

French government supports Obama's Afghan escalation

Kumaran Ira
11 December 2009

The French government has enthusiastically backed US President Barack Obama's escalation of the war in Afghanistan, defying broad popular opposition.

In a statement released December 2, French President Nicolas Sarkozy said Obama's December 1 escalation announcement "provides a new impetus for international commitment and opens new prospects for the future." Sarkozy said he would examine France's troop contribution to the Afghan war after the international Afghanistan conference, to be held next January in London.

An Ifop poll recently found 82 percent opposition in France to sending further French troops to Afghanistan. Moreover, 65 percent of the population opposes military intervention in Afghanistan.

Since Sarkozy's election in 2007, France has rapidly increased its participation in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. Last year, France doubled its troop level in Afghanistan. To date, France has the fourth largest contingent in the NATO occupation force, with more than 3,700 personnel assigned to the mission, of which 3,400 are based in Afghanistan. France recently sent 150 gendarmes to help train Afghan police.

In the lead-up to Obama's speech, Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner made clear his determination to collaborate with the US on the Afghan occupation. In a November 13 interview in *Le Monde*, he said: "We would like Europe and the United States to meet much more often on this Afghan problem. No one is thinking of leaving Afghanistan immediately—which should facilitate this type of approach.... We are preparing a briefing on this subject, together with European partners who are very engaged on Afghanistan."

The bourgeois opposition parties, the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) and *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF), also demonstrated their support for the occupation, while making tactical criticisms of Sarkozy's policy, such as opposing further troop deployments. On France 2 television, former PS first secretary François Hollande said: "We must not send more troops and above all, we must change the mission."

These parties have played a key role in supporting the French mission in Afghanistan since it began, after the attacks of

September 11, 2001. At that time, French troops were sent to Afghanistan by the Plural Left government (PS-PCF-Greens) of then-Prime Minister Lionel Jospin of the PS, in collaboration with then-President Jacques Chirac, a conservative.

As the ruling class commits to a war that is spreading from Afghanistan into Pakistan and beyond, it is necessary to speak plainly: this is a historic crime against the people of Central Asia and of the NATO countries, guaranteeing immense expenditures of blood and resources in an ever-expanding military quagmire that threatens to draw in all the major military powers of Eurasia.

Moreover, Afghanistan is only one of several areas in which Paris has lined up with Washington, sometimes going beyond even the US government's bellicose stances in the region.

In September 2007, Kouchner declared that France was preparing for war with Iran, and he has consistently threatened that country with isolation or attack. In his recent visit to Israel, he said that Iran had not yet responded to offers made by world powers regarding its store of uranium, and Tehran was engaging in self-destructive behavior. "If Iran develops a nuclear weapon," he said, "this will not be acceptable to us. We must not add another threat to the region."

Sarkozy has also signaled support for separatism in Tibet, a volatile region in China adjacent to Afghanistan. In December 2008, when France was holding the EU's rotating presidency, China cancelled its summit with Europe, for the first time in 11 years, in protest at Sarkozy's decision to meet the Dalai Lama in Poland.

Working people must oppose the reckless policies of the NATO countries in Afghanistan, but this opposition requires an understanding of the root cause of the war: capitalism. In the case of France, where full support for US wars dates to Sarkozy's election, its connection to the profit and strategic interests of the capitalist class is particularly clear.

Sarkozy's predecessor Jacques Chirac, though he supported the Afghan war, had opposed the US drive to war in Iraq. However, his policies faced growing difficulties in the final years of his term. The rejection of the referendum on the European constitution in 2005 by French and Dutch voters undermined hopes that France could lead Europe in a viable foreign policy independent from Washington. The bourgeoisie

also lost confidence that Chirac could impose social austerity on the working class when mass demonstrations forced the partial retraction of the CPE (First Job Contract) reform in 2006.

The bourgeoisie viewed Sarkozy's presidency as the opportunity to implement a social program of "rupture"—destroying the welfare state and off-shoring industrial production in the interests of France's most powerful corporations—and to move decisively closer to Washington.

The French ruling class was concerned that it was losing competitiveness due to France's high wages, the social resistance in the working class, and France's lesser use of cheap-labor production. As Sarkozy came to power, the state Council of Economic Analysis (CAE) prepared a report titled "Globalization: France's Strengths." It pointed out French businesses' limited use of the world division of labor: "An important factor in modern business competitiveness, documented in many studies, is the segmentation of the value chain, i.e., importing intermediate goods that permit the optimization of production costs. Germany, Japan and the US are far more advanced than France in this process, using far more suppliers from developing countries."

The French bourgeoisie faced the difficulty, however, that it sought to rely on cheap-labor production abroad just as the US quagmire in Iraq was throwing into question the ability of the main imperialist power to police the world order. Thus in September 2007, *Le Figaro* wrote an editorial titled "The new petrochemical Yalta," bemoaning that "the time when the great Western oil companies dominated the world is ending." Citing high prices charged by Third World countries for their oil, it said "industrialized democracies" faced "a relationship of forces that threatens to be increasingly unfavorable to them."

The solution was to seek to pool the resources of US and French imperialism, to the disadvantage of the oppressed, cheap-labor countries and of the French proletariat. In a November 2007 article for Bloomberg News, US Council on Foreign Relations member Frederick Kempe explained: "In a complex world of declining relative US and European weight," France "will become a second-rate global power if it doesn't find a way to work with her natural ally"—the US.

While slashing pensions and workers' rights in France, Sarkozy moved decisively closer to Washington in foreign policy. He also concentrated on finding cheap labor abroad—notably with the Mediterranean Union initiative designed to increase French influence in the Balkans and France's former North African colonies—and securing international contracts for France's leading corporations in the energy, aerospace-defense, and construction industries.

During his visit to Morocco in November 2007, Sarkozy signed multibillion-dollar contracts for French firms, selling nuclear reactors, and construction and transport infrastructure. Morocco has been used as a major cheap-labor platform for French companies, notably auto manufacturer Renault. That

same month, Sarkozy visited Washington and gave a speech to the US Congress. While Sarkozy was unsuccessful in placing a French officer atop NATO's Southern Command in Naples, which controls naval deployments in the Western Mediterranean, French oil firm Total did get access to the Majnoun oilfields in US-controlled Iraq.

The inauguration, on May 26, 2009, of a French military base only 150 miles from the coast of Iran, in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), demonstrates that French capitalism is moving to secure its interests in the Persian Gulf, part of its ambitions to be a global player.

Besides repeated trips to Iraq and Afghanistan to express support for the US-led occupations, Sarkozy and other officials have undertaken a long series of high-profile visits to sell nuclear plants, trains, airplanes and various other products of France's largest corporations. The long list of recipients of these visits includes China, Morocco, UAE, Brazil, South Africa and Vietnam.

Sarkozy's trip to Brazil this September highlighted the imperialist calculations behind these commercial sales trips abroad. During his two-day trip to Brazil in September, France and Brazil signed a defense agreement. Brazil agreed to buy 36 French Rafale combat aircraft, for an estimated €4 billion. France also finalized arms sales—including helicopters and submarines (four conventional and one nuclear)—for €8.5 billion.

Le Monde happily noted that Latin America was a promising growth market for French arms merchants: "Tension has risen in recent months with the coup in Honduras, which has reminded the Latin American countries that weapons may speak again on their continent."

Such comments underscore the venality and corruption of the French bourgeoisie, a power that the international proletariat scared into the arms of Washington.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact