

Macron imposes “republican order” to quash New Caledonia unrest

John Braddock
26 May 2024

French President Emmanuel Macron ended an 18-hour emergency visit to the riot-torn Pacific colony of New Caledonia on Friday, declaring that France would not “force through” contentious laws to expand the country’s voter rolls, but he has not withdrawn the legislation.

Widespread rioting, largely by indigenous Kanak youth, has devastated the island’s capital Nouméa and nearby districts. Unrest erupted on May 13 as the French National Assembly pushed through a constitutional amendment to allow French residents who have lived in New Caledonia for ten years the right to vote in local elections. The move is opposed by pro-independence leaders who claim it will dilute the vote of Kanaks who make up over 40 percent of the population.

Addressing media after separate meetings with independence leaders and three pro-France parties, Macron stressed that he had “made a very clear commitment to ensure that the controversial reform is not rushed by force and that in view of the current context, we give ourselves a few weeks so as to allow peace to return, dialogue to resume, in view of a comprehensive agreement.”

Macron said that if such a deal is reached it would become part of the French Constitution and replace the constitutional amendment focusing on the electoral changes. He has appointed a team of three negotiators to attempt to carry this through.

A spokesman for the pro-independence Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) alliance told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that the measure should be formally withdrawn or suspended to create “clear space” for talks. “For us we can’t be holding, you know, peaceful discussions while we have this deadline of first of July above our head for the bill to proceed to the Congress at Versailles,” he said.

Whatever the outcome of any talks, which will no doubt proceed despite the professed misgivings, Macron made it

clear that full independence for the colony is off the agenda. He told the leaders that the third self-determination referendum, held in December 2021 but boycotted by the pro-independence parties during the COVID pandemic, would not be relitigated. “I will not go back on this,” he insisted. Following pro-France majorities in referendums held in 1998, 2020 and 2021, Macron bluntly declared that New Caledonia had “chosen” to remain French.

Declaring that a return to “calm and security” was the “absolute priority,” Macron condemned the “unprecedented movement of insurrection” and warned that “massive new operations” would be scheduled. “Republican order in its entirety will be re-established... Step by step we will take back every neighbourhood, every roadblock, every roundabout,” he proclaimed.

Macron said that the 12-day state of emergency could only be lifted if the local pro-independence leaders called “explicitly” for all protest blockades to be dismantled. “Once these are withdrawn and this is confirmed the state of emergency will be lifted,” he said.

French security forces, now numbering about 3,000 with possibly more to come, will stay “as long as necessary”—including during the Paris Olympic Games—Macron said. He praised the security forces and vowed to “go until the end” to put down “violence.”

Tensions are far from subsiding. Police shot dead a man on Friday with the officer claiming he and a colleague were attacked by a group of 15 people. The death of the 48-year-old man brought to seven the number killed, including three Kanak youth—two by anti-independence vigilantes—and two gendarmes, during the 12 days of upheaval. Over 230 people have been arrested and 300 injured.

Christian Tein, leader of the Field Action Coordination Cell (CCAT) which is reputed to have organised the protests, said they would keep pushing for a withdrawal

of the electoral reform, as well as, eventually, independence for the territory. “We remain mobilised, we maintain the resistance in our neighbourhoods, in a structured, organised way,” he said on Facebook.

Tein, despite being under house arrest and promoted as “public enemy number one,” was invited by Macron to join the meetings—to the “surprise” of observers, according to Radio NZ. CCAT was set up in 2023 by Union Calédonienne, one of the components of the FLNKS alliance. Tien’s invitation and acceptance was a clear sign that the pro-independence groupings are directing workers and youth into futile appeals to the French state.

The FLNKS represents an indigenous layer given limited influence through the 1998 Nouméa Accord which set up a “power sharing” arrangement as part of a phony “decolonisation” process. Seeking a larger slice of the economic pie and greater political say, they are part of the political and business establishment working with Macron to strangle the movement that erupted, in opposition to them, from below.

New Caledonia’s President Louis Mapou, from the National Union for Independence, part of the FLNKS, condemned the rioters, saying “anger cannot justify harming or destroying public property, production tools, all of which this country has taken decades to build.” On the eve of Macron’s arrival, the FLNKS issued a statement saying that it hoped his visit would “give new life to a calm and serene dialogue.”

Behind the pro-independence slogans, the riots have been driven by deepening social and economic misery, particularly affecting young Kanaks who are alienated from the colony’s entire ruling elite. The poverty rate among Kanaks, the largest community, is 32.5 percent, compared to 9 percent among non-Kanaks. Youth unemployment is 26 percent.

Radio Djiido journalist Andre Qaeze told RNZ Pacific young people on the streets are saying they will “never give up” pushing back against France’s grip on the territory. He noted that the “political problem”—the voting law—is just the “visible part of the iceberg.” The deeper problem was economic. Pointing to drawn-out negotiations over independence, Qaeze noted, “for 30 years the young generation, they have seen this kind of game, and for them we cannot continue like this.”

A group of unidentified Kanak youth told an ABC film crew: “They talk about us as terrorists, but it’s them, they are the ones who are terrorists here...We protect our families, we have children.” The voiceover noted: “most

of all, they speak of neglect.” One young man said “They should not be surprised. The suburbs have always been left behind.” The movement was taking place because “no one is listening to us. We are marginalised here.”

After witnessing some of the areas of destruction by helicopter, Macron was forced to admit that social inequalities had “continued to increase.” However, he refused to accept that France had any responsibility for the situation and the riots, claiming: “They [the pro-independence leadership] rely on delinquents who have sometimes overwhelmed their order-givers.” Further slandering Kanak youth, he fraudulently condemned “the uninhibited racism that has re-emerged over the past eleven days.”

The colony, with a population of 270,000, faces an escalating economic crisis, with the vital nickel industry in turmoil and people reeling from escalating living costs. All the official parties, from both pro-independence and rival anti-independence factions, stand on the side of the business elite, opposing any meaningful measures to end poverty and social inequality.

In reality, none of the impoverished Pacific Island countries is fully independent: All of them rely heavily on aid from the imperialist powers and their governments are subject to routine interference from Australia, New Zealand, the US and France.

As Washington and its NATO allies, including France, wage war in Ukraine and escalate conflict with China in the Pacific, Macron is determined to keep a tight grip on the mineral reserves and strategic military bases in New Caledonia. Along with workers in mainland France, Kanak youth and workers are directly confronting the geopolitical interests of French imperialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact