Russian Wagner Group mercenaries to deploy to Mali as France withdraws

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At the UN General Assembly on Saturday, Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga denounced French proposals to withdraw occupation troops it has kept in Mali since 2013, stating that the Malian regime in Bamako would seek other allies. This came shortly after Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Bamako had contacted Russia's Wagner Group to hire mercenaries to fight Islamist militias in Mali.

Maïga denounced French President Emmanuel Macron's threat last month to withdraw from France's former West African colony, amid mounting popular opposition and strikes against the presence of French "Operation Barkhane" troops.

"The new situation created by the end of Barkhane, putting Mali before a *fait accompli* and abandoning it in midair, led us to explore ways and means to better ensure our security, autonomously and with other partners," Maïga said. He added, "France's Operation Barkhane suddenly announced its end with an aim, apparently, of becoming an international coalition whose shape is not yet known. … Or at least, it is not yet known to my country or to our people."

A month after the humiliating US withdrawal from Afghanistan as the NATO puppet regime in Kabul fell to the Taliban, another neo-colonial war is collapsing. Maïga—who speaks for a bloody military junta installed by two French-backed coups in the last two years, economically devastated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic—appealed to France for support against internal enemies even as he sought aid from Moscow. This underscores the class gulf separating the Malian junta from the workers and toiling people of Mali and the entire Sahel region.

Recent years have seen repeated anti-war protests in Bamako, culminating in calls for a general strike that were sold out by Malian unions in May. At the same time, Paris and its allies—the UN Minusma force, the European Takuba force, and the Sahel G-5 force from regional states—failed to crush jihadist groups that have fought in northern Mali since NATO's 2011 war in nearby Libya.

Maïga baldly denied the growth of popular opposition in Mali to the war, cravenly claiming there is "no anti-UN sentiment in Mali, not any more than there is anti-French sentiment."

He criticized Paris for suddenly withdrawing its troops: "The unilateral announcement of Barkhane's withdrawal and its transformation did not respect the tripartite bonds [between the UN, Mali and France]. Mali regrets that the principles of consultation and acting in concert, which must be the rule between privileged partners, was not observed prior to this decision."

In his remarks, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov had said that Malian authorities "contacted private armed companies because France decided to significantly reduce its military presence opposing terror cells in the north of the country, against which France ultimately was not victorious because the terrorists continue to run the show there."

Lavrov endorsed the Malian junta's discredited claims to be leading a "transition" to democracy, saying: "In the country, today, a transition is underway, elections must be prepared under the aegis of the African Union and of other international organizations." He claimed Malian "transition authorities contacted Russian private military companies, and we have nothing to do with that."

Lavrov also said Moscow would provide official military aid to the Malian junta. "We have a politico-military cooperation program and are engaged in peacekeeping in line with decisions of the UN Security Council," Lavrov declared. He stressed that this was called for by the Malian government: "Again, there should be no doubt about this, the Malian foreign minister whom I met Friday said that there was no problem with this."

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The sudden shift of the Bamako regime's allegiances reflects an explosive, international crisis of the capitalist system. It points not only to mounting class struggles in Mali and internationally, but also to conflicts between nuclear-armed world powers that threaten to erupt into war.

Significantly, Lavrov publicly denounced European Union (EU) foreign policy representative Josep Borrell for threatening Russia and arrogantly asserting that Africa belongs to Europe. "Josep Borrell told me, 'You'd better not work in Africa, because Africa is our place.' … Statements like 'I'm the first here. This is my place—go away,' this is deeply insulting. These aren't terms you should use with anyone," Lavrov said.

Despite Borrell's neo-colonial arrogance, Lavrov appealed to the EU for collaboration: "I think it would be better to coordinate our movements between the Russian Federation and the European Union in the struggle against terrorism, not only in Mali but across the Sahel."

The debacle in Mali is a humiliating setback for the offensive French imperialism has waged in its former African colonial empire since revolutionary struggles of the Tunisian and Egyptian working class erupted in 2011. The war in Libya set the stage for French operations in Ivory Coast to topple President Laurent Gbagbo and set up military bases across the Sahel to wage war in Mali.

The pretext for the war—that France and its NATO allies were fighting to destroy Islamist terrorist militias—is a political lie. The same Islamist networks in fact enjoyed French and NATO support to wage proxy wars in both Libya and especially Syria. These forces carried out terror attacks in Paris and across Europe, which the French government used as a pretext to escalate police surveillance and repression of strikes and social protests in France.

However justifiably welcome it is in Mali, the announcement of a French withdrawal does not signify a final defeat of imperialism. French troops are to be redeployed across the region, including to neighboring Niger, and Russian mercenaries are not going to Mali to fight imperialism. As Lavrov's remarks underscore, the post-Soviet capitalist kleptocracy that rules Russia, after having dissolved the Soviet Union and restored capitalism, is seeking a deal with the EU. It would happily use Mali as a bargaining chip in such negotiations.

The French withdrawal clearly also reflects mounting inter-imperialist conflicts, notably between America and France, after Washington canceled an Australian contract to buy French submarines and announced an anti-Chinese "AUKUS" alliance with Australia and the UK.

It is worth asking why the Wagner Group's arrival requires France to totally withdraw its forces in Mali. France and the Wagner Group worked together to back warlord Khalifa Haftar in the civil war in Libya, and Macron has called for closer ties with Russia throughout his presidency. Significantly, French military sources claimed that their decision to leave Mali after Bamako began considering ties to the Wagner Group was dictated by Washington and specifically by fear of a cutoff of US logistical and intelligence cooperation with its European NATO "allies."

The arrival of "Wagner in Mali could threaten US support for French or even European operations," wrote French military news site opex360.com. AFP cited French military sources saying that if French troops stayed in Mali while Wagner Group mercenaries arrived, "The United States would stop everything. … Certain European countries could also decide to disengage."

The force that must be mobilized against imperialism and its local bourgeois agents and allies is the international working class. Beyond the mass revolutionary struggles in Tunisia and Egypt a decade ago, the region has seen a mass movement against the Algerian military junta in 2019 and repeated protests and strikes across the Sahel, as well as growing strikes and social protests against inequality in France. The key task is unifying the struggles of the working class in an international movement against war and imperialism, and for socialism and a scientific policy to eradicate COVID-19.

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