

Building Common Fronts:

Solidarity, Palestine, Militarism, and Worker's Rights

—from NYC to Port Louis and Beyond

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6 August 2025 (80th anniversary of US bombing of Hiroshima)

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Rose Hill, MAURITIUS

Outside the Omnicane Sugar Factory yesterday morning at dawn, workers already angry at talk of increasing the starting age of the universal pension took up LALIT's latest leaflet with enthusiasm and a sense of struggle. That flyer, as with all of LALIT's work, connects questions of worker's rights to other key political-economic issues of our time, ending with a reiteration of the demand that Mauritius not accept the US and UK's blood money for a long-term lease of Diego Garcia. Accepting the militarized base, a base of crimes against humanity, will only give the appearance of legality, now in the name of Mauritius' new "control" over the Chagos islands. The flyer concludes by noting, in part, that the government of Mauritius is working toward joining the US-UK camp, "even as the US's economic and political empire is crumbling." So let me start today, as a life-long organizer from the USA, by agreeing with LALIT. Without a doubt, this analysis of the US's crumbling empire is a vital starting point for understanding internationalism and class issues today in any context, local or global.

It's important to understand that the end of the US empire is neither a new nor a particularly radical idea, no matter how loudly every major Global North and Western mass media outlet or politician might proclaim otherwise. Those with a historical materialist analysis can point to a number of factors regarding US production rates, the value of the dollar, the nature of growing poverty within the empire, the ever-shrinking success rate of the US military industrial complex over the past fifty years – since the defeat of the US armed forces in Vietnam, or the madness of the current orange-tinted corruption coming out of Washington DC most recently. Even mainstream peace studies academics like Norwegian peace research pioneer Johan Galtung began writing as early as 2008 about the end of the US empire, and this is the same person who successfully predicted the fall of the Soviet Union ten years before that took place. Viewing things from a working person's point of view, one can simply look at some comparative numbers: A bit over 10 percent of all people in the USA over the age of 65 live in devastating, abject poverty. If one were to shift the indicators just a little to include older US citizens who are on or just above the poverty line, barely surviving and careful not to need healthcare or transportation or more than the most basic foodstuffs – folks who are probably getting a great deal of assistance from more than one family or community member...IF one was to include all those US elders who are on the edge of poverty into our review, the numbers go up to a

staggering ONE IN THREE people over 65! The number would rise again considerably if we included those aged 60 to 65, and those living in the US as green card holders, not-yet full citizens, and those in the country without proper papers. 35% of elders in the US are effectively living in poverty – in the supposedly richest country in the world – and all the talk in Washington DC is making greater and deeper cuts to social services. The US is surely a dying empire.

The question, then, is not so much “What is going on with that crazy-man Trump?”, but rather how can we build common fronts beyond our current geographic and conceptual boundaries? How can we redefine solidarity so that our fronts include long-term bonds of mutual strengthening that will last beyond the current crisis and madness? Samora Machel of Mozambique used to talk about the true meaning of solidarity being two fists coming together to strike a single blow. What can we learn from the mistakes and successes of our past movements around the world?

Here, I think that Mauritius is in an important place, to both learn and to teach.

The successful struggle against political apartheid in South Africa, which many in this room were a vital part of and also learned from, has some crucial lessons for our times, especially regarding the freedom of Palestine. On October 13, 2023, I wrote on strategic solidarity with Palestine following the events of the previous week. I wrote of the many prominent South Africans, led by Nobel Peace Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who insisted on characterizing the Israeli Zionist regime as a settle colonial apartheid state. International isolation of apartheid South Africa, through a BDS movement that Tutu was bold enough to vocally support while inside the racist regime helped contribute to the release of Mandela and the democratic elections of 1994. Before the events of October 2023, the Netanyahu government was at its lowest point ever, particularly vulnerable to pressure and isolation. As is often the case with wars and capitalism, previously weak leaders get stronger with every bomb dropped, even if the bombs are being dropped on one’s own people with devastating effects. It’s one thing to cheerlead from afar as it appears that militants abroad are attacking our enemies. But the less sexy work of deepening BDS in our own societies is more crucial and concrete than largely symbolic mobilizations.

Another less militant-appearing act would be support for the growing number of Israeli war resisters, many quite young, going to prison or risking prison to stand up against genocide. Some of us in the international movement of war resisters remember well that the End Conscription Campaign of 1980s South Africa played a crucial role in withdrawing the white South African base from the ruling Nationalist Party. As a new generation of white South Africans refused compulsory military service, a seismic shift took place that included acceptance of majority African rule that was unthinkable just one generation earlier. Yet support for – or even information about – the anti-Zionist war resisters in Israel today is barely existent.

Another lesson from the anti-apartheid movement involves singularity of tactics, and the problem of dogmatically adhering to the belief that only one means of struggle can lead to effective revolutionary results. Today, decades later, some armchair academics debate the tired, old questions of armed struggle and nonviolence, as if any successful revolutionary movement

ever took place using only one of those paths. South Africa is, in fact, a great example of how multiple approaches can be used, working clandestinely but clearly hand-in-hand: mass democratic, unarmed civilian movements alongside of Spear of the Nation and Azanian military units. Palestinian activists, from Mohammed Abu-Nimur to Hawaida Araf and Manal Tamimi, all speak in their different ways about the problems that escalating violence and dehumanization cause on all sides. An end to the Genocide in Gaza is the most pressing issue in the world today. But almost two years of non-stop warfare does not seem to have lessened the death toll.

