrant action committees. Most notably, there was the Committee of Three Continents, clearly drawing inspiration from the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana, Cuba. This group of foreign students issued a platform that aimed to connect events in France to the “national liberation movements and socialist revolution in Africa, Asia and Latin America.” Its self-described objectives were twofold: to participate in the revolutionary movement in France and to reach out to “foreign students and workers whose modalities and means needed to be studied in accordance with the revolutionary movement in France.”

In a document released in June, the committee called for full political, social and workplace rights for immigrant workers: abolishing the work permit and visa, and the ability for immigrants to join unions and political organizations of their choice. The document also called for higher salaries for immigrant workers, echoing the slogan “equal work, equal pay” of the Beaux-Arts poster, and the demolition of the shantytowns—to be replaced with a “popular construction policy.” It also called for

100 Comité d’action pédérastique révolutionnaire
101 Front homosexual d’action révolutionnaire.
102 Gordon, Immigrants & Intellectuals, 72.
103 “Trois continents, un meme ennemi, un seul combat, un monde nouveau!” Tricontinental Sorbonne: Comité de 3 continents, May 1968, 4. Retrieved from “The May Events Archive,” online collection from Simon Fraser University Library. Translated by author. “…des ouvriers et étudiants étrangers et dont les modalités, les moyens, doivent être étudiés en accord avec les objectifs du mouvement révolutionnaire français actuel.”
possibilities of cultural expression and education in the language of origin, and “respect for the national culture.”

The Committee organized an event at the Sorbonne on the topic of whether or not Third World universities served as instruments for exploitation in the Third World (as they presumably were in France and the First World). It also organized another informational meeting on the life of immigrant workers living in France. Nevertheless, the scope of this Committee was extremely limited. The group’s document acknowledged that the “encounter between students and immigrant workers” had not yet happened and will be difficult.

In a similar vein, others created the Shantytown Action Committee. The Committee called for granting citizenship to all foreigners living in France. In a flyer, the group made five demands for immigrant workers: better work contracts instead of the work permit, better salaries, better coverage under national social insurance programs and fairer classification at the workplace (noting, with some substantial exaggeration, that 90% of immigrant workers were manœuvres or OS). It also called for the recognition of shantytowns as a legal place of residence for inhabitants and for “the respect of their own way of living.” Lastly, the flyer noted that the only way to win these demands was to unite French and immigrant workers against their common enemy: the bosses.

These initiatives were all very narrow in scope. It is also important to stress that the actual working relationship between demonstrators or activists and immigrant workers was limited—just as the relationship between demonstrators and French-born workers was. One should also be mindful of the potentially problematic way some

104 “Trois continents,” 5-8.
activists conceived of foreigners. As M.A. Bracke points out, some *gauchistes* were simply projecting the image of the archetypal Third World revolutionary onto foreigners—an image that had little bearing in reality.\(^\text{106}\)

But May 1968 was ultimately critical for laying the foundation for future encounters between immigrant activisms and a new set of allies in the French political arena. The events inaugurated a period of intense political activism, as French radicals hoped to inch closer to the revolutionary aspirations fueled by the protest movement. More importantly, when some groups of politicized immigrants hoped to act on a given issue—whether it was in response to a threat to their legal status, an issue at the workplace, perceived racism in the community—they would often turn to these new allies in the years that followed. The following chapter will illustrate how networks of immigrant actors and *gauchistes* mobilized around issues specific to the immigrant condition in France.

Chapter 3: The Post-'68 Wave of Immigrant Political Action: Rent Strikes, Factory Strikes and Hunger Strikes (1968-1973)

The period following May 1968 was one of immense political and social upheaval in France. The massive wave of strikes and occupations in May-June, while never replicated on the same scale as that month, helped to trigger a sequence of “worker insubordination” that continued well into the 1970s. There was not only a moderate increase in strikes, which eventually tapered off by the early 1980s. But the failure of the union-negotiated Grenelle Accords to adequately address the substantial wage differentials between low-classified and high-classified workers meant that rank-and-file critiques of union leadership were abundant. So too were challenges to the organization of the workplace itself. Indeed, a number of workplace conflicts in France during the 1970s involved new forms of direct action like occupation, sabotage, or even kidnapping the boss. Emblematic of this era of workplace contestation, the nation’s second-largest trade union, the CFDT even endorsed the idea of worker self-management (in addition to “collective appropriation of the principal means of production”!) at its 1970 Congress.

Among trade unions, the CFDT most consciously attempted to re-position itself

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108 The most standard measurement is the number of days not worked per year, a statistic provided annually by the French Ministry of Labor. While there are a couple of outlying years (1970 and 1976) the general trend shows an increase in strike activity after 1968, which settles by the early 1980s. See Roland Le Bris, “Les Luttes en France: 1945-1985,” Société française 21 (1986): 21.
following May ’68. As a result, it was generally more supportive of immigrant workers than the CGT in the post-68 period.

Amid the general backdrop of workplace upheaval, the period also saw a proliferation of political activism on the Left. While nearly all of the gauchiste groups had been disbanded in June 1968, many of them were reconstituted under different names and remained active. In a true sign of the times, Le Monde even dedicated a section of its newspaper at the time to “agitation,” which chronicled the daily activity of these various groups and their sympathizers. Correspondingly, this period was marked by the appearance of new political movements and outpouring of critiques that brought attention to what were regarded as previously ignored political subjects. In the spring of 1970, for instance, feminist activists formed the Women’s Liberation Movement (MLF). In 1971, lesbian and gay activists, many of whom had first met at the occupied Sorbonne, formed the Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action. Environmental groups and an organization for prisoners’ rights, led by Michel Foucault, also emerged at this time. In 1972, radicalized North African immigrants and activists formed the Arab Workers Movement.

It was this general broadening of political subjectivity—that is, the creation of ‘specific’ terrains of political action that were nevertheless grounded in a vocabulary of emancipation and revolution—that led post-colonialist theorist Robert Young to boldly declare, “May ’68 was the moment in which European revolutionary movements freed themselves from the restrictions of the single Soviet model of the past fifty years.” Slight hyperbole aside, it is nevertheless clear that a similar expansion of political

112 Mouvement de libération des femmes.
subjectivity and action was taking place in France’s neighbors of Italy and Germany; but also in the United States.\footnote{For instance, the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement or the Gay Liberation Front.}

It was in this political environment—one of increased contestation at the workplace, often involving low-wage workers, and the continued activity of 	extit{gauchistes} and their sympathizers—that different immigrant actors were able to articulate and disseminate a range of demands. In many cases, the relationship between immigrant political actors and French allies or sympathizers was problematic, as this chapter will underline. Nevertheless, as temporary, incomplete and problematic as these alliances could be, they enabled different immigrant actors to articulate and disseminate their concerns on a range of issues: living conditions in hostels and the shantytowns, discrimination both inside and outside the workplace, and threats to their legal status on French territory.

\textbf{Rent Strikes in the African Worker Hostels & Gauchiste-Immigrant Encounters}

Although their numbers were growing, sub-Saharan Africans still made up a relatively small portion of foreigners living in France at the turn of the decade. One estimate put them at 50,000 in total in France, with 20,000 living in Paris and its outskirts.\footnote{Jacques Tenessi, “L’exception ou la règle,” \textit{Droit et liberté}, February 1970, 5.} But these African immigrants, most of whom emigrated from the former French colonies in West Africa, often lived in the worst conditions among the foreign population—ones that were arguably even worse than those in the shantytowns. The 	extit{foyers}, or hostels, were financed by the government-run Social Action Fund, which itself
was financed in part by a portion of the salaries of foreign workers. But beyond that institutional tie, regulation of the living conditions in these hostels was extremely limited. These spaces were often overcrowded, with sometimes four sleeping in one of the many beds in a residence. These hostels, most of which were concentrated in the Parisian suburbs, often featured poor heating and air-conditioning and little circulation. In a 1970 documentary, one resident noted that his hostel in the Paris suburb of Saint-Denis was occupied by three different waves of residents in a given day. When two waves of residents were at work, the others slept in their beds. As the resident pointed out, this allowed for a “triple profit” for the rent-collector. These managers, in the vocabulary of activists in the day, were criticized as *marchands de sommeil*, literally “merchants of sleep.” In such living conditions, diseases were rampant and spread easily. Tuberculosis, in particular, was a major problem among the African population. In the aftermath of 1968, these hostels were the targets of outreach by the Trotskyist Communist League (LC), and to a larger extent, the Maoists of the Proletarian Left (GP). The interactions between these leftists and African immigrants, while limited to only a handful of hostels in the Parisian area, are one example of how post-68 networks served to articulate and disseminate immigrant demands.

In April 1969, the West African residents of a hostel in the Parisian suburb of Ivry were outraged after the owner demanded a 20 Franc increase in monthly payments.

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120 Ligue Communiste.
121 Gauche Prolétarienne.
Conditions at the hostel, a dilapidated former chocolate factory, were apparently so bad that residents refused to allow journalists to take photographs: “It’s really too disgusting. We’re embarrassed to live inside there.” After residents consulted with the “Alpha group,” a collection of students and teachers from Mali and France, Maoist activists and a Haitian priest, the residents of the hostel decided to refuse the pay increase and cut off all payments until conditions improved. The roughly 500 hostel residents also demanded that they be allowed to run the hostel themselves. Meanwhile, activists from the Proletarian Left launched an information campaign, distributing flyers throughout the city, which by August had brought the issue to the attention to the municipal government.

The rent strike at Ivry continued into the following year, picking up more French supporters like the liberal Movement against Racism, Anti-Semitism and for Peace (MRAP). The battle progressed through the courts and eventually the Communist Party-governed municipality helped to resolve the conflict by early 1971: the more than 500 residents on strike were ultimately split up and moved to three different hostels with better conditions. This final outcome did not address all of the initial demands—notably the residents’ call for self-management of the hostel. Nevertheless, it was a far cry from what had happened in 1969 when some residents at a Saint-Denis hostel went on a rent strike without any support from French organizations. That time, two of the

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122 René Backman, “Des locataires en or,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 11 August 1969, 9. The magazine reported that “gauchistes” launched the information campaign. But given the strong presence of the Proletarian Left at the Ivry hostel, it is almost certain that the reporter is referring to this group.


124 *Mouvement contre le racisme, l’antisémitisme et pour la paix*. The organization was founded in 1949, with the aim to eliminate discrimination in French society. The typically older generation of MRAP activists did not share the revolutionary aims of the far-left, preferring a more humanist and republican discourse.

strike leaders were deported and sent back to Mali. Another was sent to prison in France for a month. In the case of Ivry, the support of leftist allies, which translated into public visibility and eventually progressive action from the municipal authorities, played a vital role in the success of the strike. In an interview with the MRAP newspaper, the strikers’ appointed spokesperson Mamadou Diandouma said that the outcome “was due in the first place to our own action” but that it was “facilitated by the support that was given to us by French organizations and the Ivry municipality.”

Meanwhile, in 1969, the Communist League had another small group of about ten activists devoted toward organizing residents in African worker hostels. These activists made contacts among residents living in several hostels run by the ASSOTRAF association, where the conditions were similar to those at Ivry. Although the Trotskyist political tradition did not place as much emphasis on revolution in the Third World than the Maoist one did, a similar sense of internationalism pervaded the ranks of those LC activists involved in organizing the hostels. In the eyes of Gilles de Staal, a member of that “immigrant cell,” their work was ultimately guided by a vision of building a revolutionary party in France that was capable of connecting the class struggle in France to the different struggles taking place across the world: the Black Panthers in the US, the armed revolutionary groups in Latin America, Palestine or the Portuguese colonies of Africa. Indeed, after growing frustrated by the limits of the Trotskyist ideological model, those hostel organizers eventually split off to form another group called Révolution!.

At the ASSOTRAF hostels, these activists, still with the LC set up “formation schools” to teach immigrants about French labor law, capitalism, the communist

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128 De Staal, Mamadou m’a dit, 47-48.
movements in France and abroad. They also worked to organize “renters committees” in each hostel. In early 1970, the committee at Pierrefitte sent a list of demands to the ASSOTRAF President, which called for basic improvements of the conditions and the removal of the hostel owners, and also alerted the Pierrefitte municipality of the situation. After those demands weren’t met, residents in the five ASSOTRAF hostels in the Parisian area went on strike in July. And much like the “Battle of Ivry,” the conflict dragged on for over a year.

At Pierrefitte, ASSOTRAF eventually capitulated to the demands in 1971. But perhaps more significantly, the experience of the strike led directly the formation of an organization by the hostel residents, Révolution Afrique. By the end of 1971, there had been a marked shift in the co-ordination of political activity in the hostels, as Gilles de Staal describes. At this point, political activities in the hostel were being coordinated by a core group of African activists, which maintained links to the LC activists, but also took up links with leftists in Africa. Mamadou Komté, a resident of the Pierrefite hostel, founded the journal Révolution Afrique, which offered analyses of revolutionary movements in Africa and the political situation in France. The newspaper published until 1978. Révolution Afrique was also apparently in loose communication with the Black

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129 De Staal, Mamadou m’a dit, 44-45.
131 “À Pierrefitte, rien n’a changé,” 9.
132 This term came from the title of an article written by André Gorz and Philippe Gavi in the March 1970 edition of Les Temps modernes, an influential publication headed by Jean Paul Sartre.
133 “À Pierrefitte, rien n’a changé,” 9.
134 De Staal, Mamadou m’a dit, 74.
Panthers (who then maintained an embassy in Algeria), the ANC in South Africa, and the M22 in Congo-Brazzaville.\textsuperscript{135}

The plight of the tens of thousands of African hostel residents captured national attention after a January 1, 1970 fire in an overcrowded Aubervilliers hostel. Five African workers perished in the fire, and the story was featured prominently in all the major national newspapers. In what speaks to the ties fostered between some African hostels residents and French leftists, the memorial was dominated by the presence of leftist groups and sympathizers. With many carrying red flags, the crowd chanted, “We will avenge our comrades.” Jean Paul Sartre was on hand, in addition to Michel Rocard, leader of the Unified Socialist Party.\textsuperscript{136}

To be sure, these encounters between leftists and hostel residents were problematic. The Proletarian Left and Communist League were rival organizations and obviously each had their own political ambitions in organizing hostel residents. Moreover, some of these activists were probably projecting their own revolutionary ambitions onto the “over-exploited” immigrants with whom they interacted.

From a practical perspective, the Proletarian Left’s penchant for confrontation with the police did little to improve the lives of the target audience in the hostels, let alone help to build actual political power for the residents. In the southeastern city of Grenoble, for instance, GP activists decided to violently confront the manager of an immigrant hostel. This led to the police arriving on scene and using tear gas. A North African resident of the hostel told a reporter, “We’re on their side when it comes to

\textsuperscript{135} De Staal, *Mamadou m’a dit*, 75, 92-93.  
\textsuperscript{136} *Paris Noir* (1970).
questions about the center, about our conditions, but on other things, no.” Similarly symbolic and spontaneous actions from the GP may have generated publicity but accomplished little else. For example, in May 1970, activists in Paris broke into and robbed the luxury specialty food shop Fauchon and distributed the products the following day in the shantytown of Nanterre. In general, the rhetoric of the group did not reflect its actual record. So while it is noteworthy that the GP’s anthem Les nouveaux partisans includes a verse referencing Ivry, Aubervilliers and the shantytowns, the final line of that verse reads like pure fantasy: “But all immigrant workers are our brothers / United with them we declare war.”

**Gauchistes and Immigrants in the Goutte d’Or**

More than a year after the fire in Aubervilliers, another national affaire brought attention to discrimination and the living conditions faced by immigrants in the Goutte d’Or neighborhood in Paris. In October 1971, a French shopkeeper shot and killed 15-year old Algerian Djellali Ben Ali in the working class and largely North African neighborhood. Activists from the recently formed Palestine Committees and the small Maoist group Secours Rouge called the killing racially motivated, and held a demonstration on October 30. The following week, there was a much larger demonstration that amassed 4,000 people. And later that month, the Djellai Committee was formed, joined by intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault and Gilles Grange.

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139 *Les nouveaux partisans*, Dominique Grange (1971). Translated by author. “Mais tous les travailleurs immigrés sont nos frères, Tous unis avec eux on vous déclare la guerre.”
Saïd Bouziri, a Tunisian activist who helped organize the march, acknowledged that the role of the leftists was critical in getting the attention and support of such public intellectuals.

The November march was almost certainly the largest demonstration of North Africans in Paris since the days of the Algerian War, and it recalled the independence movement in more than a few ways. For one, the *Nouvel Observateur* magazine pointed out “the frightening police cordon, which had never been seen here since the Algerian War.” Some demonstrators sang the FLN hymn, and when the march ended at the Ben Ali family house, demonstrators laid down Algerian and Palestinian flags. In addition to these symbols of national liberation and anti-colonialism, other demonstrators echoed the May ‘68 call for French and immigrant worker unity. One African demonstrator, who told the crowd he was speaking in the “name of Africa and all immigrant workers,” said that “Racism isn’t French, it’s the French government. It’s the French bourgeoisie that’s racist. The French proletariat is with us.”

The Djellali Committee set up a permanent presence in the neighborhood, but its relationship with Goutte d’Or residents was complex. The experience speaks to the sometimes problematic nature of encounters between French activists, immigrant activists, and immigrants during this period. For instance, some Committee members became frustrated that the headquarters was being used to produce Palestinian

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143 *Fedaï* (Journal de soutien à la Révolution Palestiniene), 25 November 1971, 8.
144 *Jusqu’au bout* dir. by Cinélutte collective (1973; Cinélutte). Translated by author. “Je parle au nom de toute l’Afrique, et de tous les travailleurs immigrés. Le racisme n’est pas français, c’est le gouvernement français. C’est la bourgeoisie française qui est raciste, le prolétariat français est avec nous.”
propaganda, and not more information about issues in the neighborhood they were hoping to raise. Arabic literacy courses were also poorly received in the community.\footnote{Hajjat, “Alliances inattendues à la Goutte d’Or,” 523.}

Reflecting on the events several years later, Djellali’s sister Fazia suggested the French intervention in the neighborhood was opportunistic, noting that activists had not bothered to address issues like housing conditions in the area before the very public episode.

Moreover, the tone of some of these middle-class French comrades could be paternalistic:

“…Anytime someone visited us, he would immediately say: ‘My God, it’s not possible to live like this, with ten people in the same room!’ Okay, for you, it wasn’t possible, but us, we always lived like this. We had to.”\footnote{Catherine von Bülow, Fazia Ben Ali, La Goutte-d’Or ou Le Mal des racines (Paris: Stock, 1979), 247. Translated by author. “…dès que quelqu’un venait chez nous, il disait immédiatement: ’Bon Dieu, ce n’est pas possible de vivre ainsi, à dix dans une pièce!’ D’accord, pour vous, ce n’était pas possible, mais nous, on y vivait depuis toujours, il fallait bien.”}

### Immigrant Action at the Workplace


Apart from the fact that they involved immigrant workers and addressed issues specific to immigrant workers, what many of the different strikes had in common was their reliance on unconventional support networks, that is, relying on leftist activists and supporters that worked outside the structure of the union.
Laure Pitti questions the tendency of some to label these actions as “immigrant struggles” instead of “worker strikes.” However, it is clear that these workers were mobilizing precisely in response to the unique issues that shaped the immigrant condition in France: low classification with little possibility for promotion, discrimination and racism, and oftentimes housing problems. In particular, the strikes at Penarroya, which garnered national and international attention, illustrate how post-68 networks helped immigrant actors to articulate and disseminate their demands.

At the time, Penarroya was the largest lead producer in the world, and had three metal recycling plants in France: one in the Paris suburb of Saint-Denis, one in Escadéouvre and another in the Lyon suburb of Gerland. At the factories in Saint-Denis and Gerland, foreigners made up 85 and 90 percent of the workforces respectively. At these factories, conditions were poor, employees worked long hours with low pay, and were being exposed to lead poisoning on a regular basis (indeed, one of the core demands of workers involved more rigorous medical and health inspections). As one of the Saint-Denis workers put it, “This is work that French people could never do. There’s been a few I’ve seen hired here that can’t do it. It’s too dirty. It’s work that only foreigners could do.”

On January 20, 1971, 150 workers at the Saint-Denis factory went on strike and occupied the factory. The mostly North African workforce, who worked roughly 46 hours

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150 Penarroya, dir. by Anonymous (1971; La nouvelle société) Translated by author, “Ça c’est de travail que les français peuvent jamais faire. Y’en a plusieurs que j’ai vu qui ont embauché ici, ils réussissent pas à travailler parce que c’est trop sale. Ça c’est le travail des étrangers qui peuvent le faire seulement.”
per week, called for a one-franc hourly salary increase.\textsuperscript{151} While the Saint-Denis workers were all affiliated with the CGT, a short documentary crafted by a small worker-filmmaker collective noted that the leftist group \textit{Secours Rouge} was also supporting the strike (presumably by leafleting).\textsuperscript{152} By the end of the month, workers were granted a 50-cent pay increase and better transmission of medical test results.\textsuperscript{153}

Following the strike, Saint Denis workers reached out to the small leftist group \textit{Les Cahiers de Mai}, which also published a newspaper by the same name. That group circulated the letter to the other Penarroya factories, which eventually decided on a common list of grievances.\textsuperscript{154} After a lack of response from management and following the death of an Algerian worker in an accident at Gerland, workers at Saint Denis and Gerland decided to both go on strike and occupy their factories on February 9, 1972.\textsuperscript{155} The issues in question, while specific to Penarroya, were emblematic of the kinds of issues that tended to impact foreign workers far more than their French counterparts: dilapidated on-site housing, low pay, and a management eager to take advantage.

In Saint-Denis, the CGT-affiliated workers entered into negotiations with management after a day.\textsuperscript{156} At Gerland, workers had joined the CFDT union and remained on strike. Meanwhile, at Gerland, the occupation continued, and was sustained by a large network of supporters that operated outside the traditional union structure. Sympathizers organized a “support committee,” with a local Protestant Church

\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Le Monde}, 28 January 1971, 31.
\textsuperscript{152} \textit{Penarroya} film (1971).
\textsuperscript{154} Pitti, “La lutte des Penarroya contre le plomb,” \textit{Travail & Santé}.
\textsuperscript{155} \textit{Le Progrès}, 10 February 1972, 8.
\textsuperscript{156} Pitti, “La lutte des Penarroya contre le plomb,” \textit{Travail & Santé}. 
coordinating the reception of monetary donations to support the workers.\textsuperscript{157} In the meantime, \textit{Cahiers de Mai} held film showings of its self-produced “Penarroya: The two faces of the company,” which aimed to shame the international corporation for ignoring the demands of its immigrant workforce in France. (In fact, it had first displayed the film on the eve of strikes at the large Olympia theatre in Paris).\textsuperscript{158} As the strike continued at Gerland, a gala was organized with a performance from Léo Ferré, a well-known folk musician and anarchist.

This unconventional style of organizing angered the CGT, which still had a small presence at the Gerland factory. When the CFDT announced its plans to hold a march in Lyon in support of the striking workers, the CGT criticized it ruthlessly, fearing that non-union elements would take part (this, of course, was the very point of the demonstration). It also criticized the group \textit{Cahiers de Mai} for “engaging the workers of the Penarroya factory in totally inappropriate forms of action given the concrete situation of the company and the real possibilities at the moment.”\textsuperscript{159} Nevertheless, on March 13, in large part due to the visibility of the movement and the outside pressure, Penarroya management caved in on nearly every demand: increase in salary, improved classification, the immediate communication of medical tests, and the construction of a new hostel.\textsuperscript{160}

The Penarroya struggle became an important point of reference for some immigrant activists and leftists at the time. Although Arab identity was not explicitly a

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{Le Progrès}, 12 February 1972, 8.
\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Dossier Penarroya, les deux visages du trust} dir. by Dominique Dubosc (1972; Cahiers de mai).
\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Le Progrès}, 29 February 1972, 8. Translated by author. “…entraîné les travailleurs de l’usine Penarroya dans des formes d’action totalement inadaptées par rapport à la situation concrète de l’entreprise et aux possibilités réelles du moment.”
\textsuperscript{160} Pitti, “Travailleurs de France,” 104.
major theme of the strike, a newsletter circulated by the Palestine Committee of Marseille, noted, “at Penarroya, 120 Arab workers organized and won.” The implication was that further struggles like this were needed. Meanwhile, for other leftists, the labor struggle seemed to perfectly incarnate the struggle against management and stifling union bureaucracy. To this end, Penarroya was memorialized briefly in film director Jean-Luc Godard’s homage to the post-68 class struggle in France, *Tout va bien.*

*The “Sans-Papiers” and the Hunger Strikes*

The long post-war stretch of lax immigration control in France came to a sudden halt with the implementation of the Marcellin-Fontanet circularies. As a result of these two policies, which came into effect by October 1972, any foreigner hoping to obtain a visa needed to first show proof of a one year work permit at minimum and an additional employer-provided proof of housing. The circularies effectively made hundreds of thousands of immigrants “illegal” and linked many foreign workers closer to their current employers. Immigrants were dissuaded from finding employment elsewhere out of fears that they might lose their work permit and thus subject themselves to arrest and deportation. Moreover, immigrants who had entered France clandestinely had no way to retrospectively resolve their status. As a result of existing agreements with France, the policies did not affect a handful of nationalities (Europeans from the Common Market,

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161 *Al-Assifa* n. 1, April 1972.
162 *Tout va bien*, dir. by Jean-Luc Godard (1972; Criterion Collection, 2005), DVD. At the conclusion of the film, which aims to illustrate the class tension of post-1968 France, a scrolling text appears at the bottom of the screen, listing the different workplace conflicts that took place in France after May ‘68. Penarroya is included.
Algerians and Africans from the former French colonies). But the large Tunisian, Moroccan and Portuguese and other foreign populations were all affected.\textsuperscript{163}

A loose network of activists from the CFDT and the Djellali Committee were able to raise attention to the issue in the summer of 1972, and they publicized the implications of the impending circularly in the then-press agency (and future daily) \textit{Libération}, which had been founded by the Maoists of the Proletarian Left. Once more, the positions and activity of these French and immigrant activists stood in contrast to the Communist Party apparatus, whose newspaper \textit{L’Humanité} went so far as to applaud the “positive aspects” of the circulares for their insistence on having decent housing.\textsuperscript{164}

The Tunisian Saïd Bouziri, a self-identified Maoist activist who had organized in the Goutte d’Or, was the first to go on hunger strike in opposition to the law.\textsuperscript{165} He earned the support of high-profile backers (like Foucault, Sartre and Deleuze once more) that eventually became known as the Committee for the Defense of Life and Rights of Immigrant Workers (CDVDTI).\textsuperscript{166} As a result of his strike, Bouziri was eventually offered temporary renewal of his status in France, and went on to help found the Arab Workers Movement the following year.

In December 1972, 18 other Tunisians went on hunger strike at a church in Valence. Others followed suit in La Ciotat in Marseille, and in Paris at the CFDT headquarters. Several weeks later, hunger strikes erupted in roughly 20 cities across France. The majority of these strikers were Tunisian, but there were also Moroccans,

\textsuperscript{163} Abdallah, \textit{J’y suis, J’y reste}, 32-33.
\textsuperscript{164} Abdallah, \textit{J’y suis, J’y reste}, 35.
\textsuperscript{165} “Said Bouziri par lui-même,” YouTube video, 15:18, posted by Agence IM’média, November 20, 2011.
Portuguese, and even some French activists. After some hesitation over the breadth of its demands, the growing movement eventually called for an end to the Marcellin-Fontanet circulars. While strikers had the public support of leftists and the CFDT, there was also growing autonomy on the organizational level. The CDVDTI and other North African activists helped to organize the nationwide movement and its next steps with general assemblies.

In May 1973, the campaign crossed over to the workplace, when over 50 Moroccan workers went on strike at the Margoline paper recycling plants in Nanterre and Genevilliers and occupied their factories. The workers alleged they were forced to work for Margoline because they did not have the proper paperwork to find employment elsewhere.\(^{167}\) While the strike was specifically related to the Marcellin-Fontanet circulars, this action was characteristic of both immigrant and French worker political action in the post-68 period. It relied on forms of direct action, reliance on support networks outside the CGT, and demands that extended beyond simple question of salaries.

The campaign against the circulars was moderately successful. Some individuals had been able to regularize their own status after going on hunger strike. But it was not until June 1973 when the Ministry of Labor announced a provisional suspension of the entire Fontanet circularly in response to the protest movement. This move allowed for the regularization of immigrants who had entered France clandestinely before June 1973, or those who became de facto “sans-papiers” by virtue of becoming

\(^{167}\) Margoline (1973; Cinélutte).
unemployed. 35,000 people eventually regularized their situation in the following months.\textsuperscript{168}

In the post-68 era, different pockets of the immigrant population acted on a range of issues. Whether or not they conceived of their stays in France as temporary or permanent, foreigners were mobilizing in response to forms of state and societal oppression that were specific to the immigrant condition. Moreover, what is striking about the different political struggles of this period is that even when they were not explicitly workplace-related—from the rent strikes in the African hostels and protest movement in response to the death of Djellali Ben Ali to the hunger strikes of the sans-papiers—was that each set of actors continued to identify with the term “worker.” Even in the case of the sans-papiers movement, which arose in response to policies that jeopardized the status of hundreds of thousands of foreigners on French soil, the discourse of immigrant activists was marked deeply by the vocabulary of worker and class struggle. At a 1973 protest in support of immigrant hunger strikers in Paris, a group of North African demonstrators tellingly chanted: “Down with slavery, We are all workers!”\textsuperscript{169}

In all of these different micro-struggles, the concerns of immigrants were transmitted and publicized, at least initially, by new networks of French supporters that rejected the effectiveness of the previously hegemonic forms of worker-organization on the political left: The Communist Party and the CGT. The May-June 1968 movement had irrevocably fractured the hegemony of these two organizations on the French left, and had given rise to a host of movements and critiques that extended themselves into new

\textsuperscript{168} Abdallah, \textit{J’y suis, J’y reste}, 38.
\textsuperscript{169} \textit{Jusqu’au bout} dir. by Cinélutte collective (1973; Cinélutte). Translated by author. “À bas l’esclavage, nous sommes tous des ouvriers!”
terrains of political contestation. Even the trade union that was most supportive of immigrant movements at this time, the CFDT, had intentionally re-positioned itself in response to the May ‘68 challenge of union bureaucracy and authority.

In a now famous conversation on the post-68 political climate in France in March 1972, theorists and activists Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze reflected on the various fronts of political activity percolating through French society. Deleuze observed:

“…The present revolutionary movement has created multiple centers, and not as the result of weakness or insufficiency, since a certain kind of totalization pertains to power and the forces of reaction … Against this global policy of power, we initiate localized counter-responses, skirmishes, active and occasionally preventive defenses.”

This also seems to be a valuable way of considering the different political struggles of immigrants in this period. Just as there was no Communist Party guiding the movements for women’s liberation or justice for prisoners, there was no central coordinating mechanism to direct these different immigrant movements toward a united objective. The movements were indeed marginal, fragmented, and dependent on temporary and sometimes problematic alliances. Nevertheless, it is clear that during this period new alliances had emerged in order to challenge forms of oppression specific to the immigrant condition in France. This development was unprecedented.

170 “Intellectuals and Power,” in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews with Michel Foucault, ed. by Donald Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 212-216. The discussion was recorded March 4, 1972 and published in a special issue of L’Arc (No. 49, pp. 3-10). The first English translation appeared in the 1977 volume edited by Bouchard.
Chapter 4: The Arab Workers Movement: Immigrants, Workers and Revolutionaries

“Here the racists, the Arab and French bourgeoisie, tell us: ‘You’re foreigners, you only have the right to work, to accept a life of misery and racism and to shut up.’ But we, Arab workers, we, immigrants, we respond: ‘We are not merchandise that one country sells to another, we don’t live in charity, we’re workers, we take the right to struggle and affirm our dignity.’” Al Assifa, May 1972, 7.

In the period following 1968, there had emerged a series of micro-struggles contesting the different domains of exploitation and oppression related to the immigrant condition in France: housing conditions, immigrant-specific exploitation at the workplace, generalized forms of discrimination and racism in the social sphere at large, and the precarious legal status of many immigrants. These various contestations had relied, to varying degrees, on different support networks made up of immigrant activists and activists from a French political generation, the latter of which had been formed by the Algerian War and inspired by the revolutionary possibilities opened up by May ‘68.

But there was also a desire by a group of radicalizing immigrants hailing from the Arab world to co-ordinate political activity amongst themselves, which culminated with the foundation of the Arab Workers Movement in June 1972. That it was immigrants from the Arab World and not elsewhere who launched such an organization merits a brief explanation. Among the foreign population, Arab immigrants were among the most impacted by issues like poor housing and working conditions, precarious legal status, and low compensation at the workplace. Moreover, in contrast to the Portuguese, who faced many of these same issues, these Arab activists saw their actions in France as

171 Translated by author. “Ici les racistes, les bourgeois arabes et français, nous disent : « Vous êtes des étrangers, vous n’avez le droit que de travailler, d’accepter la vie de misère et le racisme et de vous taire. » Mais nous, travailleurs arabes, nous, immigrés, nous répondons : « Nous ne sommes pas une marchandise qu’un pays vend à l’autre, nous ne vivons pas de charité, nous sommes des ouvriers, nous prenons le droit de lutter et d’affirmer notre dignité » !”
complementary to the wider post-independence political movements taking place in the Arab world.\textsuperscript{172}

The MTA was loosely structured, did not have fixed membership, and was relatively limited in reach, centered mostly in the regions surrounding Paris and Marseille. Nevertheless, as the first effort by immigrants living in France to autonomously organize around immigrant-specific issues on a national scale, the creation of the MTA marked a major development in the history of immigration in France. While organizational autonomy and Arab identity was critically important to these activists, this chapter aims to demonstrate that through the group’s borderless ambitions of international revolution, its origins among the Maoist activists of the Proletarian Left, and its identification with a specific political subjectivity under an emancipatory and universalist backdrop, it was grounded deeply in the political and ideological legacy of the 1968 movement.

It is important to stress that the MTA was not focused exclusively on the question of immigration \textit{per se}. While it was founded in France and remained active only in France, the ultimate ambitions of its founders were not restricted to French territory. Under the banner of a revolutionary pan-Arabist ideology, the MTA’s founding mission was to link the increasing struggles of Arab and other immigrant workers in France (the hunger strikes, the rent strikes, the factory strikes, the anti-racist mobilizations that took place in the aftermath of 1968) to the ongoing post-independence struggles in the Arab

\textsuperscript{172} It is important to note, however, that a radical Portuguese milieu also existed in France. Many of these radical intellectuals and workers had fled Portugal to avoid conscription in the colonial wars in Africa. They had Maoist sympathies, were anti-colonialist, and like many MTA activists, established links with the Proletarian Left. Miguel Cardina “A guerra à guerra: Violência e anticolonialismo nas oposições ao Estado Novo,” \textit{Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais} 88 (2010): 224.
world—notably those in North Africa and the Palestinian liberation movement. In its aspirations to connect action in France to political movements abroad, this outward-focused revolutionary vision emanating from France harkened back to the French FLN or the other networks that had supported independence movements in North Africa or Indochina. But in contrast to these prior movements, MTA activists assumed a transnational Arab identity. In a certain sense, the borderless vision of these radicalized foreigners based in France has much in common with the founding mission of Révolution Afrique, the much smaller group organized in the African worker hostel at Pierrefitte.

The MTA’s focus on immigrant-specific issues also distinguishes the group significantly from other foreign-led political organizations that had operated in France in the post-war period. While its ultimate ambitions were revolutionary, its actions also reflected a burgeoning immigrant political consciousness among Arabs living in France. The MTA functioned practically as a network of activists that supported the various political causes relevant to the foreign population as a whole in France: it supported the hunger strikes of the sans papiers in 1972-1973 with some of its activists taking part and others even initiating them. It also supported the growing number of foreign worker strikes and aimed to bring attention to racism and discrimination in France through its demonstrations, newspapers and public meetings. Perhaps most famously, the MTA organized a relatively well-heeded walkout of Arab workers in Paris and Marseille in

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174 Aissaoui, Immigration and National Identity, 158.
175 To date, the previously cited memoirs of Gilles de Staal appear to be the only substantial existing literature on Révo Afrique! Nevertheless, a comparison of this group with the MTA would make for a fascinating topic of research.
176 Trappo, “De la clandestinité à la reconnaissance.”
response to a wave of racially-motivated killings in August 1973. Moreover, the MTA had a theatre troupe, whose performances aimed to bring attention to the different challenges that shaped the immigrant condition in France. For all of this activity alone, it is appropriate to say that the MTA was the first immigrant-led group in France to be dedicated to the “immigrant cause” on a national scale.

As evidenced by the group’s name, the adoption of a trans-national Arab identity served as a means to unite the growing struggles of immigrants with many different nationalities, and also reflected a growing immigrant political identity as Arabs living in France. But at the same time, the MTA’s ideology remained deeply influenced by the emancipatory and universalist politics of the 1968 movement, which speaks to many of its founding activists’ encounters and processes of politicization with gauchistes in France in the post-68 period. While the MTA was indeed focused on immigrant-specific actions and goals and rooted in a common Arab identity that was being forged by activists’ condition as immigrants in France, it was also, very much in the spirit of the politics of 1968, deeply universalist and tiersmondiste. These two ideological axes were not considered to be mutually exclusive.

As one MTA activist from Morocco, Mimoun Hallouss, put it: “We were convinced that our fight for dignity in France had a continuation back home. Or more precisely, that the struggles of our countries for emancipation had a direct link with our

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179 M.A. Bracke argues that the organization’s autonomy implies that radicalizing Arabs were growing frustrated with the traditional left of the PCF and CGT and also the “naïve universalism and tiersmondisme” of French leftists. Bracke, “May 1968 and Algerian immigrants in France: trajectories of mobilization and encounter,” 128.
Or as another MTA activist put it, “I fight not only to return back home, but to make revolution here in France and at home … The question of the French revolution and the Arab revolution is very linked.” Understanding this two-edged mission is critical for any examination of the MTA: the group’s ambitions were fundamentally revolutionary, with many of its founding members sharing the conviction, however unrealistic it may seem today, that they were part of an international struggle taking place in their countries of origin. But at the same time, the group also engaged on a practical basis with immigrant-specific issues.

While most MTA activists were young, they do not fit a single socioeconomic or geographic profile. Some were students, others had finished their studies in France and were working odd-jobs in the lower-middle class, others were workers in the more traditional sense. And while most of the MTA activists hailed from the former North African colonies of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, others had emigrated from Syria and Lebanon. What these various founders of different socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds shared was a sense that the growing contestation of foreign workers in France needed to be coordinated more effectively. In doing this, they were driven by the sense that their activity was complementing the ongoing socialist struggles in the Arab world.


182 Relying on the work of Johanna Siméant, Gordon calls this group déclassé for not finding employment that matched their education levels. *Immigrants & Intellectuals*, 160-162.
It is true that many of the MTA’s founders had first become politically active in their countries of origin after becoming disillusioned with the post-independence regimes, notably in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. It is probable that many of these activists partook in what the sociologist Sayad calls “anomic emigration,” that is, these individuals were already at odds with their societies of origin for either political or personal reasons and emigrated as a result. Others, who did not necessarily share the revolutionary aspirations of the founders, likely joined the MTA after becoming attracted to the MTA’s practical critiques of quotidian racism in French society. But another substantial part of the group’s founders had come of age politically in France in the intense contestation of the post-‘68 period—more precisely through the Maoists of the Proletarian Left. Many of these students and workers had their first political experience with the GP, and their views were shaped by these encounters.

One striking example of the latter trajectory is the case of Mokhtar Bachiri. In 1969, Bachiri emigrated to France from Morocco. Bachiri eventually found employment at the Renault factory in Flins, site of the famous June 1968 clash between workers and riot police, and the target of much gauchiste outreach in subsequent years. It was at this factory where Bachiri first encountered Maoist literature from the Proletarian Left. He remarked that these “were the only flyers that defended immigrants, that said there was

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183 Hajjat, “Des comités Palestine au Mouvement des travailleurs arabes,” 149-151. Hajjat employs Sayad’s analysis to the MTA. As an example, Mimoun Hallouss told the author in an interview that he did not belong to a specific organization in Morocco, but that he had been involved in the student movement there before emigrating to France in 1969. Mimoun Hallouss, phone interview with author, March 17, 2013.

184 It seems appropriate to make this distinction. The latter view can be bolstered by the author’s interview with Hallouss, who contrasted the “Marxist-leaning” activists and the ones who were less interested in political ideology and more concerned by the MTA’s discourse on anti-Arab discrimination and racism.

no difference between French and immigrants, that they all have the same rights and that
they need to unite.” Bachiri eventually joined the GP and later the MTA. The GP’s
positions on Third World liberation, condemnation of racism, and call for uniting French
and foreign workers had attracted a small group of Arab and other foreign workers.

The GP had also earned the support of other Arab students, workers and future
MTA activists living in France for its prioritization of the Palestinian cause and for
publicly supporting the Palestine Liberation Organization. After the events of Black
September in September 1970, the Proletarian Left formed the Committees for the
Support of the Palestinian Revolution, which became more commonly known as the
Palestine Committees. The loosely-structured Palestine Committees assembled a mix
of previously politicized Arab activists (the “political emigrants”), French Maoists, and
another group of Arab students and workers. From late 1970 to 1971, the Palestine
Committees organized film screenings, marches, held public events, and published
newspapers that brought attention to the Palestinian cause. But eventually the Palestine
Committees began to function as a network to support immigrant-specific causes, many

186 Bachiri’s testimony can be corroborated by a fascinating statistical analysis of the themes of
different flyers found at the Renault factory in nearby Boulogne Billancourt in 1974. While the
CGT’s literature was focused mostly on “material demands,” that is, emphasizing specific points
of contract negotiations, the various gauchiste groups focused more on “social demands”—most
often calling for an end to discrimination against foreign workers. Moreover, the gauchiste
literature featured more of what the author labeled as “criticism of structures” than the CGT.
Philippe Burtin, “Attitude et idéologie syndicales: Une analyse de tracts distribués à Renault-
188 Hajjat, “Des comités Palestine au Mouvement des travailleurs arabes,” 150. This contrasted
with the Communist Party, but also the Trotskyist LC which offered “critical support.” The
Maoist support for Palestine was symbolized perhaps most strongly at the 1972 funeral of Pierre
Overney, one of the GP’s établis who was gunned down by a security guard outside the Renault
factory in Boulogne for distributing literature commemorating the repression of a march opposing
the Algerian War. At the funeral procession, which brought roughly 200,000 to the streets of
Paris, Overney’s hearse was flanked by two large Palestinian flags.
189 In September 1970, King Hussein declared martial law inside of Jordan in response to the PLO
presence in the kingdom, and thus began targeting PLO fighters.
of its sympathizers having involved themselves in the Djellali affaire. Then they had decided to create the MTA as a means of better coordinating these different struggles.190

But the Palestinian cause continued to resonate with MTA activists for a variety of reasons and the organization would continue to endorse and reference the cause. On one level, Palestine incarnated the ongoing struggle for Arab self-determination and revolution. It is important to recall that by the early 1970s, Palestine was seen as a kind of vanguard of the struggle for national liberation in the Arab World. In a political environment where the Arab national liberation movements of the 1960s were perceived as having failed and abandoned their socialist aspirations in the eyes of these leftist activists, Palestine came to incarnate the continued aspirations for Arab liberation. There were in fact some actual contacts made between MTA activists and the main representative of the PLO in France.191 But mostly, the Palestinian struggle functioned as a key reference point for MTA activists, who could identify their myriad struggles in France with those of the Palestinian fighters. As a May 1973 bulletin equating French bosses with the state of Israel put it: “We need … to support all brothers who led a courageous fight, whether in occupied Palestine, in the Arab countries, or even in France, so that we can show our growing force to our enemies: to those who exploit us in the companies and those who occupy our lands.”192

But in addition to transnational Arab political identity, the Palestinian cause emblematized the global struggle against colonialism and oppression in a broader sense.

This was the reason why so many of the non-Arab gauchistes in France—the political generation forged by the Algerian War and emboldened by May 1968—had supported it and why much of the Western far left continues to do so today. This additional meaning of the Palestinian cause, generated in the Palestine Committees by French and Arab activists alike, was also significant for many MTA activists. For instance, when asked why Palestine was so important to the MTA activists in France, Hallouss said: “It was a movement of liberation. Whether it was in Chile or Vietnam, the struggle of the left was anti-imperialist. The struggle of the Palestinian people was a struggle that participated in the anti-imperialist struggle in the world. It’s not only because Palestinians [were] Arabs, it’s because their combat was just.”

While organizational autonomy as immigrant workers and Arab workers within France was crucial—indeed this was why the MTA had been launched in the first place—it is clear that many MTA activists still saw themselves as being involved in an international class struggle. As such, solidarity with non-Arab foreigners and French workers was a common theme. In a certain sense, this echoed the discourse of the other emancipatory movements that had emerged in 1968 and its aftermath. Conscious of their specific needs, particular forms of oppression, and own political subjectivity that had not been historically registered by the national political left, these movements were nevertheless grounded in a Marxist-influenced vocabulary of emancipatory universalism. It is appropriate to consider the MTA in this light.

193 Mimoun Hallouss, phone interview with author, March 17, 2013. Translated by author. “C’est un mouvement de libération. Dans le Chili, que ce soit au Vietnam ... la lutte de la gauche était anti-imérialiste. La lutte du peuple palestinien était une lutte qui participe à la lutte anti-imérialiste dans le monde. C’est pas uniquement parce que les Palestiniens sont les arabes, c’était parce que leur combat était juste.”
One of the most common themes, as evidenced by the MTA’s newspapers *Al-Assifa* and *La Voix des travailleurs arabes*, was the call for more solidarity and unity among Arab workers in their different political struggles. But when highlighting this theme, the distinctions between Arab workers and immigrant workers as a whole were often blurred, and the overarching dynamics of class emphasized (even when the political issues were not workplace related). For example, the July 1972 edition of *Al-Assifa* featured coverage of a number of different political actions: an ongoing strike at the Câbles de Lyon factory in Paris involving Algerian, Moroccan and Portuguese workers, a strike in Amiens demanding a work permit, a demonstration in Lyon in response to the suspicious death of an Algerian worker, a rent strike at a residence in Toulon, and even the seemingly non-political act of Arab workers in Montpellier deciding to get together to fill out paperwork for social insurance. The article concluded that in order “to change these lives of slavery that the bourgeoisie [author’s emphasis] wants to impose, it’s necessary to start talking, to meet, to regroup, to stick together… It’s this that tomorrow will make all of us the united force on the construction units, the factories, and the hostels, impose the right of Arab workers, of immigrant workers [author’s emphasis] to respect and dignity.”

An article accompanying the publication of a revamped MTA newspaper in January 1974 based in Paris also underscores the sense of class solidarity MTA activists hoped to achieve—one that extended to other foreign workers and French workers. The article noted the historical and social specificity of the Arab immigrant condition in post-

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194 *Al Assifa*, July 1972, 2. Translated by author. “Pour changer cette vie d’esclaves que la bourgeoisie veut nous imposer, il faut commencer à discuter, à se réunir, à regrouper, à se serrer les coudes. C’est cela qui ... et c’est cela qui demain fera de nous tous la force unie qui dans les chantiers, usines et foyers, imposera le droit des travailleurs arabes, des travailleurs immigrés au respect et à la dignité!”
colonial France, equating “our situation as immigrants, our struggle in France” with “the prolonging of the liberation struggle that our peoples have led for decades against colonialism.” The author noted the newspaper’s mission was grounded in the roots of “our fatherland” but that it was “open to all our immigrant brothers, all progressives and French workers with whom we are engaged in the same history here.” This sense was undoubtedly a reflection of the post-’68 era of immigrant contestation, one in which immigrants of different nationalities had acted with new alliances build with French activists. It also reflected a sense that future collaboration was possible.

Indeed, the MTA did not limit its action to only Arab immigrants. In 1974, it supported the hunger strikes of Mauritians and Pakistanis facing deportation. But the event that perhaps best captures the MTA’s desire for Arab worker autonomy, its calls for solidarity with other foreigners and French workers, and the limits of the latter, was the MTA’s call for a general strike in September 1973.

