The Gen-Z struggles in Africa and the European working class

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The eruption of mass Gen Z uprisings across Africa and Asia, Sri Lanka (2022), Kenya (2024–2025), Bangladesh (2024), Nigeria (2024), Mozambique (2024–2025), Indonesia (2025), Nepal (2025), Madagascar (2025), Morocco (2025) and Tanzania (2025), is now being followed by mass youth protests in a resurgence of the class struggle across Europe. Millions of workers and young people are taking to the streets against austerity, the destruction of public education, police repression, militarism and war.

These struggles are part of a growing international confrontation with capitalism, driven by the same financial institutions, transnational corporations and imperialist powers that dictate austerity to African and Asian governments and demand cuts in across Europe. As they develop, Pan-Africanist tendencies are seeking to revive the bankrupt nationalist programmes that have dominated African politics since independence. They present the emergence of a multipolar world as an opportunity for Africa to secure greater independence from imperialism. Behind this perspective lie the interests of privileged sections of the African middle class seeking a greater share of wealth and influence within the existing capitalist order.

This perspective finds expression in the October 2026 article *Positioning Pan-Africanism in the Geopolitical Turmoil*, published on Pan-Africanist news outlet *Pambazuka News* by Tanzanian academic Issa G. Shivji, Professor Emeritus of Law at the University of Dar es Salaam. Shivji has longstanding intellectual and institutional ties to the legacy of Julius Nyerere, having served as the founding holder of the Mwalimu Nyerere Professorial Chair in Pan-African Studies (2008–2013) and then founding Director of the Nyerere Resource Centre (2013–2019). He co-authored a three-volume biography of Tanzania's first president, published in 2020.

Shivji emerged from the Maoist-influenced radical intellectual milieu of the University of Dar es Salaam in the 1960s and 1970s, where he was associated with the University Students African Revolutionary Front (USARF), alongside figures such as Yoweri Museveni, who took power in Uganda in 1986 and has ruled ever since with an iron fist. His politics was shaped by the Stalinist-Maoist conception of a two-stage revolution, which subordinated the working class to supposedly progressive sections of the national bourgeoisie in the struggle against imperialism.

Shivji's latest article represents an attempt to resurrect Pan-Africanism through what he calls a "Sovereign Pan-African Project." His starting point is not the resurgence of the international class struggle but the changing relations between capitalist states. After describing the wars and escalating geopolitical confrontations across the world—from the war in Sudan and the threat of a wider conflict involving Ethiopia and Eritrea, to the fighting in eastern Congo, the wars in the Middle East involving the US-Israeli war on Iran, the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza, the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China—Shivji declares: "The days of the bipolar or unipolar world are over. The post-WWII hegemonic power, the US, is declining. China is rising."

Discussing Europe, he writes: "Two important candidates – Germany and Russia – are fighting it out in Ukraine while France waits in the wings." The hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian and Russian soldiers killed or wounded in this fratricidal war disappear behind references to a geopolitical contest.

The breakdown of the postwar era is the product of a world imperialist system tobogganing to a third world war, accompanied with the growth of far-right and fascistic movements, the strengthening of authoritarian forms of rule and attacks on democratic rights. Europe is diverting trillions towards rearmament while imposing austerity on the working class. In the US, the turn towards dictatorship is inseparable from the efforts of American imperialism to reverse its declining global position through war.

Shivji approaches this as an opportunity for the African bourgeoise, declaring: "History teaches us that reconfiguration of hegemonies takes place through wars."

He asks: "Can Africa resist becoming a dispensable pawn on the geopolitical chessboard?" His answer is that "Africa must position itself as an independent sovereign pole in the multipolar world." He leaves unanswered: what social class would control this supposedly sovereign African pole? Under whose ownership would its mines, banks, factories, ports and natural resources remain? Would African governments reject the debts to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and break with the dictates of global finance capital?

Shivji cynically resolves this by claiming that "Pan-Africanism and imperialism are incompatible. Therefore, per force, Pan-Africanism is anti-capitalist."

This is a lie. Pan-Africanism's principal bourgeois nationalist representatives invoked anti-imperialism, national liberation and, in many cases, "African Socialism", but did so only to win popular backing which they used to secure a more advantageous position within the world capitalist system.

The founding fathers of post-independence Pan-Africanism, including Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania and Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, presided over the creation of states within the borders drawn by the colonial powers that preserved capitalist relations and maintained their integration into the world market and their dependence on foreign capital. The Organisation of African Unity, established in 1963, forerunner of today's African Union, endorsed the preservation of inherited colonial boundaries in 1964.

The experience of more than six decades of African independence constitutes a devastating historical indictment of this nationalist perspective. Over the past years, thousands of youth have been killed, maimed and disappeared by the regimes that once promised national liberation, including FRELIMO in Mozambique, the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, and the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) in Tanzania, whose ideology of Ujamaa was celebrated internationally as a model of African socialism. The very parties that Shivji continues to

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associate with the progressive legacy of African liberation now confronts a new generation of African youth with bullets and state terror.

Shivji's attempt to resurrect this bankrupt project by claiming it must be rooted in the struggles of the African working people and in "people's sovereignty." In this way, he obscures the fundamental class contradiction that Pan-Africanism and its proponents have always attempted to obscure: the antagonism between the African bourgeoisie and the workers and impoverished masses it exploits.

Multipolarity offers no progressive alternative to the African masses to imperialism. The rise of China, far from opening a peaceful road to African liberation, has intensified the struggle between capitalist powers over the continent's minerals, markets, labour, ports and strategic infrastructure. Beijing's expanding economic influence in Africa has created new opportunities for sections of the African bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie to enrich themselves through loans, infrastructure contracts, trade and investment. But the US and European imperialism will not peacefully accept the erosion of their economic and strategic dominance on the continent. The working class, moreover, has no interest in exchanging the domination of one capitalist power for dependence upon another.

The decisive historical question is whether the African working class can overthrow the capitalist relations that make the continent subordinate to imperialism. In this struggle, the alliance with workers in the imperialist centres is fundamental.

Shivji is hostile to such a perspective. Underlying his nationalist appeal is the DNA of Third Worldist and Pan-Africanist tendencies, which view workers in the imperialist countries as a privileged labour aristocracy.

In *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), Vladimir Lenin explained that the super-profits extracted from the colonies enabled the imperialist bourgeoisie to cultivate a privileged upper stratum of workers and trade-union officials. "Obviously, out of such enormous superprofits [...] it is possible to bribe the labour leaders and the upper stratum of the labour aristocracy."

This layer provided an important social foundation for opportunism and the betrayal of socialism by the leaders of the Second International, who supported their own ruling classes during the First World War. But Lenin did not identify the entire working class of the imperialist countries with this privileged stratum. His analysis distinguished the labour aristocracy from the broad masses of workers, whose fundamental interests remained opposed to capitalism.

The Third Worldist and Pan-Africanist misappropriated Lenin to portray the bourgeoisie and working class in Africa as belonging to a common oppressed Global South, while depicting both classes in the imperialist centres as beneficiaries of exploitation. The fundamental class antagonisms within both are dissolved into geographical divisions.

The globalisation of capitalist production has refuted this perspective. As David North explained in his *Capital, Labor and the Nation-State* (1992), the enormous development of transnational production had transformed the objective conditions of the class struggle:

The days are really past when it was possible for imperialism to insulate within its own borders a privileged section of the working class and fatten them on the basis of the super-profits being extracted from its colonies. A different process is, in fact, taking place, a general lowering of the living standards of the working class in all parts of the world.

Three decades later, the scale of global social inequality is staggering. According to the International Labour Organization, labour productivity in high-income countries rose by 29 percent between 1999 and 2024, while real wages rose by just 15 percent. The declining share of global income going to labour deprived workers of $2.4 trillion in 2024 alone, compared with what they would have received had their share remained at its 2004 level. Meanwhile, according to Oxfam, the world's billionaires added $2.5 trillion to their fortunes in 2025, bringing their combined wealth to a record $18.3 trillion.

According to Oxfam, the world's 12 richest individuals now possess more wealth than the poorest half of humanity—over four billion people. The richest 1 percent controls 43.8 percent of global wealth, while the poorest half owns just 0.52 percent. The World Bank estimates that 3.7 billion people survive on less than $8.30 a day, including 811 million living in extreme poverty on less than $3 a day.

In Africa, according to Forbes, the continent's 23 billionaires saw their combined fortunes increase by $20.3 billion in the year to March 2026, reaching a record $126.7 billion. Nigeria's Aliko Dangote alone amassed an estimated $28.5 billion. An Oxfam report published in July 2025 found that Africa's four richest billionaires possessed more wealth than the poorest half of the continent's population—approximately 750 million people. Since 2020, the incomes of the richest 1 percent have grown five times faster than those of the poorest half.

These figures do not erase the enormous inequalities between African and European workers, nor do they establish identical living conditions. However, they demonstrate the universal international pressures on labour under global capitalism: falling labour income shares, the erosion of purchasing power and the persistence of precarious employment. Workers in the imperialist centres confront economic pressures arising from the same globally integrated capitalist system that exploits the African masses that are drawing them ever more firmly into a global class struggle against a common enemy—the transnational corporations and banks and the governments controlled by the financial oligarchy.

Shivji's "Sovereign Pan-African Project" gives political expression to the interests of a privileged layer of the upper-middle class in the former colonies: academics, senior civil servants, university administrators, corporate managers, professionals and owners of medium-sized businesses. These layers have their differences with the national bourgeoisie, whose leading representatives loot enormous wealth through nepotism, corruption, state contracts, backroom deals and outright mafia-style methods. They resent their exclusion from the highest levels of power and the monopolisation of lucrative opportunities by politically connected elites. But their opposition is not to capitalism.

These affluent layers enjoy living standards entirely removed from those of the overwhelming majority of the African population. They employ domestic workers, nannies, cleaners, drivers and private security guards, whose low wages make their comfortable lifestyles possible. They travel in SUVs capable of navigating the potholed roads and crumbling infrastructure produced by decades of underinvestment and corruption. Their homes and offices are equipped with air conditioning, generators and water tanks that insulate them from the electricity shortages, failing public services and extreme heat that dominate the daily lives of millions. They live in big houses behind high walls, barbed wire and guarded gates, shielding themselves from the crime and insecurity generated by mass poverty and unemployment.

These conditions shape their social and political outlook. While they may denounce the excesses of the ruling oligarchies at home, and the wage disparities of privileged foreign expatriates or ethnic groups that dominate the economy, their own privileges rest upon the exploitation of cheap labour and the enormous social gulf separating them from the working masses.

Multipolarity appears to them as new possibilities for advancing their position: through closer economic relations with Beijing, the renegotiation of trade agreements with the West and securing a larger share of the profits extracted from Africa's resources and labour.

Above all, like their own ruling class, they fear the independent mobilisation of workers and impoverished youth, which threatens the social relations upon which their own comfortable existence depends.

The mass Gen-Z uprisings across Africa have exposed the gulf separating these layers from the overwhelming majority of the population.

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For millions of young workers, the issue is not securing a better position within the capitalist state but struggle against the entire social order.

The struggles erupting across Africa, Asia and Europe pose the urgent necessity of adopting a revolutionary internationalist perspective. The answer is not the resurrection of Pan-Africanism, but the revival of revolutionary Marxism, of Trotskyism, the Marxism of the 21st century. Guided by Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, the decisive task is to unite the African working class with its class brothers and sisters internationally, including the imperialist centres, in a common struggle for workers' power and world socialism.



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