

Revolutionaries, Resistance and Crisis in Zimbabwe

By Munyaradzi Gwisai

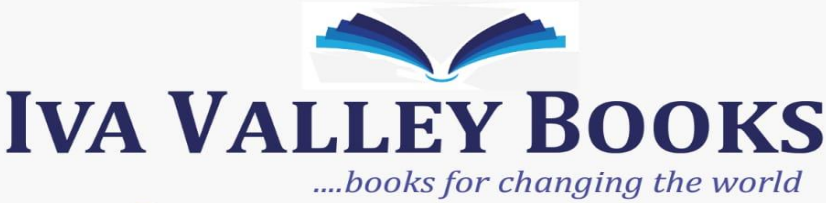


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By **Munyaradzi Gwisai**

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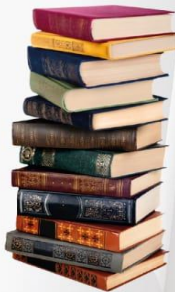

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Resistance, Crisis and Workers in Zimbabwe - An interview with Antonater Tafadzwa Choto, 2016

Introduction

In the last six years (1996 to 2002), the working masses of Zimbabwe have waged massive struggles that have shaken to the roots the post-colonial authoritarian state and its vicious neo-liberal agenda, which has caused immense suffering to the ordinary people. The struggles mirror similar events that have swept aside entrenched regimes in other periphery capitalist states like Indonesia, Serbia, Malawi and Zambia. The struggles in Zimbabwe raise fundamental questions about the possibilities of socialist revolutions in periphery capitalist societies. The working-class resistance against the ZANU-PF government has gone further and deeper than most on the continent, giving rise to a political movement, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), that in recent elections nearly defeated one of the continent's most entrenched and violent ruling classes, forcing it to beat a major retreat from its neo-liberal agenda. But the subsequent transformation of such a movement into a right-wing neo-liberal force also raises important questions for the working class.

How events will unfold remains unclear and will depend on a number of factors. Objectively, these include the extent to which the economic crisis continues to deepen, the resilience of the ruling party and the development of the emerging international anti-capitalist struggle. Also important will be whether working-class rank and file militants will develop a sufficiently strong and independent ideological and organisational alternative to the current labour bureaucracy, who are holding back the movement.

Events in Zimbabwe assume further importance not only because it is an important capitalist state in Africa, but also by its connection to South Africa, the biggest and most important centre of global capitalism on the continent. Zimbabwe is South Africa's biggest trading partner on the continent, and the two share similar colonial traditions. South Africa has the continent's biggest and historically most militant working class, of whom at least one million are Zimbabwean migrant workers. Revolts in the two most important states in the region could signal immense possibilities for working class struggles in southern and central Africa.

Uneven Zimbabwe

One of the reasons the resistance of the Zimbabwean working class has been much deeper than in many other African countries is because it is based on a comparatively much more developed industrial base. Unlike most African countries, the manufacturing sector produces a wide range of consumer goods, intermediate products and a significant range

of capital goods in sub-sectors like engineering, chemicals and transport. Manufacturing is the highest contributor to GDP, comprising about 24.8 per cent in 1990, which is about two to three times that of an average African country. The manufacturing work force contributes 16.5 per cent of formal employment and seventeen to twenty per cent of total export revenue. The manufacturing sector is well connected to other sectors of the economy, including one of the biggest and most diversified agricultural sectors in Africa. Agriculture contributes fourteen per cent to GDP (the second largest), twenty-five per cent to formal employment and 34.5 per cent to total exports. Similar developments are also exhibited in the mining, service and financial sectors.

But this impressive base was developed on an uneven, unequal and racist platform that has only accentuated with time. The economy has highly skewed ownership characteristics. Seventy-five per cent of manufactured output comes from Harare and Bulawayo, where sixty per cent of the urban population is concentrated. Sixty per cent of industrial activity is in foreign hands, whilst about 4000 white farmers (fewer than 0.1 per cent of the population) control nearly seventy per cent of the most productive land. With seventy-six per cent of the population categorised as living below the official poverty line, Zimbabwe has been ranked amongst the five most unequal societies in the world.

The necessity to protect such an uneven base resulted in the emergence of one of the most authoritarian state structures in the British Empire. Indeed, from 1890 to 1923 the country was under the "company rule" of the arch-imperialist Cecil John Rhodes' British South Africa Company. Thereafter under minority settler rule, this repressive structure continued to expand, climaxing in the Rhodesia Front state of the 1960s and 1970s, where "the repressive instruments of the settler colonial state were perfected ... it was an era of a racially founded police state."¹ This repressive structure remained substantially intact after independence, but disguised as "populist authoritarianism",² in which the working classes, ethnic minorities and opposition parties continued to suffer repression such as the Matabeleland massacres of the early 1980s.

Primitive accumulation and early struggles

After the defeat of the anti-colonial uprising or *Chimurenga* in 1896-98, the next forty years marked the development of the new capitalist state through a process of "primitive accumulation". The natives were politically disenfranchised and brutally dispossessed of independent means of production—mainly land and cattle—and turned into wage slaves. Peasants were forced to pay colonial taxes.

From the start, the new order faced resistance from the peasantry and new working class. But such resistance, like the 1912 Wankie Colliery strike and the Shamva Mine strikes of the 1920s, were isolated and divided and quickly crushed. The only serious attempt at building organised structures was the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), formed in 1927 by migrant workers who had been inspired by a similar organisation in South Africa. But the ICU floundered during the Great Depression in the 1930s, a victim not only of immense state harassment but also of the very nature of an economy based on an unskilled and semi-migrant pre-industrial proletariat.

The section of the working class that could have provided leadership was the white workers, most of whom had come from South Africa and Britain and were familiar with proletarian organisations and struggles. In 1916 railway workers formed the Rhodesia Railway Workers' Union, while the Rhodesia Mine and General Workers' Association was formed in 1919, both of which led some spectacularly successful strikes in the early 1920s and provided the basis of the Rhodesia Labour Party.

Under the pressure of the Great Depression of the 1930s, white settler capital reorganised under the Reform Party government, which pursued a racist state capitalist intervention in the economy, enabling the subsidy and protection of weak and peripheral petty bourgeois capital and labour, in what was dubbed "socialism for whites". Under the 1934 Industrial Conciliation Act, the white working class was coopted as junior partners in this racist social contract, being granted the right to form trade unions and to bargain collectively, but surrendering their rights to independence and to take strike action.

Henceforth it became one of the strongest bulwarks for the racist colonial state, a position which was particularly welcomed by both domestic and international capital. The new prime minister, Godfrey Huggins, stated: The European in this country can be likened to an island of white in a sea of black ... with the artisan and the tradesman forming the shores and the professional classes the highlands in the centre. Is the native to be allowed to erode away the shores and gradually attack the highlands? To permit this would mean that the leaven of civilization would be removed from the country, and the black man would inevitably revert to a barbarism worse than before.³

However, there was a possibility of developing an independent socialist movement through the fledgling Southern Rhodesia Communist Party, which had been formed from radical elements in the Rhodesia Labour Party, and those who had been associated with the South African Communist Party and the Communist Party of Great Britain. But at that

time Russia was pushing "Popular Front" unity of all classes, which in Rhodesia meant unity with the white liberals. The price the party had to pay for this unity was to stop the work it had begun with the emerging black working class, as this was deemed antagonistic towards the increasingly racist white labour force. This ultimately destroyed the party, as it divorced it from a real working-class base.

Parallel to this was the emergence of organisations representing the emerging black petty bourgeoisie, whose agenda was limited to putting pressure on the colonial state to grant more opportunities to certain black Rhodesians. One of the leading organisations was the Southern Rhodesian African National Congress, formed in the 1930s, but until the emergence of the struggles of the black working class in the late 1940s it remained small and largely irrelevant, looking to white reformists for direction and leadership.

Emergence of the industrial proletariat and modern resistance

From the late 1930s to the 1960s, Rhodesia underwent rapid industrialisation on the basis of state capitalist policies driven by war demand, an expanded European market and the federation with Zambia and Malawi. For instance, using an index of 100 for 1939, gross manufacturing output rose to 470 by 1953 with annual growth rates of 11.7 per cent. By 1950 the total black work force had more than trebled to reach 469,000, of whom about half were industrial workers concentrated in Bulawayo and Harare, working and living under very harsh conditions without the right to organise in trade unions or political organisations. Accommodation and health facilities were completely inadequate. Settler policy remained mired in an ideology that viewed black workers at best as a pre-industrial, semi-migrant force that would eventually retreat to its rural hinterland, and at worst as unwanted vagrants in the white man's growing cities.

