

Former South African President Nelson Mandela dies

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6 December 2013

Long standing leader of the African National Congress (ANC) and the first president of post-Apartheid South Africa, Nelson Mandela, died December 5 in Johannesburg at age 95, after suffering a protracted respiratory illness.

Mandela's death has been accompanied by an outpouring of tributes from world leaders, each seeking to outdo the other in presenting the most mawkish depictions of Mandela as a secular saint. US President Barack Obama called the former ANC leader "one of the most influential, courageous, and profoundly good human beings that any of us will share time with on this Earth," while his predecessor, George W. Bush, described Mandela as "one of the great forces for freedom and equality of our time."

Underlying the cynical rhetoric of the current and former war criminals occupying the White House, and that of their allied heads of government around the world, is genuine gratitude for the invaluable service Mandela rendered to the South African ruling elite and world imperialism. Mandela utilised his indubitable political skills and personal courage to stave off the threat of a social revolution in South Africa, dismantling the Apartheid regime while defending capitalism and protecting the property and wealth of the country's white rulers and of transnational corporate investors.

Mandela was born Rolihlahla Mandela on July 18, 1918, in Cape Province when South Africa was a British dominium. Born into a chiefly Xhosa family, Mandela was assigned the name Nelson when he first attended a school run by British Methodist missionaries. In 1939 he began attending the University of Fort Hare, where he met future ANC leader Oliver Tambo.

After moving to Johannesburg, without the necessary permit issued by the Apartheid regime, Mandela worked illegally as a night watchman at a mine pit before he met ANC figure Walter Sisulu, who later secured him a position as an articled clerk in a white law firm. He studied part-time to complete his law degree at Witwatersrand University, one of only four universities that would accept blacks on specialist courses.

Mandela joined the ANC in 1943 and was one of the co-founders of the ANC Youth League the following year. By 1950 he was a member of the ANC's national executive committee. From the beginning of his political life, Mandela was a hostile opponent of Marxism and any perspective of organising the working class in a revolutionary struggle against the Apartheid regime and the capitalist system it served.

In 1950, he opposed the organisation of a general strike of the Johannesburg proletariat to commemorate May Day, and was involved in efforts to physically break up meetings organised by the Communist Party (CP) of South Africa. The successful mass strike, however, demonstrated the enormous social power of the burgeoning

urban working class, and the incident had a significant impact on Mandela. He subsequently developed close ties with the CP.

The South African Stalinists, like their counterparts internationally, advanced a "two stage" theory, under which colonial and semi-colonial countries were deemed to have to first pass through a period of "democratic" capitalist development, under the leadership of so-called progressive layers of the national bourgeoisie, with the struggle for socialism postponed to the indefinite future. The "two-stage" theory was first advanced by Joseph Stalin in the USSR as part of the counter-revolutionary bureaucracy's attack on the internationalist Marxist perspective defended by Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition.

Trotsky, and the Fourth International he helped found in 1938, upheld the Theory of Permanent Revolution, which explained that in colonial and oppressed countries only a fight for power by the working class could advance the struggle against imperialism and ensure genuine national liberation and democratic and social rights for workers and the oppressed masses. This revolution was permanent in that the working class, having seized power, could not restrict itself to democratic tasks and would be compelled to carry out measures of a socialist character, at the same time turning to the working class in the advanced capitalist countries in a unified fight for world socialist revolution.

Mandela was certainly aware of the Fourth International's perspective, having met in 1948 with the South African Trotskyist Isaac Tabata. ("It was difficult for me to cope with his arguments," Mandela later told his authorised biographer Anthony Sampson. "I didn't want to continue arguing with the fellow because he was demolishing me just like that.")

The ANC leader utilised the Stalinists as a means of subordinating the South African working class to a bourgeois nationalist perspective. The ANC's Freedom Charter, adopted in 1956, was drafted by a member of the CP, Rusty Bernstein. In an article published the same year, Mandela explained that the Charter was "by no means a blueprint for a socialist state."

While the document called for the nationalisation of the banks, gold mines and land, Mandela continued, these measures would be capitalist in character: "The breaking up and democratisation of these monopolies will open up fresh fields for the development of a prosperous non-European bourgeois class. For the first time in the history of this country the non-European bourgeoisie will have the opportunity to own in their own name and right mills and factories, and trade and private enterprise will boom and flourish as never before."

This perspective of "Black capitalism" in South Africa remained at

the heart of Mandela's political career, for all its vicissitudes, over the next five decades.

In 1961, Mandela managed to defend himself against treason charges levelled by the Apartheid regime, and was acquitted following a six-year trial process. Soon afterwards, however, Mandela returned from a six month overseas tour canvassing for international support and was again arrested after the US Central Intelligence Agency tipped off their South African colleagues. He and his co-defendants were imprisoned and ultimately put on trial under the Sabotage Act and the Suppression of Communism Act for complicity in more than 200 acts of sabotage aimed at aiding guerrilla warfare, and facilitating violent revolution and armed invasion.

