

French parliament votes for continued military presence in Afghanistan

Antoine Lerougetel
25 September 2008

On September 22, the French National Assembly and the Senate voted for government's motion approving the continued presence of France's military contingent in Afghanistan. The proposition was passed in the National Assembly 343 votes to 210, with 10 abstentions. The French Communist Party (Parti communiste français, PCF) and the Greens joined with the main opposition Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste, PS) to oppose the measure. Four PS deputies voted with the ruling Union for a Popular Movement (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, UMP), and two abstained.

Also voting with the UMP were their allies in the New Centre and the Democratic Movement (Mouvement démocrate, MoDem) of François Bayrou. Voting patterns were similar in the Senate, with 209 voting in favour and 119 voting against.

All the parliamentary parties accept the claim that the task of the military intervention forces is to fight terrorism and bring aid to the Afghan people.

In none of the debates or media coverage was it pointed out that the US political elite had long been preparing military interventions in Central Asia before the 9/11 terrorist attacks provided a pretext. This was in order to control the gas and oil resources in the region and thus continue to dominate the US's major rivals, Europe, Japan and China. French imperialism's support, along with that of other powers, was entirely predatory, wishing not to be left out of the share-out of the spoils.

The Socialist Party was at pains to make it clear that it was in fundamental agreement with the UMP on French policy in Afghanistan. The chairman of that group in the National Assembly, Jean-Marc Ayrault, told UMP deputies, "We are united by the cause, separated by the means to achieve it."

He stressed, "I want to say straight away: France cannot, having regard for the values she defends, brutally disengage from Afghanistan.... We are not voting against the continuation of France's engagement in Afghanistan. We are voting against a political and military conception which is driving us into an impasse."

The PS spokesman on foreign affairs, the senator Didier Boulaud, affirmed, "We have not said that we must withdraw from Afghanistan, we know well that it's impossible. We've said that we wanted to put an end to the blind escalation in these conditions."

Libération reports that, in contrast to the PS position, the 24 Communist and Green "no" votes were "a clear 'no' to the French presence in Afghanistan." The paper quotes Green deputy Noël Mamère, "You have to admit the obvious, the coalition has lost the war. We demand the withdrawal of French troops."

In reality, both parties have called for the intervention of United Nations troops, many of whom would be the same imperialist forces wearing blue helmets. The PCF and the Greens were in PS Prime Minister Lionel Jospin's plural left government (1997-2002), which sent the French forces into Afghanistan.

François Fillon, making an appeal for national unity since "France is not safe from terrorism," called on the PS deputies to abide by the "pledge" made at the UN by the then-Gaullist President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, and evoked a "moral duty" to Afghanistan. He was referring to the American-led coalition "Enduring Freedom," which invaded the country in the aftermath of the Al Qaeda attack on the World Trade Centre. France contributed 500 soldiers to the UN intervention force, the ISAF (International Security and Assistance Force).

The conservative *Le Figaro's* September 23 editorial

also reproached the PS for forgetting “the appeals for ‘national unity’ made by Lionel Jospin seven years ago in this very chamber.”

A *Médiapart* article graphically describes the competition at the National Assembly debate over which party could present itself as the best representative of French militarism. At the mention by Fillon of the 10 soldiers killed August 18 in an ambush by the Afghan resistance, “At this last word, the first applause can be heard from the UMP and New Centre benches. The clamour spreads along the rows, swells to enflame the chamber. And the entire gathering is now applauding the heroes.... Both sides of the Assembly had to demonstrate that the soldiers had not fallen for nothing.”

The debate was marked by the continuing controversy over the conditions in which the 10 soldiers died. The army has attempted to deny allegations from soldiers involved in the action that the men were ill-equipped and were left without proper support. A recent NATO report has given further credence to these allegations. In an attempt to quell the furore, Fillon announced at the National Assembly the sending of 100 further troops to join the 2,600 already there, plus helicopters and other equipment.

A document on the PS web site, “The Conflict in Six Questions,” dated September 17, explains: “France was the first country to show its support for the United States after 9/11. Since 2003, on the basis of a political consensus, France has been participating in the ISAF. A balance which was upset by Nicolas Sarkozy who decided last April to reinforce the French troops and to take part in military operations.”

The PS’s newly found “opposition” reflects a desire on the part of growing sections of the French and European bourgeoisie to distance themselves from a US whose military is overstretched in Iraq and Afghanistan, threatening Iran and engaging in dangerous confrontations with Russia over Georgia. The collapse of Wall Street’s banking and the danger of a slump in the US economy affecting the entire world further undermine US imperialism’s position.

The above-quoted PS document also states: “Then, apart from the weakness of its means, the coalition suffers from a lack of strategy and the crushing weight of the United States. This dominance hampers the coalition in the dialogue with the influential countries

in the region (Iran, China, Russia) but also the credibility of the Karzai government. It seems then to be urgent and necessary to revise the strategic approach. It is notably a question of establishing a dialogue between the Kabul government and the Taliban.”

Libération’s September 23 editorial expresses similar concerns: “An [Afghan] government, elected but incapable of guaranteeing a minimum of order and security in entire regions, military actions which often hit innocent people, a coalition which is considered by a growing number of Afghans to be an oppressor and not a liberator: that’s what should have made the American strategists think, they who are the true masters of the troops serving there. A clearer French position could be of help here.”

The *Dernières nouvelles d’Alsace* put it thus: “The weight of Europe, which has more soldiers on the ground (45 percent of NATO troops) than the US (only 39 percent) gives Europe the opportunity to contest an American strategy whose correctness and effectiveness are dubious.”

This is a position adopted by much of the French media, but so too is the stricture at the beginning of the *Libération* editorial: “Leave Afghanistan today, ingloriously and without precautions? No.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact