



a documentary film by **lucie tourette** 2013 | **hd** | 58' | **french**

# COMING FOR A VISIT

**Undocumented migrants win the battle to get their papers. A historic strike filmed from within.** Despite having no papers, Mohamed, Diallo, Hamet and others have worked and paid taxes in France for years in restaurants, cleaning companies, or construction. In 2009, they go on strike along with 600 other undoc-

umented workers to demand their legalization. They have invested all their energy in this battle: now that their status has been disclosed publically, there is no way back.

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**ASPLAN** 

# SUMMARY

Paris, 2009. More than 6000 undocumented migrants (sans-papiers) go on strike to demand their legalization. Despite having no papers, Mohamed, Diallo, Hamet and others have worked and paid taxes in France for years in restaurants, cleaning companies, or construction. They have invested all their energy in this battle: now that their status has been disclosed publically, there is no way back.

Their employers are at the center of the conflict. French law requires their prior agreement for any legalization, and sans-papiers workers must find a way to obtain it. But their employers know that undocumented migrants will not accept the same working conditions once they have secured legal status. Some temp agency managers say it without joking at the beginning of the film: they lack labor that is "ready to do anything".

Company occupations are as playful as they are risky. Action after action, workers gain confidence in their struggles. As undocumented migrants, they constantly risk being arrested. Yet as workers they have the right to strike and occupy their work site. Assisted by unionists, over the months they learn to negotiate with canny employers and obtain from them what previously seemed out of reach.

For the first time, a camera had unrestricted access to the daily life of the strike during several months. Striker meetings, negotiations with employers, discussions with the police: *Coming for a Visit* tightly follows the courage, occasional hopelessness, conflicts and camaraderie of sans-papiers who learned how to strike by doing it.





## CONTEXT

In the 2000 decade, the hunt for foreigners with irregular status accelerated in France. Three laws on immigration toughened conditions of residence for foreigners. Legalization options narrowed down. More and more foreigners have been constricted to a clandestine life. Identity checks, arrests, and deportations surged.

When, in 2007, a law allowed the legalization of undocumented migrants with an employment contract, labor unions stepped into the breach – among them France's larger union, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT). Hundreds, soon thousands of undocumented migrant workers went on strike inside their companies, and demanded legal papers. In 2009, they were more than 6000, among them 1400 temporary staffing agency

workers, which is the group we have followed for this documentary. These temp workers have initiated the biggest strike in the sector ever in France. It is a historic moment for the fight of the sans-papiers as much as for labor struggles.

## SYNOPSIS

Mohamed N'Diaye is an undocumented Mauritanian. Elected delegate by the other strikers, he finds himself on the frontline of negotiations with business owners. First, the task seems to him to be out of reach. His colleague Bandjoukou explains: *"No delegate has the capacity to discuss clearly with an employer. We are not unionists, we are not trained at all. We are blind men"*.

The final scene shows the occupation of a temp agency. In it one can see the progress made over the months when Mohamed introduces himself as “Mohamed, delegate of the CGT”. Alternating between firmness, humor, and false connivance, Mohamed surprises his adversary. The agency manager is stunned that an undocumented migrant can represent a labor union: “You can’t be from the CGT if you don’t have papers!” Numerical pressure and Mohamed’s negotiating skills will allow the operation to succeed.

How can workers who are intimidated by their employers manage, through perseverance, to speak as equals with business owners and managers constantly trying to bring them back to their subaltern status?

Employers of undocumented migrants have found themselves at the heart of the conflict. Some of them are interviewed at the beginning of the documentary. Their words provide some

early elements of context, hinting at work relations based on submissiveness and paternalism. “*The problem is that as soon as they [migrant workers] know they have rights, they allow themselves so many things*”, complains the clerical employee of an agency.

Raymond Chauveau is a labor leader from the CGT. A few days before the start of the strike, in October 2009, he explained to upcoming strikers during a meeting “*Those who are not ready to fight can leave us*”. Those who are going to strike do not know if their movement will be successful, nor how much time the conflict will last. They are preparing themselves to several months without an income. Scores of them will be unable to pay their rent and will lose their housing. They need to be “*ready to fight*” indeed!

At the beginning of the film, only experienced white unionists take the microphone, even though the strike they are organizing involves several thousands of





black workers. *Coming for a Visit* follows these strikers as they gradually speak out for themselves, and become the actors of their own destiny.

Meetings hosting up to several hundred strikers are organized everyday in a Paris union building called the "103". They are facilitated by a representative of the CGT: Maurice Amzallag. A retired railroad worker, Maurice voluntarily remained at the bottom of the ladder throughout his career, so as to remain closer to the most precarious workers. He took part in numerous conflicts in which he contributed to setting up worker committees. His main concern is providing training to strikers.

