

Introduction to Pambazuka's Special Edition on the labour movement in Africa

Sunday 5 February 2017, by [WHITTAKER Shaun](#) (Date first published: 26 January 2017).

In the face of multiple crises of profit-driven socio-economic systems that have driven millions of people in Africa into hopeless poverty, the urgent questions of our time are quite clear: How do we change the balance of class forces in favour of the working class? What are the radical reforms around which a program of mass action could be initiated? How do we form mass workers' parties all over the continent? What about organisations of the jobless, the landless and the homeless, the feminist structures, the youth?

Humanity has entered an interregnum of long duration and ever-increasing morbid symptoms. This conjuncture will generate a whole layer of populist leaders and movements, and new waves of suppression and militarism for the foreseeable future. These are the ways in which capital would attempt to survive the multiple crises that beset the profit-driven socio-economic system - in specific the breakdown of the world capitalist system since 2008. So this confluence of historical events will also spawn enormous struggles all over the globe that the left-wing should prepare for in earnest.

Are we ideologically equipped for this? Ideology is an imperative site of struggle. For sure, we should start with our ideas about transformation and grapple with what that would mean in practice for the left-wing on this mercilessly exploited continent. A frequently voiced criticism of Marxism(s) on this landmass is that it is Eurocentric and was developed by 'white' males, and is therefore not of relevance. Similarly, the opposition to Marxism(s) in Latin America continued for a very long time due to the perceived harsh evaluation of Simon Bolivar by the young Karl Marx. Fortunately, the works of the Argentinean radical thinker, José Aricó, has put that to rest now. Clearly, it is high time that we fully debunk all these misconceptions about Marxism(s) on this continent as well.

The essentialism that dismisses Marxism(s) in such a cavalier manner does not even begin to wrestle sufficiently with that theory of transformation, and fails to provide a left-wing alternative to the socio-economic crises. In fact, in contrast to Marx's political attitude towards Bolivar, that revolutionary intellectual was appalled by colonialism in Africa and elsewhere, and referred approvingly to the resistance of the slaves. The critique of the (anti-social) logic of capitalism - and the urgent need to transform it - reverberated throughout Marx's writings when he, for instance, pointed out the fate of colonised peoples, i.e. that with 'the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production', Africa was turned into 'a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins'. Similarly, in *The German Ideology*, he remarked favourably on the fugitive slaves of all the colonies and the insurgent slaves of Haiti.

Indeed, the so-called marginal works of Marx provided a strident criticism of slavery in the southern parts of the USA, colonialism in India and Ireland, etc. So, the left-wing today still fight for the universal values that arose out of class struggles (e.g. of the 'black' Jacobins) in the aftermath of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. After all, the emergence of industrial capitalism cannot be comprehended without acknowledging the links with colonial capitalism in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

The pan-Africanism of the elite, the conservative 'black' nationalism and the third worldism of a Frantz Fanon represent a political cul-de-sac. If anything, this era requires the hegemony of the working class – whatever the social manifestations of that class might be as unemployed, casual or part-time workers, etc. And the continent actually has a long history of Marxisms and anti-capitalist struggles. Cases in point include the noteworthy correspondence of the Workers' Party of South Africa with Leon Trotsky in the early 1900s; the remarkable leadership provided by the South African revolutionary socialist Isaac Tabata over a period of several decades; the anti-colonial resistance of Jonker Afrikaner and Jakob Marengo in Namibia, etc. In every single country on this continent is to be found valiant histories of anti-colonial fighters and anti-capitalist activists. It is just that we have yet to complete the writing of this crucial history. And it is an urgent project for the organic intellectuals of this continent and the left-wing in general.

Another pressing task is the promotion of multilingualism. We should strengthen the network of left-wing activists on the continent by finding practical ways to overcome the language barriers presented by English, French, Portuguese, Arabic, etc. There must be linkups with left-wing translators, and the development of effective multilingual programs. We need to convert all the crucial left-wing literature into key African vernaculars. Surely, the works of Antonio Gramsci, André Gorz, Rosa Luxemburg, Amílcar Cabral, Neville Alexander and many others deserve to be translated into African languages. And this would constitute a vital part of the cultural liberation of the continent. This special issue of Pambazuka News could regrettably not obtain papers from North Africa, where massive struggles are ongoing, probably due to the language barriers. Nonetheless, the translation of the paper on Congo Brazzaville published in this edition shows that it is possible.

Besides the ideological aspect, the struggle, of course, is also about the organisational forms that this assumes. This Special Edition is fortunate to host the first public debate on the recent conference of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), the largest trade union on the continent. Following that meeting of December 2016, some of the political questions ought to be clear by now: How do we change the balance of class forces in favour of the working class? What are the radical reforms around which a program of mass action could be initiated? How do we form mass workers' parties all over the continent? Should workers' councils be founded? What about organisations of the jobless, the landless and the homeless, the civics, the feminist structures, the youth committees, the reading groups, and so forth? Does it make any sense to prioritise the struggle for a living wage in the context of mass unemployment? Should the left-wing not be calling for the abolishment of the wage system and rather put forth radical reforms that would benefit the entire working class?

Radical reforms could focus on, for example, the demand for 50 litres of water and 1 kilowatt hour of electricity to be provided free per person on a daily basis, food banks that prepare one free meal per day, a basic income grant, and, in the longer term, the equal distribution of jobs and wealth, a shorter work week, social housing, etc. A crucial conversation would have to be about whether or not the working class should support industrialisation or, alternatively, what kind of industrialisation must be tolerated in light of the ecological crisis which holds tremendous implications for this continent. Any serious left-wing project ought to permanently keep this calamity in mind.

In the final analysis, the challenge for the left-wing is to link up with the jobless, the landless and the homeless in a mass workers' party and to unite employed and unemployed, formal and informal, permanent and temporary, urban and rural, women and men, young and old, 'black' and 'white', etc. Political lessons from elsewhere would suggest that the left-wing – not the trade unions – should take the lead in building such a workers' party.

And it ought to be a non-sectarian leadership that could combine the entire working class and all those left-wing political tendencies that concur on mass action as the primary way forward. In fact,

as we always insist, trade union members should join such a mass workers' party as individuals, and not as a bloc. The patient building of a revolutionary mass party with a politically conscious cadre is a better option in the longer term.

Lastly, we would like to thank all the contributors to this Special Edition for their significant inputs – without their time, effort and commitment this issue would not have materialised. And it was important to receive articles on dissimilar countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Mauritius, Congo Brazzaville, the Ivory Coast and Namibia. The unevenness in mass consciousness among different working classes is evident, but this should not demoralise us in fighting for another world that is possible.

Similarly, the comrades of *Pambazuka News* ought to be recognised for their exceptional role in providing a platform for left-wing discourse on the continent over so many years. This publication has become central to continent-wide discussions and should only expand.

It is our hope that this edition on 'The Labour Movement in Africa – Prospects and Challenges' will likewise contribute meaningfully to the much-needed ongoing dialogues among left-wing activists. In deliberating on the prospects and challenges, let us be guided by Gramsci's aphorism, viz. optimism of willpower, pessimism of intellect.

On behalf of the Marxist Group of Namibia, I dedicate this Specific Edition to all the working class leaders of this continent – in particular to the memory of Johannes Nangutuuala, the leader of the Namibian general strike of 1971-72, who died under mysterious circumstances while in the company of a Swapo securocrat. Memory is a weapon.

A luta continua!

Shaun Whittaker, Guest Editor

P.S.

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