

Protests mount against Macron's refusal to withdraw French troops from Niger

Alex Lantier
5 September 2023

After tens of thousands of workers and youth protested this weekend in Niger's capital, Niamey, thousands have encircled the NATO military base in Niamey. The base hosts some 1,500 French troops alongside US and Italian troops, fighter jets, killer drones and attack helicopters. Protesters are demanding that French troops, who have intervened across France's former colonial empire in the Sahel during the 2013-2022 French war in neighboring Mali, leave immediately.

A protester outside the Niamey base, Ibrahim Mohamed, told France Info he could not find any innocent explanation for the spate of mass murders in villages that took place across the Sahel during France's war in Mali. "With all the tools France has today with surveillance drones and heavy weapons ... I don't understand how individuals on motorcycles can come kill our people day and night," he said.

Maïkoul Zodi, the Niger coordinator of the Turn The Page activist network who addressed protesters surrounding the Niamey base yesterday, declared: "[W]e have encircled this base and we will camp out here until the last French soldiers leave our territory before we go home."

Paris is pursuing a blatantly neocolonial policy, however. President Emmanuel Macron and the military brass still refuse to withdraw their troops or replace France's unpopular ambassador to Niger, Sylvain Itté. Anonymous French officers are issuing threats in the press to crack down on protests in Niamey and pledging that any withdrawal they carry out will aim to strengthen French combat effectiveness across the entire Sahel.

France Info cited "the army general staff" as warning that "French forces are ready to retaliate against any threat to [France's] military and diplomatic positions in Niger."

Yesterday, French officials confirmed that they have opened talks with Niger's military regime on a partial

withdrawal of French troops from Niamey. However, the purpose of these talks is to give French troops the option to redeploy out of the most contested areas in Niger, so they could continue combat duties elsewhere in the region.

Le Figaro wrote: "It is useless to leave more than one thousand soldiers inactive in this area. 'Functional' discussions have begun to organize the withdrawal of certain military elements, according to the defense ministry. These are 'preparatory' discussions, that are technical and not political, it is said. The soldiers could be deployed elsewhere, their number is not yet decided. The general staff wants to maintain its operational credibility on the ground [in Niger]. The move could of course be reversed."

In the meantime, French officials are ignoring an offer from China, Niger's second-largest trading partner after France, to mediate between Paris and the Nigerien junta. Chinese Ambassador to Niger Jiang Feng extended this offer after meeting with Ali Mahaman Lamine Zeine, the prime minister nominated by the Nigerien military junta.

"The Chinese government intends to play a positive role, as a mediator, completely respecting regional countries in order to find a political solution to this Nigerien crisis," Jiang said. "China always follows the principle of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs," Jiang added, saying that he hoped African countries could "solve their problems, African-style."

The Chinese regime's attempt to broker a settlement with Paris reflects concerns within ruling circles in Beijing over Macron's aggressive policy in Niger. Since the July 26 coup in Niger ousted French-backed President Mohamed Bazoum, Macron has pressed aggressively to slap sanctions on Niger and prepare an invasion of the country by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries to return Bazoum to power. The sanctions and the threat to topple the junta in Niamey

cuts across significant Chinese economic interests.

Beijing is building major infrastructure projects in Niger, which decades of French domination since formal independence from France in 1960 have left as one of the world's poorest countries. It is building a 2,000-kilometer oil pipeline to transport Nigerien oil to ports in Benin, and a €1 billion hydropower plant at Kandadji on the Niger river to reduce the number of blackouts in Niger. It is unclear whether French-ECOWAS sanctions can block Beijing's projects, or whether Nigerien oil sales on world markets can allow Niamey to evade the ECOWAS sanctions.

Already, however, it is apparent that Paris faces the deepest challenge to its hegemony over its former colonial empire since the bloody 1954-1962 war for Algerian independence from France. The coup in Niger came after a series of coups in neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso which brought to power military regimes that demanded the departure of French troops from their countries. This reflected growing outrage among workers and youth at the bloodshed in Mali and across the Sahel during France's 2013-2022 war in Mali.

The crisis of French imperialism is all the more serious due to the explosive opposition in the working class in France to Macron's austerity diktat at home. He rammed through pension cuts this spring in the face of overwhelming popular opposition and mass strikes by millions of workers, trampling the will of the people underfoot and sending riot police squads to brutally assault strikers and protesters. Having slashed pensions, Macron then rammed through a €100 billion increase in France's military budget amid the NATO war on Russia in Ukraine.

The objective conditions for a united, international revolutionary struggle of workers in France and in France's former African colonies against imperialism are emerging.

The decisive question facing the construction of such a movement is a political break with the national trade union bureaucracies and allied pseudo-left or nationalist parties, based on an international struggle against imperialist war and for socialism. In France, these forces blocked broader strike action this spring to bring down Macron during the pensions struggle. In Niger and across the Sahel, they are working to prop up the military juntas' negotiations with imperialism, while trying to falsely present the juntas as "left," anti-imperialist governments.

In reality, the junta in Niger is desperately seeking to maintain relations with Macron, while trying to defuse

explosive opposition to imperialism among workers and youth. Indeed, as talks between the Nigerien and French militaries over a partial French evacuation proceeded, Niger's junta made its position unmistakably clear in a press conference by Prime Minister Zeine.

Zeine called for cooperation with French imperialism, while noting that France's military presence in Niger is "in a position of illegality" as it is opposed by the population and not authorized by the government. Pointing to the junta's "exchanges" with the French army, he said: "What we would like is, if possible, to maintain a cooperation with the country with whom we share so many things."

Similarly, despite their invocations of opposition to France, the human rights organizations and activist groups in the Turn The Page network that is intervening in the protests in Niger are also closely tied to imperialist interests. The network's web site lists among its sponsors the French state's French Development Agency (AFD), the German state-funded Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, and the US National Democratic Institute (NDI). The NDI is part of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a longtime conduit for CIA funds.

The struggle against imperialism and war can only proceed through a conscious turn to unify workers struggles internationally across Africa, Europe and beyond into a movement against imperialism and the capitalist elites' domination of social and economic life. This signifies opposing both imperialism and its various petty-bourgeois agencies in former colonial countries and building an international movement of the working class against imperialist war and for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact