

Kenya's Gen Z insurgency, the strike wave and the struggle for Permanent Revolution- Part 1

Kipchumba Ochieng
3 October 2024

This article is the first in a three part series. Part 2 was published on October 4 and Part 3 on October 6.

Throughout history, the struggles of young people have often foreshadowed broader movements by the working class. In Kenya, after leading nationwide protests demanding the resignation of President William Ruto and his corrupt capitalist government, the country's young generation, often referred to as Gen Z, has paved the way for a broader intensification of the class struggle.

This phase is marked by mass strikes across various sectors, including teachers, civil servants, airport staff, healthcare workers, and university lecturers, among others, protesting against low wages, precarious working conditions, and privatization policies.

Workers and youth find themselves in opposition not only to Ruto's regime, now joined by the opposition party Orange Democratic Movement led by billionaire Raila Odinga, and backed by the Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU) and the influential Christian and Muslim clergy, but the entire 60-year-old post-independence edifice backed by the US and NATO imperialist powers.

Opposition is being driven by the immense popular anger over imposition of International Monetary Fund (IMF) attacks on the working class and rural masses in the form of tax hikes, new levies, and austerity measures in education, healthcare and infrastructure. These measures are being implemented by a ruling elite serving as stooges of the IMF, amid a cost-of-living crisis that has worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic and NATO's war on Russia in Ukraine and youth unemployment levels that reach 67 percent.

The movement, which transcends the tribal divisions long stoked by the Kenyan ruling class to divide workers, has gained mass sympathy across Africa. Protests have erupted in Nigeria against the hated Bola Tinubu regime, whose security forces killed dozens and arrested over 700 during a 10-day nationwide demonstration against soaring costs of living, corruption and IMF austerity in August. In Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni, who has ruled with an iron fist for nearly four decades, made pre-emptive arrests of hundreds trying to launch anti-corruption protests to avoid mass protests like in neighbouring Kenya.

The youth, workers and rural masses stand at a crossroad. "As President William Ruto marks two years in office today, his administration is fighting protests and workers' strikes that threaten his hold on power" stated the *Daily Nation* in a recent article under the title, "A nation of protests and strikes."

However, left at their present level, in the absence of a clear programme, perspective and political leadership, this mass movement of workers and youth will prove inadequate to defeat a ruling elite that is determined to impose the full weight of IMF austerity measures and deepen its war alliance with the US—which is waging war against Russia in the Ukraine

in Europe, arming the Israeli-genocide against Palestinians as part of a broader war across the oil-rich Middle East—and making advanced preparations for war against China in the Pacific.

There is a growing sense among the youth that their protests during June, July and August have reached an impasse, with nothing being advanced other than calls to sack the corrupt political establishment. As for the striking workers, the union leaders are systemically working with Ruto to sell-out their struggles.

The bloody events in Kenya where over 60 demonstrators have died and scores were abducted demonstrate once again the anti-democratic and anti-working class character of the bourgeois-nationalist regimes which took power in the former colonial countries. Sixty years after independence, the bourgeoisie is completely incapable of solving the basic democratic problems, overcome tribal divisions, tear down the artificial borders imposed by colonial powers and secure independence from imperialism.

Improving living standards, creating jobs, radically expanding healthcare and education, and providing basic housing are no longer compatible with the profit system. Nothing less than a fundamental socialist transformation of society will do.

In Kenya and internationally, the working class is being thrust into a political struggle against the entire capitalist order. The task posed is to fight for a workers' government in alliance with the rural masses that will take the economy into social ownership, placing the banks, large plantations and major corporations under the democratic control of the workers and seizing the ill-gotten wealth of the parasitical layer running the state. Every factory, workplace, plantation and neighbourhood must become a centre of resistance to the policies of the ruling class and its political representatives.

The allies of Kenyan workers are their class brothers and sisters throughout Africa and around the world who also confront a worsening social crisis. The fight for a socialist future is necessarily an international one.

If the events have confirmed the centrality of class struggle and the objective basis for a socialist movement, they have also confirmed that the successful prosecution of the class struggle requires a historically-grounded political strategy.

The evolution of countries like Kenya is vindication of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, developed at the beginning of the 20th century. Trotsky, co-leader with Lenin of the October Revolution, insisted that the working class had to fight directly for power, drawing behind it the rural masses, which could play no independent political role.