In August of that year, Arabs living in Marseille were rocked by a wave of racially motivated killings, triggered by the death of a French bus driver at the hands of a mentally unstable Algerian immigrant. A newspaper in Marseille called for avenging the death, and some had heeded the call by killing seven North African immigrants in the following week. Even a Gaullist-affiliated student group in a nearby region shockingly

195 Al Assifa, La Voix des Travailleurs Arabes, January 1974, 8.
196 See Images, Figure 2. The MTA marched on May 1, International Workers’ Day. Its participation in such a march and the slogans on a poster advertising the march illustrate the MTA’s identification with the broader workers’ movement—not simply “Arab workers.”
called for the “elimination of North African and anti-French scum.” Security was a major concern among the North African population. In response, MTA activists called for a “general strike against racism”, which saw 30,000 North African workers in Marseille walk off their jobs on September 3. The MTA followed this action by using its networks of supporters to mobilize for another “general strike” on September 14 in Paris.

But while the numbers for this strike were moderately successful, they also underlined the MTA’s general isolation from the rest of the French labor movement. The CGT, rather unsurprisingly, had denounced the action. The Amicale d’Algérie—the official representative of the FLN government in France that the MTA had bitterly criticized in the past—did not endorse the action. Even the Great Mosque of Paris, where those on strike assembled for a rally, cooperated with a police request to not endorse the action. Although the MTA suggested that many French workers took part, the fact is that relatively few French workers heeded the call.

Even some radical Portuguese activists in the city of Grenoble who had decried a similar racially-motivated killing of a Portuguese worker seemed to acknowledge they were not impacted by the MTA’s strike. Their journal *O Alarme* criticized the recent wave of killings and the problem of racism in French society, noting that “now it’s the

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199 *La Marseillaise*, 27 August 1973, 11. Translated by author. “…l’élimination de la pègre nord-africaine et anti-française.”
201 In Marseille, the CGT local flatly opposed it. In Paris, they did not endorse the strike.
202 This tension can explain why Patrick Weil, one of the preeminent historians of immigration in France, mischaracterized the MTA as simply an “opposition movement to the Algerian government.” Weil, 103.
203 An October 1973 edition of *La Voix des Travailleurs Arabes* remarked that the “united action of Arab workers was not only understood by French workers, but approved and supported in many worksites and businesses.” However, Hajjat convincingly argues that it was only followed by a minority of French workers, who walked out for a few hours. Hajjat, “Le MTA et la ‘grève générale,’” 40.
204 These political émigrés from Portugal were Maoist-leaning, and their newspaper even featured the name of J.P. Sartre.
Algerian comrades who are at the center (as they always have been)” of such violence. But *O Alarme* reported simply that “Arab comrades had responded with strikes and demonstrations.”\(^\text{205}\) Another newspaper produced by a cross-section of radicalized foreign workers at the General Motors plant in Gennevilliers asked if September 14 was a strike of “Arabs or all workers”? While the Arab activists had insisted the strike concerned all foreigners and French workers, “it wasn’t in this way that the Yugoslavs, the Portuguese and others interpreted it … Arabs were killed by racists in Marseille, but we die in the same way falling from scaffolding in the construction industry.”\(^\text{206}\) It was clear that the MTA’s unique and burgeoning Arab immigrant political consciousness ultimately did not have that large of audience among the wider non-Arab foreign worker population.

The MTA’s general strike also underlined major transformations in the dynamics of post-war immigration to France. Immigration was becoming increasingly politicized, in large part due to the post-’68 wave of political action, but the subject was also increasingly seen as problematic by the French government. While immigrant labor had been regarded as a boost to the post-war economy, it was increasingly regarded as hampering the economy by the mid 1970s. The implementation of the Marcellin-Fontanet circularies had hinted that the relatively lax immigration controls of the post-war era were coming to a close. But it was ultimately the negative effects of the oil crisis in 1973 and 1974 on the French economy that triggered a more dramatic shift in immigration policy.

\(^{205}\) *O Alarme*, October 1973, 4. Translated by author. “…*agora são os camaradas argelinos que estão (como sempre estiveram) na baila.*” “…*os camaradas árabes têm respondido com greves e manifestações.*”

\(^{206}\) 12 millions immigrés en lutte, November 1973, 2. Translated by author. “*Ce n’est pas de cette façon, cependant, que les yougoslaves, les portugais et les autres ont compris les choses … Des arabes ont été tués par des racistes à Marseille, mais on meurt aussi de la même façon en tombant des échaffaudages [sic] du bâtiment.*”
In 1974, the French government announced an immediate, indefinite end to all immigration.

Moreover, by this period, the foreign population was increasingly non-European, which in addition to the effects of the economic crisis and the greater visibility of the foreign population as a result of the post-’68 wave of immigrant political activism, contributed to immigration becoming a major national political issue. The following and final chapter will illustrate these changing politics of immigration in France, the decline of the ‘68-era movements, and the considerably different environment that gave rise to the 1983 Marche des Beurs.
Chapter 5: Declining Contestations & The Changing Politics of Immigration

It is perhaps tempting to want to conclude that the post-’68 wave of immigrant contestation ultimately improved material and social conditions for the foreign population at large—that one can pinpoint precise events or moments that helped “turned the tide.” For example, even if the radical and emancipatory energies of the women’s liberation or gay liberation movements had dissipated by the end of the decade, the liberalization of social norms regarding these groups is often cited as one of the main (if exaggerated) ‘victories’ of May 1968. However, the case is even less convincing that post-’68 immigrant political movements led to more tolerance of foreigners, or more acceptance of The Other in French society. What is nevertheless clear is that these movements did lead to a much greater visibility of the issues facing foreign workers in France and therefore to immigration becoming a “political issue” in France.

Two critical legislative accomplishments resulted from this period, both of which are linked to the substantial pressure that these immigrant political contestations had enacted on the French state apparatus and the mainstream political parties: a law that made discrimination based on national origin a punishable offense, and a series of laws that eliminated the discrimination foreigners had faced in the national trade union structure. The liberal organization MRAP had lobbied for the former for thirteen years, before a version of the bill finally passed in June 1972. This law made calling for discrimination, hate or violence against another person for national origins a punishable offense. While leftist groups and immigrant activists had not involved themselves in the formal legislative efforts, their condemnation of discrimination and racism explains the legislation’s success after years of stagnation. Indeed, by the early 1970s, the CGT and
the CFDT both endorsed it.\(^{207}\) The law was hailed as landmark legislation at the time, but the wave of racist crimes in Marseille shows its obvious limitations. Progressive legislation alone could not transform social consciousness, or erase the sustained presence of a plethora of far-right groups nostalgic for France’s colonial past.

Additionally, in large part due to the involvement of foreign workers in the 1968 strikes and the subsequent sequence of worker “insubordination,” the French legislature passed two laws that sought to better integrate foreign workers into the national trade union structure. In 1972, foreigners were given the right to vote and be elected to leadership positions—but with the condition that they be able to read and write in French. This latter condition was eventually removed in 1975.\(^{208}\) These reforms, initiated by the trade union movement and the French state, had clearly responded to the labor unrest involving foreign workers.\(^{209}\)

The success of these legislative efforts underlined the growing consciousness of immigrant-specific issues among the mainstream parties of the French left and the trade union movement. For instance, by 1976, the newly ascendant Socialist Party endorsed the right of foreigners to form associations.\(^{210}\) By 1981, the Socialist Party eventually endorsed the right to vote for foreigners in municipal elections—although the Mitterrand administration never came through on that promise.\(^{211}\)

\(^{207}\) *Droit et liberté*, July–August 1972, 9.  
\(^{209}\) To draw a comparison with the United States, the Wagner Act of 1935 responded to a similar wave of labor unrest, albeit on a much greater scale.  
\(^{210}\) Gordon, *Immigrants & Intellectuals*, 176.  
\(^{211}\) Current French President François Hollande also included this promise in his 2012 election platform. As of May 2013, the reform has yet to be enacted.
At the same time, the greater visibility of immigrant issues was also accompanied by the decade-long evolution of immigration into a national political “problem.”\textsuperscript{212} This development can be traced back as early the 1970 fire in Aubervilliers, which highlighted that housing conditions for foreigners required more active management from the state.\textsuperscript{213} On the one hand, the official discourse—that the living conditions in the hostels and the shantytowns were unacceptable and needed to be addressed for health and safety reasons—should be taken at face value. But it is also probable that state officials were alarmed at the fact that the Aubervilliers memorial had been so dominated by the gauchistes, and that nearly all political action regarding the plight of shantytown and hostel residents had, up until this point, essentially been monopolized by the far-left (with the exception of MRAP). Lastly, the hostels and shantytowns clashed with France’s “new modern” image that the government was trying to adopt. In any case, following the events in Aubervilliers, the Prime Minister called for speeding up the already existing policy of destroying the shantytowns. This process finally came to a close in 1976.\textsuperscript{214}

Two other critical factors contributed to the immigration becoming a political “problem”: the economic downturn and subsequent spike in unemployment and the ongoing rise in non-European immigration—often involving France’s former colonial subjects. By 1975, the two largest foreign populations in France were Algerians and Portuguese, overtaking the Spanish and Italians. But between 1968 and 1975, the


\textsuperscript{213} Gastaut, “Les bidonvilles: lieux d’exclusion et de marginalité en France durant les trente glorieuses,” Gastaut argues the shantytown was politicized by May 1968 and the fire in Aubervilliers.

\textsuperscript{214} Gastaut, “Les bidonvilles: lieux d’exclusion et de marginalité en France durant les trente glorieuses.”
population of Moroccans had more than tripled, with the Tunisian population more than
doubling. Emigration from all of these countries would continue to rise in subsequent
years (albeit at a much smaller rate from Portugal). By 1982, the non-European foreign
population had overtaken the foreign European population, and the former nationalities
had come to be the new face of immigration in France.

Under the pressures of economic problems and rising non-European emigration,
there was a spike in violence and hostility toward foreigners. In 1973, a group of far-right
activists Marseille bombed the Algerian consulate—only months after the spree of
killings that had triggered the MTA’s “general strike.”^215 Meanwhile, the far right group
New Order launched a public campaign demanding an end to “immigration sauvage,” a
clear play on the double meaning of the word “savage.”^216 Even the National Front, while
still marginal at this time, was founded in 1972.217 These far-right groups were confined
to the fringe, but they spoke to the growing backlash against immigration in an
increasingly difficult economic climate.

Correspondingly, the French state took a more hands-on approach in overseeing
migratory policy, and attempting to better control non-European immigration. In 1974,
the administration indefinitely halted all immigration to France. While that policy only
remained in effect for a year, the state continued to attempt to restrict and control
migratory flows in an unprecedented fashion. In 1977, the so-called Stoléru-Bonnet

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^217 The National Front won its first election in 1983. In recent years, it has seen a surge in
popularity. In 2002, its presidential candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen advanced to the second round
against incumbent Jacques Chirac, where he was handily defeated. In 2012, Le Pen’s daughter
Marine Le Pen received 17.9% of the vote in the first round—the highest percentage of the vote
for a FN presidential candidate in the party’s history.
circularies encouraged immigrants to return to their countries of origin by offering monetary compensation.\footnote{218}{Abdallah, \textit{J’y suis, J’y reste}, 52-55.}

These changing politics of immigration were also marked by a decline in \textit{gauchisme} and a shift in the character of immigrant-specific political contestation. As mentioned in the introduction, there is no clear consensus as to when the “1968 years” came to a close. It is nevertheless clear that by the mid-1970s, many of the leftist groups that had been so active after 1968 were increasingly less relevant. This can be explained, in part, due to the simple fact that the \textit{Grand Soir} never materialized. There were brief moments that recalled 1968: the widely attended funeral for Pierre Overney or the 1973 occupation of the Lip factory, where workers actually enacted the call for self-management and managed the workplace themselves. But a movement on the scale of May never emerged again. In addition to this political disillusionment, leftist groups’ penchant for clashing with authorities took a toll on activists. The Proletarian Left had been banned in 1970, and was forced to work underground. The Communist League was banned in 1973, and similarly forced to re-constitute itself under a different name.\footnote{219}{Significantly, the LC was banned for violently confronting New Order for its meeting on the topic of “Halte à l’immigration sauvage.”}

The decline of these groups also had much to do with the international political context, where the revolutionary socialist movements that had inspired a generation of activists suffered a series of setbacks. By the mid 1970s, the Cultural Revolution had already begun to fade from memory, cemented by U.S. President Richard Nixon’s visit to Mao in 1972. The liberal economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping further signaled that China had abandoned its revolutionary project. Meanwhile in Latin America, the leftist guerilla movements were failing to make inroads against the military dictatorships. Moreover, in
nearby Italy and Germany, left-wing radical groups were increasingly marginalized, and fizzled away as some members opted for the armed route.\footnote{Notably, the Red Brigades (Italy) and the Red Army Faction (Germany).}

A massive transformation in intellectual life in France was also taking place. The dominant Marxist intellectual tradition, characterized by towering figures like Louis Althusser or Jean-Paul Sartre (who was present at nearly every one of the ‘68 demonstrations, from Aubervilliers to the Goutte d’Or to Overney’s funeral) was giving way to an assemblage of thinkers who became known as the ‘New Philosophers,’ a group of liberal intellectuals who had very explicitly renounced their radical pasts and previous Marxist-inspired perspectives on class struggle and social change. While critiques of the Soviet Union were not unprecedented—they were, in fact, very common among the French radical left—the 1974 publication of the \textit{Gulag Archipelago} contributed to a deeper backlash against the broader Marxist political project of emancipation itself. While the generation of ‘68 had sought to re-invigorate the Marxist political tradition and revolutionary project by liberating it from the Communist Party, there was a growing sense that that emancipatory project needed to be abandoned altogether.\footnote{See for example, André Glucksmann, \textit{Les maîtres penseurs} (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1977).}

Indeed, the turn from ‘68 era \textit{gauchiste} leaders to champions of liberalism in France is stunning in its scope, a political and intellectual evolution captured and bitterly critiqued by Guy Houcquenghem.\footnote{Guy Houcquenghem, \textit{Lettre ouverte à ceux qui sont passés du col Mao au Rotary} (Paris: Albin Michel, 1986). Houcquenghem was a philosophy professor at the University of Vincennes, a Maoist sympathizer himself, and had helped found the FHAR.} Many of the prominent \textit{gauchistes} became supporters of the Socialist Party’s François Mittérand, who triumphed in the 1981 election, and a handful even joined the administration. Even Regis Debray, who had
studied under Louis Althusser and traveled to Bolivia with Che Guevara, took a job in
Mitterrand’s cabinet, advising the President on international affairs from 1981 to 1985.

Amid this changing international and national political context, the immigrant
dratic movements of France changed too. This is not to suggest there were no longer
any movements that harkened back to the post-’68 contestations in terms of the issues
they raised. For instance, the nationally coordinated rent strike at the state-run Sonacotra
hostels, which lasted from 1975 to 1980, recalled the smaller-scale strikes at Ivry,
Pierrefitte, and elsewhere.223 There were outbursts of opposition to the various laws
restricting immigration in the 1970s. There were also a handful of strikes involving
immigrant workers in the early 1980s.224

But the support networks that had linked the far-left to immigrant activists had
 vanished. In January 1980, Mogniss Abdallah lamented the passing of what the magazine
Sans Frontière, run by former MTA activists, dubbed the “Immigrant Years” in its cover
story: the various worker strikes and factory occupations, the anti-racist causes from
Djellali to the 1973 ‘general strike’: “At the dawning of the 1980s,” Abdallah wrote,
“immigrants seem a bit like ‘losers’ that one wouldn’t support like before. We won’t see
again, like in 71, Sartre, Foucault and Mauriac in Barbès.”225 It was clear that a certain

223 Choukri Hmed, “‘Sonacotra cedera!’: La construction collective d’une identité collective à
l’occasion de la grève des loyers dans les foyers de travailleurs migrants (1973-1981),” Revue
224 Vincent Gay, “Des grèves de la dignité aux luttes contre les licenciements: les travailleurs
http://www.contretemps.eu/interventions/gr%C3%A8ves-dignit%C3%A9-luttes-contre-
licenciements-travailleurs-immigr%C3%A9s-citroen-talbot-1982-1.
author. À l’aube de ces années 1980, les immigrés apparaissent un peu comme des “perdants”
qu’on ne soutiendra plus comme avant. On ne verra plus comme avant, en 71, Sartre, Foucault,
et Claude Mauriac à Barbès.” Barbès is one of the principal streets that runs through the Goutte
d’Or neighborhood in northern Paris.
chapter of immigrant activism in France—a period of intense contestation facilitated by networks of immigrants and a new generation of French sympathizers, oftentimes fueled by revolutionary aspirations—had come to close.

Like many of the French leftists with whom they had interacted, MTA activists faced disillusionment and state repression, and generally scaled back their political activity. For one, the PLO had suffered a series of setbacks, and while Palestine continued to serve as an important reference point, it was no longer regarded as the vanguard of Arab revolution. Meanwhile, the post-independence regimes in the Arab World had stabilized themselves, as the influence of socialist and pan-Arab activists waned. All in all, the MTA’s founding mission of linking revolution in the Arab World to political struggles in France was looking more and more unlikely.

In this changing international and national context, the MTA began to splinter, eventually dissolving itself in 1976. The more immediate factor was an intense debate over the aims of the theatre troupe Al-Assifa, which pitted those who supported organizational and artistic autonomy for the troupe against those who wanted it to remain focused on politics. The debate itself is incredibly telling of the political disillusionment many MTA activists felt by the middle of the decade. As Mokhtar Bachiri remarked at the time, “Often, it is only the acting that brings us together. That is insufficient and dangerous for our continuation.”

Many MTA activists thus shifted their focus away from overtly political contestation and toward cultural production in the later part of the decade. In 1979, former MTA activists helped launch the magazine Sans Frontière to chronicle issues.

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facing the immigrant population at large. The journal featured some political and social commentary on immigration, but its tone and underlying mission were a far cry from Al-Assifa—the journal in which activists from the Palestine Committees had chronicled the latest advances of the PLO next to worker strikes in France, calling for worker solidarity.

In 1981, Mokhtar Bachiri and Said Bouziri helped found Radio Soleil Goutte d’Or, a North-African community station broadcasting music and talk, which eventually became known as Radio Beur.\(^{228}\)

**New Political Subjects & The Gap in Historical Memory**

These new cultural initiatives were directed in part at what became known as the Beur generation, that is the so-called “second generation” of immigrants.\(^{229}\) In many respects, this generation was materially better off than their parents: they were living in better housing conditions, and with a clear pathway toward French citizenship, they faced a far more stable legal situation than their parents.\(^{230}\) But they had nevertheless come of age in a country that was increasingly sensitive to the “problem” of immigration, which served as the basis for their political action. The Beur political activists of the 1980s were motivated by what they saw as the persistence of unequal race relations in French society, the discrimination they faced as a result of their North African heritage, and what they considered to be police brutality.


\(^{229}\) This term is both problematic and ultimately inaccurate, since most of the “second generation” was not actually made up of immigrants. They are the children of immigrants.

