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The West's Neocolonial Adventure: Africa and the Struggle Against Imperialism

By Abayomi Azikiwe

March 01, 2014

Feb 21, 2014, marks the 49th anniversary of the assassination of Malcolm X, El Hajj Malik Shabazz, who was gunned down before hundreds of people in Harlem at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem in 1965. Nearly five decades since his murder there are still many remaining questions about the conspiracy to eliminate this heroic and iconic figure who was a legend in his own time and has been immortalized since he was taken away from his family, comrades and supporters worldwide.

Malcolm X represented the best within transformational leadership during the 20th century. He was born into a Garveyite family with both of his parents playing leading roles within the Universal Negro Improvement Association–African Communities League (UNIA-ACL).

Malcolm's parents met at a UNIA Convention held in Montreal, Quebec (Canada) in 1919. This gathering proved to be pivotal in the growth of the Garvey Movement. The following year the UNIA would hold its convention in New York City where for a month the organization would hammer out its program and make an international appeal for the liberation of African people.

Louise Little, Malcolm's mother, was originally from the Caribbean island-nation of Grenada. His father, Earl Little, a Baptist preacher, was born in Georgia.

Earl Little was reportedly killed by the white supremacist organization known as the Black Legion in 1931. This racist and fascist group was similar to the Ku Klux Klan and carried out terror campaigns against African Americans and labor activists in Michigan.

As a result of his father's brutal murder, his mother became isolated and was committed to a mental institution for nearly three decades. The Little family would be broken up and the children were sent to foster care and to live with other relatives.

Malcolm would eventually move to Boston in 1941 where he fell into the street life and landed in prison by 1946. During his time in prison between 1946-1952, he became an intellectual and later a member of the Nation of Islam under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad.

Of course Malcolm would come to Detroit and Inkster, a suburb outside the city, to work and organize for the NOI. He became an assistant Minister of Mosque Number One where he recruited co-workers, youth, street people, members of churches and anyone willing to listen to the NOI's views and world outlook.

In 1957, Malcolm was appointed as the national spokesman for the NOI. He traveled around the United States preaching and organizing for Elijah Muhammad.

Later in 1959 Malcolm would take his first trip abroad to Egypt, Ghana, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. He was acting as an emissary of Elijah Muhammad and the NOI.

Malcolm brought politics, material historical analysis and international affairs to the NOI. He would found the Messenger Magazine in 1959 that later grew into the Muhammad Speaks newspaper in 1961. This newspaper became widely circulated inside the African American community across the U.S.

Malcolm X and Global Struggle for African and World Emancipation

Like Garvey, Du Bois, Henry Sylvester Williams, Anna J. Cooper, Addie Hunton, Amy Ashwood Garvey and others before him, Malcolm X realized that the plight of African people inside North America was inextricably linked to the conditions of the masses on the continent and in the Diaspora. He also recognized that the colonized and neo-colonized peoples were engaging in mass and armed struggles to win their national liberation in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, the Caribbean and South America.

In 1960 in New York City at the Teresa Hotel in Harlem he would play leading role in hosting the-then Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro and his delegation which had traveled to the United Nations. The Cuban delegation was treated in a hostile and racist fashion until Fidel moved up to Harlem and won the respect and recognition he and his comrades deserved.

However, by 1963, Malcolm X would run into obstacles within the NOI. He would be forced out of the organization and in March 1964 he formed the Muslim Mosque, Inc. and later the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) in June of the same year.

His second trip abroad in April and May 1964 was much more political and organizationally directed. He would visit Mecca for Hajj but also spent time in Egypt under the late President Gamal Abdel Nasser and in Ghana, which was led at the time by Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah, the chief strategist and tactician of the African Revolution.

Upon returning to New York Malcolm indicated that his organizational activities would not be limited to demanding the acquisition of full democratic rights and self-determination for African Americans in North America but would seek allies in Africa, the Arab world and other regions of the globe where oppressed people resided. He went back to Africa, the Middle East and Western Europe between July and November 1964 to further seek working relationships with progressive and revolutionary governments as well as national liberation movements.

It was Malcolm's success in internationalizing the Black struggle during 1964 and early 1965 that brought down the raft of U.S. imperialism against him. Even today his death is described by bourgeois commentators and historians as being more of a tragedy rather than a political assault on the movements for emancipation worldwide.

Pan-Africanism and Internationalism Today

In the 21st century the legacy of Malcolm X and those who have followed in his steps is more relevant than it was five decades ago. As Malcolm observed in 1964-65, the imperialists have shifted their focus from direct to indirect rule. Their objective is to halt, frustrate and if necessary, overturn all advancements made by oppressed and working people throughout the globe.

Capitalism is in a deeper economic and political crisis today than it was during the 1960s. In the second decade of the 21st century the ideologues of the capitalist system put forward no solutions to the problems of poverty, joblessness, environmental degradation, racism and national oppression, gender inequality, etc. All the spokespersons for this exploitative system articulate are more measures leading to greater austerity, war and political repression across the world from Africa, to Europe to the entire Western hemisphere.

Five decades ago the Democratic administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a so-called "War on Poverty." However, the fundamental causes of poverty and income inequality were never attacked by the system. When the masses of African Americans went into the streets to demand Civil Rights their efforts were thwarted by the state. Later as the movement became more militant and armed it was ruthlessly repressed by the local police, the intelligence services, the National Guard and the Army Airborne Divisions.

After the assassination of Malcolm X, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference would take a position against the U.S. imperialist war being waged on the Vietnamese people respectively in 1966 and 1967. SNCC would be met with political and law-enforcement repression and Dr. King was assassinated as a direct result of their people's struggle against poverty, racism and war.

From the period of Johnson's lackluster "war on poverty" to the "benign neglect" of the Nixon administration and subsequent regimes, structural unemployment and poverty has worsened. In this period the ruling class openly advocates the further mass impoverishment of workers, women, trade unionists, the nationally oppressed, workers in general and even retirees.

In Detroit, where Malcolm X organized during the 1950s, the very social base which served as the cadre for the NOI and subsequent organizations such as the Republic of New Africa (RNA) and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW), has been systematically eroded due to the development of the capitalist system of production and social relations. Notions of a post-industrial or post-capitalist society became an ideological tool to dissuade and demoralize the working class and the oppressed from organizing in their own interests.

If the profits accrued from the exploitation of workers in the U.S. are not enough then the ruling class will move to other areas of the country or outside its borders. The impact of these policies has still not satisfied the owners of the means of production and now they want to repress the masses even further to take away not only the social safety net which grew out of the struggles during the Great Depression and Post-World War II period but to also break its contracts with organized labor stealing their homes, wages, jobs, pensions and healthcare systems.

Due to the crisis of the world capitalist system, even the superficial trappings of bourgeois democracy have been torn asunder. In order to enforce austerity a system of emergency management and forced bankruptcy is being implemented in Detroit and the state of Michigan as a precursor and blueprint for the working class across the U.S.

A key element of this process of the disempowerment and super-exploitation of the masses is imperialist war. The Pentagon budget has grown exponentially even in the aftermath of the Cold War where the much talked about "peace dividend" never materialized during the 1990s and in the successive decades.

The war against working people in the U.S. is an extension of the campaign of vilification, demonization and outright occupation of the oppressed nations. It is only the rich defense contractors, industrialists and bankers who profit from imperialist conquest. Since the beginning of the so-called "war on terror" the overall conditions of working and oppressed people in the U.S. has decline precipitously.

Consequently, our struggle against the economic crisis, racist violence and austerity is part and parcel of a broader movement taking root around the world. As Malcolm X and later Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would repeatedly state "our problem is not only an American problem, but a world problem."

Some Recent Case Studies on the Intensifying Global Class Struggle

Egypt and Tunisia

An indication of the people's willingness to fight the system of global oppression was illustrated clearly in Tunisia and Egypt during 2011. In southern Tunisia a national rebellion took root leading to the fall of the former dictator Zen Abidine Ben Ali in January of that year.

Later in Egypt, a national uprising, which resulted in the deaths of at least 800 people, erupted on January 25 leading to the removal of Hosni Mubarak who had dominated politics since the assassination of Anwar Sadat in October 1981. The movement in Egypt influenced developments in other parts of Africa and the Middle East—eventually inspiring the Wisconsin capitol takeover and standoff that winter.

Of course the Occupy Wall Street Movement (OWS) can be traced to the actions in North Africa and Wisconsin. The Occupy Movement spread across the U.S. and indeed the world with occupations in England, Australia and other countries.

Although these events prove that when pushed far enough the masses will rise up, the question becomes what are we fighting for? How do we transform a righteous people's rebellion into a revolution that can not only affect the system but overthrow it?

This is why we must place emphasis on the ideological struggle and the necessity of revolutionary organization. V.I. Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party and the Russian Revolution, understood the questions of organization and power. In his works on "The State and Revolution," "What Is To Be Done?," and "Marxism and Insurrection," Lenin takes up these issues.

One fundamental difference between Marxism-Leninism and Anarchism is how the state is viewed. How can working people transform the state to serve its own interests? Lenin pointed out through his study of Marx and Engels observations related to the Paris Commune of 1870-71 as well as the revolutionary uprisings of 1848-1851, that in order to move towards a classless society the workers and the oppressed must seize state power to fully eliminate all vestiges of exploitation and inequality.

These challenges become even more significant for the African Revolution in light of the legacy of slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism. Today the imperialists are able to rule indirectly through patronage, bribery, the tactical support of bourgeois class forces within the oppressed nations. If these measures are not sufficient the U.S., NATO and its allies can send in their military units to carry out aerial bombardments, drone attacks, counter-intelligence operations, and economic strangulation through sanctions or complete occupations with boots on the ground.

In Egypt the situation appears to have come full circle with the military back in power where Field Marshall Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi poised to take off his military uniform and run as a civilian president. The U.S., which had subsidized the Egyptian armed forces as rulers for three-and-a-half decades, refuses to label the events as a coup in order to maintain its control and influence over this strategic state.

In Tunisia, left politicians face assassination and other forms of political repression in order to open the way for a technocratic neocolonial state still in alliance with France and Washington.

The form of the political system is emphasized over its essence which is still geared toward pleasing the West and its foreign policy imperatives for the region.

Central African Republic and South Sudan

Dominating corporate news coverage of the African continent recently has been the internal conflicts within the Central African Republic and South Sudan. These states have been the scene of military interventions by France, the U.S., the European Union (EU) and its allies in the region.

When discussing the events in the CAR and South Sudan the western media outlets often emphasize the ethnic-religious aspects of the conflicts and crises. The general tone of the reporting is to provide a rationale for imperialist intervention in order ostensibly restore order or possibly “democracy.”

Nonetheless, the role of these African states in the imperialist system of economic exploitation and oppression is never pointed out. Neither is there any serious mention of the strategic resources that exist in abundance in both the CAR and South Sudan.

France had colonized the CAR for decades and has always maintained both a military and economic presence inside the country. Paris’ motivations in the CAR are by no means “humanitarian” since colonialism was never a project to improve the conditions of peoples in Africa but to conquer, expropriate and exploit the people and their resources.

As more French troops poured into the CAR the greater the security risks were to its people. Many CAR residents realized this and began to organize demonstrations against the role of the French and Chadian troops.

The government of interim President Michel Djotodia was forcefully removed in January and a new regime headed by Catherine Samba-Panza, the former mayor of the capital of Bangui, was installed. However, the violence against the minority Muslim population continues. The situation is such that tens of thousands of Muslims, both CAR citizens and foreign nationals from Chad and Sudan are being forced to flee.

France announced that it will deploy another 400 troops bringing the official total up to 2,000 and that the EU will also send in another 1,000 soldiers. Several thousand troops from Chad, Rwanda and the Republic of Congo-Brazzaville are also in the country under the auspices of the MISCA, a Central African regional initiative, and the United Nations Security Council, which authorized the occupation led by France.

The Pentagon has been assisting the occupation of the CAR by ferrying troops into the state and providing intelligence and logistical support. In October 2011, the Obama administration had announced that it was deploying Special Forces and military trainers to four East and Central African states including the CAR along with the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and South Sudan.

Mineral resources found in the CAR include gold, diamonds and uranium. The imperialists and their multi-national mining firms want to further exploit these resources for the benefit of Wall Street and the Pentagon.

In the Republic of South Sudan, the U.S. along with the State of Israel pushed for years in favor of the partition of the Republic of Sudan, which prior to 2011, was the largest geographic nation-state in Africa. The country was emerging as a significant oil-producing state marketing 500,000 barrels per day.

The Republic of Sudan also has natural gas and other hydro-electric potential for regional power generation. Strategically located on the Nile River, a project is underway with neighboring Ethiopia to build a Great Renaissance Dam that would redirect large sections of the Nile so that other states within East, North and Central Africa can deepen their cooperation through power generation and trade.

British colonialism and U.S. neocolonialism are at the root of the current crisis between the Republic of Sudan and South Sudan as well as the internal problems within the two now divided states. The role of the People's Republic of China also cannot be ignored since most of the oil concessions in the Republic of Sudan were held by China and other Asian states.

Therefore the partition of the country has brought about economic hardships for both states. Yet these issues are rarely mentioned, if at all, when the situation prevailing inside both the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan are discussed in the Western press.

The role of Uganda, a key U.S. ally, has been instrumental in determining the outcome of the initial phase of the conflict between South Sudan President Salva Kiir and ousted Vice-President Riek Machar. Uganda's government wants to maintain stability within South Sudan and have therefore sent thousands of its own troops into the country to bolster the Kiir regime.

Peace talks at the African Union (AU) headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia are being undermined by the Ugandan military presence. The U.S. utilized its newly-created East African Response Force, a unit of the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), to enter South Sudan with greater force. Pentagon troops were deployed from the AFRICOM military base in the Horn of Africa state of Djibouti at Camp Lemonnier.

All throughout East Africa the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) maintains a strong presence. In Somalia, the CIA has a field station and launches drone attacks against alleged Al-Shabaab operatives in various regions of the country.

In Somalia there are 22,000 troops occupying the country from several U.S.-allied states in Africa including Uganda, Burundi, Sierra Leone and Djibouti. These forces are maintained through funding and training from Washington and Brussels. The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has recently announced that the 2,000 Kenyan Defense Forces troops have been integrated into its operations from the south of the country which also has oil and is strategically located on the Gulf of Aden, one of the most lucrative shipping lanes in the world.

To secure the utilization of the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, there are flotillas of warships off the coast of Somalia from both the Pentagon and the EU Naval Force. The region of East Africa has also witness large-scale findings of additional petroleum and natural gas resources both inland and off shore from Somalia down to Mozambique.

Consequently, we can expect an escalating presence of the Pentagon and the EU within the East and Central African regions. These military operations are clearly designed as well to contain and block the greater involvement of the People's Republic of China in this region of the continent.

South Africa and Zimbabwe

The Republic of South Africa has gained considerable attention with the passing of former African National Congress (ANC) leader and President Nelson Mandela. People within South Africa, the continent and the world mourned the passing of this freedom fighter on December 5, 2013.

South Africa has the strongest economy on the African continent and the largest working class. The working class in South Africa is still quite militant with ongoing strikes in the mining, automotive, agricultural and service industries of the national economy which is well integrated into the world capitalist system.

During the 1980s, the working class movement through the trade unions came to the fore making the demise of the apartheid a reality. The combined forces of the mass and trade union movements along with the armed struggle and the international solidarity campaigns proved to be a winning strategy in the defeat of one of the most egregious forms of national oppression internationally.

Apartheid, like slavery, Jim Crow and classical colonialism, was an economic system of exploitation. Even though the forms of racist discrimination have been legally abolished the South African state and economy still remains within the capitalist sphere of influence.

The South African Communist Party during the anti-apartheid struggle for national liberation characterized the system in the country as "colonialism of a special type." Nonetheless since the ascendancy of the ANC to political power, South Africa is facing the same problems that other states on the continent are grappling with. There are the aspects of modern-day capitalism, i.e. high unemployment, underemployment, burgeoning class divisions, the intransigence of capital and the threat of imperialist intervention.

