

WSWS International Editorial Board meeting

Africa and the perspective of international socialism

Part One

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Published below is the first of a two-part report on Africa by Richard Tyler to an expanded meeting of the World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board (IEB) held in Sydney from January 22 to 27, 2006. Tyler is a WSWS correspondent and a member of the Socialist Equality Party in the UK.

WSWS IEB chairman David North's report was posted on 27 February. SEP (Australia) national secretary Nick Beams' report was posted in three parts: Part one on February 28, Part two on March 1 and Part three on March 2. James Cogan's report on Iraq was posted on March 3. Barry Grey's report was published in two parts: Part one on March 4 and Part two on March 6. Patrick Martin's report was published in two parts: Part one on March 7 and Part two on March 8. John Chan report on China was published in three parts: Part one was posted on March 9, Part two on March 10 and Part three on March 11. Uli Rippert's report on Europe was posted in three parts: Part one on March 13, Part two on March 14 and Part three on March 15. Julie Hyland's report on New Labour in Britain was posted in two parts: Part one on March 16 and Part two on March 17. Bill Van Auken's report on Latin America was posted in two parts: Part one on March 18 and Part two on March 20. David Walsh's report on artistic and cultural issues was posted in two parts: Part one on March 21 and Part two on March 22. Richard Hoffman's report on democratic rights was posted on March 23 and Wije Dias's report on South Asia posted on March 24.

There is probably no other continent that provides so many tragic examples of the malignant role and legacy of colonialism.

It would not be possible to write a serious history of Africa without examining the centuries of oppression and exploitation at the hands of the world's leading capitalist nations, something that is beyond the scope of this report. But I will attempt to sketch out some of the main political issues that should inform us in developing our perspectives.

Against those who claim that a solution to the poverty, misery and oppression of the millions of Africans at the hands of Western corporations, or their proxy masters in the local bourgeoisie can be found by turning to nationalism in its many guises—including its Pan-Africanist variety—we insist that the only realistic perspective is one that links the struggle of the black working class and peasant masses in Africa to that of working people in the advanced countries to put an end to the profit system.

At the end of World War II there were only three independent African countries, but by the 1960s the vast majority were independent.

Now, almost half a century later, it is evident that formal independence has not brought any lasting improvement to the lives of Africa's poor.

Whatever progress was made in the early years of independence, in fields such as health and education, by the 1980s poverty began to sharply rise again, accelerating during the 1990s and into the new millennium.

Statistics produced by the World Bank show Africa's poor are actually getting poorer, with the average daily income of those living on less than \$1 a day falling from 64 cents in 1981 to 60 cents in 2001. According to the same source, under-nourishment is also growing in Africa as a whole.

The source of this poverty and hunger cannot be ascribed to so-called "natural" problems like difficult terrain, poor harvests or a lack of agricultural machinery and chemicals (as important as such factors are).

Africa's poverty is a direct product of the global capitalist economy. It is the supreme example of a process Marx described so powerfully:

"Accumulation of wealth at one pole, is therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole, i.e., on the side of the class that produces its product in the form of capital."

According to the United Nations, Africa's population of nearly one billion contains the greatest proportion of people living in absolute poverty, defined as those living on one dollar a day or less. Under the economic direction of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the absolute poverty level has risen—encompassing 47 percent of the continent's population today, an increase from 42 percent twenty years ago.

Perhaps the single greatest indictment of the role of imperialism in Africa is the health catastrophe that afflicts the continent in the form of the AIDS pandemic.

According to UNAIDS, 25.8 million people were infected with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa in 2005—some two thirds of the world total. An estimated 3.2 million more people became infected during that year and 2.4 million died of AIDS-related diseases.

How little is being done to reduce this terrible toll can be seen in the figures for those obtaining anti-retroviral (ART) drugs. In six southern African countries—South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland—more than 20 percent of the population are HIV infected. There was some increase in drug provision last year. Yet, according to a study carried out by the University of Pretoria, out of over 9 million with HIV/AIDS in these six countries, some 1.4 million need ART drugs but only 208,000 (about 15 percent) are receiving them. It should be noted that this includes two of the wealthiest countries in Africa—South Africa and Botswana—so the levels of provision are much lower throughout the rest of the continent.

A series of other initiatives for dealing with the catastrophic situation has been put forward. The biggest and most expensive publicity stunt was

mounted at the G8 summit last June by U2 frontman Bono, former pop singer Sir Bob Geldof, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President Bush. Huge media hype was given to the promised cancellation by the IMF, the World Bank and the African Development Bank over the next 10 years of some \$40 billion of debt owed by developing countries.

To put the amount of debt relief in perspective: Africa's total external debt stands at some \$300 billion, yet the amount saved is only about \$1.5 billion a year in debt repayments. Moreover, the much-heralded debt write-off will have to be paid for by giving Western companies unrestricted license to extract more profits from the impoverished African population.

The debt cancellation will hardly diminish the lucrative returns that Western banks and governments make out of Africa, with some \$15 billion being paid in debt servicing each year. For the \$540 billion received in loans between 1970 and 2003—much of it going to corrupt Western-backed dictatorships during the Cold War period—\$579 billion has already been paid back in debt servicing.

Imperialism is not an “unjust policy” that Western governments can be persuaded to ameliorate when it applies to the poorest of countries, as demanded by the NGO professionals, trade union bureaucrats and radical groups. Finance capital and transnational corporations dominate the economic life of the entire planet, down to the poorest farmer in Malawi.

The false euphoria generated by Bono and Geldof over the debt package last summer collapsed in December 2005 at the World Trade Organisation talks in Korea. The charity Oxfam commented: “Rich countries’ interests have prevailed yet again. The EU and US have betrayed their promises to reform trade rules to promote development and poor countries have had to fight a rearguard action simply to keep some of their issues on the table.”

Although only a small part of the world total, foreign direct investment in Africa increased to \$18 billion in 2004 from \$14 billion the previous year. According to UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), well over half of this investment came from the US, France, Britain, the Netherlands and South Africa. Most of the investment is in oil and mining and hardly benefits the local population at all.

The four countries receiving the highest level of investment, over \$1 billion each, are oil producers: Nigeria, Angola, Equatorial Guinea and Sudan. Africa's share of US oil imports is expected to increase from 18 percent now to 25 percent in 2015. Chevron (US) and Total (France) are expected to increase investment.

High prices for copper, diamonds, gold and platinum have also encouraged rising investment. Tanzania and Ghana are singled out as countries where there has been a boom in investment in gold mining, but as little as 5 percent of earnings stays within each country. In the service sector, telecommunications, electricity, transport and water have been privatized and now opened up to foreign investment in a number of African states.

This emphasizes the fact that when the Western transnationals and governments step up their investment in key areas of Africa, they have to ensure they can repatriate the profits gained from exploiting valuable raw materials such as oil and precious metals.

China is also accelerating its involvement in the continent. An article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* in May 2005 noted that as the world's second largest consumer of crude oil, China is bringing in more than 25 percent of its oil imports from the Gulf of Guinea and Sudan:

“Its thirst is limitless: by 2020 it will be forced to supply 60 percent of its energy needs from abroad, even from nations such as Chad that has maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Although in 2004 only 2 percent of Chinese trade was with Africa, the continent has done particularly well as China has opened up to the world: during the 1990s, Sino-African trade grew by 700 percent and since the first China-Africa Forum in Beijing in 2000, more than 40 agreements have been signed, doubling trade to more than \$20 billion over the four years to the end of 2004. By the end of 2005, China is expected to become Africa's third

most important trading partner, behind the US and France and ahead of the UK.”

Africa and the theory of Permanent Revolution

Marxists have always led a political struggle for the independent interests of the working class against the various petty bourgeois and bourgeois nationalist movements in the colonial and semi-colonial countries.

Under conditions in which the world's markets and resources have been divided up between the major powers, the national bourgeoisie in Africa has proved incapable of leading and completing the democratic revolution. Firstly, this is because it is subordinate to and dependent on the imperialist countries for investment, productive technique and access to global markets.

Secondly, the historical experience in Africa has exposed the falsity of the claims of the Stalinists that the conflict with imperialism produces a common interest between the classes, so that the anti-imperialist struggle would be in two stages, the first of which would proceed as a democratic revolution led by the bourgeoisie.

In 1935, Trotsky wrote to supporters in South Africa opposing the conception of the Stalinists who had “transformed the program of national liberation into an empty abstraction that is elevated above the reality of class relations.” As for the African National Congress (ANC), Trotsky insisted: “The Bolshevik-Leninists unmask before the native masses the inability of the Congress to achieve the realization of even its own demands, because of its superficial, conciliatory policy. In contradistinction to the Congress, the Bolshevik-Leninists develop a program of revolutionary class struggle” (*Writings of Leon Trotsky [1934-35]*, New York: Pathfinder, 1974, p 252).

As well as the Stalinists, we should mention the key role played by petty bourgeois radical organizations—particularly the Pabloites—in boosting the nationalist movements and governments throughout Africa, in presenting them as a progressive and even socialist way forward for the working class and peasantry. The most important experience was in relation to Algeria.

The Pabloite support for the FLN regime in Algeria became a major issue, when, in the late 1950s and early 60s the American Trotskyists of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) were moving toward uniting with the Pabloites. Following the Pabloites, the SWP attempted to portray the petty bourgeois nationalist governments in Algeria and Cuba as progressive and revolutionary. In *Trotskyism Betrayed*, written in 1962, the British Socialist Labour League attacked the SWP's opportunist line:

“It [the FLN] is bound hand and foot by its relationship with world imperialism. This relationship prevents it from satisfying the social demands of the Algerian masses or from consolidating its power for a prolonged period. The need is for a proletarian movement against the FLN leaders, against the Evian agreement [the deal between the FLN and the French granting nominal independence], to continue the struggle for independence: which means, for the masses, not only peace but also bread and land” (*Trotskyism versus Revisionism*, London: New Park Publications, Vol. 3, p. 248).

Having once opposed the opportunist line of the Pabloites, the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) leaders Healy, Banda and Slaughter presented a perspective in 1979 that virtually abandoned drawing any class distinctions in the semi-colonial countries. Like the Pabloites, the WRP now made the so-called “armed struggle” the touchstone for evaluating the anti-imperialist credentials of various bourgeois nationalists.

The *Fourth International* magazine, “How the Workers Revolutionary

Party betrayed Trotskyism” documents the impact of this abandonment of revolutionary internationalism in the chapters dealing with the WRP’s betrayal of the Zimbabwean revolution.

The WRP boosted the Patriotic Front leaders Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo, presenting them as the bearers of social progress in Zimbabwe:

“Rather than stating clearly that the Zimbabwean bourgeoisie is incapable of securing genuine national independence and that it will prosecute the armed struggle only within the limits of its class interest, the [WRP perspectives] document hitched the fate of the working class to the policies of the bourgeoisie” (“How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism 1973-1985”, *Fourth International*, Volume 13. No 1, Summer 1986, p. 48).

The WRP’s claim that a “workers and peasants government” could be established under the aegis of the bourgeois Patriotic Front, “constituted a Pabloite deception of the working class, which assisted in the disorientation of the Zimbabwean masses and left them unprepared for the treachery of the Patriotic Front leaders” (p. 48).

This diagnosis has proved all too tragically correct.

The catastrophic impact of imperialism in Africa over the past two decades, the absolute impoverishment, the virtual absence of public healthcare and education, and the looting of the continent’s vast resources by Western corporations could not have taken place without the willing support and collaboration of the various bourgeois nationalist regimes that hold sway in Africa.

Beginning in the early 1980s, African leaders such as Jerry Rawlings in Ghana abandoned their socialist rhetoric and accepted IMF structural adjustment programmes. In 1985, Julius Nyerere admitted the failure of his version of “African Socialism” and resigned as president of Tanzania. The next year, Tanzania accepted an IMF programme.

By 1990, forty African countries had accepted rigorous IMF restructuring policies. This included currency devaluations—an average drop of 50 percent—selling off government-owned industries and slashing public spending. Health services and education systems were privatized, and governments competed with each other for Western investment and trade deals.

Throughout Africa, free-market capitalism, or what became known as the “Washington consensus,” was implemented with drastic results for millions of African peasants and workers.

At the other pole, a local elite has been able to acquire fabulous wealth, for example, in South Africa. Under President Mbeki, the ANC government is fully committed to free-market policies. A small group of former ANC leaders, the so-called “waBenzi” (a person who drives a Mercedes Benz), have enriched themselves by getting shares in the big mining corporations under the programme of “black economic empowerment” in deals worth billions of dollars.

In an article last year titled, “The New Rand Lords,” *Time* magazine noted that the imposing Rand Club in downtown Johannesburg, where South Africa’s mining magnates and millionaires have been meeting for more than a century, has some new members:

“A black elite has crossed over from politics and the ruling African National Congress (A.N.C.): Rand Club members include Cyril Ramaphosa, 52, one of South Africa’s richest men, who was once touted as a possible successor to Nelson Mandela.”

Ramaphosa, many may remember, was once the leader of the South African miners’ union.

The existence of the Soviet Union and the Cold War that developed during the 1960s and 1970s placed certain limits on the depredations of imperialism. In Africa, it meant that to a limited extent, the national bourgeoisie could rest on the Soviet Union (and to some degree China), gaining access to a range of military hardware. As a consequence, many of these bourgeois nationalists even claimed to be Marxist. But this was merely a form of pseudo independence from imperialism.

Even before the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, free-market policies had gained the ascendancy across the continent.

As historian William R. Keylor notes in his *The Twentieth Century World—An international history*: “The Soviet-American competition in Africa that had emerged so unexpectedly during the second half of the seventies proved to be short-lived because of Moscow’s inability to supplement its military aid with much in the way of economic support (such as trade, loans and investments). In particular, the inconvertibility of East bloc currencies precluded the expansion of African trade with Comecon countries [Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (1949-91), which economically linked the USSR with Eastern Europe and later Mongolia, Cuba and Vietnam] beyond the customary bilateral barter schemes” (p 423).

In the 1980s, a series of African regimes—including Egypt, Sudan, Somalia and Guinea—that had previously welcomed the support of the Eastern bloc rapidly broke with their erstwhile benefactors, sending the Soviet “advisors” packing. Instead, they turned to London, Paris, Tokyo and New York in search of finance.

Keylor observes: “The Western bloc, due to its dominant position in the international economic system from which Africa could not, or would not, shake free, continued to exercise the dominant external influence on the continent during the 1980s” (ibid).

The past period has witnessed an increasing number of conflicts and wars of an ethnic, tribalist or religious character. Whole regions have come to be dominated by criminal gangs or warlords, leading to the break up of many of the states established in the 1960s, such as the Ivory Coast, amid a bitter struggle for control over strategic assets.

In bloody clashes between neighbouring countries—as in the Congo—tens of thousands have been killed in the fratricidal struggle for the control of valuable commodities, resulting in new terms being coined, such as “resource wars” and “conflict diamonds”.

In 1994, the world was horrified to find that Rwanda, a tiny country in the heart of Africa, was run by a regime of one tribal grouping that was seeking the total extermination of another tribe. With systematic planning, the Hutu Power regime, as it was called, killed some 800,000 or more Tutsis in a three-month period.

This kind of tribalism was essentially the creation of the imperialists who used divide-and-rule methods to run their colonies—in this case the Belgians who ruled through the minority Tutsis—and the Western powers that continued to use it to exert their influence after independence.

The true reason for UN inaction in Rwanda was that the warring factions each had the support of different imperialist powers, either openly or covertly. The French were backing the government, while the US, through Uganda, was tacitly backing the RPF rebels, the largely Tutsi movement that had taken over much of the country.

To be continued



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