

New Caledonia referendum rejects independence from France

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Voters in the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia chose by a 56.9 percent majority in Sunday's referendum to reject full independence from France. The turnout was high with nearly 80 percent of 270,000 residents casting a ballot. Notwithstanding the anti-independence victory, the referendum was marked by a late surge in support by pro-independence indigenous Kanaks.

While the territory has a measure of self-government, France retains control over defence, policing, the judiciary, monetary policy and foreign affairs. Underlining the real relationship with Paris, 350 extra French riot police were sent to the country in mid-October to provide extra "security."

Speaking on television, French President Emmanuel Macron hailed the result as "a vote of confidence in the French republic, its future and its values." He added the French state would ensure "liberty, equality and fraternity for everyone"—hypocritical claims given the long and brutal history of French colonial rule in the Pacific, Africa and elsewhere.

While Macron had formally struck a "neutral" position before the vote, the French ruling elite was opposed to any breakaway. New Caledonia occupies a key strategic position as France's with military headquarters in the Pacific. In May, Macron visited Australia before heading to New Caledonia as part of the referendum preparations. He proposed an axis between France, India and Australia in the Indo-Pacific, with New Caledonia playing a key role in the US-led confrontation with China.

In the lead-up to the vote, Charles Wea, a Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS) spokesman in Australia, told SBS News: "We want to build a new society and new country and set up effectively a new relationship with France because we can no longer accept French colonialism in New Caledonia."

These hopes have, not for the first time, been dashed. A plebiscite in 1987, which was boycotted by the FLNKS,

saw a 98 percent vote against independence. Sunday's result will further entrench the deep social divisions between the largely impoverished Kanaks, who make up 44 percent of the population, and the more privileged, mainly European, layers.

A controversial electoral roll was created for the poll on which all Kanaks and only long-term New Caledonian residents could register. In October 2016, 5,000 people rallied in the capital Noumea to demand that Kanaks be automatically enrolled for the vote. An estimated 25,000 Kanaks were not on the general roll and were at risk of missing out. There were widespread claims of fraud by the authorities in the vetting process.

Divisions over independence continue. The 2014 elections saw a victory for 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.

Under agreements signed as part of the 1988 Matignon Accord, further votes are possible in 2020 and again 2023. The anti-independence parties, which have strong support in France from the far-right leader Marine LePen, want a clause allowing for a new referendum only every 25 years, and only if half the voters request one. They claim that without France, New Caledonia would not only become impoverished like other Pacific nations, but also a "province of China."

While no French political party endorses independence, a recent poll commissioned by French television found that within France, almost two thirds of respondents thought New Caledonia's independence would be a "good, or a very good thing."

With the build-up against China intensifying, French influence in the Pacific was boosted when the Pacific Islands Forum unanimously agreed in 2016 to admit New Caledonia and French Polynesia as members. France had

been pushing for membership for its territories since 2003.

New Caledonia's economy is underpinned by annual subsidies from France to the tune of €1.3 billion (\$US1.48 billion), while French companies retain significant economic interests. The main island, Grande Terre, has the world's largest known nickel deposits, about a quarter of all known reserves. It is also the second largest cobalt producer. Nickel is critically important in the defence industry, and has been designated a "strategic material" to ensure the French state can maintain a close watch over its production and distribution.

New Caledonia was established as a French colonial possession in 1853, and used as a penal colony. The Kanak people were removed from their land, forced onto reservations and subject to the *Indignat*, a code of 'native regulations,' which gave them inferior legal status. Uprisings occurred in 1878 and 1917.

Today Kanaks make up 95 percent of the unemployed and many low-paid workers live in slum conditions. Police clashes with Kanak youth have erupted with increasing violence, prompting demands by local politicians for harsher "law and order" measures.

Meanwhile, descendants of the original European settlers known as Caldoches, French public servants, military personnel and business employees occupy expensive residences overlooking the tourist beaches and yacht harbors.

Tensions erupted in 1988 when a group of Kanaks captured the gendarmerie on the island of Ouvéa, killed four gendarmes and took 27 hostages. Some 300 troops were flown in under the command of the head of the French elite anti-terrorist squad. The military stormed the cave where the Kanaks were holed up, killing 21 Kanaks and 2 policemen. The French troops reportedly tortured and beat civilians during the massacre.

The then minority Socialist Party government in Paris moved to bring the crisis under control. Prime Minister Rocard brokered the Matignon Accord, which was billed as a "compromise" between the independence movement, led by Jean-Marie Tjibaou of the FLNKS, and anti-independence leader Jacques Lafleur. The accord, which set out the long-term process for the independence referendum, was ratified by an 81 percent majority in a national plebiscite in which, however, only 37 percent of the electorate voted.

The Matignon Accord was followed in 1998 by the Nouméa Accord. The agreements gave limited influence to a privileged Kanak layer, effectively defusing the

independence movement. Money was poured in to building a Kanak infrastructure, training public servants and establishing a base for this layer in the lucrative mining industry.

The nationalist movement—formed by a layer of educated Kanaks radicalised while studying in France during the late 1960s—put the issue of independence on the backburner and dropped its socialistic phrase-mongering, in return for political and business opportunities. Amid a widespread feeling among ordinary Kanaks that they had been betrayed, Tjibaou and his deputy were assassinated in 1989 by a former supporter.

As around the world, the globalisation of production has completely undermined the program of national economic regulation on which nationalist movements such as the FLNKS were based. The tiny island states in the Pacific that were granted nominal independence in the 1970s and 1980s are completely dependent on the major powers economically and strategically. Insofar as the FLNKS still calls for independence from France, it represents the interests of a relatively privileged layer of Kanaks who are seeking a larger slice of the economic pie and a greater political say.

While the nationalist movement is now increasingly moribund, class struggles have erupted, propelled by a precipitous collapse in global commodity prices, including nickel. Broad sections of the working class, including miners, processing workers, truck drivers, airport workers and others have all engaged in militant struggles to defend jobs and conditions, bringing them into conflict with the entire ruling class.

Workers in New Caledonia should turn to their class brothers and sisters throughout the Pacific, as well as the working class in France, Australia, New Zealand and internationally for a joint struggle against the capitalist system that oppresses them all.



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