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# Swallowed by Mzansi: South Africa's ruling class in Africa

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June 10, 2011

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Mzansi is a Zulu word that is used to popularly refer to South Africa. Thanks Lucien Van der Walt for comments and feedback on the article.

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is due to the fact that a counter-power in the hands of workers and the poor is going to be needed if states, capitalism and imperialism are going to be fundamentally challenged. This also means a struggle has to be taken into unions in the region, which are often bureaucratised, centralised, reformist, and closely linked to states. Workers and the poor themselves need to transform unions into revolutionary, self-managed, non-hierarchical and directly democratic decentralised organisations that can eventually supplant the power of the ruling class. Without such revolutionary unions and movements it is going to be extremely difficult to defeat imperialism – and the systems of capitalism, racism, nationalism and states on which it rests.

stowed it can only be taken. Certainly local ruling classes may resist an imperialist power for their own benefit, but this resistance is an attempt to increase their own wealth and power. As such, in order to end imperialism – whether conducted by the ruling classes in South Africa, China, the US or EU – workers and the poor in southern Africa are going to have to rely on one another. By necessity, the cruel interlinking systems of imperialism, states, capitalism, foreign and local ruling classes will have to be fought simultaneously. Only the working class and poor have a material interest in ending these oppressive interlinking systems.

This struggle against imperialism (including South African imperialism) in the region, however, is still in its infancy and faces many challenges. There is a danger it could take on nationalistic connotations. It is, therefore, vital that workers across southern Africa and internationally begin to forge links and unite against their common enemies: foreign and local ruling elites. In the case of South African imperialism, South African workers need to unite with their brothers and sisters in neighbouring countries: they too face common enemies. South African workers once again need to fight their struggles based on internationalism; if not there is the real potential for further outbreaks of xenophobic violence. Indeed, workers across the world have more in common with one another than they do with any boss or politician. As such, workers, peasants and the poor should not put any faith in cross-class alliances with local elites. Rather, they need to form unity with one another, and struggle outside of and against states. It is also no use just resisting one imperialist power, all imperialist powers have to be fought.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in the region is that most local progressive movements are weak. This needs to change. Movements need to become powerful fighting organisations, but this can only be achieved by practicing direct democracy, undertaking self-education, self-organisation and direct action. Workers and the poor within movements also need to keep power in their own hands, and not relinquish it to left intellectuals or bureaucrats. This

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conditions, and an end to racist treatment<sup>7071</sup>. Likewise, Illovo and Tongaat-Hullett have been surprised by the militant actions of workers in southern Africa, which has included sabotage<sup>7273</sup>. In 2010 a lot of the anger of the mass riots in Maputo was also directed at South African private and state-owned companies. Clearly, workers, peasants and the poor across the region are feeling a growing sense of anger about the exploitation and domination that they have been subjected to by the South African ruling class.

Although the elite in the neighbouring states are sometimes annoyed by the South African ruling classes' behaviour, few have openly challenged it. The reason for this is that it is not in their material interests to defy the South African state or capital. Even if they were to challenge the South African elite, it would not mean an end to the exploitation of workers and the poor in southern Africa. The ruling classes in southern African states owe their positions to exploiting and dominating their own 'citizens'. The case of the 'anti-imperialist' Zimbabwean state is a prime example. While undertaking policies that benefit the Zimbabwean elite, such as expropriating some of the possessions of imperialist powers in the country, the state has intensified its oppression of workers and the poor. This is the only way that leading state officials, making up part of the Zimbabwean ruling class, can maintain their positions at the apex of Zimbabwean society. Thus, workers and the poor can't rely on local ruling classes or states – which due to their centralised and hierarchical nature generate rulers – to bring about freedom. The ruling classes won't give people freedom because it is not in their interests – in any case true freedom cannot be be-

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<sup>70</sup> [www.netnewspublisher.com/supermarket-chain-shoprite-checkers-paralyzed-by-strike-action-in-zambia](http://www.netnewspublisher.com/supermarket-chain-shoprite-checkers-paralyzed-by-strike-action-in-zambia) 11<sup>th</sup> August 2009

<sup>71</sup> [www.africafiles.org/article.asp?ID=18567](http://www.africafiles.org/article.asp?ID=18567) 25<sup>th</sup> July 2008.

<sup>72</sup> [www.libcom.org/news/one-dead-mozambique-wildcat-strike-18072007](http://www.libcom.org/news/one-dead-mozambique-wildcat-strike-18072007) 18<sup>th</sup> July 2007.

<sup>73</sup> [www.radiovop.com/](http://www.radiovop.com/) 14<sup>th</sup> January 2009.

by the South African state – it has been meant to demonstrate that it is a force to be reckoned with in Africa. In reality the role of the South African troops in the DRC has often involved targeting the enemies of the South African state’s local allies, in the name of subduing rebels and keeping the ‘peace’. For instance, in 2006 South African troops, making up a UN force, were implicated in an attack on a village reportedly being used as a base by a rebel militia. During the attack at least 30 civilians died. It was also reported that troops opened fire indiscriminately on the village with “machine-gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades”<sup>69</sup>. The South African state has also spent billions on purchasing new offensive weaponry to rebuild the traditional strength of its forces. It would be mistaken to view this military build up as being done on behalf of the US – rather it is being done by the South African state to increase its own power in the region.

## Conclusion

From an anarchist perspective, it is clear that South Africa’s ruling classes are acting as imperialists in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. Central to this has been the role of the South African state. It has protected and furthered the interests of the South African ruling class in the rest of Africa. It has also been involved in protecting its power and augmenting it by dominating the region, which has included dominating forums like SADC and the AU.

There are, however, promising signs that a struggle against the dominance of the South African ruling class by the popular classes in the region is beginning to happen. Shoprite across Africa has been wracked by strikes for better wages, better working

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<sup>69</sup> Pienaar, H. SA troops linked to DRC massacre. [www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/sa-troops-linked-to-drc-massacre-1.287315](http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/sa-troops-linked-to-drc-massacre-1.287315) 30<sup>th</sup> June 2006.

When walking down the streets of any town or city in sub-Saharan Africa one of the most striking things is the dominance of South African linked businesses. On almost every corner the neon lights and billboards of companies like MTN, Stanbic, Shoprite, Mr Price, Pick ‘n Pay, Nando’s etc. loom large. Some places, such as the southern coast of Mozambique, have become virtual ‘little South Africas’ – with beer-bellied rich South Africans tearing around in 4X4s and flaunting their wealth in the form of luxury holiday homes and speedboats. Likewise, South African troops can be seen patrolling in countries such as the Sudan – supposedly keeping the peace!

All of these are the outward symbols of South Africa’s economic and state power in the region. In most southern African countries, South African based private and state-owned companies have become one of the largest sources of foreign direct investment. In some places this has even seen them surpassing the investments from the UK, US and EU<sup>1</sup>. It is no exaggeration to say that South African linked corporations have come to play a huge role in the mining, financial, retail, services, telecommunications and leisure sectors in southern Africa<sup>2</sup>. Coupled to this, South Africa runs a major trade surplus with the rest of Africa: it exports five times more than it imports with regards to the continent<sup>3</sup>. The South African state also has a colossal presence in the region, whether as the head of ‘peacekeeping’ missions, the driver of trade and investment agreements, or the leader of the African Union (AU).

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, D., Saunders, R. & Oloyede, O. 2008. South African corporations and post-apartheid expansion in Africa – creating a new regional space. *African Sociological Review* Vol. 12 No. 1 pp. 1–19.

<sup>2</sup> Patel, S. 2006. South African Investment in Southern Africa: Trade Union Responses in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa. Labour Research Service: South Africa.

<sup>3</sup> Naidu, S. & Lutchman, J. 2004. Understanding South Africa’s Engagement in the Region: Has the Leopard Changed its Spots? Paper presented at the Southern African Regional Poverty Network conference.

In this article, using an anarchist analysis, it will be argued that this lopsided trade, expansive investment and projection of state power by the South African ruling class are signs of the imperialist role they play in southern Africa. In undertaking this, it will be outlined how the South African ruling class, as an integral part of their imperialist role, are conducting a class war against the workers and the poor across sub-Saharan Africa. Through examining this class war, it will hopefully become clear that the South African state is being used as a key instrument by the ruling class – made up of capitalists and high-ranking state officials – to further their own interests in southern Africa. The consequence of highlighting the imperialist nature of the South African state also has implications for the strategies and tactics that should be used in struggle. It will be strongly argued that due to its hierarchical centralising and expansionist ambitions, the state cannot be used as a tool for liberation in South Africa or in the region.

Before outlining an anarchist analysis of imperialism, and discussing why the South African ruling class should be considered imperialist, it is important to highlight some of the main debates on the left around the nature of South Africa's role in the rest of Africa. In doing so, it will become clear why and how an anarchist interpretation differs from these.

## **Differing positions on South Africa's role in Africa**

South African linked corporations and the state have played a dominant role in southern Africa since at least the 1920s. South African linked corporations, including the likes of AngloAmerican, grew rich by exploiting workers from across southern Africa<sup>4</sup>. Un-

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<sup>4</sup> Van der Walt, L. 2007. Anarchism and Syndicalism in South Africa 1904–1921: Rethinking the History of Labour and the Left. PHD Thesis: University of the Witwatersrand

having a central role, and it is explicitly stated that they will be involved in new projects throughout Africa. This means that the South African state views its continued and even expanded role within the region as essential. The fact that this expansionist role has been codified in the state's economic policy speaks volumes about the nature of the South African state's behaviour in Africa: it is an arrogant, dominating and exploiting force.

The conceited manner that the South African state has conducted itself within the region has even irked some of its partners and allies that head up neighbouring states. To be sure, the behaviour of South African state officials within forums, such as SADC, has become infamous. The South African state has often disregarded established protocols, packed these forums with numerous delegates and, thereby, dominated proceedings. It has also been noted that South African officials regularly disregard the viewpoints of neighbouring delegations. Added to this, the South African state has arrogantly come to view itself as the rightful driver of the region's developmental policies<sup>67</sup>. This arrogance is the arrogance of an imperialist.

The post-apartheid state has also not been averse to using its military power in the continent. In 1998, under Mandela's leadership, it invaded Lesotho following a coup. The reason for the invasion was to protect South African investments in the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. The main aim of this Project was to supply water to the wealthy neighbourhoods and industries of Johannesburg<sup>68</sup>. The state officials in Pretoria clearly were not going to allow this long term supply of water to be jeopardized – hence troops marched into the neighbouring country. In recent years, South African troops have also been deployed to the DRC and Sudan as a 'peacekeeping force'. In reality this was a projection and accumulation of power

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<sup>67</sup> Swatuk, L. 2000. South Africa in the region: "Botha would be proud". Southern Africa Report Vol 15, No 3 pp. 12–15.

<sup>68</sup> flag.blackened.net

what the South African state is doing is to realise its actions are all aimed at increasing its power.

The South African state itself, through its state-owned corporations, has become a major economic player in the rest of Africa. The state-owned Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) has R 13.9 billion invested in projects in 22 African countries<sup>63</sup>. The state-owned electricity company, Eskom, has interests in 33 other African countries. There are also plans underway by Eskom and the state to build a massive hydro-electric dam on the Congo River. Electricity will be imported from there into South Africa by Eskom. Any excess capacity, not needed in South Africa, will then be exported out into the region at a profit<sup>64</sup>. Likewise, PetroSA has also been expanding into Africa to ensure the state's future oil supplies<sup>65</sup>. As part of securing its long term energy needs, the South African state has also signed agreements with countries in the region to directly secure land for its future biofuel and food needs<sup>66</sup>. These actions, although having benefits for capital, are mainly about securing the state's future strategic needs and placing itself in a pivotal position in terms of energy in the region. All of this is about securing its power in the long term; they are in no way aimed at benefiting the US or EU nor are they sub-imperialist actions – they are rather expansionist.

Ominously, the South African state's latest domestic economic policy, the *New Growth Path* (NGP), explicitly promotes the expansion of South African exports and investment into Africa. Indeed, it has been identified as vital for the future growth of the South African economy. Within this, state-owned companies are seen as

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<sup>63</sup> Industrial Development Corporation. Annual Report 2010: Towards a New Developmental Growth Path. IDC: South Africa.

<sup>64</sup> Newman, N. South Africa in Africa. ILRIG: South Africa.

<sup>65</sup> UNCTAD. 2005. Case Study on Outward Foreign Direct Investment by South Africa Enterprises. United Nations: Switzerland

<sup>66</sup> Hall, R. 2010. The Many Faces of the Investor Rush in Southern Africa: Towards a Typology of Commercial Land Deals. PLAAS: South Africa.

der apartheid the South African state also undertook regular military incursions into neighboring countries to weaken their opposition and to ensure their continued dependence<sup>5</sup>. With the end of apartheid and the quantum growth of South African based corporations investing in the rest of Africa, a debate has re-opened on the left around what role the post-apartheid elite in South Africa have been playing on the continent, including whose interests they have been serving.

The dominant view amongst the left is that South Africa plays a sub-imperial role in Africa. According to this argument, the elite in South Africa have elected to position themselves as a junior partner of British and US imperialism. Thus, the elite in South Africa are seen as mainly serving the interests of US and Britain in Africa, and consequently they are seldom viewed as taking any independent actions – in their own interest – beyond the odd rhetorical flourish<sup>6</sup>. The most prominent person putting forward the sub-imperialist argument, Patrick Bond, stated in 2006 that: “Mbeki's project has been to situate South Africa as a subimperial partner of the world's major military and economic powers, insofar as this entails lubricating markets and systems of accumulation by tying Africa into the institutional framework of global capital, and by assisting – as a ‘deputy sheriff’ – in implementing imperial military and socio-political strategies”<sup>7</sup>.

In the sub-imperialist argument, therefore, one of the core functions of the South African elite is seen as that of a peddler of neo-liberalism in Africa, ultimately on behalf of the US, the EU and Britain. The central evidence used to back up this argu-

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<sup>5</sup> Hanlon, J. 1986. Beggar Your Neighbours: Apartheid Power in Southern Africa. James Curry: United Kingdom

<sup>6</sup> Bond, P. 2004. Talk Left, Walk Right: South Africa's Frustrated Global Reforms. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press: South Africa

<sup>7</sup> Bond, P. 2006. South African sub-imperial accumulation. In Bond, P., Chitonge, H. and Hopfmann, A. The Accumulation of Capital in Southern Africa. Rosa Luxemburg Foundation: South Africa pp. 90 -106

ment is the role that South Africa played in developing the *New Partnership for Africa's Development* (NEPAD). As such, people making the sub-imperial argument have continuously highlighted the co-operation that took place between South Africa, the US and World Bank in developing NEPAD. NEPAD's main goals were to promote neo-liberalism across Africa, with a particular focus on privatisation, trade and investment liberalisation<sup>8</sup>. In this argument, South Africa's involvement in NEPAD is seen as being undertaken mainly to please the US and Britain; rather than for its own distinct interests. Certainly, people who have put forward the sub-imperialist argument admit that South African capitalists are expansionist in Africa – which is an important part of the argument – but despite this expansionism, they argue that South Africa's elite remain mostly in service of the US and EU<sup>9</sup>.

In the sub-imperialist argument, the close co-operation and collaboration that takes place between the US and South African militaries is also highlighted. Much has, therefore, been made of the cooperation between the two states around aspects of the 'war on terror', including – perhaps somewhat paradoxically – the sale of arms by the South African state to the US military. The beefing up of South Africa's military is also taken as evidence of the seeming willingness of the South African elite to act as a proxy for the US militarily in Africa<sup>10</sup>.

The main protagonists of this argument consequently believe that a struggle needs to be waged in South Africa, the region, the continent and Third World to ensure the emergence of more pro-

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<sup>8</sup> Miller, D. 2003. NEPAD and South African Corporations in Africa: Whose African Renaissance? ILRIG: South Africa

<sup>9</sup> Bond, P. 2006. Looting Africa: The Economics of Exploitation. UKZN Press: South Africa

<sup>10</sup> Bond, P. 2006. South African sub-imperial accumulation. In Bond, P., Chitonge, H. and Hopfmann, A. The Accumulation of Capital in Southern Africa. Rosa Luxemburg Foundation: South Africa pp. 90.

Pretoria has also used its political power within Africa to defend and promote the interests of South African linked capital against other imperial capitals and states. For instance, shortly after the Zuma government signed a state to state deal around oil explorations with the DRC, the DRC state took away the oil concessions of the British based multinational, Tullow Oil. These oil concessions were subsequently handed over to a South African linked company owned by Jacob Zuma's nephew; much to the annoyance of the UK and Tullow Oil<sup>61</sup>. Similarly, in Mozambique the South African state secured gas concessions for SASOL by pressurising the Mozambican state into forcing its rival, Enron, out of the country (at the time Enron was one of the largest corporations in the world and was being backed strongly in its bid by the US state)<sup>62</sup>. On the political front, the post-apartheid state has also defended governments in the region, like the Mugabe regime, against the US and UK. While there may have been some economic reasons for doing so, the main reason was a show of force. The post-apartheid state was demonstrating that regionally it did not always have to tow the line of the US, UK or EU. It also protected Mugabe's state in order to avoid destabilising its own agenda in the AU. If it had taken a strong stance against Mugabe there would have been a political blowback that would have adversely impacted on its leadership of the AU. In all of these actions, the South African state was acting as a rival imperialist to the US and EU. This, however, does not deny the fact that the South African state aligns itself with the US. Undeniably, it willingly partners with the US, but it does so to increase its own power. This constant drive for power, however, also sees the South African state going against the US state, especially in the context of southern Africa. These actions are not contradictory when seen through an anarchist lens – the key to understanding

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<sup>61</sup> [www.citypress.co.za](http://www.citypress.co.za) 26<sup>th</sup> June 2010

<sup>62</sup> Castel-Branco, C.N. 2004. What is the Experience and Impact of South African Trade and Investment on the Growth and Development of Host Economies: A View from Mozambique



state strategy to secure opportunities for elite South Africans in the region.

