Former South African President Nelson Mandela dies

By Patrick O’Connor
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Long standing leader of the African National Congress (ANC) and the first president of post-Apartheid South Africa, Nelson Mandela, died December 5 in Johannesburg at age 95, after suffering a protracted respiratory illness.

Mandela’s death has been accompanied by an outpouring of tributes from world leaders, each seeking to outdo the other in presenting the most mawkish depictions of Mandela as a secular saint. US President Barack Obama called the former ANC leader “one of the most influential, courageous, and profoundly good human beings that any of us will share time with on this Earth,” while his predecessor, George W. Bush, described Mandela as “one of the great forces for freedom and equality of our time.”

Underlying the cynical rhetoric of the current and former war criminals occupying the White House, and that of their allied heads of government around the world, is genuine gratitude for the invaluable service Mandela rendered to the South African ruling elite and world imperialism. Mandela utilised his indubitable political skills and personal courage to stave off the threat of a social revolution in South Africa, dismantling the Apartheid regime while defending capitalism and protecting the property and wealth of the country’s white rulers and of transnational corporate investors.

Mandela was born Rolihlahla Mandela on July 18, 1918, in Cape Province when South Africa was a British dominion. Born into a chiefly Xhosa family, Mandela was assigned the name Nelson when he first attended a school run by British Methodist missionaries. In 1939 he began attending the University of Fort Hare, where he met future ANC leader Oliver Tambo.

After moving to Johannesburg, without the necessary permit issued by the Apartheid regime, Mandela worked illegally as a night watchman at a mine pit before he met ANC figure Walter Sisulu, who later secured him a position as an articled clerk in a white law firm. He studied part-time to complete his law degree at Witwatersrand University, one of only four universities that would accept blacks on specialist courses.

Mandela joined the ANC in 1943 and was one of the co-founders of the ANC Youth League the following year. By 1950 he was a member of the ANC’s national executive committee. From the beginning of his political life, Mandela was a hostile opponent of Marxism and any perspective of organising the working class in a revolutionary struggle against the Apartheid regime and the capitalist system it served.

In 1950, he opposed the organisation of a general strike of the Johannesburg proletariat to commemorate May Day, and was involved in efforts to physically break up meetings organised by the Communist Party (CP) of South Africa. The successful mass strike, however, demonstrated the enormous social power of the burgeoning urban working class, and the incident had a significant impact on Mandela. He subsequently developed close ties with the CP.

The South African Stalinists, like their counterparts internationally, advanced a “two stage” theory, under which colonial and semi-colonial countries were deemed to have to first pass through a period of “democratic” capitalist development, under the leadership of so-called progressive layers of the national bourgeoisie, with the struggle for socialism postponed to the indefinite future. The “two-stage” theory was first advanced by Joseph Stalin in the USSR as part of the counter-revolutionary bureaucracy’s attack on the internationalist Marxist perspective defended by Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition.

Trotsky, and the Fourth International he helped found in 1938, upheld the Theory of Permanent Revolution, which explained that in colonial and oppressed countries only a fight for power by the working class could advance the struggle against imperialism and ensure genuine national liberation and democratic and social rights for workers and the oppressed masses. This revolution was permanent in that the working class, having seized power, could not restrict itself to democratic tasks and would be compelled to carry out measures of a socialist character, at the same time turning to the working class in the advanced capitalist countries in a unified fight for world socialist revolution.

Mandela was certainly aware of the Fourth International’s perspective, having met in 1948 with the South African Trotskyist Isaac Tabata. (“It was difficult for me to cope with his arguments,” Mandela later told his authorised biographer Anthony Sampson. “I didn’t want to continue arguing with the fellow because he was demolishing me just like that.”)

The ANC leader utilised the Stalinists as a means of subordinating the South African working class to a bourgeois nationalist perspective. The ANC’s Freedom Charter, adopted in 1956, was drafted by a member of the CP, Rusty Bernstein. In an article published the same year, Mandela explained that the Charter was “by no means a blue-print for a socialist state.”

While the document called for the nationalisation of the banks, gold mines and land, Mandela continued, these measures would be capitalist in character: “The breaking up and democratisation of these monopolies will open up fresh fields for the development of a prosperous non-European bourgeois class. 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 perspective of “Black capitalism” in South Africa remained at
of South Africa’s biggest newspaper group, in anticipation of his takeover of O’Reilly’s Caribbean island and gave the go-ahead for his takeover of the newspaper. He explained: “Money was dazzling. Hence, we demand,” he declared. The former president’s death will inevitably be followed in the next period by social and industrial upheavals that will once again raise the necessity of a socialist revolution in South Africa.