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# The first collective protest of black African migrants in postcolonial France (1960–1975): a struggle for housing and rights

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## ABSTRACT

The study of the political activism of black African diasporas in France after the independence era remains a neglected area of research. This paper fills a gap in the literature by exploring the first notable postcolonial protests in the country by sub-Saharan migrants. The struggle of black African workers against their dire housing conditions opened up a ‘cycle of collective action’ that led to the better-known Sonacotra migrant hostels (*foyers*) rent strike of 1975–1980. Even before the Sonacotra strike, however, black African workers had been able to call on the authorities from both their origin and residence countries and to mobilize transnational networks in order to support their demands. This article provides the first comprehensive historical study of this decisive period. It highlights how ethnic ties are intertwined with political and social ones, focusing on the solidarities that these migrants developed in political networks and in their neighbourhoods.

**KEYWORDS** France; West Africa; migrants; protest; race; housing

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## Introduction

Although the political activism of diasporic Africans in France before decolonization has been well researched (e.g. Dewitte 1985; Edwards 2003; Wilder 2015), their mobilization after the independence era remains deeply overlooked. This article seeks to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the first notable protests carried out by sub-Saharan migrants just after the decolonization process. The struggle by black African workers to improve their dire housing conditions created a ‘cycle of collective action’ (for a sociological definition of this concept, see e.g. Snow and Benford 1992). Importantly, this cycle laid the groundwork for the Sonacotra rent strike in the second half of the 1970s, a social movement too often portrayed by anti-racism activists and social scientists alike as the first significant political mobilization of immigrants

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in French postcolonial history (e.g. Ginesy-Galano 1984; Hmed 2006; Bernardot 2008).

Some episodes of the protest cycle initiated by West African migrants have been included in volumes devoted to the history of immigration in France. However, the diffuse continuity of these micro-mobilizations, which unfolded for fifteen years throughout Paris and its outskirts, has not been fully investigated. This article provides the first historical study of this decisive period through the systematic study of the available municipal, departmental and national archives on the topic, supplemented with readings of personal archives kept by African and French activists involved in the protests.

Based upon the reconstituted timeline of events, this article sheds light on a defining moment in the postcolonial history of African diasporas in France, in which black workers emerged as political actors, able to address authorities from both their countries of origin and residence and to mobilize transnational networks in order to support their demands. In line with an emerging transatlantic scholarship that is reassessing the construction of blackness in France since the imperial era (e.g. Ndiaye 2008; Germain 2008; Keaton, Sharpley-Whiting, and Stovall 2012), the analysis here bears witness to the lasting permanence of ethnic and racial boundaries beyond decolonization, notably through the design of a segregated housing policy for black workers from the 1960s onwards.

This article starts with the housing crisis that was generated by the sharp rise in migratory flows from former French colonies during the Algerian War. This led not only to the intervention of representatives from pro-governmental African associations, but also to the first formal protests by black workers. These developments occurred in a tense context in which black African and North African migrants were pitted against each other in competition for scarce housing resources. The second section of the article examines how various associations and public organizations in the mid-1960s attempted to answer these housing shortages by developing a racialized housing policy for sub-Saharan migrants. Their efforts fell short of finding viable solutions, but, in gathering hundreds of migrants in the same living spaces, created conducive conditions for increasing political mobilization. The last section of the article is set against the backdrop of the stark political changes wrought in the aftermath of May 1968. This period saw a significant increase in micro-mobilizations and attempts by radical French and African militants to build a coordinated movement, thereby laying the foundations for the protest cycle initiated by Sonacotra residents in the second half of the 1970s (Hmed 2006, 397–413).

### **Beyond ethnic tensions: the structuring of protest (1960–1964)**

Like most liberal Western democracies (see e.g. Fitzgerald and Cook-Martin 2014), the French state officially abandoned selective immigration policies

based upon ethnic and racial criteria after the Second World War (Weil 1991). The independence era nevertheless underlined the conspicuous ambivalence of a supposedly colour-blind egalitarian republic and the country's allegedly 'race-free immigration policy' (Silverman 2007, 633). On the one hand, Algerians living in France were stripped of their French citizenship at the end of the War of Independence (Shepard 2006). On the other, sub-Saharan migrants were not deemed 'assimilable' by French demographers and ministers, illustrating the enduring existence of ethnic hierarchies at the topmost levels of the state (Dedieu 2012).

In spite of the non-institutionalization of these migratory flows, the decolonization era was a landmark for the transformation of West African migrations, which, after having long been continental, became gradually intercontinental (Manchuelle 1997). Apart from the economic boom of the post-war period, two primary reasons for this can be identified. First, in the late 1950s, the Algerian War opened new employment opportunities for sub-Saharan migrants as French men enrolled in the military and Algerian workers departed to fight for their homeland's independence (Tapinos 1975, 47–54; Adams 1977, 98). Second, the independence of former French African colonies led to multilateral agreements offering Africans freedom of circulation in order to preserve the economic and political interests of France in Africa and to avoid 'mass returns' of Europeans settled there (Viet 1998, 279–295). As a result, a sharp rise in migratory flows to France can be seen in the aftermath of the decolonization process: the West African migrant population climbed sharply from 2,296 people in 1954 to 17,787 in 1962 (Dedieu 2012, 24–25).

The vast majority of black African migrants in France came from the Senegal River Valley at the junction of Mali, Mauritania and Senegal.<sup>1</sup> Eighty-five per cent of these were of Haalpulaar and Soninke background (Diarra 1968, 902). In the mid-1960s, the French departments that hosted the majority of these migratory flows were those of the Bouches-du-Rhône, which received 5,000 migrants, and the Seine, which received 10,000. Metallurgic, electric and mechanical factories hired almost 58% of this manpower, compared to 16% in the textile sector, 8% in the chemical industry and 6% in public construction (Dedieu 2012, 24–25).

Given the French authorities' lack of preparedness for these unanticipated migratory flows and the context of post-war reconstruction (e.g. Weil 1991; Viet 1998), the first black African migrants could not access the regular public housing system, nor were they offered dedicated facilities. In contrast, Algerian workers were provided for by the Sonacotral, a state-sponsored housing project, developed in 1956 as much to house this working-class population as to control their political activities (Hmed 2006).

As a result, most black African migrants in this period were forced to seek accommodation in a range of privately owned facilities, including shacks,

Algerian-owned hotels, houses rented out sometimes by sub-Saharan compatriots, and the basements of buildings also housing North African workers. Very early on the situation became dangerous as these substandard lodgings posed multiple health risks. There were several occurrences of shacks burning down due to defective heating systems, as well as a high number of tuberculosis cases during the winter (Dedieu 2012, 28–31).

These dire conditions pushed well-established charity organizations, such as the Comité Inter Mouvements Auprès des Évacués (CIMADE), to raise public awareness. New associations such as the Association pour la Formation Technique de Base des Travailleurs Africains et Malgaches (AFTAM), Soutien Dignité aux Travailleurs Africains (Soundiata) and Accueil et Promotion were set up by high-ranking civil servants and political figures tied to Protestant and Catholic networks in order to bring relief to this specific category of the population.<sup>2</sup> The situation also attracted the attention of African political actors. Of particular importance in this regard were pro-governmental associations that had been founded under the aegis of the Malian and Senegalese states to scrutinize their citizens' activism at a time when one-partyism was developing in Africa. Notable among these were the Association des Travailleurs Maliens en France (ATMF) and, more importantly, the influential Union Générale des Travailleurs Sénégalais en France (UGTSF) run by Sally N'Dongo. Close to Senegalese and French political figures, N'Dongo became one of the first people to call public attention to the appalling conditions faced by sub-Saharan workers (Union Générale des Travailleurs Sénégalais en France 1970).

In the early 1960s, housing-related protests were sparse as black Africans were preoccupied with settling and finding work in their country of residence. A few tensions in the northern outskirts of Paris can nevertheless be identified. The arrival of French citizens repatriated from Algeria in 1962 and the return of Algerian workers after the end of the War of Independence exerted intense pressure on the housing market. The Préfecture of Paris warned that 'the situation that has been created may quickly become problematic, given the racial tensions that exist between Africans and North Africans and the housing difficulties faced by these workers'.<sup>3</sup>

The first conflicts to emerge took place in the outskirts of Paris, especially in the municipalities located north of Paris, a stronghold of the French Communist Party (PCF) since the 1920s (Stovall 1989). Very early on, elected communist officials, in particular the Mayor of Saint-Denis, repeatedly challenged the government on the social situation faced by black African migrants. The city of Saint-Denis was home to a large concentration of immigrants in the early 1960s, with as many as 1,000 of them living either in shacks or in hostels owned primarily by Algerians.<sup>4</sup>

Conflicts between North Africans and black Africans were recorded as early as 1961 (Jenkins 2011, 131–135). The most significant outbreak occurred in

July 1963, when the Algerian owner of a hotel located at 14 rue du Landy in Saint-Denis decided to expel West African tenants after the theft of some shoes, a crime for which they had been 'accused without proof'.<sup>5</sup> The tenants agreed to leave provided that they were reimbursed for the rent they had already paid. When the owner, supported by some of his compatriots, refused, the conflict turned into a street fight between approximately 100 North Africans and nearly thirty black Africans, resulting in the intervention of the police and the arrest of seventy-eight people.<sup>6</sup> The consuls of Algeria, Mauritania and Senegal stressed in a joint statement that the incident was 'more a drama of misery than a racial conflict'. For its part, the prominent anti-racist organization Mouvement contre le Racisme et pour l'Amitié entre les Peuples (MRAP) warned against substituting racial explanations for social and economic analysis in interpretations of these growing tensions.<sup>7</sup>

In the same period as these ethnic conflicts, black Africans led political protests in Saint-Denis. These were mostly organized by a group of 200 migrant workers living in shacks on the rue de la Boulangerie (Dedieu 2012, 53–55). An exchange of letters between one of them, Galadio Camara, and the Mayor of Saint-Denis illustrates the determination of some migrants to represent the African community of Saint-Denis as well as their efforts to deal directly with local authorities.<sup>8</sup> This correspondence led to official meetings and, in October 1964, an 'Assembly of Workers of Black Africa' was organized. The assembly gave rise to a resolution calling for coordinated action between trade unions and workers from sub-Saharan Africa to seek 'as soon as possible the financing and construction of homes' and to ensure that African workers enjoyed 'the same benefits as French workers'. This resolution was supported by the representatives of some African associations and by two main French trade unions, the Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens (CFTC) and the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT).

The efforts of communist municipalities to respond to the crisis proved short-lived due to a shortage of public funding and a scarcity of available land on which new housing could be built. Furthermore, the fact that black Africans were, in large part, temporary migrants did not encourage the town halls to take more decisive action. In spite of this, very early on black African migrants were able to organize effective protests. In line with the scholarship on the influence of networks on settlement patterns (e.g. Brettell 2000), this ability can be linked to the ethnic networks that West Africans, especially Soninke, had developed since the imperial era, as much to support themselves as to lobby authorities in Africa and in France in the twentieth century (Manchuelle 1997). Even if the overwhelming majority of West African migrants were newcomers tied by ethnic links, they were not deprived of social capital – they could rely on some people in their own community. Some of these people could simply be the ones with literacy skills, such as Galadio Camara; others, such as Sally N'Dongo, could be connected to both

the French and Senegalese establishments, demonstrating the historical depth of political ties between France and Africa. These ties provided sub-Saharan migrants with relationships and arguments that they could draw upon to convey their demands to both local and national authorities (Mann 2003; Mann 2015, 154–156).

### **Segregated housing structures as sites of mobilization (1965–1968)**

The manner in which the French state tackled the housing shortage faced by black African migrants underlines the continuity of a racialized management of postcolonial migrants far beyond the independence era, in the housing sector as well as at the workplace (Pitti 2005). Although the Sonacotra broadened its focus from supporting Algerians to supporting all immigrants in 1963,<sup>9</sup> it housed very few black Africans at the time. This reluctance stemmed from the belief that black Africans had community-based ways of living together that were incompatible with the alleged individualism of North Africans.<sup>10</sup> The associations that had been created in the early 1960s to provide social assistance to black Africans, such as AFTAM and Soundiata, began to develop their own housing projects alongside their educational programmes. These initiatives were supported by public subsidies from the Fonds d'Action Sociale (FAS). The choice made by the French state and administrative apparatus to offer specialized accommodation for black Africans was explicitly based on the argument that they required 'adapted structures'.<sup>11</sup> Thus, private associations, with state subsidies, were deemed better equipped to deal with the issue (Laurens 2009, 105–107). Contrary to the Sonacotra, which saw the community-based character of black immigrants as an obstacle to their insertion in existing accommodation, the associations viewed this as a resource, relying on forms of internal organization aimed at replicating the hierarchies of the villages of origin (Béguin 2014).

The first wave of new accommodation dedicated to black African migrants emerged between 1963 and 1968.<sup>12</sup> Organizations such as AFTAM, Soundiata and Accueil et Promotion<sup>13</sup> converted factories, warehouses and other disused buildings into dormitories in various parts of Paris and the neighbouring towns. Previously constituted groups were often relocated to these newly opened *foyers*. Within a few years, African housing shifted from localized communities of a few dozen migrants in privately owned lodging to dedicated structures accommodating hundreds of migrants, partly grouped according to common national, regional or ethnic origins. Many of those grouped together had developed bonds in their former accommodation and, in some cases, in the same factories. Unsurprisingly, by concentrating large numbers of migrants, these new structures enhanced their opportunities to organize and mobilize. Thus, the mid-1960s saw a distinct increase in West

Africans raising housing-related issues. Any solutions that were found were largely below standard, thus fuelling further demands for improvements, repairs and an end to rent increases.

In this context, Sally N'Dongo, president of the UGTSF, took action in 1965 against an increase in rent for the *foyer* located at 3 rue Riquet in the 19th arrondissement of Paris at the request of the 200 African workers who lived there. The matter was dealt with by a legal team and copies of the statement made by the bailiff were sent to the consulates of Mali, Senegal and Mauritania.<sup>14</sup> Enjoying strong support from leading organizations and left-wing parties, the UGTSF stood out as the national association that led calls for a solution. It was, however, unable to find any viable resolution to the workers' issue; the situation worsened, prompting an increasing number of independent and grass-roots mobilizations.

This was not an isolated case. A 1969 document from the Préfecture de Police provides a list of five black African *foyers*, each containing between 200 and 600 immigrant residents, known to be connected with 'unrest'.<sup>15</sup> Among these was one located at 43 rue Pinel in Saint-Denis. Opened in 1966 and managed by Association pour l'Aide Sociale aux Travailleurs Africains (ASSOTRAF), it was home to 200 migrants. In 1967, the tenants asked for television on all floors, a change of sheets every day, refurbishment of the dormitories, and an increase in the number of service personnel. Their protest was led by Boubacar Bathily, who was close to the PCF and the CGT.<sup>16</sup> Contrary to the earliest case at the rue du Landy, which involved tension between North Africans and black Africans, in these predominantly black African *foyers*, ethnic identities did not become salient during the other political struggles mentioned here. Muslim identity, although not prominent either, did surface in demands for spaces of prayer, such as in the *foyer* located in rue de Charonne, Paris, in 1967 (Bernardot 2008, 116).<sup>17</sup>

Although ostensibly providing the means of easier access to and administrative control of these migrant populations, in gathering thousands of workers in the same place, the *foyers* had the knock-on effect of providing sites of mobilization. Migrants intensified their demands and consolidated forms of collective organization, illustrated in the continuing appeals to the authorities of the countries of origin and to the local French authorities.

### **Transnational networks, urban dynamics and the politicization of a cause (1969–1974)**

May 1968 constitutes a turning point in the politicization of French society. As Gordon (2012) argues, it was the moment when radical left-wing organizations put the migrants' working and living conditions on their agendas, while contesting the monopoly of the PCF and the CGT over the working class. The emerging scholarship on the transnationalization of activist politics



after 1968 (Christiansen and Scarlett 2013) has brought back to the fore the involvement of North African migrants in protests directed towards both the politics of their home countries and the policies of the French government. Although most often overlooked by historiography, black African migrants, whether workers or students, were also part of these movements.

The involvement of black migrants in radical politics was given impetus not only by their situation in France, but also by the African political context. First, in 1968, Senegalese students in Dakar protested against the regime of Leopold Sedar Senghor (Bathily 1992), while also occupying Senegal's embassy in Paris (Gordon 2012). In the same year, in Mali, General Moussa Traoré overthrew socialist leader Modibo Keita and set up a dictatorship (Wolpin 1975). In addition, an increasing number of Africans were beginning to realize that decolonization was not complete in most former French colonies as the former colonial power granted military support to one-party regimes (N'Dongo 1972). Finally, a number of colonies were still fighting for independence, notably Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique. As early as 1968, these loosely interrelated local, national and international dynamics were having undeniable effects. Black African migrants joined the strikes in factories and *foyers*. Some of the most significant national associations, including the UGTSF, began to distance themselves from the initial backing of their home country regimes and to embrace a radical agenda with the support of intellectuals involved in Third World ideologies (Dedieu 2012; Gordon 2012).

Radical organizations were instrumental in the increasing politicization of migrants.<sup>18</sup> Some of these worked at developing political activities within the *foyers* themselves, often through literacy classes. Their access was facilitated by the fact that the *foyers* for black Africans were more open to strangers than the Sonacotra *foyers*. Indeed, between 1967 and 1970, contacts by leftist movements in the *foyers* of the Paris region mainly targeted those run by associations or the Prefecture (35.2%), as well as private *foyers* (22.2%), largely those accommodating black Africans (Hmed 2006, 408–409). Their presence contributed to a shift in the social hierarchies within the *foyers*. Stemming from their social status in home villages, elders within *foyer* communities had traditionally held a high degree of legitimacy, something sought after by *foyer* managers themselves. Activists, however, encouraged younger migrants to engage in collective action and to emancipate themselves from their elders' tutelage (Samuel 1978; Quiminal 1991; Fiévet 1999).

A strike at the *foyer* of Ivry in 1969 and the reactions to a deadly accident in a *foyer* located in Aubervilliers a few months later were turning points in the politicization of migrants and their partnership with leftists. Their joint protests highlighted the communist municipalities' unease in addressing black migrants' needs, while also underscoring the dubious positions of the African authorities towards their citizens living abroad.

