

South Africa: Anti-Apartheid International Solidarity: Lessons for Renewing Internationalism Today

Friday 9 April 2021, by [KAAF Gunnett](#) (Date first published: 14 March 2021).

The anti-apartheid international solidarity was forged on the global terrain of the capitalist world system that was shaped by the conditions, social and political forces that emerged in the (post-World War II) postwar period, up to 1994. Let's try and reread this history, with the benefit of hindsight and see what can we learn for renewing internationalism for advancing radical struggles today.

The Postwar Context: Hope, Progress and Reaction

The end of the Second World War, in 1945, brought about hope for world peace and progressive transformation in social relations across the globe; between countries and within countries. In the Global South, there was hope for an end to colonialism, apartheid, domination and all forms of discrimination. In the Global North, there was hope for the improvement in the social conditions of workers and women, even though the prospects of a socialist revolution had been crushed in the interwar period (1918-1939).

The establishment of the United Nations brought about relative peace and multilateralism in the global governance, but power relations between the countries of the Global North and those of the Global South continued to be unequal and depict imperialist relations. The ascendancy of the US to the position of a global hegemon, replacing the UK, brought an end to imperial rivalries of the pre-World War II period, and instead ushered in an era of collective imperialism by powerful countries of the north led by the US (the triad made up of the US, Europe and Japan) .

The cold war also intensified between the West (led by US) and the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc. I'm deliberately saying "intensified", instead of saying it was inaugurated because the cold war started in 1922, after the end of the protracted Russian Civil War (1918-1922) that had eight foreign armies against the Red Army.

The postwar period was not just the era of cold war rivalry between the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc on one hand, and the US and western allies on the other hand, as mostly painted in the mainstream academic literature and in the media. Rather, there were four main power blocs that dominated the postwar period. These are; (1) the US and western allies and Japan, (2) the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, (3) China and (4) Nonaligned Movement. China was an important power bloc that even had veto powers in the UN security council. As a socialist tendency, China was independent of the Soviet Union even before the Sino- Soviet conflict broke out in the early 1960s.

On the economic front, the postwar period revived and restructured global capitalism anew, following the collapse of capital accumulation and deep crisis (the Great Depression that began in

1929) of the interwar war period, and ushered in the longest period of capitalist growth and prosperity, that ended in the stagflation crisis of the mid-1970s. This was the 30 years of Golden Age, as it is referred in economic history literature. Global capitalism experienced higher levels of growth and high rates of profits between 1945 and 1975. This period of the Golden Age that was spurred on by the reconstruction effort following the destruction of the war. A lot of investment was made into the reconstruction effort, and huge investments were made to meet the vast demand of goods and services spurred on by a big expansion in industries such automobile, housing, appliances, military industries etc.

There were three main left tendencies dominated the political scene after 1945 until the 1980s. These are socialism (dominated Soviet and Maoist versions), social democracy and national liberation. The post-World War II social democracy in Europe and in the US was a class compromise between working classes and the bourgeoisies following the militant struggles by workers. The bourgeoisies had to make concessions with workers by extending the social wage, paying workers higher wages and guaranteeing employment and so on. These concessions were also meant to avert the socialist revolution in the Global North, since the militant struggles of workers made it possible. The liberal establishment, on its own, failed to avert the socialist revolution in the Global North (particularly in Europe), thus fascism was allowed by the liberal ruling classes to run amok, mainly to crush the socialist revolution in the interwar period, while social democracy was used, in the postwar period, to neutralise the militancy of workers in Global North. To say social democracy was meant to neutralise the militancy of workers is not to downplay the fact that the social rights workers won were the victories tirelessly fought for, and not given on a silver platter.

In South Africa, the National Party won the 1948 elections on a ticket of Afrikaner nationalism. In order to advance the plight of the Afrikaners, they had to intensify racism and racial power relations through a policy of apartheid. They said apartheid was a policy of separate development, when it was actually a crude racist capitalist accumulation of whites by dispossessing blacks, to borrow a phrase from David Harvey, "accumulation by dispossession". The rise of the Afrikaner capital was promoted whilst the status of the white working class as an aristocracy of labour was strongly affirmed. There was no black capitalist class under apartheid, only a small middle class and the overwhelming majority of black population were consigned to cheap labour. Harold Wolpe (see Wolpe's 1972 paper, Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid) provides an insightful analysis of cheap labour of the SA capitalism during apartheid years. Bernard Magubane (See Magubane's 1979 book, The political economy of race and class in South Africa) provides a comprehensive study of the race and class relation in the political economy of apartheid. Read together (Wolpe and Magubane), they present best overview of South Africa's capitalism in the apartheid years.

The struggle against apartheid became one of the most globalized national struggles in the postwar period. The human rights culture and the rights of nations to have freedom and sovereignty that spread more rapidly in the postwar period helped build the international solidarity against apartheid in all the regions of the world. The dominant global progressive (I use the term 'progressive' as distinct from the 'left') political traditions; the liberals, the social democrats, liberation nationalists and Communists, all supported the international solidarity struggle against apartheid. But then the support of all these dominant progressive schools was never socially and ideologically natural. Let's now assess each one of main power blocs in the light of social power relations in the world system as it obtained then.

The West: Imperialism, Ambivalence, Mass Solidarity

Western governments initially supported the apartheid government because imperialism was tied to gold and other minerals that South Africa had in large deposits and they did not have and really

needed. Later, particularly after concerted international pressure in the 60s and 70s, after the UN had declared “apartheid a crime against humanity”, then most western governments started to condemn and joined the economic sanctions, albeit in an ambivalent manner. The US never heeded the call for sanctions when it was made in the 60s, instead openly sided with the apartheid state and declared many liberation fighters and movements “terrorists”. The US only supported the economic sanctions efforts later in 1985, whilst the British government never supported sanctions and (particularly Thatcher Conservative Party that governed Britain from the 1979 until 1990) openly sided with the apartheid government.

Among the ordinary people of the west, anti-apartheid mass movements sprang up and got consolidated into strong movements. These antiapartheid movements in the west played an important role in the international mobilization against apartheid and in supporting the struggle against apartheid inside the country, by mobilizing resources and other means. These antiapartheid movements were made up of liberals, social democrats, trade unionists and communists.

The Soviet Union: Material Support and Weak Anti-Capitalist Outlook

Internationally, the first reliable ally of the South African liberation movement was the Comintern (Communist International), the Third International, led by Soviet Union in the 1920s already. Even some of the earliest radical policies of the SACP were inspired by resolutions of the Comintern. The Black Republic Thesis adopted by the SACP in the 1920s is one of such policies. With all its limitations, it was an important theory in grounding a Marxist approach to a colonial reality. Later, in the early 1960s, the SACP developed the CST (Colonialism of a Special Type) Thesis which was more coherent and groundbreaking in elaborating a Marxist approach in a settler-colonial setting. It is sad that the SACP has not elaborated any coherent Marxist approach to confront the neoliberal capitalism in the post-94 period.

The Soviet Union also provided material support a great deal to the ANC and the SACP. Even though initially the ANC received military training support from both the Soviet and China, the ANC dumped China and got trapped in the Soviet corner as soon as the Sino-Soviet conflict broke out in the early 1960s. The Soviet relations bestowed more than just Stalinist tendencies to the ANC-SACP alliance. The Soviet Union bestowed a benign or the weak anti-capitalist outlook unto the SACP and the alliance, remember the Soviet Union had a policy of “peaceful coexistence ” with the west. This comes from the Yalta deal that Stalin made with Roosevelt and Churchill in 1945 after the World War II; that the Soviet Union would keep to the Eastern Bloc and not encourage socialist revolutions elsewhere in the world. Remember Moscow initially warned Castro and his comrades in Cuba not to go the socialist route and declare themselves communists!

In assessing the history of the Soviet Union today, in retrospect; in rereading the history with the benefit of hindsight, it becomes very clear that all the socialist projects that faithfully followed to the soviet line are no longer around today, whereas those that sought to pave an independent line from the Soviet Union are still around today, perusing sovereign development projects, delinking projects of some kind, to use Samir Amin’s language; China, Cuba and Vietnam. This is not to shoot down completely the inspirational history of the Soviet Union as delinking and as an important attempt at a socialist revolution.

Nonaligned Movement: Revolutionary Promise and Capitulation

The Bandung Conference of 1955 marked the inauguration of Nonaligned Movement which was a bloc of national liberation movements from Asia and Africa. Cuba later joined in and became an important country from South America since there were no other South American countries in the Nonaligned Movement. The Nonalignment Movement was an important power bloc that initially

challenged the capitalist world system, particularly its imperialist dimension because it sought to promote sovereign development.

In Africa, independence leaders, such as the Nkruma Nyerere, Neto, Mashele, Kaunda, Nasser, Gaddafi, initially proposed and implemented some radical development projects that sought to delink from global capitalism. But they later capitulated to the powers in the global capitalist system, particularly during the neoliberal era, from the early 80s, following the exhaustion of the golden age. Africa was then recolonized by finance capital through debt and structural adjustment programmes that were introduced.

The SA liberation movement received enormous support from African governments of the liberated Africa. Some of these African countries paid the prize for supporting the liberation struggle in SA. They were always attacked by the militarily stronger apartheid government. And the apartheid government supported, obviously working with western governments, dangerous opposition groups in their violent efforts that plunged some of these African countries in protracted civil wars. Mozambique and Angola are the cases in point here.

The World System in the Early 90s to 2020: Crises, Social Struggles, Decadence or Revolutionary Transformation ?

The negotiations for a democratic transition in South Africa took place within the terrain of global capitalism that Samir Amin characterized as an Empire of Chaos in his 1991 book, that goes by the same title. The global capitalism was in a crisis, already showing signs of the serious failures of the neoliberal stage that had been inaugurated in the 70s. There were no alternatives on the left. The Soviet and Eastern bloc were collapsing. China was seriously consolidating its integration into global capitalism. The liberation movements had failed to advance any meaningful social transformation, based on a sustained delinking development projects, and had capitulated and lost most of the progressive impulses. Social democracy in Europe and in the US had gotten exhausted also failed on the weight of neoliberalism that reversed social wage gains and reduced workers' wages in absolute terms and as a proportion of national income.

So it was an Empire of Chaos in which capitalism of the central core countries remained powerful but was declining, in crises and imploding in a chaotic way.

There are similarities and discontinuities between the postwar period until 1994, the last 50 years of the liberation struggle in which the international solidarity was mobilized as an important pillar of the struggle, and the current period where internationalism is going to be decisive in crystalizing new forms of organizing and political forces for a revolutionary transformation. The first 30 years of the immediate postwar was marked by stability and prosperity. The crisis of neoliberalism has been deepening in the global system since 1975, it reached its apogee in the 2008 global financial crisis and the Long Depression that followed and rages on the current global economic reality.

Imperialism was there in postwar and continues operate today in the period of unending multiple capitalist crises. The political crisis and the decline of democracy has eroded the legitimacy the liberal establishment and its discredited neoliberal policies for economic and social management. It is an economic crisis of capital accumulation where there are no profitable outlets for new investment to stimulate growth and reestablish accumulation on a higher equilibrium. It is an ecological crisis of climate change, natural disasters, pandemics and the depletion of natural resources, and as a result the survival of humanity of planet Earth is seriously threatened.

The unending global capitalist crises echo Rosa Luxemburg's retort that it's either: "Socialism or Barbarism." The workers and peoples of the Global South as the major victims of global capitalism,

on the objective plane, have the initiative on their side. The peoples of the South should initiate audacious revolutionary transformation, but for that revolutionary process to succeed and transcend capitalism and its terminal crisis, the peoples of the global south should link up with workers and middle classes of the Global North. That's the only internationalism that can crystalise global forms of struggle as well as social and political forces that can pose a true revolutionary transformation towards socialism on the global level. That socialism should be about social progress and the ongoing democratization (expansion of direct democratic participatory aspects, and not limit democracy to institutions of checks and balances and representative democracy like liberalism does). And of course if it is not ecological, it is not socialism, hence eco-socialism.

South Africa remains a microcosm of global contradictions such as acute wealth and income inequality, racism, foreign capital domination in the economy, gender oppression, violence, xenophobia, urban decay and extreme poverty, rural and urban underdevelopment, precariousness, mass unemployment, climate and ecological crisis etc. That's why South Africa is the storm zone for social and political struggles that should crystalize the new internationalism.

Gunnnett Kaaf

[*Click here*](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Alternative Information and Development Centre

<http://aidc.org.za/anti-apartheid-international-solidarity-lessons-for-renewing-internationalism-today/>