

An exchange on Zimbabwe

24 September 2002

The following letter is in response to the World Socialist Web Site article “Britain’s Guardian backs CIA dirty tricks in Zimbabwe”. It is published together with a reply by Ann Talbot on behalf of the editorial board.

So the past colonial rule of Zimbabwe is responsible for the rampant corruption practiced by the Zimbabwe ruling elite?

I do not dispute that the colonial past has a large part to play in Zimbabwe’s current situation, the biggest problem by far is the way Mugabe has ruled Zimbabwe like a personal fiefdom.

Perhaps you would do well to actually spend some time in Zimbabwe, talking to Zimbabweans before writing your naïve comments.

PD

Dear PD

The *World Socialist Web Site* has always made clear our political opposition to Mugabe and the nationalist regime in Zimbabwe. Mugabe is indeed a despotic head of a corrupt regime that persecutes all political opposition in order to defend the selfish interests of a small but wealthy elite. We are also clear that the country has suffered a sharp economic decline and that millions of people are now facing starvation due to famine, on top of the poverty and HIV-AIDS epidemic already affecting large sections of the population.

The fundamental issue is on what basis do we oppose such bourgeois nationalist regimes. You say Mugabe is the biggest problem in Zimbabwe. Can we also ask, is Saddam Hussein the biggest problem in Iraq? Was Milosevic the biggest problem in Serbia? Was the Taliban the biggest problem in Afghanistan? An argument that points to the “evil” nature of one leader or regime is a rather limited analysis of the world and one that is employed to justify the efforts of the Bush administration in the United States and of the Blair government in Britain to subordinate the oppressed peoples of the world to their dictates—usually by

bombing them into submission.

You say that the colonial past has a “large part to play” in Zimbabwe’s current situation, as though it may provide some historical background to the major problem of Mugabe’s corrupt dictatorship. We beg to differ. History determines the nature of the present political situation, including despotic regimes. Colonial exploitation is not just a relic of the past that came to an end in 1980. Before that time a small white elite ruled over what was then Rhodesia, with the black majority forced into cheap manual labour, farming the poorest land, and given no right to vote. The mineral wealth of Rhodesia and large tracts of the best quality land were stolen from the local population.

This state of affairs was the result of a world economic system—imperialism. Africa was divided up between the major powers and the colonies organised to provide raw materials and cheap labour for a world market dominated by western corporations and banks.

Imperialism did not disappear from Africa after 1980 in Zimbabwe, or after independence was granted to most of the former colonies in the 1960s. African countries continued to be subordinated to the West, their economies geared to the export of minerals and raw materials. The possibility of development that was held out proved to be illusory. Apart from initial improvements in welfare systems, virtually every country in Africa was forced more and more into debt and then placed under IMF/World Bank Structural Programmes. Zimbabwe inherited the debts as well as an economy dependent on agricultural and mineral exports from the white Rhodesian regime. The point we were making in the article was that by the 1990s its economy was facing a decline already experienced in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, with falling commodity prices and growing debts to the IMF and western banks.

To say that the colonial past has a “large part to play” in this dire economic situation but the real problem is

one corrupt ruler, Mugabe, does not stand up. Are we to say that the economic disaster and famine that face Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, and so on is also primarily due to corrupt leaders? Apart from the naivety of the “evil leader” analysis, it is also completely dependent on whom the western media and politicians decide to put under the spotlight, depending on their current concerns.

How is that the Mozambique regime, for example, receives praise from Tony Blair and other western leaders, when the poverty, unemployment and lack of democratic rights in that country are not that different from Zimbabwe’s? Do we hear repeated press complaints about the corruption of the Angolan regime, where the population suffers some of the worst poverty in Africa? Could this relate to the collaboration with the oil corporations that this regime offers?

Or if we go back in time a little, what was so different about the situation before the mid 1990s, when Mugabe was regularly praised by western leaders for bringing a bloody civil war to an end while safeguarding capitalist private property? Wasn’t there a notable lack of interest in the western media when Mugabe massacred hundreds of unarmed civilians in Matebeland during the 1980s?

Mugabe has fallen foul of the West not because he is a despot, but because of his failure to implement IMF measures with sufficient vigour. The level of control over every aspect of a country’s finance now demanded by the IMF was too great a threat to the interests of Mugabe and the Zanu-PF elite.

Does that mean we should side with the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and their western backers who wish to bring back the IMF programme? Absolutely not. To hold out a promise of more democracy—or “good governance” as it is called—and a more secure economic future on this basis is a fraud. Examination of countries where unfettered free market measures have been applied shows what would really happen. Apart from resulting in a different section of the local elite taking over the government, living standards would plummet even further and what is left of the welfare state measures introduced in the 1980s would be wiped out.

The opposition of the *World Socialist Web Site* to Mugabe proceeds from the standpoint of the independent political interests of the Zimbabwean and

international working class. Mugabe is a representative of the national bourgeoisie and as such is incapable of freeing the working class from imperialist domination or articulating a genuinely democratic alternative to colonial domination. Despite his occasional socialist rhetoric, he and his coterie have enriched themselves at the direct expense of the workers and peasants while preserving the right of the western companies and banks to exploit Zimbabwe’s abundant resources.

Mugabe’s “national revolution” has manifestly failed the majority of the Zimbabwean population, including rural peasantry who have received none of the investment needed for their small farms. The only beneficiaries of the land reform programme are the small black elite who have increased their land holdings.

How should the working people, unemployed and rural poor oppose Mugabe? Rather than being duped into supporting the IMF by MDC politicians and others, they should take an independent socialist standpoint. Opposing the dead end of nationalism they should work for unity with working people throughout the African continent and the whole world in a movement that opposes the profit system. The creation of genuine democracy and fulfilment of the social aspirations of the people necessitates repudiating the debts to the western banks, taking the mines and factories out of the hands of western corporations and the local wealthy elites and putting them under the democratic ownership and control of the whole population. Removing the despotic rule of Mugabe on this basis would play a major part in shaping the political situation in Africa to meet the political and social requirements of the working class.

Yours sincerely,

Ann Talbot



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact