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Africa - East Africa

Kenya's First Socialist Library

A new RLS partner in Nairobi seeks to popularize socialist literature in the city and beyond

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The Ukombozi Library in Nairobi, Kenya

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung has been active on the African continent since its international department, the Centre for Dialogue and Cooperation, was founded in 2000. With four different offices operating across the region, the RLS seeks to engage in political dialogue and collaborative work with local actors, while providing them with a global platform to link up with like-minded individuals and organizations around the world. In the past, the RLS has supported studies on sustainable agriculture, pilot projects to help strengthen local solidarity economies, and a number of initiatives addressing conflict-resolution and poverty reduction, to name but a few.

One of the Stiftung's primary focuses, however, is political education. Wherever we are active, we do our best to facilitate the spread of critical theory, Marxism, and counter-hegemonic literature and thought of all stripes by supporting local initiatives and providing materials to the extent we can. One of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung's newer African partners in this regard is the Ukombozi Library in Nairobi, Kenya, which works together with our East Africa Office in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania as part of its "Empowering Citizens in Kenya through Progressive Knowledge and Perspectives" project.

As one of very few (and perhaps only) sources of Marxist and socialist literature in Kenya, the

Ukombozi Library is a unique and deeply worthwhile endeavour, contributing to the revival of socialist thinking and action in Africa following decades of repression and neoliberal political hegemony. Recently, Loren Balhorn from the RLS headquarters in Berlin sat down with the library's coordinator, Kimani Waweru, to learn more about Ukombozi's history and mission.

LB: Can you tell us a little bit about how Ukombozi Library was started? What kinds of people and groups were involved in its founding?

KW: The Ukombozi Library was started in August 2017 in order to provide interested readers with progressive literature, especially on socialism. Over the years the Kenyan government has tried to suppress socialist material, or sought to depict such literature as irreverent to modern times. During the rule of Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi (the first and second presidents), people who were found with such materials were arrested, tortured, detained, and even forced to seek political asylum. For example, the historian Maina Kinyatti was jailed for six years.

Many activists were also members of the December 12th Movement or DTM, an underground political movement in the 1980s that later became the Mwakenya Movement. DTM had its own secret library, established and managed by Nazmi Durrani. When Nazmi Durrani passed away in 1990, the books were stored at the homes of several Mwakenya cadres. In 2017, Mwakenya together with [Vita Books](#) and the Mau Mau Research Centre collected those materials and established a library so they could be shared with the public. That library is the Ukombozi Library, located just across the road from the main campus of the University of Nairobi. The library strives to break with the colonial and imperialist mould of public libraries by meeting the informational needs of students, working people, and peasants. These needs are rarely met by national and tertiary libraries. The library was given the name *Ukombozi*, "Liberation", meaning it seeks to liberate people from capitalist and imperialist mind-sets.

What kinds of literature do you offer? What are some of the most popular books?

Kimani Waweru is the coordinator of the Ukombozi Library in Nairobi, Kenya. He spoke with **Loren Balhorn**, an editor at [rosalux.de/en](https://www.rosalux.de/en).

The Ukombozi Library focuses on material geared towards empowering the working class. We believe that doing so will contribute to awakening people who can then participate in the struggle for a better Kenya—a Kenya where socially created wealth benefits everyone, as opposed to the present situation in which a minority gobbles up disproportionate amounts of the nation's wealth. On this basis, the library places an emphasis on books covering history, resistance, and theoretical works on socialism and Marxism. These include works by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. Additional materials include experiences from Vietnam, China, Cuba, Albania, and so on. African topics are represented mainly by the writings of Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, and others active in the anti-colonial struggle, including in the former Portuguese colonies. South African materials include publications from the South African Communist Party and various trade unions.

Kenyan materials held in the library include studies on the Mau Mau and earlier struggles against colonialism. The material published underground by DTM and Mwakenya, as well as Umoja and the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya (CRPPK) in London are also available. Some of these will be featured in the forthcoming book *Crimes of Capitalism in Kenya* published by Vita, and were part of a talk on "[Repression and Resistance](#)" held at the Mathare Social Justice Centre in Nairobi on 26 October 2019.

Other materials include videos, photos, and conference proceedings from various relevant events. Depending on the availability of funds, we have proposed digitizing these materials, including the archives of DTM, Mwakenya, Umoja, and CRPPK.

What role does the library play in Nairobi's political scene?

It does not play any role in the open parliamentary and party-political scene. However, it provides materials and space for student study sessions and meetings in working-class areas, where it holds forums, film screenings, and related events aimed at increasing awareness and raising consciousness of political, economic, and social issues. It works closely with many of Kenya's 16 Social Justice Centres in their work to educate, politicize, and organize their communities.

Thanks to the support of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung through the project "Empowering Citizens in Kenya through Progressive Knowledge and Perspectives", the library recently launched a series of study and discussion sessions for college and university students and social justice activists from both the older and younger generations. Geared towards sharpening attendees' ideological standpoint, the sessions are conducted at the library every Monday from 17:00 to 19:00. Activists also use the space to organize key events that are ignored by the ruling class and the government, such as Kimathi Day (18 February) and African Liberation Day (25 May). Dedan Kimathi was the leader of the Land and Freedom Army, popularly known as the Mau Mau, which is credited with achieving Kenya's independence from colonial rule. Over the years, the Kenyan neo-colonial regimes have ignored the contribution made by the Mau Mau under the leadership of Kimathi. It is against this backdrop of official silence that activists organize activities to celebrate the Mau Mau and Kimathi's work. The activity is also meant to inspire people in their daily struggles today.

The library has also become a key reference centre in matters to do with the Mau Mau, with Nairobi journalists visiting us to find materials on the subject, such as [Nyambega Gisesa](#) of the *Daily Nation*.

How accessible is left-wing literature in Nairobi and Kenya more generally? Are there other socialist magazines, publishing houses, etc. targeting politicized workers and activists?

Left-wing literature is not widely available here—in fact, that was one of the reasons for establishing the Ukombozi Library in the first place. University libraries in Kenya do not house progressive material, nor do they show much interest in the underground and aboveground publications from DTM, Mwakenya, or the Archives of Makhan Singh (the founder of Kenya's radical trade-union movement), which have neither been digitized nor promoted. Similarly, Makhan Singh's two pioneering books on the history of the trade-union movement in Kenya have been out of print for decades. Vita Books is now planning to reprint them.

There are no well-known magazines that focus on socialism in Kenya. It is for this reason that Vita Books and Ukombozi Library launched the magazine, *The Kenya Socialist*. Most publishing houses in Kenya are commercial, meaning they publish material that can generate a profit. It is rare to find one dedicated to publishing left-wing literature. Of the hundreds of publishing houses in Kenya, Vita Books and the Mau Mau Research Centre are among the only ones devoted to anti-imperialist and socialist publications.

What kinds of people use the library? Do you have relationships with trade unions, socialist groups, etc.?

Most people who use the Ukombozi Library are university students and political and social justice activists. Trade unions in Kenya have become part of the establishment and are not progressive or active on behalf of the working class. Although they played a crucial role in the war of independence and the Mau Mau Uprising, unions were systematically disempowered by successive post-independence governments, carefully guided by the departing British. Since the 1960s the trade-union leadership has aligned itself with the neo-colonial regime. Union leaders are no different from right-wing politicians in terms of ideology and wealth acquisition. The library is aware of this challenge, and has been trying to reach out to ordinary workers by inviting them to its activities and aiming to equip them to become trade union activists at the grassroots level.

You mentioned that the Ukombozi Library recently began a project with the RLS East Africa Office in Dar es Salaam called "Empowering Citizens in Kenya through Progressive Knowledge and Perspectives". Could you tell me a bit more about the collaboration and what you hope to achieve with it?"

As the title suggests, the project aims at empowering Kenyan people through progressive information. It does this through forums, film screenings, documentaries, and conducting study sessions. All these activities are based on collecting relevant material on social theory, resistance to capitalism, and activist experiences from around the world. So far our activities have succeeded, and growing numbers of people are becoming aware of the library, its collections, and activities. The average number of people attending our Monday study sessions has been increasing.

Through the support of the "Empowering Citizens" project, the Ukombozi Library aims to promote alternative material representing a wide range of progressive viewpoints from Kenya, Africa, and around the world. Progressive materials, especially those on socialism, have been side-lined in Kenya from colonial to present times. It is truly unfortunate that oppressed people (workers, peasants, etc.) are kept in ignorance of such literature. Through this project, the library hopes to reach out to these groups of people, as they are the ones who need this information most to guide them in their struggle against the effects of capitalism.

How do you deal with language barriers? Most "radical" literature is published in the major European languages, but obviously not everyone, and especially working-class people, in the rest of the world can read English, French, etc. What language groups do you try to cater to? Do you also offer literature in local languages?

Most of the political material in the library is published in English, but there are a number of texts in Kiswahili, the language used by the working class and peasants, and other national languages like Kikuyu and Luo. Most people who come to borrow books are students and activist proficient in English. There is also a group of activists whose level of education is low and prefer literature in Kiswahili, as well as people who prefer books in their native languages, especially those written by Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Some key books from China, Latin America, and Asia are usually available in English translation. We would like to translate some of the material in the library (including books from Vita Books) into Kiswahili, and also to set up an internet radio station to read out such material—if and when funding allows.

The library is very keen to reach out to the working class, students, peasants, etc., which is why we conduct our activities in Kiswahili. The study sessions are also used to deconstruct difficult English terms, so that people can understand them and apply concepts in their practice.

You mentioned that the library also issues a magazine called *The Kenya Socialist*. Are there many publications of this kind in the country, or are you unique? And what does the project seek to accomplish?

As far as we are aware, there are no other publications dedicated to promoting socialist ideas in Kenya. This is not accidental. It has been overt and covert government policy to discourage socialist literature, and most literature promoting capitalist ideology does so without specifically mentioning capitalism or its alternative, socialism. This is then reinforced through government policies, the education system, and mass media. That was one of our main motivations for starting *The Kenya Socialist*.

Some publications produced by different organizations tackle various aspects such as human rights, protecting the environment, land, etc., but few relate those issues directly to capitalism itself. *The Kenya Socialist* is unique due to the fact that it deliberately focuses on promoting socialism in Kenya. One issue has been published to date, and the second will be out early next year. The goals of our magazine are:

Increasing awareness of classes, class contradictions, and class struggles in Kenya, both historical and current.

Exposing the damage done by capitalism and imperialism in Kenya and Africa as a whole.

Offering solidarity to the working class, peasants, and other working people and communities in their struggles for equality and justice.

Promoting internationalism and working in solidarity with people in Africa and around the world in their resistance to imperialism.

Making explicit the politics of information and communication as tools of both repression as well as resistance in Kenya.

[Download The Kenya Socialist](#)

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