

Zimbabwe: Promotion of the MDC by middle class radicals politically disarms the working class

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In the parliamentary elections in Zimbabwe in June this year, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) won 57 of the directly elected parliamentary seats. Having been launched as a political party only a few months earlier, it reduced the ruling Zimbabwean National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) majority to only five seats. Many workers in the urban areas, enduring worsening poverty and unemployment, supported the MDC. They were misled by its populist denunciation of the government's corruption and mismanagement of the economy into believing that the new party would defend their interests.

The Western powers backed the MDC, and Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe was made the target of press attacks all over the world. Governments that until recently described Mugabe in glowing terms suddenly discovered that he was a despot, lacking a democratic mandate for his rule—a change of opinion accounted for only by the West's annoyance at his failure to implement the structural adjustment policies demanded by the IMF with the necessary vigour. They hoped for an MDC victory and the ousting of ZANU-PF.

Middle class radical organisations such as the British Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) and others hailed the election result as a step forward for the working class, despite the imperialist backing the MDC received. The SWP claim that because the Zimbabwean Congress of Trades Unions (ZCTU) set up the MDC, it can represent the social and political interests of workers. The SWP's Zimbabwean sister party, the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), boasted that they were one of the first civic groups to “encourage the ZCTU to form a workers party to remove the ZANU-PF”.

The September issue of *Socialist Review*, journal of the SWP in Britain, carried an interview with Munyaradzi Gwasai, an ISO member elected to parliament on the MDC ticket. In seeking to justify his party's pro-MDC stance, Gwasai exposes the opportunist politics of the SWP.

The interview confirms that the MDC is a creature of the Western powers and that the ZCTU's role was to prevent any independent political development in the working class.

The National Constitutional Association, (NCA), the forerunner of the MDC, was founded at a time of mounting strikes and protests against Mugabe's government. Gwasai explains: “In the labour forums being held in Harare and Bulawayo a minority of workers would call for a party and the standard response would be, ‘The ZCTU represents all workers from all parties’.... But there were the stayaways [strikes] of 1998—including the five-day stayaway that was stopped—and the formation of the National Constitutional Assembly and also the crisis in the economy. It was then that those around [ZCTU head and current MDC leader Morgan] Tsvangirai began to think about it.”

Gwasai explains that the NCA was largely funded by the German think-tank, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FEF). Describing it as “an

influential social democratic organisation”, he comments that the FEF “had a strategy for building a viable party by getting people to work together without calling it a political party.... I think it was felt that there was a danger of radicalisation of the working class, particularly with 1997, and this is how Morgan [Tsvangirai] was then brought in as a figurehead leader of the NCA.... He lent credibility to the NCA, which was well funded.”

The very name of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation is one that should give pause for thought to anyone with a genuine concern for the democratic aspirations of the working masses. It was founded in 1925 by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) of Germany and some trade union leaders “to honour the legacy of Friedrich Ebert”, who died the same year. Ebert was a leader of the SPD and supported German imperialism in the First World War. After the war he became the first president of the Weimar Republic. In January 1919, along with Philipp Scheidemann and Gustav Noske, he led the Social Democratic government's efforts to defend German imperialism from revolutionary overthrow. Machine guns and cannons were employed against workers' demonstrations on the streets of Berlin. Hundreds of revolutionaries, including Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, were killed under the orders of a man who famously said, “I hate the revolution!”

In post-World War Two Germany, the FEF was revived in 1947 and ever since has played a crucial role internationally for the German ruling class. With a budget of more than 200 million marks (\$90 million) per year, around 700 staff members in its headquarters and perhaps another 2,000 worldwide, it has the biggest archive on the labour movement in Europe, a huge research centre and its own publishing house. Each year several hundred students are awarded “scholarships for social democracy”. It trains diplomats, academics and political forces considered friendly to German and Western interests all over the world.

In the 1970s the FEF played a crucial role in controlling the situation in Spain and Portugal: In the political turmoil surrounding the downfall of the respective dictatorships, it provided finance to set up reformist social democratic parties to stave off the threat of revolution. It also supplied politicians who had been picked up by the FEF amongst the exile students in West Germany, and were then trained and financed in the preceding years. Today the FEF maintains offices in 74 countries and is active in Eastern Europe, where it actively supported the transition to the market economy, as well as in South America, Asia and Africa.

Germany does not have the same extensive colonial links with African countries as France or Britain, so at present they work through “advisors”, “workshops” and “seminars”. In 1996 the FEF spent 35 percent of its total expenditure on the African continent. In 1993 the organisation was advising Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) on constitutional issues. The following year, ANC candidates for provincial

prime-ministerial office were sent to Germany for training. It has also organised workshops and seminars in South Africa on the privatisation of the economy.

Its claim to be promoting “democracy”, “parliamentary procedures” and “gender issues” is a thinly veiled cover for its efforts to further the interests of German imperialism. It particularly targets the trade unions, of which it writes, “In working with the international trade union organisations, the question of coordination and cooperation in individual branches and in transnational corporations is becoming increasingly important.”

In 1997 the FEF gave financial support to the NCA in Zimbabwe, obviously hoping to establish its influence in a potential replacement government for that of Robert Mugabe. But it was not the only international body supporting Tsvangirai, the NCA and later the MDC. Support also came from the press and politicians all over the world. In April this year Tsvangirai travelled to Britain to appeal for finances. While he was in London, a joint letter supporting the MDC was published in the *Times* newspaper from leading Conservatives Lord Howe, Lord Carrington, Lord Chalker of Wallasey, Malcolm Rifkind, Douglas Hurd (all former ministers under Margaret Thatcher), former US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester A. Crocker, Evelyn de Rothschild from the eponymous banking family and others.

Many of the signatories are members of the Zimbabwe Democracy Trust (ZDT), a group of powerful British and American politicians and businessmen, with direct financial interests in Zimbabwe, which has provided the MDC with extensive monetary assistance and advice.

In explaining why the imperialist powers and Zimbabwe's rich white farmers—who occupy three of the top four leadership positions in the MDC—made the unions the central focus of a new party through which to articulate their interests, Gwisai merely says that it was to lend them “credibility”. He implies that in this way, thanks to Tsvangirai, forces normally antithetical to their aims somehow misused the trade unions. But Tsvangirai could not have jumped into bed with the political representatives of Western imperialism without a broader base of support in the ZCTU leadership, who believed their own interests were served by such an arrangement. No one in a leading position within the trade unions was hoodwinked regarding the political character of the MDC. Its programme advocates privatisation, swingeing cuts in government expenditure, sacking thousands of government employees and the introduction of a social contract involving the government, business and the ZCTU. It calls for “political changes to win support from the multilateral financial institutions and donors to restructure the national debt”.

The Zimbabwean trade union bureaucracy had embraced similar policies long before the founding of the NCA or the MDC. In an interview with the *Multinational Monitor* in May 1996, Tsvangirai was asked about the structural adjustment programme imposed by the IMF. He replied, “There is no option. There were serious financial deficits, so the government had to go to the World Bank and IMF to obtain bridging finance. That meant also swallowing the medicine from the World Bank and IMF, which is structural adjustment... We are not opposed to macroeconomic stability measures.” Tsvangirai said his organisation supported the free market and the IMF's structural adjustment programme. His complaint was only about the way the programme was administered.

In the *Socialist Review* interview, Gwisai complains that his organisation was excluded from the conference held to discuss the formation of the MDC as a political party, “I suppose mainly because of our paper and our contribution in labour forums where we called for a socialist programme.” This is itself a telling admission. Probably the first official action by the organisation which the SWP defines as a “workers party” was to impose a proscription on groups advocating socialist measures, while they sat down to discuss a program effectively drawn up

by the IMF.

Gwisai quotes with approval the fact that at the end of the conference, there was thunderous applause when Gibson Sibanda, (then president of the ZCTU) said, “Now let's be clear—we are forming a workers party. Is this correct?” But he then complains that this was “not captured in the manifesto” and that later the MDC was defined as a “movement of ‘working people’, but this was allowed to include the bosses.”

As far as the SWP is concerned, the MDC's pro-imperialist policies are a secondary and hopefully transient feature. What is fundamental, they argue, is that the party's social base is in the trade union movement and therefore in the working class. Gwisai explains how the MDC used the structures of the ZCTU to establish itself. “The entire leadership of the regions was worker-led. The activists who had built the stayaways and demonstrations of 1997 were the ones who were building the regions. When the launch was held it was amazing! The regional leaders were assuming that on the basis of having built the movement since February, they would be in the national leadership. Then at the rally, a list of people was just announced.”

The only conclusion Gwisai offers from these experiences is that the party was “hijacked”. But he then advances the hope that by mobilising the rank and file it can be won to a socialist program. He continues, “There was real disillusionment, and there was a danger of us socialists becoming swamped. But we knew the radical workers were with the MDC.” Asked how he became the MDC candidate for the Highfield constituency, he replied that the ISO hoped that they would be able to use the campaign “as a platform for building a revolutionary alternative” and that socialists could change the party's course in a leftward direction. With unintended irony, he notes that he was originally adopted as candidate for the Harare area, but was shifted to Highfield “because of hostility from the party leadership and its bourgeois party sympathisers about a socialist standing in the central business district”.

Stripped to its essentials, the politics of the SWP and the ISO rest on an identification of the trade unions with the working class. They assert that because the unions have a mass working class membership they are, ipso facto, “workers organisations” and therefore can represent the social interests of the working class, if only the pro-capitalist leaders are replaced by popular rank-and-file leadership.

The SWP are indifferent to any critical historical examination of the role played by the trade unions. They assume that the development of a workers party will essentially repeat the events that led to the formation of the British Labour Party in 1906, where the trade unions established a party to represent their interests in parliament based on a reformist programme. They claim that inasmuch as Marxists advocated a tactical orientation to the Labour Party at that time—based on winning the mass of workers organised in the trade unions to revolutionary socialism—then this is what must be done today with the MDC and similar organisations set up by the trade union bureaucracy. They have argued for years that the most advanced section of workers in Britain is represented by trade union shop stewards who will inevitably come into conflict with the trade union leaders, due to their own efforts to defend wages and conditions.

The attitude of the Marxist movement towards the trade unions was always far more complex than that presented by the SWP. Writers such as Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg sought to explain that the trade unions have always been hostile to the struggle for socialism and consistently play a crucial role in blocking the development of socialist consciousness in the working class. Trade unions arose as defensive organisations of the working class, but the perspective of trade unionism, no matter how militant, has always been confined to bargaining over immediate issues of wages and working conditions, rather than challenging the profit system itself.

The unions promote the conception of a common interest between workers and their employers. As such, the character of a union's

leadership is never an accidental feature. The limited form of trade union struggle encourages the organisational domination of a privileged bureaucracy with a vested interest in defending the profit system. Marxists have always argued that the building of a genuine socialist party requires a struggle to overcome and transcend trade union consciousness and in this way break the political domination of this bureaucracy over the working class.

If this was true at the turn of the twentieth century, what is the situation at the dawn of the twenty-first? The SWP make no account whatsoever of the contemporary experience of millions of workers with the trade unions. Over the past two decades, trade unions in every country have betrayed the interests of their members and acted as direct instruments of the employers and the state. This has taken place regardless of the formal political orientation of the trade union leadership—whether reformist, Stalinist or openly pro-capitalist, as with the American AFL-CIO. The shop stewards—the minor officials glorified by the SWP—have almost universally abandoned their past militancy in favour of securing positions on union/management bodies. Even in countries where the trade unions have emerged more recently as mass popular organisations, they, and the parties based on them, have become defenders of corporate interests against their rank-and-file members.

Perhaps the most famous example is that of *Solidarity* in Poland. It was set up in 1980 in the course of a militant struggle at the Gdansk shipyard against the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy. In 1989, after the collapse of Stalinism, the Solidarity-led government came to power and implemented “shock therapy” policies that reduced the majority of Poland’s population to poverty. The same is true in many African countries. In South Africa, COSATU is a partner in the ANC government closely involved in the implementation of President Mbeki’s pro-business policies. President Chiluba of Zambia is a similar figure to Tsvangirai. He was the leader of the Zambian trade union movement until his party, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy, defeated President Kenneth Kaunda’s United National Independence Party in a landslide victory in 1991. Since then his IMF-inspired policies have decimated the lives of the people of Zambia.

The viability of the trade unions as nationally based defensive organisations of the working class has been undermined by the development of global production. The transnational corporations require a new type of labour force, stripped of all rights and completely subservient to the needs of the global production process, and they look to their political representatives in the trade union bureaucracy to provide this. But as far as the SWP is concerned, the issue of globalisation and its impact on the workers movement is only ever addressed in order to dismiss its significance. Nothing much has changed, they argue. In the July-August *Socialist Review*, for example, they point out correctly that “The world working class is massively bigger and stronger than at any time in history. As multinationals have expanded over the globe, so they have created a world working class in which there is increasingly a common interest.”

Despite the numerical strengthening of the working class, however, billions of workers have suffered a terrible decline in living standards due to the failure of the old workers organisations. Not only does the SWP make no attempt to explain this, but it also turns reality on its head by asserting that “The level of organisation has also not been seen before. Enormously powerful trade unions now exist in virtually every country, in virtually every sector of production. It is this power that, ultimately, will halt the power of the multinationals in their tracks.”

Such a grotesque glorification of trade unionism subordinates the working class to the very organisations on which the ruling class relies to enforce its interests. Despite their socialist rhetoric, the SWP have helped the union bureaucracy and the MDC to channel the mass opposition movement against Mugabe’s corrupt regime behind pro-imperialist policies. The working class is the only social force that can advance a

programme on which to take forward a struggle for democratic rights and social equality. But to do so, it must begin to act independently of the political representatives of the imperialist powers and the native bourgeoisie alike. Instead Zimbabwe’s urban working class have been dragooned into a common organisation with their oppressors, enabling Mugabe to convince millions of land-hungry peasants that ZANU-PF are their allies against the white farmers.

This past week, both the MDC and ZANU-PF have made threats of violence against one another. Tsvangirai told 20,000 supporters at an MDC rally that if Mugabe did not want to step down before the next elections scheduled for 2002, “we will remove you violently”. The government responded with threats to arrest Tsvangirai and a warning that any attempt forcibly to remove Mugabe from office will be met with violence.

Last month the MDC claimed a grenade attack on its headquarters had been the work of a police agent, but the government alleged that it was an inside job. Police also claim to have discovered arms caches belonging to the MDC, which could signal the beginning of the party’s repression. Faced with this growing threat of open civil war, only a political rebellion against the MDC and the creation of a genuine socialist and internationalist party can overcome the dangers presented by a political division between urban and rural workers.



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