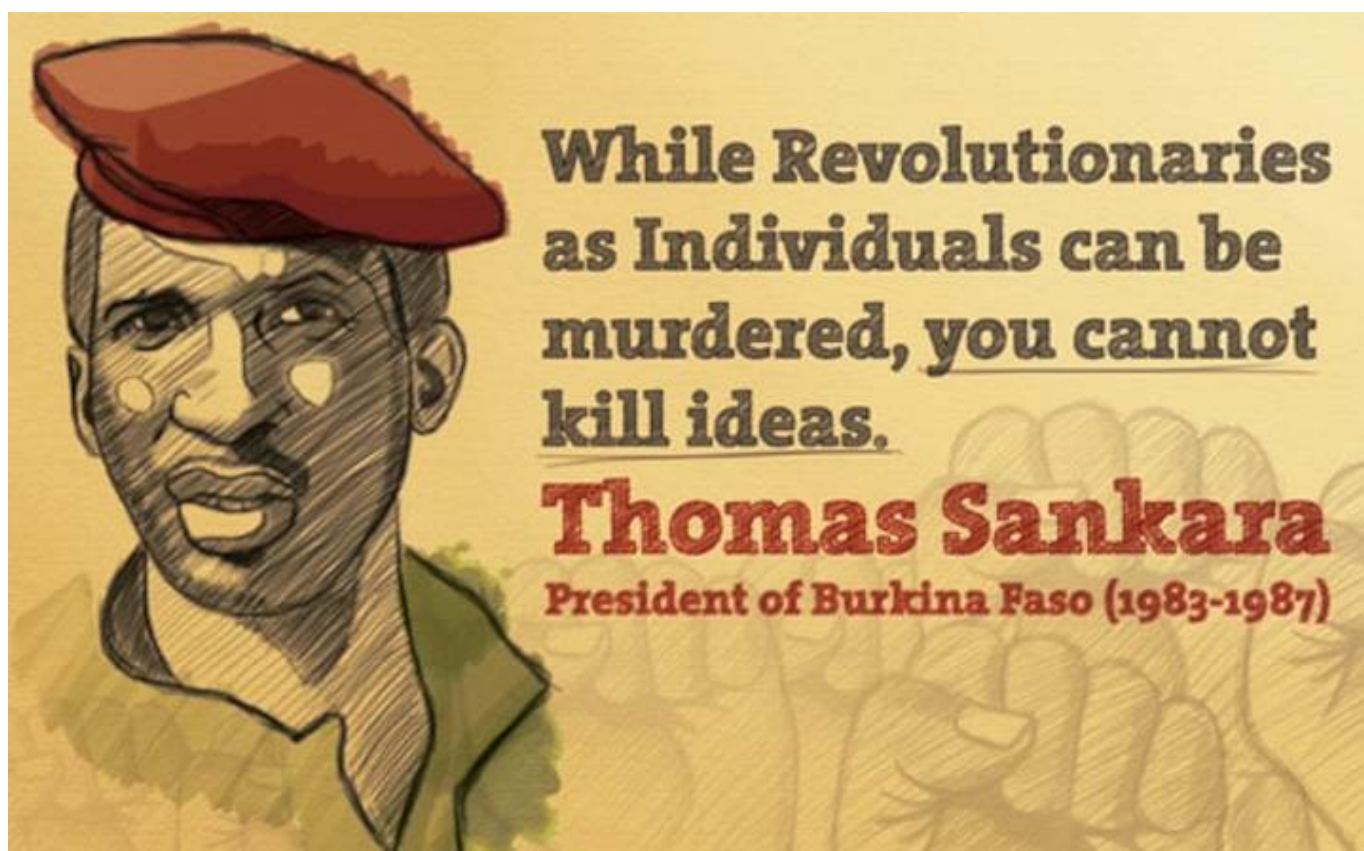


Thomas Sankara, “Africa’s Che Guevara” Dec. 21, 1949 - Oct. 15, 1987

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On Oct. 15, 1987, Thomas Sankara, Burkina Faso’s West African revolutionary

leader, was assassinated. Sankara, a Marxist and revolutionary, has been nicknamed “Africa’s Che Guevara.”

It is interesting to note that at a time when youth have focused the world’s attention on the dire issue of climate crisis, and workers and Indigenous people in Ecuador are rising up against the International Monetary Fund’s austerity demands — that Sankara spearheaded major programs in both areas.

He promoted and led a massive people’s campaign called the “One village, one grove” program to combat desertification of the Sahel (the area between the Sahara Desert and Sudanian Savanna). Over 10 million trees were planted. That legacy lives on.

Under Sankara’s leadership, Burkina Faso nationalized land and mineral wealth and refused aid from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, which incurred the wrath of both U.S. and French imperialism.

This began in 1983, when a group of revolutionaries under the leadership of 33-year-old Thomas Sankara led a popular revolt that took power.

One of the first acts of Sankara and the new revolution was to rename the colonial Upper Volta to Burkina Faso, which means “The Land of the Upright People” in Mossi. It was an act in defiance of French imperialism, which had coined the name “Upper Volta.” Burkina Faso was meant to instill people’s pride.

In just four years, amazing progress was made. Education and health care were made a priority. A national literacy campaign was developed and 2.5 million children were vaccinated against yellow fever, meningitis and measles. Women were appointed to government positions and their status was elevated so that they could go to school and work outside the home. Forced marriages, polygamy and female genital mutilation were all outlawed.

The assassination of Thomas Sankara and the overturn of this amazing revolution is reminiscent of the Paris Commune. While brief, the revolution's legacy deserves to be studied and remembered by generations to come. The spirit of revolution continues today in the fight of the workers and Indigenous people in Ecuador and those in the streets everywhere fighting capitalist crisis and imperialist domination and war.

Thomas Sankara, presente!

Struggle-La Lucha would like to commemorate and recognize Sankara's legacy by reprinting the following speech. This speech was given Feb. 5, 1986, at the first International Silva Conference for the Protection of the Trees and Forests in Paris:

Imperialism is the arsonist of our forests and savannas

My homeland, Burkina Faso, is without question one of the rare countries on this planet justified in calling itself and viewing itself as a distillation of all the natural evils from which mankind still suffers at the end of this twentieth century.

Eight million Burkinabè have painfully internalized this reality for twenty-three years. They have watched their mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons die, with hunger, famine, disease, and ignorance decimating them by the hundreds. With tears in their eyes, they have watched ponds and rivers dry up. Since 1973, they have seen the environment deteriorate, trees die, and the desert invade with giant strides. It is estimated that the desert in the Sahel advances at the rate of seven kilometers per year.

Only by looking at these realities can one understand and accept the legitimate revolt that was born, that matured over a long period of time, and that finally

erupted in an organized way the night of August 4, 1983, in the form of a democratic and popular revolution in Burkina Faso.

Here I am merely a humble spokesperson of a people who, having passively watched their natural environment die, refuse to watch themselves die. Since August 4, 1983, water, trees, and lives—if not survival itself—have been fundamental and sacred elements in all action taken by the National Council of the Revolution, which leads Burkina Faso.

In this regard, I am also compelled to pay tribute to the French people, to their government, and in particular to their president, Mr. François Mitterrand, for this initiative, which expresses the political genius and clear-sightedness of a people always open to the world and sensitive to its misery. Burkina Faso, situated in the heart of the Sahel, will always fully appreciate initiatives that are in perfect harmony with the most vital concerns of its people. The country will be present at them whenever it is necessary, in contrast to useless pleasure trips.

For nearly three years now, my people, the Burkinabè people, have been fighting a battle against the encroachment of the desert. So it was their duty to be here on this platform to talk about their experience, and also benefit from the experience of other peoples from around the world. For nearly three years in Burkina Faso, every happy event—marriages, baptisms, award presentations, and visits by prominent individuals and others—is celebrated with a tree-planting ceremony.

To greet the new year, 1986, all the school children and students of our capital, Ouagadougou, built more than 3,500 improved cookstoves with their own hands, offering them to their mothers. This was in addition to the 80,000 cookstoves made by women themselves over the course of two years. This was their contribution to the national effort to reduce the consumption of firewood and to protect trees and life.

The ability to buy or simply rent one of the hundreds of public dwellings built since August 4, 1983, is strictly conditional on the beneficiary promising to plant a minimum number of trees and to nurture them like the apple of his eye. Those who receive these dwellings but were mindless of their commitment have already been evicted, thanks to the vigilance of our Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, committees that poisonous tongues take pleasure in systematically and unilaterally denigrating.

After having vaccinated throughout the national territory, in two weeks, 2.5 million children between the ages of nine months and fourteen years—children from Burkina Faso and from neighboring countries—against measles, meningitis, and yellow fever; after having sunk more than 150 wells assuring drinking water to the 20 or so districts in our capital that lacked this vital necessity until now; after having raised the literacy rate from 12 to 22 percent in two years—the Burkinabè people victoriously continue their struggle for a green Burkina.

Ten million trees were planted under the auspices of a fifteen-month People's Development Program, our first venture while awaiting the five-year plan. In the villages and in the developed river valleys, families must each plant one hundred trees per year.

The cutting and selling of firewood has been completely reorganized and is now strictly regulated. These measures range from the requirement to hold a lumber merchant's card, through respecting the zones designated for wood cutting, to the requirement to ensure reforestation of deforested areas. Today, every Burkinabè town and village owns a wood grove, thus reviving an ancestral tradition.

Thanks to the effort to make the popular masses aware of their responsibilities, our urban centers are free of the plague of roaming livestock. In our countryside, our efforts focus on settling livestock in one place as a means of promoting intensive stockbreeding in order to fight against unrestrained nomadism.

All criminal acts of arson by those who burn the forest are subject to trial and sanctioning by the Popular Courts of Conciliation in the villages. The requirement of planting a certain number of trees is one of the sanctions issued by these courts.

From February 10 to March 20, more than 35,000 peasants—officials of the cooperative village groups—will take intensive, basic courses on the subjects of economic management and environmental organization and maintenance.

Since January 15, a vast operation called the “Popular Harvest of Forest Seeds” has been under way in Burkina for the purpose of supplying the 7,000 village nurseries. We sum up all of these activities under the label “the three battles.”

Ladies and Gentlemen:

My intention is not to heap unrestrained and inordinate praise on the modest revolutionary experience of my people with regard to the defense of the trees and forests. My intention is to speak as explicitly as possible about the profound changes occurring in the relationship between men and trees in Burkina Faso. My intention is to bear witness as accurately as possible to the birth and development of a deep and sincere love between Burkinabè men and trees in my homeland.

In doing this, we believe we are applying our theoretical conceptions on this, based on the specific ways and means of our Sahel reality, in the search for resolutions to present and future dangers attacking trees all over the planet.

Our efforts and those of the entire community gathered here, your cumulative experience and ours, will surely guarantee us victory after victory in the struggle to save our trees, our environment, and, in short, our lives.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

I come to you with the hope that you are taking up a battle from which we cannot be

absent, we who are attacked daily and who are waiting for the miracle of greenery to rise up from the courage to say what must be said. I have come to join with you in deploring the harshness of nature. But I have also come to denounce the ones whose selfishness is the source of his fellow man's misfortune. Colonial plunder has decimated our forests without the slightest thought of replenishing them for our tomorrows.

The unpunished disruption of the biosphere by savage and murderous forays on the land and in the air continues. One cannot say too much about the extent to which all these machines that spew fumes spread carnage. Those who have the technological means to find the culprits have no interest in doing so, and those who have an interest in doing so lack the technological means. They have only their intuition and their innermost conviction.

We are not against progress, but we do not want progress that is anarchic and criminally neglects the rights of others. We therefore wish to affirm that the battle against the encroachment of the desert is a battle to establish a balance between man, nature, and society. As such it is a political battle above all, and not an act of fate.

The creation of a Ministry of Water as a complement to the Ministry of the Environment and Tourism in my country demonstrates our desire to clearly formulate the problems in order to be able to resolve them. We must fight to find the financial means to exploit our existing water resources—drilling operations, reservoirs, and dams. This is the place to denounce the one-sided contracts and draconian conditions imposed by banks and other financial institutions that doom our projects in this field. It is these prohibitive conditions that lead to our countries' traumatizing debt and eliminate any meaningful maneuvering room.

Neither fallacious Malthusian arguments—and I assert that Africa remains an underpopulated continent—nor the vacation resorts pompously and demagogically

christened “reforestation operations” provide an answer. We and our misery are spurned like bald and mangy dogs whose lamentations and cries disturb the peace and quiet of the manufacturers and merchants of misery.

That is why Burkina has proposed and continues to propose that at least 1 percent of the colossal sums of money sacrificed to the search for cohabitation with other stars and planets be used, by way of compensation, to finance projects to save trees and lives. We have not abandoned hope that a dialogue with the Martians might lead to the reconquest of Eden. But in the meantime, earthlings that we are, we also have the right to reject a choice limited simply to the alternatives of hell or purgatory.

Explained in this way, our struggle for the trees and forests is first and foremost a democratic and popular struggle. Because a handful of forestry engineers and experts getting themselves all worked up in a sterile and costly manner will never accomplish anything! Nor can the worked-up consciences of a multitude of forums and institutions—sincere and praiseworthy though they may be—make the Sahel green again, when we lack the funds to drill wells for drinking water a hundred meters deep, while money abounds to drill oil wells three thousand meters deep!

As Karl Marx said, those who live in a palace do not think about the same things, nor in the same way, as those who live in a hut. This struggle to defend the trees and forests is above all a struggle against imperialism. Because imperialism is the arsonist setting fire to our forests and our savannas.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

We rely on these revolutionary principles of struggle so that the green of abundance, joy, and happiness may take its rightful place. We believe in the power of the revolution to stop the death of our Faso and usher in a bright future for it. ...

This fight can be waged. We must not retreat in face of the immensity of the task.

We must not turn away from the suffering of others, for the spread of the desert no longer knows any borders.

We can win this struggle if we choose to be architects and not simply bees. It will be the victory of consciousness over instinct. The bee and the architect, yes! If the author of these lines will allow me, I will extend this twofold analogy to a threefold one: the bee, the architect, and the revolutionary architect.

Homeland or death, we will win!

