

South Africa's ANC at 100: A balance sheet of bourgeois nationalism

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The centenary celebration by South Africa's African National Congress provides a fitting occasion for a balance sheet on the character and fate of the ANC and similar bourgeois nationalist movements.

Founded in 1912, the ANC is one of the oldest of these movements, having drawn its inspiration from the even older Indian National Congress. It played a pivotal role in the negotiated end of the apartheid regime in South Africa and for the last 18 years has been the country's ruling party.

The 100th anniversary has been used by the ANC to attempt to draw fresh credibility from the long history of struggle against the brutal apartheid system in South Africa in which many were killed or imprisoned, and workers and youth in the country's black townships fought heroically against heavily armed security forces.

But as in country after country where bourgeois nationalist or "national liberation" movements have come to power, the leadership of the ANC, far from realizing the aspirations of the masses who came into struggle, merely exploited their sacrifices to cement their own integration into the ranks of the imperialist and national capitalist oppressors, turning not a small number of the old advocates of liberation into multi-millionaire businessmen.

In a rambling 90-minute speech delivered last weekend to a crowd in Bloemfontein, the town where the ANC was founded 100 years ago, South African President Jacob Zuma dwelled at considerable length on the ANC's history, while providing precious little in terms of concrete proposals to alter the oppressive conditions in which the vast majority of the country's population still lives.

These conditions have only worsened during the nearly two decades of ANC rule. While racial apartheid has ended, the chasm between the wealthy elite and masses of workers and oppressed has only grown.

Social inequality, measured by the Gini coefficient, is worse in South Africa today than in any other country on the planet, save Namibia. Fully 70 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. While the official unemployment rate hovers around 25 percent, most realistic estimates put it at close to 40 percent.

So-called "free market reforms" have assured that those at the top, including both the old white ruling elite and a new layer in the top echelons of the ANC and the trade union bureaucracy, have accumulated immense wealth. Figures like Cyril Ramaphosa, the former leader of the National Union of Mineworkers and secretary general of the ANC, who is now worth some \$275 million, became the principal beneficiaries of the policy of "Black Economic Empowerment" inaugurated by the ANC after it took office.

The African historian Achille Mbembe has aptly described the ANC as a party "consumed by corruption and greed, brutal internecine battles for power and a deadly combination of predatory instincts and intellectual vacuity."

While the centenary's focus on the ANC's glory days of illegality and "armed struggle" may provide the ruling party with a welcome distraction from this ugly present-day reality, the seeds of this degeneration were present and identifiable from the movement's outset.

The ANC was born in the context of the defeat of the protracted tribal struggles against white colonial conquest and the unification of British imperialism with its former opponents among the Boers on a common platform of oppression of the black majority and expropriation of their land. It put itself forward as a representative of the aspiring black middle class. It sought not imperialism's defeat, but rather its patronage, offering itself as an interlocutor between the white ruling class and the masses of black workers and

oppressed.

In 1956, Nelson Mandela summed up the ANC's aims, promising that if it came to power it would not introduce socialism, but rather, "For the first time in the history of this country, the non-European bourgeoisie will have the opportunity to own in their own name and right mills and factories, and trade and private enterprise will boom and flourish as never before." This vision has now found its fulfillment at the expense of the masses of black workers.

Starting in the 1960s, the ANC, in alliance with the Stalinist South African Communist Party, employed the rhetoric of revolution and class struggle, but Mandela's perspective of empowering and enriching an aspiring black bourgeoisie remained its fundamental program. When the uprisings in Soweto and the other black townships began to make the country ungovernable, the white ruling elite, spearheaded by the Anglo-American Corporation, initiated negotiations for a peaceful end to apartheid and a formal transfer of power, with the aim of quelling the revolutionary challenge from below and preserving their wealth and property. Mandela and the ANC obliged.

In 1935, Leon Trotsky, in a letter to his followers in South Africa, warned of "the inability of the Congress [ANC] to achieve the realization of even its own demands because of its superficial, conciliatory policy."

This warning proved prescient. The ANC's trajectory, like that of all the other bourgeois nationalist and nationalistic liberation movements in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East—from the Indian Congress Party, to the Palestine Liberation Organization, to the Sandinistas—has vindicated the fundamental perspective advanced by Trotsky in his Theory of Permanent Revolution.

Trotsky's perspective established that the bourgeoisie in the oppressed countries, tied to imperialism and fearful of the working class, is organically incapable of carrying out the struggle for democracy and an end to imperialist domination. Those tasks can be realized only by the working class, leading the oppressed masses, seizing power into its own hands and going over to a socialist revolution as part of the struggle of the international working class to put an end to capitalism on a global scale.

The ANC's 100th birthday celebration was held

amid growing indications of a resurgence of the class struggle in South Africa, driven by the crisis of world capitalism. South African workers will inevitably come into conflict with the ANC government and the multi-millionaire capitalists and transnational banks and corporations that it represents. What is required is a new leadership in the working class based on an internationalist and socialist perspective to carry through the fight for genuine democracy, equality and socialism. This means the building of a South African section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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