Amid COVID-19 pandemic, Germany, France spend billions on new fighter jets

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Germany, France and Spain are negotiating a multi-billion-euro project to develop a joint European fighter jet, the Future Combat Air System (FCAS). Brushing aside the over 1 million European deaths from COVID-19 due to the European Union's (EU) "herd immunity" policy with the claim there is no money to fund a scientific social distancing policy, they are preparing to instead spend hundreds of billions of euros on war planning.

Yesterday, French Junior Defence Minister for Armament Joël Barre announced that a final deal on the FCAS could be announced this week. A financing deal between Airbus and Dassault on the FCAS was already announced on April 6. Airbus, French defence contractors Dassault and Thales, and various subcontractors across Europe are the key firms involved in the FCAS, which is expected to replace both Dassault's Rafale jet and the Eurofighter made by Airbus in 2040.

Last month, German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and her French counterpart, Florence Parly, met to discuss the FCAS program. This came amid reports that German Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative government is anxious to have the FCAS programme's financing fully decided before the Bundestag (parliament) elections in September.

Kramp-Karrenbauer declared that the programme is in a "very decisive phase." She indicated that some final points, such as engine development, still need clarification, adding, "we as politicians expect the industry to jointly find a viable basis (for the next steps of the project) which we can accept."

There are continuing tensions, however, as German and French unions fight over which models and what factories would be most involved in building the fighter jet.

For her part, Parly called the FCAS "above all a political project," declaring: "It is above all the will of France and Germany to give the very best to our army and to build a European defence programme that both countries seek. Both of us think the same thing: we need an agreement by the end of the month."

The FCAS, expected to be operational by 2040, is a massive programme to build fighters, drones, combat technologies involving "cloud" computing, and secure communication systems. It got the green light in a 2017 meeting of the Franco-German Council of Defence Ministries, with spending to be shared equally between Paris and Berlin. Estimates of its overall cost range from €100 billion to a recent report in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* placing it at €500 billion.

From its inception, this programme was based on massive military spending increases financed by EU austerity attacks on the working class and sweeping cuts to social spending. After the NATO-backed regime change operation in Ukraine in 2014, the NATO military alliance called on European states to spend 2 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defence.

Now, amid the pandemic, this build-up is based on the EU's "herd immunity" policy. Berlin and Paris claim there is no money to finance social distancing policies, and that public funds should instead be handed over to massive military programmes and the EU's €2 trillion bank and corporate bailouts. Based on such arguments, the EU is not only refusing to cut military spending, despite the economic collapse produced by their response to the pandemic, but is actually raising military spending rapidly.

Berlin and Paris led an EU health policy that saw over 1 million deaths in Europe, with the continent's hospitals overwhelmed. According to official statistics, France has the most recorded COVID-19 cases of any

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European country, at 5.7 million, and Germany has 3.4 million. Over 104,000 and 83,000 people have died of COVID-19 in France and Germany, respectively.

At the same time, Germany reported record high military spending of €53 billion this year. For its part, amid the collapse in GDP due to the pandemic, France is allocating 2.1 percent of its GDP, or €49.7 billion, to its defence budget. France's 2019-25 military budgeting law gave the armed forces €18 billion more in 2019 than they received in 2017. Last year, Parly reported that the French military's investment budget between 2019 and 2023 would total €110 billion.

This spending has gone hand in hand with a growing campaign by European capitalist politicians and media to develop the EU as an aggressive military alliance. In 2018, amid mass "yellow vest" protests against social inequality, French President Emmanuel Macron insisted that Europe had to be prepared for war against Russia, China and the United States. Such arguments were retailed in countless articles by German and French media.

In 2019, German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW) warned that if the EU "does not act as one, it will find itself at the whim of other world powers." It added, "our military and industrial sectors are at risk of becoming technologically dependent. That makes cooperation not just an option, but a requirement."

Last spring, in the initial weeks of the pandemic in Europe, *Le Monde* drew the link between an aggressive EU foreign policy and the EU's "herd immunity" policy on the pandemic. Denouncing "China-centric globalisation," it endorsed Trump's rejection of masks and social distancing policies. It approvingly described the Trump administration's policy as "the 'business first' option, sacrificing part of its population to not leave Chinese power with an open field."

Now, as they leave millions to die of COVID-19 and insist that all social distancing policies must be ended, the EU powers are intensifying plans for all-out global war between nuclear powers. Indeed, French military chief of staff General Thierry Burkhard recently told Britain's *Economist* that France needs a "hardening" of its land army, currently fighting a bloody war in Mali: "We absolutely have to prepare for a more dangerous world."

The type of conflict being considered is exemplified by the French military's Operation Orion, war games slated for 2023 to train for high-intensity warfare against other major powers. Currently, reports indicate French forces up to the strength of a division, or around 25,000 soldiers, could be involved in the exercise in northern France, along with UK, Belgian and US troops.

Le Nouvel Economiste recently devoted an article to Operation Orion, noting that it is part of a "generational transformation" of the French and European military.

The magazine reported, "The spectre of high-intensity warfare is now so widely spread in French military thought that this scenario has its own acronym: HEM, or Hypothesis of a Major Engagement. Possible adversaries are not named but include not only Russia, but also Turkey or a North African country. French generals believe they have a decade to prepare. Study groups cover all potential issues, from arms shortages to social resilience, to the question of whether citizens are 'ready to accept a level of losses we have never seen since World War II,' says one participant."

These reports underscore the critical necessity of an international mobilisation of the working class across Europe and beyond, against both the "herd immunity" policies of capitalist governments and the imperialist powers' accelerating drive toward World War III.

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