

# The Internal Colony

Jean-Paul Sartre



Jean-Paul Sartre, the much-discussed French philosopher who penetrates so deeply into European political thinking and, from this perspective views the situation of the Third World, makes this commentary on *Le livre des travailleurs africains en France* (The Book of African Workers in France), published by the General Union of Senegalese Workers in France (UGTSF), in Maspero Editions.

The commentary is Sartre's denunciation of the treatment given African workers in France — not only the Senegalese — and how they are used for an indefinite prolongation of the French colonial system, and it was released during the debate over the book's publication organized by UGTSF.

Tricontinental considers it necessary to publish Sartre's words on the work which is profusely and meticulously documented.

WHAT one understands when one reads this book, is that the situation to which the African workers are subjected — and many other immigrant workers along with them — is not due to negligence, nor solely to racism: the superexploitation of the African worker is necessary to the French capitalist economy.

It is often said of the North Americans that they have their colonies "at home," in their own country; and what France is doing is trying to reconstruct internally the colonies she has lost. We see, in particular, the meaning of the system that integrates the African workers into our economy.

First of all, the book is very clear on one thing: the underground. The underground is a farce: it is in fact a policy of immigration. As one of the Africans questioned states very well: "You don't walk from Senegal, you come by boat; consequently, this boat arrives at a port, Marseilles for example, and how can the 30 or 50 African workers aboard disembark without the tolerance of the police?" Tolerance which, on the one hand, is evidently dictated by the needs of the patrons;

tolerance which, on the other hand, makes those African workers themselves pay dearly. In other words, they pay to enter the country, a country which on the other hand now says: "But these people have come without being invited; we don't know them; we have no responsibility for them. Their dwellings are uninhabitable? But there are too many of them." There are too many of them, but not so many that they don't all serve the French economy. What it allows equally — for one yes, for one no — is to have the threat of expulsion hanging over them, precisely because they have not been invited!

You see, to begin with, that it is necessary to view this famous farce of the underground as the type of immigration the owners, in fact, want. In effect, the metropolis used to import raw material from the colony. It still does so, although now under a form of neocolonialism. This is what explains, as has been said very well, the destruction of the structures of the African countries for the benefit of the former metropolis. And it is also what explains (it is a circle) that the immigrant workers are more numerous than before, because, clearly, in their country the situation is becoming more and more difficult. What is imported today with these men?

They want to import them as what one might call "human raw material"; that is, they want them to be unskilled workers: unskilled precisely because skilled work will be reserved for the French workers; moreover they are systematically denied the possibilities for apprenticeship when they are working. One of them — all of this is in the book — who, for example, asked permission to study in order to hold a skilled job, was told: "We have no need here for skilled workers nor even specialized workers, we need manual labor."

It is therefore clear that they want to reduce the worker to the limit of his most elemental possibilities. And when skilled workers appear among the Senegalese and the Africans in general, they make them work in jobs very inferior to their skill (there are cooks in Le Havre who have worked for 30 years in a hotel as dishwashers, although they know their trade perfectly) or, then, if they give them their correct position, they pay them much less than the work demands. Such is the case with a truck driver, for example, who is presently working — I don't remember in which town — as a truck driver and is paid as a peon.

So it is a general policy. This policy has great advantages for the owner: first, those imported are "formed" men; that is, the owner and, in general, the French economy, do not have to support the legitimate weight of a childhood in which they would have to invest. One has to be at least 14 or 15 years old to work, which means that from birth up to the moment a person enters a plant, an industry or any work, he has 15 nonproductive years. These 15 years are simply wiped out in the case of the formed man who is imported, one who will be incorporated into the work force immediately, after three days of apprenticeship, for example. Thus, these men, and there are a million such men — I do not speak of the Senegalese alone — a million men, which allows the French owner a considerable saving. Moreover, they perform tasks that the French workers find more and more repugnant, and so, as has been said very well, they are not integrated into the French working class but are left on the side line. They are subworkers. Thus a racism develops that is very useful to capital. Then they do everything possible

to prevent them from entering French life and progressing like any other Frenchman. They do everything possible to make them keep their native tongue, and not learn any other language that would allow them to read and write. Whenever it is necessary to teach them, volunteers, and usually French revolutionaries, undertake the task. But there is nothing that permits literacy education. Why? Because "where there is no elite there are no problems," is what they said in the Belgian Congo (and on the other hand this later caused many problems).

Finally, they only allow them to associate with each other; the General Union of Senegalese Workers in France (UGTSF) is a so-called "foreign" association; now it takes only a decree of the Ministry of the Interior to dissolve a foreign association, without motive; consequently, any possibility of a union is highly precarious. Finally, on the question of social welfare, for example, which in principle they must receive, there are significant benefits as follows: only if their families are with them do they receive any family subsidy; of course it is quite evident that the majority of African workers do not bring their families out of their country because they are living here precisely to send whatever money they can to support their families. Consequently, either they are not paid these benefits or if they sometimes receive some, they are at a much lower rate. Nevertheless, they say to the African workers: "But you have not been robbed, because all this reverts to the social action fund which, for example, must construct homes with this money." But do you know how deceitful that is? Because, finally, they ask these African workers themselves, with the money to which they have a right, to build houses that later belong to the state and which they never enjoy for very long because, in general, there is this famous rotation movement which permits the replacement of men worn out by fatigue and illness; they would never have more than two or three years in a house they had paid for. As you see, this is both a cheat and a major benefit for French industry. Consequently the African worker is super-exploited and he is superexploited because it is not possible for the French economy to maintain a competitive corner in Europe if it does not, precisely, use men that are poorly paid, who receive salaries inferior to the salaries of French workers.

As you know, there is a whole horrible process that follows from this — that is to say, the places where they actually live — because the housing that should be constructed for them has not been built. There is discrimination and the constant possibility of being expelled and then the actual expulsions (all those that have taken place since 1968 are cited in the work). But in a more general manner, tens of thousands of men are destroyed; they send them back to their country without a skilled job, having contracted illnesses due to the change of climate but above all, because of the unhealthy conditions in which they live; they have been constantly exploited and superexploited. And all this solely and consciously because this labor force — this truly colonial labor force — is necessary.

For these reasons I believe that everyone must read this book because they must be aware through deeds, not theories, only through deeds, of the mechanism of superexploitation; and recognize that we really have our colonies in the interior, as the North Americans do, with the difference that the situation of the North American blacks is a little less bad than the situation of the Africans who work in our country.