Ivry is probably the best example, and according to our sources the first example, of a *foyer* whose tenants went on strike with the support of radical collectives, in this case the Maoist movement Gauche Prolétarienne (Gastaut 2000, 52–60). Set up in a disused factory and managed by a Malian, this *foyer* housed more than 550 people relocated from shacks. It had no water supply and was deprived of both an effective electrical system and proper refuse collection. From 1969, in an atmosphere of mounting tension, conflict embroiled not only the manager and the tenants but also the communist municipality and the Malian consulate, which had supported the relocation. Two crucial shifts in the political alliances available to the protesters can be underlined. First, contrary to the previous period, appeals to French municipal authorities proved less successful in the context of fierce opposition from leftist movements to the PCF. Second, the African national authorities began to become discredited due to the consolidation of authoritarian regimes on the continent.

The Ivry strike became truly public after the accident at Aubervilliers, a clandestine *foyer* supervised by Senegalese authorities. On New Year's Eve, 1970, five West Africans were accidentally asphyxiated while they tried to arrange a source of heat (Gastaut 2000, 52–60; Perron 2009, 71–79). This tragedy caused a general outcry. On the day of the funerals, radical militants occupied the headquarters of the Conseil National du Patronat Français with the support of intellectuals engaged in Third World causes. During the occupation, activists articulated slogans that highlighted the emerging links between domestic and international issues. In reference to French military intervention in Africa, for example, they chanted: 'Imperialism kills in Aubervilliers like in Chad' (Gordon 2012, 101).

These events occurred against the backdrop of rising unemployment and a tightening of migration policies.<sup>19</sup> As a result, there was an upsurge in mobilizations, which had previously been relatively few and far between. Archival records expose the widespread fears shared by administrative authorities of the emergence of a unified movement. Thus, in 1972, the Paris Préfecture de Police warned that: 'African migration poses serious problems, specifically in the African *foyers* that are becoming increasingly disturbed by a climate of demands and violence in the face of which the management organizations appear powerless.'<sup>20</sup> The fear of a 'contagion' of strikes became prominent in 1973. In this context of mounting unrest, administration officials revisited their previous decision to segregate black African migrants. The suggestion was even made to promote their 'dissemination in multiethnic structures',<sup>21</sup> although this approach was ultimately not put into practice.

In the first half of the 1970s, two periods of protests can be distinguished: the first in the ASSOTRAF *foyers* between 1970 and 1972,<sup>22</sup> and the second in AFTAM *foyers* from 1972 until 1974.<sup>23</sup> These two movements, both of which unified the individual *foyers* within each housing organization, suggest that

the protests may have been enabled through the existence of a common management structure, as was later the case in the Sonacotra movement. However, an in-depth analysis of each period suggests that this line of explanation cannot fully explain the succession of protests. Challenging a rise in rent announced by the same managing structure certainly helped bind striking residents together across *foyers* run by the same organization. Yet, a detailed investigation of specific cases shows a large number of interacting factors at play in the acceleration of mobilizations: the scope of activist networks; the local integration of *foyers* in the environment of the larger urban protests of the time; and the various attempts made to create a coordinating structure for all of the *foyers* on strike.

The influence of activist networks on the upsurge of strikes appears to be a determining factor in explaining the full development of the cycle of protests starting in the early 1960s. Their impact is exemplified by strikes initiated in two *foyers* run by ASSOTRAF in the north of Paris. Located in Pierrefitte and Drancy, two working-class towns in the vicinity of Saint-Denis, they were the sites of the initial activities of the group Révolution Afrique. Linked to the organization Révolution!, this movement gathered French and African students as well as black workers living in the *foyers*. It published an eponymous journal with articles covering both the situation on the African continent and the one in France. In July 1970, a rent strike was initiated in the *foyer* located at rue Lénine in Pierrefitte to protest against housing conditions.<sup>24</sup> Throughout 1971, the residents pursued the rent strike, in the face of police repression in July<sup>25</sup> and, later, judiciary action.<sup>26</sup> In December 1971, the movement spread to the neighbouring *foyer* of Drancy. Both in activist narratives and in administrative accounts of the time, the rent strike in Drancy is acknowledged as the starting point of the first 'organized movement' or 'wave' of strikes in the *foyers*,<sup>27</sup> a fact that illustrates the influence of Révolution Afrique, not only in the coordination of the protests in the Drancy *foyer* itself but also in its ability to tie protests together across locations.

Likewise, the strikes in the *foyers* cannot be dissociated from the larger urban conflicts that were taking place at the same time in French cities and neighbourhoods (Castells et al. 1978), and which often provided local support to the activist politics of the black African migrants. The best example of this integration is illustrated by a strike that took place in a *foyer* located at 214 rue Raymond Losserand in Paris's 15th arrondissement. This *foyer*, a former factory, was one of the earliest buildings to be converted by Soundiata into a housing facility in 1963.<sup>28</sup> In April 1973, it was home to 271 black Africans who were informed that they would have to leave the site due to an urban renewal development in the neighbourhood. The residents were offered relocation to several *foyers* located in other districts, which they opposed, arguing first that these new residences were a long distance from their places of work, and second that they wanted to stay together.<sup>29</sup> They

organized a local 'Committee of African Workers' with one delegate per room. The case stands out due to the strong support that the foyer residents received from a local committee composed of neighbours who were also affected by the urban renewal policies. The attention that this particular affair drew is impressive. François Mitterrand, then leader of the Socialist Party, who visited the site on 19 January 1974, stated that 'the conditions were worse than those which he experienced as a prisoner of war in Germany'.<sup>30</sup> Despite the solidarity of left-wing parties and neighbourhood associations, the residents were forced by police to leave the site on 26 January and relocate, scattering to several different sites in the north and south of Paris.

Throughout this period, there were some attempts to create a coordinating committee that would gather together all of the *foyers* on strike. This principle was clearly tied to the political debates of the time around what was termed 'auto-gestion' (self-determination). As early as 1971, a coordinating committee was set up, consisting of delegates from the *foyers* at Aubervilliers, Drancy, Pierrefitte, Saint-Denis and Charonne in Paris.<sup>31</sup> Although they appear to have been short-lived and did not result in a perennially stable structure, debates among French and African activists on the necessity of unifying the various struggles were constant throughout the early 1970s.<sup>32</sup>

### **Black workers protest: initiating the cycle of the Sonacotra movement?**

The Sonacotra rent strike (1975–1980) has greatly overshadowed the earlier protests made by black workers. Most accounts, whether scholarly studies or memoirs, construe the Sonacotra movement both as being the first significant political mobilization of immigrants in French postcolonial history, and as being qualitatively distinct to the mobilizations in the black *foyers*. This a posteriori reconstruction is based on a narrative constructed by Sonacotra spokesmen themselves, and to a lesser extent by social scientists who have emphasized the innovative and highly political character of the Sonacotra movement, portraying previous protests as unrelated and narrowly focused on living conditions (Hmed 2006).

Based upon the systematic analysis of private and public archive records, this article counters such a view. It elucidates, on the contrary, the extent to which the collective action led by black migrants paved the way structurally for the Sonacotra movement. As an institution managing *foyers*, the Sonacotra was qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from the institutions running the *foyers* that accommodated primarily black Africans. Although containing a multi-ethnic constituency, Sonacotra facilities still accommodated predominantly Algerian residents (54% in 1971).<sup>33</sup> In the mid-1970s, it ran roughly half of the existing *foyers*<sup>34</sup> and had strong backing from the French state.

Offering mostly individual rooms, and preventing the reconstruction of community ties, as late as 1974, the Sonacotra administration considered rent strikes to be a 'black problem'.<sup>35</sup>

However, when protests erupted at a significant level in the Sonacotra *foyers* in 1975, it was treated as a national issue – in contrast to earlier mobilizations of black Africans, which were dealt with at a local level. The few discussions of the distinctiveness of the Sonacotra movement vis-à-vis earlier protests focus on one main avenue of explanation: the disciplinary character of the Sonacotra *foyers*. The latter had more stringent internal rules than those housing black Africans, and their management by local staff with origins in the colonial military service explain why the protests within them immediately focused on political rights and the dismissal of racist managers (Hmed 2006, 399–405). Additionally, with regard to the dynamics of the movement, it needs to be pointed out that the Sonacotra strikers faced a managing institution that was both less compromising than the associations had been and that possessed the financial ability to cope with long strikes.

This article demonstrates that the features analytically prominent in the interpretations of the Sonacotra movement had already characterized prior black movements. First, a central structuring dimension was at the core of the Sonacotra movement, which strived to maintain unity. In the case of the black African *foyers*, the scattered attempts to coordinate efforts, evidenced in the previous section, testify to the ambition to centralize these earlier movements. Second, independence from political parties and trade unions was one of the main aims of the Sonacotra protest, illustrating the failure of left-wing parties to acknowledge the difficult working and living conditions of postcolonial migrants, very much in evidence in the 1970s due to the economic crisis. As discussed, earlier protests by black workers had also challenged communist municipalities over their management of public housing. Third, the Sonacotra movement is correctly emphasized as focusing on rights, such as the right to hold political meetings in the *foyers*. However, this article discloses a wide range of claims made by black workers, from the very material to the political. As of 1968, the demands of black workers spanned not only living and working conditions in France, but also equal rights at the workplace and in the city. Finally, not only did black workers initiate a repertoire of contention that would be taken over, adapted and expanded by Sonacotra activists, they were also instrumental in the actual inception of the Sonacotra movement. Indeed, several of the first Sonacotra *foyers* to go on strike were populated primarily by black workers (Bernardot 2008, 113–114), even though they only accounted for a small minority of the overall Sonacotra constituency (3.9% in 1971).<sup>36</sup> Given their long history of contentious relations with their landlords, this underlines a 'demographic' continuity between the first cycle and the second cycle of immigrant-led collective action.

Yet, the long struggle of black workers is afforded little weight by activists and social scientists. To understand how analysts fail to conceptualize the micro-mobilizations of black activists as a continuum that constitutes a cycle of protest intrinsically linked to the Sonacotra cycle, one has to consider how the Sonacotra movement was built and how migration scholarship was elaborated in France. With regard to the first element, the Sonacotra spokesmen founded the collective identity of their movements by erasing the past struggles led by black workers (for a discussion, see Hmed 2006, 439–440). The second element concerns France's historical scholarship on migrations itself, in terms of both content and method. This scholarship is relatively new, having developed in the 1980s with the pioneering works of Noiriel (1996 for the English translation). The historiography is even newer as far as African migrants are concerned. Their history appears to be overlooked, in contrast to that of North Africans who are statistically more numerous and whose movements are tightly linked to a pivotal event of French history: the Algerian War. Finally, being scattered both in time and space, the analytical reconstruction of this first cycle of protests has been obstructed by the fact that archives are dispersed in various public institutions or are in the possession of private individuals.

## Conclusion

The *foyers* are crucial sites through which to reconsider the history of African migration to France. Mainly conducted by anthropologists, early studies of the *foyers* have long focused on residents' reconstruction of 'African ways of living' in France, with a specific emphasis on their ethnic belonging and cultural practices (Barou 1978). Further studies have highlighted African migrants' transnational networks as well as their contributions to community development projects in their regions of origin (Quiminal 1991; Timera 1996; Daum 1998). But the plurality of black migrants' social networks requires further exploration; their inscriptions in distinct urban environments, working sites, and most importantly, political groups are in particular need of investigation. This article is a call to renew the study of the history of African diasporas in France by going beyond the ethnic and cultural lenses that characterize the literature. It has highlighted how ethnic boundaries (for a review of these concepts, see Lamont and Molnár 2002) can be remodelled by racialized administrative practices and intertwined with political, social and local dynamics grounded in history. Thus, the observed differences between the micro-mobilizations initiated by West Africans in the 1960s, on the one hand, and the strongly memorialized North African-led Sonacotra strike of the mid-1970s, on the other, point less to cultural differences between these two communities than to unique patterns of emigration, divergent treatment by the French state, and the distinct postcolonial trajectories of their states of origin.

By providing an investigation of African migrants' protests after the independence era, this study also contributes to an emerging scholarship that writes the history of these diasporas from a transnational perspective. Attesting to the prominence of the assimilationist model in migration studies, research on West Africans' political engagement has long focused exclusively on their participation in social movements directed towards their host society. However, the recent diffusion of the transnational paradigm across the social sciences has subverted this approach. This shift has allowed scholars to break free from 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and Schiller 2002) and has thus opened new possibilities for the investigation of migrants' participation in political life in their home countries (Dedieu et al. 2013, ii). This article brings to the foreground the activism of black migrants, not only in French but also in African political movements. It has furthermore delineated their interrelated nature, showing how the constitution of a 'post-colonial historic bloc' (Bayart 2009, 193) linking France and its former colonies was contested very early on, from below and from places too often portrayed as isolated from and deprived of political life.

### Abbreviations for archives consulted

ADSD	Departmental Archives of the Seine-Saint-Denis
AMSD	Municipal Archives of Saint-Denis
AN	National Archives
APP	Archives of the Préfecture de Police
IHTP	Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent

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### Notes

1. West African workers were racially categorized as black by social services, employers, and in everyday social interactions in France. Documents consulted for this article show that they also used this category as one of their own means of self-identification.
2. Accueil et Promotion was founded in 1961; AFTAM in 1962; Soundiata in 1963. See 'Main d'œuvre noire dans la Seine', *Cahiers Nord-Africains*, 102, 1964.
3. Note from the Préfecture de Police, July 18, 1964 (APP, GA A7).
4. Note from the Mairie de Saint-Denis, March 26, 1963 (AMSD, 18 ACW 23).
5. *Paris Jour*, July 24, 1963. Glaes (2007) provides an extensive analysis of this case.
6. *La Croix*, July 25, 1963.

7. *Combat*, July 25, 1963.
8. The following is based on the letters kept in AMSD, 18 ACW 23.
9. In 1963, the Sonacotral removed the reference to Algerian workers from its name, becoming the Société Nationale de Construction de Logements pour les Travailleurs (Sonacotra) (Hmed 2006, 20).
10. Bernardot (2008, 81) provides the following figures: in 1966, 2% of Sonacotra residents were from sub-Saharan Africa, 77% from North Africa, 12% from France, and 10% of other European origin.
11. See the report by Esperet (1964).
12. See the report by the Préfecture de Paris, *Logement collectif à caractère non lucratif des travailleurs à Paris et dans les trois départements limitrophes*, 1968 (AN, 20050150/61).
13. Other organizations include the ASSOTRAF and Association des Foyers de la Région Parisienne (AFRP).
14. Note from the Préfecture de Police, April 14, 1965 (APP, GA A7).
15. Note of the Préfecture de Police, July 8, 1969 (APP, GA A7).
16. Note from the Préfecture de Police, July 4, 1967 (APP, GA A7).
17. Demands for spaces of prayer in the *foyers* or in the workplace did not provide the basis for developing a common political repertoire across North and West Africans, due to the distinct religious styles of their Muslim affiliations, further reinforced by a distinctive treatment by the authorities (Davidson 2012).
18. The Maoist 'Gauche prolétarienne' is reported to have been particularly active in late 1969, mostly in Ivry but also in the North of Paris (Note, February 13, 1970, APP, GA A7). In addition, the Maoist Union des Communistes de France – Marxiste-Léniniste (UCF-ML) mainly had influence in the Sonacotra *foyers* (Gordon 2012, 196). *Révolution Afrique*, emanating from the Trotskyist *Révolution!*, made demands regarding housing conditions and rights in the *foyers* the core of its activities in France. Local alliances with other organizations, such as MRAP, CIMADE, and established political movements is evidenced in many cases, for example the support given by Parti Socialiste Unifié members to the *foyer* Bisson in Paris (Gordon 2012, 177).
19. The debates on the subject, and the adoption in 1972 of the Marcellin-Fontanet circular, constitute the major turn in a generalized attempt to control migratory flows by the government. These prompted the first mobilizations of 'undocumented' migrants (Siméant 1998, 180).
20. Note from the Préfecture de la Région Parisienne, April 11, 1972 (ADSD, 1801 W 227).
21. Note on the problems raised by the management of *foyers* for African workers in the Parisian region, April 1973 (AN, 19870056/1).
22. Letter from the president of ASSOTRAF to the Préfet of Seine-Saint-Denis, March 15, 1972 (ADSD, 1150 W 13).
23. Note from the Renseignements généraux, February 6, 1975 (ADSD, 1801W 226).
24. See *Commune: Organe central des comités de locataires*, 1, 1971.
25. On the clashes with the police in 1971, see *Révolution Afrique*, 15, 1976.
26. Leaders were brought to court. See *Révolution Afrique*, 5, 1973.
27. See the April 1973 note from the Fonds d'Action Sociale (AN 19870056/1). A *Révolution Afrique* movie *Portes ouvertes à Drancy* (1972) was shown in many *foyers* in order to consciously spread the movement (Staal 2008).



28. Jenkins (2011, 112–117) provides a detailed account of this case, although without reference to the Monique Hervo Archives deposited at the IHTP, on which the following is based.
29. The administrative services attempted to erode the collective by offering individual relocations to residents who were employed by the municipality of Paris (Monique Hervo Archives, IHTP).
30. Agence France-Presse, January 19, 1974 (Monique Hervo Archives, IHTP).
31. Commune: organe central des comités de locataires, 1, February – March 1971.
32. Minutes of a meeting held at the Léon-Gaumont *foyer* in Montreuil, November 1974 (Monique Hervo Archives, IHTP).
33. According to a printed leaflet by the Sonacotra (AN, 19870056/12).
34. At the end of 1974, the Sonacotra managed 66,615 beds for migrant workers (Bernardot 2008, 95), compared to the figures for the other main management institutions: Association pour le Développement des Foyers du Bâtiment et des Métaux (ADEF) 18,334; AFRP 5,900; AFTAM 9,700; ASSOTRAF 2,230; Soundiata 2,060. See notes for the 1975 multi-annual plan for the rehabilitation of the *foyers* (AN, 19870056/3).
35. Letter from Sonacotra director Eugène Claudius-Petit to Hervé de Charette, December 1974 (AN, 19870056/7).
36. See the aforementioned Sonacotra leaflet (AN, 19870056/12).

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