

French president backs generals' revolt against cuts to military budget

Antoine Lerougetel**18 June 2014**

At a meeting of the Defense and National Security Council on June 2, France's Socialist Party (PS) President François Hollande ended over three weeks of arm-twisting by Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and the armed forces' top generals against cuts in military spending, which culminated in a threat by the entire French general staff to resign.

Hollande said there would be no cuts to the Military Appropriations Law 2014 to 2019 passed last December. He stressed the "primordial character of our defense commitment in order to strengthen our international influence, protect our vital interests and ensure France's security."

According to press reports, Le Drian had mobilized the military brass against cuts demanded by the Finance Ministry and supported by Prime Minister Manuel Valls. According to *La Tribune*, "Beyond the budget, at stake is employment, a dual successful industry, the operational capacity of the armed forces, notably the army, and France's place in the world. That's what he [Le Drian] wrote to Prime Minister Manuel Valls," in a May 9 letter.

On May 13, in a highly unusual intrusion into politics by the military, four five-star generals, heading France's three military services, the army, the air force and the navy, and the chief of staff of France's armed forces, General Pierre de Villiers, had handed in letters of resignation in protest against leaked proposals for €6 billion of extra cuts in military spending over the next three years.

Hit by the economic crisis, France has reduced its military expenditure from €47.7 billion (2.4 percent of its gross domestic product in 2006 and 2007) to €31.4 billion (1.5 percent of its GDP) in the current Military Appropriations Law.

Valls' immediate response on May 23, when the

story was made public by the right-wing daily *Le Figaro*, was to capitulate to the generals. "The military budget will be totally maintained," Valls pledged. "The armed forces have already made a lot of sacrifices for years."

The decision of Valls and then Hollande is in line with NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen's May 4 call for NATO powers to rearm, amid the escalating military tensions with Russia after the NATO countries backed the February 22 fascist putsch in Ukraine. Rasmussen demanded, "Stop running down your defense spending, turn the trend around and step by step invest more money in defense." (See "Europe's 9/11")

The mass public threat of resignation by the generals represents an extraordinary and reactionary military intrusion into public life. The fact that Valls and Hollande so effortlessly aligned themselves with the policies demanded by the military itself testifies to the profound integration of the PS government and its pseudo-left supporters, such as the New Anti-capitalist Party, into the policy of French militarism.

There were only a few impotent remarks in the bourgeois press noting the direct intervention of the army chiefs into political life. *Le Monde* wrote, "Republican tradition demands that the military know how to simmer without making a ripple on the water's surface. But this time, the three army chiefs (air, land, sea) let it be known that they could resign *en bloc*, unheard of in the Fifth Republic."

Interventions of the army into French politics in times of deep crisis are not "unheard of," in fact. *Le Monde* omitted the fact that the Fifth Republic itself was brought into existence by a military coup during the Algerian war in 1958, led by supporters of General Charles de Gaulle, to preempt a coup by opponents of

Algerian independence from France. This coup put an end to the Fourth Republic, established after the collapse of the World War II-era Nazi-collaborationist regime. Another failed putsch against de Gaulle by supporters of French rule in Algeria followed, in 1961.

What the recent intervention of the generals makes clear, however, is the danger posed by the rising weight of the army and the security services in political life.

In the recent period, governments of the right and of the bourgeois “left” have time and again launched wars or police operations within France, depending ever more directly on the armed forces and seeking to shift the political atmosphere far to the right. In the last three years alone, the French armed forces have launched interventions in Libya, Ivory Coast, Syria, Mali and the Ivory Coast. Most of these interventions had the explicit support of petty-bourgeois, pseudo-left forces such as the New Anti-capitalist Party.

The police have become an increasingly prominent force inside France. In 2005, right-wing President Jacques Chirac even imposed a state of emergency, formally lifting civil and democratic rights, during suburban riots by youth in working class estates. This provoked no opposition in the political establishment, including the union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left. (See “France’s state of emergency—Sarkozy threatens mass deportations”)

As a result, the armed forces feel themselves in an ever-stronger position, able to set its terms and dictate that budget cuts will fall on social services and on the working class, not on the military. In this, they have the support of *Le Monde* who, whatever its mild criticisms of the generals, is a vociferous supporter of French imperialism.

Le Monde denounced the Finance Ministry’s proposed military spending cuts as “small shopkeepers’ arithmetic. It doesn’t take into account the impact...[of] defense expenditure on the aeronautical industry and other cutting-edge sectors. Worried, the seven bosses of the big firms in these sectors have just asked to speak to François Hollande. From Mali to the Central African Republic, if there is a public service whose performance is unanimously recognized, it is the armed forces.”

With militaristic sentiment pervading the ruling class and petty-bourgeois pseudo-left circles, the working class emerges as the only constituency for democratic

rights and opposition to imperialist militarism.

In this, the working class finds itself in direct opposition to the entire political establishment, which is doing everything it can to channel rising social discontent in a far-right direction. The generals’ mass resignation threat was revealed by *Le Figaro* only three days before the May 25 European election, in which the neofascist National Front (FN) defeated the PS and, with 25 percent, received the most votes of any political party in France.

The increasing respectability of the FN in the bourgeois media and political life, like the open intervention of the army to dictate the French budget, are signs of the advanced state of the decay of democracy in France.



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