

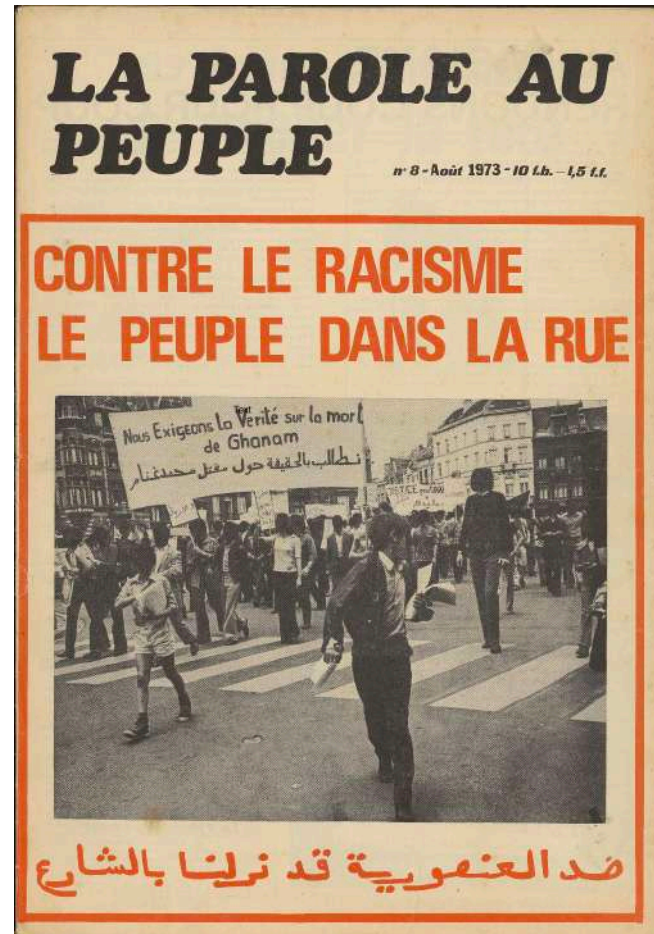
ARCHIVE OF MAGHREBI RESISTANCE IN 1970S BELGIUM

MUSTAPHA BENTALEB AND JOACHIM BEN YAKOUB

This contribution operates a bit differently from others in this issue. This is true for its format, but more importantly, because it centers the diasporic political struggles of groups (Maghrebi, and more particularly Moroccan) whose familial histories are not directly related to the colonial history of the concerned European state (in this case, Belgium) – a similar contribution should therefore be made in the future centering this time the Congolese, Rwandan, and Burundian diasporas. Moroccans (in particular Rifans), Algerians, and Tunisians form a large part of the racialized working class in Belgium since the 1960s, and have organized politically to resist the various forms of racial capitalist exploitation and police violence. Mustapha Bentaleb, who has a first-hand experience of these struggles, and Joachim Ben Yakoub use six archival documents from the 1970s to recount the various forms this political organizing has taken.

Truth and Justice for Ghanam ///

On June 23, 1973, a demonstration set off from Place Gaucheret in Schaerbeek, Brussels. The procession quickly grew in numbers, responding to the slogans shouted in unison: “We want the truth about Ghanam’s death!” Earlier that year, on May 7, at around 4:30 a.m., Mohamed Ghanam, a young Moroccan man, aged 22, lost his life. He was with a friend on Boulevard Léopold III, the same street where car doors had been forced that night, when he was struck by a bullet shot from a distance by the local police. He died on the way to the hospital. Ghanam’s death provoked anger and indignation among the Maghrebi community in Brussels who felt increasingly threatened in public spaces. Can a policeman kill someone because he suspects him of trying to steal a car? Is it possible for a policeman to feel threatened from 25 meters distance, claiming self-defense? Why does the press want to cover this up? People wondered. On May 15, the Ghanam Truth Committee was formed to respond to the need for justice. It issued an open letter to the mayor of Schaerbeek, Roger Nols, denouncing the increasing brutality of the Schaerbeek police’s arbitrary hunt on immigrant workers and demanding a form of accountability from the mayor. The need to express their anger and rage grew and culminated in what



would become the first mobilization denouncing prevailing racism, carried by the Maghrebi community in Brussels. Speeches recalled the dire living conditions, daily regressions, and the need to unite to put an end to growing intimidations. It was an unprecedented mobilization from which the trade unions and traditional anti-racist structures were largely absent, showing for the first time the combativeness of the Maghrebi community in Brussels.



Hungerstrike in Schaerbeek ///

From March 22 to April 1, 1974, Maghrebi workers went on a hunger strike in the Saints-Jean-et-Nicolas church in Schaerbeek to demand the right to work and residence. Members of the French Movement of Arab Workers, committed to the struggle against racism, defending immigrant workers, and improving their working and living conditions, formed the Groupement de Travailleurs Marocains. Upon their arrival in Brussels, they mobilized Moroccan workers and defied the ban on demonstrations at the parvis Saint-Jean-Baptiste in Molenbeek to demand the right to work and protest against the hunt for so-called illegal immigrants. Following a violent intervention by the police, they reaffirmed their determination to defend the rights of workers. On Friday, March 22, three workers began a hunger strike in the church of Saints Jean-et-Nicolas to demand work permits and to mobilize against ongoing police raids, illegal work, and deportations. The tactic of hunger strike was part of a repertoire already performed in France by the Arab Workers at that time. The number of

hunger strikers increased until an incident with the Schaerbeek police force sparked public outrage. Despite the formation of a Support Committee and an impressive list of organizations backing the strike, on the orders of the Minister of Justice, the police arrested the twelve hunger strikers on Monday, April 1, and sent them back by charter plane to Morocco and Tunisia. The Committee denounced the inhumanity of the decision and called for the formation of a front, marking the absence of trade union organizations, which underestimated the precarious position of Arab workers. To continue the struggle, three Belgians militants began a new hunger strike at the Béguinage church. Two important demonstrations brought thousands of people together in the streets of Schaerbeek and Anderlecht. Finally, on August 1, 1974, the Ministerial Committee for Economic and Social Coordination decided to halt immigration of non-EU workers and to increase investments in control forces to prevent further uncontrolled immigration. Consequently, some 7,470 workers had to be regularized before a full “immigration-stop” could be implemented.



Le Travailleur Arabe ///

Unlike in France where the unions suspected organized Arab workers of dividing the working class, in Belgium the two large unions, the Socialists and Christians, invested in the creation of embedded categorial spaces. On side of the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (ACV-CSC), an Arab section was created in June 1970 under the leadership of Moroccan trade unionist Nouri Lekbir. A School of Arab Unity and different Maisons Arabes de Culture Ouvrière (MACO), were set up in several cities in Belgium. Different Maghrebi militants congregated to plot new action defending their right to work, in solidarity with all the oppressed people, starting with the Arab and more particularly the Palestinian people. El Amil El Arabi (Arab Worker) was the first monthly information magazine of the

Arab section of the Christian Union. Founded by editor-in-chief Nouri Lekbir, it was always written entirely in Modern Standard Arabic. Published since 1973 with financial support from the trade union movement, it aimed to inform, represent, and mobilize union members. Content covered classic union themes such as the struggle against poverty and for social security, as well as Middle Eastern political issues from a pan-arab perspective. The ACV attempted several times to intervene in the excess of political articles but encountered difficulties thanks to the use of Arabic. The conflict escalated and led to a serious funding cut in 1982, and a steep decline in membership. When Nouri Lekbir also left the ACV, the magazine quickly lost its relevance and finally ceased to exist in 1989.



Regroupement Démocratique Marocain ///

From 1974 onwards, the Moroccan Democratic Regroupment (RDM) succeeded in federating the efforts of self-organization among Maghrebi workers in Belgium. This was a necessary step in defense of economic and political rights, as well as in the struggle for equality and solidarity. By promoting various literacy and anti-racist initiatives, while simultaneously engaging in different forms of public artistic expression, the unionized efforts of leftist students and workers culminated in the formation of the RDM, bringing together and reinforced a growing internationalist spirit. A solid network was established through mobilizations, including workers' strikes, demonstrations for Palestine, and the well-known hunger strikes for regularization in 1974. The Progressive Front, represented by Mohamed El Baroudi and supported by Farid Mellah, launched a wide-ranging appeal to coordinate actions to defend the interests and rights of Moroccans in Brussels within a Democratic Front. The charter of the grouping was finally adopted on October 12, 1975. The RDM was an entirely self-financed, dynamic organization. Among its emblematic actions was the

mobilization against Morocco's decision to stop issuing identity documents at their consulates in Brussels. Additionally, Schools of the Future, homework schools, and spaces for cultural education were structured in five different Brussels municipalities. The group also published a newspaper, "Le Regroupement", hosted a radio program on a free radio station, and organized regular educational programs for adults at the Farid Mellah school. In the artistic sphere, the RDM produced and promoted music, visual art, and theatre collectives such as Oulad El Oummal, Hbab El Ghorba, and Ahi El Hijra. The RDM not only expanded its influence in Belgium but also coordinated actions on the European level, facilitating the creation of the Coordination of Moroccan Democratic Associations in Europe (CADIME). This coalition comprised the RDM for Belgium, the ATMF for France (Association des Travailleurs Marocains en France), the KMAN for Holland (Komitee van Marokkaanse Arbeiders in Nederland), and the MAV for Germany (German-based Vereinigung der Marokkanischen Arbeiter). These organizations were closely aligned ideologically and shared the same struggle in defense of human rights.

Ahl EL Hijra ///

The art collective Ahl El Hijra (People of Migration) was at the heart of cultural action in Brussels during the seventies. The notions of justice and social engagement were deeply ingrained in their practice from the outset. The collective began in the basement of a house, where the urban struggle converged against the Manhattan project in Schaerbeek. After meeting Abdelmajid, a young Moroccan student involved in the fight against gentrification but also deeply immersed in the burgeoning popular and protest music scene of the Maghreb, the group discovered a new repertoire. They listened attentively to the music and learned the lyrics of the Nass El Ghiwan by heart to make them their own. In their own words: "Ahl El Hijra's musical group rhythms popular percussion, that of gnaoua, jilala, aissaou, soussa,... Its music is drawn from the roots of its people. They have chosen to sing in the popular language of the peasants, the streets, the souks and the beggars. Their songs speak of the daily life of immigrants and that of the country." During a cultural evening organized at the Théâtre Poème, they performed just after the Andi Andek (give and take) RDM's theatre play directed by Hamid Chakir, questioning the corrupted state of affairs in their homeland. Although they joined the cultural commission of the RDM and co-organized the yearly Moussem festival and May Day celebrations, they also continued to organize their cultural activities independently and developed a series of exhibitions, film clubs, music, and theater workshops. In 1982, they memorialized their work with a self-produced vinyl record, distributed in a thousand copies. That same year, during Mayor Roger Nols' tenure, they joined the struggle against racism in Schaerbeek, setting up the exhibition entitled "What's happening in Schaerbeek," based on current political documents and a critical argument resulting from collective research, creating a real outlet for the anger inspired by this systematic stigmatization, denouncing police harassment, and dismantling the racist ideology of domination altogether.

Moussem ///

A special commission within the RDM was responsible for the coordination of their different cultural actions, with the aim to deepen popular culture and to fight feelings of cultural uprooting. The Moussem festival was a key moment in the existence of the RDM. On the initiative of CADIME, from 1980 onwards, the European festival of Moroccan immigration. was held annually (or almost annually) in various cities in France, Belgium, Germany and Holland. The second edition took place in Brussels in May 1981 and was hosted by the RDM at the Janson auditorium of the Free University of Brussels. During which the



CADIME published its charter, during the second Moussem held in Brussels and. Spread over two days, the event mobilized hundreds of volunteers and attract thousands of participants. It defended a collective politics of plurality, carried by Maghrebi workers in Europe bridging a living tradition with the experience of displacement. In Morocco, Moussem refers to a week-long seasonal festival celebrating the end of the harvest and functions essentially as a sacred rite of passage. In Europe it transformed into a cultural festival highlighting, bringing together through concerts, dances and theater, both Moroccan heritage and the demands of Moroccan democratic organizations, reflecting the many relations between a lively tradition and the desire to consciously and respectfully take part in the public life of various European cities. ■

Mustapha Bentaleb is an electrical engineer by profession and a long-standing community activist. He has worked with many civic organizations and was often involved with associations of the first generation of Moroccan workers in Brussels. He helped found the "Espace Magh" Maghreb cultural center and the Center for Archives and Research on the History of Maghreb and Arab Immigration (CARHIMA).

Joachim Ben Yakoub is a writer and teacher, sometimes also operating as curator and dramaturg, working on the border of different arts schools and institutions. He works in the Kitchen, a collective study and workspace in Brussels and is affiliated to the MENARG and S:PAM research group of Ghent University, where he is conducting research on the aesthetics of revolt somewhere in between the Maghreb and Belgium.

تنسيق جمعيات الهجرة المغربية بأوروبا
التجمع الديمقراطي للمغربيين ببلجيكا - اتحاد العمال المغاربة بالمانيا - جمعية المغاربة بفرنسا (تنسيق الفروع)
جمعية العمال المغاربة بفرنسا

الموسم الثاني للهجرة المغربية بأوروبا

2^e MOUSSEM DE L'IMMIGRATION MAROCAINE EN EUROPE

2^e MOUSSEM VAN DE MAROKKANSE IMMIGRATIE IN EUROPE

COORDINATION DES ASSOCIATIONS MAROCAINES EN EUROPE RDM - AMF (c.s.)
KMAN - MAB KOÖRDINATIE VAN DE MAROKKANSE VERENIGINGEN IN EUROPE

DANSE POPULAIRE **موسيقى** **MUSIQUE** **MUZIEK**
قمر شعبي **POESIE** **POEZIE**
VOLKS DANSEN **مسرح** **THEATRE** **TONEEL** **EXPOSITIONS**
معارض **TENTOON STELLINGEN**
تورنوي كرة القدم **TOURNOI DE FOOTBALL**
VOETBAL-TORNOOI

29 و 30 ماي 1981 بالجامعة العرة بروكسيل
29 & 30 MAI MEI 1981 SALLE PAUL EMILE JANSON * ULB
A PARTIR DE 18 H A 23 H VANAF 18 U TOT 23 U 22 AV PAUL HEGER LAAN 1050 BRUXELLES

مع مشاركة:
اهل الهجرة - تحببتكم
إد زحاک الوکنی لخالبة المغرب (فرانک برونس)
فرقة شعبية مغربية
فرقة أبناء الشهداء الفلسطينية
فرقة بلجيكية

Met de Medwerking van:
- AHL EL HIJRA HAJITKOUIM.
- UNEM. (SEKTIE BRUSSEL)
- VOLKS MUSIEK GROEPEN. Kennende
- PALESTYNSE DANS-GROEP
- GAM. etc...

Avec la participation:
- AHL EL HIJRA HAJITKOUIM.
- UNEM (Sektion de Bruxelles)
- GROUPE MUSICAUX populaires venant du MAROC
- GROUPE PALESTINIEN "ENFANTS DES MARTYRS"
- GAM. etc....