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Obituary: Hamba Kahle Wilstar Choongo!

Michael Schmidt

March 2002

The international anarchist movement will be saddened at the belated news of the death of Wilstar Choongo, founder of the Anarchist & Workers' Solidarity Movement (AWSM) of Zambia.

A self-taught anarchist activist, Wilstar first came to the attention of the movement in 1996 through his lone battle to improve the salaries of employees at the University of Zambia (UNZA) where he worked as a librarian – and where he built up a formidable collection of anarchist works for the use of students.

Zambia, a former British colony, gained its independence without much of a struggle in 1964. The 30-year African socialist regime of Kenneth Kaunda proved disastrous. The economy remained essentially extractive, agriculture shrivelled as farmers flooded into the cities because of urban food subsidies. Then the collapse of the copper price in the mid-1970s put paid to any hoped-for recovery.

When Kaunda was defeated by the former Zambian Congress of Trade Unions general secretary Frederick Chiluba in the first democratic elections in 1991, the stage was set for the neo-liberal dismantling of an already drastically weakened country.

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Although Chiluba had climbed to power on the back of a pro-democratic working class, his Movement for Multi-party Democracy soon revealed its true colours. Every organised group of citizens has to be annually licensed by the police and executions and torture resumed after a seven-year reprieve.

Although Zambia had played host to many African national-liberation exile and guerrilla groups (including the ANC/MK) during the Kaunda era, the inertia of never having fought for its own independence meant there was no tradition of grassroots protest, and only a tiny Left represented by the Socialist Caucus, a Marxist-Leninist discussion group at UNZA.

People in the shantytowns literally eat mud for the mineral content.

In a two-week period that I was there, five employed UNZA workers were buried after having died of malnutrition – and this as the well-heeled employees of neo-liberal NGOs managing the structural adjustment of Zambia sported about with satellite dishes and Toyota Landcruisers.

It was against this background that Wilstar alone took on the entire varsity administration in an attempt to get a pay rise for the staff. Wilstar was taken to court, but he was unbowed, and he won the pay rise, which encouraged the starving workers to fight for more. That fight brought him onto the “organise” anarchist e-mail discussion list and established links with us at the Workers’ Solidarity Federation (WSF) of South Africa.

Wilstar was born at Kalomo, a town in Southern Province, the son of small-scale farmers. He joined UNZA as a librarian.

In 1995 and 1996, he contributed critical articles in the opposition *The Post* newspaper on the new Zambian constitution that was then being drawn up, arguing for the decentralisation of power. In 1996/97, he was the mainstay of support for a group of students who had been kicked out of UNZA for daring to call a non-party-sectarian meeting.

I first met Wilstar when he invited me to Zambia in August 1998 as a WSF delegate to give a public talk on the common enemy facing South African and Zambian workers. He was a friendly, shambling man with a ready grin. I well recall sitting on the bed in his cramped apartment eating a meal of eggs, bread and oranges and engaging in fervent discussions on anarchist strategies.

Shortly after my visit, he and most of the youths of the Socialist Caucus' UNZA-Cuba Friendship Association, who had converted to anarchism, set up the AWSM (sometimes referred to as the Anarchist Workers' Group – Zambia), the first known anarchist organisation in Central Africa, and one which linked students, staff and workers.

Wilstar decided against the AWSM becoming a WSF section because of the great distances involved, but hoped to maintain regular contact and material and ideological support. In early 1999, WSF proposed that the AWSM become a WSF section, the South African and Zambian sections to be federated horizontally. As things turned out, the WSF dissolved in September 1999 because of the ineffectiveness of its organisational method, and the far more productive Bikisha Media Collective, Zabalaza Books and Anarchist Union sprang up in its stead.

But we last had contact with Wilstar on July 15, 1999. Unknown to us, he died shortly afterwards, aged 35, following a bout with malaria that brought on meningitis. Uncomplaining to the end, he had not even mentioned his illness to his comrades.

He left a wife and three young children. This obituary was delayed due to the critical problems of communication among workers in Africa. The AWSM is believed to have collapsed as a result of his death.

But although death cut short efforts to build a Central African anarchist movement, Wilstar's direct-actionist example of anarchism in practice is still remembered as a great contribution to the ethics of the emergent Left in the region.

A Socialist Caucus activist described him so: “He wasn’t prepared to make things convenient for himself. His death is an extremely big loss to the whole fragile Left and UNZA is still reeling from it.” As we say in South Africa when a militant dies: “Hamba kahle (go well) Comrade Wilstar!”