



French troops out of Mali, down with French colonialism!

Marc Lassalle Mon, 16/08/2021 - 13:55

Marc Lassalle

In a declaration in June 2021, President Macron announced the end of France's Operation Barkhane in Mali. This military intervention was started in 2013 under the name of Serval by then President François Hollande, allegedly to stop the advance of jihadists threatening the capital Bamako. At the time of its launch, all the French political parties supported it, including the Front de Gauche, the Communist Party and Jean-Luc Mélenchon. The only notable exceptions were the New Anticapitalist Party, NPA, and Lutte Ouvrière, LO, who denounced it from an anti-imperialist position.

Eight years later, the balance sheet for French imperialism is bleak, but it is even worse for the people of Mali. Despite positioning 5100 troops in the country, and using an arsenal of high-tech weapons like drones, helicopters, missiles, jet-fighters etc., Sahel (the area just south of the Sahara desert) has become the epicentre of international terrorism according to Emmanuel Macron. The jihadists are even becoming a threat to other countries like Burkina-Faso and aim at expanding towards Senegal or Côte d'Ivoire.

Two coups d'état in 9 months have pushed the state of Mali even further towards collapse while Chad is also destabilised. 8000 people, mostly civilians, have been killed in the area since 2012 and 2 million have been displaced while 3.9 million need humanitarian aid. The parallel with the simultaneous retreat of US and NATO forces out of Afghanistan, and the dire situation there, is evident. However, despite all the announcements, this is far from the end of French colonial oppression in the area, and new crises and interventions are looming ahead.

Colony

France liberates. France carries values. It has no interest in Mali. It does not defend any economic or political scheme. It simply serves for peace claimed François Hollande in 2013. Alas, this rhetoric is simply an accumulation of cynical lies and a complete travesty of the truth.

The actions of AQMI and other fundamentalist Islamist groups are utterly reactionary and we condemn the oppression of women's rights and other fundamental liberties and the imposition of theocratic measures. But, just like the imperialist occupation in Afghanistan, democracy and women's rights only serve as an ideological fig leaf. The real reason for this intervention lies elsewhere.

The French 'serving liberty and peace' started with the military occupation of the country in 1863, after which Mali was integrated into French West Africa, first as Haut-Sénégal-Niger and then as French Soudan. To develop the production of rice and cotton, forced labour was massively used, and the population also supplied hundreds of thousands for the French army as cannon fodder under the name of 'tirailleurs' in both World Wars.

As in other French colonies, the independence obtained in 1960 was more formal than substantial. A coup d'état in 1968 put in power a dictator, Moussa Traoré, who remained president until 1991 with the backing of the French state. From the economic point of view, big business is completely dominated by the French multinationals in the banking sector (BNP-Paribas), the infrastructure and construction (Bolloré, Bouygues), telecom (Orange) etc. with a comfortable surplus of €300 million in the trade exchanges in favour of France. Mali is completely dependent on France

for its currency, like most other states from the French colonial empire: the franc CFA is indeed printed in and strictly controlled by France.

Mali is one of the ten poorest countries in the world. According to the Human Development Index, it ranks 175 out of 187 countries, with a life expectancy of 53 years and a rate of illiteracy of 69 percent. More than half of the population lives in poverty. After the crisis of cotton, once the 'white gold', the only known wealth is real gold: Mali is the third largest African producer, and this accounts for two-thirds of the value of exports, controlled by Canadian and South-African companies.

It is therefore no wonder that Malian immigrants constitute a significant component of the French working class, especially in the construction sector, and like all other immigrants are particularly oppressed by the racist discriminatory laws in France.

So, given all this, why is France so concerned about a poor backward country in the middle of Africa?

Intervention

The first reason, of course, is that Mali, like most other African countries, is seen by French imperialism as a present and future source of raw materials and cheap labour. The north of the country is largely unexplored, but besides gold and oil, other minerals might be present. There are also plans to exploit solar power in the Sahara and transfer it as electric energy to Europe.

More important for France, the large uranium mine of Arlit in Niger is only a few hours away from the Malian border. This mine produces most of the uranium for French reactors as well, of course, for nuclear weapons. A stable and controlled situation in Northern Mali is essential for the continued production in Arlit of this strategic commodity.

Control of the situation in Mali is also crucial for the control of the routes linking central Africa to the Maghreb. As in the days of caravans, when trade was flourishing across the Sahara, these routes are now heavily used to trade all kind of goods, including cigarettes, hostages, weapons and drugs. They are also used by thousands of migrants every year to go North, trying to reach Libya or Tunisia and then Europe. In summary, Mali is an important link in the French colonial domination of the whole area and French imperialism cannot tolerate the country disintegrating, opening the way for uncontrolled armed groups at the service of other interests. Indeed, this could destabilise the whole area much beyond Sahel.

After rapid victories against the jihadist groups (AQMI, MUJAO, Ansar Eddine) at the beginning of the intervention, the French army gave control of the Northern part of the country to an armed Tuareg group, MNLA (Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad). The jihadists suffered several defeats but still spread throughout the region, trying to link up with other conflicts, for instance in the centre of Mali. The initial popularity of the French intervention started to evaporate after several cases of civilian killings. With the state authority declining, the country is more and more under control of armed groups.

Weak state

The problem is that, as a state, Mali was fundamentally weak ever since its creation. Like many other colonial states, it is really an artificial entity, the North is a desert region essentially populated by the Tuareg, a nomadic people without a state who today are spread over five countries. Further south, Sahel is inhabited by cattle herders, it is only closer to Niger that agriculture is possible. Tensions between Tuareg and the central Malian state have been a virtually permanent feature for decades, including several insurrections and civil wars.

On top of this patchwork nature, the central state has been extremely weakened by its imperialist domination. Between the years 1970 and 1980, the debt doubled, with France being the main lender. In the 1990s, the IMF and World Bank imposed a harsh policy of debt restructuring (structural adjustment plans), leading to privatisation and cuts in the already meagre public sector, including schools and health services. In many villages, schools are non-existent and

health services are limited to traditional medicine. No wonder that the Malian army is in an appalling state. Corruption is rife and the hundred million euros invested there by Western powers simply disappeared in the hands of an inept bureaucratic caste.

The international situation is also a mighty source of destabilisation. The French-UK intervention in Libya quickly toppled the regime of Gaddafi but created a political chaos in which control of Libyan oil is heavily disputed. The fall of the Gaddafi regime led to the creation of armed groups in North Mali: Tuareg soldiers, once part of Gaddafi's army, escaped to Mali and Libya's huge stocks of weapons were sold across the whole region. More globally, Mali is just a pawn in a new scramble for Africa, where the old links of domination created by the French imperialism are threatened by other countries including China.

One reason for the Barkhane expedition, therefore, was to reaffirm French supremacy in its backyard. France is probably the only country that can send troops into the region almost at will, without even the disguise of an international peace mission sanctioned by the UN. And this with practically no international protest or indignation. The scenes of French paratroopers taking Timbuktu were intended both as a demonstration of force for other African countries, 'behave or the same will happen in your country?', and to fend off other powers.

However, as Napoleon once said, you can do many things with a bayonet, except sit on it. Eight years later, France does not intend to be further involved in a never-ending peace-keeping mission that is already transforming into a slow war of attrition. Declaring the end of Operation Barkhane, therefore, is just a move to camouflage the reality of a change of strategy.

New mission

France will leave 2000 soldiers in the area, on top of the 4000 permanently based in Africa from Cote d'Ivoire to Djibouti. These forces have already intervened 48 times in the region since its independence, almost once per year.

For many years, France has sought to give its intervention the cover of an international mandate. This not only gives political cover but also allows the replacement of French troops with those from other countries. The UN has created a peacekeeping mission MINUSMA (Mission Multidimensionnelle Intégrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation du Mali), with troops from other African countries including Chad. A special summit "G5 Sahel" has been created with Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina-Faso and Mauritania. European countries have supported Barkhane logistically and allowed funds for the training of the Malian army. Pursuing this logic, France has basically struck a deal with Tuareg forces in the North, most notably the MNLA, using them as a proxy for the French army.

Increasingly, the EU is drawn into intervening politically in the Maghreb and Sahel, effectively regarding it as its southern border, and supports French imperialism as the leading force in this task. Through MINUSMA, the EU heads a mission to train the Malian army and police forces. Germany alone has now stationed more than 1000 soldiers in the country to back French imperialist interests, and to pursue its own. Several EU countries, amongst them, France, Sweden, Estonia and the Czech Republic, are sponsoring a new 'anti-terror' intervention group named Takuba, whose actions will not be confined to Mali, but back up the whole of G5 Sahel.

No progressive solution can come to the Malian people from the French imperialist intervention, or from any joint missions with its allies, be they under the banner of the UN, the EU or any other 'peace keeping' alliance.

Indeed, the opposite is true. All imperialist forces and their auxiliaries need to be withdrawn from the country. If they are so concerned about the people of Mali, they could just leave their weapons in the hands of labour, women's and democratic organisations. Only through the self-organisation of workers and peasants, the arming of the people and the creation of workers', peasants' and popular militias will it be possible to stop reactionary violence and the oppression of women by fundamentalist Islamic forces, from the Malian army and from other occupation forces.

This form of self-defence and self-organisation has to go hand in hand, with fighting against the iron grip that French and other imperialist powers exert over the continent through debt and so-called "restructuring programmes". If one

wants to address the social devastation of the country, one needs to cancel the debt and expropriate without compensation all imperialist companies and the corrupt capitalist class of the country itself who plunder its wealth. Likewise, one needs to address the key democratic issues in Mali and beyond; the right of national self-determination for people like the Tuareg, the defence and extension of women's rights, the grip of the military and bureaucratic elite, the land question, which has sharpened and is likely to sharpen further because of global warming and the desertification of land.

All these questions need to be addressed in the struggle against the Islamists, the putschist regimes and the imperialists. In order to address these key social and democratic issues and the future of the country, the struggle for a constituent assembly will be crucial to rally the working class, the peasantry, the urban and rural poor, women, oppressed nationalities, the democratic intelligentsia and even sections of the urban petit bourgeoisie. Given the Bonapartist nature of the regime in Mali and of its state, the elections and working of a constituent assembly would need to be controlled by councils of action of the working class and the popular masses, fighting within such an assembly to take power into the hands of a workers' and peasants' government, resting on those councils, and an armed popular militia.

In order to bring such a perspective about, the working class needs to take the political lead in such a revolutionary struggle, combining the unresolved democratic questions with the struggle for a socialist transformation in Mali and the whole continent. In order to achieve this task, the working class needs to build up its own party, based on a programme for permanent revolution.

The withdrawal of all the imperialist troops is key for any development in such a direction. The French, German and other 'peacekeeping' troops have not only proven themselves completely unable to stop the forces of reaction, they are themselves part of the problem, being systematically engaged in atrocities. Even more, it is their colonial and imperialist domination of the country that impoverishes the masses and blocks any real democratic or social development, and it is the economic and geopolitical interests of French imperialism and its allies that they defend. The imperialist troops will be deadly enemies of any real and independent movement of the popular masses, and of the working class in particular, be it in Mali or any other African state. Therefore, the working class in France and the EU has to fight without reservation against any form of imperialist intervention in Mali and the whole continent.

French troops and all their allies out of Mali and other African countries! No to any renewed UN or EU 'peacekeeping' mission!

No to fortress Europe! Open the borders to migrants! Full democratic rights in Europe for migrants and EU workers!

Cancellation of Mali's debt! Stop the plundering of the African continent by imperialist countries!

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/french-troops-out-mali-down-french-colonialism>