

# French crackdown on “youth delinquency” in New Caledonia

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France’s Socialist Party government will send 53 extra police to New Caledonia in February amid high-level concerns over growing “lawlessness” in the small French Pacific territory, which has a population of less than 300,000.

A special policing unit will combat “youth delinquency.” This means intensifying police repression against marginalised youth, particularly indigenous Kanaks, who suffer high levels of unemployment and impoverishment.

The deployment was announced earlier this month at hastily convened talks in Paris, involving Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve, Justice Minister Jean-Jacques Urvoas and Overseas Minister Ericka Bareigts, following several days of unrest in the territory. The main road south of Noumea, the capital, was blocked by dozens of burned stolen cars during clashes between young Kanaks and the security forces. The closure left more than 10,000 people without normal deliveries of food, medicines and fuel for three days.

The clashes, near the township of St Louis, were triggered by the fatal shooting of a 23-year-old prison escapee late last month. Prosecutors claimed a police officer fired at the driver of a van travelling at speed toward one of his colleagues, supposedly trying to hit him.

The following day, five police were injured after being shot at, allegedly by armed youth, when they tried to clear roadblocks that had been set up in retaliation. The main road north from Noumea was also blocked by burning cars.

The family of the slain man have challenged police claims about the circumstances of his death. Roch Wamytan, the Kanak Grand Chief of the area, said there were witnesses and an official complaint would be laid in an effort to uncover the truth.

Seeking to outdo President Francois Hollande’s administration, right-wing former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, a candidate in next year’s presidential election, immediately demanded compulsory military service in New Caledonia to curb “crime.” Sarkozy told *Les Nouvelles Caledoniennes* that military training should be mandatory for youth over 18 who are not in education or employment. He also proposed lowering the age of criminal responsibility from 18 years to 16 in order to “end the [ruling] Socialists’ culture of impunity.”

Radio New Zealand reported that New Caledonian politicians welcomed the promised crackdown. The Republican Party proposed increased public surveillance, restrictions on alcohol sales and harsher penalties for young offenders. Former territorial president Harold Martin said Paris was no longer “playing down the seriousness of the problem” but predicted it would not stop young Kanaks “raiding” the Noumea area.

Wamytan did not oppose the crackdown, but said “customary authorities”—the indigenous Kanak leadership—needed to be “tied in” to any new measures. He criticised some proposals as like “using a hammer to kill a fly.”

The incidents point to explosive social tensions as the economic crisis impacts on Kanak youth. Clashes in impoverished areas have occurred with increasing violence over the past two years. In March, 40 police were deployed against youth deemed responsible for break-ins in the St Louis area. Shots were fired at a police armoured vehicle when it sought to recover a stolen car.

The “law and order” measures are being instituted as the working class is being thrust into struggles over jobs and living standards. Following a 40 percent drop

in the global price of nickel, major job cuts are underway in the mining and processing sector.

Last November, New Caledonia President Philippe Germain warned that the closure of a nickel refinery in the Australian state of Queensland could lead to widespread civil unrest. New Caledonia's mines were the main suppliers of the smelter before it was shut down in March.

Hundreds of workers at the Société Le Nickel processing plant in Noumea struck and set up pickets last November to oppose the loss of 60 jobs and a decision to delay building a new power plant for the smelter. The unions shut down the strike, while steering workers behind the demands of the Republicans to lift export restrictions. The previous August, truck drivers from the mining contractor union ContraKmine, who feared for their jobs, blockaded Noumea for three weeks demanding an increase in approvals for exports of ore to China.

Currently, the Koniambo (KNS) nickel plant, owned by the transnational Glencore-Xstrata and Northern Province's Société Minière du Sud Pacifique, is axing 140 positions from its workforce of 950. A court temporarily halted the first tranche of 47 sackings, saying the company failed to follow proper procedures.

Political tensions are also building amid preparations for a referendum on the territory's independence. On November 7, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls chaired a meeting in Paris attended by New Caledonia's leading pro- and anti-independence politicians, to discuss the plebiscite. Under the terms of the 1998 Noumea Accord, the vote must be held by November 2018.

According to Radio NZ, Valls expressed concern that the "unrest" exhibited near Noumea in recent weeks could be unleashed again.

Last month, 5,000 people rallied in Noumea to demand that Kanaks be automatically enrolled for the vote. The roll is restricted to long-term residents who are also on the general electoral list. The Kanaks have a customary status but an estimated 25,000 are not on the general roll and are at risk of missing out. There are claims of fraud by the French authorities in the vetting process.

The demand for independence has a long history. In 1984 the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS) launched the most recent struggle for

independence by proclaiming a provisional government. French settlers, or "caldoches," retaliated by killing 10 Kanaks in an ambush at Hienghene. All the accused were acquitted by a Noumea court. The massacre was followed by the murder of a prominent FLNKS leader, Eloi Machoro, by paramilitary marksmen. His death sparked riots and barricades throughout the territory.

Tensions climaxed in April 1988 when a group of Kanaks captured the gendarmerie on the island of Ouvéa, killing 4 policemen and taking 27 hostages. Some 300 elite troops were flown in and stormed a cave where the Kanaks were holed up, killing 21. Two police died. The troops reportedly tortured and beat civilians during the operation.

Deep divisions over independence continue. The 2014 elections saw a victory to three anti-independence parties—Caledonia Together, Front for Unity and Union for Caledonia in France. Together they won 29 of the 54 seats in the Congress, but just 49 percent of the popular vote.

With a permanent military garrison of 1,500 troops, New Caledonia remains vital to France's imperialist geo-strategic positioning in the Pacific. After years of lobbying by France, New Caledonia and French Polynesia were recently admitted to membership of the regional Pacific Islands Forum in order to boost moves, led by American allies Australia and New Zealand, to counter China's growing influence.

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