

African Debt, War and Imperialism are Linked

Why Bono and Geldof Got It Wrong

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At the beginning of this month, the leaders of the eight most powerful nations met in Gleneagles, Scotland, to decide on the critical issues that will impact the lives of the six billion other people on this planet, and the planet itself. Much critical analysis of these failed meetings was overshadowed or replaced by coverage of the London bombings. Ironically, even though the host of the hour, Tony Blair, was attempting to recast himself as the savior of Africa, a move seemingly light years away, or certainly several continents away from Iraq, both the London bombings and the G8 meetings are inseparable from the war on Iraq.

Previously, I have written about the connections of the attacks in London and the attacks on Fallujah. This article will recount my experiences in Scotland, protesting the dictatorial nature and issues of the G8 meetings, and offer an analysis of the Blair government's public relations campaign surrounding the meetings, a campaign aided and abetted by the Bush regime, British NGOs, and quite unfortunately, Bob Geldof and Bono. I conclude that facilitating the fusion of the anti-war movement with the global justice movement is an absolutely critical task for those of us working toward the eradication of poverty, war, and imperialism. One practical and immediate tactic is to mobilize the biggest demonstration possible on September 24 in Washington, DC the site of both a national anti-war rally and march, and meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

Co-opting of a Movement: The Make Poverty History Demonstration

The largest mobilization ever amassed in Scottish history occurred the Monday before the G8 leaders met in Gleneagles. Over 300,000 demonstrators packed the streets of the picturesque town of Edinburgh with quite a large part of the crowd being unable to march the route, after having waited up to three hours in line, because of the enormity of the demonstration's turnout.

The theme of the march, which was also the name of the NGO that temporarily formed to organize it, was "Make Poverty History." The most influential player of Make Poverty History (MPH) was Oxfam, a centrist NGO with close allegiance to the British government, in particular with British Chancellor Gordon Brown's office. Working closely with the Commission for Africa, which is chaired by Bob Geldof and run by Blair, Brown, and Britain's overseas aid minister Hilary Benn, the official MPH campaign ignorantly fell into supporting the neo-liberal agenda of the G8 leaders.

Although the commitment toward ending the debt and fighting African poverty is genuine from the NGOs and rock stars, the assumptions and recommendations manufactured by the Commission for Africa would prove disastrous for Africa's workers, peasants, and the urban poor. These include the assumption that the impact of Western maneuvers on Africa has

been largely benign. There is a complete absence of criticism of the ongoing Western military interventions of the last half century, and the colonial exploits and brutality forced upon the peoples of African nations. The other damaging assumption of the Commission revolves around the premise that free trade and privatization are somehow the key to liberation for Africans. The International Monetary Fund is viewed as being able to “play an invaluable role” in clearing the way for “private sector investors.” Private profit making is seen as the panacea to poverty: “Successful growth will be led by the private sector.” The commission concludes that only by ridding themselves of barriers to free trade and exporting to the rest of the world can Africans work their way out of poverty.

In contrast to this whitewashing and sidestepping, the organizers of the G8 Alternatives and the Stop the War coalition won political battles and arguments, some lasting a year long, to lawfully protest at the fence surrounding the G8 meetings in Gleneagles, secure housing for protesters, and organize a counter-summit in Edinburgh. Importantly, the message of “Fight Poverty, Not War” was stamped throughout the huge Make Poverty History demonstration critically inserting the obvious and necessary linkage between war and poverty a linkage many in Blair’s government were trying to ignore. Thus, although Make Poverty History organizers were not confident enough or willing to draw out the connection, the British anti-war movement succeeded in proving that the hundreds of thousands marching against poverty were also marching against war and the system that creates both.

Poverty in Africa: the Real Story

Blair and Brown’s simplistic rhetoric of relieving Africa’s debt instead masks the reality that there are massive and continuous flows of wealth out of Africa into the pockets of Western capitalists who are inextricably bound to the system that impoverishes millions, while the bankers and investors profiteer from the militarized budget. The Commission for Africa’s agenda and the drive for free trade actually ties the mass of Africans into an exploitative neo-liberal system that has been bleeding them dry for decades.

A professor of development studies at the London School of Economics, Gavin Capps has researched the numbers behind the debt. In an article titled “Redesigning the Debt Trap,” he explains the dangerous web that the debt, structural adjustment programs, and capital flight creates in Africa. He cites Africa Action, a U.S.-based NGO, reporting in 2001 that the ratios of foreign debt to the continent’s gross national product increased from 51% in 1982 to 100% in 1992. Africa’s debt grew to four times its export income in the early 1990s. Its debt burden is twice that of any other region in the world, it carries 11% of the developing countries’ debt, with only 5% of its income. The gross national product in Africa is \$308 per capita, while its debt stands at \$355 per capita.

The money spent paying back the debt and the interest on the debt expanded from an average of \$1.7 billion from 1970-1979 to \$14.6 billion from 1997-1999. Africa received a total of \$540 billion in loans, paid back \$550 billion, and still retained a debt of \$295 billion between 1970 and 2002. In 1990 African countries paid out \$60 billion more than they received in new loans, and by 1997, this increased to about 162 British pounds. In 2001, sub-Saharan Africa borrowed \$11.4 billion, and paid back \$14.5 billion.

This catastrophe is played out in the social service and health sectors. Shrinking African national budgets are being spent in greater proportions to repaying Western creditors at the expense of welfare or productive domestic investment. During the 1980s debt service repayments averaged 16% of African government expenditure compared to 12% on

education and 4% on health. A decade later, the situation remains appalling, as interest payments are prioritized over human needs. In 1999 the Zambian government was pressured to spend \$14 million more in debt service than on its collapsing health care system, in the face of the AIDS pandemic reaching new heights. Also in 1999, 33% of Angola's gross domestic product was spent on debt repayments, as compared to 4.9% of gross national product on education and 1.4% on health. In the whole of sub-Saharan Africa in 2001, debt repayment amounted to 3.8% of GDP, as opposed to 2.4% spent on health care.

In tandem with the debt repayment crisis, capital flight and structural adjustment programs tighten the fatal stranglehold on the African continent. Capital flight, the transfer of locally owned capital to the advanced economies, amounted to \$187 billion during 1970 and 1996 in 30 sub-Saharan African countries. This flight of capital was inextricably bound with the accumulation of debt, as roughly 80 cents on every dollar borrowed by these countries flowed out as capital flight the same year. When interest is added, the stock of capital flight of those 30 countries equals \$274 billion, or 145% of the total debt owed by that group of countries in 1996.

Corrupt leaders skimmed from the top of these profits. But simply attributing capital flight to the greed of African politicians hides more than it reveals. The great powers, the leaders of the G8, propped up African dictators like Mobutu Sese Seko, of Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo, in order to guarantee Western strategic interests during the Cold War. (Mobutu was installed in mineral-rich Zaire after the CIA-backed assassination of popular radical nationalist leader Patrice Lumumba.) Breaking the pathologyzing myth of corrupt black African leaders, apartheid South Africa enabled an average of 7% of annual gross domestic product to leave as capital flight between 1970 and 1988, a flight whose destination was into the coffers of major Anglo corporations. Such a move defied local capital controls and broke the international sanctions regime on apartheid. Thus, the private "white" capitalists of South Africa and white European business leaders were also in lockstep support of capital flight.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank consolidated their hold over Africa directly because of the debt crisis. They continue to ensure commercial banks are repaid by lending African states more money to service their private debts. And these U.S.-led institutions act as debt collection agencies for the Western powers, in addition to the IMF's insistence on even harsher repayment terms of the multilateral loans it makes. The charters of the IMF and World Bank specifically forbid debts that they hold to be rescheduled or written off, and most of these debts are charged at market rates. This is one of the main reasons why Africa's total debt has continued to grow while an even greater volume of its resources has flowed out of the continent.