With the upcoming elections in South Africa on May 7, a struggle is unfolding between the ANC and its allies within the SACP and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) on the one hand and the Democratic Alliance party backed up by the mine owners and industrial magnates on the other. Although we would never claim as some ultra-leftists and reactionaries do, that there has been no progress in South Africa in light of the advances in housing, education, affirmative action, public transport and international relations, there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done to re-correct the legacy of the settler-colonial system of apartheid.

Mines which produced 80 percent of the world's supply of platinum must be nationalized for the benefit of the workers inside the country. This is the only solution to the conditions under which the workers are toiling prompting them to sustain strikes and other labor actions in their demands for better wages and working conditions.

In neighboring Zimbabwe, the ZANU-PF government in 2000 paved the way for the large-scale redistribution of land which had been stolen by the white settlers during the later years of the 19th century. The government of President Robert Mugabe suffered sanctions and other efforts to both destabilize and overthrow the sovereign state of Zimbabwe.

Nevertheless, ZANU-PF has been able to hold out from this onslaught over the last fifteen years. There is much discussion now on how to further the empowerment of the African masses through the nationalization of mining and other sectors.

It seems inevitable that South Africa and Namibia will eventually take a similar course as Zimbabwe. These states combined with other regional entities can set the pace for greater mechanisms of economic and political unity throughout Africa.

Most states within the AU have stood by Zimbabwe in its struggle to defeat the western-backed sanctions and other forms of destabilization. At the recent AU Summit in Ethiopia, President Mugabe was voted in as Vice-Chair of the continental organization setting the stage for its takeover of the institution in 2015.

In the recent elections in Zimbabwe where ZANU-PF won the poll by a landslide, all relevant regional African organizations endorsed the outcome illustrating support for land reform and other forms of empowerment throughout the continent. Despite the sanctions imposed by Britain, the U.S., the EU and Australia, the Republic of South Africa, the regional Southern African Development Community (SADC), the AU in addition to the People's Republic of China have maintained and enhanced fraternal relations with Zimbabwe.

Conclusion: Our Tasks as Anti-Imperialists

We must continue our solidarity with the struggles of working and oppressed peoples throughout the globe. The efforts on the part of the ruling class to divide the peoples of the so-called Global South from those residing in the more Northern industrialized regions cannot be allowed to succeed.

Any vestiges of “protectionism” and national chauvinism which remain among the workers in the West can only be described as political reaction emanating from a delusional worldview. These outlooks have gotten workers nowhere in the current period since their wages have been lowered and the ideological offensive on the part of the ruling class is intensifying.

Workers and the nationally oppressed inside the U.S. must answer the bankers and bosses with acts of solidarity with the peoples of Africa, the Middle East, Asia-Pacific and South America. Workers in South Africa should be championed in their heroic struggles for a living wage and control over their wealth and conditions of employment.

In Colombia workers at General Motors who have been injured on the job are thrown away like trash. A coalition of Detroit workers and community activists have taken up the plight of the injured Colombian GM workers and have provided concrete actions of solidarity through demonstrations, public relations campaigns and material support.

There is growing support for the revolutions in Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia. Ruling class propaganda against all the forces of progress, socialism and revolution in South America has often been ignored by the people of the U.S. and Western Europe.

Many people who have traveled to these Caribbean and South American states are struck by the degree to which working and poor people have been empowered. In Cuba there are social gains that have been in existence for decades in the areas of healthcare, technological and scientific research that remain unmatched in the U.S.

The attempted isolation by U.S. imperialism of progressive states and socialist construction in South America has not worked. The South American governments are looking to Africa, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region for allies.

These trends are reflected in the African-South American Summit, the BRICS Summit, and the Non-aligned Movement (NAM), which is currently chaired by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Such developments in international relations are a manifestation of a rising consciousness and unity among the former colonial and neo-colonial states and peoples.

Workers and oppressed peoples in the West must embrace and defend these gains in order to learn lessons that can be beneficial in the overall global class struggle. The degree to which our solidarity is expressed with the peoples of the world the further we will be along in winning a world devoid of exploitation and oppression therefore creating the conditions for the realization of a socialist future.