Such conditions bred massive struggles, starting with the 1945 railway workers' strikes, but the most decisive being the April 1948 general strike. Two months before the strike, meetings called by various organisations, which only a year earlier had attracted fewer than 200 people, were now attracting thousands of people in Bulawayo and Harare. These meetings united the various strata of the urban masses across national, ethnic and gender lines. For instance, police spies at the meetings reported: Several mass meetings were convened at Bulawayo by the Bulawayo Federation of African Workers' Union ... and the African Workers' Voice Association between the 16th March and the 6th April at which signs were manifested that Bulawayo Africans were losing faith in their leaders'

handling of affairs. The mood at these mass meetings was developing ugly characteristics and strike action was being called for.⁴

On 13 April a mass meeting in Bulawayo, attended by more than 40,000 people, triggered the general strike. Despite the frantic efforts of the black and white middle-class leaders and advisers of the organisations that had called the meeting, "the mob . refused to listen to the leaders" and shouted: "We are not going to work. Chia! Chia! [Strike! Strike!] The leaders are cowards; they have taken our money; we must strike. We don't want leaders who are afraid. We are not going back to work. We want to strike."⁵

The strike that erupted the following morning was marked by intense militancy as tens of thousands of black workers struck to protest at poor wages and to demand a living national wage and better living conditions. Within days the strike had spread nationally, supported by militant pickets and demonstrations and engulfing even the most backward sections, including farm workers, domestic workers, the unemployed and housewives.

The colonial state was able to suppress the strike only by use of unprecedented force, including soldiers, and as a result of the betrayal of the middle-class leaders of the movement like Burombo who lied that the government had agreed to the minimum wage. Nevertheless, the government was forced to grant significant concessions, including a national minimum wage and recognition of black trade unions.

The 1948 revolt laid the basis for the development of the first viable working-class organisations, starting with the Southern Rhodesia Trade Union Congress (SRTUC), formed in 1954 and led by Joshua Nkomo. In 1957 the first real nationalist party, the African National Congress (ANC), was formed: a working-class-based mass movement that took most of its leaders from the labour movement, with Nkomo as president.

The *Zhii* strike movement of 1960-61 accelerated working-class struggles. At a time when most of Africa was achieving independence, the black middle-class leadership led by Nkomo accepted the state's offer of black elections in fifteen out of sixty-five parliamentary seats. But at an SRTUC congress in March 1961, workers rejected this, instead going for massive strikes, in which they also called for a new minimum wage and release of all political detainees.

The strikes were brutally suppressed, leading to twenty-three deaths and the arrest of the leaders of the National Democratic Party (the successor to the banned ANC). Such was the impact of the working-class movement that the colonial state could survive only by transforming itself into a fascist police state led by the Rhodesia Front, which in 1965 made a

unilateral declaration of independence. But even then, it is quite probable that the colonial state could have been defeated had it not been for the leadership of the movement, who instead of leading the rising class sought but failed to attain liberal imperial intervention on their behalf by the UK's Labour government. A section of the radical intelligentsia headed by Ndabaningi Sithole and Robert Mugabe broke with Nkomo in 1963 to form the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU).

From the 1970s, the centre of the anti-colonial movement shifted from the working class to a peasant-based guerrilla movement led by radical middle-class intellectuals whose ideology mixed radical nationalism with Maoist and Stalinist ideas. It is this movement which led to independence in 1980.

The seeds of the working-class failure to sustain leadership of a movement it had started were sown in 1948. While the general strike offered a major threat to the Rhodesian state, the absence of revolutionary leadership to provide direction led the working class to look to the African middle class for leadership. Such ideological immaturity was exploited by radical members of the middle class, who by identifying with the strike were able to ride its wave to political eminence. One of the most notable examples was Benjamin Burombo, a small shop owner who joined the strike and then rose to the leadership of the movement on the back of his radical but opportunistic oratory. Far from being the heroic leader of the strike, recent research has now revealed that Burombo was actually a scab who tried to cash in on the strike, but whose "militant" transformation in support of the strike made him its mythical leader.⁶

Another example was Joshua Nkomo, the railway's first black graduate, who was employed to set up a social welfare department to prevent working-class action like the 1945 railway strike. Yet he rose to become the leader of the political movement that arose from the strike. Ironically, Nkomo's rise to become the most eminent nationalist of his period also reflected the very rich traditions of 1948—that a member of an ethnic minority could rise to such a position reflects the unifying power of working-class struggles.

A second key factor was the response of the colonial ruling class. Shaken by the power of the strike, the ruling class reorganised in the early 1950s when, under a banner of liberal enlightenment, it sought, for its own ends, to foster a black reformist leadership to neutralise the rising working class movement. In the words of Prime Minister Huggins:

What we are witnessing here is nothing new, it has already happened in Europe. We are witnessing the emergence of a proletariat, and in this

country it happens to be black ... We shall never be able to do much with these people until we have established a native middle class.⁷

The economy, which grew rapidly in the context of the postwar "long boom", made available relative increases in the previously ultra-low wages of black industrial workers, and minor breaches were made in the colour bar that had generally prevented the training and advancement of skilled black workers. The centrepiece of this new liberal paradigm was the 1959 Industrial Conciliation Act, which created "multiracial" trade unions including the black trade union leaders, although in reality control remained with white labour, militant class action like strikes was prohibited and "economism" was entrenched.

Forced to recognise the existence of black labour by the sheer force of class struggle, colonial capital "gave in" in a way that was designed to protect its real class interests by granting a few crumbs to the emerging black "aristocracy", hoping that this group would become the immediate police of a rising black industrial population. This process was accelerated and aided after 1958 by international capital and right-wing union bodies, particularly the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the African American Labour Centre, both right-wing bodies of US imperialism in the Cold War.

Some unions split and maintained links with the nationalist parties, such as the Southern Rhodesia African Trade Union Congress, which was aligned to the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). But one by one the subsequent federations succumbed to "economism"—by which trade union activity is limited only to "economic" issues—under a variety of pressures, including the repressive state machinery. After 1965, more political unions were savagely repressed under such legislation as the Law and Order Maintenance Act and the Emergency Powers Act, whereby hundreds of trade unionists were jailed for illegal strikes or receiving or associating with "unlawful organizations" like the nationalist parties or the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). The split in the nationalist movement between ZAPU and ZANU, which was increasingly "tribalist", also took its toll on the remnants of the political trade unions. Such trade unions were of secondary importance in the 1970s, in reality ceasing to be real trade unions but rather the labour wings of the guerrilla movement. The decline in working-class struggle is shown by the decrease in the number of strikes, from 138 in 1965 to only nineteen in 1971.

In such a state and under the severe repression of the Smith regime, the working class had become to all intents and purposes irrelevant to a struggle that it had initiated.

The 1980-81 explosions: pains of rebirth

In the two years after independence in 1980, the working class exploded in a manner that had last been seen in 1948. There were an estimated 200 strikes, in virtually every sector of the economy. The main demand was for higher wages in response to the attacks on workers under the Rhodesian state from the mid-1970s onwards. But there were also other issues, such as racism and the cumbersome and anti-working-class dispute settlement machinery. The strikes completely bypassed the old unions, with new institutions, the enterprise-based "workers' committees" emerging spontaneously to lead the strikes, whose impact was such that the April 1980 strikes wiped out the export surplus for May, exports declining by ten per cent. They have been described as "one of the most severe industrial relations crises in the history of the country".

The strikes, together with the spontaneous peasant invasions of white commercial farms that also occurred at the time, forced the new black government to introduce the most far-going reforms since the 1930s, significantly expanding the benefits of state capitalism to the black masses, in areas like education, health, employment laws and agrarian reform. Thus in education the number of primary schools doubled, while secondary school enrolment jumped from 66,000 in 1979 to nearly 150,000 by 1981. An extensive primary health care system was set up, which by 1990 had resulted in a reduction of infant mortality rates by sixteen per cent, while nearly 18,000 peasant families were resettled in the first three years. The Minimum Wages Act and Employment Act repealed some of the most obnoxious and racist of the colonial employment laws and guaranteed a national minimum wage which saw real wages rise in 1980-81 to the highest ever.

The new regime attempted to use such reforms to consolidate its hegemony by falsely proclaiming them to be "socialism". But the truth of the new regime was contained in Mugabe's Reconciliation Speech at independence, in which he assured white capital that its property and privileges would not be touched. In reality the regime, like the Huggins one before it, sought, under the guise of patriotic appeals to development and reconciliation, to construct a "social contract" of state, capital and labour whose main aim was the stabilisation and growth of capitalism. Indeed, when the concessions and appeals to "patriotism" failed to quell the workers' rising militancy, the new black government responded in a similar manner to the settler regimes. This response was a combination of repression using the same laws and machinery that had been used by the colonial regime and measures aimed at fostering and coopting a labour

bureaucracy to weaken a rank-and-file workers' movement. Prime Minister Robert Mugabe denounced striking teachers and nurses as people with unrevolutionary minds, "who had never experienced the real hardships of the struggle for independence". Striking workers were soon being arrested, detained or beaten by riot police under the Emergency Powers Act and the Law and Order Maintenance Act, the very cornerstone of colonial legislation introduced in the 1960s to smash working-class nationalist militancy.

In 1981, the state, despite the opposition of the old unions, succeeded in imposing a unified national labour centre, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), staffed by its own supporters like president Alfred Makwarimba and general secretary Albert Mugabe, the brother of the prime minister. Thus the ZCTU president denounced striking workers: "This country needs a disciplined work force to encourage development—we are not going to achieve anything by going on strike, no matter how genuine our grievance."⁸

But the new labour aristocracy of the ZCTU was never able to fulfil its master's mandate, for a number of reasons beginning with its ostentatious corruption and the alienation of its leadership from rank-and-file workers, a situation made worse by the virtual replacement of collective bargaining by the statutory minimum wages. By the end of 1984 there was widespread disillusionment with the existing group in charge of the Congress, leading to its removal by the government in 1985 as the state realised it could achieve its original goal of "social partnership" with the more professional but hitherto marginalised old unions, who by then had shown that they were more than willing to work with the new state, more so with the 1987 Unity Agreement. It is from such unions that most of the officials in the 1985 interim leadership and those subsequently elected at the 1988 congress, were drawn. These included Jeffrey Mutandare (president) and Morgan Tsvangirai (general secretary) from the Associated Mine Workers of Zimbabwe and others like G. Sibanda, L. Matombo and C. Gwiyo from the railways, telecommunications and banking sectors.

'Social partnership' and the labour aristocracy

The new "social partnership" was formalised in the Labour Relations Act of 1985. Under the act, registered unions were granted monopolistic rights to collective bargaining and representation, including a union dues check-off system, under the act's "one industry, one union" provisions, while the workers' committees were formally subordinated to the unions, thus addressing one of the main grievances of the labour bureaucracy.

Job security was improved by subjecting dismissals to state approval. While strengthening the central unions, the act firmly restricted independent rank-and-file activity. It effectively outlawed all strikes and prohibited the use of union funds for political purposes, while the state reserved immense powers to interfere in internal union affairs, including supervision and regulation of elections, union dues and the registration of unions.

Under this "enabling" environment, the unions began to grow, with Tsvangirai overseeing the professionalisation of the ZCTU, including the creation of ZCTU regions and districts. Similar processes took place in a number of affiliates of the ZCTU. Thus while the policies of the new state had facilitated such growth, they also undermined the emergence of a militant rank-and-file-based union movement as was happening in South Africa (COSATU) by ensuring the continuity of the old conformist union leadership by shielding it from the rank-and-file movement which had emerged in the early 1980s.

However, for a brief period between 1988 and 1992, there was a radical leftward shift in key sections of the labour bureaucracy, reflecting the tension created by the regime's adoption of free market policies from 1988, including neo-liberal amendments to the Labour Relations Act allowing for easier dismissal of workers. Important also was the influence of Stalinist intellectuals at the University of Zimbabwe like K. Makamure and S. Ghutto, whose sense of betrayal following ZANU's neo-liberal shift was shared by some union leaders. The 1991 May Day celebrations were organised under the themes and banners, "Employers liberated, workers sacrificed" and "Are we going to make 1991 the Year of the World Bank Storm?" The labour bureaucracy developed growing ties with radicalising university students, hundreds of whom attended the May Day rallies. When the University of Zimbabwe was closed in October 1989 with the arrest of student leaders, the ZCTU general secretary, Tsvangirai, denounced the closure in very strong terms and was himself detained. In the 1990 elections, the growing autonomy of the ZCTU was demonstrated by its refusal to endorse ZANU-PF, while many workers tacitly supported a new breakaway party, Edgar Tekere's Zimbabwe Unity Movement. Thus this role of Stalinism, limited as it was due to its character of focusing on the labour leadership as opposed to the rank and file, demonstrated the fundamental importance of socialist intervention in the working class. However, this shift to the left lasted only until 1992. Thereafter, after the global demise of Stalinism and under the growing influence of Western reformist trade unions and NGOs, the labour bureaucracy returned to its previous conformist reformist positions,

calling for a "social contract" involving the state, capital and labour in the implementation of the IMF-supported Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP). This new ideological position of the labour bureaucracy, aiming to offset the worst effects of structural adjustment rather than opposing it outright, was captured in the ZCTU's "Beyond ESAP" policy document. The term "comrade" was quietly replaced with "brother" and "sister".

The storm clouds gather: the failure of neo-liberalism and social partnership

But the long-term stability of the "social contract" or the Reconciliation paradigm depended on the ability of the post-colonial state to guarantee improving working and living conditions for the black masses, as the colonial state had done for the white workers and petty bourgeoisie. And in turn the state premised its ability to do so on a deepening of state capitalist policies. But therein lay the ultimate weakness, for the state of local and international capital had changed, and such policies were now being replaced at a global level by neo-liberalism, aimed at resuscitating capitalism after the deep crisis of the 1970s. The ascendancy of political figures advocating this new ideology in the UK and USA accelerated this approach, arguing for privatisation, tax cuts for businesses, the deregulation of the labour market and an end to market-distorting state subsidies of health and education.

After 1990 as the economy stagnated, and led by Bernard Chidzero, the Zimbabwean ruling elites, without any democratic consultation, adopted this neo-liberal agenda, which it christened the Economic Structural Adjustment Program. ESAP was supposed to bring prosperity within five years. Mugabe was lauded in the West as a statesman and given all sorts of awards.

But the prosperity never materialised. In fact, during ESAP economic performance actually worsened: whereas annual economic growth averaged five per cent in non-drought years in the 1980s, in the 1990s it averaged less than two per cent. Export earnings declined by 10.7 per cent in 1991, while the share of manufacturing in GDP declined by 14.2 per cent, with more than 50,000 jobs lost. Real wages declined as the consumer price index rose massively. According to the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe, a quasi-official body, "Prospects of getting the promised cake from ESAP are bleak as consumers continue to suffer severely from the so called temporary shocks of the programme which appear to be permanent".

Under this growing crisis, the middle classes and sections of the working class began to stir, as shown by the increasing strikes and demonstrations by professional groups like teachers, nurses and doctors from the mid-1990s onwards and the university students from earlier on. As long as these remained isolated struggles, the regime and the ruling classes remained relatively safe. But their actions pointed to the future, and clearly things could not remain the same for long. The growing economic crisis and poverty were radicalising ever increasing numbers of the working masses despite the efforts of the labour bureaucracy to keep them down under the *de facto* social contract. Things were bound to explode sooner or later, as shown by the December 1995 riots in Harare against police brutality. And explode they did, starting in 1996, setting the working-class movement on an unprecedented path of development.

The government workers' general strike of 1996

For about three weeks starting in August 1996, tens of thousands of government workers went on a nationwide general strike in protest against poor working conditions. The strike had been started spontaneously by nurses and doctors despite attempts to stop it by the leaders of the public sector unions such as the Public Service Association and the Zimbabwe Nurses' Association.

After some tough negotiations, the strike ended with the striking workers receiving a significant pay increase, bonuses, reinstatement of the 7000 strikers who had been dismissed and promises of a new harmonised labour act that would cover all workers and give recognition to the public sector unions. However, health sector workers, especially the nurses, were not happy with the compromise and resumed the strike in November, continuing until February 1997. Now isolated, they were ultimately defeated, but not before they had inspired masses of workers in the private sector generally, including forcing the ZCTU to call a half-hearted general strike in solidarity.

The government workers' strike was a watershed, shattering the social partnership paradigm of the 1990s, drawing on the militant traditions of 1980-81 and 1948 and developing new ones. The first significant element was size. While the 20,000 striking workers in 1995 were the highest number since 1980-81, these were completely dwarfed by the more than 235,000 strikers in 1996. As in the 1948 general strike, the key driving force was the mass meetings of thousands of workers such as in Harare at Africa Unity Square. Such meetings radicalised the workers, leading to increasingly political demands such as cutting the size of the government, providing adequate resources in hospitals and enacting a new

harmonised labour law. The meetings made the leaders accountable and became organising platforms from which flying pickets were sent daily to government offices to persuade those who had gone back to rejoin the strike.

But the 1996 general strike represented two major new developments. First, for the first time, a radical rank and file emerged to become the *de facto* leadership of the movement, drawing up a radical program uniting all workers. This was the eleven-person strike committee, the United Civil Servants Negotiation Committee, which was elected on the second day of the strike from militants among the strikers, including doctors and nurses. The government was forced to negotiate with the strike committee, although in the end the official leaders wormed their way back in, striking a compromise deal that eventually ended the strike. The result was the persecution of members of this committee, who initially lost their jobs and careers, only to be reinstated after a long legal battle.

The election of the strike committee and the militant conduct of the strike were closely tied to the second key development: the intervention of a revolutionary socialist group, the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), a very small Trotskyist organisation affiliated to the Tony Cliff-founded International Socialist Tendency. ISO was formed as a student study circle at the University of Zimbabwe in 1989 and by 1996 had developed a core based on the is principles of focusing on workers' self-activity as opposed to the Stalinist approach of focusing on the union officials. The 1996 strike was its first intervention in a real mass workers' struggle, after its sterling role in the December 1995 anti-police brutality demonstration. The role of the group has been consistently and deliberately ignored by bourgeois historians and political commentators, although a cursory look at the newspapers of the period clearly reveals its role.

From the second day of the strike, the small ISO contingent, which included students from the Harare Polytechnic, joined the workers at Africa Unity Square, Harare Hospital and in Bulawayo to give solidarity messages. The ISO issued a small leaflet calling for an indefinite strike, broader demands and the election of a strike committee. These ideas were adopted by the workers, and ISO members became a key part of the strike in Harare and Bulawayo, conferring with the strike committee on the way forward.

Recognition of the key role of the ISO in the strike came from two opposing sources. The government daily, the *Herald*, ran a comment on the strike calling on workers to dissociate themselves from "groups which were bent on transforming their legitimate strike into some Bolshevik

revolution". At the same time, the ISO's slogan, *Shinga Mushandi Shinga! Qina Msebenzi Qina!* (Worker, be resolute! Fight on!) became the official slogan of the striking workers. In the 1997 strikes, this slogan spread to the private sector workers and became the official slogan of the ZCTU itself, much to the chagrin of the union leaders, who despised its origins. The 1996 strike was decisive. The single largest component of the class had risen up across craft and regional lines to take on a hitherto feared state-and scored a victory. The strike signalled the re-emergence of the working class as the leading agent of political and democratic transformation in periphery capitalist societies, just as it showed the critical role of socialist intervention in class struggle. It was the great dress rehearsal for the struggles that exploded in the next few years.

The explosion of 1997

The year 1997 was to witness the largest number of strikes and demonstrations in the history of Zimbabwe. Workers, students and even the previously marginalised war veterans and peasants came out in protest against the massive fall in their living standards which resulted from a continuing economic crisis, accelerated by the reforms of the 1990s. Every sector of the economy was hit as recalcitrant employers, used to years of docile unions, initially refused to budge but subsequently bowed down. Unlike the 1980 strikes, those in 1997 were industry-wide, involving the unions in industries like construction, clothing and catering, and even in the agricultural sector. In 1997 there were fifty-five recorded strikes involving more than 1,073,000 workers.

These strikes inspired other sections of the oppressed to revolt. Students staged the first ever nationwide demonstrations under the leadership of the Zimbabwe National Students Union. For the first time since 1980, landless peasants and war veterans invaded white farms, and for some time resisted efforts by the police and government to evict them. Also inspired by the struggles erupting around them were the hitherto marginalised and now destitute former guerrillas, who too started demonstrations demanding pensions and denouncing corruption in government. They too were brutally suppressed, but they became key in delegitimising the post-colonial ruling class.

Reeling from massive pressure from below, in November 1997 Mugabe's government gave in to the war veterans' demands, awarding them a lump sum and pensions to be financed by ordinary people through a newly introduced five per cent "War Veterans Levy" and a 2.5 per cent increases in sales tax. A section of the ZCTU leadership, led by Tsvangirai, like Burombo before them, realised that unless they

abandoned their class-collaborationist strategy and embraced the revolts, they too would be swept aside by the rising tide. After nationwide ZCTU mass meetings, labour forums, at which the demand for action was overwhelming, the labour leaders called for a two-day national strike, starting on December 9, 1997. The strike became ...the largest and most successful strike since independence—and probably since the national strikes of 1948. Almost all businesses and workplaces shut, involving more than one million workers, management, informal sector entrepreneurs and civil servants. In most cities, there were large demonstrations supported by a broad range of civic and professional organizations.⁹

When the police violently stopped workers from assembling at Africa Unity Square, now the traditional assembly point of striking workers, there were riots that left the city centre a ghost town. Running scared, the ZCTU leaders, Morgan Tsvangirai and Gibson Sibanda, called off the strike, stating that the action would resume in January when workers returned to work from the annual Christmas holiday.

In early January 1998, as the ZCTU leaders prevaricated on calling for action, housewives in one of Harare's poorest suburbs started demonstrating against increases in bread prices. The riots quickly spread to the unemployed and workers in Harare and other towns, despite the disassociation of the ZCTU leaders from the protests. The ISO leaflet entitled "Todya Marara Here?" ("Do they want us to eat dirt?") was quickly adopted by the rioting masses, leading to the arrest and harassment of leading ISO members in Harare and Bulawayo as the organisers of the riots. There was another highly successful stayaway on March 2-3, 1998, to protest the retention of the sales tax increases and rising cost of living. Another stayaway shortly thereafter was averted when the bosses and government quickly conceded to the workers' demand for a twenty per cent cost of living adjustment. At the May Day rallies, workers endorsed a five-day stayaway to protest the rapidly deteriorating living conditions. These revolts represented a massive development of the class. As the crisis deepened, the working class had grown immensely in militancy and consciousness, forcing the reluctant leadership into action it would rather have avoided. The militancy reflected the emergence of the young and educated post-1980 workers, who had suffered the most from the neo-liberal agenda through casualised, low paying jobs. Inspired by recent struggles like the 1996 strike, such workers enthusiastically supported the ZCTU stayaways and increasingly coalesced around the workers' committees, turning them into radicalised organisational instruments, not just against the state and the bosses, but also potentially against the

reformist leadership of the untransformed unions-a process which, however, in 1997-98 was slowed down when such leaders half-heartedly accepted the strikes, thereby buying time.

The second significance of the 1997-98 revolts was their impact on the ruling political elite. One of the most entrenched and violent ruling elites in Africa was forced to retreat before the power of the working-class-led revolts. Aware of the fate of earlier African regimes, Mugabe, with significant opposition from the political neo-liberals of his own party centred on Eddison Zvobgo, conducted a partial economic and ideological retreat from ESAP. Instead, ideologically, Mugabe adopted an increasingly anti-imperialist and racist rhetoric centred on the land issue and, with the support of war veterans leader Chenjerai Hunzvi, threatened to acquire the largest ever number of farms for resettlement. It was in this context, attempting to breathe new life into a pseudo-radical "Third Worldism", that the regime sent Zimbabwean troops into the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1998.

However, Mugabe faced resistance to this leftward lurch not only from within ZANU-PF, but from local and international capital. The value of the Zimbabwean dollar crashed by seventy-five per cent in November 1998, and subsequently in October 1999, with the suspension of IMF and World Bank loans, which in turn massively accelerated the economic crisis. A campaign for Mugabe's international isolation was instituted. Although Mugabe came under increasing pressure to return to neo-liberal policies, such was the impact of the revolt from below that he had no alternative but to make concessions to this movement.

Formation of the Movement for Democratic Change

Reflecting the growing consciousness of the class, economic demands were soon complemented by increasing demands from many workers, especially at the labour forums, for the ZCTU to take on the regime politically by leading the formation of a workers party, as had happened in Zambia. Given its economist ancestry, this was initially opposed by the leadership, but by the end of 1998 pressure not only from worker militants but also from the increasingly radicalised professional and intellectual middle classes made them make a sharp U-turn. These classes, after years of futile attempts to build viable opposition parties, now recognised the indispensable strategic importance of organised labour in any viable challenge against ZANU-PF, although they were opposed to the idea of a labour party, preferring a "broad-based party", which they could dominate. In February 1999, the ZCTU convened a National Working People's Convention. This established the Movement for Democratic Change,

which on September 11 was officially launched as a political party, and which in June 2000 came close to defeating ZANU-PF in the parliamentary elections.

The period between March and September 1999 was a bustle of activity among the working class. MDC committees were built in the factories, usually around the most militant members of the workers' committees. Meetings were convened in the towns by the ZCTU regions, which had been the engine of the stayaways, and now acted as the *de facto* MDC provincial structures—the party was routinely referred to as a "labour party".

But there were already signs that the dominance of the MDC by the working class would be contested. The February 1999 convention was dominated by the liberal middle-class intelligentsia. In contrast, the ISO was barred from attending. Instead of the "labour party" called for by the worker militants, a popular front "movement" was set up. As the ISO warned, the declaration adopted was "a very dangerous document that will perpetuate the suffering of workers and the poor . It is in fact a clever cover up for the drafters' intention of continuing with ESAP should they get into power."¹⁰

At the launch of the MDC in September 1999, this class direction became clearer. Without any involvement of its regional structures, the labour bureaucracy imposed an "interim" national executive drawn largely from the neo-liberal middle classes, especially from the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) and the disbanded Forum Party. The rank-and-file unionists who had built the movement were marginalised. The inaugural congress in January 2000, through patently undemocratic manoeuvres, ensured the confirmation of this leadership and adoption of a manifesto in which IMF neo-liberal policies were the centrepiece, together with reactionary right-wing positions on land.

By the June 2000 elections, the neo-liberal takeover of the party was complete, with the union bureaucracy itself now marginalised. Trade unionists composed fewer than twenty per cent of the parliamentary candidates, most of whom, including party president Morgan Tsvangirai, were in unsafe rural constituencies, which they lost. Nevertheless, following the 2000 referendum victory, the MDC won nearly half of the contested seats, sweeping the board in the urban centres where the working class was strong. ZANU-PF achieved a narrow victory thanks to its violent and intimidatory rural campaign, but also due to Mugabe's opportunistic manoeuvres to outflank the MDC on its left, especially on the land question.

While the MDC had been propelled nearly into power by the working class, the character of the party by the 2000 elections was patently rabid anti-working class neo-liberal. How had this happened?

The relative ease with which a movement with so much potential was turned into a neo-liberal popular front lay in the historical and continuing weakness of the working-class movement, and the lack of a significant socialist movement. While the 1997-98 mass actions had rocked Mugabe and generated the first significant challenge to his rule in twenty years, they had not developed into an independent rank-and-file movement that could challenge the stranglehold of a reformist labour bureaucracy. Under pressure from below, the bureaucracy had participated in and endorsed the mass actions, gaining significant moral authority in the process. However, it remained prone to vacillation and fundamentally untransformed, as shown by its cancellation of the second day of the December 1997 strike. Threatened by the workers' growing radicalisation and vulnerable to state repression, including the 1998 ban on strikes, and attempts to ban the ZCTU, the bureaucracy sought to rein in the workers. From March 1998, they shifted from strike-based demonstrations to "peaceful stayaways" in which workers were told to stay at home. This reduced the militancy and impact of the action, individualised workers and made them vulnerable to intimidation; it also prevented the mass gatherings that had been the basis for pressure on the union bureaucracy, reducing its accountability. In late 1998 and early 1999, the ZCTU chiefs unilaterally cancelled two major stayaway actions. Their sudden support for the formation of the MDC should be understood in this context. In late 1998, they argued that militant stayaways were no longer useful, if not counter-productive, enabling Mugabe to declare a state of emergency. Instead, what was needed was a political party to fight the 2000 elections. These ideas appealed to many workers, and this partly accounts for the growth of reformist parliamentary illusions and the subsequent decline of militant struggles in the period 1999-2000.

The second key factor in the right-wing takeover of a rising working-class movement in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere, lay in the role of the middle-class intelligentsia. The neo-liberal agenda had been imposed in Zimbabwe, as throughout most of the periphery societies, through authoritarian regimes such as Africa's one party state regimes, Latin America's military juntas and Eastern Europe's Stalinist dictatorships. In such societies, the distinction between economics and politics becomes razor thin. Thus the revolts that emerged against the worsening conditions of the masses as a result of the deepening economic crisis of neo-liberal capitalism inevitably assumed a political form—democratic struggles against the authoritarian

superstructure that had imposed the neo-liberal framework in the first place. At that stage the forces of global neo-liberalism, cognisant of the revolutionary potential of the emerging struggles, were forced to abandon the old authoritarian forms of domination of the periphery, and instead assume a more democratic face with which they would be able to intervene and neutralise the rising movement. The groups to whom their cynical appeals to bourgeois democratic values like rule of law, human rights, and good governance appealed most were the middle-class intelligentsia who were being radicalised under the impact of the crisis. But in the absence of a rival ideological alternative, given the ignominious demise of "communism" and the accompanying bourgeois triumphalism of this period, many of these groups got into bed with global neo-liberalist forces without interrogating the true nature of their partner. In any case the massive dowry, thinly disguised bribes, that global neo-liberalism poured into their civic groups, academia, "independent media" and churches were too much for most to resist.

And thus from Poland to Serbia to Zambia to Zimbabwe, these middle classes became the midwives who delivered the militant and rising but trusting and ideologically immature working-class movement into the arms of the neo-liberal forces.

In Zimbabwe the critical middle-class body which negotiated the neo-liberal take over of the rising workers movement was the NCA. The NCA had been formed in 1997 as a vehicle for mobilising the middle classes around the demand for a new constitution, and was financed and mentored by German and Scandinavian social democratic foundations and unions. Tsvangirai's nominal leadership of the NCA placed its middle-class leaders in a uniquely powerful position to take control of the political party that emerged under his leadership. Their role in the MDC gave the new party respectability in the eyes of international financial organisations, which could now write off Mugabe, who had previously done their bidding but who no longer had the authority to impose their reforms. Just ahead of the 2000 elections, the IMF, World Bank and Western bank loans were suspended, accelerating the economic crisis.

Neo-liberalism, the MDC and the ISO experience

What was the role of the International Socialist Organization in this? Given the growing neo-liberal takeover of the MDC, what was the role of ISO, one of whose leading members was actually a member of parliament. Was this participation an act of opportunism or would remaining outside have been an act of "left-wing infantilism"? Many

groups will be confronted by similar questions as the crisis of neo-liberalism grows globally.

To remain outside and criticise a party that represented a rising working-class movement and had a massive following in the class risked being identified with a hated neo-liberal regime and condemning us to irrelevance if not death from "ultraleftism". On the other hand, entrism risked "right-wing liquidationism" such as that of the SACP in the ANC or splits when the time to end entrism arrived. After intense internal debate centred on the principles developed by Lenin in *"Left-Wing" Communism-An Infantile Disorder*, it was resolved to go for "entrism" based on two interrelated principles. First, Lenin's argument for entrism based on the non-negotiable principle of absolute freedom of expression to ruthlessly expose the bankruptcy of the ideas and leadership of the party, which we did by opposing to the party's neo-liberal manifesto our own alternative anti-neo-liberal "Action Programme", especially on the land question, and producing *Socialist Worker*. Second, organisational autonomy based on Trotsky's united front principle, whereby we resisted the party leadership's attempts to disband us, but instead we constantly sought to use the party's platforms, including the parliamentary seat, to relate to and recruit rank-and-file militants. We did this with relative success among the party's rank-and-file militants in the two biggest provinces, Harare and Bulawayo, and, most critically, by building rank-and-file industrial committees in the industrial areas surrounding our constituency, which provided us with our first real roots in the working class. Both these groups subsequently played a critical role in defending us from the party leadership who wanted to expel us as the relationship between the ISO and the party leadership, fanned by the media, deteriorated massively as a result of our attacks on the increasingly right-wing nature of the party. The central idea is that in time, with the benefit of experience after the betrayals of a centrist government, the masses will be able to identify with the earlier communist propaganda, thus raising a contradiction between the centrist leaders and their base and creating real opportunities for growth of the revolutionary organisation.

However, in December 2000, the MDC leadership unilaterally cancelled a popular and long-awaited mass action to remove Mugabe, which was modelled on the Serbian revolts that had brought down Slobodan Milosevic. This was due to pressure from local and international capitalists, who feared the radicalising effect of such an action on the masses.¹¹ Disillusionment among ordinary members of the MDC, which had developed from the failure of its parliamentary representatives to raise their bread-and-butter concerns, crystallised around this decision.

the ISO concluded that this event marked the decisive break of the MDC leadership with its mass base. However, because of the importance of the 2002 presidential elections, which still fostered reformist illusions in workers, it was resolved that the initial break could not be made by the ISO, but an accelerated ideological offensive was to be launched against the MDC leadership, a decision that was a decisive factor in a subsequent little split to hit the ISO in August, as some of the older members, now comfortable in the MDC, couldn't stomach this. In February 2001, Gwisai presented a summarised ISO perspective paper to an MDC leadership seminar, which laid the blame for the party's declining fortunes on the "hijacking of the party by the bourgeoisie, marginalisation of workers, adoption of neo-liberal positions and cowardly failure to physically confront the Mugabe regime and bosses". It warned, "It is ... imperative that the party moves much more leftward than it has been in order to relink to its base, in order to win the presidential elections". On land, it argued, "This is central to Mugabe's campaign, and if he distributes the 5 million hectares of land using chiefs ... with the war vets as their police officers, he could actually get the majority of peasants on his side, who are the majority of voters, and just scrape through in 2002". It argued that to avoid this, the MDC "must adopt a more radical land position than Mugabe".

This was followed, on May Day 2001, by ISO support for factory invasions by war veterans, but combined with a call on workers to take similar actions themselves, to stop retrenchments and win better conditions. The response, unsurprisingly, was a series of personalised attacks on Gwisai and the ISO by both the media and MDC politicians. For example, the leading independent *Daily News* declared:

Few people will dispute the assertion that the MDC Member of Parliament for Highfield, Munyaradzi Gwisai ... has simply gone much too far ... a leaflet published by his anachronistic ISO and distributed on May Day trashes any need to uphold the rule of law saying "the rule of law does not give people food" ... of greater concern is the fact that here is a parliamentarian—and a lawyer at that—openly inciting citizens to disobey the very laws for which he is paid to help make [sic]. On the record of his utterances, the man has no business being in Parliament. Nor does he have any business being in the legal fraternity either. He should be expelled from both bodies ...¹²

However, workers were reported offering support:

Expelling the controversial MDC legislator, Munyaradzi Gwisai, will be tantamount to killing the messiah, a snap survey by *The Observer* has revealed ... "Gwisai is not talking of imagined imbalances and he is

correct. No sane Zimbabwean can dispute that. If MDC expel him they will be confirming that the party has been hijacked by the bourgeoisie from workers," said a civil servant .. Ms Jane Murefu, a mother of two and resident of Highfield, said if Gwisai was to be pushed out of the party she would follow him as he had shown all the traits of a determined revolutionary. "Gwisai has kept a lot of people with confidence that the MDC had their interests and if they push him out they would be creating confusion and people will desert the party," she added.¹³

The ISO was unable to stop the ultimate neo-liberal takeover of the MDC fundamentally because it lacked the necessary size and penetration of the working class to offer a sufficient counterweight to the might of local and international neo-liberal forces, vindicating Trotsky's imperative that the revolutionary party has to be built before the revolutionary explosions occur. While no doubt now after the elections, no reason exists for the ISO to remain a day longer in the MDC, it is true that the limited influence it exerted, its survival and growth, doubling its size in the period in question, probably vindicated the entrism. A powerful reflection of this was found in the presidential elections results. Compared to the 2000 elections, the MDC's vote in virtually all urban areas stagnated or declined, as for instance the more than five per cent declines in the bourgeois constituencies of MDC stalwarts like Tendai Biti, Welshman Ncube and Dave Coltart. Yet despite the decision of the ISO not to campaign for Tsvangirai in the elections, in Highfield, represented by Gwisai, the MDC share increased by 9.1 per cent, rising from 73 per cent to 82.1 per cent, which was by far the best performing constituency of the MDC outside Chipinge South, where the MDC swallowed a smaller opposition party. Of course the entrism was not easy, as shown by the split in July 2001. But overall the experience laid the basis for a possible breakthrough to grow into a sizeable socialist organisation with sufficient roots in the working class to be in a much stronger position to lead the working class in confronting the beast, the fire next time and storming the heavens.

Conclusion

As I write, the results of the 2002 presidential elections have just been announced and Mugabe declared the winner after receiving 1,685,212, or 56.2 per cent, of the votes compared to Tsvangirai's 42 per cent share or 1,258,401.

Thus, for now, one of the main aspirations of the movement that started around 1996 with so much promise has ended in a massive electoral defeat that brought much sadness to the urban areas. What went wrong?

The MDC and its local and Western allies have alleged electoral fraud and massive intimidation for the defeat and have refused to recognise the results, with the West imposing sanctions and calling for fresh elections. While violence was real in the elections, especially in the rural areas, such violence had been anticipated, Brian Raftopoulos, a key liberal of civic society and strong associate of the MDC, warning in mid-2000, "... the MDC must face the prospect of a violent presidential election", a thing which the MDC dismally failed to do, relying on a belief that "change is in the air".

Making the violence potent and delivering Mugabe victory were two factors that we had warned of in the 2001 perspective paper, namely the ideological and strategic crisis of the MDC, centred on its massive shift to right-wing neo-liberalism, and on the other hand Mugabe's partial economic and ideological retreat from neo-liberalism to assume "a nationalist, racist, pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist one, centred around the land question". As we then warned:

That Mugabe's strategy has worked and could work around the presidential elections has in no small measure been helped by the wrong tactics and strategies adopted by the middle classes who now dominate our party. Their obvious pro west, pro commercial farmer, pro IMF positions were a godsend gift to Mugabe. The MDC could only have dealt with Mugabe by outflanking on the left on bread and butter issues ... Thus in the end Mugabe's delivery on land and radical rhetoric separated the urban poor from the rural poor, ensuring him victory. Mugabe's share compared to 2000 increased by 7.9 per cent while the MDC declined by 5.1 per cent, with Mugabe's key gains in rural areas where voter turnout also increased significantly, including in the MDC Matebeleland strongholds and seven semi-rural MDC constituencies.

On the other hand, the MDC, arising from an anti-IMF working-class movement, moved to the right to the alarm of most of its supporters. As the crisis deepened and parliamentary reformism failed to deliver and the masses called for mass action, the MDC leadership dithered and eventually rejected the Serbian route, opting for Western pressure, the courts and winning the elections. Their allies in the trade unions, especially the ZCTU, followed suit, with all militant action frowned on as potentially threatening an election they increasingly believed they would win. So the working classes were massively demobilised and disillusioned as they continued to suffer under a growing crisis. Not surprisingly, apathy in the urban areas in the elections ran at more than 50 per cent. This is a key reason why the massive revolts that had been predicted against a stolen election have failed to materialise. The roar of the 1997

lion had, by March 2002, been reduced to less than a kitten's meow, as the three-day stayaway called by the ZCTU to protest the results was a disastrous failure.

But neither the win by Mugabe nor the deceptive post-election calm means the end of the crisis in Zimbabwe. The economic crisis is extremely severe, including massive food shortages. The polarisation of the Mugabe state from its bourgeois base is deep and growing, for the global neo-liberal forces cannot allow Mugabe's precedent to stand, given the massive threat that this would mean for the key centre of capitalism on the continent, South Africa.

It must be remembered that, while Mugabe is an intelligent and ruthless operator, capable of sophisticated tactical shifts and the wrongfooting of his opponents, he and the ZANU-PF are not immune from the tensions arising from the economic crisis, to which they have no solutions. The ZANU-PF remains a party dominated by the black national bourgeoisie, who, in the context of the weak private capitalism prevalent in peripheral states like Zimbabwe, have sought to use the state, like their white colonial predecessors, as a channel for accumulation. This gives ZANU-PF a contradictory relationship with the free market tendencies dominant in the international economy: it resists the forced reduction of its capacity to develop economic policies that enable its own state-based accumulation, but at the same time greedily eyes the potential gains it can make from privatisation. Opposed to them are the lower structures of the party, especially those around the reactivated and radicalised war veterans, whose underlying aspirations are clearly similar to those of the working class, namely anti-neo-liberalism. As the economic/political crisis worsens, under Western pressure, these tensions can only grow, and should the former side prevail, rapprochement with capital remains a distinct possibility.

The central elements of such rapprochement might be some cooption of the MDC as a junior partner in a massively neo-liberal government of national unity, together with some constitutional reforms allowing for the eventual graceful retirement of Mugabe and his replacement by a figure more acceptable to the West. It is to drive towards such a result that the West is maintaining and increasing pressure on Mugabe, who has already shown an inclination to drop his cynical anti-imperialist posture of the election campaign period by stating in his victory speech that the neo-liberal-based, New Millennium Economic Recovery Program would be the basis of his economic policies.

On the other hand, the deepening of the neo-liberal agenda by a Mugabe government, especially without the cooption of the MDC as a junior

partner and acquiescence of the West, would mean the acceleration of the climax of the crisis in revolts bigger than those of 1997-98 and similar to those seen recently in Argentina.

Thus Mugabe has no open solution to the growing crisis. Neither is the MDC's position any better. Rapprochement with ZANU-PF, as is favoured by most of its leadership, would amount to a kiss of death, while its right-wing degeneration has gone too far for it to be anything other than a rapidly declining rump of an electoral force.

