

An exchange on the land occupations in Zimbabwe

17 October 2001

Comrades,

I write in response to your article Zimbabwe: Mugabe regime steps up repression as economy collapses.

I find the article problematic on several counts. Perhaps most worrying is the failure to see the class significance of the land occupations and, in fact, the replacement of class analysis with “biographical” analysis when it comes to interpreting events in Zimbabwe. The latter approach has been propagated with extreme success by Western media in the effort to deny legitimacy to the occupations. They tell us that they are “orchestrated” by Mugabe; that they must be understood as part of Mugabe’s electoral campaign and his unquenchable thirst for power; that the people involved are “thugs” and “so-called war veterans”.

While opportunistic and criminal elements are no doubt present, it is a gross distortion of the truth to emphasize these at the expense of the landless and landshort. In fact, land occupations of various types have been ongoing in Zimbabwe throughout its 20 years of independence, not to mention the liberation struggle and the whole of the colonial period. This most recent episode is the climax of a longer, low profile, and dispersed struggle for land, whose last high-profile flare-up occurred in the immediate aftermath of independence. At that time, the occupations compelled the government to act fast in redistributing land—including the high quality land that had been abandoned by white farmers during the war, and would not have otherwise been acquired by the government for redistribution under market-based instruments of acquisition.

It is worth noting—against the biographical approach—that ZANU-PF, and Mugabe himself, responded to a crisis of legitimacy brought on by structural adjustment (liberalisation) and manifest in the erosion of the economic and social gains made after the first decade of independence. The campaign against a neoliberal ZANU-PF was led by organised workers, the ZCTU [Zimbabwe Confederation of Trade Unions], throughout the decade, with mass demonstrations and national stay-aways. But the ZCTU never had a rigorous vantage point on the land question, and indeed could not claim to represent the rural oppressed (outside large-scale commercial farming), for it never built structures in the rural areas and never affiliated the peasant union. Radical peasant politics remained firmly outside the “civil” bounds of society and in fact it has been this politics that has been given leadership by war veterans. The latter, and particularly the lower echelons, rebelled against the elite of the ruling party in the midst of ZANU’s crisis of legitimacy, in 1997. It is this rebellion that compelled the leadership to return to the liberation cause, in order to maintain legitimacy. The process, therefore, is not “driven by Mugabe”; it is a class struggle. The ZCTU in the process got outflanked, and the politics of “peasants” and “workers” became dichotomised more than they ever have been—falsely and extremely polarised.

Two more points require brief comment. The first is what appears to be a “natural” inclination to side with organised worker politics than to recognize the semi-proletarianised reality of the Zimbabwean peasantry and the variety of political forms which it throws up. This reality does not have a unitary organisational expression, for the ZCTU only expresses the

proletarianised side of the reality. Moreover, it must be recognised that “independent” trade unionism does not exist in this world. This is especially true in the third world. If a trade union is not patronised by the state, it is patronised by the ICFTU, a Northern-dominated international trade union movement whose definition of “the worker” does not make room for the semi-proletarian.

The second point is your distrust of smallholder farming. You mention that the breaking up of large-scale commercial agriculture is retrograde. This view, of course, has a long pedigree, against which Lenin most notably took exception. More recently, there has (finally) emerged a consensus—which is odd insofar as it includes the government of China and the World Bank—that smallholder agriculture is more productive than large-scale. This seems to be true regardless of the tenure regime. In Zimbabwe, the distrustful view has a pedigree of its own—the Rhodesian.

Zimbabwe is the only state at the moment (outside socialist ones) that supports radical land reform. This is an historical opportunity that must be seized. Democratisation is a long process with many relevant social realms.

After the democratisation of the structure of land ownership worldwide, we must support not least the democratisation of international trade unionism and the global state.

Sincerely,

PY

Athens, Greece

Chris Talbot replies:

Dear PY,

Before attempting to dismiss our analysis of the current crisis in Zimbabwe, you should carefully read through the article you criticise, as well as other articles on Zimbabwe on the *World Socialist Web Site*. It is surely elementary advice to study our position before pronouncing against us.