For decades, the South African state has positioned itself in southern Africa as the dominant political and economic power. To maintain this position, the post-apartheid South African state has signed trade and investment agreements with the majority of African states, which are highly favourable to private and state-owned South African companies. For instance, after signing a bilateral agreement with the Mozambican state, South African agribusinesses were given thousands of hectares of land in Mozambique<sup>58</sup>. When a similar deal was signed with the Congo (Brazzaville) state, South African commercial farmers were allocated 200 000 hectares of ex-state owned land, with the option of extending this to 10 million hectares in the future: this is an area twice the size of Switzerland<sup>59</sup>! These and other such deals have been justified by leading officials on the basis that: “If we can’t find opportunities for white South African farmers in this country, we must do it elsewhere in the continent”<sup>60</sup>. Not merely content with such sweet trade and investment deals, the South African state has also established Bi-National Commissions with the ruling elite in numerous other African countries – which favour South Africa’s commercial interests. Likewise the South African state was the driving force in promoting a free trade agreement across the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which again will benefit the most powerful economy in southern Africa: South Africa. None of these are deals that have been done on behalf of the US or EU; they were rather South African state-led deals that were aimed at benefiting South Africa’s old and new elite.

<sup>58</sup> [www.flag.blackened.net/revolt/africa/wsfws/4\\_1\\_moz.html](http://www.flag.blackened.net/revolt/africa/wsfws/4_1_moz.html)

<sup>59</sup> Hall, R. 2010. The Many Faces of the Investor Rush in Southern Africa: Towards a Typology of Commercial Land Deals. PLAAS: South Africa

<sup>60</sup> Hoffstatter, A. Government drive to set up white SA farmers in Africa. Business Day 12<sup>th</sup> October 2009

gressive governments<sup>11</sup>. This should involve, according to those making the argument, progressive political parties taking state power<sup>12</sup>. It is argued these governments could then default on foreign debt, control capital flight, undertake inward-development strategies, end liberalisation, attract foreign investment on favourable terms, and shift the global balance of forces more towards the ‘South’.<sup>13</sup> Through this strategy it is believed that US imperialism could be blunted, and South Africa’s sub-imperialist role ended in the region.

A countervailing argument is that South Africa cannot even be considered sub-imperialist. According to this broad argument, the elite in South Africa are seen as being either petit bourgeois<sup>14</sup> or a comprador class<sup>15</sup>, who are totally dominated by the North and/or who are local puppets of imperialism. Those that head the South African state and South African based corporations are seen as being completely reliant on foreign capital and powers for their positions<sup>16</sup>. Accordingly, it is argued that South African based corporations are either subsidiaries of US and EU corporations, or they are owned through shares by financiers from the North. The expansion of such corporations into Africa via South Africa, therefore,

<sup>11</sup> Patel, S. 2006. South African Investment in Southern Africa: Trade Union Responses in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa. Labour Research Service: South Africa.

<sup>12</sup> Bond, P. 2006. Looting Africa: The Economics of Exploitation. UKZN Press: South Africa, pg. 135

<sup>13</sup> Bond, P. 2006. Looting Africa: The Economics of Exploitation. UKZN Press: South Africa

<sup>14</sup> Chitalia, D. outlines this view in Amin, S., Chitala, D. & Mandaza, I. (eds.) 1987. SAFCC: Prospects for Disengagement and Development in Southern Africa. Zed Books: United Kingdom

<sup>15</sup> Amin, S. —. A Programme for the South African Left. [www.forumdesalternatives.org/.../Samir\\_AMIN-A\\_PROGRAMME\\_FOR\\_THE\\_LEFT\\_IN\\_SOUTH\\_AFRICA%7Bi%7D.pdf](http://www.forumdesalternatives.org/.../Samir_AMIN-A_PROGRAMME_FOR_THE_LEFT_IN_SOUTH_AFRICA%7Bi%7D.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Chitalia, D. outlines this view in Amin, S., Chitala, D. & Mandaza, I. (eds.) 1987. SAFCC: Prospects for Disengagement and Development in Southern Africa. Zed Books: United Kingdom

tends to be seen as the expansion of US and EU entities. This is then viewed as part and parcel of Northern imperialism; not South African sub-imperialism. Likewise, South Africa's own domestic economic policies along with initiatives such as NEPAD are viewed as being set by the IMF and World Bank, and hence the US state. Although certain differences are admitted, for the most part South Africa is consequently seen as being as much of a victim of Northern imperialism as any other African or Third World state<sup>17</sup>.

To combat this situation, it is argued, an alliance including workers, peasants and sometimes even the black petit bourgeoisie<sup>18</sup> is needed to drive states in the South – including South Africa – towards being more progressive. The argument goes that these more progressive states, including South Africa, could formulate industrial strategies, along with land redistribution, to benefit the popular classes. Protagonists of this argument also propose that the market should be regulated by the state, but that an entrepreneurial layer should also be allowed to exist. Such 'Southern' states, including South Africa, India, Brazil and China, could then work together to combat Northern imperialism<sup>19</sup>.

