

# WHAT'S HAPPENING IN SCHAER- BEEK?

Mustapha Bentaleb and Joachim Ben Yakoub

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**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).

*As editors, we arrived at this contribution by Mustapha Bentaleb and Joachim Ben Yakoub somewhat like late-comers to a gathering, where a conversation is already unfolding, photographs are being passed around, and old songs still linger in the air. What we encountered was not a linear narrative, but a constellation of memories, documents, names, and voices—partially preserved, partially reconstructed.*

*The setting is a contemporary collective workspace in Brussels, known as The Kitchen. There, the authors imagine a gathering with members of the former cultural-political group Ahl el Hijra, sharing yellowing photographs, leafing through copies of Tribune Immigrée, and reflecting on acts of resistance from early 1980s Belgium. This layered return—across time, media, and memory—invites us to consider not only what remains of these histories, but how we reassemble their fragments in the present.*

*At the heart of the story is Schaerbeek, a working-class district in Brussels where many Maghrebi workers settled following the 1964 labor agreement between Belgium and Morocco. In 1982, under Mayor Roger Nols, immigrant residents were systematically excluded from the municipal registry—cut off from basic social rights such as legal recognition, welfare, and access to schooling. In response, Ahl el Hijra launched a series of actions: a hunger strike, public gatherings, and a collectively built exhibition titled What's Happening in Schaerbeek?.*

*This contribution returns to that moment, by allowing fragments to speak. Archival photographs, interviews with a former member of Ahl el Hijra, pages from Tribune Immigrée (Issue 4, Feb.–Apr. 1982), and the protest song His Imprisoned Shadow converge to form a scattered composition. These materials do not merely document the resistance. They express its cadence, ambiguity, and urgency. Poems, songs, and images appear not as ornament, but as political tools in their own right—anchoring memory, sharpening critique, and giving form to solidarity.*

*This offering can be read not just as an archival case, but as an invitation: to reimagine how stories of exclusion and defiance resonate across generations. What follows is not a definitive account, but a listening position, attuned to what surfaces when the past is reopened in the present.*

'Did you receive the invitation for the commemoration evening of our friend?  
It will be on June 28, everyone is welcome, and his friends are taking care of everything.'

'Yes, thanks Naïm!  
'We'll be there, without fail.'

Fatiha replies,

'May his soul rest in peace.'

It's impossible to stop the current of time. Drop by drop, the elders are departing. Naïm, Abid and Fatiha gather around the Kitchen's central table, surrounded by books, postcards, posters, and catalogs - artifacts of a seemingly bygone era. They meet regularly here, in this space for study and collaborative work downtown Brussels, where different collectives assemble to keep traces of what preceded them and weave a shared memory.<sup>1</sup>

'I found some documents from the Quartier Nord, and from the group Ahl El Hijra, that you'll love.'

Naïm, one of the guardians of the Maghrebi militant memory in Brussels, opens his leather-covered notebook and pulls out a few copies of *Tribune Immigrée*, a magazine founded in 1981 by Brussels militants, mainly Moroccan, but also Turkish, Spanish, Italian, Latin American, and their comrades. The journal was edited by a dear friend of Naïm, Abderrahmane Cherradi, a trade unionist from the earliest days.<sup>2</sup>

He then takes out a stack of photos, bringing back images of a time they thought had slipped through history's fingers.

'This is the family album of Ahl el Hijra, Abid once entrusted to me.'

Fatiha, one of the hosts working in the Kitchen, spreads the slightly yellowed photos one by one on the table. A series of nine photographs stand out of the pile.

<sup>1</sup> The Kitchen is a work and study space, a retreat in the center of Brussels. It is a meeting point for collaborative thinking, bringing together collectives to study and create, to create and study, experimenting with different rhythms of hosting, oftentimes dealing with memories of solidarity from the global majority and its diaspora's, but not only.

<sup>2</sup> You can find more stories and documents from the newspaper *Tribune Immigrée* on the open platform [www.firstwaves.be](http://www.firstwaves.be)



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Abid, musician, artist and once an active member of the group Ahl El Hijra<sup>3</sup>, retells the story how in 1982, during the mandate of Mayor Roger Nols in Schaerbeek, the group had gathered to set up an exhibition entitled: *What's Happening in Schaerbeek?*

The photo album that preserved the traces preceding Fatiha, points to an assembly exhausted by long hours of hard, yet joyous labor. The collective study of the situation in Schaerbeek undertaken by Ahl El Hijra led to the construction and mounting of the exhibition, which was presented on the different floors of the working-class house the group rented in the Rue des Palais.

Fatiha recognizes the joy emanating from a particular staging in the photographs—allowing for a shift in perspective that reframes not just the photographs, but the entire study situation itself.

‘It’s reassuring to see that the collective study of our living conditions and the duty of memory were already carried by the elders.’

Fatiha shares with a warm re-comforting voice. The nine photographs, pulled from the past, propel them through time, allowing for a mise en abyme to unfold. The images become after-images, helping Naïm and Fatiha to recognize themselves in the gesture of re-assembling and re-composing the traces gathered around the table. Like the central table in the Kitchen—surrounded by an assemblage of insurgent documents—the exhibition too stands as a witness to a vibrant engagement, forging memorial justice through a collective artistic proposition. The photographs showing the making-off of the exhibition reveal careful study and the rigor necessary to untangle the tenacious gears of colonial histories.

‘Abid, is it you then who carries the poem *Inquiétudes?*’

‘Haven’t you noticed? We’re all pointing at the same person.’

Not knowing how to respond to Abid’s rhetorical question, Naïm reads a poem out loud written on one of the boards in the photograph:

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More stories and documents, including those of the Ahl El Hijra group, can be found on the open platform [www.firstwaves.be](http://www.firstwaves.be)

'When I was insulted.  
When the police beat me.  
When a municipality refused me.  
When my school was targeted.  
There was no one left to worry.'

Fragments of the *Tribune Immigrée*, assembled on the Kitchen's central table, shed light on the harsh context that shaped the group's artistic practice—and against which they mobilized, and they still mobilize, as it remains a contentious site of struggle today.

'Everything has already been said, written, documented, chanted...  
But few have remembered?,' Fatiha wondered

'It reminds me of one of your most popular songs,'  
Naïm replied,  
'*His Imprisoned Shadow*'

'These are words already spoken.  
The elders already uttered them.  
They are hard, they are true.  
They are gentle, they are of peace.'

It was also in 1982, Abid proudly intervenes, that the group immortalized their work with a self-produced vinyl record in a thousand copies. Music, song, and poetry were mobilized to oppose the political absurdities and stupidities of their time in Schaerbeek. Like theater, music served as both an expression of lived stories and a vehicle for protest. These engaged forms still resonate today—echoing through photographs of past assemblies and now through this re-assembling, bearing witness to histories that refuse to end.

Fatiha, Naïm and Abid continue their conversation to the rhythms of popular percussion, those of the Gnawa, Jilalas, Aissaoua, Souassas,... to the rhythms of Brussels and its untamable stories.

'The inkwell overflows, and the quill thirsts.'

### The Refusal of Registration in Schaerbeek

[ ... ] The non-registrations in Schaerbeek and other communes of the Brussels agglomeration, the restrictive and repressive measures announced by Justice Minister Jean Gol, are only manifestations of a certain official racism<sup>4</sup>, "a state racism" put in place by a legal and regulatory arsenal that has been developing implacably for a few years, despite the vote the previous year of a law repressing certain acts of racism.<sup>5</sup>

It strikes a category among the most deprived inhabitants of this country, immigrant workers.

[ ... ] The symptoms are numerous. Racial profiling has existed for years, and "show of force" operations in Schaerbeek and other Brussels communes are becoming frequent. Due to the sense of insecurity prevailing in public opinion, especially in certain neighborhoods, they maintain the idea that the presence of immigrants is the main factor of this insecurity.

To be suspect, to be stopped and frisked with hands against the wall in the middle of the street, to thus wear on one's face the image of the guilty, guilty of everything and nothing, the image of the undesirable made responsible for the crisis and especially unemployment, is a humiliation that hurts and deteriorates the being deeply.

The lack of reactions provoked by the repressive measures of Mr. Gol is also revealing of a certain mindset.

A mindset dangerous not only for immigrant workers but also for Belgian workers!

[ ... ] The slogan "same patron, same struggle" must not remain just a slogan.

Belgian unions have always defended the principles of equality between Belgian and immigrant workers. Sometimes immigrant workers may feel that solidarity is at certain moments or places influenced by rivalry between major unions. It should however be clear that immigrants want the Belgian working class to support them, unreservedly, especially when it comes to their most basic demands.

*Tribune Immigrée*,  
No. 4, Feb–Apr 1982, pp.



### Testimonies of the Unregistered

These are not 'clandestines.' And if they are 'illegal,' it's due solely to the commune of Schaerbeek (or another), and the commune alone! These testimonies among others show it.

Mr. L.: *In St. Josse, I obtained a provisional three-month card for my child. Afterward, I came to live in Schaerbeek. It's been five months that I've been waiting for my child to be registered. All the papers are in order though. The commune doesn't want to issue a certificate for family allowances.*

Mr. M.: *I've lived in Schaerbeek since 1977. My mother is still in Morocco, and I've taken steps for her to come to Schaerbeek. All formalities are complete. Her file has been at the Schaerbeek commune for a year. I want to stay here and live with my mother. At the commune, they don't want to register her because I'm unemployed. I find work, but it's never more than three or four months. For them, that doesn't count.*

Mr. H.: *The registration of the son was refused in the population register of Schaerbeek. Mr. H. is Moroccan, he has lived in Belgium for 20 years. His wife arrived five years ago. They have three children. The eldest was born in Morocco, is 13 years old, and has lived in Belgium for a year. When he arrived, they went to the Schaerbeek administration for registration. At first, there seemed to be no problem. Then, after several months of waiting, they suddenly refused his registration. Meanwhile, he was already enrolled in school and attending classes normally. To justify this refusal, the communal employee told them: 'We don't want more immigrants.'*

Mr. H.: *Because of all this, my child risks failing this school year; he'd have to change schools. Plus, if he's not registered, I have to pay for school. I don't know what to do anymore; I've been here for 20 years, and I have no rights. I've tried three times to find out why this refusal, in vain. My wife won't stop crying. She lost a child because of all these troubles. I myself am getting sick in this country that calls itself democratic. How can one separate a child from his mother? I thank the people who defend anti-racism.*

*Tribune Immigrée*,  
No. 4, Feb–Apr 1982, pp. 16

<sup>4</sup> Non-registration refers to the refusal to register foreigners in the Schaerbeek population register.

<sup>5</sup> The Moureaux law, 1981. Adopted under Philippe Moureaux, then Minister of Justice, in response to the rise of extreme right-wing movements in Europe, this pioneering law criminalizes racism, xenophobia and discrimination (race, religion, origin), prohibits public hate speech and discriminatory acts (employment, housing, services), with penal sanctions.



**Hunger Strike in Schaerbeek: Timeline & Results**

**March 21**  
About fifty organizations launch, via posters, an ultimatum to the commune of Schaerbeek: "Register everyone within 8 days."

**Sunday, March 28**  
10 Schaerbeek residents (Belgians and immigrants) begin a hunger strike demanding the registration of all immigrants entitled to it under the December 1980 law. The strikers drink only water. The strike is publicized via posters. Quickly, many people and organizations come to the strike site. Signatures and telegrams of support pour in. Letters are sent everywhere to Nols and the Prime Minister. Every day at 6 PM, an open general assembly is held, attracting more and more people.

**Tuesday, April 6**  
Nols receives a delegation from the support committee. He explains his criteria: register those with income. He declares that he expects the government to reintroduce the possibility of limiting registrations. The support committee holds a press conference.

**Afternoon**  
Meeting between Minister Gol and the mayors and Mr. Demuyter. It doesn't fully satisfy the racist mayors.

**Wednesday, April 7**  
New delegation received. Nols registers the wife of a delegation member. But this isn't enough for the strikers, who demand registration for all without discrimination. Around the 18th day, a few hundred protesters head toward the town hall. 50 Belgians burn their ID cards. They've decided to be in solidarity and enter illegality themselves. The police don't intervene during the action. But that evening, they conduct a real raid in immigrant cafés.