Your assertion that we substitute a “biographical” for a class analysis is false. Our references to Mugabe are not to suggest that his personal ambition is the driving force behind recent political developments in Zimbabwe. In so far as we are distinguishing him from the ZANU-PF regime as a whole, it is to point to his tendency to take personal control of state power. This tendency is hardly unusual in a crisis-ridden regime in an underdeveloped country.

Mugabe is the leading representative of the state in a country that is oppressed by imperialism. But the class nature of that state is capitalist. Despite the fact that ZANU-PF came to power after a lengthy liberation struggle against the Rhodesian white supremacists, it is not essentially different to the other bourgeois nationalist regimes throughout Africa and the underdeveloped world.

We wrote: “The transformation of leaders such as Mugabe into venal despots expresses the antagonistic relationship of the national bourgeoisie to the oppressed masses of workers and peasants. None of the states in Africa created by de-colonisation have been able to evolve along genuinely democratic lines, redistribute the land and satisfy the aspirations

of the masses. Far from seeking to overthrow the existing social order, the national bourgeoisie took the place of the old colonial rulers in exploiting the country's working class and natural resources while to a growing degree acting as the political agents for the interests of the imperialist governments and transnational corporations." [1]

The national bourgeoisie in backward countries cannot play a historically progressive role. In his *Theory of Permanent Revolution*, Leon Trotsky pointed out that the democratic tasks carried out by bourgeois revolutions in Europe and North America in previous centuries—national unification, giving the land to the peasants—could no longer be carried out by the national bourgeoisie under the economic domination of imperialism and confronted by a growing working class that threatened its interests. These democratic tasks would now have to be carried out by the working class as part of the socialist revolution.

We have sought to explain that Mugabe and the ZANU-PF regime are not genuine opponents of imperialism and must share responsibility with the West for the disaster in Zimbabwe:

"For the last 20 years Mugabe has supported private enterprise, notwithstanding his previous claims to be a Marxist. The huge white-owned farms have been allowed to thrive, contributing a substantial part of Zimbabwe's export earnings. Land reform carried out in the 1980s was on the basis of a 'willing seller-willing buyer' agreement, in which farmers who wanted to quit were compensated from a grant made by Britain. Only 65,000 farms for war veterans were established under this scheme, a small fraction of the number promised.

"Dissatisfaction with Mugabe on the part of Britain and other Western governments has only developed in the last few years. They have come to see him as an obstacle to the wholesale adoption by Zimbabwe of free market economic policies, under the auspices of the IMF.

"Whilst the ZANU-PF regime worked with Western support under an IMF structural adjustment programme throughout the 1990s, a fall in export earnings from 1997 onwards drove the government deeper into debt. The IMF conditioned new loans with demands for more drastic cuts in government spending. It also demanded that Mugabe end his intervention in the war in the Congo, where Zimbabwe has 10,000 troops supporting the government of Laurent Kabila at a cost of £1 million a day.

"Mugabe feared that complying with these conditions would undermine ZANU-PF's base of support, both in public sector employment and in the army, where Zimbabwe's generals were making lucrative deals for concessions on the Democratic Republic of Congo's mineral wealth." [2]

In many of our articles, we have pointed to the social disaster that has now developed in Zimbabwe. Over 70 percent of the population live in poverty, unemployment is at least 50 percent, and over a quarter of the population are HIV infected and there has been a huge increase in deaths from AIDS.

Your assertion that we have a "'natural' inclination to side with organized worker politics" can be easily refuted. We do not need to be told that independent trade unions do not exist. In relation to Zimbabwe, despite the fact that the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was created by the unions and has support amongst working people in the cities, we have consistently stressed that it is committed to the free market policies that have resulted in a social catastrophe throughout Africa. The MDC has received Western backing precisely because of its pro-IMF policies, and we have warned working people not to support it, even though it puts itself forward as a democratic alternative to the repression and corruption of the ZANU-PF regime.

We opposed the position of the British Socialist Workers Party, who advocate support for the MDC:

"Stripped to its essentials, the politics of the SWP 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."

We then made a brief summary of our analysis of the trade unions, based on the bitter experiences that workers have had in the twentieth century:

"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."

We stressed further: "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". [3]

You argue that "radical peasant politics", given leadership by the war veterans ("particularly the lower echelons") is compelling ZANU-PF to "return to the liberation cause, in order to retain legitimacy." Hence your conclusion that we should support the Zimbabwe regime's "radical land reform" as part of the "democratization of the structure of land ownership worldwide" to be followed by the "democratization of international trade unionism and the global state."

This type of "two-stage" argument—workers must support a bourgeois nationalist movement or regime at the moment; since progressive developments will ensue in the future—has been presented so many times to justify so many betrayals, that it has a very bad smell about it. It is the standard argument advanced by a plethora of middle class radical organizations who have no conception of building an independent socialist movement in the working class and who offer up various surrogates instead—radical peasant movements, national liberation struggles, or whatever. You do not say which regimes you consider to be "socialist" today. The only candidates we can imagine—Cuba, North Korea, etc.—would suggest at best an uncritical approach to the claims of their leading cliques and a non-Marxist analysis of their actual class character. After all, these impoverished regimes are the antithesis of the perspective that the socialist movement has always fought for—the planned and democratic utilisation of the most advanced productive forces of humankind on a global scale.

The argument that the working class movement should subordinate itself to bourgeois nationalism was the central policy of Stalinism in relation to the colonial world. On this basis, many bloody betrayals of workers and peasants were carried out, beginning with China in 1927, where under Stalin's advice the Chinese Communist Party promoted illusions in the nationalist Kuomintang. The Chinese revolution was drowned in blood, when thousands of communists and workers were butchered by the Kuomintang troops. Stalin's theory that revolutions in the underdeveloped world would occur in two stages—first the democratic or national revolution, then the socialist at some future date—had disastrous consequences in one country after another. On the basis of this policy, for example, the Indonesian Communist Party supported the bourgeois nationalist leader Sukarno in 1965. This political disarming of the masses

led to their defeat in a military coup in which more than half a million workers, youth and poor peasants were murdered.

In Africa, this two-stage theory was adopted by many of the Pan-Africanist leaders who came to power when the former colonial rulers granted independence in the 1960s. Leaders like Nkrumah in Ghana, Sekou-Touré in Guinea or Nyerere in Tanzania claimed that they would build up a national economy and eventually move to the construction of socialism. This “socialist” period proved to be short-lived or even stillborn, however. By the late 1970s it was clear that the World Bank and Western donors would no longer allow the development of limited welfare state measures or nationalizations of certain industries. Debts that had been allowed to accumulate now had to be paid off and interest rates soared as a result. The illusion of “independence” was further undermined in the late 1980s with the end of the Cold War, and with it the possibility of African regimes projecting a “socialist” image by leaning towards the Soviet Union or China.

Even during the 1960s and 70s, Stalinist theories in relation to the colonial world were becoming increasingly threadbare. New theses were put forward by middle class radical organizations to boost illusions in bourgeois nationalism. It is here that we find the origins of your arguments about “radical peasant politics”. In Africa in particular, it was argued that it was no longer necessary to build an independent working class socialist movement because the national liberation movements and then the newly established regimes in Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe had a different character—they were based on a peasant support.

The politics of the petty-bourgeois radicals were backed by the arguments of some more serious academic writers. Thus one detailed study set out “a case for the importance of peasant agency in the twentieth century history of Zimbabwe” [4]. Another writer on Africa, John Saul, wrote that, “Peasants in the twentieth century have become a revolutionary force in ways that Marx necessarily could not predict.” [5].

Saul’s arguments were typical of a whole genre from that period and resemble your own very closely. Thus he wrote on Mozambique that the “peasant base of the struggle has become the key to both FRELIMO’s [the national liberation movement in Mozambique] military success and to its own internal clarity as a revolutionary movement.” [6] Going on to suggest “that in such a peasantry, increasingly well organised and now working self-consciously against various forms of exploitation, there can be some guarantee of the continued forward movement of the Mozambican revolution, even after independence has been won.” [7].

Writing on Zimbabwe, a year before the Lancaster House agreement was signed between British imperialism, Mugabe’s ZANU-PF and Joshua Nkomo’s rival ZAPU, Saul concluded that the leaders of the liberation movement in negotiations with the Western powers, were a “little prone to compromise away the essence of African demands.” The reason was that the peasant-based guerrillas, “with their promise to the Zimbabwean people of a more meaningful independence than that which neo-colonialism can offer, have become crucial participants in the negotiations almost in spite of themselves. They thus force the entire spectrum of Zimbabwean nationalism to the left”. [8]

What have been the results of these nationalist struggles, pressurised by the so-called “peasant base”? They have proved a disaster for the people of southern Africa. Mozambique is one of the poorest countries in Africa, and the FRELIMO leaders were among the first to accept IMF structural adjustment programmes and ditch their socialist phrase mongering. Angola’s leaders also junked their Marxist demagoguery and the country’s oil wealth now enriches a tiny elite whilst most of the country is completely devastated by civil war. We have already referred to the social catastrophe in Zimbabwe. Surely the bitter lesson from these last 20 years is that the working people and impoverished masses of Africa should place no reliance on bourgeois nationalism, “peasant-based” or otherwise?

Let us now turn to considerations of the specific issue of the land

occupations in Zimbabwe. Your comment that “the occupations compelled the government to act fast in redistributing land” glosses over what actually happened in the 1980s. ZANU-PF won widespread support during the war of independence from the peasants and rural poor by promising to seize the land from the white farmers and to nationalise it. As we indicated above, on coming to power it reneged on its promises and the land that was distributed—mostly containing the poorest soil—went to a small minority. In other words, it forms part of the patronage the regime has used to stay in power and has nothing to do with democracy. You also ignore the fact that squatters’ movements were violently suppressed and the army utilised to kill thousands of political opponents of the government in Matabeleland.

But we must also emphasise a basic economic consideration. Agricultural policy cannot be separated from industry, transport, finance and so on—i.e. the economy as a whole. The limited redistribution of land carried out in the 1980s, and also some expansion in the welfare state, particularly education, was made possible because ZANU-PF had inherited the national economy that was developed under the Smith regime in conditions of virtual isolation. One book on African agriculture that paints rather a rosy picture of the developments made on Zimbabwe’s new small farms created in the 1980s, explains that it was based on inputs (fertilizer and high-yielding seeds), cheap credit from the government, research back-up, price incentives and access to markets [9]. It makes clear that this could only be done because “Zimbabwe had built in advantages” [10]—in other words it inherited a relatively developed national economy.

The possibilities of that kind of national development perhaps continued in Zimbabwe and South Africa later than in the rest of Africa, but given the expansion and domination of the global economy that has taken place over the last decade or more this has now become impossible. If large-scale capitalist farming is to be abandoned—which was in decline anyway, given the falling price of tobacco and other commodities—what does the ZANU-PF regime intend to replace it with? Given the country’s state of financial collapse—with Mugabe flying to Libya to beg a loan from Gaddafi in order pay for a little more fuel—how precisely is this “democratization of the structure of land ownership” you speak of supposed to take place? Isn’t it the case that with no finances available for fertilizers, farm machinery, etc. there can be no agricultural development? And that those able to grab a plot of land will be thrown back into subsistence farming, whereas the rest of the population, including millions living in the cities, will be left to starve?

Mugabe and the ZANU-PF leaders have no strategy for the Zimbabwean economy, apart from a desperate gamble that they can pressurize the West into resuming financial support. They clearly do not believe in any possible return to a nationally based economy—the basis of the “liberation cause”.

