

An exchange on sanctions against Zimbabwe

22 October 2007

The following letter on Zimbabwe was received from a reader of the WSWS. It is followed by a reply by Chris Talbot.

I feel strongly that the propaganda apparatus in Britain is being allowed to get away with making out that the killing of large numbers of Zimbabweans (who have the “lowest lifespans on earth”) is not a result of economic sanctions imposed by America, Britain and the EU but of Mr. Mugabe’s conduct. This is perverse. The extraordinary propaganda offensive waged against this tiny country reflects the fear that the British people will say: “Economic sanctions cause the death; ergo our leaders are the killers.”? Zimbabwe is a classic “threat of a good example.” Land owned by the many; companies must be at least 51 percent native owned. Zimbabwe “must be seen to fail,” however many of them get killed. It will do [the *World Socialist Web Site*] enormous credit if you make these points, almost as a lone voice.?

LT

Dear LT:

We are completely opposed to the sanctions being imposed on Zimbabwe by the United States and European Union. For President George Bush to tell the United Nations last week that Zimbabwe is a “tyrannical regime” and call for pressure to be put on President Robert Mugabe to “allow greater freedoms” is rank hypocrisy. The Bush administration, responsible for the continuing occupation of Iraq with all the indescribable suffering of the population that entails, supports all kinds of oppressive regimes in Africa and throughout the world.

Perhaps even more sickening than Bush in relation to Zimbabwe is the position of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. Attempting to drum up electoral support for a government that is deeply unpopular because of its slavish support for the US in Iraq, Brown has adopted a high moral tone in denouncing Mugabe’s rule. As well as pushing for more sanctions, he has said he will boycott the Europe-Africa summit to be held in Lisbon, Portugal in December if Mugabe attends.

The close relations that Her Majesty’s government has with many brutal regimes—its defence industry depends on lucrative arms deals with Saudi Arabia, for example—and the fact that Britain was once the biggest colonial power with a record of brutality second to none, especially in Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), has not prevented Brown or his predecessor Tony Blair from making such offensive gestures.

But you are suggesting that it is *only* US and European sanctions that are causing the catastrophic situation in Zimbabwe and not Mugabe’s conduct. This is the argument put forward by the Zimbabwean ZANU-PF government itself. It is false and excuses Mugabe and ZANU-PF from their role in this dire situation.

You need to consider what happened before 2000. Despite the

socialist rhetoric, ZANU-PF, when it took power in 1979 after defeating the white racist Smith regime, did so on the basis of a deal with Britain and the US that accepted a capitalist economy and the domination of the world market. Measures put forward to win support during the civil war period—such as nationalising industry and seizing the land owned by the wealthy white farmers—were dropped. For the next 20 years there was no attempt at land redistribution, and white farmers were allowed to make large profits, some becoming millionaires.

ZANU-PF could not establish a viable capitalist nation state that was free from imperialist domination, nor did it resolve the land question as the bourgeoisie had in Europe when it ended feudal serfdom in an earlier period.

This confirms the analysis which Leon Trotsky made in the theory of permanent revolution. In the current period it is impossible to start from the conditions in a particular country, but only from the world class struggle and the international development of the world economy, of which the national conditions are a particular expression.

In former colonial countries like Zimbabwe, the bourgeois elite is subservient to imperialism and too fearful of its own working class to carry through a bourgeois revolution. Only the working class, winning the support of the poor peasants, can carry through a consistent struggle against international capital and its local representatives, rallying the peasantry behind it by freeing the land from the domination of the rich farmers as part of a revolutionary overthrow that must of necessity take on a socialist character.

Such a revolutionary movement must not and cannot be limited to the national boundaries imposed by colonialism, but must spread throughout Africa. It would seek to overcome underdevelopment and backwardness by basing itself on the struggle to forge a political alliance with the working class in the advanced imperialist centres in their struggle to overthrow capitalism and establish socialism as a world system.

This is the perspective the WSWS advocates and forms the basis for building a genuinely international socialist movement.

By the 1980s most sub-Saharan African regimes abandoned the earlier policies, put forward by the Pan Africanists and so-called African Socialists like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, of developing a self-sufficient national economy. Under the pressure of imperialism such national schemes soon ended in failure. Those governments that continued to call themselves socialist only did so because support from the Soviet Union or China gave them some leverage against the Western powers.

By the 1980s and 1990s, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they mainly accepted International Monetary Fund

(IMF)-World Bank measures. Mugabe and ZANU-PF, though achieving “independence” some 20 years after most of the other African regimes, followed the same path. The result has been a continuing decline in the economic position of the vast majority of their populations. As one African commentator recently pointed out, “These policies have generated wealth for elites and created economic growth in a few countries, but have proved over two decades singularly unable to reduce the human misery affecting hundreds of millions.”[1]

The free market economic measures imposed on Zimbabwe during the 1990s by the IMF and the World Bank were introduced *with Mugabe’s support* and at that time praises were heaped on him by Western leaders. They had a devastating impact. Improvements in the economy and in welfare measures made during the 1980s were wiped out and went into reverse. Unemployment reached between 35 and 50 percent by 1997. By 1999 more than two thirds of the population were living on less than \$2 a day, with many below the poverty line [2].

Was Mugabe’s decision in 2000 to oppose the IMF measures he had previously supported one which socialists should defend? Should we conclude that Zimbabwe is, as you suggest, a “threat of a good example” to the Western powers?

Not at all. Mugabe only decided to oppose IMF conditions because they were undermining the system of patronage on which his rule relies. He organised the seizure of white farms by state-backed gangs. The “land owned by the many” you refer to mainly meant land being taken from white farmers and handed to ZANU-PF supporters—setting up small and unviable farming units rather than actually making land the collective property of the “many.”

Mugabe hoped his seizure of white farms would persuade the West to negotiate a better deal—a serious miscalculation. Rather than proving to be a good example, the policies of economic nationalism that the ZANU-PF government embarked upon have proved to be disastrous. Conditions in Zimbabwe must be some of the worst in Africa, if not the whole world. The “lowest lifespan” you refer to is unfortunately likely to be the case, though reliable statistics are not available. There is no antiretroviral treatment available for HIV/AIDS, which affects at least a fifth of 15-49 year-olds in Zimbabwe. Large sections of the population now face starvation with little food left in the shops and a collapse in currency—annual inflation is over 7,000 percent. Some 4 million people, a quarter of the population, have left the country, mainly emigrating to South Africa.

Last week Zimbabwe ran out of bread. The minister for agriculture said he was “disappointed that our new farmers have proved to be failures since the start of the land reform programme in 2000.” [3]

The government was unable to find hard currency to pay for a shipment of wheat from Mozambique. The land policy of ZANU-PF is a disaster. There was no investment in inputs, no training for new farmers, no adequate infrastructure, and therefore a sharp decline in what had been the main part of the economy.

A law has just been passed to force foreign-owned companies to sell over half the value of their equity to black investors—the 51 percent native-ownership of companies you refer to. If this is implemented, only the tiny elite around Mugabe and the ZANU-

PF leadership have the wealth to buy into these gold and platinum mining shares anyway. But the idea that such a national economic development is possible—cut off from the world economy—is just as utopian a scheme in mining as it was in agriculture. Again it is a serious miscalculation if Mugabe thinks that the threat of such measures will persuade the West to make a deal with him.

It is true that these economic nationalist policies have had even more drastic results as a result of sanctions. Although the Western governments call them “smart” sanctions—because they are supposed to target the families of the elite with travel restrictions, etc., and claim they do not affect the majority population—this is a fraud. As newzimbabwe.com, [4] by no means supporters of Mugabe, have explained, in 2001 the US enacted the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act. This enables the president to instruct US representatives on the multilateral lending agencies—such as the IMF, World Bank and the Africa Development Bank—to vote against credit facilities (in all their various forms) to Zimbabwe. Given the dominance of the US over these institutions, it has had a major impact, stopping Zimbabwe from obtaining the credit any country needs to function in the world markets.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has a record second to none in opposing US, British and Western policies imposed on Zimbabwe. We have consistently opposed IMF-World Bank measures and have shown that the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, which puts forward IMF policies, is backed by the US and Western governments. But we have also consistently exposed the bankruptcy of bourgeois nationalism. In this we include not only Mugabe and ZANU-PF but also the governments of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) led by South Africa. The SADC is currently working, on behalf of the Western powers, to get Zimbabwe back into the IMF with all the draconian free market measures that entails and to get a power sharing arrangement between ZANU-PF and the MDC.

We advocate the development of a socialist movement of working people and poor peasants in opposition to free market policies, throughout the African continent. Such a movement must of necessity be international in character, totally rejecting the dead end of nationalist politics.

Chris Talbot for the WSWS

Notes:

- [1] “The stolen African voice,” *The Guardian*, July 4, 2007.
- [2] “Impoverishing a Continent: The World Bank and the IMF in Africa,” Asad Ismi, July 2004.
- [3] “Zimbabwe runs out of bread,” *The Guardian*, October 1, 2007.
- [4] “Zimbabwe sanctions: are they political or economic?” Newzimbabwe.com, November 3, 2006.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact