

Imperialism, South Africa and the ANC: an exchange of views

Tuesday 14 March 2023, by [LODGE Tom](#), [MASISI Lesego](#), [MYERS Bob](#) (Date first published: 16 February 2023).

Friends in South Africa have responded to the article “[Russia and South Africa: the oppressors make a deal](#)”, by Bob Myers, published on People & Nature last month. Here are two comments, by Tom Lodge and Lesego Masisi, and a further comment by Bob.

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Tom Lodge: ‘Treating Russia’s rulers as allies is short-sighted’

I think the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) are making a mistake in supporting Russian operations in Ukraine. [South African foreign minister] Naledi Pandor’s arguments are stretching the professed “neutrality” stance very thin. That said, [Bob Myers’s article](#) has too many mistakes to be taken seriously.

For example, Nelson Mandela in 1946 accompanied JB Marks on visits to the mineworkers’ compounds during the strike, speaking to kinsfolk who were among the isibondas who helped to supply local leadership. Far from opposing the strike, Youth Leaguers drew inspiration from it.

In 1957, local ANC leaders helped lead the Alexandra Bus boycott and the ANC helped organise solidarity boycotts elsewhere on the Rand. The politics of the boycott was complicated, and the ANC weren’t the only actors involved. There were disagreements over strategy, but it is simply untrue that the ANC refused support. The ANC bus owner was Richard Baloyi, but by the 1950s he no longer owned a bus company having been bought out by PUTCO in the aftermath of bus boycotts in the 1940s.

On Russia and Ukraine. That the ANC continues to have a sentimental regard for Russia is understandable, given the historic associations between Moscow and the anti-apartheid struggle (to which Ukrainians made a signal contribution as well). Naledi Pandor’s proposal that a multi-polar world might offer better developmental opportunities has merit. But Russia’s rulers preside over a criminalised capitalist autocracy. Treating them as allies is short-sighted.

Lesego Masi: 'It is not practical to take a stance that aids unilateralism'

One can't be easily convinced by the contents of [Bob Myers's article](#), and what it ought to do, if they are grounded in solid analysis of current international geo-economics, in addition to a solid analysis of historical developments. Such lazy analyses seek to absorb some feeble/unsure leftists into right-wing and liberal (right-wing sympathisers) propaganda and conspiracy. It honestly takes away from South Africa's sovereignty and its ability to think for itself.

This obviously does not mean that those who are involved in serious academia and the Genuine left are oblivious to the failures of the ANC in South Africa, and the Global Left, particularly in the context of historical institutional path dependency analysis, structuralist analysis and post-structuralist analysis of our current issues and how we found ourselves here today.

These are not well understood topics/concepts amongst ordinary leftists, and are also quite lacking in everyday political engagements in South Africa.

Additionally, many of the issues faced today in nation-states that were previously colonised, such as stunted development, incoherence between structures of governance and limited inclusion of the ordinary public in strategic decision-making, originate from the inheritance of a policy direction, or path, from the former colonisers, with often little motivation and resources to create a new policy path.

These policies obviously don't ignore their enabling legislative components, which are drafted in such a way so as to talk left, but walk right. This is tied to accommodating the various stakeholders, who include the former colonial regimes, especially in nations that didn't experience a Cuban-style forms of insurrection and transfer of power.

Had these concepts been commonplace in the entire progressive space, in sober engagements, in governance, in realpolitik, and not just in academia, it would have been far easier to organise our people, and youth, in a meaningful way to challenge internal class domination and hegemony, and by extension, challenge imperialist global hegemony.

This hegemony manifests itself to essential social institutions for our individual and collective development, and the juridico-political and ideological landscape of the country, to achieve its purpose. Notwithstanding the fact that it would have been extremely difficult for some leftists to be walled off by these type of divisive and propagandistic articles.

With regards to Russia and South Africa's relations, it is not practical to take a stance that aids unilateralism, which is antithetical to SA's foreign policy direction, as well as the interests of its people. This is obviously not playing into the hands of Russia, as it is often echoed by the same right-wing sympathisers, who seek to undermine South Africa's sovereignty and ability to think for itself regarding its relations with Russia and label any independent-thinking nation (usually nations in the Global South and BRICS member states) as Putin sympathizers. Reductionist much? A classic Pro-Western tactic.

The ANC-led South African government is seemed to be oblivious to the exaggerated human rights violations by western media done by Russia since they politically align with Russia, as much as they do with the EU, US and other nations that contrast each other, just as a truly Non-Aligned country. On top of this, the Ministry of International Relations and Cooperation in South Africa re-affirmed that the conflict should be resolved diplomatically, with both parties opening themselves up to compromise and promoting the interests of peace.

However, Ukraine has been accepting military packages from the US, amongst other Ukrainian sympathisers, such as the \$858 million defence aid that was approved by US Congress a few weeks ago, and an additional \$3.7 billion package from 2023 onwards, which obviously suggests that Ukraine is allowing itself to be used as a Western proxy, to cause aggression with Russia, and enable the global arms trade to continue to profiteer off of the lives of many innocent Ukrainian women and children, instead of mediating to resolve the conflict in a sharply impartial way. Who benefits from the global arms trade?

What is to be done?

Bob Myers: 'The ANC used working class militancy for its own ends'

My article on the recent agreements between South Africa and Russia has been criticised by some comrades in South Africa and I will try to answer them. First of all let me say that most of what I wrote was drawn from my experiences in SA in the 1990's. [Here is a link](#) to a much longer piece I wrote about those times.

In case people don't have time to read this longer bit let me just explain that my relationship with trade unionists in South Africa began when I helped the South African metal workers' union, NUMSA, organise the UK tour by BTR Sarmcol strikers. At the time I was a metal workers' shop steward in a BTR factory in London, so that was the link between us.

Most of what I wrote in [the piece](#) on the People and Nature blog came out of my discussions with NUMSA members in Durban, Port Elizabeth (as it was then) and Cape Town. The story of the bus boycott, as I wrote it, was told to me by many people. If it turns out that this was an "urban myth", then I admit I got it wrong.

About the ANC and the post-war miners strike. Again, this was drawn from what people told me but I think I have abbreviated the story so much as to get it wrong. What people told me was that, post war, the older ANC leadership was becoming more and more remote from the new black working class that was emerging with its own voice. Mandela and other ANC youth leaders sensed this and saw they had to change tack if they were to have any influence on this new movement. So they adopted a much more militant stand, but they did this primarily to ensure the continued influence of the ANC, rather than to strengthen the newly emerging workers' movement. And I have certainly read that on the day the miners' strike started, Mandela spoke at a big ANC rally and didn't once mention the strike. In my piece I inferred a motive for this silence which I was wrong to do.

So if I have got facts wrong then I withdraw them, but what I stand by is the general assertion that the ANC sought to use the working class militancy for its own ends and to ultimately stifle it, not for the real emancipation of the working class from exploitation by capital. Their ability to do this was greatly helped by their relationship with the USSR that allowed them to appear as "revolutionaries", which they were not.

Other criticism seems to assume that, because I wrote about this Russia-SA alliance as anti-working class, then somehow I must support the US/NATO alliance. This was a short article that simply set out to show that the so-called "anti-imperialism" of the Russia-SA stand was nothing of the sort, and that there was a long history of the ANC's relationship with Russia which was always against the ability of the working class to organise itself, find its own voice.

It seems to me many people start their thinking with these imperialist blocs and their antagonisms. Of course you can't ignore these things, but my starting point is always what is happening in the working class globally. There simply is no future for humanity if the working class cannot begin to organise itself internationally to fight for its own interests. I think it can get very boring if everything you write has to begin with some kind of summary of world affairs starting with the category of nations, which, through its summarising, is usually wrong.

So let me make clear that I think alliance of US and NATO countries also has as its central aim the control and suppression of the working class, every bit as much as the Russia-SA one. I chose to write about the latter only because I see so many so called radicals or "lefts" falling for this nonsense of the "anti-imperialism" of the Russia-SA alliance.

I also think that people make the mistake of thinking that a description of all the alliances and conflicts between various parts of capital leads them to an understanding of how militants should react to events such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Developments in the world are not just the outcomes of competition and conflict between various elements of capital. They are, above all, the outcome of capital's continuous need to control its eternal enemy – the working class. The global working class has to oppose the Russian invasion for its own reasons, nothing to do with the various imperial plots

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P.S.

People and Nature

<https://peopleandnature.wordpress.com/2023/02/16/imperialism-south-africa-and-the-anc-an-exchange-of-views/>