## Are these explanations adequate?

Important points are made within both arguments. Notably, they highlight how US imperialism has been a very powerful and destructive force within southern Africa, including South Africa. The

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<sup>17</sup> Amin, S. —. A Programme for the South African Left. [www.forumdesalternatives.org/.../Samir\\_AMIN-A\\_PROGRAMME\\_FOR\\_THE\\_LEFT\\_IN\\_SOUTH\\_AFRICA%7Bi%7D.pdf](http://www.forumdesalternatives.org/.../Samir_AMIN-A_PROGRAMME_FOR_THE_LEFT_IN_SOUTH_AFRICA%7Bi%7D.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Chitalia, D. outlines this view in Amin, S., Chitalia, D. & Mandaza, I. (eds.) 1987. SAFCC: Prospects for Disengagement and Development in Southern Africa. Zed Books: United Kingdom

<sup>19</sup> Amin, S. —. A Programme for the South African Left. [www.forumdesalternatives.org/.../Samir\\_AMIN-A\\_PROGRAMME\\_FOR\\_THE\\_LEFT\\_IN\\_SOUTH\\_AFRICA%7Bi%7D.pdf](http://www.forumdesalternatives.org/.../Samir_AMIN-A_PROGRAMME_FOR_THE_LEFT_IN_SOUTH_AFRICA%7Bi%7D.pdf)

tal. This means the actions of the likes of AngloGold Ashanti are often attributed to Europeans or North Americans and 'their' imperialism<sup>56</sup>. But this overlooks the fact that elite South Africans also have major shares, and senior positions, within such companies, including ANC-linked 'liberation heroes' like Toyko Sexwale, Cyril Ramaphosa and Patrice Motsepe. What past arguments on South Africa's role in Africa, therefore, perhaps fail to fully grasp is that when South African capital forms such partnerships with 'Northern capital', they are doing this to increase their own wealth. This means they are not victims but opportunists. When they expand into Africa, alone or in partnership with other capitalists, they – by definition of being capitalists – conduct themselves as rapacious opportunists. They don't expand into Africa because evil Europeans and North Americans told them to do so; they do it to make money and become more powerful. To make this money, they trample and abuse workers and the poor in the region; and use this to also drive down the wages of workers in South Africa. As such their imperialistic nature and practices are evident.

## South Africa's imperialist state

The expansion of South African linked capital in Africa is also not some natural phenomena; it has been facilitated and promoted by the South African state. As pointed out, the South African state worked with the US, EU, IMF and World Bank to develop a continental neo-liberal programme, NEPAD<sup>57</sup>. It is also no accident that South African based companies have been the main beneficiaries of NEPAD. While NEPAD could, in isolation, perhaps be considered sub-imperialist, it has only been one pillar of a much broader

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<sup>56</sup> War on Want. 2006. Anglo American: The Alternative Report. War on Want: United Kingdom

<sup>57</sup> Bond, P. 2005. US Empire and South African sub-imperialism. Socialist Register 2005: The Empire Reloaded. Merlin Press Ltd: United Kingdom

reportedly been threatened with arrest on numerous occasions. Indeed, AngloGold Ashanti has become notorious for its activities, and even stands accused of financing a warlord to protect its interests during the war in the DRC<sup>52</sup>.

AngloGold Ashanti is by no means the only South African based multinational to have close relationships with the states in which they invest. Other South African linked corporations often form close ties with state officials, along with securing local partners. For example, Illovo Sugar is exceptionally close to the Malawian state. The Malawian state reportedly evicted 30 000 people to make way for an Illovo plantation<sup>53</sup>. In Zimbabwe, Barloworld even supplied the Zimbabwean state with the bulldozers for its brutal evictions during Operation Murambatsvina<sup>54</sup>. Politicians and state officials across Africa have also given South African companies massive tax breaks to curry favour with them<sup>55</sup>. Local ruling elites form such relations with imperialist capital – whether from South Africa, China, the US and EU – because it secures their positions, it strengthens their state (due to resources derived from collaborating with multinational companies) and benefits them materially. This means that local elites in southern Africa are not simply puppets; they are rather maneuvering and collaborating with imperialists for their own interests.

The question is: should these actions by elite South Africans be considered imperialist? Past arguments on South Africa's role in Africa have been correct in pointing out that South African capital often collaborates with capital from the US and EU – for example AngloGold and Illovo Sugar are partly owned by British capi-

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<sup>52</sup> Evans, J. A. Anglo 'messed up' in the DRC. Mail and Guardian 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2005.

<sup>53</sup> [www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportID=21920](http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportID=21920)

<sup>54</sup> Majavu, M. & Weekes, A. South African business in Zimbabwe. [www.zcommunications.org](http://www.zcommunications.org) 21<sup>st</sup> August 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Matthys, N. & Hattingh, S. 2007. Ghana: The Gold Rush of Destruction. ILRIG: South Africa.

US state and corporations have extracted vast amounts of wealth from South Africa and the region. Although both arguments rightfully view US and EU imperialism as powerful forces, they perhaps fail to realise or acknowledge that they are not all-powerful. This means that the ruling class in South Africa is quite capable of carrying out its own independent actions. For example, sections of the South African elite can and do sometimes act contrary to the wishes of the US and EU, when it suits them. As will be discussed later, in certain parts of Africa, the South African ruling class have pushed out, out competed and even undermined the interests of the US and EU. Over the last few years, the South African ruling class have also been seeking closer relations with the Chinese state. Again this has been for their own benefit; despite the discomfort this has caused the EU and US. This means the ruling class in South Africa are following their own interests: in the case of southern Africa this involves dominating it as an imperialist, sometimes in collaboration with the US and EU and sometimes alone. The key, therefore, is that even when South Africa's ruling class collaborate with the EU and US it is a willful act of self-interest – they are not merely powerless puppets. Neither of the above arguments seems to be able to fully account for any of the independent actions taken by the South African ruling class.

As both of the above arguments also derive from Marxist and dependency theory perspectives, the actions of the South African state, as an expansionist entity in its own right, are also often glossed over or dismissed as sub-imperialist. This partly derives from the fact that in both arguments the state is viewed as being controlled solely by the capitalist class or its puppets. They, therefore, fail to see that high ranking state officials are a distinct part of the ruling class. State officials through their positions often have control over the means of production (in the form of state-owned companies), and more importantly they have control over the means of coercion and administration through the state. This makes high-ranking state officials powerful, and

through this control they form a distinct part of the ruling class<sup>20</sup>. Although high ranking state officials have very similar interests to the capitalists under capitalism, as they derive much of their wealth and power from the income generated through capitalist exploitation, they also have their own distinct interests. Sometimes these interests can clash with those of capitalists. A good example of this is that states sometimes implement policies and political practices, like increasing tax rates, which are contrary to the interests of capitalists; but do have benefits for the state in terms of increased power. Thus, the ruling class cannot be reduced only to capitalists; it includes, and can even be made up solely of, high ranking state officials<sup>21</sup>. Anarchists have long pointed out that class is not just about the relations of production but also relations of domination<sup>22</sup>. High ranking state officials, through their positions, are able to use the state to control persons and territories in ways that are not simply about exploitation, but domination. Both of the above arguments fail to see this, which has implications for how they view the role of the South African state and ruling class in Africa.

To understand how both South African capitalists and high ranking state officials can be imperialists, in their own right and in conjunction with one another, it is important to understand an anarchist view of imperialism – before applying this analysis to the South African context.

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<sup>20</sup> Van der Walt, L. & Schmidt, M. 2009. *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*. AK Press: United States.

<sup>21</sup> Bakunin, M. 1874. *Statism and Anarchy*. Cambridge Press: United Kingdom.

<sup>22</sup> Van der Walt, L. & Schmidt, M. 2009. *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*. AK Press: United States.

ties, often privatised under Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and NEPAD, and then slashing the workforce to drive up productivity and profits<sup>47</sup>. Local competitors often emulate these practices and attack workers to increase their profits and vie for market share. As such, the expansion of South African corporations in Africa appears to be contributing towards the deterioration of working conditions. This expansion, however, has also been used as a weapon to try and tame the South African working class. With the extension of South African capital into the region, local strikes have become less effective. Likewise, when faced with radical workers, South African companies often use the threat of relocating their operations<sup>48</sup>.

South African registered multinationals have not only attacked workers, but have also unleashed their oppressive power on communities. They have done this to gain access to land and pass off the costs of pollution onto communities. For example, the Johannesburg registered company, AngloGold Ashanti, has been involved in polluting rivers in Tanzania and Ghana. Communities along these rivers have suffered chronic health problems and their livelihoods have been completely ruined. Coupled to this, AngloGold Ashanti, along with their allies in the Ghanaian and Tanzanian states, have been involved in violently expropriating land and suppressing small-scale subsistence miners who enter the company's claims<sup>49</sup><sup>50</sup><sup>51</sup>. Activists highlighting these abuses have

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<sup>47</sup> Schroeder, R. 2008. South African capital in the land of Ujamaa: Contested Terrain in Tanzania. *African Sociological Review* Vol 12, No 1.

<sup>48</sup> Patel, S. 2006. *South African Investment in Southern Africa: Trade Union Responses in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa*. Labour Research Service: South Africa.

<sup>49</sup> ActionAid. 2006. *Gold Rush: The Impact of Gold Mining on Poor People in Obuasi in Ghana*. ActionAid: South Africa.

<sup>50</sup> Lissner, A. 2008. *Someone Else's Treasure: The Impacts of Gold Mining in Tanzania*. Norwegian Church Aid: Tanzania.

<sup>51</sup> Ghana News Agency. *AngloGold Ashanti and the Obuasi police lied*. Business News, July 2005

ucts from its home base<sup>40</sup>. South African based multinationals also tend to use South African based banks, which have also expanded into the region, when seeking finance. With an already established client base these banks have become major competitors to international banks such as Standard Chartered in Africa. Thus, South African corporations often create interlinking service providing chains when moving into Africa<sup>41</sup>. The vast majority of the profits that they make are also either repatriated or stashed away in tax havens. This pattern of trade and investment contributes towards the limited industrialisation of other southern African countries<sup>42</sup>.

South African linked corporations are involved in an intense class war in the continent through driving down wages, promoting casualisation, and undermining workers and unions. For instance, MTN in Nigeria actively prevents its workers joining unions<sup>43</sup>; Shoprite has a nasty habit of almost exclusively hiring expatriate white South Africans as managers along with introducing old South African labour practices<sup>44</sup>; Tongaat-Hullett pays its workers appalling wages<sup>45</sup>, while Illovo Sugar in Zambia operates a compound with apartheid-like curfews for workers<sup>46</sup>. South African companies are also notorious for purchasing existing en-

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<sup>40</sup> Miller, D., Saunders, R. & Oloyede, O. 2008. South African corporations and post-apartheid expansion in Africa – creating a new regional space. *African Sociological Review* Vol. 12 No. 1 pp. 1–19.

<sup>41</sup> Miller, D., Saunders, R. & Oloyede, O. 2008. South African corporations and post-apartheid expansion in Africa – creating a new regional space. *African Sociological Review* Vol. 12 No. 1 pp. 1–19.

<sup>42</sup> Hanlon, J. 1986. *Beggar Your Neighbours: Apartheid Power in Southern Africa*. James Curry: United Kingdom.

<sup>43</sup> ---. The options for the Nigerian working masses. *Workers Alternative*. 17 May 2006

<sup>44</sup> Miller, D., Nel, E. & Hampwaye, G. 2008. Malls in Zambia: Racialised retail expansion and South African foreign investors in Zambia. *African Sociological Review* Vol 12, No 1 pp. 35–54.

<sup>45</sup> libcom.org 19<sup>th</sup> July 2007

<sup>46</sup> Mataka, D. Zambia Sugar not so sweet after all. [www.times.co.zm/news/viewnews.cgi?category=8&id=1067233381](http://www.times.co.zm/news/viewnews.cgi?category=8&id=1067233381)

## An anarchist view of imperialism

In an anarchist view, imperialism is the process by which the ruling class of one country dominates the people and material of another – by political and/or economic means. By definition this means ruthlessly oppressing and exploiting the workers and poor of the dominated country<sup>23</sup>. It is, therefore, workers and the poor who bare the brunt of imperialism. However, the local elite's ambitions can also be stifled by imperialism, although not always. If this happens, these local elites can and sometimes do resist imperialism. It is this that often forms the basis of the ideology of nationalism in the Third World.

One of the driving forces of modern imperialism is the expansionist nature of capital. Capital is always seeking out areas where there are new markets, cheap raw materials, cheap labour, less competition, and fewer regulations. In short capital is always seeking to expand into areas where it can maximize its profits. With problems such as over-production/under-consumption etc. in more developed economies, capitalists also seek to escape these problems and thereby reduce the competition they face within their home markets<sup>24</sup>. As such, capital is inherently expansionist – if a corporation doesn't expand it faces the real prospect of losing out to competitors or being swallowed up<sup>25</sup>. As such, anarchists – like most Marxists – view powerful capital as being imperialist in nature.

Imperialism is also part and parcel of class war. By expanding into other markets or countries, usually where labour is cheaper and more easily exploitable, imperialism allows capitalists to increase the strength they have with respect to the working class in their states of origin. By expanding into other regions, capitalists are effectively embarking upon an 'investment strike' within their

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<sup>23</sup> [www.infoshop.org](http://www.infoshop.org)

<sup>24</sup> Berkman, A. 1929. *The ABC of Anarchism*. Vanguard Press: United States.

<sup>25</sup> Clark, J. & Martin C. 2004. *Anarchy, Geography and Modernity: The Radical Social Thought of Elisee Reclus*. Lexington Books: United States

home countries; while broadening their bases of operation. This allows them to reduce the possible impact of local strikes on their operations, as their entities in other regions will usually not be affected. It also enables them to play 'foreign' workers off against 'local' workers in a bid to drive down wages<sup>26</sup>. Imperialism, therefore, operates as a disciplining force on the working class, and leads to the increased exploitation of workers in the country of destination and, often, in the country of origin.

Imperialism also functions to check or control the industrialisation of the dominated countries. This is done through ensuring a system of inequitable trade and by extracting profits from the dominated countries. This often forces dominated countries to import value added products while specialising in the export of raw materials. In attempting to dominate countries in such a manner, the possibility of conflict always arises. Local ruling classes in dominated countries are usually willing to collaborate with imperial capital, because they benefit by doing so. However, in certain cases, these ruling classes may come to begrudge and resist their subordination. Thus, ruling classes within dominated states should not simply be viewed as compradors, as they can and do sometimes resist imperialism (if they choose to collaborate this is also a willful act that is aimed at increasing their own power). To prevent local elites resisting, therefore, expansionist capital requires powerful states – and militaries – as a threat, or actual weapon, to check such 'unruly' local ruling classes. The struggle for new markets and access to new resources also invariably leads to conflict and tensions amongst competing imperial capital, which in turn requires powerful states to protect their respective interests<sup>27</sup>. Linked to this, capitalists require the backing of powerful states to negotiate and enforce favorable trade and investment agreements. Therefore, pow-

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<sup>26</sup> [www.infoshop.org](http://www.infoshop.org)

<sup>27</sup> Kropotkin, P. 1892. *The Conquest of Bread*. AK Press: United States.

internationalist and infused with the ideas and practices of mutual aid. Thus, people should also seek to globalise their struggles and fight to win concessions such as a global minimum wage and standard working conditions as part of building a working class counter-power that can end states, capitalism and imperialism.

## **The South African ruling class are imperialists!**

When an anarchist view of imperialism is applied to the role of the South African ruling class, and their actions in sub-Saharan Africa, it becomes clear that they are imperialists. South African linked capital, sometimes in conjunction with international partners, have been expanding headlong into Africa because of the high rates of return it offers. South African based corporations have been making profits ranging from 30% to 60% in the rest of Africa; compared with returns of 14 to 20% in South Africa<sup>37</sup>. In fact, for decades South African corporations have been expanding internationally to try to escape over-production/under-consumption in South Africa<sup>38</sup>. Trade between South Africa and the rest of Africa is not only skewed in terms of volume, but also follows a pattern whereby South Africa mostly imports raw materials and exports value added goods to its neighbours, including weapons, plastics, chemicals, explosives, and machinery<sup>39</sup>. South African linked corporations operating in Africa also have propensity to import many of their goods from South Africa. For example, the retailer Shoprite – which has stores across the continent – sources most of its prod-

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<sup>37</sup> Saunders, R. South African investment in Africa: Restructuring and resistance. [www.africafiles.org/printableversion.asp?17873](http://www.africafiles.org/printableversion.asp?17873)

<sup>38</sup> Innes, D. 1984. *Anglo: Anglo American and the Rise of Modern South Africa*. Raven Press: South Africa.

<sup>39</sup> Martin, W. 2008. South Africa's subimperial futures: Washington Consensus, Bandung consensus or a peoples consensus? *African Sociological Review* Vol. 12 No. 1

would become a “retrogressive, disastrous, counter-revolutionary movement”<sup>35</sup>. History has proved Bakunin right: using the state to bring about liberation has been shown to be an oxymoron and a historical failure.

