

## What is China's role in Africa? A friend? Or a new imperialist overlord?

In recent weeks the relationship between China and Africa has generated considerable attention and debate throughout the continent. The recently concluded Forum on China-Africa Cooperation was attended by leaders from almost every country on the continent. An array of critical questions has come to the fore about China's position, its influence and interests on the continent. Many have described this relationship as colonial in nature owing to the economic and political imbalances that exist, drawing comparisons with Africa's brutal colonial past. In other quarters the relationship has been lauded as presenting opportunities to solve Africa's long standing developmental challenges.

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For better or worse China's relationship with Africa has a profound impact on Africa's working class masses. It is estimated that Chinese companies employ African workers for 85% of their labour. It is through the lenses of the working class that we must examine China's role.

China's meteoric rise over the past four decades has given prominence to its geo-political role around the globe. China's role in the anti-colonial struggles of the 1960's and 1970s, though presented as supportive, was always in pursuit of its own geo-political interests – its rivalry with the former Soviet Union and the US for influence. China's monumental rise into an economic and military giant has given its global expansion a much more aggressive expansionist character. In 2009 China overtook the US to become Africa's biggest trading partner – worth now US\$170 billion as well as its biggest source of foreign investment totalling US\$76.5 billion in trade and investment in 2017. China has invested massively

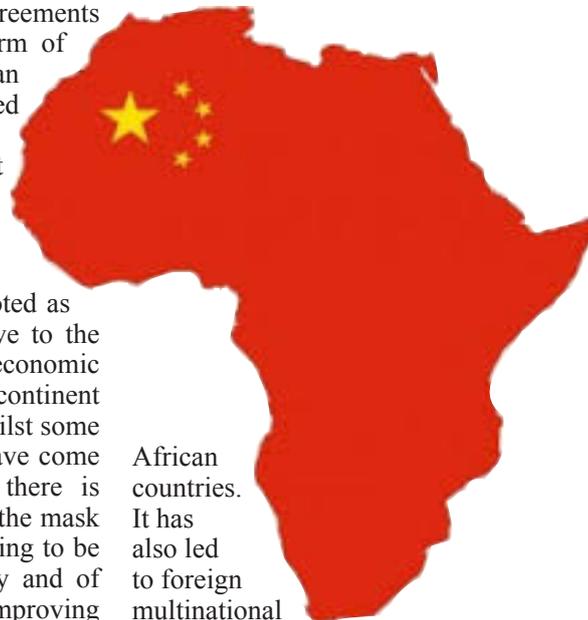
through numerous bilateral agreements involving loans and in the form of infrastructure projects. African governments have embraced China's loans, said to be at comparatively low interest rates and relaxed conditions compared to the World-Bank and the IMF.

China is therefore being promoted as Africa's development alternative to the loan shark Western neo-liberal economic models that have ravaged the continent over the past three decades. Whilst some of the infrastructure projects have come with developmental benefits, there is growing evidence that beneath the mask of benevolence they are beginning to be seen as a threat to sovereignty and of making very little difference in improving the material conditions of the continent's working class masses. China is eager to collaborate with African elites to realise its aims and expand its influence. In exchange the elites act as gate keepers for Chinese interests benevolently relaxing labour norms and turning a blind eye on rules that are intended to protect natural resources including land and mineral wealth, and the environment.

The reality is that Africa does not generate enough economic activity to repay Chinese loans. In fact the continent is plunged into a perennial cycle of debt. From South Africa to Kenya, from Zambia to Djibouti, the level of debt has dramatically increased with almost nothing to show for the masses. Though branded as not colonial it is exploitative nonetheless making no difference to African economies' post-independence neo-colonial character.

Under capitalism, Africa's historical role as a source of cheap labour and raw material has continued almost uninterrupted, maintaining its position at the bottom of the global developmental pyramid. China's has evolved into a state capitalist economy. Its relationship with Africa and the rest of the third world is based on the needs of a domestic economy awash with excess liquidity.

With the rising power of workers forcing wages upwards at home, China has begun to outsource its labour to low-wage



African countries.

It has also led to foreign multinational companies invested in China, searching for maximum profits, turning their sights elsewhere including Africa. As China has developed into the world's second biggest economy, its global ambitions have become entangled in competition with the traditional Western imperialist powers. The imperialist character of China's foreign economic policy is evident both on the continent and elsewhere. In SA, cheap steel imports threaten the viability of the domestic steel industry. For defaulting on its debt, China has seized has a port in Sri Lanka.

Africa's political and economic elites are willing accomplices in keeping the continent on this ruinous path. Both Africa's natural resources and labour continue to be exploited. Weakened, disunited and disorganised, the African working class is under siege by global capitalism. The struggle of the African working class against capitalism however continues. Only through the intensification and escalation of this struggle can the African working class liberate itself from capitalist oppression, regardless of the guise in which it appears and where it originates from. Only through workers unity, strong, independent, democratic worker-controlled trade unions and mass workers parties with socialist programmes can the working class break the chains of neo-colonialism and emancipate the continent from capitalism and imperialism.