

Orion 23: France holds its largest-ever military exercise for war with Russia

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On Saturday, the French military's Operation Orion 2023 (Orion 23) began with hundreds of parachutists being dropped in the Tarn region of southern France. On Sunday morning, an amphibious assault was simulated at Sète on the Mediterranean coast.

This first stage of Orion 2023, which continues until the end of the week, involves 7,000 troops from France, the US, Italy, Spain, Belgium and the UK, which are all part of the NATO alliance that is waging war against Russia in Ukraine. Over this week, as many as 2,300 military vehicles will be involved in the war games. These include 40 warplanes, over 100 drones, 30 warships and the Charles De Gaulle aircraft carrier.

According to General Yves Métayer, who led the organization of the operation, "We have never done an exercise of this magnitude over such a long period of time." Another officer told France3: "The amount of resources made available, the degree of synergy between the different armies, is unheard of since I joined the army."

However, the status of this week's war games as the largest ever on French soil will only last a few weeks. A second stage of Operation Orion, involving over 12,000 troops, is scheduled to begin in mid-April in the Champagne region.

In the capitalist press, Orion 23 is being all but explicitly acknowledged as part of far-advanced preparations for an all-out NATO land war with Russia. Indeed, by supplying offensive weaponry to Ukraine, the NATO powers are already engaged in a de facto war on Russia.

State-run news agency France24 reported that the war games "should enable the French army to prepare for a high-intensity conflict against an enemy state of equal strength. ... In a context of global geopolitical upheaval, the use of force is no longer taboo, and the prospect of

a major conflict is no longer science fiction."

While France's bloody imperialist war in Mali allowed the military to hone its use of modern fighter-bomber aircraft and drones, its ground operations relied on smaller special forces groups. General Vincent Desportes told France24 that Orion 23 is essential to "regain the know-how in terms of managing large joint forces that we have lost because for two decades we have focused on small operations."

The fictionalized scenario in this week's war game is widely reported in the media. In a thinly veiled reference to Russia, a hostile power called "Mercure" has invaded a French ally named "Arnland," and the French army's goal is to establish a bridgehead in occupied Arnland and begin to push back Mercure forces. Such a scenario played out in occupied southern Ukraine or Crimea is undoubtedly a critical part of NATO's battlefield plans for direct confrontation with Russia.

Another goal of Orion 23 is also to prepare to place the French state on a war footing. The Orion operation involved a simulated "information war," where both sides struggle to control reportage on their actions. This is in line with the NATO powers' efforts to suppress public knowledge of role played by Ukrainian neo-Nazi militias in the war against Russia, in addition to whitewashing war crimes committed by Ukrainian forces.

According to the French Defense Ministry's web site, the exercise will also involve many non-military government ministries and "will bring together the energies of civilian and military personnel working on the cohesion of the French nation." In other words, police and nominally civilian sections of the French state machine are also readying themselves for propaganda operations and intensified repression of

strikes at protests, in the event of all-out war.

Operation Orion comes amid an explosion of the class struggle in France, as millions march against French President Emmanuel Macron's widely despised pension reform, which he justifies with the claim that "there is no more money."

When it comes to pursuing the imperialist ambitions of the French ruling class and its NATO allies, however, hundreds of billions of euros are thrown around like small change. Orion 23, which cost €35 million to organize and involves billions of euros in military equipment, is only part of a far larger French military rearmament. In January, Macron pledged to spend €413 billion on the French military by 2030 (compared to under €300 billion for 2020-2025). A special amendment adopted in October last year also added an extra €3 billion to the military's 2023 budget.

Since the beginning of the conflict, France has spent around €2 billion on arms deliveries and other aid to Ukraine. In January 2023, Macron was the first NATO leader to commit to tank deliveries to Ukrainian forces, pledging dozens of AMX-10 RCR light tanks. This year, France will complete the delivery of 30 self-propelled Howitzers to Ukraine, which have a unit cost of €7.5 million. Moreover, 2,000 Ukrainian troops are currently being trained on French soil.

With millions marching against Macron's widely despised pension reform and deep popular opposition to further French arming of Ukraine against Russia, the French military's open preparation for war with Russia with the Orion 23 exercises necessarily raises the question: How is Macron able to so brazenly funnel hundreds of billions to the military and prepare a bloody war against Russia?

The president has only been able to carry out his policy due to the support of the pseudo-left parties and trade union bureaucracies. While nominally opposed to Macron's pension reform, pseudo-left Unsubmissive France leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon—and his NUPES (New Popular Ecological and Social Union) coalition with French social democrats and Stalinists—claim there is no link between the funding for the war and Macron's attack on the working class.

Mélenchon and the unions have supported NATO's arms deliveries to Ukraine since the beginning of the war and continue to whitewash NATO's years-long efforts to provoke Putin into his reactionary invasion of

Ukraine, which ultimately succeeded in February of last year.

The same forces also support massive investment into French rearmament. Earlier this month, a parliamentary report co-authored by Anna Pic, a member of the Socialist Party (PS), and Mélenchon's NUPES coalition called for even more funding for exercises to prepare France for "the hypothesis of a major conflict."

The unprecedented scale of Orion 23 must be taken as a warning of the very advanced state of preparations for total war in Europe, and another major escalation of NATO's war against Russia that threatens to spiral into a global conflagration between nuclear powers. For the financial oligarchy that rules France and the other NATO powers, the losses and the costs of the war are to be borne overwhelmingly by the working class. Workers and youth who oppose pension cuts, austerity and other attacks on the working class must also therefore take up the struggle against the NATO war on Russia.



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