The MDC's electoral defeat marks the beginning of the end of the illusions in the neo-liberal middle-class and labour bureaucrat opportunists who hijacked the rising movement of 1997-98 into a reformist parliamentary channel, which has now reached a dead end. Their demise is likely whether because they compromise with the autocratic regime or because they withdraw into their shells to enjoy the loot from the bosses, the West, or their parliamentary or municipal positions. This defeat of the neo-liberal reformist route in the context of a growing crisis means the return of struggles to finalise the unfinished business of 1997, to smash dictatorship and neo-liberal capitalism. Herein lies the most fundamental question confronting the Zimbabwean working class and socialist movement today: the issue of leadership. Under the pressure of the growing crisis, with socialist intervention, will rank-and-file union activists break through the suffocating grip of the old union bureaucracy? Can the post-independence generation, which is educated, casualised and extremely militant, create its own leadership and mobilise other sections of the oppressed such as the war veterans, peasants, students and unemployed, as it did in 1997-98, joining such struggles with other struggles in the region, critically with those of South Africa? The process has begun in some unions, but at a very slow and hesitant pace, stifled by the ZCTU leaders. Alternatively, the movement could be coopted and neutralised by the new splinter unions being created by ZANU-PF via the war veteran-dominated Zimbabwe Federation of Trade Unions, just as the workers' committee movement was in 1980-81. As the history of Zimbabweans has shown, unless there is substantial socialist intervention in the rising working-class movement, it remains vulnerable to cooption by its class enemies and may prove unable to fulfil its potential. Such intervention is critical in giving the movement appropriate organisational and ideological direction. It can help generalise the experience of the class, acting as its memory bank, sharing the lessons of 1948, 1980-81 and 1997-98. It can demonstrate the connection between the individual struggles of the different sections of the oppressed, and show that these are neither accidental nor confined to

Zimbabwe, but are the inevitable consequence of an international system that is based on unplanned production for the maximisation of profit, and not human need. It can argue for the need to construct a working-class-led, anti-neo-liberal united front to smash this system, and can demonstrate it in the concrete circumstances of struggle.

To play such a role, the experience of the ISO shows the need to construct sizeable socialist organisations sufficiently rooted in the class. To achieve this in the twenty-first century requires a radical reorientation to meet the new challenges we face. Socialists must turn outwards to lead and to learn from the emerging movement, and from amongst their varied experiences. They must leave behind the legacy of sectarian practices based on toy "internationals", personality cults, undemocratic structures and practices and unprincipled splits and expulsions.

Revolutionaries must appreciate that a theoretical understanding of the nature of the period, and the strategies necessary to relate to it, is only the first step on a long journey. For without experience and the willingness to learn from it, even some of the best movements have failed the real test of their times. Given the demise of Stalinism and the great opportunities opened by the growing global anti-capitalism movement, it would be a terrible crime to continue with old practices that divide and demobilise the international revolutionary movement at a time when its potential has never been greater, nor its task more urgent.

Notes

1. N. Tengende, "Workers, students and the struggles for democracy: state-civil society relations in Zimbabwe", Ph.D. dissertation, Roskilde University, 1994, p. 60.

2. *ibid.*

3. B. Raftopoulos and I. Phimister (eds), *Keep on Knocking: A history of the labour movement in Zimbabwe, 1890-1997*, Baobab Books/ZCTU/Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Harare, pp. 33-45.

4. I. Phimister, *Wangi Kolia: Coal, capital and labour in colonial Zimbabwe, 1894-1954*, Baobab Books, Harare, 1994, p. 64.

5. Quoted in A. Astrow, *Zimbabwe: A revolution that lost its way?*, Zed Books, London, 1983, p. 21.

6. B. Raftopolous, "The labour movement in Zimbabwe", in *Keep on Knocking, op.cit.*, pp. 69-70.

7. Government of Zimbabwe, Ministry of Labour Manpower Planning and Social Welfare, *Labour and Economy: Report of the National Trade Unions Survey*, Zimbabwe, 1984, Vol. 1, p. 16.

8. The *Herald*, October 31, 1981, quoted in E. Chikweche, "History of the Zimbabwe labour movement, 1980-1990", LLBS Hons dissertation, University of Zimbabwe, 1991, p. 14.

9. *Socialist Worker*, February 1998.

10. *Socialist Worker*, May-June 1999.

11. This was publicly disclosed by one of the party's leading ideologues. David Coltart stated that one of the reasons the mass action had been called off was that "the international community pleaded with us to hold off on the use of mass action, promising at the same time that if we backed off, they would do all they could to increase pressure on Mugabe". D. Coltart, "Some words of encouragement", *Opinion*, December 16, 2000, MDC web site: <http://www.mdczimbabwe.com>.

12. "Is Gwisai becoming a rebel without a cause?", Comment, *Daily News*, May 8, 2001.

13. "Gwisai's expulsion—a dangerous move", *Observer*, May 24, 2001. This is a small weekly in Mutare, Zimbabwe's third largest city.

Resistance, Crisis and Workers in Zimbabwe, 2016

This interview was originally published on-line at:

<https://roape.net/2016/04/15/resistance-crisis-and-workers-in-zimbabwe/>



ROAPE's Leo Zeilig talks to Antonater Tafadzwa Choto about the ongoing economic crisis in Zimbabwe, the impact on ordinary people, and some of the factors that are likely to worsen or mitigate the crisis in forthcoming years. Choto is a well-known labour activist, researcher and currently director of the Zimbabwe Labour Centre.

Robert Mugabe was finally removed as President of Zimbabwe in November 2017. See: Zimbabwe After Mugabe - <http://isj.org.uk/zimbabwe-after-mugabe/>

Can you please give us a few details about the history of your own activism?

I have worked for years as a social justice activist after having participated in a number of workers and social justice struggles from the mid-1990s. Initially I was involved in a feminist group that campaigned against discrimination against women, with women harassed and

attacked. Later I became a socialist active in the labour struggles of the 1990s. I am currently the director of the Zimbabwe Labour Centre. The ZLC stands for the justice for working people in the work place and society at large. We also campaign against neo-liberal policies that, we believe, have had a disastrous impact on Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe has now been in a prolonged and terrible crisis for more than a decade, can you explain what is going on and what life is like in the country at the moment?

One story seems to represent the general picture, to me. On his birthday interview in February 2016 the President, Robert Mugabe, announced that the country had lost US\$15 billion revenue from the mining of diamonds mines in Marange diamond fields in Chiadzwa. US\$15 billion was supposed to be channelled to the treasury to help the ailing economy but was lost through corruption. Mugabe admitted this publically. Mugabe then announced that the government was taking over the mining of diamonds in Marange. Sounds positive, right? Sadly not. While he made this announcement, he said nothing about efforts to recover money that could go a long way to helping the country and the majority of ordinary people in poverty. Instead of bringing the culprits before the justice system he stated that the government would seek to lure other foreign investors, who will come, no doubt, to loot more money from the diamond fields.

At the same time his Minister of Finance Patrick Chinamasa and Reserve Bank Governor John Mangudya were delighted to announce that the IMF would grant Zimbabwe a loan, the 1st in 20 years, of \$984 million in the 3rd quarter of the year after paying off foreign lenders. This is not good news for Zimbabwe. IMF money will see more austerity and worsening of life for ordinary people in Zimbabwe. In many ways the current collapse in the economy, with its long political crisis, was triggered by the conditions attached to such loans – known across the continent – as structural adjustment, in the 1990s. There is little different in these new loans. Why does the government not focus on bringing back US\$15 billion of stolen assets from the Marange diamond fields?

The reasons are complex, but essentially the government refuses, for all of its black empowerment bombast, to make any serious efforts at controlling the countries riches for itself. Zimbabwe is endowed with vast mineral wealth with only a minority, approximately 1% enjoying access to enormous wealth, in kick-backs from deals with multinational corporations. At the same time more than 90% of the population struggle to afford to send their children to school, while young girls are often

forced into prostitution or early marriages and boys turn to petty stealing or drugs. The gap between the poor and the rich continues to widen. Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, has always been a city of extremes, but never more so than today. The mansions the rich build for themselves, match the opulence of Constantia in Cape Town, while holidaying all over the world, and sending their children to top universities in Europe and America. Even South African universities, long the preferred destination for the children of the black elite, is no longer deemed adequate.

The ruling party ZANU-PF is incredibly divided, with a recent split and a new party created. The opposition too has split, again and again. Can you explain to us what the significance of these developments is?

Divisions among the elite have been incredibly unpleasant. The cake for the 1% has been shrinking for a number of years because of the global economic crisis, the slow-down in the Chinese economy, and the collapse of the rand in South Africa. Each of these factors have had a negative effect on the ailing country. The political game in Zimbabwe depends on these economies for their pay-outs. The elite both in Zanu-PF and the opposition are now greedily fighting amongst themselves, while dividing ordinary people who are forced to fight for the crumbs. With Joice Mujuru, the former Vice-President expelled from Zanu-PF in 2014, the purge in the ruling party has not abated. Next in line could see Vice-President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who had previously been seen as a replacement for Robert Mugabe.

Mujuru was joined by others who had also suffered the purge in Zanu-PF, to form a political party People First (PF) – which is essentially no different from Zanu-PF, though perhaps more intensely committed to neoliberal policies, so pitching itself to the right of Zanu-PF. The Mnangagwa faction dubbed 'Lacoste' – for the emblem worn on supporters' tee-shirts – seems to be losing the succession battle to the G40 (Generation 40). G40 consists mainly of young and energetic Zanu-PF members, who did not fight in the liberation struggle and are pushing for Grace Mugabe, the president's wife, to succeed her husband even though Grace continuously refutes her presidential ambitions. Jonathan Moyo, Saviour Kasukuwere and Robert Zhuwavo are the leaders of G40 and are currently mobilising for a '1 million men match' in support of Mugabe who is under pressure to step down due to his advanced age in May.

The diverse opposition is suffering from a similar crisis. The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) is little better than the ruling party, as it is also

marred by factionalism, between the current President of the party, Morgan Tsvangirai, and the former party youth leader, Nelson Chamisa, who lost his position as spokes-person at the party's last congress. Since the MDC's formation in 1999 it has seen numerous splits, for example, MDC-N led by Welchman Ncube, [and] the disbanded MDC-99 [led] by Job Sikhala, a former student activist, who returned to the party fold in 2014. [While] Tendai Biti, the former MDC finance minister in the Government of National Unity, became the secretary-general of MDC-Renewal in 2015. In September that year MDC-Renewal launched as a distinct party, the People's Democratic Party, with Biti elected president of the new party. The MDC is in total disarray. Essentially these parties, recycling politicians and elites, compete to promote neo-liberal policies with similarly anti-worker austerity policies. This is all the more astonishing if you consider the fact that many of these figures, Biti, Sikhala, Chamisa, emerged from a radical socialist politics in the 1990s.

For an example of the neoliberal venality, the MDC-T which is running the city council of Harare has targeted vendors who try to make a living hawking juice cards (telephone recharge cards), fruit and vegetables, [and] cheap imported goods, [and] called for more powers to be given to city police to prosecute the vendors. Early this year we saw the council demolishing the houses of the poor, yet the council has not build a single house for more than 20 years now.

Zimbabwe's trade union movement, its impressive working class activism in the 1990s, helped to found the main opposition party in 1999. Can you tell ROAPE something about the state of workers and trade unions in the country today and how the organised representation of workers has been weakened?

For more than a decade the country has been in crisis, workers and the poor, have paid the price for the crisis created by the government and rich. Figures are hard to come by, but roughly seventy percent of organised workers – in a relatively large and developed working class – has been retrenched since 1998. The working class, in cities and towns, around Zimbabwe has been literally declassed, tens of thousands moving to South Africa, or forced into the informal sector. So the neo-liberal policies adopted by the government from the 1990s has seen thousands of workers losing their jobs through retrenchments. This has had a dramatic impact, weakening organised labour. Unions have not only lost their membership through retrenchments, but those workers who have maintained their positions have sought to distance themselves from any radical fightback fearing for their jobs. Unemployment, as we know, is a

massive disincentive for strike action. This was made worse by the Nyamange vs Zuva Petroleum ruling on 17 July 2015 that upheld common law, stating an employer could terminate an employee's contract by giving three months' notice. The ruling immediately saw more than 30,000 workers laid off, by being given three months' notice. Remaining workers have either been put on casual contracts or silenced to protect their jobs. The result for the organised, working class has been devastating.

Not only have the unions been weakened by low membership but also through their relationship to companies as they seek to survive. Most of the union's financial subscriptions have collapsed making it difficult for them to operate and at times receiving their union's dues from the company late, or depending on contributions from NGOs. This has created a situation with the union bureaucracy 'compromising' with bosses, and being bought off by 'donations' at the expense of their membership.

In some cases the situation is appalling. Not only are the union leaders being increasingly incorporated, or more crudely simply bought-off, but some seek to compete with chief executives of companies, living similarly luxury lifestyles, driving cars donated to them by the company, and drinking and dining at the same bars and restaurants. Thus many of them have become buddies with managers, further compromising workers' rights. Frequently we see union leaders urging workers to accept short-term contracts and salary cuts or face unemployment.

This has ... also made worse splits in the trade union movement with numerous splinter unions being formed. The petty, personal differences and disputes among trade union leaders with competing trade union federations, unable to unite. Last year, for example, after the Zuva ruling, which dealt a considerable advantage to company bosses to continue their attacks on the working class, the trade union movement failed to mount any serious or sustained action.

It is important to recall that the trade union movement, under pressure from a powerful rank and file, was at the heart of every serious political challenge to the regime for more than twenty years after independence in 1980. The current situation, viewed historically, is all the more devastating.

As the economic meltdown has rippled across Zimbabwe, can you explain how this has impacted on women?

As usual the most affected by these interlinking crises are women. Women were the majority of workers in Zimbabwe employed in the retail sector, where many still work. In the middle of this crisis women have been targeted, with the gains that working women made in the 1980's and 1990's being almost entirely eroded.

Most women no longer enjoy maternity leave with many forced to take unpaid leave for a month, compelled to return to work before they have recovered from giving birth, with childcare provision completely absent. They are then forced to work normal hours, with no provisions for breastfeeding etc. Wanting to protect their jobs most women feel compelled to accept these circumstances, since any position is preferable to staying at home with no income.

Sexism, sexual harassment and discrimination, have long been a problem in Zimbabwe. But in recent years, levels of sexual harassment have increased dramatically, but again it is hard to assess exactly the extent of this increase as cases are not reported because of fear of reprisals. We have dealt with a significant increase in cases of sexual harassment at the Zimbabwe Labour Centre.

The threat of job losses casts a long, dark shadow across all aspects of Zimbabwe – but, perhaps, most worryingly on the position of women in society. So it has been made to look fashionable for a woman to have an affair with her boss, showered with gifts and special treatment at work, only to be dumped in favour of another woman. Again this is increasingly common.

As the crisis continues to worsen with firms cutting jobs at companies like the mobile phone giant Econet, the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) etc., the only way out for many young and single mothers is to accept sexual advances from the supervisor and managers. Such scandals that have been exposed show how bosses, for example, at the state National Social Security Authority (NSSA), received loans from the pension scheme for their girlfriends with no action taken to recover the public money. All this does is to encourage the oppression of women in workplaces around the country.

Can you talk about the state of rank and file action in Zimbabwe? What sort of opposition is emerging in the recent strikes and actions that have taken place?

Despite the attacks we have seen, and the corruption of certain union leaders, workers are beginning to organise themselves independently. Over 300 hundred workers in 2015 from the parastatal, the Grain

Marketing Board, spent more than a month sleeping outside their company premises in the middle of the rainy season to demand the payment of salary arrears dating back to 2014. These workers received solidarity from fellow unions and progressive civil society organisations like the International Socialist Organisation, the Zimbabwe Labour Centre, and many individuals in Zimbabwe and elsewhere on the continent. They partially won and only left the companies premises after agreeing to a deal to be paid US\$350 per month, until all their salaries arrears were repaid. They threatened to return should the employer default.

Inspired by the example of GMB workers, National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ) workers in March this year also occupied the company premises to highlight that they do not have anywhere to live, as they have not been paid for 15 months. Their strike continues. Nurses from Mutare, a city in the east of Zimbabwe, also staged a sit-in at council offices in February this year, demanding their salary arrears be paid. Frequently, such militant and often unorganised action is the only language left for workers.

Finally, for the radical left, what are the strategies and possibilities for a progressive and socialist politics in Zimbabwe?

As the crisis continues to worsen in Zimbabwe the divisions – you could say the cannibalism – in the ruling elite will deepen as they fight amongst each other for their own survival. These divisions and factionalism is a struggle over the control of a frail and broken economy, with a divided comprador elite involved in a vicious battle over the country's puny spoils. The struggle for socialists is to ensure that the working class, women and the poor do not become involved in these battles. These forces must resist the temptations of political parties, new and old, who are calling for further austerity against the poor. The MDC, when it was part of the Government of National Unity, from 2009 to elections in 2013, and its current economic policies offer little for Zimbabwe's poor. The recent rank and file action we have seen gives an example of how unions can be strengthened, but corrupt union leaders must be replaced by those committed to advancing their members rights. There is much to be done.

For more on the issues discussed by Choto see:

the website of the Zimbabwe Labour

Centre <http://www.zimlabourcentre.co.zw/> Articles on Zimbabwe's political and economic crisis in ROAPE's archive:

<http://www.roape.org/published.html>