



# socialistworld.net

website of the committee for a workers' international

Africa

## Workers' struggle and capitalist nightmare

Economic 'upswing' offers no improvement for the masses

Per-Åke Westerlund, CWI Sweden

28 September 2007

The following article is based on an introduction speech on Africa given during the 2007 CWI Summer School, in Belgium, on 3 August. Readers can also find articles on the recent strikes in Nigeria and South Africa on [socialistworld.net](http://socialistworld.net).

"Many features of this latest Nigerian farce, namely corruption and mismanagement, still scar many other parts of Africa. The post-colonial continent has hitherto been a colossal flop."

This editorial comment from the Economist magazine, following the Nigerian elections earlier this year, in spring, is typical of how right-wing politicians describe Africa today. This "colossal flop" is cynically treated as an "African" phenomenon, with no explanation given of its roots in colonialism, capitalism and imperialism.

In fact, Africa has been living through a period of increased economic growth, as well as increasing resistance and struggle of the masses. This year, this has been particularly underlined by the general strikes in South Africa and Nigeria.

Africa has seen an economic boom in the 2000s, with an average growth of 5 % a year since 2001. Foreign direct investment (FDI) into the continent quadrupled over the last six years. This is a boom mainly based on "China factors" i.e. a) increased trade with China, from \$3 billion in 1995 to 55 billion in 2006, b) Chinese investments in commodities, infrastructure and industry, c) the peak of the oil price and increased mineral prices.

For the masses, however, this upswing has offered no improvement, rather worsening conditions. Nigeria's biggest city, Lagos, is a city of "crime, poverty, nightmarish congestion, an almost total breakdown of services. We have no fuel, no food, water, no light, no free education" described a man working at the rubbish dump. (Financial Times, London, 13 July 2007).

Facts speak for themselves:

- 40 per cent of the African population of 900 million live on less than \$1 a day
- 72 per cent of the urban population in Africa lives in slum housing
- 85 per cent of people dying in HIV/aids live in Sub-Saharan Africa

## Colonialism and imperialism

While many researchers can find these figures,

the question is why is Africa in this state? By blaming "the Africans" – it is not difficult to find particularly corrupt regimes to use as an example – Western powers want to escape from their own historical and current role in Africa.

Colonialism, in most of Africa up to the 1960s, and the continuing neo-colonial economic exploitation via imperialism's domination of the world economy, is the main factors explaining the situation in Africa, today. Here are just a few general examples:

1. Since former colonial countries gained independence, imperialist powers have given financial and military support to the most oppressive and corrupt regimes, as long as it served their own power and profits.
2. Africa is plundered of its resources. \$150 billion worth of minerals is stolen every year, according to the African Union.
3. Most African states are or have been in a debt trap since the 1970s, paying huge amounts to the IMF etc on ever increasing loans.
4. Western subsidies undermine African production. For example, the US and the EU subsidises cotton producers with \$5bn a year, equivalent of a third of the total GDP of Burkina Faso, an important West African cotton producer.
5. Climate change will hit Africa hardest, with flooding in some parts and deserts spreading in others. Already 2007 saw the worst ever flooding in Sudan.

The effects of this capitalise plundering and its "division of labour" – which sees some become multi-billionaires, while most have nothing – are the wars, civil wars, failed states and massacres seen in Africa. Against this background, UN troops have been used in many regions: 15,000 troops are in Liberia, 20,000 in Congo and now the US wants 25,000 UN/AU troops in Sudan. But these troops offer no solution, and in many cases, only aggravate the situation. Another sign of desperation is that tens of thousands of refugees die every year, trying to reach Europe. Some awareness of the role played by imperialism has even hit Western popular culture recently, in, for example, the film, 'Blood Diamond', and in the most recent books of John Le Carré.

In the 1980s, Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) involving cuts in living standards were imposed on many African countries. The IMF and

the World Bank pushed for privatisations and state sector cuts as means to stop the economic crises. But the result was further economic decline. Africa's share of world trade fell from 6% in 1980 to 2% in 2002. The present economic upturn, however, has not followed any new economic policy. The NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa Development) is one of the latest projects for neo-liberal policies and increased exploitation by western and Chinese companies.

## Workers' strikes

Repeatedly, there has been strong resistance against neo-liberalism. Most Western media are completely silent about the resistance led by the working class, shown again this year with the high number of strikes and mass protests this year. Just to give some examples of strikes in 2007:

Gambia: dockworkers went on strike against redundancies. Zambia: in mid-July there was a long strike against effects of privatisation of housing and water in Ndola and there was also a strike by miners at Kansani Mine in Solwezi. Cameroon: Health workers won concessions after strike threats at the two biggest hospitals in Yaonde and Douala: 15 months arrears of wages paid, temporary workers should be accounted for in the budget and the hospitals promised to recruit 300 more staff. Ghana: Bus drivers' strike was planned when 300 drivers were threatened with redundancies. Workers had strike meetings with red bands and sang war songs. The union leader was dismissed as corrupt. Mozambique: Seasonal workers at Mafambisse sugar plantation won a pay rise of almost 50 per cent after strike. Liberia: University staff went on strike and security forces attacked a student demonstration in favour of the strike. Mali: There was a 24-hour general strike on 25-26 June.

## Guinea

One of the most impressive movements in 2006-2007 was the general strike in Guinea. This country was once regarded as the "pearl" of French West Africa, with half of global reserves of bauxite, which is the key substance in aluminium production. Even today, it is the biggest exporter of bauxite ore and the second in produc-

tion. Bauxite stands for 90 per cent of Guinea's exports. Ruled by the Western-backed Lansante Conté since he seized power in a 1984 coup, the country is blighted by poverty and over the last 10 years has witnessed drastically worsening conditions.

But in the last few years, the masses have been overcoming their fear of the Lansante Conté regime. The movement started with strikes of teachers, in January 2006, in demand for payment of back wages. There was also a one-week strike in the summer of 2006. The beginning of this year saw an 18-day general strike led by the trade unions. According to press reports, these have only around 5,000 members. But the strike call had mass support from the urban poor in all ethnic groups. In several instances, the masses chased away the police. Repression was severe, with 120 people killed. Troops from neighbouring countries were used as they were regarded by Conté to be more reliable.

Although this struggle started over wages, it soon developed into a struggle against the regime. As in many cases, however, the trade union leaders backed off from a total confrontation, since it would have raised the question of who should run society. For time being, they settled a deal for a new prime minister who works under Conté. However, this will not be a solution and, as in other countries, the question is how the strength of the masses can be transformed into the necessary political instrument - a fighting workers' party.

## Nigeria

The imperialist powers accepted the so-called elections in Nigeria this spring, despite their acknowledgement of massive fraud. In the south-south and southeast parts of the country, there were no elections at all. In Lagos, only 20 per cent voted. In Edo state, the former president of the National Labour Congress (NLC) won, but a different winner was officially declared. These were just a few examples. When the victory of opposition parties in some states was used as evidence of fair elections, the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM, CWI Nigeria) explained that opposition parties already ruled these states and were able to match the governing party with their levels of fraud, corruption and bribes. After all

reports about the fake elections, the new president, Yar'Adua, was present at the July G8 summit with Bush, Merkel, Blair etc, in Germany, since Nigeria is a key business partner for imperialism.

Over the last few years, the oil incomes of Nigeria have increased massively on the basis of the increased oil price. Oil provides 95 per cent of exports and 80 per cent of government revenues. On this basis, the Nigerian stock market is regarded among "world's top performers", with banking stocks trebled in price in six months.

But for the masses, the situation has become even worse than before, despite the boom and the return of civilian rule since 1999. 70 per cent of the population live on less than a dollar a day and 25 million are illiterate. "Recovery has failed to reach the poor", the Financial Times wrote on 12 July. Actually, key areas as electricity power and roads are now in a worse state than in 1999, when military rule ended. Nigeria has only installed electricity capacity of 4,500 MW (one eighth of South Africa's); with mostly up to half not working. The entire Sub-Saharan Africa has only the same electricity capacity as Poland (700 million inhabitants compared to 38 million). Manufacturing industry in Nigeria works at only 52 per cent of its capacity. Recently, China's rise as an export power has meant that it now has half of Nigeria's shoe market, while 200,000 jobs have been lost in the textile industry as a result of Asian competition.

Obasanjo, Nigeria's president from 1999-2007, who was previously a military ruler in the 1970s, followed a policy of privatisation and "reforms", hitting workers and poor, while benefiting the corrupt elite. This policy during an upsurge in oil prices led to enormous bitterness, as the masses compare it with first oil boom at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, when there were a least a few benefits for the masses like a big expansion of free education.

At the end of May, on the day of Yar'Adua's inauguration, there was only a small opposition rally, while, at the same time, contractors and politicians met at a Hilton hotel in the capital, Abuja, seeking positions with the new government. The DSM, warned that the limited protest was not to be taken as proof of a 'calm period' ahead. Nigeria saw seven general strikes and mass protests from 2002-2005, and mass anger can explode again. With increased oil prices, Nigeria is in a potentially explosive situation. People ask: 'Where

is the money going? Who is benefiting from the high fuel price? Why should we pay more for fuel when it is the world price that rose, not the price of its production in Nigeria?'

Within a month, Nigeria saw its largest general strike. As a confirmation of a fighting mood, even before this strike, 16,000 university lectures were on strike for three months, demanding increased funding for education.

The general strike was triggered by the very last decisions of the Obasanjo regime, including, to increase fuel prices from 65 to 75 naira. This hit everyone who needs fuel to produce electricity and it caused increased travel costs. Value Added Tax (a form of sales tax) went from 5 to 10 per cent. Obasanjo also allowed the sale of two state oil refineries to billionaire tycoons who were his friends.

The strike received the biggest support for any general strike in the history of Nigeria. It brought together all the anger against the ruling elite who steal the country's oil wealth, shamelessly rig elections, and treat the mass of the population with contempt. But with most working people dependent on daily incomes, it rapidly raised the question: what is the next step? The DSM stressed the need for working people need to be in control of their struggle, at all times: "Activists in workplaces and communities must take immediate steps to hold assemblies that can democratically form Action Committees" to take care of the struggle and the needs of the struggling masses. Eventually, the struggle comes down to the issue of who should rule society. Despite its condemnation of April's rigged elections, the trade union leadership was not prepared to challenge the government, and did not believe the working class was able to take the struggle further.

The strike ended with the government retreating from the VAT increase and the tycoons withdrawing from the refinery deal. Both those threats, however, will inevitable come back as part of the programme of a capitalist government. But worse the union leadership made a 180-degree turn following the end of the strike, with statements about a "strategic partnership" with President Yar'Adua. The president, feeling the pressure from below, said he stood for a "new, different" type of government, even a unity government giving some pieces of the wealth to

"opposition" politicians. The masses won no material improvement from the strike, but the importance of strikes and struggles goes further than the issues triggering them. In this case, the strength of the working masses, and their willingness to struggle was heavily underlined. However this strike's result has temporarily led some workers and poor to seek 'personal' solutions to problems. But the underlying crisis in Nigeria means that activists will continue to discuss the lessons of recent events, while broader layers will once again see the need for struggle. Immediately, the creation of fighting democratic workers' organisations will be a focus for the DSM in Nigeria.

## South Africa

Friday 1 June 2006, saw the start of the biggest strike in South Africa's history. Almost one million public sector workers participated, with marches in 43 towns and cities on the first day. The demand was for a 12 % wage increase. This time, workers, and even trade union leaders, it seemed, were prepared to challenge the tradition of the government settle the wage deal from above.

The ANC government answered brutally, with threats to sack workers who defied a strike ban "in essential services". State forces also used violence. "Tear gas, stun grenades and rubber bullets to attack striking workers", the comrades from the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM, CWI South Africa) reported. The DSM was very involved in the strike, while, at the same time, criticising the union leadership for not preparing the strike sufficiently. The DSM advocated "a rolling campaign" of mass action, under the protection of an indefinite strike notice, as a build-up towards a general strike, drawing in the unions in the private sector", to gain momentum in the strike.

The strike took place after eight years of economic boom. The stock exchange was on an all time high, and the state had its first budget surplus (11 billion rand). Nothing of this reached the workers. Inflation is at 6.3 per cent, higher than previous wage increases. Unemployment stands at 40 per cent. Alongside the stock market, household debts are also booming. This is a result of the neo-liberal policies followed by the ANC governments.

The strike ended on 28 June, with the union leaders retreating in face of a government ultimatum. The deal was settled on 7.5% wage increase, up from the original offer of 5.3 %, but far from the demand of the unions. The government underestimated the mood, and thought they could rely on the union leaders at an earlier stage. The state repression, "Will leave an indelible imprint on mass consciousness", the DSM stressed.

The right-wing media tried to link the strike to the ongoing leadership struggle in the ANC. In December, the ANC will decide over its next party leader, who is expected to become the country's new president. The present president, Thabo Mbeki, cannot stand in the next elections, according to the constitution. Mbeki's candidate for president, not chosen yet, will be challenged by former deputy ANC leader, Jacob Zuma, who has populist appeal. Zuma's attempts to gain support from the strike, however, failed, and politically there is no fundamental difference between Zuma and Mbeki. It is a power struggle, since South Africa, like many other governments, gives many power to the president. This meant ANC leaders loyal to Mbeki were able to accumulate huge fortunes. An ANC leader interviewed in the Financial Times (London) said they were not expecting any change of policy, whoever wins. The ANC is "not facing a Trotskyite push" from the trade unions, it was claimed.

Despite strong support for the June strike in local ANC branches, the ANC and its allies, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), will not take a new political course. The call for a new workers' party is a slogan and a campaign that will gain in strength, based on the experience of June's historic strike.

## Congo (Democratic republic of Congo)

Last year, Western powers, led by US imperialism, pushed through so-called elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The US, the EU, China and other powers, wanted Joseph Kabila to win the elections. He even received tanks from Beijing, as one of many gifts (aid from richer countries makes up half of the Congo state budget). Kabila controlled the central bank

and the diamond and mining companies during the "transition", after years of terrible conflict and a peace deal was signed in South Africa, in 2003. For this reason, Kabila got "unconditional international support", writes the International Crisis Group (ICG), since the US, Canada, Belgium, South Africa and other states "promoted their economic interests". In a similar way, the West accepted President Paul Biya's "victory" through massive fraud, in oil-rich Cameroon, in July, this year.

The Congo saw civil wars from 1997-2003, with up to five million killed. This was a conflict essentially over control of the country's huge mineral wealth. The 'peace process' afterwards was built on sand. There are 330,000 militia soldiers supposedly disarmed, but with no money or jobs. As in other African states, there is hardly any electricity, and Congo has only 300 miles of asphalt road. It means that only multinational companies, with helicopters etc, can transport all they need.

When Kabila's victory was announced, on 24 November, one million people took to the streets in protest, in the capital city, Kinshasa. In August 2006, there was armed fighting between Kabila's troops and militias belonging to his challenger, Jean-Pierre Bemba. In March, earlier this year, fighting left 600 dead, and Bemba went into exile in Portugal.

The new Congo regime is extremely unstable. Kabila's army is the "worst human rights abuser", according to the ICG, carrying out murders, rapes etc. There are 30 different parties in the new government, with 60 ministers. Only an estimated 75 % of Kinshasa's population of six million can "satisfy their basic needs". To keep "order" in the capital, Kabila relied on support from Angolan troops, for which Angola has received three 'diamond villages' as payment.

The Crisis Group outlines the perspective of a "drift to authoritarianism and urban unrest in the West, while militias continue to clash with the weak national army in the East". Kabila might prepare for a military attack on the Kivu, in eastern Congo.

Despite the low economic level of the country, the years 2003-2006 saw 40 strikes by state employees, in schools, hospitals, water service etc. Their wages are around 20 dollars a month, but

many civil servants do not even get any wage. The new government has promised to pay back wages in September 2007. Whether this takes place or not, will be one factor deciding what will happen in Congo this autumn.

## Sudan

Since the armed conflict in Darfur started in 2003, more than 200,000 people have died, and two million people have been forced to leave their homes. There are 250,000 'Internally Dispersed Persons', this year, alone. For its own reasons, the US government denounced what it previously described as "genocide" in Sudan. There is no doubt about the scale of the suffering in Sudan. But what are the motives of US imperialism? This is particularly the case in Sudan. Here Washington calculates the number of conflict victims using the same statistical methods which the administration denounces when they are used to estimate a dead toll of hundreds of thousands in Iraq.

Despite the strong tone of the US, Washington is still relying on Khartoum in its "war against terror". Leaders of Sudan's ruling party, the NCP, even visited the CIA head quarters, recently. In a recent UN resolution on Sudan, advocating 26,000 troops from the UN and the African Union (AU) should be deployed in Darfur, the threat of sanctions was dropped.

The long north-south civil war in Sudan ended in a peace agreement in 2005. The rebel movement of the south, the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), officially entered the national government. Western imperialism has strong links to the SPLM. "In many respects, south Sudan is already its own country", commented The Economist (London, 28 July 2007) and the magazine predicted a 'sovereign south Sudan', by 2011.

The Darfur Peace Agreement, signed last year, has had no practical effect whatsoever. It was only signed by one wing of the rebel SLA group, while there are a multitude of other SLA factions, plus other rebel groups, such as the JEM, NRF etc. Meanwhile, the regime continues to use the army and the Janjaweed militias to attack rebels and civilians in Darfur. Both Chad and the Central African Republic are militarily involved. Chad, with French support, provides bases for

the Darfur rebels. Khartoum supports rebel groups in Chad.

Sudan's President Bashir received support from China because of Beijing's need for Sudanese oil. Now, however, even China demands his regime cooperates with the UN resolution. Bashir may do so, to a degree, as long as it allows him to stay in power and control the national wealth.

The imperialist interventions in Sudan, as in rest of Africa, will not change the situation for the suffering masses. The US will intervene as part of a power struggle with China, over influence and raw material in Africa. Washington is, for example, calculating on an increased share from Africa of its imported oil.

## Somalia

The military invasion by Ethiopia into Somalia, in the beginning of this year, supported by the US, did not stabilise the country. On the contrary. Somalia is going through a rapid 'Iraqisation', with armed resistance and suicide bombers. The Western-backed government is completely isolated. Former warlords are back and Ethiopian troops do most of the fighting, supported by the US. Uganda has 1,500 troops in Somalia, with no other African Union states taking part, despite earlier decisions by the AU. The US pays the bill of the military operation, at \$100 million.

Somalia is also a humanitarian catastrophe. This March and April, alone, saw 400,000 new refugees created and 1,600 civilians killed. Food prices increased 50%, this year.

## Zimbabwe

To deal with the extreme crisis in Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe launched three "radical" laws. First, companies should have 51% "real Zimbabwean ownership", i.e. 'black ownership'. Second, the government can nationalise the mining industry and third, a commission for wages and prices was set up to reduce prices by 50%. These desperate measures only succeeded in worsening the crises. Mugabe has no real control of the economy, and shops are now empty. Only dog food, toilet paper and washing powder are for sale.

Inflation in Zimbabwe is running at 6,000-13,000%. The Zimbabwean Consumer Council says a

family of five needed 61,097 Zimbabwean dollars to live for one month, one year ago, but now they need 8.2 million.

Robert Mugabe was for long regarded a 'model pupil' by Western imperialism, following his taking advice from the IMF etc. Eventually, the IMF-imposed policies led to a growth of workers' protests, at the end of the 1990s, and moves to form a workers' party. However, pro-capitalist elements ensured that no workers' party was formed. Instead, the Movement for Democratic Change emerged as a pro-capitalist opposition. In response, Mugabe and his ruling clique began to use anti-colonial rhetoric. This made Mugabe and Zimbabwe, alongside Sudan, a favourite example of 'bad Africa' in the Western media. The concern of imperialism and neighbouring governments, however, is first and foremost, to prevent mass struggle and mass migration. There are already more than two million Zimbabweans living in South Africa. Imperialism promotes the Zimbabwean opposition around the pro-West MDC and Morgan Tsvangirai, who, in turn, want some kind of agreement with factions in the ruling Zanu PF party.

Trade unions in Zimbabwe have a tradition of struggle. A general strike called on 2-3 April, this year, failed, however, since the leadership had not prepared for it. The union tops told people to stay home, not to mobilise their collective strength. Nevertheless, workers' anger is growing over their desperate conditions. The bank workers' union, for example, threatened strike action several times, this year.

## Update on Zimbabwe (15 September 2007):

The economic crisis has aggravated further, since early August. On 9 September, the country's 100,000 teachers went on strike for higher wages. The government offered a raise from Z\$2.9 million to Z\$6.9 million a month, but the union demands Z\$24.2 million. The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) called for a national strikes again, on 19-20 September, and the teachers' union will take part in it. On 12 September, tax collectors were out on a one-day strike.

President Mugabe's attempt to stall hyperinflation has clearly failed. The response from

most food producing companies - including multinationals, like Unilever - was to stop production entirely. The shortage have gone even worse. In mid-September, the regime retreated and allowed prices to be raised 20 per cent (from the July cut by 50 per cent), in order to satisfy the private producers. In addition, VAT was increased, raising prices even further. Real inflation is now estimated to be 25,000 per cent. The Zimbabwean dollar has been officially devalued, from 250 Zdollars per US\$1 to 30,000. Mugabe has declared the indexing of salaries, wages and prices of goods banned, something the ZCTU has branded as "illegal, unconstitutional and a violation of international labour conventions."

At the same time, Mugabe is struggling for his political survival. In negotiations with the two MDC factions, the regime has made some concessions, attempting to tie this opposition into supporting elections, in March or June next year. The MDC will get promises that the law used to attacks its protests will be changed, at the same time, as it might scale down those protests. Before then, Mugabe is facing the Congress of his own Zanu PF, which has not yet formally chosen him as the candidate for the elections, despite his request for that. Again, the only way forward for the Zimbabwean masses is to put no thrust in either of the political camps in the elections. Only their own struggle, linked up with workers and poor in the region, can take control over the resources and show a way forward.

## 50 years since independence

This year, marks 50 years since the former British colony, Ghana, gained independence, the first colony in sub-Saharan Africa to do so. Independence was achieved on the basis of experiences of World War II (African soldiers, increased exploitation and anti-racist propaganda), the independence struggle in India, and the rise of US imperialism (challenging France and Britain). A key role in the independence struggle was played by the working class, with general strikes in Tanganyika in 1947 and the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1950, and a 160 day long strike by 16,000 railway workers in French West Africa. Also Kenya,

Zambia and Nigeria have trade unions traditions from those days.

But while the struggle against colonialism has mass support, it was generally not a democratic mass movement, with independent workers' organisations. However, in many countries there was support for the general idea of socialism, as the way forward. Often the Soviet Union, China and Cuba, despite the absence of genuine democratic rights, were seen as models of how countries could develop their economies and society by breaking with capitalism. African leaders often reflected that pressure, calling themselves "socialists" and, while not breaking with capitalism, developing so-called "mixed" economies that had a large state element. But, in Africa, this model of "controlled capitalism" failed much faster than in Europe. State companies and plans for the economies were run by bureaucrats. The economies were looted by the local elite and often under the control of imperialist states and companies. For a period, governments could play off the then two superpowers (US imperialism and Stalinist Russia), but, with the collapse of Stalinism, and increased capitalist globalisation in the 1990s, African and its masses went into even deeper crises.

The horrors of the civil wars, most recent in West and Central Africa, underline that capitalism and landlordism in Africa only offers more violent break up, fighting over resources, climate wastelands and starvation. The only way forward is global democratic socialism. The struggle of workers and the poor masses in Africa will play a decisive role towards achieving this goal.