

# Malian army detains president in French-backed coup aiming to strangle strikes

**Kumaran Ira****25 May 2021**

On Monday, Malian troops loyal to the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP) junta detained top members of the interim transition government. President Bah Ndaw, Prime Minister Moctar Ouane and defence minister Souleymane Doucoure are now being held in a military base in Kati outside the capital, Bamako.

Colonel Assimi Goïta, vice president of the transition and strongman of the CNSP, spoke on television, declaring that he had placed the leading officials “outside their prerogatives” in order to “preserve the transition charter and defend the Republic.”

Goïta criticized the interim Ouane government for reshuffling the cabinet “in agreement with the President of the transition” but “without consultation with the vice president,” i.e., himself. Two of Goïta’s key allies—Colonels Sadio Camara and Modibo Koné, who occupied the defense and security portfolios—had been ousted from the government the day before. Goïta also accused the government of failing to bring the growing strike wave in Mali under control.

The coup comes as Mali and the entire Sahel are rocked by growing social protests against the eight-year French war in the Sahel, and mass strikes. The arrangements on which French imperialism relied to launch its war in 2013—supposedly to fight “terrorism,” but in reality to occupy its former colony, after a coup ousted Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré in March 2012—are collapsing. With the war widely hated, workers in Mali are entering into struggle, demanding wage increases.

Last week, the National Workers’ Union of Mali (UNTM) called for a five-day strike after negotiations with the government over wages failed. The strike has shut down banks and public services. The union reported that “the strike is being widely observed and the country is literally paralyzed.”

Strikers are demanding the implementation of key

demands including the recruitment of at least 20,000 young graduates into the civil service. Civil servants are also demanding the integration into the public service of all teachers in community schools, and the application of wage increases they obtained in the public sector in 2014 and 2019 for the private sector.

The central aim of the coup, as it has rapidly emerged, is to work with the union bureaucracy and the corrupt political establishment to strangle the strike and crush mounting working class opposition to exploitation, the botched official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the French war.

Under intense pressure from workers, the UNTM had been forced to threaten an unlimited strike starting on Friday if its demands are not met. However, last night the UNTM seized upon the pretext of the coup to call off the strike. “The trade union federation does not want to increase the potential suffering of the population through this new political crisis,” UNTM Secretary for Economic Questions Ousmane Traoré told AFP.

The treachery of the UNTM bureaucracy points to the underlying aims of the Malian coup plotters, and their backers in Paris: to suppress the growing strike and political militancy among workers in Mali and across the Sahel, so the war and the exploitation of the working class can continue.

Last Friday, Ouane reacted to the mounting strikes by presenting the resignation of his government. Ndaw immediately reappointed him to form a new government. However, this provoked bitter conflicts within Mali’s so-called “transition” regime, which emerged last September from the August 18, 2020 coup that toppled President Ibrahim Boubba Keïta. The regime is formally tasked with overseeing an 18-month transition back to civilian rule, with elections slated for February 2022.

Not only the CNSP junta, but also the June 5, 2020 Movement-Rally of Patriotic Forces (M5-RPF) opposed

Ndaw's reappointment of Ouane, with the M5-RPF declaring that it would not join the future government.

The M5-RPF was the principal political organization that backed the CNSP's coup last August, encouraging mass protests by youth in Bamako into the dead end of supporting the CNSP. Both the M5-RPF and the CNSP were heavily supported behind the scenes during last year's coup by French imperialism, who backed the coup to block a broader movement of the Malian working class and oppressed masses demanding French troops leave the Sahel.

Relying on these political forces, Goïta launched the coup. He clearly calculated that, as during the August 2020 coup, whatever criticisms are made by the imperialist powers will be purely for show, and that Paris will continue supporting him as long as he creates conditions for the French war to continue.

Indeed, the European powers, the US State Department, the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU) issued the usual formal condemnations. The UN and the AU issued a joint statement demanding the "immediate and unconditional release" of the interim officials and adding, "the international community rejects in advance any act of coercion, including forced resignations." ECOWAS, the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany also signed the statement.

At Monday's European Summit, French President Emmanuel Macron denounced an "unacceptable coup" in Mali, threatening EU sanctions against the country. European leaders "condemned in the strongest possible terms the arrest of the President of Mali and his Prime Minister," Macron declared, calling it "an unacceptable coup d'état within a coup d'état."

All of these statements are empty rhetoric designed to provide a democratic fig leaf for a military coup and the suppression of the working class so the war can continue.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called the coup a "coup by force," declining to label it a "military coup." Radio France Internationale explained that the purpose of this terminology was "to leave a chance to negotiations" between Goïta and the civilian authorities.

Le Drian made clear that French policy is to put pressure on both army and the political parties to work out a deal backing the transition government and France's presence in Mali. Speaking to the National Assembly, he said: "We demand the liberation of the authorities, whose security must be guaranteed, as well as the immediate return to the normal course of the transition ... I insist that, if somehow there was no return to order in the transition,

we would take immediate measures targeting political and military leaders who are blocking the transition."

This cynical imperialist policy is steeped in blood. As Paris has tried to play off different ethnic groups against each other, Mali has seen rising sectarian massacres and killings carried out by French-backed forces. The UN Human Rights and Protection Division has catalogued over 100 extrajudicial executions perpetrated by the French-backed Malian Defence and Security Forces (MDSF).

Already suffering from heavy disruptions to its food supply bound up with global warming, Mali has been devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The 14,252 cases and 514 deaths from COVID-19 are widely supposed to be a massive underestimate, as the country's underdeveloped health care system is swamped.

Because of rising wartime violence in the central and northern regions of Ségou, Mopti, Tombouctou, Gao and Ménaka, the total number of internally displaced in Mali has exploded from 208,000 to 326,000 in 2019 and 2020, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. The violence has also spilled over into neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger. Mali suffered its deadliest year on record in 2020, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, which counted more than 2,800 casualties.

An essential task of workers internationally is to oppose the French war in Mali and to defend Malian workers' struggles against the threats from the Malian army, Paris, and their international allies.



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