As for “radical peasant” politics, we have seen no evidence that the war veterans have any different political policies from ZANU-PF. Of course there is, and has been for decades, a legitimate demand from the rural poor for the return of the land seized by white farmers under the Smith regime, and before that in colonial times. But we are not inclined to ignore the extensive Marxist literature on the different class nature of the peasantry and the working class. In his writings on China, warning of the dangers of basing the Communist Party on the peasantry, Trotsky wrote:

“The worker approaches questions from the socialist standpoint; the peasant’s viewpoint is petty-bourgeois. The worker strives to socialize the property that is taken away from the exploiters; the peasant seeks to divide it up. The worker desires to put palaces and parks to common use; the peasant, in so far as he cannot divide them, inclines to burning the palaces and cutting down the parks. The worker tries to solve problems on a national scale and in accordance with a plan; the peasant, on the other hand, approaches all problems on a local scale and takes a hostile attitude

to centralized planning, etc.” [11]

There have been numerous examples of movements based on the most economically backward layers of the peasantry that have developed in the most reactionary direction. Most notable would be the mobilization of peasants by the Pol Pot regime in Kampuchea against the urban population and the working class, or in Africa the mobilization of thousands of Hutus in Rwanda in the ethnic-based massacre of Tutsis. You note as an aside concerning the present land occupations in Zimbabwe, “opportunistic and criminal elements are no doubt present.” But it is hardly a minor question that the occupations have proceeded by the killing and intimidation of black farm labourers, with hundreds now rendered homeless. You speak of the politics of peasants and workers becoming “falsely and extremely polarized,” but ignore the serious danger that far from developing in a democratic direction the result could be descent into civil war—with the war veterans, backed by the army and police, pitched against the urban population. After all, in a recent interview with the British *Guardian* newspaper the leader of the war veterans, Andy Mhlanga, made very clear his commitment to Mugabe winning the presidential elections: “We will not accept an MDC victory. If they win we will go back to war.”

The only viable way forward for both the urban working class and the rural masses throughout Africa is to reject the politics of nationalism and the “radical peasantry” and proceed on socialist lines as we have insisted:

“The only alternative to the disastrous leadership of the African bourgeoisie, whether or not it continues to espouse the rhetoric of “national liberation” like Zanu-PF, or gives open support to the free market like the MDC, is for the working class of the region to develop an independent socialist movement that would win the backing of millions of small peasants and rural poor. A socialist policy for the resolution of the land question would first and foremost recognise the necessity for democratic control and social ownership not just of agriculture but of industry and banking also, and on a continental scale and ultimately global scale.

“There is no possibility of an agricultural development being made in Africa without a repudiation of the huge levels of debt owed to the Western banks. It is also necessary to develop a plan for the economy that provides for the whole population, rather than being primarily a source of minerals and raw materials that from colonial times on has benefited only Western corporations and a tiny elite. Such a plan would recognise the legitimate aspirations of millions of poor people for land in southern Africa, whilst encouraging the development of the most productive techniques to provide food for the rapidly expanding urban centres. Throughout much of Africa, the main rural production is subsistence agriculture, which cannot meet the needs of an expanding population.

“Mechanisation, provision of chemical and organic fertilisers and pesticides, as well as making available scientific expertise has long been recognised as basic requirements to increase food production in Africa.

Small-scale private producers should be assisted with interest-free loans, but the ultimate requirement must be the development of the most advanced large-scale agricultural production, run collectively and socially owned, as opposed to the present profit-based large farms that are owned by a wealthy and mainly white elite.” [12]

A final comment on the question of “smallholder farming”. Lumping together China, the World Bank and Lenin on this question can do nothing but confuse. It is true that the Chinese Communist Party based itself on the peasantry in coming to power in 1949. (For a Marxist analysis of the historical development of China see “Deng Xiaoping and the fate of the Chinese Revolution”). But the Chinese bureaucracy turned to the restoration of capitalism under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and has now embraced free market economics. The result for the peasantry has been a disaster. Thus in one article we point out:

“In rural China, ignored by policy makers, agricultural incomes are

stagnating or falling in cases where government subsidies are being cut. Recent surveys indicate that over 20 percent of peasant households depend upon one or more family member having other work. Rural underemployment is estimated at 150 million and can only grow as greater mechanisation is introduced. Migration to the cities is continuous, with landless peasants supplying low-cost labour for industry.” [13]

Clearly the Chinese government is no longer part of your “consensus” that boosts smallholder agriculture. As for the World Bank, it has certainly backed some schemes that boost smallholder capitalist farming because its philosophy is to promote free market capitalism against what are perceived as the “socialist” leanings of governments in oppressed countries. But the prevalent conception that smallholder farming is more productive surely comes from the environmentalists.

