

French overseas minister convenes talks on New Caledonia's future

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France's Minister of the Overseas Manuel Valls arrived in New Caledonia on February 23 to resume crucial talks regarding the French Pacific territory's political future in the wake of widespread civil unrest, mostly by indigenous Kanak youth, that began last May and caused damage estimated at €2.2 billion.

On the day Valls arrived in the capital Nouméa, he made a highly provocative visit to the Kanak centre of Mont-Dore to conduct a ceremony in honour of a French gendarme, one of two killed at the height of the riots. A further 12 deaths were Kanaks who were victims of France's brutal military crackdown.

Valls later travelled to the outer islands to commemorate four French police killed during the 1988 Ouvéa crisis. He then went on to the tomb of 19 Kanak activists massacred by French forces during the two-week hostage siege. The pro-independence movement has always regarded the actions of French special forces in 1988 as criminal.

Valls called for every New Caledonia "stakeholder" to "reconcile memories" and sit at the negotiation table "without hatred."

Valls is part of the right-wing minority government of Prime Minister François Bayrou. A former prime minister, he is the eighth Overseas Minister since Emmanuel Macron became president in 2017. He is likely to have been given the New Caledonia portfolio to provide a "progressive" gloss given his experience overseeing France's rule in the colony as prime minister under the François Hollande Socialist Party presidency from 2014 to 2016.

Valls has adopted a superficially conciliatory approach. Interviewed by *Le Monde* on 12 February ahead of his visit, Valls spoke not just about the existing "shared" sovereignty provisions of the 1988 Nouméa Accord but noted the Accord's reference to eventual "full and complete sovereignty" and decolonisation.

The first two days of Valls' visit were disrupted by demonstrations by some 500 pro-France, anti-independence protesters. Loyalist leaders Sonia Backes and Nicolas Metzdorf berated Valls, claiming he would side with the pro-

independence factions following his statements about "decolonisation" and the indigenous Kanak as "the first people" in the French colony.

Loyalist parties, at a large meeting in Nouméa on 19 February, categorically rejected Valls' comments on sovereignty, maintaining their position that New Caledonia remains within France and "*pas de cadeaux*" ("no concessions") to independence parties.

The Loyalists stressed that three referendums had resulted in consecutive rejections of independence in 2018, 2020, and 2021. The third and final referendum in December 2021 was boycotted by the Kanak community who have since disputed the validity of its result. Macron has ruled out another referendum.

Earlier in February, Valls had met in Paris with six delegations of New Caledonian political leaders. Once in the territory, he held an initial joint meeting with pro-independence and pro-France politicians behind closed doors.

Valls told media the main themes for the talks would be New Caledonia's relationship with France, its "governance" principles and a supposed new "social" deal to better include the territory's disenfranchised youth. Also up for discussion are the controversial electoral roll conditions of eligibility that sparked the riots, "decolonisation" and a transfer of certain powers from France.

"There is no taboo, everything is on the table," Valls said, assuring France was "determined to reach an agreement" while emphasising that New Caledonia must remain "united and indivisible." Valls insisted that all political stakeholders faced an "historic responsibility" and had to "accept to speak to each other and with the government of France." It remains unclear, however, whether France will actually cede any more powers to the territory's government.

The talks follow the collapse of New Caledonia's first independence-party-dominated government in 20 years on Christmas Eve. The cabinet then installed anti-independence Alcide Ponga as its new president. Ponga, 49, is the first indigenous Kanak to lead the pro-France *Le Rassemblement*

party. The change represented a sharp shift to the right within the local political establishment in the wake of the months of rioting.

The pro-independence movement split into separate factions last year after entering talks with the previous government while striving to keep a lid on the rebellion that had erupted from below and outside their control. Daniel Goa, retiring leader of Union Calédonienne (UC) admitted that during the riots there was “a perception” that calls coming from all political parties, including UC, were “not heeded” and the insurrection had gotten out of control.

The two factions are divided over how to deal with the latest talks. The main Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS), led by the UC, only confirmed their presence at the last minute. They declared they would be at the table to “deepen the discussion,” but flagged several issues, including the status of political prisoners arrested during the riots and a supervisory role for the UN.

The FLNKS want a full independence and sovereignty process with a so-called “Kanak Agreement” to be signed this September, followed by a five-year transition period. UC leader Emmanuel Tjibaou has described the current French approach as more “positive” compared to previous governments in Paris.

Meanwhile the breakaway Progressist Union in Melanesia (UPM) and Kanak Liberation Party (PALIKA) are open to a concept of independence “in association with France,” similar to the Cook Islands’ neo-colonial relationship with New Zealand, which is itself facing a crisis.

Loyalist political leaders have put forward a proposal for federalism. New Caledonia has three provinces. The Southern Province, centred on the capital, has always been the bastion of anti-independence leadership. The Loyalty Islands and the Northern Province have been managed by pro-independence Kanak leaders for more than 30 years. Federalism basically envisages that the south should secede from the rest of the country, effectively a form of apartheid.

Whatever the outcome the talks will not resolve the deep economic and social crisis hitting the colony, and in particular the impoverished working class and youth. The issues behind the unrest including poverty, social inequality, unemployment and social desperation remain. The rebellion brought a substantial section of Kanak youth into conflict, not only with French colonial oppression, but with the territory’s political establishment, including the local government and the FLNKS.

The economic repercussions of the months of rioting are dire. Six hundred businesses were destroyed and looted, and an estimated 10,000 people lost their jobs. At least a dozen schools, particularly in the Greater Nouméa area, were destroyed and could not reopen for the beginning of the year.

Over 10,000 residents, from a population of 293,000, have left for good, including 16 percent of the colony’s medical staff.

The nickel industry, with 20-30 percent of the world’s nickel reserves, is the backbone of the economy employing thousands of workers but is in crisis. The industry was already in decline before the uprising due to global competition from suppliers in China and Indonesia. Since then, exports have dropped and two of the main smelters are idled in care and maintenance.

In February 2024, Christel Bories, chair of the French minerals giant Eramet, told the *Financial Times*, that the company’s subsidiary SLN (Société Le Nickel) in New Caledonia would be among the sites and smelters at risk of being “wiped out... within five years” because of its “lack of competitiveness.”

Bories anticipated that by 2030, Indonesia could end up accounting for more than three-quarters of the world’s highest class of pure nickel. “I very much doubt that many governments can be found who still want to massively subsidise... to compete with Indonesian production,” she said.

Under these conditions, the perspective of establishing an “independent” New Caledonia on a capitalist basis is a pipedream. Formal independence from France will only mean subordination to one or more other imperialist powers. The bourgeois nationalist program is a reactionary political trap for New Caledonia’s workers and poor, especially amid the escalating US-led drive to war in the Pacific and global capitalist austerity measures.

None of the fragile, impoverished Pacific countries is fully independent, nor can they be. All rely heavily on aid from the imperialist powers and are subject to routine interference from Australia, New Zealand, the US and France. Only the unification of the working class across the region, and in the imperialist countries themselves, in the struggle for socialist revolution, can bring an end to colonial exploitation and lead to genuine equality and freedom for the oppressed peoples of the Pacific.



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