

Africa and the perspective of international socialism

Nick Beams
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Dear editor,

I have two related questions. First, as a regular reader of your site, I would like to know whether your critique of the oft-voiced desire of many (primarily northern based) globalisation protesters to strengthen the nation state vis-à-vis global capital extends to those seeking similar solutions in the South, where I would think a strengthened state could more justifiably be seen as a necessary antidote to imperialist forces. That is, would you universalise your analysis to third world contexts? Take much of sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, where the mode of production can hardly be seen to have reached the highest stages of capitalism as yet, remaining largely agrarian in nature with an undeveloped native bourgeoisie. Is not the state in this context—albeit not the colonially created and rationalised ones that exist today—a necessary evil in this regard?

This brings me to my second question. In this context, would not a radical pan-Africanism, one that is socialist and internationalist in orientation (as defended by the likes of Patrice Lumumba, C.L.R. James, and Frantz Fanon) compliment rather than obstruct international proletarian revolution?

Yours sincerely,

OL

Dear OL,

The first point I want to make in reply to your questions is that there is a fundamental class division between the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the WSWS and all the anti-globalisation protestors, whether in the advanced capitalist countries or the so-called South.

Their response to the latest phase of capitalist development—the globalisation of production and the emergence of an international financial system—is to turn to the nation-state to try to hold this process in check, to regulate and constrain it. That is, they align themselves with one or other section of the capitalist class that has come into conflict with those sections most directly associated with the globalisation process.

In opposition to this essentially reactionary outlook, the perspective of the WSWS is based on the understanding that globalisation of production is a progressive historical development. The socially destructive consequences which accompany it flow not from globalisation as such but from the subordination of economic processes to the social relations of capitalism—the private profit system and the nation-state.

This raises the following question: How is the global economy going to be rationally organised and planned so that its immense economic, technical and cultural capacities can be utilised for the advancement of mankind as a whole? The international working class,

itself a creation of global capitalism, is the sole social force capable of carrying out this task.

The historic perspective is this: either the productive forces will be taken forward through the construction of a higher social order or mankind will be thrown back into new forms of barbarism.

It is necessary to place the issues you have raised within the context of the history of the past century. Socialism became an historic necessity with the eruption of World War I. The contradictions of capitalism now expressed themselves in the greatest mass slaughter ever seen, opening up three decades of war, fascism, the holocaust, and another world war, culminating in the use of nuclear weapons.

As World War I erupted Trotsky explained that fundamentally it represented the revolt of the productive forces against the nation-state system. The working class, therefore, could not align itself with the national state for this had become the main obstacle to economic development. Rather, he insisted: “The only way in which the proletariat can meet the imperialist perplexity of capitalism is by opposing to it as a practical program of the day the socialist organisation of world economy.”

In the post-war period this perspective seemed, to short-sighted observers, a utopian voice from the past. In the capitalist countries continuous economic growth was hailed as testimony to the viability of the profit system, economic growth in the Soviet Union seemed to provide proof of the viability of the nationalist perspective of socialism in one country and in the former colonial countries, the perspective of national economic development appeared to provide a way forward.

But history has shown that in judging the viability of political perspectives it is necessary to take a long view stretching over many decades. The post-war period was an exception, not a new path of historical development. The processes of economic globalisation over the past twenty years have brought to forefront all the historical issues which arose at the beginning of the 20th century. Three imperialist wars have been launched in the past decade, the working class in all the major capitalist countries has seen its living standards under continuous attack amidst ever greater economic uncertainty, while in the former colonial countries, the perspective of national economic advance has collapsed.

Nowhere is clearer than in Africa. The poverty which grips this region is not the outcome of national conditions. It is not as if the African countries are passing through some stage of national development experienced at an earlier point by the advanced capitalist countries. In fact a reversal is taking place.

Some facts and figures make this clear. According to the World Bank, for example, between 1980 and 2000 sub-Saharan Africa's net

external debt more than trebled from \$60 billion to \$200 billion, in spite of \$229 billion having been repaid in debt servicing. To put it another way, sub-Saharan Africa has paid off its 1980 debt fourfold but is more than three times deeper in debt. More is spent in debt servicing in this region than on health care and education combined.

The exploitation of the African continent by imperialist financial capital, which one ventures to say outstrips anything achieved in the days of outright colonialism, does not end there.

In order to increase production and raise living standards these countries need to import products from the major industrialised nations paid for by increased exports. But this is impossible. Trade figures show that since 1980 the value of sub-Saharan exports have been cut by half relative to imports from the industrialised countries. Under dictates of the IMF and the World Bank, African exports to the world market have increased. But this is no solution, since the only effect of increased exports is drive down prices. Taking the period 1980-81 as a base of 100, the terms of trade for sub-Saharan exports are now under 65.

The same picture emerges from an examination of the statistics on capital flows. According to the IMF, the sub-Saharan countries must make themselves attractive to international investors by undergoing “structural adjustment” programs aimed at “freeing up” markets and enabling the free movement of capital. But the claim that this will lead to an inflow of capital and economic development is refuted by statistics.

According to an UNCTAD report, in the period 1975 to 1982 the input of capital represented 3.9 percent of the Gross National Product of the sub-Saharan countries. In the period from 1983 to 1998, when structural adjustment policies became widespread, it was only 1.8 percent of GNP, a drop of 50 percent.

Moreover, not only is there a decrease in capital inflow but the policies imposed by the IMF—above all the lifting of controls on the transfer of capital—have led to an outflow funds as sections of the African bourgeoisie transfer their resources overseas.

A recent study published by the IMF itself notes that “there is now considerable evidence that the buildup in debt was accompanied by increasing capital from the region” and that sub-Saharan Africa was “simultaneously an importer and exporter of capital.” In fact one process feeds on the other. The more capital flight takes place, the more governments have to borrow internationally, and the greater becomes the interest and debt burden on the population as health, education and other expenditures are cut back to meet debt servicing charges.

What these, and many other figures, demonstrate is that the impoverishment of Africa is the outcome of processes rooted in the global capitalist economy. It can only be ended through the rational reorganisation of the world economy so that its resources are utilised to meet the needs of the population as a whole, rather than the profit demands of capital.

You write that sub-Saharan Africa remains largely agrarian in nature where the mode of production “can hardly be seen to have reached the highest stages of capitalism.”

That is both true and not true. It is certainly true that the economy of Africa remains trapped within poverty and backwardness. But this backwardness is not a national phenomenon. It is the outcome of the highest stage of capitalism—the domination of the world economy by global capital. Furthermore, while its economy is backward, there is a powerful working class throughout the African continent whose potential political power is far beyond its numerical strength. The only

way forward for the African masses is the unification of this working class with the workers of the rest of the world on the basis of an international socialist perspective.

However, like many others who have gone before, you might conclude that while such a perspective may be all very well for the future, a seemingly more realisable program needs to be advanced. Should not the national state be strengthened against the depredations of global capitalism?

Of course, as you immediately recognise, there is an immediate problem here. What state are we talking about? The present “nation-state” structures in Africa are the creations of the imperialist powers. They cannot be the vehicle for the liberation of the masses from its domination. But on this, as on every other question, basic class issues are raised. While the post-colonial states have been the vehicle for the suppression of the masses and their subordination to imperialist finance capital, these structures have been eagerly grasped by the African bourgeoisie as the means for its own advancement.

Consideration of these issues leads you on to the perspective of pan-Africanism. But all the same issues arise. Could a pan-African state survive and develop without international trade, without resources from the rest of the world. How would those be acquired, if not through trade? In other words such a state could not escape the coils of the capitalist profit system.

Here it is necessary to draw out the lessons of the collapse of the Soviet Union. This did not signify the death of the perspective of international socialism. Rather, it was the demonstration, in practice, of the theoretical conclusion advanced by Trotsky that the nationalist perspective of “socialism in one country” was completely unviable. Furthermore, its collapse has made clear the bankruptcy of all national perspectives. After all, if it proved impossible to construct a viable alternative to capitalism in one sixth of the globe, with all the resources that were available in the USSR, then it is impossible on the African continent.

In conclusion, let me emphasise that it is necessary to examine the historical road that has already been travelled. The African national leaders who came to power in the 1950s and 1960s held out the prospect that with the formation of an ex-colonial state, a path to economic development would open up. The more left-wing of these leaders even spoke of African unity and held out the prospect of some kind of African socialism.

This whole perspective ended in a disaster. Now, in order for the working class and masses to advance, the lessons of that historical experience must be drawn out.

The liberation of the African people from imperialist domination, the raising of living standards, the ending of the bloody wars and civil wars which have so devastated this region—these will be some of the great achievements of international socialism and the resurgence of the international working class movement or they will not be carried out at all.



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