Their argument is a crude one. The huge expansion of agricultural production that has taken place over the last few decades, the so-called “Green revolution”, has been based on large-scale capitalist farming. It has undoubtedly thrown up serious technical and environmental problems—soil erosion, the over-use of nitrogen fertilizers, etc—that the environmentalists have campaigned against. But there is no reason, however, on the basis of scientific research, why these problems could not be overcome. In the underdeveloped countries there have been a number of disastrous large-scale agricultural projects that were under-financed and based upon Western advice that was ignorant of local conditions. Again the reasons for failure were largely due to technical problems that could be overcome, or the economic restrictions imposed by imperialism. Based on dubious statistical comparisons of the productivity of large-scale capitalist agriculture with that of small-scale peasant farming the environmentalists put forward a “small-is-beautiful” argument. Thus they have used technical/environmental problems, thrown up by the drive for profit in large-scale farming, to argue for the small-scale petty-bourgeois production that is central to the Greens’ retrogressive politics.

Finally we come to Lenin, i.e. the socialist standpoint, where you seem to be seriously misinformed. In 1917 Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolshevik leaders of the Russian revolution sought to win the peasants away from the party of “radical peasant politics” of that time, the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), to the side of the working class. They recognised, correctly, that the SRs would refuse to break from the bourgeoisie. Based on Trotsky’s *Theory of Permanent Revolution*, their conception was that the agrarian problems in this backward country with a huge peasantry could only be resolved through the socialist revolution.

Bolshevik policy on the land question is explained in the sympathetic account given by E.H. Carr in his work, “The Bolshevik Revolution” [14]. The Bolsheviks demanded the transfer of all land “into the hands of the peasantry organised in Soviets of Peasants’ Deputies or other really and fully elected democratically elected organs of self-government” and called for the nationalisation of the land by the state “which would transfer the right of distributing it to the local democratic organs.” [15]

Whilst recognising that the small peasants had to be won to the side of the revolution, Lenin had no illusions in limited small-scale capitalist production. His approach was to win peasants over to socialized collective farming by patient education, an approach that had nothing to do with the draconian and panic measures imposed by the Stalinists in the early 1930s:

“We cannot conceal from the peasants, and still less from the proletarians and semi-proletarians of the countryside that small-scale cultivation, so long as commodity markets and capitalism remains, is *not able* to deliver mankind from mass poverty, that it is necessary to *think* about a transition to large-scale cultivation for social account and to *take this in hand at once*, teaching the masses and *learning from the masses* how to make this transition by practically appropriate means.” [17, emphasis in original].

Notes:

- [1] Zimbabwe: Mugabe government abandons the rule of law
- [2] Crisis in Zimbabwe: British military force poised to intervene
- [3] Zimbabwe: Promotion of the MDC by middle class radicals politically disarms the working class
- [4] *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe*, by Terence Ranger, James Currey, London, 1985
- [5] *The State and Revolution in Eastern Africa*, by John Saul, Heinemann, London, 1979, p 298
- [6] Ibid, p 318
- [7] Ibid, p 320
- [8] Ibid, p 119
- 9] *The Greening of Africa*, by Paul Harrison, Paladin, 1987, pp 89-92
- [10] Ibid, p 95
- [11] *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1932*, Pathfinder Press, p 194
- [12] Zimbabwe land agreement reflects West's concern over instability in Africa
- [13] Beijing's WTO concessions signal a new stage in China's capitalist restructuring
- [14] *The Bolshevik Revolution*, E.H. Carr, Volume 2, Pelican, 1966.
- [15] Ibid, p 36
- [16] ibid, p 37



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