

France inaugurates €4.2 billion defence ministry complex

Kumaran Ira

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On November 5, French President François Hollande, Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, and several generals inaugurated a massive, €4.2 billion defence ministry complex in the Balard area of south Paris. The new building, the “Hexagone-Balard,” is being dubbed the French Pentagon.

The building, occupying 42 hectares, equivalent to 22 football pitches, contains walls designed to withstand missile strikes and a highly secure underground operational room. It brings together the defence ministry, the chiefs of staff of the armed forces including the army, air force and navy, as well as the defence procurement and technology agency responsible for the programme management, development and purchase of weapon systems for the French military.

The lavish complex can accommodate about 9,300 military and civil staff. Its inauguration was “a historic step for the ministry of defence, which has finally brought all its forces (land, air and sea) together on the same site,” Hollande declared.

Hollande boasted that the building is “one of the most highly protected in France. We must understand the reasons: here it is the key issue that is involved, the defence of our country. Buried under these storeys, there is the defence planning and operations centre, which I have just visited. Because Balard is the command centre of our military operations.”

As its economic and industrial strength collapses, French imperialism is seeking to defend its interest by escalating military operation and wars. Having made itself deeply unpopular by its attacks on jobs and social spending, Hollande’s Socialist Party (PS) is launching escalating military adventures abroad. It aims to impose neo-colonial regimes across much of France’s former colonial empire, while boosting itself in the polls with a few military successes, so it can proceed with more social attacks.

Since Hollande came to power in 2012, the PS has escalated military operations in Africa, including in Mali, the Sahel region, and the Central African Republic, and in the Middle East, where France is carrying out airstrikes alongside the US in both Iraq and Syria. This imperialist onslaught has not only made Hollande more unpopular, but it has also placed major operational strains on the French armed forces.

The French Defence Ministry cited “the need to bring together the general staffs to help our operations.... Since the Gulf War [against Iraq] at the beginning of the 1990s, in a period marked by more combined arms operations for crisis management, the need for closer integration of the general staffs and central leaderships has been identified. The Hexagone Balard concretises this.”

The PS hailed the bringing together of army, air force and navy headquarters. Jean-Paul Bodin, secretary general for the administration of the defence ministry, said, “It allows us to be in contact with each other much more easily than before and also to mobilise personnel faster, if necessary.”

Military escalation abroad goes hand in hand with a permanent military build-up inside France that threatens fundamental democratic rights. The government is dramatically expanding police-state measures designed to intimidate and repress social discontent, and the armed forces and intelligence agencies play an ever-greater role in French political life.

Hollande is dramatically accelerating its use of clandestine operations to extra-judicially murder targeted individuals around the world in the name of the so-called war on terror.

At the same time, the government plans to indefinitely maintain the 10,000 troops deployed across France after the January 7 attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, as a draconian new surveillance law gives the state vast powers to spy on the entire population.

Hollande himself bluntly declared, “Without reliable armed forces, we cannot act politically.”

The Defence Ministry commented that one of the main purposes of the new building was to “advise the government on military operations and propose strategic options to the president of the Republic.”

The inauguration of the lavish military complex shows that the claims of the PS and the entire political establishment, that they are cutting social services because it has no money, are reactionary lies. In fact, the government has spent over €4 billion for the Hexagone-Balard to prepare for operations against the population of France and the world.

The total cost of €4.2 billion contract will be paid off by the Defence Ministry between 2014 and 2041, with an annual amount of €150 million. This money, undoubtedly, will be extracted by further cuts from essential social spending on workers.

The Hexagone-Balard project, launched by former conservative president Nicolas Sarkozy in 2009, was a massive corporate boondoggle. The consortium that built the complex included construction and telecommunication firm Bouygues, defence and electronics firm Thales; Sodexo and Axa Real Estate all participated, employing over 1,500 workers.

The construction of the Hexagone-Balard was engulfed in scandal. Suspicions of corruption and favoritism in bidding for construction contracts led to an investigation and the indictment of three people, including an officer and a Bouygues executive.

The economic magazine *Challenges* cited one example of a “€2,274 bill to install two electrical outlets.... These two electrical outlets, for example, were part of the installation of a printer and a scanner that cost €13,613.21.”

Challenges cited an agent who ironically said, “At those prices, the scanner must be covered in 18-carat gold or platinum, and covered with diamonds, sapphires, rubies, and emeralds.”



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