France prepares to boost military spending

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As it drafts its revised military strategy, France's Socialist Party government (PS) is preparing a major military escalation. The government recently convened a Defense Council to review the military budget, escalate overseas military operations and permanently maintain troops deployed across France after the mass *Charlie Hebdo* shooting in January.

The government said that a review of the 2014-2019 Military Program Law (LPM) will take place in the summer, ensuring the armed forces receive the funding promised to them. Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian stressed the need to "protect the necessary financial resources for the LPM."

Up to 23,000 posts in the army that were set to be eliminated by 2019 are being reinstated in order to maintain a military presence at home and abroad. Proposed measures include boosting reservists from 28,000 to 40,000, enhancing cyber-warfare operations and hiring an extra 500 intelligence specialists.

Under conditions where the ruling class has nothing to offer for unemployed youth, it is preparing to use them as cannon fodder in its escalating imperialist wars. The government is also promoting military service in France's overseas territories for young people without qualifications. About one thousand positions will reportedly be opened up in the army "by autumn 2015."

Plans for a permanent military build-up inside France underscore the deep concern of the political establishment over rising social discontent. Discredited by its austerity policies and unpopular wars, the French ruling elite is dramatically expanding police-state measures designed to intimidate and repress social discontent.

As part of the revised military strategy, President François Hollande stressed that the deployment of some 10,000 troops across France after the January 7 attack on the editorial offices of *Charlie Hebdo* will be maintained indefinitely. This is the first time the government deployed simultaneously as many troops inside France as abroad.

According to a statement issued by the Elysée Presidential palace, "The threat of a terrorist attack against our country remaining high, the head of state has decided to keep the number of troops deployed on our national territory at 10,000, to reinforce security forces led by the Interior Ministry."

While claiming that there is no money for essential public services including health and education, the government is spending about one million euros a day on Opération Sentinelle (Operation Sentinel), a nationwide security operation, in order to mobilize these troops.

The revised military strategy comes amid sharpening geopolitical tensions between global powers. The conflict with Russia over Ukraine after the NATO-backed fascist-led coup last February has threatened nuclear war. Under the "pivot to Asia", the US is fomenting a war drive aimed at China. Inter-imperialist tensions are also exploding within Europe amid a broad campaign for re-militarization whose most striking feature is the resurgence of German imperialism's military ambitions.

The French ruling class is nervously watching the rise of the German military. Germany plans to boost its defense budget by 6.2 percent over the next five years, aiming to increase defense spending to more than €35 billion by 2019 and comprehensively modernize the army. Between 2010-2014, Berlin has raised defense spending seven percent to €32.4 billion, while French defense spending fell 2.5 percent over the same period to €31.4 billion.

The French ruling class is reacting by stepping up its own rearmament. Hollande's decision to revise the military strategy comes as high-ranking military officers publicly denounced the government's decision

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to cut the military budget last year. At the same time, the neo-fascist National Front (FN), benefiting from the bankruptcy of the discredited PS, is calling for the rearmament of France, making political appeals to the military.

FN leader Marine Le Pen has called for a halt to defense budget cuts, insisting on keeping a minimum military budget of two percent of GDP and increasing defense spending by €2 billion yearly, for an indefinite period. (See: Neo-fascist National Front calls for rearming of French imperialism)

The rearmament policy is a warning to the working class. As workers' social rights and living standards are looted to pay for military escalation, European capitalism is preparing the type of arms race between the European powers that twice, in the last century, plunged the continent into world war.

Confronting economic decline and a rising trade deficit, French imperialism is seeking to overcome its crisis through military means. Participating in the US-led war in the Middle East, France is carrying out military operations in Africa, including in Mali and Central African Republic, aiming at re-establishing their former colonial spheres of influence.

Under the revised strategy, 10,000 troops will be mobilized for external operations. The government plans to escalate its military operations in Africa and the Middle East. France is currently involved in major military operations, including Sangaris in the Central African Republic (CAR), Barkhane in Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, and Chammal in Iraq.

The PS government is also preparing to increase French troops in the African Sahel region. Some 3,000 French troops have been deployed in the region. Le Drian said France would "slightly increase" the number of troops participating in the Barkhane anti-jihadist operation and reduce soldiers in the Central African Republic "to give us the means to support" the fight against Boko Haram.

While not giving specific troop figures, Le Drian said that Paris has no intention of intervening in the fight against Boko Haram, but added that "we are considering logistical and intelligence support to forces from Chad, Niger, and Cameroon on the ground."

Le Drian said the new Madama desert base situated near the Libyan border in northern Niger would be fully operational in July, ostensibly to combat the flow of weapons and jihadists from neighbouring Libya to countries including Mali or Nigeria.

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