

A Marxist reflects on the death of Nelson Mandela

What a pilgrimage, as the world bourgeoisie's political chiefs rushed off to South Africa to show their respects at Nelson Mandela's funeral! Bush, Obama, Clinton, Sarkozy, Hollande, Cameron et.al.: the whole lot – friends and enemies, old and new – all reverently joined together to canonise him. Even their enemies (declared or nominally non-aligned), from the Chinese delegate to Castro from Cuba, or Lula from Brazil, not to mention “socialists” like Tony Blair, would not have missed this pious communion for the world; attendance was a point of honour! Which raises the question: How on earth can you explain this planet-wide assembly to celebrate a dead man?

August Bebel was a lathe-operator and outstanding leader of the German working class and the Second International in the 19th and early 20th centuries. “What have I done wrong now?” he used to wonder whenever the bourgeois press had anything nice to say about him. But Mandela was made from different stuff. It did not bother him to be smothered in glory by a grateful bourgeoisie. He knew perfectly well why it was; he even said as much when they gave him a Nobel Prize. He made no bones about telling the jury: “Forgiveness frees the soul, it makes fear evaporate. That is why forgiveness is such a powerful weapon.”

The die was cast the moment he emerged from his long captivity. Mandela cared more about the opulent South African bourgeoisie's “soul” and their “fear” than he did about the real suffering of millions of urban and rural proletarians outrageously exploited and crushed by fear every day. His forgiveness freed the bourgeoisie's soul while thinly gilding the chains of exploitation with a varnish of fictitious equality. And Bob's your uncle: the venomous fruit of social and political class collaboration mutated into a Christian-

inspired psychological virtue.

But you would be wrong to say or think that he was always so accommodating towards the possessing class and the oppressors of his people. Immediately after World War II he founded the Youth League together with Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo in an attempt to radicalise an ANC (African National Congress) that was pledged to Gandhi's old conciliatory opportunism based on non-violent resistance to British imperialism. They launched a more combative and assertive policy on the part of African nationalism. With the banning of the Stalinised South African Communist Party (SACP) in 1950, there was a rapprochement between that party and the ANC, of which Mandela became the unchallenged leader in 1952. This alliance was strengthened by the Sharpeville massacre in 1961, when the leaders of these allied organisations launched the armed struggle. Later they were also all in gaol together on Robben Island.

And that was where Mandela – the radical rebel of African nationalism – and his companions adapted their outdated and compromised radical Gandhism to the very latest modern version of class-collaboration embodied in Stalinism, which has just emerged triumphant from World War II. It was not a difficult adjustment; Trotsky had already exposed the complicity between Gandhism and Stalinism in 1939, for example. When he wrote: "... the Comintern has completely gone over to Gandhi's position and the position of the conciliationist colonial bourgeoisie in general." ("India Faced with Imperialist War", Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-1940, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1977, p.31)

Indeed, this shift flowed directly from the dreadful policy of the Popular Front which Khrushchev and company further extended and generalised into the lying and suicidal policy of "peaceful co-existence".

There is little point speculating which way the ANC and Mandela would have gone without the close link to the SACP.

However, reality reveals very close collaboration culminating in the as it were natural conversion of the ANC from its own homespun Gandhism to the very latest version of class collaboration represented by Stalinism – with all its cruel consequences. The Bolsheviks of old used prison and exile to sharpen a Marxist understanding of their revolutionary tasks. The 27 painful years spent together with Stalinists on barren Robben Island were the complete opposite, and thoroughly moulded Mandela into an evangelist for the Stalinist gospel of a social peace dominated by the powerful. The criminal pimp who thus prostituted what was – for all its hesitations and shortcomings – a great liberation movement into a resolute instrument of social conciliation was none other than the Stalinist SACP.

Towards the end of the 1980s the whole South African socio-political system was rapidly deteriorating in line with the worsening world crisis of capitalism and ultra-liberal attempts to find a way out. In South Africa, the whole bourgeois edifice was spectacularly ablaze and proletarian revolution was imminent, especially since that South African version of fascism, apartheid, had ruled out any intermediate formation that might have acted as a buffer to soften the violence of the collision between the fundamental classes.

The terrified leaders of the bourgeoisie panicked, revoked the bans on the ANC and SACP and rushed off to implore the gaoled leaders to put the fire out. The enormity of this self-humiliation on the part of so proud and arrogant a class gives some measure of the scale of the revolutionary threat and the trouble the system was in.

No-one can say that Mandela and his associates gave way without getting anything in return. Like their Stalinist models who between 1940 and 1945 rescued the bourgeoisie from the threat of revolution in return for a few real but clearly limited and temporary improvements, Mandela too negotiated a price for acting as fireman. Nor can anyone say the price was

worthless, when in fact a whole mortally offended nation felt the abolition of racist apartheid very positively.

From the outset, however, we Marxists very severely criticised this agreement; not just because it was limited – as if we gamble all or nothing, which is completely alien to our methods – nor because we disagree with its anti-apartheid content, which a great and long-suffering nation wanted. We were and are utterly opposed to this pact between the bourgeois South African state and Mandela's ANC because the latter substituted their anti-apartheid demands in place of more fundamental social demands. They purely and simply replaced class demands with general anti-racism, as if racist apartheid was not the immediate and natural product of essentially colonialist, rapacious and parasitical South African capitalism.

Negotiations of this sort normally turn on what is at stake in the confrontation and the relative strengths of the two sides. From this point of view, the result of these negotiations fell clearly short of both the colossal stakes involved in the confrontation between the revolution and the authorities and the regime's congenital weakness in the face of the overwhelming strength of a proletariat fully standing up for itself. These exceptional conditions are the proper yardstick against which to judge the agreement and understand its inevitable and logical consequences. Exactly like their Stalinist mentors who previously allied themselves with the so-called "democratic" bourgeoisie against its twin brother, fascism, Mandela and the ANC demanded a "normal" capitalism without apartheid. Separated in time but close in their content, their negotiations and agreements were praised to the skies by the enthusiastic bourgeoisie, but merely put a brave face on what the Bible calls "selling their birth-right" (the revolution and power) "for a mess of pottage".

Set aside the slightest hesitation about describing this pact of complicity in these terms. It would be wrong and dangerous

to imagine that the same mistaken and cruel illusions which had seized the great masses also nourished the ANC leaders. Unlike the former, Mandela and friends were not dupes. They acted deliberately to get this agreement, fully conscious of what it meant. That is proved perfectly well by two major phenomena.

First is the immediate stampede by a good number of the cadres and leaders of the ANC and the unions jostling for lucrative positions up there with the bourgeoisie. The well-known ANC and miners' union leader Cyril Ramaphosa, who was catapulted straight onto the board of directors of various mining companies, is undoubtedly the most repulsive of these newly-rich, but by no means the only one. There may be some ANC leaders who never got involved in bourgeois businesses, but almost all of them are up to their necks in enormous corruption, starting with President Jacob Zuma. South Africa is regularly reported to be one of the countries where corruption is most widespread.

The other irrefutable proof that they sold out the revolution and workers' plans cheaply is that this huge shift by the ANC leaders and cadre into the ranks of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by a profound re-adjustment on the part of leading ANC members, led by Mandela, in the objectives of their programme. At the beginning of the 1990s they were already turning its collectivist social orientation into a catalogue of demands shorn of any reference to the labouring classes, meticulously weeding out demands raised by rank and file workers and peasants.

If any more eloquent proof is needed, then look how from the start there were massive protests from the unions and within the ANC against this real treachery and for a return to the movements' original Charter of demands. On this we must mention our Comrade Mkhungo Bongani, Durban engineering worker, NUMSA trade union representative and ANC member who tried to prevent this rightward turn, raising his voice and

organising workers against this treachery. While seeking support from British trade unions in his search for a revolutionary way forward, he recognised the correctness of the revolutionary orientation of Trotskyism. It was then as our close comrade that he returned to Durban to rally workers and revolutionaries into a fighting political organisation. Sadly, illness and poverty defeated this fighter, who died prematurely. But the South African working class can be proud to have had in its ranks a Marxist revolutionary of his temper, as perspicacious in understanding the tasks as he was firm and resolute in his convictions. This class has great need of the stimulating example of Comrade Bongani in its current struggle to build its revolutionary party.

Indeed, that struggle has already started. The catastrophic situation into which they have dragged working people all over the country is decisive, irrefutable, historically verified proof of how treacherous Mandela's pact and his whole policy were. Even official figures reveal what a disastrous situation the super-exploited urban and rural working class are in, eking a painful living with basic conditions of daily life (work, wages, housing, water, electricity, transport, services, etc.) not met. Social inequality had widened further. Even government statistics – which are probably somewhat flattering – mention that 85% of the population only get 22% of gross revenue. Unemployment is over 25% of the active population, but over 40% of young people (these statistics too are probably embroidered). The Mandela leadership also backed off in the face of the white rural bourgeoisie. There was a rather timid attempt at agrarian reform in 1994 which anticipated that 30% of land would be redistributed by 2014. But by 2009 only 6% of land had been redistributed! So the Mandela leadership completely abandoned the agrarian revolution, a central pivot of the revolution and, in its shameful retreat, renounced practically all the significant tasks even of a consistent bourgeois revolution. The great majority of the black farm-workers live in absolute

poverty.

It is therefore completely understandable that the working class and in particular the miners have taken up a struggle against their decline. Not long since, the whole world discovered with astonishment and indignation how the bourgeoisie and its state allied to a corrupt trade union bureaucracy responded with a brutal gunfire and savage, cruel massacre to the demands of the Lonmin miners at Marikana. There were also several trade union leaders among those who provoked and organised this revolting massacre, most prominently the same traitor Cyril Ramaphosa in his capacity as one of the bosses of Lonmin, the firm responsible for laying this murderous trap. The trade union bureaucracy then covered the whole thing up in complicity with the employers. The working class learnt its lesson. A series of strikes broke out and the actions and demonstrations organised showed that, though they had been paralysed by illusions for a while, the working class had started a fight. Its best elements radicalised the trade unions, which are now seeking their independent working-class road, while the most far-sighted have got involved in building the revolutionary workers' party.

The whole country is in ferment and South African workers, with their Namibian sisters and brothers, are taking their first difficult and cautious but also decisive and promising steps towards the rebirth of their class party. Our comrades in Namibia are in the front ranks of this general ferment and we salute them as brothers. This is a powerful groundswell which will surely grow soon to shake the whole world.

So it is hardly surprising that the world bourgeoisie got concerned and mobilised all its various courtesans and underlings to rush off to South Africa. Their sure class instinct sensed the danger. The looming peril had to be countered immediately, and they thought that poisoning the consciousness of the working class and working people with

Mandela's toxic doctrine of general human brotherhood without class distinction was the best way to do it.

But if the bourgeoisie seem determined to raise this lie to the level of international generalisation, they risk colliding head-on with the very thing that working people in South Africa are experiencing. So to open the road to its revolutionary proletarian party, the South African working class needs first of all to complete and deepen the process of learning from this precious experience. The key to success in founding its party is critically surpassing and transcending Mandela's ideology and practice.

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By Balazs Nagy December 2013