

Banlieues Climat: Fighting Eco-Fascism with Popular Ecology

Article by Veronica Gennari

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France's far-right parties have widened their support base in part by fusing concerns over immigration and climate into a new "green nationalist" ideology. Youth in the suburbs of Paris and elsewhere see through the lie, and are developing new narratives to wrestle the climate agenda back from ecofascism.

On the morning of 12 October, a crowd gathered in Saint-Ouen-sur-Seine, the first commune north of Paris. Close to the town square, they waited for the inauguration of Ecole du Climat (the Climate School). Sanaa Saitouli, co-founder of *Banlieues Climat*, a French environmental association, stood in front of the crowd, emotional and unable to speak. Féris Barkat, an activist and influencer who co-founded the school along with Saitouli and two others, smiled as he began to address the crowd.

"When Banlieues Climat was born, Sanaa told me that one day we would open our own school where we could do climate education," he said. "I replied to her that she was crazy. And instead, almost two years after the association was created, the school is a reality."

Barkat and Saitouli, as well as Abdelaali El Badaoui and Youssef Soukouna, the other co-founders, come from what are called priority neighbourhoods (*zone à urbaniser en priorité*, ZUP) due to the socio-economic challenges they face.

The school that they founded is the fruit of months of hard work by young people of Banlieues Climat, which aims to raise awareness of environmental and climate issues in working-class neighbourhoods. Since the association's founding in 2022, the goal has been to bring working-class voices to the forefront of public debate, and to develop projects on the ground in these neighbourhoods.

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Created by the youth for the youth, Banlieues Climat revolves around several initiatives. First and foremost, it aims to provide environmental education and train new young trainers. It also has a strong focus on awareness raising: for instance, *Le Banquet Végétal* is an initiative that seeks to raise awareness of the benefits of plant-based cooking, and which provided cooking workshops at the inauguration of the climate school in collaboration with Banlieues Climat.

Present at the school's inauguration ceremony were a dozen young people, trained by the association, who had travelled by bike from Saint-Ouen to Marseille in the south of France in order to raise awareness about climate change through contact with farmers and other ecologists.

As the Mayor of Saint-Ouen, Karim Bouamrane, said at the school's opening day, the association may well be focused on climate, but it represents the "convergence of struggles – the climate one along with the social and political ones", and is a response to these struggles. In a context of significant recent gains by the far right, Bouamrane stated: "Never again!" adding that "Banlieues Climat means never again through climate."



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The evolution of France's far right

On September 21, the new French government was officially announced. Socialist Party president Olivier Faure labelled it the most right-wing government in the history of the Fifth Republic. Led by the Republican Michel Barnier, it confirms the rightward shift of president Macron.

France follows a Europe-wide trend of right and far-right parties gaining power. In the last European elections in June 2024, the French far-right *Rassemblement National* (RN) party (formerly *Front National*) of Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella garnered 7.7 million votes – 2.5 million more than they had received five years earlier. Even if it does not control any ministries, the RN has undeniable power and influence over the Barnier government, which includes many right-wing politicians.

One of the strategies the far-right has used to garner wider support is to tie longstanding fears over immigration to newer concerns around the ecological crisis, with the former apparently contributing to the latter. Historically, the right has held a sceptical position on climate, denying the urgency of the crisis. *Reconquête's* president Eric Zemmour even once compared global warming to a "new religion". Now, however, with more French voters understanding the gravity of the climate crisis, the far right has developed its own narrative on climate change.

Climate scepticism becomes ecofascism

The far-right's new climate narrative does not come with support for green policies. In June, Marine Le Pen, former president of the RN, stated: "I want to stop renewable energy, because what you call renewable energy is not clean and is not renewable." She then went on to assure supporters that she was not a climate sceptic.

The environmentalism of France's far-right has two main strands. The first sees environmental issues as a second-tier problem. In the RN's program for the 2024 legislative elections, for example, climate is not among the issues the party wishes to focus on. In fact, climate is not in the program at all, except for a few mentions here and there. The second strand, which has gained ground in recent years, is called eco-fascism, or green nationalism. This view acknowledges climate change as a

problem but assigns the blame to migrants, peoples of the global south, and modernity.

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Francesca Santolini, author of *Ecofascists: Extreme Right and the Environment*, told the *Green European Journal*: “Today, right parties are forced to deal with ecology because it is now an unavoidable issue,” widely discussed by policy-makers and the public. Even once-sceptical parties have been forced to reconsider their positions and introduce new narratives. “The narrative that the far right develops is populist and works through the inversion of reality, through the creation of enemies and taskmasters,” Santolini says. With regard to the climate, she says, far-right parties “acknowledge an ecological crisis but attribute the responsibility to factors other than fossil fuels.”

Attributing responsibility to migrants is the basis of so-called “eco-bordering”, whereby territory is defended on the grounds of ecological safeguarding. The concept was coined in 2021 by two British scholars, [Joe Turner and Dan Bailey](#). In their analysis of the propaganda of 22 nationalist parties in Europe, they found a perfect distillation of eco-bordering in the words of Marine Le Pen: “Environmentalism is the natural child of patriotism, which is the natural child of rootedness,” [said](#) Le Pen in 2019. “The best preservation of the environment is the defence of borders,” she [added](#).

The idea that migrants (even those from territories that suffer greatly from the climate crisis) negatively impact the environment in their countries of arrival goes back to Malthusian and conservative thinkers who insisted on the idea of nature’s original purity. These thinkers believed that only those who owned the land were capable of protecting it, while those that did not (for instance, migrants) were a threat.

“It’s shameful,” says Barkat. “These are strategies to win over a popular electorate.” The new belief of the French and European far right is embodied well in the words of Jordan Bardella, who [said](#) in 2019 that “borders are the environment’s best allies...It’s thanks to them that we’re going to save the planet.” For Santolini, this idea comes “directly from the Nazi narrative of blood and soil and thus from the line of thought that links environmentalism to xenophobia”.



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Where climate hits the hardest

“It is a way to set the poor against the poorest, but it’s fake news. If we want to save the environment, we know how to do it, and we know who is consuming the most,” says Barkat. “Poor people are not the problem and neither are the peripheries.”

Much of Banlieues Climat’s work and activism aims precisely at bringing the voices of these underprivileged working-class neighbourhoods into the media spotlight. “Indeed, even if they are the areas where people consume the least because they are less prosperous and more precarious, working-class neighbourhoods are [still] the ones most exposed to the climate crisis,” explains Barkat.

The typical landscape of the suburbs of large French cities (especially ZUPs) is exemplified by the HLM tower blocks. These are huge longitudinal buildings that create what in France is called a *cit *. They date from the 1950s and 1960s and were created to accommodate large numbers of residents, especially migrants. Often built in haste and lacking thermal insulation, these buildings now need heavy renovations. In the meantime, however, they are a poor place to shelter from the cold in winter or heat waves in summer. “We live in areas not designed to withstand the heat,” says Barkat. “Thermal renovation of buildings is often delayed and green spaces are lacking.”

The suburbs, where space is abundant and less expensive than in metropolises, were also subjected to massive industrialisation from the second half of the 19th century (especially in the north of Paris). Due to their proximity to a bigger city, which provided them with a market, important industries and transport infrastructures took root in working-class neighbourhoods, subjecting their residents to pollution and other drivers of poor health.

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Health was the starting point of Barkat's ecological consciousness. He became truly aware of the climate emergency and the direct link between climate and health when his mother became seriously ill due to pollution. Since the beginning of Banlieue Climat, raising awareness about the effects of air pollution, among other things, has powered the movement's work. [A study in 2021 by *Santé Publique France*](#) showed that 40,000 deaths each year in France were attributable to fine particles. When the French were stuck inside their homes during the Covid-19 lockdown and therefore subjected to less pollution, [the number of deaths dropped by 2,300.](#)

If climate is neglected, then the health of the population will suffer, but banlieues will be affected more violently as they have the lowest healthcare provision in France. Féris Barkat believes that, in the suburbs, climate awareness is closely linked to social policies needed to improve living conditions. He is sure that the rise of far-right parties will lead to a further erosion of social protection in suburban areas, which will in turn cause a lack of interest in ecology. "It is a vicious circle," he says. "I don't think the far right will have a big direct impact on the climate issue in the suburbs, but there will be a repercussion through the social issue."

Far-right parties continue to peddle a narrative that the suburbs have enjoyed too many state benefits, to the detriment of forgotten rural areas. "In difficult neighbourhoods, there is a lot more public money pouring in than in our countryside," [asserted Le Pen in 2023.](#)

Despite the fact that [studies](#) have refuted Le Pen's position that rural areas receive less state support than suburban ones, her policies still tend to prioritise rural France and are hostile to suburban areas that are mostly populated by people with an immigrant background. She has even attacked L'aide médicale d'état (AME), a state system that allows immigrants in an without legal status to benefit from access to healthcare. The French far right wants to drastically reduce access to it, if not abolish it altogether.

Fighting back with ecology

The ZUPs in France "are highly multicultural," explains Barkat. "[They are] where second or third-generation French immigrants live." Many come from the Maghreb region or Africa, he continues, which means "there is a strong environmental interest related to origins that can be awakened... Their ancestors came from the areas where the climate crisis is the greatest."

It is precisely this interest that young members of Banlieues Climat seek to awaken. Indeed, the association offers several initiatives to raise awareness of the climate issue. First, it conducts training sessions that are recognised by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research. These sessions are conducted by young people for their peers and include exchanges, courses and debates. So far, Banlieues Climat has taught over 400 young people. "Now that the school is open, we are also getting ready to train a delegation of young people to attend COP 30 in Belem in November 2025," Sanaa Saitouli said.

Barkat says that with its many initiatives, the association tries "to turn the spotlight on young people from working-class neighbourhoods who usually don't have room to speak in public." This is exactly what he did during the election period this year. Faced with the advance of the right and the risk of having a prime minister directly from the RN, Barkat and other activists have spoken out more on ecological and political initiatives.

"We really worked to change the balance of power," he explains. "We sent young people to speak on TV and did [an art projection on the National Assembly](#) to say that we, as children of migrant people, are at home. We know it but others doubt it. We reminded them."

Despite being immediately intercepted and stopped by police forces, the art projection on the National Assembly, showing the famous singer Aya Nakamura (a target of far-right attacks), drew attention to working-class neighbourhoods. "When there is a need and an urgency to fight against the extreme right, Banlieues Climat has taken up a position without question, and we have decided to take action," said Saitouli.

Youth in working-class neighbourhoods continue to respond to far-right policies with activism and ecology. During a training in Cergy, one participant expressed very clearly the idea that animates Banlieues Climat: "Sometimes we, young people from immigrant backgrounds, are seen as a problem in France. But the good thing is that the climate issue is a problem for all of France. If we solve it or contribute to solving it, we will be seen as the solution."

At the opening day of the Climate School, Laurence Tubiana, a prominent French climate advocate and godmother of Banlieues Climat, underscored this fact. "The battle against the climate crisis cannot be done if everyone doesn't participate

and, in particular, it can't be done without young people from working-class neighbourhoods," she said.

During the election period, said Barkat, "I saw an incredible amount of energy. Many wanted to help us. The main point is to avoid resignation because nothing has changed for years. That is what we are doing."



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