What does it mean then, conceptually but also for us as workers and organizers, to build concretely beyond the rhetorical flourishes and movement mythologies? In Mauritius and LALIT, I think there is a profound and historic legacy, understanding the connections between the colonization of the Chagos archipelago, the militarization of the Indian Ocean, and the responsibilities of people here to live by and for human rights for everyone everywhere. That combination of insights borne of experience is all-too rare in the global geopolitics of the past half-century. What, then, can we expect together – in the next steps for an end to the US occupation and heinous uses of Diego Garcia, in the next steps for a free Palestine, and envisioning a world beyond the US empire?

I want to end the formal part of my talk today by noting one very concrete way that a number of us in the USA are answering parts of these questions in the belly of that beast. A coalition has emerged over the last five years bringing together people in the USA of African, Latina, Asian, and European descent, under the name of the Spirit of Mandela coalition. Though I am one of the nine-member national Coordinating Committee, the majority of the CC is from a number of different tendencies within the Black Liberation Movement; the majority of those are original Black Panther Party members, many of whom spent many years incarcerated as forgotten or unknown US political prisoners. In naming the coalition “Mandela,” we were intentionally connecting our work to the world’s most famous former political prisoner...but not just to Nelson. The intent of Spirit of Mandela’s name is to connect with African and global sisters and brothers and to also pay homage to the many Mandelas who have played key freedom fighter roles in brining people together for liberation and change.

In 2021, the Spirit of Mandela coalition spotlighted a then-70-year-old petition, brought to the newly formed United Nations in 1951 by prominent actor Paul Robeson, sociologist W.E.B. DuBois, and others. “We Charge Genocide,” they wrote, speaking of the centuries of genocidal-level practices against the Black, Brown, and Indigenous Peoples of North America. We brought together dozens of experts in their fields to provide testimony at an International Tribunal modeled after the Bertrand Russel Tribunals of the Vietnam War era, presided over by an independent panel of international jurists. We met at the very auditorium where Minister Malcolm X was assassinated, as the judges reviewed five counts of US crimes against humanity: police violence; mass incarceration; political prisoners, systemic health inequalities, and environmental racism. Following through on Minister Malcolm’s promise to take the case of the United States treatment of Black folks before an impartial United Nations panel, the judges delivered their verdict at the United Nations inter-faith Church Center. The US was found Guilty of Genocide on the five basic counts before the Tribunal.

One aspect of this significant initiative is that, as we work in tandem to redefine and rebuild solidarities, we must realize that redefining genocide is also taking place among international legal and human rights advocates. The extraordinary, rapid-fire genocide under way in Gaza is a shocking daily reminder that the post-World War Two promises of “never again” were never, in fact, taken seriously. But the slower, endemic genocides of more off-the-radar genocides like those perpetrated against the Black, Brown, and Indigenous Peoples of North America from the very first moments of the US federal state must now be seriously considered and centered. Renowned President of the United Nations Working Group on People of African Descent Mireille Fanon Mendes-France, director of the Franz Fanon Foundation dedicated to the work of her father and one of the Spirit of Mandela Tribunal jurists is one of those working to help rethink the genocide convention so that it is a more liberatory force for all peoples. Mireille wrote that, on an international human rights level, we need “a new definition of human based on the perception that the colonized, the damned [the wretched of the earth] have what should be (what MUST BE) [considered] humanity.”

In closing, it is worth noting that a new network of still-colonized peoples has been forming – quietly at first – over the past several years. The Occupied Peoples Forum, initiated by resistance representatives from Palestine and Puerto Rico, West Papua and Western Sahara, Kurdistan/Rojava and Kashmir, Ambazonia and Tibet, brings together peoples still facing direct military, colonial subjugation. In conjunction with the US-based Spirit of Mandela coalition, the Occupied Peoples Forum and other emerging networks are trying to imagine and actualize what common fronts might look like, what will be required of all of us, in these times of tragic and traumatizing destruction. LALIT and the movements of Mauritius have, I think, an important role to play in these spaces, as we rebuild an internationalism where the people of even a tiny island in the very middle of the Indian Ocean are considered as fully human. If the failing US empire has the deadly but incorrect vision that they can consider the people of the Chagos Islands and all of Mauritius nothing more than military real estate, the whole world must understand that tiny islands which many have never heard of must be considered as part of our family, our comrades, our internationalist consciousness and struggles. Forgive this rhetorical nod to a neoliberal catchphrase but let us let no people be left behind.

Dear comrades, family and friends: it has been a great honor these days to travel around this island with you, to break bread with you, to leaflet with you! Now, we must strategize together to collectively build something new in the 21st century that is fit for a time that follows from all that we have learned and left behind in the 20th. Echoing a phrase heard around the world, needed now more than ever before, please allow me to close with the simple but profound phrase:

LALIT-LA KONTINIE!