**Thursday, April 8**  
A delegation from CSV-ACV and MOC-ACW meets Prime Minister Martens. He declares that the December 1980 law must be applied. He commits to convening Mr. Gol and Mr. Demuyter on Monday, April 19, to take measures to this effect and, if needed, to bring it to the Council of Ministers on Friday, April 23. The day ends with a very successful solidarity evening: the room was too small.

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**Friday, April 9**  
The general assembly of all participants in the action considers Martens' promises a first victory. They decide to suspend the hunger strike, especially as doctors are alarmed by the strikers' condition: "The 5 strikers continuing their fast have now lost at least 14% of their starting weight, which for several was already below normal. For some, it's becoming difficult to drink and retain the liquid needed to sustain vital functions..." Moreover, 170 groups and organizations have expressed support. The support committee decides to continue the action in other forms, notably by calling for a demonstration. Because no one is ready to rely solely on the Prime Minister's promises.

**Saturday, April 10**  
Demonstration in Schaerbeek's streets, but few Belgians participate. The general assembly adopts the idea of a new demonstration the following Sunday. It ends with a theatrical performance by the Moroccan group Ahl El Hijra on immigrants' daily problems in Belgium. During the week, the support desk continues.

**Thursday, April 15**  
New support evening with many groups and singers of all nationalities.

**Sunday, April 18**  
Demonstration bringing together 1,500 people with participation from many immigrant groups, a delegation from FGFB and CSC, LRT, PTB, and delegations from other regions: Mons, Ghent, the Anti-Fascist Front of Antwerp, the Immigrant Workers' Defense Committee of Walloon Brabant ...<sup>6</sup>

**Monday, April 19**  
Contrary to expectations, the Prime Minister didn't meet with Ministers Gol and Demuyter that Monday. At the Prime Minister's office, they confirm that Martens will see Demuyter during the week about Schaerbeek, but no day or time is set. Nothing is specified about convening the Council of Ministers. At Mr. Gol's office, they're surprised by rumors of a meeting. As for Mr. Demuyter, he claims to be unaware of any planned meeting with Martens about applying the orders annulling the non-registration decisions of Schaerbeek's College of Mayor and Aldermen.

At the time of finalizing our journal, we still don't know what form the continuation of the action will take.

Tribune Immigrée, No. 4, Feb-Apr 1982, pp. 17

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FGTB: General Federation of Belgian Labour; CSC: Confederation of Christian Trade Unions; LRT: Revolutionary Workers' League; PTB: Workers' Party of Belgium.

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His Imprisoned Shadow  
*Ahl El Hijra, 1982*

Our time is not a dream  
 No trust illuminates it  
 Truth never lived on words  
 Today it's buried in them  
     Its tomb is dark  
 Its shoulder burdened  
 They've withered its brain  
 And imprisoned its shadow  
     With salt and ants

When the mute saw it  
 He spoke: *It must be said.*

These are words already spoken  
 The elders already uttered them  
 They are hard, they are true  
 They are gentle, they are of peace  
     They are beautiful, they are truth  
 They are old

Open your notebooks  
 Take your pens  
     The inkwell overflows  
 And the quill thirsts

Enough imagery and silence  
 We want screams and justice  
 Enough whispers and wars  
 We want death to cease  
     Enough illiterates and comedies  
 We want wealth redistributed

I'll tell the story of torture  
 The story of the man who vanished from his life  
     He abandoned his day  
 He left to absent himself  
 He vanished from his life  
 We'll never hear from him again

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Truth is eternal in my breath  
Wholly I lean toward it  
I'll denounce the wrongs

You who swept my ashes  
My name isn't for the past  
Tomorrow it will spread  
My friends will revive it

It will be in the reading  
It will be part of people's language

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# QUEER ASSEMBLAGES, QUEER SURVIVAL:

Aytak Dibavar

# RUMINATIONS ON SOFT UTOPIA

**Aytak Dibavar** is a queer Iranian multidisciplinary artist, activist, feminist educator, and former human rights lawyer currently based in the Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at Bowdoin College. Their interdisciplinary work focuses on theorising capitalist-imperialist cis-heteropatriarchy,

transnational feminisms, and queer futurity from the Global South. Their research has appeared in journals such as *Global Constitutionalism*, *Kohl*, and *Refuge*, and they have two forthcoming monographs with Columbia University Press (2025) and Routledge (2026).

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