Mandela further raised his stature within the ANC with a defiant speech in which he pledged to die if necessary in pursuit of the destruction of Apartheid, while at the same time rejecting allegations that he was a communist. He told the court: "The realisation of the Freedom Charter would open up fresh fields for a prosperous African population of all classes, including the middle class. The ANC has never at any period of its history advocated a revolutionary change in the economic structure of the country, nor has it, to the best of my recollection, ever condemned capitalist society."

Found guilty in 1964, Mandela and the other accused were sentenced to life imprisonment, much of which was spent in Robben Island, off the coast of Cape Town.

By the mid-1980s, the government was in enormous crisis, amid an upsurge of mass strikes and revolts by workers and youth across South Africa's townships and cities. From jail, Mandela was courted by leading corporate executives, who recognised the revolutionary threat from below and saw in Mandela the best hope of politically defusing the situation.

The Apartheid regime opened up negotiations with the ANC leader in 1985, the same year that it declared martial law in a bid to suppress the insurrectionary struggles being waged by working class black youth. The negotiations led to Mandela's release from prison in February 1990. Multi-party elections in 1994 saw the ANC take power with 62 percent of the national vote, and Mandela become president, a post he held for the next five years, until 1999.

Mandela and the ANC came to power having beforehand made a secret commitment, as Anthony Sampson explained, "to reduce the deficit, to high interest rates and to an open economy, in return for access to an IMF loan of \$850 million, if required." Implicit in all of the negotiations over the end of Apartheid was an assurance that the property, wealth, and commercial interests of both the white elite and international finance capital would be protected.

Mandela warned ordinary South Africans against any expectation that the new government would alleviate the country's mass poverty. "We must rid ourselves of the culture of entitlement that leads to the expectation that the government must promptly deliver whatever it is that we demand," he declared. The *New York Times* noted on Thursday that Mandela also told workers to "tighten your belts" and "accept low wages so that investment would flow."

At the same time, Mandela courted the South African ultra-wealthy. The *Guardian's* obituary noted his "attachment to the glamour of the very rich." The newspaper explained: "[M]oney was dazzling. Hence, once freed, he holidayed at the Irish businessman Sir Tony O'Reilly's Caribbean island and gave the go-ahead for his takeover of South Africa's biggest newspaper group, in anticipation of his 'magic money' providing black empowerment in the media. He allowed the casino king, Sol Kerzner, to host the wedding of his daughter Zinzi.

He borrowed rich men's houses and flew around South Africa in their aircraft."

The social and economic disaster now evident in South Africa stands as an indictment of Mandela's role in preserving capitalist rule and of his perspective of promoting a "non-European bourgeoisie."

The end of apartheid saw the country's people win the ability to vote and secure other democratic rights denied to them under Apartheid rule—but it did not alter the fundamental division in society, which is based on class not race.

Nearly 20 years after the end of Apartheid, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world. Grottesque levels of exploitation and poverty afflict most of the population, with just over 50 percent living below the official poverty line. Officially, unemployment stands at 25 percent of the workforce, but the real figure is far higher. South Africa has the largest population infected with HIV/AIDS in the world, with up to 6.4 million people, or 12 percent of total population, including 450,000 children affected. Official data shows that only 28 percent of those infected are receiving treatment. Life expectancy was just 58 years in 2011, among the lowest in the world.

At the other end of society, a tiny minority that now includes a layer of ANC, ex-Stalinist, and trade union figures have amassed enormous personal wealth. The country now has the most US dollar billionaires of any African state, with 14 individuals now in this category, up from two a decade earlier.

Mandela has died right at the point where social and political tensions in South Africa have reached a boiling point. The ANC and its Stalinist and trade union allies are deeply despised by the working class, and the administration of Mandela's successor Jacob Zuma is in an unprecedented crisis.

The deepening global capitalist crisis has seen a stepped up drive by multinational mining and other corporations to further undermine the wages and conditions of the South African working class, while the country's ruling elite is seeking to attract investment from other low-wage platforms in Africa and other regions. These processes have generated enormous social tensions.

The 2012 police massacre of striking platinum workers at Marikana was an expression of the bitter hostility of the ANC government and its allied trade unions to the aspirations of ordinary workers for decent living standards and workplace protections, and of the enormous political vacuum that has emerged. A government that claims to embody the struggle to end Apartheid carried out a massacre of workers that echoed the mass killings at Sharpeville and Soweto, the worst crimes of the Apartheid regime.

The former president's death will inevitably be followed in the next period by social and industrial upheavals that will once again raise the necessity of a socialist revolution in South Africa.



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