

One year since the Gen-Z Uprising in Kenya: The need for a socialist and internationalist strategy

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Today marks one year since the Gen-Z uprising shook the Kenyan political establishment and its imperialist backers. Hundreds of thousands are expected to pour into the streets once again, demanding the resignation of President William Ruto and commemorating those slain during last year's brutal repression.

Today's protests take place under conditions of mounting global upheaval. Just ten days ago, up to 11 million people demonstrated across the United States under the slogan "No kings" in response to Donald Trump's drive toward dictatorship. Across Europe, hundreds of thousands continue to take to the streets to oppose the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. Alongside this, billions across the globe watch with horror as the US-Israeli onslaught against Iran, a historically oppressed country, escalates toward regional and potentially world war.

The demonstrations in Kenya are a renewed act of defiance. A year later, nothing has been resolved. Inequality is worsening, youth unemployment stands at 67 percent, and wages remain low. The transition from the National Health Insurance Fund to the Social Health Insurance Fund has intensified the assault on an already underfunded healthcare system. Food and fuel prices remain punishingly high, set to rise further as the imperialist war against Iran escalates. Taxes withdrawn last year have returned under new names.

The only clear political outcome has been the incorporation of the bourgeois opposition, led by billionaire Raila Odinga, into Ruto's government in what functions as a de facto parliamentary dictatorship ruling through police terror, enforced disappearances, and state-sponsored violence.

The Ruto regime has deployed thousands of police, including the notorious General Service Unit and the Rapid Deployment Unit, flooding the capital with armed vehicles, water cannon, and dog units. Nairobi is under effective siege, with Parliament Road, State House Road, and surrounding government buildings under heavy security. Major roads have been sealed off. Government spokesperson Isaac Mwaura declared, "There will be no protests. Whoever wants to mark any anniversary or wants to protest can do it in their homes."

Millions oppose Ruto government

The eruption of mass protests across Kenya in mid-2024, led primarily by young people, marked a turning point in the social and political life of the country, with reverberations felt across the African continent. Opposition to Ruto's International Monetary Fund (IMF)-imposed Finance Bill 2024 rapidly developed into an insurgency against the entire

post-independence capitalist order. It exposed the deep crisis of Kenyan and global capitalism.

The Finance Bill 2024 was drafted under the dictates of the IMF, proposing sweeping tax increases on essential goods, including fuel, bread, and cooking oil, as well as new levies on digital services and mobile transactions that millions rely on.

President Ruto presented the bill as a "necessary" measure to reduce Kenya's ballooning debt, now over 70 percent of GDP. It facilitated the plunder of the country on behalf of international finance capital. The IMF, acting as an enforcement arm of US and European imperialism, demanded these measures to guarantee debt repayments to foreign creditors and speculative investors. The masses were to bear the burden for a crisis created by decades of imperialist looting, corruption, and the subordination of Kenya's economy to the profit demands of global capital.

Lacking any formal organisational structure, and cutting across the tribal divisions the ruling class have long cultivated to divide the working class, millions of young people mobilised across cities and towns. Using social media platforms, memes, AI tools, and translated versions of the Finance Bill, they exposed what the corporate media and political elite sought to conceal. The main rallying call was "Ruto must go". The movement grew rapidly in both scale and militancy, culminating in the mass demonstrations of June 25 when protesters stormed parliament.

The capitalist state responded with unrestrained violence. On June 25 alone, at least 22 people were gunned down by security forces in Nairobi and other cities, as officers were heard ordering "kuua, kuua" ("kill, kill" in Kiswahili). Scores were abducted, countless others were tortured. Protests were banned, and state-funded goons sent to disrupt demonstrations.

Ruto ordered the first-ever domestic deployment of the Kenya Defence Forces to crush unarmed protests. By year's end, at least 65 protesters had been killed, more than 1,500 unlawfully arrested, and 89 forcibly disappeared, with many still unaccounted for. The violence exposed the true character of the Kenyan state: a bourgeois dictatorship upheld by imperialism and enforced with bullets and batons.

Solidarity protests sprang up across the continent—in Uganda, where President Yoweri Museveni has ruled for four decades, as well as Nigeria and Ghana. Social media platforms became a site of intense engagement and discussion. Videos of the Nairobi demonstrations, the storming of parliament, and the police brutality were shared by millions. The uprising captured the attention of youth internationally, who saw in it a reflection of their own deteriorating social conditions and a symbol of resistance.

The crisis of revolutionary leadership

Yet these events sharply exposed the central political crisis confronting the working class in Kenya and internationally: the absence of revolutionary leadership.

Those who presented themselves as alternatives to the regime proved to be nothing of the sort. The bourgeois opposition coalition Azimio la Umoja, led by the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) and its longtime billionaire figurehead Raila Odinga, closed ranks with the regime. Just a year earlier, Odinga had postured as a leader of anti-austerity demonstrations. But when the Gen-Z protests erupted outside his control, he joined the Ruto regime, alarmed by the revolutionary potential of the movement. He quickly moved to absorb self-styled Gen-Z “leaders.”

“We cannot burn the country to achieve change,” he said. “Dialogue is the way forward and I used the opportunity to push for reforms. Those calling it betrayal misunderstand the bigger picture.”

Odinga was following a well-worn script. In the 1990s, he led protests against the brutal, Western-backed dictatorship of Daniel arap Moi only to later merge his party with Moi’s KANU and serve as energy minister. After the stolen 2007 election, he called-off resistance and entered into a coalition government with Mwai Kibaki, despite state violence against his supporters that left 1,200 dead and 500,000 displaced. He repeated this in 2018 with a deal following another disputed election involving Uhuru Kenyatta. In 2023, he briefly mobilised protests against Ruto’s Finance Bill, only to call them off when they threatened to trigger a broader, working-class-based movement.

Throughout, Odinga has played the role of containing mass opposition within the narrow confines of Kenya’s tribalist politics and constitutional reform. His embrace of Ruto has exposed that his true loyalties lie with preservation of the imperialist order upon which his ill-gotten wealth depends.

Like Odinga, the trade union bureaucracy actively worked to strangle the uprising. The Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU), representing 36 trade unions and 1.5 million workers, headed by long-time bureaucrat Francis Atwoli, openly backed the Ruto regime and denounced the protests. Atwoli declared that “Kenya is a hub of economic activities in this region, and we must protect it at all costs.” Ruto had to be supported to “ensure that this country remains peaceful.”

At every stage the trade union bureaucracy sought to isolate workers from the youth-led protests and prevent the formation of a unified mass movement—from the lead-up to the mass demonstrations to the June 25 uprising and the nationwide strike wave that followed encompassing teachers, healthcare workers, airport staff, county civil servants, and university lecturers.

Stalinism and the pseudo-left

The betrayals of Odinga and the trade union bureaucracy were made possible by the support of the Stalinist Communist Party of Kenya, now rebranded as the Communist Party Marxist—Kenya (CPM-K), and the pseudo-left Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL). These organisations acted as political firewalls for the regime, working to disorient radicalised layers of youth and workers. Posturing as opponents of austerity and repression, their real function was to keep mass opposition within safe, nationalist, and pro-capitalist channels, and to block the development of an independent revolutionary movement of the working class.

The Communist Party Marxist—Kenya (CPM-K), rooted in Maoist-Stalinist traditions, intervened on the basis of the “National Democratic

Revolution” perspective, a fraudulent two-stage theory that calls first for the establishment of bourgeois democracy, postponing socialism to an indefinite future. During the Gen Z protests this meant vacillating between timid appeals for Ruto to reverse his austerity measures and calls for his resignation in favour of an ill-defined “pro-poor” government or “people’s democracy.”

Central to this perspective is their glorification of the 2010 Constitution, which they helped draft and present as a “site of class struggle.” They argue that the bourgeoisie’s failure to implement its provisions is the main obstacle to progress, and that enforcing them will “inevitably” lead to socialism. Their programme confines workers within the limits of reforming the nation state, by pressuring a mythical progressive wing of the ruling class.

Externally, the CPM-K advances a perspective for the Kenyan bourgeoisie orienting toward China as a supposed path to national development. Exploiting the widespread hatred of US and European imperialism, the party portrays Beijing as a more benevolent alternative, sowing illusions in multipolarity—the notion that aligning with rival capitalist states like China or Russia can offer a progressive alternative to the current global order even as world imperialism descends into a global conflagration.

The pseudo-left Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL) emerged from a split with the CPM-K carried out on an entirely unprincipled basis. The central point of contention was the CPM-K’s orientation toward China, not its Stalinist political foundations. The RSL subsequently affiliated with the Morenoite International Socialist League (ISL), an organisation notorious for supporting NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine and whitewashing Ukrainian fascism. The RSL advances a confused mixture of Pan-Africanism, identity politics, and radical phrasemongering.

Despite claiming to oppose Stalinism, the RSL continues to collaborate with the CPM-K in the National Provisional Coordination Committee of People’s Assemblies, even as the Kenyan Stalinists denounce Trotskyism, glorify Stalin’s purges of the Old Bolsheviks in the 1930s, and vow to suppress “Trotskyist deviations” with “iron discipline.”

RSL’s sole “contribution” to the Gen-Z struggle was to insist it must remain without leadership or organisation. Ezra Otieno, a leading member, glorified the spontaneous character of the movement and its lack of a perspective, stating that it was “a good tactic not to have leaders emerging for now, because the government is actively looking for leaders. As the RSL, we go there with a purpose, because we must be in solidarity with the masses—we fully agree with what they say. So we go to the streets, we try to organise our people. When joining in, we do not carry banners as people just go without anything, to move around.”

The theory of Permanent Revolution

What the Gen-Z uprising has revealed above all is that the absence of revolutionary leadership is the decisive obstacle facing the working class, not just in Kenya, but across Africa and around the world. The spontaneous courage and militancy of the youth cannot substitute for a clear political programme and conscious strategy. That strategy is provided only by the theory of Permanent Revolution, developed by Leon Trotsky and upheld today solely by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

Permanent Revolution begins from the recognition that in countries of belated capitalist development like Kenya, the capitalist class can no longer lead the struggles for democracy as it did in the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century in the United States and France. Fearful of the proletariat and, in ex-colonial countries like Kenya,

dependent on foreign imperialism, the capitalists necessarily oppose democratic rule. Democracy can be established only by the working class seizing state power and placing all the resources of the economy under the control of the workers and oppressed masses.

This struggle cannot be confined within national borders. The working class is a revolutionary and international class, with no interest in maintaining private ownership of the means of production that is the basis of its own exploitation and no loyalty to the nation-state that upholds and defends the capitalist order and bourgeois rule. It is objectively unified by its position within the global system of capitalist exploitation, facing common enemies in the transnational corporations, banks and imperialist powers and its own capitalist rulers.

The Kenyan working class must link its struggle with workers across the African continent and in the imperialist centers, above all in the US and Europe. Only through the international unity of the working class can the fight against austerity, dictatorship, and imperialist war be waged. Against all those who have betrayed Trotskyism, the ICFI fights to build revolutionary parties in every country based on the international unity of the working class and the strategy of world socialist revolution.

The future depends not on spontaneous protest, tribal alliances, or deals with the ruling class, but on the conscious struggle to arm the working class with a revolutionary programme and a party to carry it out. The essential task is the building of a Kenyan section of the ICFI.



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