It, therefore, stands to reason that anarchists believe that to end imperialism, and to achieve genuine national liberation, requires workers, peasants and the poor to end capitalism, the state and indeed all forms of oppression – like racism and sexism – through an international class struggle: workers literally uniting across borders against their class enemies. Thus, states and capitalism would have to be smashed and replaced by genuine worker self-management, self-governance based on federated councils, and an economy that is aimed at meeting peoples’ needs; if genuine freedom is to be achieved. To get to such a society – free of domination, oppression and imperialism – one can’t rely on rulers, vanguards or states: doing so will lead to the rise of a new elite. This translates into a situation whereby the means and the ends of struggle should be as similar as possible – to get to a free society; movements based on direct democracy, self-management, self-organisation and direct action are needed. As such, the struggle for genuine freedom also has to be taken up in unions and social movements to transform these into such vehicles of direct democracy and working class counter-power. Such movements, infused with libertarian principles, would literally be creating the new society within the shell of the old. As part of moving towards a free society via revolution, it would also be vital for these movements to win concessions from states and capital in the short term, thereby building class confidence and organisation, which would be essential if capitalism, the state and imperialism are to be ended<sup>36</sup>. The basis of this struggle for immediate gains should be

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<sup>35</sup> Bakunin, “Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism”, p. 99

<sup>36</sup> Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front. Don’t Vote, Organise. [www.zabalaza.net/zababooks](http://www.zabalaza.net/zababooks)

erful capital needs a powerful state as a backer and protector<sup>28</sup>. In highlighting the role of the state as a protector of capital, an anarchist analysis is similar to most Marxist ones. An anarchist analysis, however, also views states as being more than simply this.

For anarchists, high ranking state officials in powerful states are usually most willing to play this role of protector and backer, but for their own reasons and not merely because they are puppets. Their power and wealth, derived through means such as taxes, often rests on having powerful capital within their state. It is, therefore, often in their direct interests to help ‘their’ capitalists expand into new regions. In order to make ones state secure, a strong economy is needed<sup>29</sup>. As a consequence, the relationship between high-ranking state officials with capital is close under capitalism – they form part of the ruling class – but each still can have their own distinct interests. For high ranking state officials, strengthening the wealth and power of the state solidifies their own positions. State officials, however, also often use their positions to accrue personal wealth and business opportunities; sometimes undermining existing capitalists to do so.

Powerful states are also imperialist in their own right. Like different capitalists, states compete with one another to increase their influence and power. They also vie with one another to secure resources for their long term economic and political future, including gaining access to oil, gas, coal and recently biofuels. This is done by attempting to increase their sphere of influence. This competition between states creates a situation where there is a hierarchy of states. In this states are either dominant or dominated. In order not to be dominated they always have to strive to increase their power by expanding the areas they control – in the case of modern imperialism this is indirect control. To achieve this, powerful states will try to gain the consent of the ruling classes of dominated

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<sup>28</sup> Berkman, A. 2003. What is Anarchism. AK Press: United States, pp 31.

<sup>29</sup> [www.infoshop.org](http://www.infoshop.org)

states. Less powerful states often seek out more powerful ones as protectors and do so to secure their own positions and to climb the hierarchy of states. In this constant jostling states are only constrained by the fear of what other states can do to them. This means that threat of military power is always in the background. Bakunin summed up the inherent expansionist ambitions of states when he said:

*“The supreme law of the State is self-preservation at any cost. And since all States, ever since they came to exist upon the earth, have been condemned to perpetual struggle – a struggle against their populations, whom they oppress and ruin, a struggle against all foreign States, every one of which can be strong only if others are weak – and since States cannot hold their own in this struggle unless they constantly keep on augmenting their power against their own subjects as well as against the neighbourhood States – it follows that the supreme law of the State is the augmentation of its power to the detriment of internal liberty and external justice”<sup>30</sup>.*

States cannot, therefore, end imperialism – the drive to expand their power and influence is inherent within them. Even if a state can resist one imperialist, another would inevitably arise under the global system of states. With the decline of a major imperialist power, others will step into the vacuum – often leading to many mini-imperialists. Likewise, even when a state successfully resists imperialism, it is quite likely to begin acting as an imperialist in its own right – it would have to do so to continue to augment its power. States and imperialism are, therefore, intimately intertwined. While not every state is an imperialist, and only powerful

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<sup>30</sup> Bakunin, M. Ethics: Morality of the State. In Maximoff, G (ed.) 1953. The Political Philosophy of Bakunin. The Free Press: United States.

states are able to act as imperialists; due to the expansionist ambitions of all states (in controlling people within their own territories and gaining power over other states), imperialism is the potential and aspiration of all states.

Indeed, states are centralizing and hierarchical institutions, which exist to enforce a situation whereby a minority rules over a majority<sup>31</sup>. The hierarchical structure of states also inevitably concentrates power in the hands of the directing elite. States are, therefore, the concentrated power of the ruling class – made up of both capitalists and high ranking state officials – and are a central pillar of ruling class power<sup>32</sup>. In Africa projects, like ‘African socialism’, aiming to use the state to supposedly liberate people literally turned into a nightmare. A new tiny elite, headed by the likes of Nkrumah, arose at the head of these states, and were involved in brutally oppressing and exploiting workers and the poor to expand their own power<sup>33</sup>. The anarchist Mikhail Bakunin foresaw the possibility of such a situation arising in cases where national liberation was based upon the strategy of capturing state power. Bakunin said that the “statist path” was “entirely ruinous for the great masses of the people” because it did not abolish class power but simply changed the make-up of the ruling class<sup>34</sup>. Due to the centralised nature of states, only a few can rule – a majority of people can never be involved in decision making under a state system as it is hierarchical. As such, he stated that if the national liberation struggle was carried out with “ambitious intent to set up a powerful state”, or if “it is carried out without the people and must therefore depend for success on a privileged class” it

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<sup>31</sup> Kropotkin, P. 1897. The State: Its Historic Role. Freedom Press: United Kingdom

<sup>32</sup> Van der Walt, L. & Schmidt, M. 2009. Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism. AK Press: United States

<sup>33</sup> Mbah, S & Igariwey, I. 1997. African Anarchism: The History of a Movement. Sharp Press: United States

<sup>34</sup> Bakunin, “Statism and Anarchy”, p. 343