He explained that in countries with a belated capitalist development such as Russia during the early 20th century, or today's Kenya, the bourgeoisie was incapable of carrying through the democratic revolution. Democratic tasks associated with the bourgeois revolutions of the 19th

century, including the overthrow of colonial rule—national unification, overcoming tribal divisions and imperialist drawn-up borders and the solution to the agrarian problem—fell to the working class which would be compelled to begin to implement socialist measures, which could only be completed on the international arena. The bourgeoisie, tied to the imperialist powers that now dominate the world and its resources and markets, and above all, terrified of the working class, cannot and will not carry them out.

No matter how intensely the fundamental contradictions of capitalism emerge in a particular crisis or how severe the pressures are within a national context, the fight for socialism can only advance if the working class is grounded in the internationalist strategy articulated by the Theory of Permanent Revolution.

The betrayal of the struggle for independence

The theory of Permanent Revolution has been vindicated in Kenya's struggle for independence and in the "Second Liberation" against the post-independence capitalist regimes.

The territory now called Kenya was violently integrated into the British Empire from 1888 to 1895, with successive colonial governments relying on force to suppress tribal uprisings, seize land from the native population, collect taxes and create a steady supply of cheap labour to work on the coffee and tea plantations. In the 1910s, British imperialism started to sponsor European migrants to move to the region, hoping to create a "white man's country" in the heart of East Africa, while Kenyans of African and Asian origin were discriminated against racially. All this led to the first explosive workers' struggles in the 1920s, in the form of mass protests, strikes and the first trade unions.

From the mid-1930s through the 1950s, colonial Africa and Asia were rocked by mass anti-colonial struggles. In *War and the Fourth International*, written in 1934, Trotsky had explained the progressive role the colonial and semi-colonial masses would play in the struggle for socialism:

Their struggle is doubly progressive: tearing the backward peoples from Asiatism, sectionalism and foreign bondage, they strike powerful blows at the imperialist states. But it must be clearly understood beforehand that the belated revolutions in Asia and Africa are incapable of opening up a new epoch of renaissance for the national state. The liberation of the colonies will be merely a gigantic episode in the world socialist revolution, just as the belated democratic overturn in Russia, which was also a semi-colonial country, was only the introduction to the socialist revolution.

The democratic tasks of the post-war anti-colonial struggles could only be achieved under the leadership of the working class as part of the broader struggle for socialism internationally. But that road was blocked by Stalinism.

Stalinism emerged within the Russian Communist Party and state apparatus after the October Revolution of 1917. Under conditions of the defeats suffered by the working class in Europe in the aftermath of the Revolution, above all in Germany, Stalinism represented a nationalist reaction against Marxist internationalism. It emerged as the representative of a privileged, conservative bureaucracy which usurped power from the working class. Its outlook was summed up in the nationalist conception of

"Socialism in One Country" that rejected the internationalist perspective on which the Bolshevik revolution had been based, and was to have profound consequences for the working class internationally.

Internationally, the Stalinists resurrected the theoretical justification for supporting a section of the capitalist class, originally put forward by opponents of the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks—the idea of a two-stage revolution.

According to the two-stage theory, the colonial and semi-colonial countries first require a bourgeois democratic revolution to enable a period of capitalist development that would create the framework for the class struggle between capitalists and workers to arise in the national arena. This would lay the foundations for a second stage at some undefined later point that would consist of the struggle for socialism.

The Stalinists argued that a section of the capitalist class or emerging "native bourgeoisie," whose growth had been stifled by colonial rule, would necessarily play a progressive role. To provide it a revolutionary veneer, Stalin proposed it as a bloc of four classes—workers, peasants, the urban middle class, and sections of the non-comprador capitalist class, referred to as "the progressive section of the national bourgeoisie." Socialist measures were out of the question, until these national democratic tasks had been completed.

The defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1925-1927 provided a devastating confirmation of Trotsky's warnings as to the dangers represented by the Stalinist perspective.

Stalin directed the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to support the party of the Chinese capitalist class—the Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-shek. In doing so, Stalin became the gravedigger of the Chinese revolution that broke out in 1925, facilitating the massacre of the Shanghai working class in April 1927 by Chiang and his armies. After April 1927, the CCP was ordered to enter the "left" Kuomintang, which then crushed the workers' and peasants' movement no less brutally than Chiang. A large section of the CCP leadership was murdered by the bourgeois-nationalist forces.

In the wake of these disasters, and to cover up his own political responsibility for them, Stalin ordered the CCP to stage an uprising in Canton that had no chance of success as the revolutionary upsurge waned. Extracting the necessary lessons from this new disaster, Trotsky pointed out that in seizing power the programme of the Canton workers did not stop at a "first stage" as dictated by Moscow, but was compelled to go further—nationalising the banks, big business and transportation and confiscating bourgeois dwellings. "The question arises," Trotsky wrote, "if these are the methods of a bourgeois revolution then what should the proletarian revolution in China look like."

This defeat had a far-reaching impact on the history of the 20th century, effectively marking the end of the young CCP as a mass party of the Chinese working class. Fleeing into the countryside, the remnants of the CCP leadership, including Mao Zedong, reestablished the Communist Party as an essentially peasant-based organisation.

During the 1930s, the Stalinist bureaucracy, assumed a consciously counter-revolutionary role, carrying out a political genocide against Trotskyism in the Soviet Union and collaborating with world imperialism in the suppression of revolutionary struggles internationally and the suppression of anti-colonial struggles. Trotsky would be murdered by a Stalinist agent in 1940.

After the Second World War, Stalinism again prevented a revolutionary reckoning with capitalism. In Western Europe, the Stalinists bureaucracy, disarmed mass movements and propped up bourgeois governments that still retained colonies like France and Italy, where depression, fascism and war had discredited capitalism in the eyes of broad masses of the population. The French Communist Party joined the imperialist government led by General Charles de Gaulle which waged war against colonial peoples in Africa and South East Asia.

The counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism in Africa

In the colonies, Stalinism systematically betrayed the struggles of the oppressed masses. Pursuing its narrow interests, the Soviet bureaucracy supported national liberation struggles across Africa as part of the Cold War conflict with the imperialist countries. But it had no intention of promoting socialist revolutions, which would have destabilised the position of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

In Sudan, which had the largest Communist Party—with 10,000 members—in Africa outside of South Africa, the Stalinists helped the nationalist Gaafar Nimeiry to power in 1969. Moscow made no protest the following year, when, having used them to defeat his Islamist opponents, Nimeiry expelled all the Communist Party ministers from his government and imprisoned and executed party members.

In South Africa, Stalinism forced the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) to adopt the slogan for an “independent native South African republic as a stage towards a workers’ and peasants’ republic, with full equal rights for all races, black, coloured and white.” This meant prioritising the struggle for a “national democratic revolution”—equal voting rights in a unitary state—over that of the struggle for socialist revolution.

In the 1950s, the CPSA worked within the bourgeois-nationalist African National Congress (ANC) and pushed for “revolutionary nationalism,” linking this to its theory of “Colonialism of a Special Type,” which meant that black-majority South Africa was a “colony” of white oppressors and so the first stage was national liberation, led by the ANC and the second, socialism, led by the CPSA. The CPSA drafted the ANC’s Freedom Charter, published in 1955. Although cloaked in socialist phraseology, this was not a socialist programme, but was nationalist and capitalist in character.

In Kenya, Stalinist figures like Makhan Singh, a member of the Communist Party of India and editor for some of its newspapers for many years—with close relations with the Communist Party of South Africa and the Communist Party of Great Britain—played a leading role in subordinating the working class to bourgeois nationalist forces of the Kenya African Union (KAU), led by conservative nationalists like Jomo Kenyatta.

Kenyatta loathed the working class, defended capitalist private property and advocated the creation of a capitalist state within the borders imposed by imperialism. He was all too willing to associate himself with Singh, who provided him with radical credentials, amid a growing radicalisation of the masses.

In 1947, Kenyatta betrayed the Mombasa General Strike of around 15,000 workers demanding better conditions and pay, organised by the African Workers Federation. Kenyatta refused to defend the workers against the colonial repression carried out under the authority of Clement Atlee’s Labour government in Britain which pursued a ruthless imperialist foreign policy. Kenyatta denounced any sympathy strikes or meetings in support of the arrested trade union leaders as illegal. He advised workers to bring future grievances to individual employers, “write your demands on paper, give them to your employers, give them notice of intention to strike and then strike if need be—that is a proper way,” he advised.

The strike was part of a larger wave of worker movements that spread across the globe, including Africa, between 1945 and 1950. During this period, workers organised general strikes and mass demonstrations, highlighting the need to build a Marxist-Trotskyist party rooted in the working class. This party would have aimed to lead the mass peasantry by advancing a revolutionary agrarian programme that would mobilise tens of millions of peasants across the continent, uniting them in the struggle against native oppressors and imperialism.

General strikes erupted in several countries, including South Africa, Nigeria, Senegal, Egypt, Ghana, Sudan, Uganda, and Nigeria in 1945, Tanganyika (now Tanzania) in 1947, and Zanzibar in 1948. City-wide strikes also took place in Dakar and Dar es Salaam.

Singh founded the Labour Trade Union of Kenya in 1935, making it one of the first mass trade unions in the country. In 1949, he co-founded the East African Trades Union Congress (EATUC) with African trade unionist and KAU member Fred Kubai. Singh also led the Marxist Study Group, composed of Stalinists and nationalists. He was influential in the editorial direction of the popular *Daily Chronicle*, a left-leaning, pro-independence newspaper, and was a regular contributor.

In 1950, at a meeting organised jointly by KAU and EATUC, Singh and Kubai moved an addendum to the main resolution which called for an independent capitalist state and the establishment a bourgeois-democratic government, separated from any call for a struggle for socialism. It called for “the complete independence and sovereignty of the East African territories and the establishment in all these territories of democratic government elected by the people and responsible to the people of these territories only, and that the solution should be implemented at an early date.”

The path to socialism would supposedly proceed through a protracted stage of bourgeois-democratic development of the nation state after independence from Britain.

In 1950, the Nairobi General Strike saw over 100,000 workers go out in Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, and Nakuru, following the arrest and imprisonment of Singh and Kubai. The strike demanded freedom, better wages, improved working conditions, and the recognition of trade unions, reflecting widespread discontent with the colonial labour policies and racial discrimination. It brought the colonial economy to a standstill, prompting mass arrests by British colonial authorities. EATUC once again subordinated the working class to the Kenyatta’s KAU and called off the strike at its peak to avoid further confrontation with the colonial government.

As historian Dave Hyde notes in *The Nairobi General Strike: From Protest to Insurgency*, “The EATUC tail-ended a KAU which was intent on reforming the colonial state whose foundations it considered unshakeable. When these underpinnings showed serious signs of fissure, and after the KAU’s already frail support amongst ‘Outcast Nairobi’ had dwindled to nothing, the EATUC was unable to make the turn required. It is significant that trade union leaders did not take the advantage at this juncture to raise demands for a labour party. Instead they worked to rejuvenate the KAU, conspicuous by its refusal to support the strike, by redirecting flagging support back to the organisation at a time when it was the focus of widespread skepticism.”

A call for an independent workers’ party would have represented more than an agitational tactic. It would have embodied a definite strategical conception of the revolutionary development of the East African working class against KAU and other nationalist leaders in Tanzania and Uganda, which EATUC led by Stalinists had no intention of undertaking. It would have meant going beyond isolated economic struggles to a fundamental mobilisation against the colonial and native bourgeoisie and its political instruments in KAU in the struggle for socialism.

In the 1930s, despite acknowledging his “insufficient acquaintance with the activities of the National Congress,” Trotsky offered South African Trotskyists a series of recommendations regarding their approach to the African National Congress, which could have been adopted by a Kenyan socialist movement against the bourgeois nationalist KAU. Trotsky said:

1. The Bolshevik-Leninists [Trotskyists] put themselves in defense of the Congress, in all cases when it is being attacked by the white oppressors and their chauvinistic agents in the ranks of the workers’ organizations.
2. The Bolshevik-Leninists place the progressive over the reactionary

tendencies in the program of the Congress.

3. 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.

4. Separate episodic agreements with the Congress, if they are forced by circumstances, are permissible only within the framework of strictly defined practical tasks, with the retention of full and complete independence of our own organization and freedom of political criticism.

EUTUC's betrayals of the working class occurred during a period of mass radicalisation among the Kikuyu peasantry in central Kenya, who were victims of the British settlers' land seizures. They became increasingly disillusioned with the KAU's aim to achieve national independence through constitutional and peaceful means. From 1947 to 1952, the KAU's leadership made repeated attempts to reach a compromise with British imperialism, but each of these attempts were rebuffed.

Amid mounting opposition from the rural masses, British imperialism stared at the prospect of insurrection. The post-war anti-colonial movements reached a peak with the Chinese Revolution in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950. During this period, anti-colonial wars were waged by French forces in Indo-China and Algeria, the Dutch in Indonesia, and the British in Malaya (today's Malaysia). In 1952, as incidents of open defiance against colonial authorities spread across Kenya, particularly in the rural areas, London declared a state of emergency from 1952 to 1960. They arrested leaders of the KAU, including Kenyatta, banned EATUC, and instituted martial law.

The Mau Mau revolt

Thousands of radicalised peasants, driven by land seizures by British settlers and harsh colonial policies, launched the anti-colonial Mau Mau (Kenya Land Freedom Army-KLFA) movement. The uprising was fuelled by deep-seated grievances among the Kikuyu, Meru, and Embu communities and was led by radical petty-bourgeois sections of KAU, like Dedan Kimathi, dissatisfied by the moderate Kenyatta leadership.

