

France boosts military spending, recruits more youth into the army

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On Wednesday, the French cabinet approved a 109-page review of the 2014-2019 Military Program Law adopted after the Socialist Party (PS) government released the Military strategy White paper in 2013. The law is to be debated and voted on in the parliament in June.

The review includes an extra €3.8 billion in spending on the military between 2015 and 2019, bringing France's total defense budget for that period to €162.4 billion. This is the first major rise in French defense spending in a quarter century. In addition to the extra spending, other measures include permanent deployment of from 7,000 to as many as 10,000 troops inside France, as well as boosting naval and air forces and the number of troops available for overseas military operations. The army will go to 77,000 from 66,000 men next year.

Most of these new troops will be fighting in foreign wars. According to *Le Monde*, "we must provide sufficient, well-trained forces for external military operations at an elevated pace from the Sahel to Iraq."

Extra spending will also go to cyber warfare, aeronautics and intelligence. Around one billion euros will be spent on the purchase of new equipment including seven attack helicopters, six troop-transport helicopters, and two navy patrol vessels.

Above all, however, France is boosting the size of its army, as masses of youth face unemployment due to the deep economic crisis of European capitalism. Around 13,000 youth will be recruited this year, after the army recruited 10,000 youth in 2014. During a May 19 press conference, the chief of the army general staff, General Jean-Pierre Bosser announced, "the army will become France's biggest recruiter." He called this "an unprecedented objective, an extremely important effort."

France's rearmament program is accompanied by massive cuts in social spending and draconian police state measures to deal with rising social anger in the working class against austerity and war. The increase in military spending is to be counterbalanced by €3 billion in cuts in health care, housing and education.

France's reactionary rearmament drive is part of a broad military escalation across Europe. Noting that eleven European countries increased defense spending between 2013 and 2014, including Poland (14.33 percent), Holland (2.6 percent) and Sweden (7.18 percent), the military review paper claimed that France was simply moving to keep pace with broader European trends.

The review paper pointed in particular to German rearmament plans. It wrote, "Germany, which until recently was indicating plans to cut spending, announced last March a substantial increase in its defense spending efforts in the short to medium term. Starting in 2016, Germany will spend an extra 1.2 billion euros (including pensions). This will go to sustain the objective of increasing the defense budget by 6.2 percent in five years."

The rearmament of the major imperialist powers inside Europe is a warning to the working class internationally of the bankruptcy of the social order. Driven by a social and economic crisis for which they have no solution, and by the escalating disasters produced by their wars in the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe, the European capitalist classes are furiously rearming, as they did before the two world wars of the 20th century.

As the wars and extra spending on military are deeply unpopular with broad masses of people facing unemployment and austerity, the French government is advancing false and hypocritical arguments that its

rearmament drive is designed to protect the French people against terrorism.

The review paper explained, “Terrorist attacks of January 2015 in Paris showed that France, like other European states, is directly exposed to terrorist threats of unprecedented scope, above all in Africa and the Middle East. Since this threat does not stop at France’s borders, these attacks illustrate the growing integration between the security of the population on the national territory and France’s military action outside its borders.”

This entails not only a massive escalation of military and police-state measures at home, but a broad commitment by the French military to re-occupy large sections of France’s former colonial empire in Africa and Syria. The paper wrote, “This militarized terrorist menace constitutes a major challenge, to be fought in the Sahel-Sahara desert region, a zone as vast as the European continent, or in Iraq against the Islamic State. It requires in particular a serious effort in the areas of intelligence, and the mobility and speed of reaction of our forces.”

In fact, the rise of Islamist forces in the Sahel and in Iraq is largely the product of NATO proxy wars in Libya and Syria, enthusiastically supported by French imperialism, in which NATO relied on Al Qaeda-linked forces to topple regimes targeted by the Western powers for regime change. The NATO powers have not abandoned their reliance on Islamist forces in Libya and Syria, and the claim that they are fighting a “war on terror” is a reactionary lie.

Above all, however, rearmament in France and across Europe is directed not primarily against poorly armed terrorist and guerrilla groups, but at the risk of military conflict between states.

Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian justified the strategic review and the decision to boost military spending by pointing to the rising tide of wars surrounding Europe. He wrote, “Faced with the evolution of the strategic context, France has made the decision to increase its defense budget in the coming years.”

The spending review strategy paper pointed to “a definite degradation of the international situation and the lasting increase of identified risks and dangers. These require the consolidation of our military efforts.”

A major point in the document is the NATO powers’

campaign to threaten war with Russia, after a NATO-backed, fascist-led coup in Ukraine to oust pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich last February led to civil war in Ukraine. The conflict with Russia, as French President François Hollande remarked earlier this year, could lead to “total war”.

According to the paper, “the Ukrainian crisis raises again, in a way that is unprecedented in many years the question of international security and the stability of borders on the European continent itself.”

This statement, coming amid the simultaneous rearmament of the major European imperialist powers, underscores that far more is at stake than simply Al Qaeda-linked forces, or even the danger of war with Russia. Conflicts with deep historical roots, above all between German and French imperialism, are rapidly emerging.

The French media’s criticisms of the promotion in Germany of Bismarck, who led the German defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, like the recent publication of a book by Jean-Luc Mélenchon denouncing Germany as a “poison” in Europe, testify to these rising tensions.

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