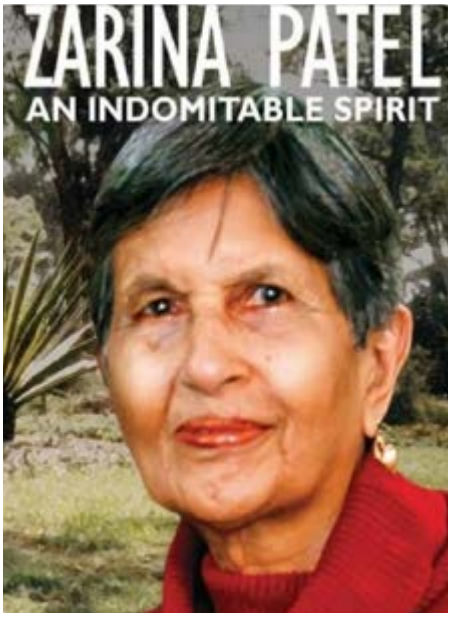
Zarina Patel and the story of Kenya's labour and Left movements

By **Lucien van der Walt**



Zarina found in the December 12 Movement a prefiguration of a new Kenya: rebels against the suffocating party-state, the wretched economy, the colonial legacy, and communalism; Black, Asian, Kikuyu, Kalenjin and more, standing together for a better tomorrow.

ZARINA PATEL, CHAMPION OF THE workers and women, passed away on 25 April 2024 after a long illness, aged 88. Author, artist, editor, and stalwart of popular movements, she is widely mourned. Her political life, and her research, provide a unique window into the often-forgotten story of labour and left-wing movements in Kenya. She not only wrote histories—she made history.

Born in 1936, Zarina was from Kenya's South Asian community. As in southern Africa, there was an Asian presence for millennia, but most arrived as cheap, often indentured, labour under Britain. Many worked in harsh conditions on the Uganda Railway connecting the coast and East African interior.

She grew up in the final years of British colonialism and witnessed the independent Kenyan African National Union (Kanu) government of Jomo Kenyatta, established in 1964, become a repressive, corrupt, patronage-based machine. She saw the creation of a mythmaking, official patriotic history that reduced the liberation struggle to Kanu, and built a personality cult for Kenyatta.

KANU's party-state suppressed opposition and tried to close or capture every independent space or movement. In 1965, unions were forced into a single, government-run Central Organisation of Trade Unions (Cotu). Rival parties and dissenters were repressed. This accelerated in the 1970s and 1980s under Daniel arap Moi, who ruled until 2002.

African repression of the Left

Many in today's labour and Left movements look back fondly, often uncritically, at early African nationalist states. But Kanu's trajectory was not unusual. Workers backed Kwame Nkrumah's rise in Ghana, but the independent government, launched in 1957, banned rivals and introduced detention without trial—and made strikes illegal. In 1961, workers, backed by street traders and the unemployed, organised a 17-day general strike. This was met with a state of emergency. Controls over workers followed, including a state-backed Trades Union Congress in 1965.

Julius Nyerere of Tanzania argued, in his 1962 essay *Ujamaa*, that workers who wanted too much were actually "potential capitalists" who needed to be "coerced by the government." He, too, built a one-party state that tried to swallow unions. In 1971, Nyerere's *Mwongozo* guidelines promised workers' control, but when workers occupied factories, he sent in the riot police.

The same scenario played out elsewhere: for example, in Kenneth Kaunda's Zambia. Ideology made no difference. Actually, these governments—Kenya's included—all declared themselves 'socialist' while oppressing the popular classes.

It is hardly surprising that the Left is weak in many African countries. Outside of South Africa and Namibia, 'socialism' is commonly identified with repressive, corrupt states, and the Left is seen as separate to workers' movements.

Kanu was one of the worst. Its corruption was on an industrial scale. Whereas Nkrumah and Nyerere tried to smother ethnic politics and tackle the chieftaincy, Kenyatta relied on Kikuyu ethnic chauvinism, and fostered hostility to other groups, including Indians. Moi continued this divide-and-rule, although he switched to a Kalenjin base.

Zarina—feminist and socialist

Zarina was influenced by feminist, left-wing, socialist, and Marxist ideas from the 1960s onwards. This was very risky. Kanu assassinated opponents, both within and outside the party. Victims ranged from moderate former trade unionist Tom Mboya to Kanu leftist Pio Pinto. Its communalist politics led to violent youth militias, and also the scapegoating of minorities: rioters targeted Indians in 1982, and there were orchestrated attacks in 1993.

Zarina involved herself in struggles in the 1970s. She joined the underground December 12 Movement (DTM) in the early 1980s; this was a cell-based, non-racial, and socialist movement. She was active in Mombasa and Nairobi. DTM members would engage *wananchi* (the people, 'citizens') in public spaces, through theatre, and (illegal) publications. In the DTM, Zarina met Zahid Rajan, later her life partner. They worked together on their cell's underground newsletters, *Pambana* and *HDK*.

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Marxism gaining ground

Marxism, and class analysis, were gaining ground in the universities in Kenya and neighbouring Tanzania. It was no alien 'Western' plant, as nationalists then and now—Moi among them—loved to claim. It was a global movement, co-made by Africans. Notable East African Marxist scholars included Kenya's Peter Anyang Nyong'o and Tanzania's Issa Shivji. Materials like South Africa's (banned) *African Communist* journal were also important influences in the region.

The DTM drew heavily on the radical university milieu. Zarina thrived in the DTM's political work, while she was always sceptical of dogmatic assertions, favouring debate, scepticism, and openness. She was critical of a decadent modern culture that embraced consumerism, drugs, easy money, sugar daddies, Hollywood values and extreme individualism—but in retrospect, too, of

the DTM's conformist left-wing culture.

What Zarina would never compromise was the need to fight injustice and exploitation. She was an ardent opponent of class systems, and of communal, racial, and religious strife and hatred. She was tireless in her fight to restore Kenya's democratic constitution, and to open space for the popular classes to remake Kenya, non-racialism, and a common nationhood.

Disappointments of the 'second liberation'

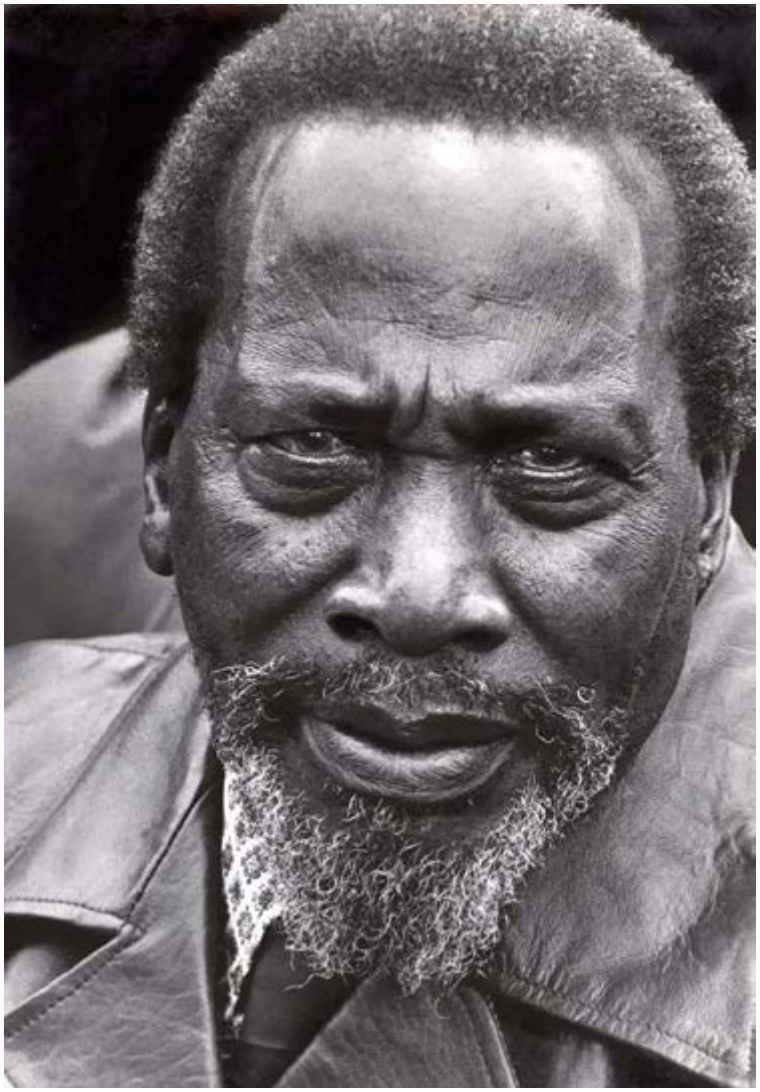
From the late 1980s, the 'second liberation' swept sub-Saharan Africa: decades-old authoritarian governments were forced by popular pressures to hold open elections; many toppled. Unions often played a major role, including in Ghana and Zambia. But much depended on whether incumbents were willing to risk elections. To their eternal credit, Nyerere and Kaunda allowed peaceful transitions, and Kaunda gracefully conceded defeat to the union-backed Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) in 1991.

Moi's Kanu government took a different road. It held supposedly open elections in 1992, but opponents were intimidated, and votes rigged; state-sponsored ethnic violence killed hundreds.

Patronage, Big Man politics, and the ruthless struggle to win state positions—a sure road to power and wealth—were also deeply entrenched in the political culture.

Kanu lost in 2002. Wracked by factionalism in the aftermath, it played a limited role in the 2007 elections. But its legacy remained: the election results were disputed, leading to massive, party-linked, ethnic conflicts. 1,400 died, 600,000 were displaced.

The disappointments of the 'second liberation' were playing out elsewhere too—notably, the MMD's rapid evolution into a corrupt establishment party.
A full discussion of why parties usually betray voters and serve the powerful and wealthy falls outside the scope of this article. But some of the reasons are the cross-class character of parties, which reward identity politics and Big Men; parties' integration into state power, which is after all their main purpose; leaders' enrichment through office; and the top-down, centralised nature of states, which can only be wielded by self-interested small elites.



The Kenyan African National Union (Kanu) government of Jomo Kenyatta, established in 1964, became a repressive, corrupt, patronage-based machine.

Many *wananchi* sense these truths, but they are rarely translated into an alternative politics. A major reason is that anti-imperialist nationalists, and the Left generally, also aim at winning state power through parties. Instead of rejecting the party system, they tend to blame parties' failures on contingent factors: ideology, leaders, and members.

Nationalists see betrayal, crooks, or cowards. For Frantz Fanon, the problem was the "absence of ideology," "intellectual laziness" and a greedy "psychology." Obviously, politics and skills matter. But these factors cannot explain why the problems repeat—and regardless of ideology and ability. Consider the parallel developments in Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, and Zambia.

Postcolonial leaders pursue their own interests

Marxists instead blamed party leaders' class position: many in DTM (says Gona) thought the problem was that Kanu was supposedly "completely mortgaged to the USA." This was underpinned by the idea, held by most Marxists, that postcolonial elites were not really ruling classes. Classes were based on means of production, and they were in government. So, they were characterised as fragile (if odious) 'petty bourgeoisies' without real power, and reliant on support from 'imperialism'.

But this misreads postcolonial state elites' resources and character. Marx's rival, the anarchist and syndicalist Mikhail Bakunin, had a broader class analysis. He called such groups a "new bureaucratic aristocracy", based on control of the instruments of state. He drew attention to the fact that they wielded armies and bureaucracies, state industries and budgets. They were usually the biggest employers. Control of the main means of administration and coercion made them *ruling classes*, and enabled enrichment, corruption, and patronage.

Since high office was essential to their class position, political battles were ruthless; patronage and repression were valuable tools. When these local ruling classes worked with powerful imperial states, they did so in their *own* interests. And their resources provided real autonomy: Moi was able to ignore demands from the 'international community' for fair elections.

This background perhaps helps explain why the Left declined in Kenya's 'second liberation'. It struggled to understand the terrain, and the terrain was shaped by the battles of the 'bureaucratic aristocracy.' Meanwhile, hollowed out by Kanu, Cotu could not form the basis for an alternative, popular counter-power. Civil society, beyond the parties instead centred on the educated middle class, donor dollars, and NGOs.

Focus on history

Zarina started to focus on 'people-centred movements' and suggested that "the capture of the state by vanguard parties" was not "an adequate form." She doubted Cotu could be salvaged. In 1991, she was central to struggles to save Nairobi's Jeevanjee Gardens, donated to the city by local Indian businessman A.M. Jeevanjee, in 1906, from a Kanu-backed land grab.

Her attention turned increasingly to research on the history of labour, the Left, and local Indians. With Zahid, she founded and ran *AwaaZ* ("Voice") magazine from 2000.

By then, she had published her first book, *Challenge to Colonialism*, about Jeevanjee. He co-founded the Indian Association in 1900, and the East Africa Indian National Congress (EAINC) in 1914; these inspired Harry Thuku's East Africa Association in 1918, the first Black nationalist group.

Like many early critics of colonialism, Jevanjee was from an elite, frustrated by racial barriers within the British Empire—in his case, raised by local whites. He sought reforms within the British Empire framework, not independence, and stressed lobbying and pressure.

While imperial racism was real, it existed alongside an imperial *class* project of incorporating local elites—educated, capitalist, and aristocratic—through education, qualified voting, indirect rule, and trade. Class divides were common in African and Asian societies, and nationalists like Jevanjee accepted them: they wanted unfair racial barriers removed, not classes. The 1950s-1960s nationalists, like Kanu and the rest, had given up on reforming the Empire. But they shared, with their predecessors, a leadership core based on frustrated local elites, and an acceptance of class society, exemplified by their leaders' development into 'new bureaucratic aristocracies'.

Zarina's work not only challenged Kanu's self-serving patriotic history by restoring the memory of groups like EAINC, but also started unveiling a more radical tradition of local struggle.

Makhan Singh and the memorial lectures

Unquiet: The Life and Times of Makhan Singh, a towering labour history of the British and early independence periods, recovered a radical tradition of trade unionism, very different to Cotu. This centred on the Labour Trade Union of East Africa, founded in 1935, later merged into the East African Trade Union Congress. It organised both black and Indian workers, was critical of capitalism and colonialism, transnational in outlook, and also organised in Tanzania and built links in Uganda.

The leading figure was Makhan Singh, son of Sudh Singh, who was fired for forming the Railway Artisans Union in the 1920s. Makhan came from a Ghadar Party background. A global movement influenced by Bakunin, anarchism, and syndicalism, Ghadar ("revolt") insisted that anti-colonial struggle be waged by and for the popular classes. Rather than replacing imperial overlords with local exploiters, it aimed at an egalitarian, bottom-up society. Ghadarites were active in East Africa, and three were shot, two hanged, eight jailed and twenty deported in a crackdown in the 1910s; but it survived underground.

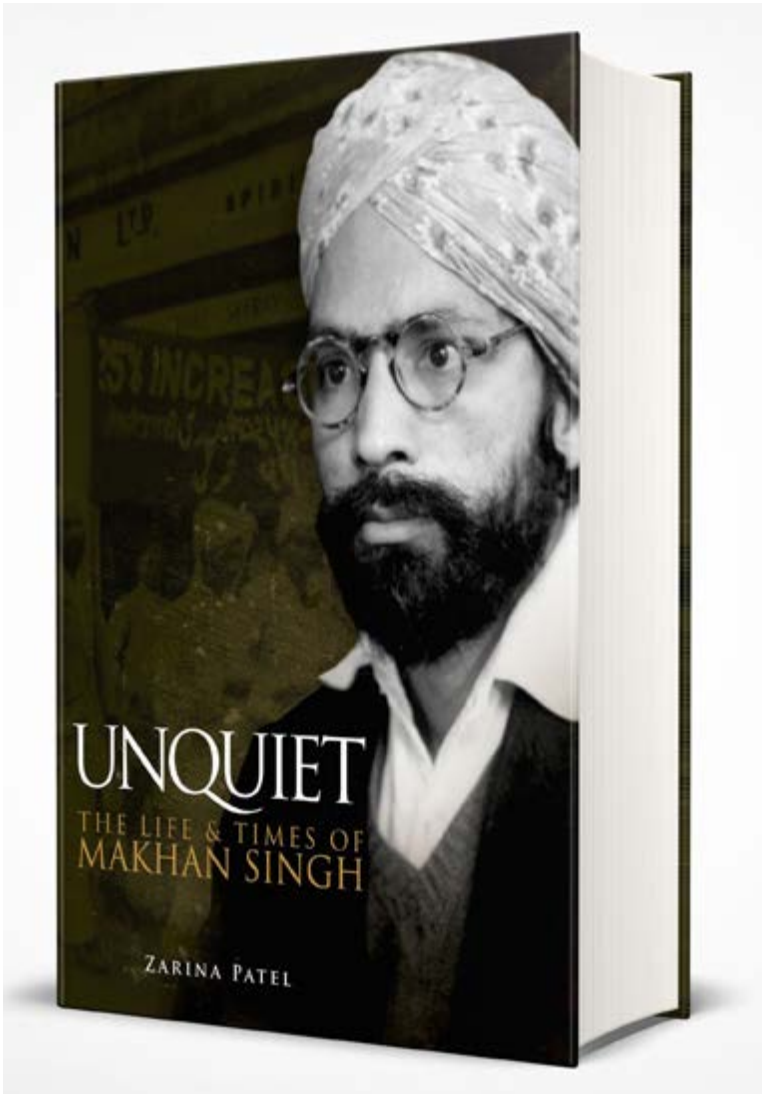
In the 1920s, Ghadarism moved closer to the Soviet Union, as did Singh, and he developed links with communists abroad, including South Africa. In the late 1940s, Singh, an Irishman called T.P. O'Brien and *Daily Chronicle* journalists were running a Marxist Study Group in Nairobi.

In 1950—and speaking for East African TUC—Singh was the first to publicly demand "complete independence" for East Africa. This was well before EAINC, or what became Kanu. Britain's repression intensified in the 1950s. Singh was sent into internal exile, like Kenyatta. The unions survived but, like the national liberation movement, were captured by moderates. The stage was now set for the state to be handed to Kanu.

The Left retained a presence. Pinto and a white Marxist, Douglas Rogers, ran the main Kanu paper for years; Singh was admitted to Kanu. But he was marginalised, as were leftists like Oginga Odinga; others, like Pinto, were killed.

Zarina tried to revive the memory of these stalwarts through the Makhan Singh Memorial Lectures series started in 2006, and other means: over 5,000 visited the touring Pinto Exhibition she and Zahid organised in 2023.

And so, we come full circle: Zarina and the DTM were part of an ongoing radical tradition that Britain and KANU had tried to destroy, dating to the 1910s, sometimes surviving underground. Zarina, Gona argues, must be remembered alongside Kibachia, Odinga, Pinto and Singh, as "among the Kenyan patriots, revolutionaries ... who fought for ... the political changes that Kenyans are enjoying."



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