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## Why imperialism mourns Mandela

By Bill Van Auken

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The death of Nelson Mandela at the age of 95 has touched off a worldwide exercise in official mourning that is virtually without precedent.

No doubt working people in South Africa and internationally pay tribute to the courage and sacrifice demonstrated by the African National Congress leader—as well as thousands of others who lost their lives and freedom—during his long years of illegality, persecution and imprisonment under the hated Apartheid regime.

Capitalist governments and the corporate-controlled media the world over, however, have rushed to offer condolences for their own reasons. These include heads of states that supported South Africa’s apartheid rule and aided in the capture and imprisonment of Mandela as a “terrorist” half a century ago.

Barack Obama, who presides over the horrors of Guantanamo and a US prison system that holds over 1.5 million behind bars, issued a statement in which he declared himself “one of the countless millions who drew inspiration” from the man who spent 27 years on Robben Island.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, the standard-bearer of the right-wing Tory Party, ordered the flag flown at half-mast outside 10 Downing Street and proclaimed Mandela “a towering figure in our time, a legend in life and now in death—a true global hero.”

Billionaires like Michael Bloomberg, who ordered flags in New York City lowered, and Bill Gates felt compelled to issue their own statements.

What is noteworthy in the sanctimonious blather served up by the media on the occasion of Mandela’s death is the way in which a man whose life is inextricably bound up with the history and politics of South Africa is turned into an entirely apolitical icon, a plaster saint embodying, in the words of Obama, “being guided not by hate, but by love.”

What is it that the capitalist oligarchs in country after country really mourn in the death of Mandela? It is clearly not his will to resist an oppressive system—that is something they are all prepared to punish with imprisonment or drone missile assassination.

Rather, the answer is to be found in the present social and political crisis gripping South Africa, as well as the historic role played by Mandela in preserving capitalist interests in the country under the most explosive conditions.

It is significant that on the day before Mandela’s death, South Africa’s Institute for Justice and Reconciliation issued an annual report showing that those surveyed felt overwhelmingly that class inequality represented the paramount issue in South African society, with twice as many (27.9 percent) citing class as opposed to race (14.6 percent) as the “greatest impediment to national reconciliation.”

Two decades after the ending of the legal racial oppression of Apartheid, the class question has come to the fore in South Africa, embodied in the heroic mass struggles of the miners and other sections of the working class that have come into direct conflict with the African National Congress.

These eruptions found their sharpest expression in the August 16, 2012 massacre of 34 striking miners at the Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana, a mass killing whose bloody images recalled the worst episodes of Apartheid repression at Sharpeville and Soweto. This time, however, the bloodletting was orchestrated by the ANC government and its allies in the official trade union federation, COSATU.

South Africa today ranks as the most socially unequal country on the face of the planet. The gap between wealth and poverty and the number of poor South Africans are both greater than they were when Mandela walked out of prison in 1990. Fully 60 percent of the country’s income goes to the top 10 percent, while the bottom 50 percent lives below the poverty line, collectively

receiving less than 8 percent of total earnings. At least 20 million are jobless, including over half of the younger workers.

Meanwhile, under the mantle of programs like “Black Economic Empowerment,” a thin layer of black ex-ANC leaders, trade union officials and small businessmen has become very rich from incorporation onto boards of directors, acquisitions of stock, and contracts with the government. It is under these conditions that ANC governments that have followed Mandela’s, first under Thabo Mbeki and now Jacob Zuma, have come to be seen as the corrupt representatives of a wealthy ruling establishment.

Mandela, who played a less and less active role in the country’s political life, nevertheless served as a facade for the ANC, which traded on his history of sacrifice and his image of humble dignity to hide its own corrupt self-dealing. Behind the facade, of course, Mandela and his family raked in millions, with his children and grandchildren active in some 200 private companies.

The *New York Times* published an article Friday under the worried headline, “Mandela’s Death Leaves South Africa Without Its Moral Center.” Clearly, there are fears that the passing of Mandela will serve to strip the ANC of what little credibility it has left, opening the way to intensified class struggle.

Concern among capitalist governments and corporate oligarchs over the implications of Mandela’s passing for the current crisis in South Africa is bound up with gratitude for services rendered by the ex-president and ANC leader. In the mid-1980s, when the South African ruling class began its negotiations with Mandela and the ANC on ending Apartheid, the country was in deep economic crisis and teetering on the brink of civil war. The government felt compelled to impose a state of emergency, having lost control of the black working class townships.

The international and South African mining corporations, banks and other firms, together with the most conscious elements within the Apartheid regime, recognized that the ANC—and Mandela in particular—were the only ones capable of quelling a revolutionary upheaval. It was for that purpose he was released from prison 23 years ago.

Utilizing the prestige it had acquired through its association with armed struggle and its socialistic rhetoric, the ANC worked to contain the mass uprising that it neither controlled nor desired and subordinate it to a negotiated settlement that preserved the wealth and property of the international corporations and the country’s white capitalist rulers.

Before taking office, Mandela and the ANC ditched large parts of the movement’s program, particularly those planks relating to public ownership of the banks, mines and major industries. They signed a secret letter of intent with the International Monetary Fund pledging to implement free market policies, including drastic budget cuts, high interest rates and the scrapping of all barriers to the penetration of international capital.

In doing so, Mandela realized a vision he had enunciated nearly four decades earlier, when he wrote that enacting the ANC's program would mean: "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."

However, this "flourishing," which boosted the profits of the transnational mining firms and banks while creating a layer of black multi-millionaires, has been paid for through the intensified exploitation of South African workers.

The ignominious path trod by the ANC was not unique. During the same period, virtually every one of the so-called national liberation movements, from the Palestine Liberation Organization to the Sandinistas, pursued similar policies, making their peace with imperialism and pursuing wealth and privilege for a narrow layer.

In this context, the death of Mandela underscores the fact that there exists no way forward for the working class in South Africa—and for that matter, worldwide—outside of the class struggle and socialist revolution.

A new party must be built, founded on the Theory of Permanent Revolution elaborated by Leon Trotsky, which established that in countries like South Africa, the national bourgeoisie, dependent upon imperialism and fearful of revolution from below, is incapable of resolving the fundamental democratic and social tasks facing the masses. This can be achieved only by the working class taking power into its own hands and overthrowing capitalism, as part of the international struggle to put an end to imperialism and establish world socialism.