The first weeks of the strike are dominated by a recurring question: that of the lack of experienced unionists to support the mobilization. While the obstacle seems insurmountable to strikers, Maurice Amzallag seeks to reassure them. He encourages them to become aware of their collective strength: *"What frightens employers is the number of strikers and the strength we display"*. He incites them

to project themselves beyond the strike: *"Little by little YOU are the unionists. In the beginning you did not think you could go see the employers. [...] Today, more and more employers let us in, and listen to the strikers who came. [...] Tomorrow, when you are in the companies, you will be the labor leaders and the union delegates. Start training now!"*

For each new negotiation, strikers adjust their strategy to the target. While in the supermarket of a rich neighborhood of Paris, they make sure to gain the sympathy of the well-off customers. Each occupation raises the issue of the police. Protected by labor law, *sans-papiers* on strike are not arrested. Two policemen leave after being informed that the strikers belong to the CGT, who is one of France's largest and most respected labor unions.

During the occupation of the French headquarters of Randstad temporary staffing services, undocumented workers come in far higher numbers. The building is immense, and it is crucial to occupy as many offices as possible. In-

vading a cozy professional universe that is not theirs, they split between floors, greeting office clerks who can be either welcoming or hostile. Struck by panic, the management of the company sets the fire alarm on, and evacuates the staff from the building. Policemen play an ambiguous role. Armed with a flash ball, they alternatively use negotiation and threat. Relations are not simple either with the local union representatives from the company: surprised by the mass occupation, they also seek to have the strikers evacuate.

Confronted with the challenge of facing various public reactions or the hostility and condescension of their employers, strikers also confront their own fears as they come out in the open and take their destiny into their own hands.

## STATEMENT OF INTENT

We made the decision to make this documentary while witnessing scenes that were particularly intense and never shown before: meetings among strikers of course, but also live negotiations with the police and employers. We wanted to show the different actors of the conflict: strikers, unionists, employers, policemen...

In the tradition of direct cinema, this film purports to keep a trace of this historic movement, but also to insure the transmission of strike tactics, so that future undocumented migrants benefit from the experience of their predecessors. It shows sans-papiers speaking up and becoming the actors of their own history.





## VISUAL APPROACH

This film is a raw testimony, a direct immersion at the core of a movement. Over several months our presence on the sides of strikers and union leaders allowed us to get unlimited access to preparation meetings and actions. Because trust had been established, we could circulate freely during the shooting phase. We used a light filming apparatus: a small shoulder camera, with sometimes the microphone fixed to the camera. The lens follows the action and remains in the background.

When we accompanied strikers for negotiations with their employers, we always filmed openly. Businesses and police officers accepted our presence to varying degrees. At times the camera turned into a stake in power

relations: its continued presence was mentioned by strikers as a precondition for negotiating. Backing away on this would have meant displaying weakness. The strikers never asked us to stop filming.

We banished all editing effects that could have created a distance with unrolling events. There is neither music nor off-scene comments, and only few interview extracts. After writing a book on this mobilization, we wanted to let its actors speak, and invite the viewer to follow this adventure as closely as possible. With the same purpose, we chose to avoid "technical" discussions, for example on precise aspects of temp worker employment contracts, and instead only retained "universal" moments (doubts, skirmishes, increasing self-confidence), in which viewers can more easily project themselves.

# DIRECTION

Lucie Tourette was born in 1979. *Coming for a visit* is her first documentary.

When taking art classes, she specialized in the study of photography, writing a thesis on posthumous portraits. Her interest for photography's ability to convey social phenomena drove her towards journalism. She started journalism school in Tours, from which she graduated in 2003. Since then, she has been a journalist with Bayard Presse, where she writes for the youth and environmental sectors. She began working on undocumented migrants with four sociologists: Pierre Barron, Anne Bory, Sébastien Chauvin and Nicolas Jounin. They published several articles and, in 2011, a book: *On bosse ici, on reste ici ! La grève des sans-papiers : une aventure inédite* (Paris: La Découverte). In the course of fieldwork for the book, Lucie Tourette began filming the extraordinary strike of temp workers, developing the project of making a movie about this more specific aspect of the sans-papiers worker movement.



# PRODUCTION

## Production

Lucie Tourette (ASPLAN)  
Francesco Ragazzi (VEZFILM LTD)

**Director** Lucie Tourette

**Editing** Quentin Papapietro

**Mixing** Valentin Portron

The film was accepted for in-residence editing at the Périphérie Centre for Cinematographic Creation, in partnership with department of Seine-Saint-Denis.