\(^{230}\) Unlike in the United States, French citizenship is not granted immediately to anyone born on French soil. French-born children of foreigners can obtain French citizenship after spending an extended period of time in France.
The Marche des Beurs was not the first political engagement for this generation of activists. Drawing inspiration from the “Rock Against Racism” concerts in the United Kingdom, some Beur activists (along with former MTA activist Mogniss Abdallah) had organized a series of concerts called “Rock Against Police” from 1979 to 1983. Others had protested police brutality on a more local basis. But two more immediate factors triggered the much more widely-attended national 1983 March For Equality Against Racism: the victory of the National Front in a municipal election that year, and the ruling Socialist Party’s volte-face on immigration policy. The 1983 march evolved out of the organizing efforts of different groups of young North African activists and allies. The following year saw another national march, “Convergences 84,” but it was less attended than the previous year’s action. In the meantime, other Beur activists were attracted to the growing “association movement” made possible after the ban on foreigners receiving state-subsidized funding for organizations was lifted in 1981. These various state-recognized associations, often run in conjunction with liberal French allies, focused on a set of questions that were drastically different than those posed in the ’68 period, like “the right to difference” or the challenges to building a multi-cultural France.

One of the striking features of the Beur political engagement of the 1980s is the lack of transmission of memory from the previous generation of activists. In spite of the fact that “first-generation” immigrants had acted on a wide range of immigrant-

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231 Abdallah, J’y suis, j’y reste, 57-59.
233 Bouamama, Dix ans de Marche des Beurs, 116-128.
234 This has frequently been noted by first-generation immigrant activists and historians of immigrant activism in France. See Abdallah, J’y suis, J’y reste, 58, Bouamama, Dix ans de marche des Beurs, 24, or Helène Trappo, “De la clandestinité à la reconnaissance.”
specific issues—including the problems of racism and discrimination that motivated the children of immigrants to become politically involved—many of the Beurs sensed that they were the first to “speak out.” With the exception of a handful of MTA initiatives that served as a kind of bridge between these different generations of activists, there was generally little interaction between the two generations.235

On the one hand, this can be explained by the often unstable and transitory stays in France of many immigrant activists during the 1968 years. Some foreign activists were deported for their political engagement, and others eventually returned to their countries of origin. Many of the single males that had emigrated to France in the post-war period did not settle in the country, and did not raise children in France.

Another contributing factor was that the young Beur activists were dealing with a different set of concerns than many of those “immigrant workers” who became politically involved in the aftermath of 1968. The famous “myth of return” did not shape or lurk over the political consciousness of Beur activists. These young activists had grown up in France, were on their way to becoming French nationals, and were staying in France. As such, the prior generation’s identification with the national liberation movements in the Arab World and Third World meant little. The activism of the Beurs was focused more squarely on the French political arena.

Correspondingly, the children of immigrants identified less with the term “worker” than their ‘68-era counterparts. On one level, this reflected a simple economic reality: unemployment figured far more prominently among the so-called “second generation” than those foreign workers who had arrived in France during the Trente

235 Radio Beur, Rock Against the Police, and the journal Sans Frontière were all initiatives of former MTA activists.
Glorieuses and found employment relatively easily. But the abandonment of identification with the category of “worker” also reflected the changing political vocabulary on the Western left. This underlines the critical role that the decline of *gauchisme* played in the lack of memory transmission from one generation of immigrant activists to the next. As previously mentioned, immigrant activists had identified as workers even when they were not. “Worker” was the category from which all progressive political change emanated, an assumption that was coming under intense criticism on the left itself by the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The *Beurs* were thus detached from much of the previous generation of immigrant activists not only because of their position as French nationals and the new set of political concerns this implied, but also because they were detached from the political tradition that had proven pivotal in the ‘68-era wave of immigrant activism. Indeed, *gauchisme* had not only evaporated by the mid 1970s, but many of the prominent leftist activists were in the process of disavowing their radical pasts. *Ex-gauchistes* like Serge July or Roland Castro were not interested in celebrating, much less reigniting or reenacting their past struggles. On the contrary, they and many others wanted to distance themselves from their past—whether it was to offer better practical support to the Mitterrand administration or rethink the liberal democratic ideal.

The Socialist Party and sympathizers of the Mitterrand administration were not the only political force supporting the various Beur initiatives. But they were among the most prominent supporters of the “mouvement associatif,” the 1984 march, and had

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236 The unemployment rate in France had ballooned from 3.4% in 1975 to 8.9% in 1985. “Taux de chômage depuis 1975,” *Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques*.

237 Castro had gone from doing outreach in the shantytowns with a small Maoist group to heading Mitterrand’s program to redevelop the suburbs. Gordon, *Immigrants & Intellectuals*, 212.
launched the popular group SOS Racisme, which began by selling badges at the Convergences 84. With support from high-ranking administration officials and Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac, SOS Racisme presented a morally grounded critique of racism, often divorced from socioeconomic factors. Moreover, the issue of Palestine was ignored, and the question of police brutality sidestepped. In short, SOS Racisme and other liberal supporters of the Beur initiatives had little interest in presenting their activity as a continuation of the various immigrant movements that had emerged in the aftermath of ‘68, much less the revolutionaries of the MTA. Some far-left groups did have a small presence in Beur initiatives, but they were largely overshadowed by these new (and far more prominent) sympathizers. So while there were barriers to memory transmission on the side of first-generation immigrants and the Beurs, there were also substantial barriers between the gauchistes and the sympathizers of Beurs. Between 1968 and 1983, immigration had been transformed in France—so too had the politics of immigrant activism.

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238 The badges had the slogan “Touche pas à mon pote” or “Hands off my buddy.”
Rethinking 1968 and Rethinking the Politics of Immigration in France

The ultimate goal of this thesis is to contribute to a broader re-conceptualization of the politics of immigration in France by understanding the 1968 movement to be a foundational moment for both immigrant political actors and for a generation of French activists who “discovered” the different plights of immigrants living in France. Among scholars, this point of view remains limited or under-researched to date, with the notable exception of Gordon’s foundational work. This thesis has argued for the importance of 1968 by attempting to more precisely link the development of immigrant political activism in France to the support networks of leftist activists that emerged in the movement’s aftermath. These networks and alliances helped to articulate and disseminate a wide array of demands specific to the immigrant condition in France. On the basis of these networks alone, immigrant activism in France is ultimately inseparable from May ’68. The movement opened up political and ideological space on the French Left for new immigrant-specific demands to be heard, sidestepping the Communist Party and trade union structure that had previously generally excluded the concerns of foreign workers, with its aftershocks eventually forcing the political mainstream to adapt. Even the ideology of the Arab Workers Movement, while grounded in a specific Arab political identity, remained deeply influenced by the transnational emancipatory ambitions of the 1968 movement and its generation of activists.

The ultimate legacy of these fragmented immigrant contestations is perhaps more difficult to discern. While the post-’68 wave of political action contributed to immigration becoming a mainstream issue in French society, many of the key participants had either faded into irrelevance, left the country, or renounced their past
views. While the political context of the 1980s clearly bore the effects of the post-68 wave of activism, it did not feature the same political players.

Nevertheless, there are traces of the ‘68 era of activism that reverberate today in France. Most prominent is the defense of the sans-papiers, a cause that often brings together a range of activists from the political Left and the Church to rally behind undocumented immigrants facing the threat of deportation. And while Palestine has ceased to be the major reference point it once was, French activism in support of the Palestinian cause today similarly unites leftists and activists of Arab origin. Additionally, the sometimes problematic nature of encounters between leftists and activists with foreign roots has not vanished. This is perhaps best illustrated by the failed candidacy of 21-year-old Ilhem Moussaid, a candidate for the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) in the 2010 regional elections. The fact that Moussaid wore a hijab angered some NPA activists, and she eventually withdrew her candidacy and left the party with her supporters.

The themes explored in this thesis remain generally under-researched. In part, the lack of scholarship examining the link between May ‘68 and immigrant political action is likely due to the simple fact that it has taken longer for post-colonial studies or studies of immigration to catch on in France than in the Anglo-Saxon academic world. But the general approach of this thesis also remains limited in large part because of the character of so many of the dominant interpretations of May ‘68 today. The movement has often

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240 *Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste.* The NPA is a direct descendant of the Communist League, whose more recent incarnation, the Communist Revolutionary League, dissolved itself at a 2009 conference and formed the NPA.

been reduced to little more than an inter-generational or cultural conflict, with its millions of participants reduced to “students.” The prominence of these kinds of interpretations has much to do with the intense counter-reaction the movement generated, and often come directly from prominent ex-gauchistes who have since sworn off their involvement in the events and leftist groups. As Kristen Ross has argued, many of these well-respected former leftists are also the de-facto specialists of the event—figures like Regis Debray, Serge July, the longtime editor of *Libération*, or Daniel Cohn-Bendit, now a member of European Parliament.

May 1968 has often been filtered through the commentaries of these “experts,” in large part because the events are situated in the relatively recent past. What is ultimately necessary then is less reliance on these interpretations, and more rigorous historical scholarship on the actual events and their effects themselves. In fact, there are a handful of valuable angles for future research exploring the connections between May 1968 and immigrant activism.

Further research could be devoted toward better understanding how post-'68 networks enabled the many rent strikes and factory strikes discussed in Chapter 3. The chapter analyzed a handful of individual cases, such as the strikes at the Pierrefitte hostel or the Penarroya factories. More rigorous studies could be devoted toward additional cases, with potential research focusing on why certain leftist groups chose to outreach to different factories and hostels, studying how prominent of a role these activists played, and better examining the complex relationship between French activists and immigrant actors.
Future research could also involve a deeper analysis of how the post-’68 wave of contestation contributed to the problematization of immigration in France, in terms of the counter-reactions these political actions produced from the French state and a growing section of the political right. The contemporary problem of “integration” that so often accompanies national conversations about immigration in France—that is, the notion that it is incumbent on foreigners and French citizens with non-European roots to better acclimate themselves with the values of French Republicanism—likely has roots in the counter-reactions of the post-’68 period. At first glance, the intense debates that rage over immigration, integration and Islam in contemporary France may seem far removed from the 1968 years. Nevertheless, the early contours of these issues may have taken shape in the aftermath of immigrants taking political action in 1968 and the years that followed, forcing the state and French society to finally take notice of their presence.
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