The G8, Hypocrisy, and the Right to Protest

The logic of the G8's debt relief schemes is not an act of philanthropy, but a necessary maneuver in order to maintain the debt repayments to the private banks. First, only the poorest and most heavily indebted countries would be allowed to qualify; secondly, all participants would have to adopt structural adjustment programs; and lastly, on no account would other debtors be offered any debt relief, and those that were could never have their debts written off. The retention of a large and costly debt after such "relief" is entirely legitimate within this scheme, as the stated aim is to reduce the debt of the world's poorest

states to “sustainable levels.” Calculations after structural adjustment programs are imposed do not take into account the level of poverty in a country, only its ability to pay. Thus, on average, debt repayment of the poorest countries will only be cut by a third. Practically speaking, this means that after debt reduction, Mozambique, which had been paying about \$120 billion a year in interest on the principal, will continue to spend \$70 billion a year. Tanzania’s debt reduction will only be about 10%. In Cameroon and Zambia, where one in five children do not live to the age of five and whose parents earn less than 60 cents a day, will be left with a debt of \$5 billion.

Moreover, the debt relief pledged is only just that: pledged. The people of Southeast Asia who were devastated by tsunami destruction earlier this year received only 10% of the money the wealthy governments of the world pledged, governments which were shamed into pledging a respectable amount after their citizens’ gave more generously than the governments themselves.

It is for these reasons, for the G8’s insistence that profits come before people’s lives, that protesters swarmed the streets of Edinburgh, and then met at the gates of the posh hotel at an exclusive secluded golf course in Gleneagles. Meanwhile, calling George Bush a “sincere and passionate man,” resting his head lovingly on Tony Blair’s shoulder while posing for the media cameras, Bob Geldolf joined Bono’s tradition of delegitimizing the protesters and pandering to elite leaders, in particular two of the eight men who created the poverty in the first place.

Geldolf and Bono’s actions not only dismissed the much more complicated and deeper critiques made by the protesters, but also implicitly condoned the hypocritical decisions of the corporate and government elites made during that week alone. The Scottish government punished members of Parliament who spoke out in favor of protecting protesters’ rights to peacefully dissent in Gleneagles. For an entire month, these MPs were banned from government buildings and their salaries as well as the salaries of their staff were taken away. While Bono and Geldolf spoke from on high about saving the Africans, the rock stars took no action to pressure the UK government to let across the African protesters who were being denied entry into the country and denied participation in the events at which they had been invited to speak.

On a much more crude level, police rampantly lied the day of the Gleneagles mobilization, broadcasting over the mass media that the protest was cancelled, stopping dozens of buses and telling protesters the demonstration was cancelled and to turn back, stopping British MP George Galloway’s car five times and searching it, and spreading general fear among townspeople that the protesters were violent, lawless, and ignorant. None of these intimidations worked, as the ordinary people of Gleneagles waved, hung peace banners, and smilingly took photos of our buses as they passed through the streets. Despite the sometimes literal roadblocks erected by the Scottish government, over 15,000 protesters succeeded in reaching the fence at Gleneagles, demanding an end to poverty, war, and the crippling economic injustice spawned by the eight men toasting themselves inside.

Live 8 Concerts: Did Bob Geldolf’s Music Change the World?

Besides completely whitewashing the real story behind Africa’s debt burden and the continuous misery their policies impose on the rest of the world, Blair and Brown and the rest of the G8 leaders hoped to use the Make Poverty History events as a smokescreen for the crisis occurring in Iraq. Unfortunately, Bono and Geldolf wholeheartedly supported this

move. Because of their facile and naïve view of the political situation, Bono and Geldolf helped to take the heat off Bush and Blair at their weakest point the Iraq war, which is strategically situated as the first in a long series of dominos set up by and for both Western administrations. If this domino falls, pressured by the global anti-war movement, then the long line of imperialist drives, including the debilitating imposed debt on Africa, has a much greater chance of falling, of being cancelled. Instead, with foolhardy optimism in a system and its pushers who have literally created the misery, the millionaire rock stars persist in criticizing protesters through name-calling and displays of ignorance about protesters' understanding of the situation as if ordinary people simply could not grasp the real story behind the debt.

