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Anarchism in Africa: Against Colonialism and Imperialism

Anarchist Contributions to African Liberation

Tshireletso Fidel

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When taking account of the role of the radical left in anti-imperialist, anti-colonial and national liberation struggles, the role of anarchist-syndicalists has generally been ignored. This problem emerges from the tendency to conflate radical left efforts in the above mentioned struggles with Marxists engagement. Marxists enjoy a special relationship with nationalists throughout the world, as seen in the case of a number of African nationalists who have attempted to take up socialism as an economic system subsequent to their liberation. The involvement of anarchist/syndicalists in anti-imperial, anti-colonial and national liberation struggles dates back to the mid-1800s.

Anarchists actively participated in anti-imperialist, anti-colonial and national liberation struggles in colonial and post-colonial regions including parts of Latin America, South and East Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Their participation also included militant anti-imperialist and anti-war struggles in the home imperialist states. Marxists had a marginal pres-

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ence in the trio of struggles until the 1920s, and at times presented sharp contradictions given the existence of Russian and Chinese imperialism. With increasing national and class consciousness among and within colonies, a third world revolt was seemingly becoming inevitable.

Anarchism emerged in Egypt in the 1870s where Arab workers were recruited through multi-lingual propaganda and international syndicalist unions at a later stage. Most Anarchists in Egypt were found in the Egyptian Socialist Party, which positioned itself as a pure anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist organisation. However following the seizure of British control over Egypt, anarchists and other radicals were persecuted by the government of Sa'd Zaghul. In French Algeria, the prevalence of anarchism is owed to the revolutionary syndicalist General Confederation of Labour which was actively opposed to French colonialism and discrimination, and the 1930 colonial centenary celebrations. Anarchists in the struggle for the liberation of Algeria organised both in Algeria and France against the French plutocracy.

In the early twentieth century, the self-governing dominion of South Africa had social relations similar to those in Algeria during French rule. The substantial anarchist and syndicalist movement of the early 1900s opposed the civil, political and economic disabilities imposed on the natives, as well as the segregationist nature of apartheid. A significant number of natives were recruited to several syndicalist unions and political groups such as Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA) and Industrial Socialist League (ISL). The IWA and ISL worked with and within some sectors of the African National Congress (then African Native National Congress), from a position of critical engagement. Certain ISL militants like T. W. Thibedi assisted immensely in the formation of the Communist Party and expansion of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU) into neighbouring colonies.

While anarchists and syndicalist contribution to the liberation of African nations is clearly recognisable, the impact of these struggles in advancing anti-imperialism was not captured, this can be attributed to the dominance nationalist ideas and the struggles being captured by nationalists. Successful anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles required internationalist anti-authoritarian social revolutions against the state and class system.

The participation of Anarchists in anti-imperialist, anti-colonial and national liberation struggles was driven by conviction and intention, they did not undermine the potential of these struggles to advance the revolutionary class struggle for a universal, self-managed and stateless socialist order. Anarchists believed that anti-imperialist, anti-colonial and national liberation struggles were not in any way inconsistent with their larger project, which is the removal of social and economic inequality, and all forms of exploitation. Anarchists participated in anti-imperialist, anti-colonial and national liberation struggles not only as a strategic move, but also based on principle. Colonialism and imperialism are rejected by anarchists for their coercive, discriminatory, and violently oppressive character. No one is entitled to impose their customs, languages and laws. The natives of each nation have the right to be separate, reject assimilation and state-managed multi-racialism. Oppressed nations need not recognise the existing state boundaries, which were imposed by the colonialists.

Anarchist participation in national liberation struggles was important to enlighten the nationalists. Nationalism aims to unite nations across racial and class divisions, and to create new national states. Nationalism therefore reproduces the evils of class and the state. Most struggles for independence were disappointing in result as they merely replaced foreign with local oppressors and contributed nothing towards the emancipation of the working class. Anarchists played their part in pushing national liberation struggles as far as possible, in the

direction of an internationalist, anti-statist, and class struggle based, social revolution.

While African countries were struggling for national liberation, capitalism and colonialism were undergoing a stage of metamorphosis, there was transition from capitalism to a higher system. The imperial phase of capitalism simply transferred the antagonistic relationship between the wealthy and the poor onto the world stage. As capitalists pursued to maintain and even increase their profits, they exported to previously colonised nations. These poor peripheral countries were now integrated into the world economy as the new "proletariat" of the world. This is where the Marxist theory experienced severe limitations and limited most African leaders who had adopted Marxist socialism in their thought and action.

According to Karl Marx, capitalism- as dictated by its three laws- would come to revolutionary crisis and suffer internal class revolt, paving the way for the transition to socialism. But, capitalist nations avoided this crisis by expanding the pool of workers they exploited. The acquisition of colonies had enabled the capitalist economies to dispose of their unconsumed goods, to acquire cheap resources, and to channel their excess capital. This is how the capitalist nations succeeded in delaying their revolutionary crisis- by keeping the poorer nations underdeveloped and deep in debt, and dependent on them for manufactured goods, jobs, and financial resources.

Anti-colonial and national liberation struggles failed to bring about economic emancipation to the African multitudes because they preserved all elements necessary to expand capitalism into imperialism. As a matter of fact, political independence of African countries created a platform for widespread imperialism. Political sovereignty of Africans came with increased dependency and exploitation. Most African leaders who took over post-independence failed dismally to deal with the uneven development of society within their countries, surely they could not be expected to deal with uneven devel-

opment at a global scale. Nationalism and statism provide imperialism with a platform for growth. To defeat imperialism, African leaders were supposed to pursue an internationalist, anti-statist, and class struggle based social revolution.