

YLDISS and Roberto, members of Le Syndicat des immenses, share their experiences with homelessness and involvement in the organisation. They emphasise the need to combat prejudice and stigmatisation, and call for transparency and integrity; feeling valued and respected is crucial. They highlight the vulnerability of undocumented individuals and the invisibility of some Belgians in poverty. Involving Experts by Experience in institutions is essential to address their needs, emphasising the importance of equal treatment and long-term project involvement.

INTERVIEW WITH TWO MEMBERS OF LE SYNDICAT DES IMMENSES¹

¹ In English, we could say Giant = G.I.A.N.T. = Gifted Individual, Although Needy and Troubled.



By **Laurent d'Ursel**, codirector of DoucheFLUX and secretary of Le Syndicat des immenses, Belgium

Can you briefly share with us your life story: what was your experience of homelessness like, and how did you get in contact with Le Syndicat des immenses²?

YLDISS: I'm 61, I'm Belgian and I come from a bourgeois family. I've got three brothers and my father had to leave Algeria when I was a child. We spent four years there and it was a great experience! We came back to Belgium in 1972. When I finished secondary school, I received a scholarship to pursue my studies. By then, my father was an alcoholic and my mother was not very rich. I moved to Paris when I was 17 where I started studying. I met my husband during my studies in Paris and we went to live in Lebanon. Unfortunately, my husband and my children died during a bombing. After that, I lived in different countries, moving from one to the other. When I came back to Belgium, I started working for the European Commission. But due to the death of relatives, I started to suffer from severe depression, and I lost my housing. This was the beginning of my homelessness journey. I met a member of *Le Syndicat des immenses* on the 17th October, the International Day against Poverty. This was the start of a new adventure.

Roberto: It all really began with the passing of my mother. I had a lot of downs. I found myself homeless several times in several countries. I have been living in Belgium for 30 years now. I had to move several times. At one point, I even had to couch surf at a neighbour's apartment. I've been evicted many times. When I was evicted at the end of 2019,

the social agency let me down and I found myself homeless. I had no support from my family and my daughters. I went to live in a shelter, but I suffered from physical and psychological harassment. After that I lived shortly in very poor housing, but it was a nightmare and I ended up on the streets. From there on out it was a downward spiral. I had a lot of problems with social workers. But when I arrived at DoucheFLUX, I met capable social workers for the first time. I got to know *Le Syndicat des immenses* during the Covid-19 lockdown. Here I found a place that allows me to share my ideas and my anger against social injustice.

Could you explain shortly what is Le Syndicat des immenses, what are the activities implemented, how you started engaging with Le Syndicat des immenses, and what is your role there?

YLDISS: It's a political association that advocates against poverty. Our most important demand is 'housing for all.' We do a lot of demonstrations. We are a gathering of 'Experts by Experience,' and we want to make the world understand that we are all equal. We want to change the perceptions of homeless people. I am the representative of the syndicate at the COCOM (Brussels Municipalities' Advisory Commission that helps vulnerable people).

Roberto: It's an agglomeration of a minority of poor people. Some are here for their own interests; others want to help others. I am still looking for my exact role. It changes daily.

² <https://syndicatdesimmenses.be/>

Why do you think that the work of Les immenses (advocacy, representation, awareness raising etc.) is important? Why is it especially imperative to have representation of people with lived experience in all activities that concern them?

YLDISS: Our work is very important in the fight against prejudice and the stigmatisation of homeless people. People generally think that we are responsible for our situation; we must be alcoholics and must have done something that justifies our homelessness. But this is not true. Some of us are former lawyers, builders, doctors, etc. This can happen to anybody. We want to make society understand that it is important to know people before judging them. Our experience enables us to raise awareness among decision makers. People seem to think that we are lazy, but we live under a lot of stress. Everything takes time: going to DoucheFLUX to take a shower, looking for a job, finding a place with Internet to send applications... Everything takes time.

Roberto: It allows you to keep an open mind. Transparency and integrity are key principles of the syndicate. It is essential to raise awareness about our experiences to touch the heart and emotions of the public and the decision makers.

In some cases, it can be difficult to ensure participation and representation of people with lived experience of homelessness - what do you think is needed to engage people and facilitate their involvement?

YLDISS: To give people a communication tool (Internet, telephone...). To give some financial incentives to motivate them to engage in the project (for example, FEANTSA has offered financial compensation for

this interview at the request of the syndicate). All work deserves to be rewarded. It is also important to involve people with experience in long-term projects (for example, the opening of a day shelter). People who have experienced homelessness need to feel valued and useful. On the contrary, they should not feel exploited. But they also need to feel motivated when they engage in initiatives, and not only do it for money.

In your opinion, what does real participation look like? When do you feel valued?

YLDISS: I need to feel listened to and not humiliated. People generally ask themselves what we have done wrong to be where we are. They usually listen to the service providers and social assistants, but not to the people concerned - to us! People assume that we have done something bad to deserve our situation. Respect is essential and mutual exchange is a must.

What do you think of the diversity of people with lived experience that are currently involved in activism and representation (at Le Syndicat or in general), do you think that specific groups face additional barriers?

YLDISS: I would say that women and undocumented people are the most vulnerable. The latter always fear to be expelled and are therefore afraid to talk. They don't dare to go to the police even when they are harassed. There is a clear lack of communication.

Roberto: I am often shocked by Belgians who fell into poverty and are so ashamed of their situation. They can't pay their bills and hide themselves. They have no social contacts and are generally invisible. It is very sad.

What experiences has Le Syndicat had with the authorities and how do you see the responsibility of the government? The European Commission has set up in 2021 a European Platform for Combatting Homelessness and all the EU member states have committed to work towards this goal – what should be their priority and how do you think that people with experience can be best represented in this initiative?

YLDISS: Even though the syndicate is relatively young, it is well represented in the political sphere. We are in the middle of an election year so we will need to see what happens after that. Nonetheless, it is essential to involve a large number of people living in precarious conditions, Experts by Experience, in all institutions and administrations, may they be private or public. To really understand the needs of people living in vulnerable situations, we need to involve those with direct experience.

Roberto: Too many decision makers are disconnected from the realities of the people they are supposed to work with and help. I don't believe in this new European platform. It's not concrete enough and too political. We (in organisations and institutions) need to work with psychologists, therapists and others who know about our experiences and who can communicate about these issues.

What would be your last word?

YLDISS: Respect us, consider us as experts in our fields. We should be treated as equals. Involve us in long term projects.

Roberto: Let's pray! Because the worst is yet to come, considering the rise of unemployment and migration, among others.