

Zimbabwe: Land Invasions, and lessons for the working class

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THE so-called “debate” over the deteriorating situation in Zimbabwe over the past year has generated more heat than light. The main reason why this is so is because it completely excludes the voice of the Zimbabwean working class. The argument as presented in the media is between two reactionary elite forces: old white money (big Zimbabwean landowners, South African liberal-conservatives, and British imperialist interests) and new black money (right-wing Zimbabwean peasants and ex-soldiers, South Africa’s centre-right ANC elite, and President Robert Mugabe’s kleptocracy). The saying goes that when the elephants fight, the grass gets trampled, but what has been trampled here in this bourgeois bickering is the truth about Zimbabwe, not the Zimbabwean working class itself. It is exactly because the working class has finally flexed its muscles after 20 years of subservience to Mugabe’s ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) regime that such hysteria and confusion has been generated in the media over the real issues at stake. The media have focused on land invasions (which are tiny in comparison to the millions of hectares taken over by militant landless peasants in Brazil, for example) and the murder of white farmers (an insignificant figure of eight deaths over the past year relative to the vastly higher figures for South Africa itself – although a study has claimed that the SA incidents are largely “criminal” and not “political” in motivation).

The South African media in particular has whipped up a frenzy of speculation that the land invasions will generate a similar peasants’ movement in SA where land hunger remains huge and where most of the country’s black population is still squeezed into 13% of the land. These fears do have a basis in reality. Peasant anger is growing: rural labourers’ networks are starting to demand radical changes and are secretly talking about possible mass occupations to back up their demands.

Meanwhile, the capitalist ANC government has little real commitment to land reform: far too little money has been earmarked to compensate white farmers for their land at market-related prices (not that we should cry over that) and, more seriously, at the current rate of restitution, the ANC has admitted it will take 90 years just to fulfil its moderate policies! The SA peasantry is unlikely to wait even 20 years, as the Zimbabweans did, to get their own back.

THE SOURCE OF THE TENSION

So, back to the Zimbabwean working class. Zimbabwe has a largely agrarian economy, with tobacco, maize and other cash crops, plus cattle ranching, most of it subsistence, predominating. Commercial, mostly white-owned, agriculture accounts for at least 10% of GP, contributes more than 35% of total exports and employs a quarter of all formal sector workers (360,000 people). Its primary and manufacturing industries and therefore its industrialised proletariat, along with the base this represents for organised union-based struggle, are very narrow. As a result, the political reality in Zimbabwe is that to control the countryside is to control the country. This agrarian base is the reason that Zanla and Zipra guerrillas managed to fight a moderately successful liberation bush war against the former white Rhodesian state, tying their struggle closely to that of the peasantry.

By comparison, in highly industrialised South Africa, armed struggle was totally marginal and merely served to turn up the heat of urban, union-lead civil struggle. But despite at least reaching a draw on the ground in their Chimurenga (“people’s war”), the Zimbabwean guerrillas lost it all at the Lancaster House agreement that secured a bourgeois position for Mugabe and

his cronies in exchange for the continuation of mostly-British exploitation (disguised by national “independence” in 1980) and the endless postponing of genuine revolutionary demands.

The guerrillas who had fought in the bush mostly either returned to their peasant roots or, having become accustomed to soldiering, signed up with the new Zimbabwean Defence Force, often on 20-year contracts. In exchange for these plum posts and a period of relatively peaceful “transition” (“relative” because of the vicious suppression of political dissidents and Ndebele by the notorious 5th Brigade in the Matabeleland Massacres in 1983–1987 in which about 5,000 were murdered), the black soldiers agreed with their political leadership to put revolutionary demands, especially for land, on hold time and time again. But when those contracts ran out 20 years on, many remembered their old demands and started agitating for plots of land to retire on. They were also angered by Mugabe playing fast and loose with taxpayers’ money such as that earmarked for the poor that went towards building another mansion for his wife. In August 1997, Mugabe tried to forestall war veterans’ demands by giving them an unbudgeted US\$350-million in pensions. Mugabe also continually threatened to seize white farms over the years as an election ploy to make himself seem more radical or even “socialist”, especially following the expiry of the twilight clause in the Lancaster House agreement which guaranteed some white seats in parliament, but he never seriously acted on his threats. In November 1997, Zanu-PF earmarked 1,471 white farms for compulsory acquisition by the state, but by November 1998, the number was down to 841.

Then a deepening economic crisis that led to food riots in the capital Harare sent the government scurrying to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for aid. In exchange, the IMF ordered the government to stop its plans to seize the farms. The financial situation worsened when Zimbabwe got involved in the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1998, allegedly to protect Mugabe’s own personal diamond-mining interests in the east. Zanu-PF assured the IMF that military expenditure on the war would be limited to US\$3-million a month, but they vastly underestimated the cost and after the lie was discovered, the IMF loans collapsed. Aside from its economic woes and the resulting drop in living standards for the workers, fully 25% of the country’s adult population are believed to be HIV-positive, making it the world’s second worst-affected country after Botswana. Against this backdrop, the initial spate of land invasions early in 2000 could well have been genuine, launched by real former retired soldiers/ex-guerrillas. But political machinations were to render the issue of whether their land claims were true or not totally irrelevant.

THE WORKERS FALL INTO PARTY POLITICS

So where was the organised working class in all this? And why, if the land invasions initially represented the potentially radical aspirations of the (at one time revolutionary) war veterans, did poor black workers finally wind up backing reactionary white farmers against the invaders? The sad answer was that the working class was in a bit of political disarray, despite finding new confidence in itself. The crushing economic poverty foisted on the industrial workers (with some 1,5-million unemployed and over 1-million casualised) by the Zanu-PF regime’s dancing to the tune of international capital plus the IMF and World Bank while pretending to be a “people’s state” had finally given the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) the muscle to start moving into the political arena. The 1997 war veterans’ pay-off had led to a tax hike and the ZCTU called nationwide stayaways in protest. Mugabe was to continue to exploit this gap be-

tween the war vets and the workers. After decades wedded to the Zanu-PF vanguardist version of politics, the ZCTU had little experience of true worker power. As a result, the unions immediately plunged into the error of creating a multi-class political party as its vehicle. So, in late 1999, the ZCTU created the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), a “united front of Zimbabweans representing various interests and constituent organisations”.

It is though the structure of this front-style organisation, similar to the multi-class, but far more progressive and experienced grassroots United Democratic Front (UDF) in apartheid SA, that middle-class and even bourgeois elements came to dominate the opposition.

Initially, there was little support for the MDC from these elements because of its working-class base. But that soon changed as this union-led alliance opened its doors to all sorts of shady church groups, opportunistic businessmen and petit-bourgeois non-governmental organisations. The MDC crucially failed to do the admittedly hard footwork of agitating and recruiting among the peasantry and among farm labourers, the real core of the Zimbabwean electorate. Instead, it allowed leaders from rural NGOs to “represent” these people in the party. As a result, the MDC quickly developed a middle-class leadership layer whose interests were at odds with its worker base. The party’s reformist land policy involved setting up an SA-styled land commission to consolidate unused land, instituting a land tax on under-utilised land to support the commission, and acquiring freehold title for small farmers. When the farm invasions actually began in the months before the June 2000 elections, the MDC had become a staunchly liberal-conservative party with a rogue leadership that was openly flirting with the class enemies of its worker base. Revolutionary workers in the country at this time warned of a repeat of Zambia’s experience, where the Zambian trade union federation swept the bankrupt post-independence Kenneth Kaunda regime out of power only to have former labour leader Frederick Chiluba sell them out to multinational capitalist interests (including SA’s Anglo American mining group). The MDC should arguably have backed the initial farm invasions, even if conducted by Zanu-PF agent provocateurs, as a tactical measure to divide the loyalties of the war veterans who, as ex-soldiers, still had many friends in powerful positions in the all-important military. By seizing the initiative on farm invasions, the MDC would have scared off the white farmers and other bourgeois and middle-class opportunists, but could have driven a wedge between Mugabe and the army, already disillusioned by their 300-plus dead in the DRC war and the fact that Mugabe failed to attend their funerals. By maintaining a clear revolutionary class line, organising strictly among the industrial proletariat, the unemployed and the peasantry, winning over the real war veterans and, by association, a significant section of the rank-and-file armed forces, the MDC could have become a radical grassroots organisation to shake the foundations of the Zimbabwean capitalist state. But the party, which terms itself “social democratic” was too compromised and had lost its way, so despite the MDC winning 57 out of the 150 seats in the June 2000 election (with strongholds in Harare, Bulawayo and Matabeleland), Zanu-PF carried the day for the mere cost of getting wealthy air force chief Perence Shiri, the North Korean-trained former commander of the murderous 5th Brigade and a cousin of Mugabe, to get goon squads run by a thug called “Hitler” Hunzvi to occupy 1,600 farms. Hunzvi, who was paid Z\$20-million for his “election campaign” reportedly never carried a gun in his life, so he hardly qualifies as a war vet, and the 7,000-plus invaders are believed to include 1,500 former 5th Brigade men dressed in civilian gear, as well as spooks from the Central Intelligence Organisation. The cost to the Zimbabwean economy and the workers who will be hit hardest by the continuing economic recession is clearly not of interest to Mugabe, and will not

be of much interest to the new fat-cat parliamentarians of the MDC either, except as ballot-box fodder for the 2002 presidential election.

CONCLUSION

For revolutionaries in South Africa and elsewhere to support Mugabe because of some delusion that he is in any way a “socialist”, or simply because his MDC opponents are clearly pro-capitalist, ignores the class nature of the ruling Zanu-PF elite and is just as dismissive of the real issues that Zimbabwean workers are trying to grapple with as the capitalist media have been. Cross-class alliances always sell out the working class in favour of bourgeois and would-be bourgeois forces who manipulate leadership positions to their personal advantage. The only option is a class war fought (not necessarily in open combat) by the united class of workers, peasantry and poor against all usurpers and parasites, under the aegis of their own directly-democratic fighting organisations, free of any party leadership class. This is anarchy in action and it is the only thing that will save the Zimbabwean working class from another 20 years of misery. The key question – which is of crucial importance to revolutionaries in Africa and elsewhere – is, however, not so much “should the MDC have kept itself a pure workerist party?”, but rather “should the ZCTU have formed a cross-class political party to contest bourgeois elections, at all?” The obvious answer, for true revolutionaries, is that the ZCTU should have rejected all bourgeois forums and cross-class alliances in favour of building the self-emancipatory capacity of the Zimbabwean productive base, the working class. As the Nicaraguan anarchist trade unionist Augusto Sandino rightly said: “Only the workers and the peasants will go all the way to the end!”

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