

France announces partial troop withdrawal from Afghanistan

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On July 12 Nicolas Sarkozy made a surprise visit to Afghanistan at the forward operating Tora base, in the Sarobi district east of Kabul. During his visit to Kabul, he announced the withdrawal of a quarter of the French troops by the end of 2012—that is, of some 1,000 soldiers. In addition to problems of material and human resources which the army faces, the mounting opposition of workers is the main reason for Sarkozy partially withdrawing the French soldiers from Afghanistan.

During the trip, Sarkozy spoke to Hamid Karzaï, the president of the Afghan puppet regime, and to the American general David Petraeus, commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan. Sarkozy's surprise visit took place as the death toll since late 2001 of French troops in Afghanistan reached 69.

AFP quotes Sarkozy speaking to the French troops: “You have to know how to end a war... There was never any intention of keeping troops here indefinitely”. According to *France 24*, Sarkozy stated that there would be a total withdrawal of troops in 2014. Although Sarkozy speaks of “ending the war”, France will continue to exert influence in Afghanistan, maintaining an economic partnership with the Afghan state and keeping military advisors and trainers there.

The wars being carried out by France under the auspices of NATO are becoming ever more unpopular. A May 4 BVA opinion poll registered 55 percent of French people who thought that the French soldiers should leave Afghanistan.

Similarly, public opinion, even when measured by the official organisations of the political elite, is turning against the war in Libya—the object of massive propaganda in media and political circles. A July 1 Ipsos-*Humanité* poll found that 51 percent of French

people oppose the war in Libya.

Despite the media campaigns carried out by the French bourgeoisie—justifying the wars in Afghanistan and Libya by invoking crimes against humanity committed by Gaddafi and terrorism in Afghanistan—opposition in the working class is growing. Opinion polls show that workers are becoming aware of the lies of the French bourgeoisie, which is trying to get its share of the booty accorded by US imperialism in the pillage of these two countries. The polls reflect growing consciousness of this state of affairs in the working class.

France's National Assembly and Senate voted by 482 to 27 and 311 to 24, respectively, to continue the war in Libya launched by Sarkozy in alliance with the US and the UK. Both the bourgeois “left” and the right voted for the war. The few votes against were an attempt to maintain whatever credibility with the 51 percent who oppose the war. The entire French political establishment is in favour of a militaristic policy.

The New Anti-Capitalist Party, right from the start, supported France's “humanitarian” military intervention in Libya. Spokesman Olivier Besancenot suggested sending arms to the anti-Gaddafi “rebels.”

The French Communist Party's daily, *L'Humanité*, explained the changes in the objective situation that make the French bourgeoisie consider a partial withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan: “What is new in these last weeks is the fact that being bogged down creates tensions, uncertainty and contradictions”. Later in the article it is clear that the French state fears the opposition of the working class—notably “a progressive movement which was against the war from the start and public opinion, which is anxious about the absence of an economic up-turn”.

The political context in France is very unstable and marked by the ongoing economic crisis. With the help

of the trade unions and the betrayal of the “far left” parties, the Sarkozy government is imposing an austerity programme designed to undermine the living standards of the working class. Military interventions abroad and the attacks on the democratic rights of the working class are linked to the growing class tensions in France.

French imperialism is waging wars in several countries, notably the Ivory Coast, Somalia, Afghanistan and Libya—not to mention the different intervention forces stationed in various African countries. However, France does not have the human and financial means to keep up these conflicts. The ongoing wars are very costly, leading to tensions between the military and the government.

According to *La Croix*, the cost of the war in Afghanistan for 2011 will be €470 million and there will be a big rise in the overall military budget: “In 2008 overseas operations (Afghanistan, Chad, Ivory Coast, Kosovo, Lebanon) officially cost €880 million, a 37 percent increase on 2007 and 75 percent in 2 years. At €256 million Afghanistan was the most costly, more than Chad (€246 million), Ivory Coast (€116 million, Kosovo (€103 million) and Lebanon (€78 million)”.

The current inability of France and the other European powers to adequately finance these wars also creates tensions between the European governments and US imperialism. On June 10, American Secretary of State for Defense Robert Gates criticised the “deficiencies” which could “compromise” the efficiency of the Libya mission—which Gates attributed to a supposed lack of military investment on the part of the European Union.

Sarkozy replied to Gates’ comment as follows: “Our American friends have two drones, some refueling planes and we are very appreciative, but it would never occur to a man of President (Barack) Obama’s intelligence and responsibility to say that it is America which is doing the essential work in Libya.”

This debate among the top military brass of French imperialism and its class allies in Washington is a serious warning for workers. If issues of finance are blocking the military ambitions of the bourgeoisie, the political elite will develop a strategy to mercilessly attack the social gains of the workers in order to be able to continue financing its wars.

The partial withdrawal of soldiers from Afghanistan

announced by Sarkozy does not mean that France will end the Afghan war, but rather that French imperialism is trying to modify its international strategy to avoid an explosion of public opinion in France. For the workers, these wars mean impoverishment and the suppression of democratic rights and freedoms.



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