Ironically bolstered by the strength of the global anti-war movement's ability to draw out millions in the streets, Geldolf organized Make Poverty History concerts all over the world and called for people to march in Edinburgh. As opposed to providing the real justice that South African activist Trevor Ngwane and others called for, however, Geldolf instead used his impressive soapbox to call for patronizing charity, and a more than polite request to the G8 leaders to "play nice." In the same vein, Geldolf also intentionally refused most African artists to play on his stages, saying they wouldn't draw crowds. Thus, he paternalistically reduced the people of Africa to uncultured children who need to be pitied, not empowered. He also privileged the minuscule numbers of the powerful ruling class into the position of being willing and able to change the world not the masses of ordinary people everywhere.

To make matters worse, Geldolf emailed an edict to each of the Live 8 performers, forbidding them from mentioning the Iraq War or saying anything that would "embarrass" Blair. As with the Make Poverty History demonstration, this was a case of the millions of participants being more progressive than the organizers of the event.

It was also a perfect exemplification of class unconsciousness. From the stage, the wealthiest man on the planet, Bill Gates, along with the likes of Sir Paul McCartney and Sir Bob Geldolf, positioned themselves as experts on Third World debt and poverty. Millionaires like Madonna, before performing, asked the crowd if they were ready for a revolution. And perhaps the most egregious moment came when Chris Martin of the pop band Coldplay, commented that the Live 8 concerts were the most important events ever organized in human history.

This select assortment of examples demonstrates a severe disconnect with the reality of social movements and how true change and economic justice has been developed and won by the masses of ordinary people throughout time not doled out philanthropically by millionaire and billionaire entertainers. It is through grassroots movements for civil rights, women's equality, environmental protection, lesbian and gay rights, the rights and dignity of workers, and today's anti-war movement that will continue to turn the tide and create the safe and fulfilling world in which the non-millionaires have a right to live and thrive.

DROP THE DEBT, NOT BOMBS: Why the September IMF and World Bank Protests are Critical

National anti-war coalitions such as United for Peace and Justice (www.unitedforpeace.org) and ANSWER are planning mass mobilizations on September 24-26 in Washington, DC. It is crucial for all of us to both amass the largest numbers possible for the demonstration on September 24, as well as take serious note of the World Bank and IMF meetings occurring at the same time. Creative protest events are being organized by groups like Mobilization for Global Justice and 50 Years is Enough. With Iraq War architect Paul Wolfowitz heading the

World Bank, the linkages between the anti-war and global justive movements are painfully clear.

Seattle was indeed a fork in the road. The September 11, 2001, attacks were a major setback for the U.S. global justice movement, from which it has not yet fully recovered. But like the reinvigoration of the anti-war movement after the demoralizing 2004 presidential elections, ordinary people's anger and desire to change the situation will prevail. It is my contention that the educational and political groundwork laid by the global justice movement since Seattle has undergirded the anti-war movement of today. It is why people are more quickly and deeply making the connections of global war, imperialism, and poverty than they did during the Vietnam anti-war movement.

Recently there has been much debate about unity in the streets. Time and efforts are clearly better spent at joining the immediate demand of Bringing the Troops Home and Ending the War in Iraq, with the long-term demand of empowering the people of the planet to decide on the way our economy will benefit all of us, as opposed to the handful of elite bankers, investors, and CEOs who now run the IMF and World Bank. The anti-war movement should continue to hammer away at the Achilles' heel of the Bush and Blair administrations: the occupation and war on Iraq, and merge with the global justice movement at this fortuitously timed series of events in September in Washington, DC. With the adoption of the critiques of imperialism from the global justice movement, today's anti-war movement will strengthen even more so, and ensure its survival through the people's struggle to create another world.

Virginia Rodino is co-Director of Democracy Rising and an administrative steering committee member of United for Peace and Justice. She would like to thank Chris Harman, editor of the International Socialist Journal, and Gavin Capps for information provided in this article. Her opinions are her own. Comments can be posted on her blogspot at www.democracyrising.us

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