

After Mobutu: fight for a workers republic of Zaire

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On Saturday, 17 May, President Mobutu's regime in Zaire finally fell. With scarcely any resistance, the troops of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo Zaire (ADFL) marched into the capital, Kinshasa. Jeremy Dewar looks at the consequences of Mobutu's fall.

WHEN LAURENT Kabila, leader of the ADFL, announced that Zaire no longer existed and the Democratic Republic of Congo was born, thousands of enthusiastic workers and youth took this symbolic decree to heart, destroying road signs, portraits of Mobutu and even bank notes bearing the dictator's head. The question now is whether these same workers and youth can take advantage of Mobutu's defeat, to build organisations which can fight for control over the country and its resources. Such a fight will undoubtedly bring them up against Kabila and his allies.

In the seven month civil war, the ADFL's strategy was a classic guerrillaist one. As towns and cities fell to the rebels, they recruited more troops and installed their own administrations.

But as they drew nearer to Kinshasa, another, truly popular element came into play. A series of 'dead city' general strikes ground the capital to a halt. The strikes were called by the Union of Democracy and Social Progress (UDSP). They were, in part, a ploy by this tame capitalist party to force its way into the Alliance's good books. But, in a more important sense, they were the spontaneous uprising of the Zairean workers seizing their chance to bring down Mobutu.

This explains why the ADFL were so keen to see Kinshasa taken peacefully. The ADFL is almost unknown in Kinshasa and has virtually no support outside of the anti-Mobutu struggle. The Alliance did not want ordinary workers taking an active role; on 14 May, the rebel radio station even broadcast an appeal to workers to call off their strikes because they were delaying the military capture of Kinshasa!

As it was, the fall of Kinshasa was nearly bloodless, the ADFL having done a deal with the army for an 'orderly' take-over that ensured the workers remained by-standers. One ex-soldier recounted his own surrender:

'The rebel walked up to me and told me to pick up my gun and bring it with me. Then he took me to a house where I had to hand it in and give my name. They told me to go home and find another job.'

So much for the western media's scare stories of frenzied revenge and butchery!

Typically, the imperialists ensured that their former allies, Mobutu, his extended family and cronies, were all whisked away in the nick of time. Mobutu, himself, was flown to Morocco, an old ally from 1977 when Moroccan troops were used to massacre secessionist rebels in the Shaba province. His son, Mobutu Kongolo, stayed on to personally oversee the execution of a few 'traitors' before being rescued with the aid of the French - after his own cabin crew refused to fly him out.

Tracking down and expropriating Mobutu's wealth, stolen from the Congolese masses over decades, is not just a matter of justice but a vital step to rebuilding the country. His personal assets are estimated at between \$5 and 8 billion! The average Zairean income last year was \$160 - and that was for those who were paid; many thousands were not. This is a truly obscene picture, and one the west openly endorsed. As late as 1989, US President Bush called Mobutu 'one of our most valued friends in Africa.'

Economic recovery

The economic reconstruction of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) certainly cannot be done with 'friends' like Bush or Clinton. Their primary interest is ensuring that their multinationals can continue to exploit the country's riches. As Chester Crocker, Reagan's man in Africa in the 1980s, said: 'We and our friends control the clubs and the treasuries that Kabila will need to tap if he is going to rebuild the country.'

And this is precisely what the ADFL finance minister, Mwana Nanga Mawampanga, proposes.

The DRC has abundant natural wealth. Cobalt, copper, gold, diamonds, uranium, manganese and other minerals make it naturally richer than even South Africa. In addition, the rivers and lakes have potential for hydroelectric power, its virgin forests are an untapped source for timber, its oil fields remain unopened and with modern farming methods its land could be the breadbasket for the whole of central Africa.

However, even the traditional mining sector is in ruins, stripped by the 'kleptocracy' of the Mobutu years.

Copper production has sunk from 500,000 tonnes a year in the 1980s to 30,000 last year. Cobalt production has shrunk from 17,000 tonnes to 3,000. The giant nationalised mining companies, MIBA and Gecamines, have not made a profit for 10 years. To bring copper production back up to 300,000 tonnes would cost \$1 billion in investment and would require the writing off of \$2 billion debts, according to the World Bank. That is the only reason the state concerns have not been privatised - a buyer could not be found!

World Bank figures show that by 1994 Zaire's economy had shrunk to 1958 levels while its population had tripled to 45 million. According to the Financial Times:

'If the country had simply sustained pre-independence growth rates, gross national product today would be \$1,400 per head. Instead it has fallen to \$100.'

What the imperialist economists refuse to acknowledge is the role of their structural adjustment programmes in bringing about this nightmare scenario.

Kabila's immediate economic problems are equally daunting. Inflation stands at around 9,800%, which is the other reason why Zairean bank notes were burnt so enthusiastically on 17 May! The infrastructure - roads, rail, telephones - needs \$3 billion a year to repair and maintain. Without them the economy cannot function. And most importantly, millions of workers, including 600,000 civil servants, need to be paid.

Kabila the unknown

In general, the imperialist powers have realigned themselves and given a cautious welcome to the Alliance. Even Britain recognised Congo within days of the fall of Kinshasa. Their doubts centre on the figure of Laurent Kabila: who is he? what are his politics? what will he do? Publicising these doubts is partly a way of pressurising the ADFL, but there are also lingering doubts about his Stalinist past.

Kabila's political career stretches back to Patrice Lumumba's liberation movement in the 1960s. After the failed Simba revolution of 1964, Kabila turned towards Stalinism and formed the Popular Revolutionary Party (PRP) which remains the mainstay of the ADFL. Strongly influenced by the guerrillaism of Che Guevara, who visited Kabila in the 1960s, the PRP set up liberated zones in the east among the Bembe and later the Banyamulenge (Tutsi) people. Part of the justified fear of Congolese peasants and workers stems from this period when the PRP - like other Stalinist guerrilla movements such as Sendero Luminoso in Peru - ruled by terror and drug trafficking.

The PRP's 'right-turn' in the late 1970s coincided with Kabila's collaboration with Yoweri Museveni, now the President of Uganda. The PRP now combines pro-imperialist free market economics with a strong state repressive machine.

Kabila still uses populist phrases in his speeches, talking about 'changing the face of Africa' and how his 'long years of struggle were like spreading fertiliser on a field - now it is time to harvest'. The PRP even promote political education circles amongst peasants and workers and the setting up of neighbourhood and village committees, but with one proviso: that the PRP/ADFL maintain a political monopoly.

Tension

For a political force, which in seven months has gone from obscurity to state power, this is essential if they are to keep control of Congo. This is why they have put off elections for two years, why all other political parties have been banned, why demonstrations and political activity have been outlawed and activists beaten up and incarcerated.

In fact, there are even tensions within the ADFL. Like the RPA in Rwanda, the Alliance's push for power involved massive recruitment along the way; 30,000 youths joined the rebels. Many of them resent the power of the Tutsi-dominated hardcore of the PRP.

The appointment of Kabila's nephew as governor of the mineral-rich province of Shaba stoked a rebellion within the ADFL. Ominously, this and other demonstrations in Kinshasa, led by Etienne Tshisekedi's UDSP, have begun to take on a poisonous anti-Tutsi sentiment. Congolese workers and peasants must not be drawn into the dead-end of inter-ethnic rivalries in the coming months.

On the contrary, now is the time for the Congolese masses to press for their own solution to the crisis inflicted on the country by Mobutu and his imperialist backers.

Kabila's repression is a sign of weakness, not strength. That's why all the imperialist powers, even France, are downplaying the democratic questions and backing him as the man most likely to stabilise Congo for capitalism. If they and Kabila succeed, workers and peasants will find that they have simply traded one dictatorship for another.

Congo's bosses, as well as the imperialist economists, are all urging the new government to raise taxes on the poor, to sack hundreds of thousands of state employees as an immediate solution to the budgetary crisis. How dare they? They are the ones who have ruined this naturally rich country. They should pay for the crisis.

Already, some workers have begun to use the popular committees, set up by the ADFL, to press for their demands. Okitaloma Pena-Ngongo, an official of the public services union who was imprisoned by Mobutu, has successfully fought for some committees to seek the payment of wages withheld from civil servants.

This is good. The committees should go on to demand an immediate election to a sovereign constituent assembly counterposed to the undemocratic assembly that the ADFL have promised will be convened within two months, but without elections! They must demand that the ban on political parties and activities be lifted and for the massive wealth of Congo, particularly the mines, to be taken from the multinationals and corrupt businessmen and managers of the state industries and placed under the control of the workers. Such a course would see the PRP Stalinist clique at the heart of the ADFL move swiftly against the committees. In this, Kabila would be backed by Mobutu's sworn enemies – Uganda, Rwanda, Angola and Burundi – as well as Mobutu's old allies – the USA, France, Belgium and the UK.

Even so, the success of the PRP's counter-revolution is not a foregone conclusion. The 30,000 armed peasants and workers in the Alliance army are not wedded to Kabila's project. Indeed, they are increasingly alienated from it.

Permanent revolution

But the Congolese masses need to build their own, truly democratic workers and peasants committees, and their own militia under the control of these committees. They urgently need to forge a revolutionary party to win these soldiers and the mass of the population to the strategy of permanent revolution – to pressing on from the victory over Mobutu to the victory of a socialist revolution.

The alternative, be it Kabila's pro-imperialist, but Stalinist-style dictatorship or some compromise with the rotten bourgeois and semi-racist UDSP of Tshisekedi, will replace the prison-house of Zaire with a renamed prison-house of Congo which will not be in the slightest bit democratic, despite its new name.?