The African Mau Mau Charter outlined the movement's petty-bourgeois political programme which included demands for an African government in Kenya, Africanised civil service, the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of foreign troops, rejections of foreign laws, restoration of land stolen by the settlers and for major commercial and economic activities to be put in African hands, and an immediate end to repression.

The Mau Mau fighters took to the forests of central Kenya to wage a guerrilla war against British imperialism and its colonial collaborators, resisting heroically for nearly seven years with mostly makeshift weapons. It cost hundreds of thousands of lives and defied British imperialism's mass torture, repression and brutal interning of up to a million kikuyu in concentration camps. Possibly up to 300,000 may have died as a result of the conflict, including from starvation, disease, and mistreatment in detention camps. Kimathi was captured and, after a show trial, executed in 1957. Another, 1,100 Kenyans were executed by hanging. By 1959, only small pockets of fighters survived in the forests.

The solution of the democratic demands of the radicalised peasantry required the leadership of the working class, in a struggle for socialism and in alliance with workers across Africa and in the imperialist centres. But the working class was blocked by its Stalinist and petty-bourgeois nationalist leadership, which insisted it had to be subordinated to the

KAU's nationalist, capitalist-independence objectives.

British imperialism's success in defeating the guerrilla struggle and preventing the working class from intervening was aided by bourgeois nationalists like Tom Mboya—the future architects of Kenya's post-independence regime. As the trade union leader of the Kenya Federation of Labour (KFL), his union received support from British imperialism's Trades Union Congress and was heavily funded by the CIA front, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

Mboya was repeatedly deployed by colonial authorities to suppress working-class resistance. In April 1954, the KFL leadership collaborated with colonial authorities to prevent a general strike that was called by militant workers in Nairobi to protest the brutality of Operation Anvil, staged by the British in Nairobi where thousands of workers and their families were arrested and imprisoned without trial, to break the urban support to the guerrilla war in the countryside. In Mboya's subsequent account, he would say:

In 1954 the terrorists imposed a bus boycott. Certain people tried to mix the trade unions in this boycott. The unions strongly refuted the suggestion. Soon after the successful imposition of the bus boycott, the terrorists threatened to impose a general strike. The [colonial] government sought the assistance of Federation to stamp out this threat. Fearlessly and at risk to their own lives all trade union leaders actively organized against the strike and succeeded in completely stamping out the threat. There were many leaders threatened by the terrorists but fearlessly they went out to the strike threat.

The following year, Mboya halted the powerful strike of thousands of Mombasa dock workers in 1955 that could have brought the country to a standstill. Mboya insisted that workers had to limit their demands to issues of wages, and not use their strength against the colonial authorities.

The defeat of the Mau Mau by 1959 was followed by a resurgence of class struggle over the next four years, embracing plantation and agricultural workers, industrial workers, teachers, local government and civil servants—and significantly, a pan-East African strike of railways workers from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika (now Tanzania)—leading up to independence in 1963. Despite being subordinated to the conservative KAU, mass workers' mobilisations and strikes, along with widespread eruption of the class struggle across Africa and South East Asia, made it untenable for British imperialism to maintain its control over Kenya.

This paved the way for independence negotiations at the Lancaster House Conferences (January 1960, February 1962, and September 1963), led by Jomo Kenyatta (who denounced the Mau Mau as “vermin,”) and Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, the father of today's opposition leader Raila Odinga. The party they founded, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), negotiated a deal with British imperialism and would rule a de facto one-party state for over three decades.

As Mboya would say months before independence in *Freedom and After* (1963), their nationalist movement was explicitly built against Marxism:

A nationalist movement has no time for arguments about ideology or for differences in economic and social programmes. Society in Africa—at least in the north of the Zambezi—is not divided between capitalists and workers, the landlords and the landless. The basic class distinctions in Europe are absent in Africa. Instead you have in newly independent states a government

which derives its strength from the masses, and talks in terms of universal education, more hospitals, better food, more opportunities for a better standard of life for everybody. ... The divisions there would be those of tribe or personal ambition, but very rarely could there be a genuine ideological or class differences.

Mboya's remarks were soon refuted. There were indeed classes in Africa and he articulated the interests of the new bourgeoisie. The new states would systemically suppress the development of independent revolutionary struggles of the working class and would also ensure the subordination the economy to the imperatives of the world market, dominated by the same handful of imperialist powers which had directly ruled them. The granting of independence became a vital part of the post-war arrangements whereby imperialism managed to restabilise itself for a period of over half a century.

To be continued



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact