

The Gen Z protests and the struggle for the United Socialist States of Africa

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One hundred and fifty years after the imperialist partition of Africa, and six decades after the flags of formal independence were first raised, the continent is a social powder keg.

Mass protests in Tanzania have shattered the myth of a peaceful land of safaris, idyllic beaches, and capitalist stability. Over the past week, hundreds of thousands of youth have poured into the streets to denounce the fraudulent election organised by President Samia Suluhu Hassan and her ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (Party of the Revolution, CCM). Defying curfews, internet shutdowns, live ammunition, tear gas and the deployment of the army, they have turned what the regime hoped would be an easy stage-managed contest into a mass rebellion. Reports indicate that hundreds of protestors have been killed.

This social explosion is part of a broader wave of radicalisation sweeping the former colonial countries. Over the past year and a half, tens of millions have taken to the streets: in Kenya, Angola and Nigeria against tax hikes and International Monetary Fund (IMF)-imposed austerity, in Cameroon, Mozambique and Tanzania against rigged elections and police repression, in Morocco against the neglect of health care and education while the state pours resources into football stadiums; and in Madagascar and South Africa against corruption and chronic shortages of power and water. Similar protests against grinding poverty and inequality have erupted in Bangladesh, Nepal and Peru.

Mass protests have also erupted within the imperialist centres, objectively refuting the claims of Third Worldist and Pan-Africanist tendencies that no revolutionary struggle could emerge there. In the US, seven million people demonstrated against the Trump regime and its attempt to establish a fascist dictatorship. Across Europe, millions have joined strikes and mass demonstrations against the Western-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Significantly, the new wave of protests across Africa is beginning to extend beyond the borders drawn up by European imperialism in the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference. On Tanzania's borders, demonstrators from neighbouring Malawi and Kenya attacked border posts, clashed with police and broke through to support protestors. Last year, during mass protests in Mozambique, South Africa closed its main border with Mozambique and ordered police to fire rubber bullets at demonstrators attempting to enter. Across the continent, a growing consciousness is emerging that these are not separate national crises but expressions of a common struggle.

At the forefront of these struggles stands a new generation. Born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, Gen-Z has been radicalised by unbearable social inequality. They were born into a world shaped by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and grew up amid NATO's destruction of Libya and endless regional conflicts like the Congo Wars that left millions of dead. Their formative years have been marked by the financial crash of 2008, the pandemic of 2020, and accelerating climate change disasters. They come of age in a world haunted by the genocide in Gaza, preparations for war against Russia and China, and the normalisation of

fascist politics across the globe, personified by US President Trump.

Africa's Generation Z, with a median age of just nineteen, has grown up in the poorest continent in the world, with about one third of its population, some 400 million people, living below the international poverty line of US\$2.15 per day. Despite its vast mineral wealth, Africa accounts for two thirds of the world's people in extreme poverty. More than one in fifteen children die before their fifth birthday, and one in 36 women dies from childbirth-related causes. Only two thirds of adults are literate, and barely six percent of young people obtain a tertiary education. Every year, more than ten million enter labour markets with no jobs, forcing many into informal employment, precarious hustling and despair. The myth of "Africa rising" has become a sick joke.

In contrast, Africa has its own class of oligarchs. The ten richest Africans control around US\$90 billion in combined wealth, more than the entire GDP of 45 of the continent's 49 sub-Saharan countries. Among them are Aliko Dangote of Nigeria, worth roughly US\$15 billion, Johann Rupert of South Africa with about US\$10 billion, Nicky Oppenheimer, also of South Africa, with US\$9 billion, and Egypt's Sawiris brothers—Nassef, Naguib, and Samih—together holding over US\$20 billion. They epitomise a parasitic elite whose fortunes rest on the ruthless extraction of wealth from the African working class, built on cheap labour, the looting of state assets, and the plunder of natural resources.

The working class and the question of state power

The radicalisation now unfolding among youth and workers will remain politically unarmed if it does not recognise itself as part of a historical class struggle. The essential question is not one of generational revolt but of class and state power. The issue posed by these movements is the same that confronted every previous revolution: which class will rule society.

The working class is the only social force capable of uniting all the oppressed layers of society, including the unemployed, the rural poor, and the impoverished middle strata, against the capitalist system, which is the root of exploitation, inequality and war.

If the capitalist state machine exists, the ruling class continues to rule. It rules not merely through this or that government, but through the permanent apparatus of state coercion—the police, the army, the courts, and the bureaucracy—that upholds private property. Governments change, but the state remains, safeguarding the interests of the capitalist class. For the bourgeoisie, the only way out of its crisis is through a policy of social devastation that takes the form of austerity, privatisation, and the destruction of jobs, wages, and essential services.

To oppose and defeat the attacks of the bourgeoisie, the working class must act independently of all the parties of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie that seek to suppress the class struggle in the name of

compromise. It must build its own independent organs of struggle such as action committees, workers' councils, and popular assemblies rooted in workplaces, factories, plantations, neighbourhoods, and rural communities. Only through these organisations can workers assert their class interests and begin to confront and ultimately overturn the state power of the capitalist class.

The lessons of history

These tasks emerge from a century and a half of concrete historical experience. The Paris Commune of 1871 demonstrated for the first time that the working class could seize power and begin to reorganise society on socialist lines, but it also revealed the fatal consequences of not having a revolutionary leadership. The Russian Revolution of 1917 carried that lesson forward, proving that, led by a revolutionary party armed with Marxist theory, the working class could overthrow capitalism and establish a workers' state.

The subsequent degeneration of the Soviet Union under Stalinism vindicated the analysis of Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition, which fought to defend the programme of international revolution against the nationalist theory of "socialism in one country." Against Stalinist, neo-Stalinist, and nationalist currents today that promote a two-stage theory under the banner of "national democratic revolutions," claiming that the working class in backward countries must first pass through a prolonged stage of bourgeois democracy before advancing to socialism, and against the Morenoite tendencies that today call for "constituent assemblies"—a demand to create a new parliament or refound the bourgeois state on supposedly more democratic foundations—Trotsky explained that such slogans serve to divert revolutionary movements away from the struggle for workers' power.

Leon Trotsky developed the Theory of Permanent Revolution. He insisted that in countries with a belated capitalist development, the resolution of the democratic tasks associated in the 19th century with bourgeois revolutions, including national unity and land reform, were now bound up with the taking of power by the working class. He made clear that the global development of capitalism in the imperialist epoch, coupled with fear of an already developed working class that threatened its interests, drives the national bourgeoisie into the arms of the imperialist powers that have already divided the world between them.

The realisation of socialism must be based on the same objective reality of a global economy and of the international character of the working class. African workers must strive to seize power and form their own state, offering leadership to the rural masses. But the success of a socialist revolution, even if begun in a single country, demands that it is spread to neighbouring countries, and it can only be completed on the world arena.

In Africa, this truth has been vindicated in the negative, through immense bloodshed. Nothing exposes this more than the former national liberation movements like the ANC, FRELIMO, MPLA, ZANU-PF, CCM, SWAPO, and others that have been transformed into instruments of class oppression. They preserved the same colonial state machinery and class structure they claimed to have overthrown. Their economies remained chained to the demands of foreign capital through debt, trade and the plunder of raw materials. Out of this emerged the new African bourgeoisie that became the naked political agent of the imperialist governments, transnational corporations and banks.

Without consciously drawing from these experiences, today's Gen-Z struggles will be condemned to cycles of protest without direction: prey to new demagogues peddling promises of democratic reform, and to the political co-option of a few. Recent experiences across the continent stand

as a warning.

In Kenya, a year after millions took to the streets under the slogan "Ruto Must Go", President William Ruto remains in power, deepening IMF austerity and consolidating his path toward dictatorship. His regime has killed more than 256 demonstrators, injured thousands and abducted scores of others. Hundreds now stand on trial under fraudulent terrorism charges. In Mozambique, despite the largest protests in the nation's history, the FRELIMO government remains in power after killing 411 protesters and arresting over 7,000. In Angola, the MPLA has retained power and killed at least 29 people. In Cameroon, at least 23 people have been killed in ongoing protests against the 92-year old President Paul Biya.

Reports from Tanzania state that some youth have gone to military barracks appealing for support. But bitter experience has shown that military intervention in popular uprisings is never intended to realise the aspirations of the masses, but to suppress them. In Egypt and Tunisia in 2011, the supposed neutrality of the army served to defuse the revolutionary mobilisations and restore bourgeois order. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the armed forces seized power amid mass opposition to French imperialism's 2013–2022 war in Mali and across the Sahel, mouthing the language of anti-imperialism. These regimes, however, like those they replaced, defend capitalist property relations and the interests of the national bourgeoisie.

The need for Trotskyist leadership

The experiences unfolding across Africa brings to the fore the central problem of every revolutionary movement: leadership. The courage of the youth must find conscious political direction in the building of a revolutionary Trotskyist movement.

Within the political establishment, the working class will find no alternative. The political degeneration of the ruling elites finds its twin in the bankruptcy of what passes as opposition. In South Africa, it is made up of splinters from the ANC, the uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) Party and the Economic Freedom Fighters. The first led by former corrupt president and billionaire Jacob Zuma and the other by Julius Malema, a entrepreneur who has amassed millions through corrupt state contracts. In Cameroon, Issa Tchiroma Bakary poses as an opposition figure even though he spent decades serving the Biya dictatorship, holding ministerial posts. In Mozambique, right-wing evangelical preacher Venâncio Mondlane maintains ties with Portugal's fascistic CHEGA and hails Bolsonaro and Trump. In Kenya, opposition figures such as Rigathi Gachagua, Kalonzo Musyoka, Martha Karua and Fred Matiangi are all implicated in the killing of protesters while in power.

Across Africa, the opposition are chiefly pro-business parties. In Zimbabwe, the Movement for Democratic Change pledges to "privatise and restore business confidence". In Tanzania, CHADEMA, calls for cutting corporate tax and for creating a "conducive environment for investors" in the mining, oil, and gas sectors. In Uganda, the manifesto of millionaire Bobi Wine of the National Unity Platform (NUP), pledges to "restore trust and confidence in our economy", seeking to "stabilise our business environment ... that empowers the private sector".

These are pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist forces led by affluent upper middle-class layers and capitalists whose ambitions for more wealth and influence have been blocked by the current ruling elites. Their aim is not to overthrow capitalist rule, but to secure their own place within it. Whether cloaked in populist slogans, anti-corruption initiatives, nationalist phrases, or appeals to democracy and reform, they all defend the capitalist order that condemns millions to poverty.

None have an answer to the two central questions confronting the African continent: the crushing burden of debt and the escalating drive to war.

Africa's governments are trapped in a catastrophic debt spiral. Encouraged by the IMF, the World Bank and Western investors to issue Eurobonds during the period of cheap credit, they face rising global interest rates and the shocks of the Covid-19 pandemic and the NATO war against Russia, compounded by Trump's tariffs. Over twenty African countries are already in or near default. Debt servicing consumes more than half of many national budgets, forcing savage cuts to education, health care and wages in order to guarantee payments to foreign banks and bondholders.

At the same time, the African continent is rapidly being transformed into another front of the developing Third World War. The struggle between the US and the European imperialist powers, and capitalist powers like China and Russia, is driving an intensifying scramble for control over Africa's resources, markets and strategic locations. Africa's enormous reserves of oil, gas, cobalt, copper and lithium make it indispensable to military and industrial needs.

The task before the new generation is to build a new leadership, grounded in the historical lessons of the twentieth century and guided by Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, to carry forward the struggle for socialism and the liberation of humanity. This means building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, across the African continent.

The alternative is clear: either the continued descent into war, dictatorship, and social collapse under capitalism, or the socialist unification of the African working class and youth in the struggle for the United Socialist States of Africa as part of the world socialist revolution. A federation of African workers' states would abolish the artificial borders drawn by colonialism, expropriate the banks, mines, plantations, and multinational corporations, and direct the continent's vast resources toward meeting human needs. It would end imperialist domination and create the conditions to eradicate poverty, ignorance, and disease.

The African revolution must be conceived as an inseparable part of the world socialist revolution. Only in this way can the immense energy of Africa's youth and working class find its conscious political expression and open a new chapter in the liberation of humanity. This is the historical task confronting Generation Z.



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