

Let Us Be Midwives: The Twenty-Fifth Newsletter (2018)



Dear Friends,

Greetings from the desk of the **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

Sadako Kurihara, a Japanese poet, survived the atom bomb explosion on Hiroshima. A few months later, in March 1946, she published her best-known poem – *Umashimenkana* (Bringing Forth New Life). The poem is about being in the basement of a destroyed building, the smell of blood, the closeness of sweaty people. In the midst of all this, a woman goes into labour. There was no light, no matches. But, out of the gloom, people began to volunteer to help. A woman, moaning a second ago, came forward and said she was a midwife. She helped birth the child and then died just before dawn. Kurihara's poem ends with an exhortation,

Let us be midwives!

Let us be midwives!

Even if we lay down our lives to do so.

Two terrible incidents these past ten days – a Saudi bombing of a Yemeni school bus that killed fifty children and an ISIS suicide attack of an Afghan classroom that killed 48 children. Hardness governs these incidents, both shocking but then seen as normal. The first, in Yemen, took place in its north, in a province that borders Saudi Arabia. My **report** on that bombing ends, 'This is the hour when children die. This is the hour when adults fail them, the hour of bombings and impossible negotiations'. The bombs came from Garland (Texas, USA). The United States has now prevented an independent investigation of what is surely a war crime.

Those who know Kabul know Dasht-i Barcha, an area of hope for the large number of refugees who have rushed to the city from the dangerous countryside – as I point out in my **report**. This neighbourhood was mainly populated by Hazaras from the country's west. The attack – by ISIS – was to target the Hazaras because they are Shia.

Both the attack in Yemen and in Afghanistan are part of a long-running war that Saudi Arabia has prosecuted from the Mediterranean Sea to the Hindu Kush mountains against what it sees as Iranian interests. One hopes that Saudi Arabia and Iran will meet soon and craft a historical grand bargain. Whatever the merits of their dispute, the destructive impact of the conflict for the region is far too great.

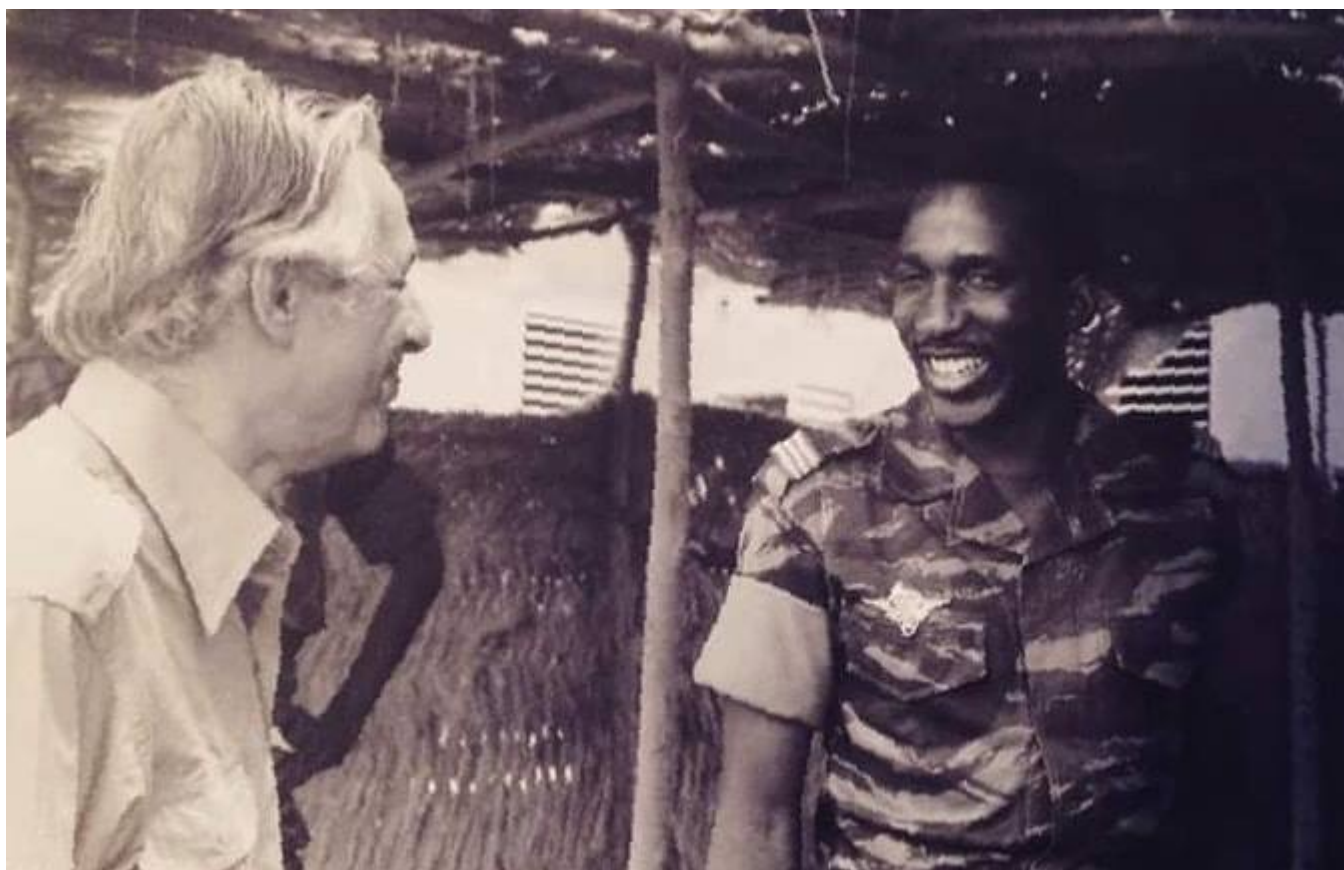
At both bomb sites, school backpacks lay strewn about. They are such a poignant symbol of childhood. The illustration above is by the Yemeni artist Wafa Alshami, who has focused on the UNICEF packs that the children used.



The lead **story** at the *New Frame* on the day of its launch this week is on the massacre at Marikana (South Africa). Six years ago, miners went on strike only to face the harshness of the government's guns. This is a painful story of death and desolation, of a people who cannot see a way out of their despair. It is hard these days to be glib about the future. The death of children in Yemen and Afghanistan, the killing of the miners in South Africa – what easy answers is one to give when confronted by such realities.

In his **essay**, Richard Pithouse, the editor of *New Frame* (a new media project based in Johannesburg, South Africa), lays out the serial grief of contemporary South Africa – the violence against workers and women, the inhospitable attitude towards migrants and the shack dwellers, the terrible unemployment and desperation of youth. But then, Richard quotes a startling line from Franz Fanon to say that we live in a 'non-viable society, a society to be replaced'. This is a line from Fanon's 1956 resignation letter from his job as a psychiatrist in Blida-Joinville (Algeria). He was leaving this post to join the frontlines of the struggle with the National Liberation Front. Why try to treat a society that is untreatable? Why not try to found a new social order? That was Fanon's standard. It is what the *New Frame* proposes, to do a journalism of the people, one that – as Fanon continues in that letter – does not hide behind the apparatus of good behaviour, 'No professional morality, no class solidarity [with the rulers], no desire to wash family linen in private, can have a prior claim. No pseudo-national mystification can prevail against the requirement of reason'. This will be journalism that is rooted in the requirements of reason.

The picture above is of the *New Frame* team. Good luck to them!



The picture is of Thomas Sankara (1949-1987), the president of Burkina Faso, meeting the Egyptian Marxist Samir Amin (1931-2018). Sankara was, in many ways, the heir to Fanon, a clear-sighted leader of his people who understood the power of imperialism. Sankara wanted urgently to build a new society, one that the Burkinabé people deserved after a century or more of colonial mendacity. When Sankara went to the United Nations in 1984, he spoke poetically of a possible future,

I have come here to ask each of you to put our efforts together so that the arrogance of those who are wrong ceases, so that the sad spectacle of children dying of hunger vanishes, so that ignorance disappears, so that the legitimate revolt of the people triumphs, so that the sound of weapons falls silent.

Such hopes are often cut down by gunfire.

Samir Amin visited Sankara because he shared the hopes of the leader and because he had already built a long career in the Sahel region of Africa as an analyst and as a militant. This past Sunday, Samir Amin died. It was a serious blow to many of us who have taken his guidance over the course of the past decades (my **obituary** is in *The Hindu*). Samir's assessment of the development of underdeveloped in the Third World remains pertinent to this day, his conceptual landscape still in need of debate and discussion. Why would a country like Burkina Faso – rich in gold and manganese – remain in such dire straits? Explanations that lay the blame on the people themselves are inadequate. Samir opened up an important seam of debate on international trade and its relationship to the struggle of classes.

Prabhat Patnaik, whose interview on the trade wars forms the basis for the **Tricontinental: Institute for**

Social Research dossier this month, writes in his **obituary** of Samir’s project. Key here is the super-exploitation of the periphery. These are important themes which will be developed in two *Political Notebooks* being produced by **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**: the first is a long interview with Samir Amin conducted by our two Fellows Jipson John and Jitheesh PM, and the second is a document on the new writings on imperialism produced by a team comprised of Ahmet Tonak, Tatiana Berringer and Lucia Pradella. Please keep an eye out for these two texts.

New worlds do not just appear. They have to be fought for and made. P. Sainath – the Senior Fellow at **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research** – has just published a brilliant **story** about Hausabai Patil (now 91 years old). Hausabai took up the gun in the 1940s to fight against British colonialism, joining her legendary father Nana Patil – the head of the *Prati Sarkar*. This story forms part of Sainath’s series to document the lives of such brave, but often unsung, freedom fighters (these will be collected into a book by **LeftWord Books** next year). The story ends wonderfully. The team of interviewers is ready to depart. She asks, ‘are you going to take me now?’ When they ask her where, she answers, ‘To work with you all’. This is the human spirit, undaunted.



Undaunted too are the people of Brazil, who have marched over hundreds of kilometres to register their candidate – Lula – for the presidential election in October. They came in waves to Brasilia, to fight the judicial coup against themselves and to put their views forward. In the picture stand four people who are leading this wave of unrest for Lula and against the soft coup, each making an L for Lula: (from the right) São Paulo former mayor Fernando Haddad, who will be Lula’s running mate, Dilma Rousseff, the former president of Brazil, Gleisi Hoffman, the leader of the Workers’ Party of Brazil, and Manuela d’Avila, a Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB) lawmaker who will step in as a the vice presidential candidate if Lula is debarred from the election. For the full context of the story, read MST leader João Pedro Stédile’s **note** on the current situation, published at *People’s Dispatch*.



Finally, there is a terrible crisis afoot in the Indian state of Kerala. Floodwaters rage across the state, killing and displacing. The situation is dire. Subin Dennis, a researcher at the **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research** office in Delhi, has **put** the data together on the volume of rainfall and ends with the address where you can donate money for what will be a very expensive recovery. The government of Kerala has created a **website**, which is also very helpful. Please do your part.

Our **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research** image of the week (see below) is of Ruth First (1949-1982) the South African revolutionary, the journalist and the anti-apartheid activist. Exiled from her homeland, she wrote important work on Africa – from a book on Libya to the best book on *coup d'états* on the continent – as well as a classic about being imprisoned (*117 Days*). ‘Politicians are men who compete with one another for power’, Ruth wrote in 1969, ‘not men who use power to confront their country’s problems’. She was assassinated in her office in Mozambique on August 17 by the South African police. The archive of her writing is now **on-line**. Sankara, Amin, First – these were all people who got up in the darkness, tried to birth a new society and then left us to carry on the struggle. Let us be midwives!

Warmly, Vijay.

PS: you can find all the previous newsletters at our **website** as well as our dossiers, working documents and other materials. If you’d like to receive this newsletter in French, Portuguese or Spanish – let me know. To subscribe to this newsletter, visit the website.

RUTH FIRST

1925-1982

