

Police-military crackdown intensifies in New Caledonia as French elections loom

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Amid ongoing unrest over French rule in the Pacific colony of New Caledonia, a police raid on Wednesday morning resulted in the arrest of eleven pro-independence Kanak activists. The operation included a search of the Nouméa headquarters of Union Calédonienne (UC), the largest pro-independence party.

According to the public prosecutor's office the group was detained for up to 96 hours while under investigation. They face several potential charges, including organised destruction of goods and property and incitement of crimes and murders or attempted murder of officers entrusted with public authority.

Among those charged is Christian Tein, leader of the CCAT (Field Action Coordination Committee), regarded as the main organising group behind the past month's riots. Tein was arrested as he prepared to hold a news conference at CCAT's offices located in the building housing the UC headquarters. Reine Hue, a UC official, said the police "entered the offices and took photos, especially of documents."

The UC immediately called on "all CCAT groups as well as our youth to stay calm and not respond to provocation on the ground or on social media." CCAT also released a statement urging "all independence activists not to respond to this new provocation, to demonstrate our determination, and not to fall into the trap of this colonial manoeuvre from another era."

Solidarity Kanaky, a pro-independence network in France, denounced the "criminalisation of CCAT" and the "abusive arrests, which once again are designed to meet the expectations of the most radical [pro-French] 'loyalists.'" It demanded an urgent visit by a United Nations mission and "an independent investigation to establish truth and justice for those murdered and injured in recent weeks."

The arrests have the hallmark of a fresh political provocation by the French state. The raid took place two weeks out from the first round of elections for the French National Assembly on June 30. Called by President Emmanuel Macron, the snap election is being conducted

amid a sharp rightward shift by the French ruling elites following large gains for far-right parties in the recent European Parliamentary elections.

As the French political establishment prepares an intensified war on the working class at home and imperialist war abroad, it is seeking to tighten its grip over its strategically significant Pacific territory. The passage of a constitutional amendment through the National Assembly on May 13 to expand the territory's voter rolls and allow recent immigrants to vote in local elections provoked an eruption of social anger by thousands of Kanak youth.

Pro-independence parties say the amendment will dilute the vote of indigenous Kanaks who make up over 40 percent of the population. The unrest has devastated the capital Nouméa and the colony is under the heel of a repressive police-military operation. Nine people, seven of them Kanaks, have been killed, hundreds injured and over 1,200 arrested. Nearly 3,700 French security forces will stay as long as necessary to impose "Republican order," according to Macron.

Lifting a 12-day state of emergency on May 28, Macron demanded the pro-independence leaders use their influence to get protesters' blockades around the main island dismantled. Tein was one who obliged. On social networks the day after accepting an invitation to meet with Macron during his Nouméa visit on May 23, Tein—previously dubbed "public enemy number one"—had called for the easing of security measures to allow him to speak to militants.

Despite the massive security operation and pressure wielded by Macron, the rebellion has not been brought under control. The FLNKS (pro-independence Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste) admitted that it failed to persuade protesters to remove roadblocks because the young activists were not convinced Macron would drop the electoral reform. Macron confirmed last week he had "suspended," but not withdrawn, the contentious amendment.

The FLNKS is an alliance of four pro-independence parties and sub-groups, including UC. It represents the

interests of a privileged layer that has benefited from so-called “power sharing” arrangements under the Nouméa Accord (1998) and is now part of the local political establishment. In a letter to Macron’s negotiating team on June 4 the FLNKS said Macron’s refusal to abandon the reform “represents a real difficulty and prevents our activists from hearing the call for calm and appeasement.”

Amid the tensions wracking the colony of 270,000 people, two National Assembly seats are being contested by the official pro-independence and anti-independence factions. The snap election is exacerbating longstanding differences within the independence movement and widening fractures between anti-independence parties.

On the pro-France side, the Calédonie ensemble (CE) is competing against an electoral alliance of two right-wing parties: Les Loyalistes and Rassemblement-Les Républicains who have split the two constituencies—one combining Nouméa with the Loyalty Islands and the second covering the rest of the main island of Grande Terre—between them.

A decision to defer the FLNKS Congress on June 15 meant that the main pro-independence coalition could not agree on joint candidates. UC has since nominated two: Omayra Naisseline for the first constituency and Emmanuel Tjibaou, son of the late Jean-Marie Tjibaou, founding president of the FLNKS, for the second. A range of smaller groups have nominated candidates across both constituencies.

The postponement of the FLNKS Congress exposed the escalating tensions between its purportedly “hard-line” faction, essentially the UC, and more “moderate” parties led by the Kanak Liberation Party (PALIKA).

The congress was convened in the village of Netchaot under the responsibility of PALIKA. Radio NZ reported that after the UC delegation arrived late there was a meeting of party leaders behind closed doors at which point it was announced that the congress, including an anticipated debate on “sensitive points,” would not proceed.

A large group of CCAT militants had been kept waiting outside, aiming to take part with the support of UC. But the hosts and organisers made it clear that this was unacceptable and could be seen as an attempt by the movement to take over the FLNKS. Ahead of the congress, CCAT had organised its own two-day general assembly with 300-plus attendees.

The “moderate” components of the FLNKS and organisers declared that if the postponed congress is to resume at another date then all the roadblocks still in place throughout New Caledonia should be lifted.

A New Caledonia government spokesperson Charles Wea told RNZ this week that the FLNKS and wider movement want a “robust process” leading to independence. “All the

unrest, all the troubles, is the result of the ignorance of the French government,” he said. “We cannot have peace without the independence of the country.”

In fact all of the factions of the Kanak movement have been exposed by the social uprising that erupted from below and outside their control. The riots have much deeper roots than unresolved frustrations over independence. The crisis comes at a time of escalating economic turmoil and social discontent. Unemployment among youth is 26 percent, mainly affecting young Kanaks.

Any bourgeois program of national “independence,” amid escalating imperialist antagonisms and capitalist austerity measures, is a dead-end. None of the fragile, impoverished Pacific Island countries is fully independent, nor can they be. All rely heavily on aid from the imperialist powers and their governments are subject to routine interference from Australia, New Zealand, the US and France.

New Caledonia’s Kanak workers and youth can achieve democratic rights and decent living standards only by arming themselves with a program based on the complete political independence of the working class from all the parties and representatives of the ruling elites. This must be aimed at abolishing the capitalist profit system and reorganising society along socialist lines.

Such a program requires a movement that is both socialist and international in scope—none of New Caledonia’s problems can be resolved within New Caledonia alone, but only through a unified struggle with workers throughout the Pacific and within metropolitan France itself.



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