
Trade unions in Nigeria

the temperature is rising



Pro-democracy demonstration on the streets of Lagos, Nigeria's capital city

JANE BARRETT spent two weeks in Nigeria in March this year. During her visit she spoke to many trade union leaders and rank and file activists. In this article she describes the role of the trade union movement in the struggle for democracy.



Nigeria won independence from British rule in 1960. Since then, it has known only two brief periods of civilian rule – between 1960 and 1966 and then again between 1979 and 1983. On 12 June 1993, the population went to the polls to elect a president for the first time in 11 years. The military regime had determined the two candidates and their manifestos. Despite this, voters, supported by the trade union movement and other democratic forces, enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to vote. The winner was Chief Moshood Abiola, representing the Social Democratic Party.

Abiola was a popular figure. As a working class boy, he spent his childhood chopping and selling firewood. He educated himself and eventually became the first African head of the giant telecommunications multi-national, ITT, in Africa. Later he became a millionaire through a string of media houses and many other concerns. He is widely known in Nigeria as a philanthropic capitalist.

However, the military regime did not announce the election results. Their excuse was that Abiola's installation as president, would unleash a civil war between the predominantly Muslim North, and the mainly Christian South. Abiola is a Southern, Yoruba-speaking Muslim.

Most commentators agree that this was a lame excuse. The military feared the election of a popular president with a legitimate mandate, who had committed himself to tackling corruption. Abiola had announced that those who had plundered the national purse would be made to repay the State.

Contrary to the claims of the military, Abiola commanded enough support across the 30-state Nigerian federation to be a unifying rather than a divisive figure.

The Campaign for Democracy

The annulment of the elections resulted in a week-long strike, led by the Campaign for Democracy, a united front body of many human rights and activist organisations, and crucially supported by a range of trade unions. Instead of installing Abiola, the regime side-stepped the issue. Head of state General Ibrahim Babangida was replaced by a so-called Interim Government led by Shonekan, a senior civil servant. Shonekan was given the brief to restore order and re-open the democratisation process. He was clearly not acting independently, but was following the orders of General Sani Abacha, Babangida's right-hand man and strategist.

During this period, there were many strikes and democratic rallies demanding that the election result be announced, and that the military and their puppet regime stand down. Matters came to a head when the Shonekan government tried to remove a range of subsidies which helped protect the living standards of working people from the ravages of inflation. Shonekan, under orders from the new military leaders, decided to take on the trade unions. He announced that, as part of the IMF structural adjustment package, subsidies would be removed and fuel increases implemented immediately. To make things worse, the regime engineered a fuel shortage, forcing massive fuel price increases. This had a tremendous knock-on effect, and prices of basic food stuffs and other goods soared.

General strike

This move angered the trade union movement. An immediate general strike was declared and, for five days, the whole economy began to grind to a halt. The strike gathered momentum and soon won the support of students, market traders, the unemployed and all those who wanted a return to civilian rule.

On the sixth day of action, Shonekan was



Derseted streets in Lagos during a general strike called by the NLC against the military regime

dismissed by General Abacha, and a new set of generals promised to start a process of moving towards democracy – which most Nigerians argue is simply a delaying tactic. The generals also promised to negotiate a Relief Package with the trade union movement to include protection for the very low paid, an end to corruption, and full and proper consultation with the trade union movement on the economy. This marked an important advance for the trade union movement, and they have since been formulating a programme of economic measures which will benefit the working class. Calls for the immediate installation of Abiola as president have continued.

A temporary truce

While the general strike was spurred by the regime's annulment of the June presidential election, the demands and subsequent negotiations went much further. A return to work truce was reached on 14 December last year after the regime agreed to principles in the Relief Package. These included the

abolition of school fees for the first twelve years of education; the introduction of a comprehensive national health scheme; the provision of houses for low income earners, and more commuter buses.

As an interim measure, it was agreed that workers in each sector should negotiate a set of allowances to alleviate the growing cost of transport, housing, health and education. The regime also agreed to scrap elements of its Structural Adjustment Programme, and to hold a national summit to find an alternative solution to Nigeria's economic problems. Immediately following the strike, negotiations for allowances in the private sector proceeded fairly well, but came unstuck in the public sector due to the government's failure to budget for the recommended allowances.

The textile union believes that the events of 12 June and the subsequent General Strike have helped convince more and more workers of the relationship between the struggle for workers' rights and the struggle for democracy. However, union officials point out that the labour movement faces some

severe limitations – including its limited access to the mass media. Despite the fact that Nigeria has many daily newspapers – including those with a fighting tradition – workers find it difficult to get a real voice through the commercial press.

“The message about the link between democracy and wages is therefore not that easy to spread. We also have work to do in breaking down certain ethnic perceptions, otherwise we may continue to get varied responses to calls for action as in the case of the national strike, when the south came out much stronger than the north.” But the textile union officials are convinced that the Nigerian trade union movement “will never again be just a bread and butter movement”.

Debating strategy and economics

But the labour movement has yet to agree on the correct strategy to oppose the continued presence of a military government. Some argue that the union movement should submerge itself in support of the Social Democratic Party of Abiola. Others argue for complete distance from all political parties, and yet others push for the establishment of a labour party which articulates the voice of workers.

The textile union argues strongly that the starting point is to build the trade union movement’s credibility by consolidating structures and servicing members. Adams Oshiomhole has argued repeatedly for unions to be seen as standard bearers, particularly in behaving in a democratic manner, with transparency and accountability. He argues that unions have a responsibility to show all Nigerians that it is possible to promote a culture of democracy, and to lead by example. “How can we tell the regime to behave democratically if we ourselves do not have our own houses in democratic good order,” says Adams Oshimhole, the union’s general secretary and vice president of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC).

Meanwhile, debate continues within the trade union movement about an economic vision for Nigeria. At an NLC seminar on “Labour and the Crisis of Economic Adjustment” in February 1994, the labour

movement started to put together the building blocks for an alternative economic policy. The seminar reiterated the NLC’s long-standing position – that a prerequisite to economic reconstruction was democratic government. Only a democratic government could be expected to manage the economy properly. This would have to include a ban on imports of luxury goods, stopping all smuggling, and a review of fiscal and monetary policies. The value of *naira* [the Nigerian currency] would have to be strengthened, the growth of small industries encouraged and the minimum pension lifted to the level of the minimum wage. Worker participation in decision making was seen as a key to economic recovery.

The seminar also emphasised the need for unions to encourage skills training and retraining as well as the need to expand basic trade union education by establishing a functioning education department in each union. The conclusions of the workshop, whilst somewhat disparate and general, could mark the beginning of a process not unlike COSATU’s development of an economic policy and contributions to the Reconstruction and Development Programme.

Division between military and people

With its population of 110 million, over thirty languages, two almost equally dominant religions (Christianity and Islam) and a federal constitution uniting 30 states, many superficial observers argue that Nigeria is politically fragile. It is fragile, but not along the tribal or religious lines that some like to suggest. As Adams Oshiomhole puts it, “the biggest division in this society is between those with uniforms and those without. After all,” he says, “the bosses always remain united – whenever did you hear of them dividing on tribal or religious lines? So, when we hear people say that Nigeria is about to break up on those lines, we know it is because they have an interest in seeing the so-called stability of the corrupt military regime maintained.”

The “uniform divide” is reflected in the

Continued on page 88

Trade union rights

Like in South Africa under apartheid, aspects of Nigeria's labour legislation are surprisingly "progressive". As in South Africa, this is largely due to the strength of the union movement and its fierce defence of trade union rights. In 1978, the regime intervened to force unions to merge into industrial unions affiliated to one of the two national centres. The state's idea was to create a union movement beholden to the regime out of the disparate union movement which was grouped into a range of national centres. But the union movement used the merger process to its own advantage.

Prior to 1978, the unions fought bitter recognition battles. However, the Trade Union Amendment Decree of 1978 changed much of that. Among other things, the Decree provided for the automatic deduction of union subscriptions. Once the majority of workers in a workplace were organised, deductions would be made for all employees, excluding managerial staff.

However, as in many countries which outlaw discrimination based on union membership, in practice it still exists. Some Nigerian employers still dismiss union leaders and pressurise applicant employees to pledge that they will not join a union if given the job. The extent to which Nigerian employers stick to the law depends in large measure on the strength of workplace organisation.

The labour relations legislative framework is built along the lines of a compulsory arbitration system. Disputes of right are referred to an industrial court (equivalent in status to the Supreme Court). Disputes of interest are referred to mediation, with the mediator generally appointed by the Minister for Labour (although in theory it is a joint appointment). If mediation fails, the dispute is referred to a tripartite panel of three arbitrators, with government chairing.

Nigerian unionists regard the industrial court with some contempt. This is because, like its British counterpart, it works on the philosophy that conditions can't be imposed on the master/servant relationship, and therefore declines to award reinstatement in

the case of unfair dismissals. The tripartite arbitration panel in the case of disputes of interest is seen as judging disputes fairly. However, the procedure is rarely used.

For, despite the fact that the labour legislation makes no provision for strikes (except in the case of an employer defying an arbitration award), strikes are the most common form of dispute resolution. The textile union for example, handles at least two strikes a week.

Not only are strikes not formally built into the industrial relations system, but the Dispute Act of 1976 states that a worker should not be paid for any period of striking, and his/her contract should be deemed broken. Despite these provisions, most workers get paid for the full duration of a strike (including in the public sector), as part of the back-to-work agreement. Workers regard this as a precondition for any return to work and anything less as totally unacceptable.

None of the unions has strike funds to see workers through before the return to work and backpay, but as Oshiomhole and his comrades in the NUTGTWN point out, "every Nigerian person is part of a family and workers can sustain strikes only because of the support they get from their immediate family and the family of workers in general". Textile workers have sustained strikes of seven weeks and more, whilst teachers in some states were on strike for four months during 1994. In 1993, almost every major sector, including doctors, went on strike.

Only once has the regime tried to charge workers for breaking the law by striking. In 1989, after a strike in the energy sector, a number of workers received ten-year sentences for striking and strike-related activities. However, they were released in 1992 after mass pressure on the regime. Detention without trial has rarely been used against unionists, although it has been used against political activists.

"The military are simply too aware of how workers would respond," say the textile union officials. And the regime has never been bold enough to carry out repeated threats of "deregulating" trade unions. ☆

Continued from page 86

special schools and hospitals reserved for military personnel, the car perks, and the massive early retirement benefits (many bankers in Nigeria are retired army officers who have gone into banking on the basis of their retirement packages).

Over the years, just as there is an established relationship between the military and banking, the military has become integral to almost every part of the Nigerian economy – even those parts of the economy engaged in illegal activities. The US State Department, for example, now regards Nigeria as the most important staging post for the transportation of hard drugs to Europe. Given that airfields and storage facilities are under military command, it would be impossible for this deadly trade to go ahead without the involvement of very senior officers.

The same is true of Nigeria's largest export earner, its considerable oil reserves. Millions of barrels of oil have in the past been spirited away and sold on the world market without any returns being filed with the Ministry of Finance. Along with the drugs trade, this accounts for billions of dollars being stolen from a nation in which millions of people are struggling to stay alive.

For many years, the Nigerian trade union movement has been the only mass democratic organisation able to sustain continued opposition to military rule. Various democratic fronts of organisations have participated in ongoing resistance, but the union movement has been centre stage in the unfolding struggle for democracy. Its unique ability to unite workers regardless of their religious or ethnic backgrounds, and to provide a national organisational framework for protest, has earned it the grudging respect of all Nigeria's political players.

The trade union movement comprises two national centres – one for 'junior' workers and one for 'senior' workers (a state-imposed categorisation). The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) represents over four million so-called junior workers in 41 affiliates, and the Senior Staff Consultative Association of Nigeria (SESCAN) represents approximately

three million workers. The two national centres enjoy a close working relationship.

The temperature is rising

In the past month, there have been renewed calls for the installation of Abiola as president. As I write, Abiola himself is in detention after proclaiming himself President on the anniversary of the annulled election. Many other leading civil rights activists have been detained, and charges are pending which could result in hefty prison sentences.

The Abacha regime is clinging to its strategy of a Constitutional Conference made up of representatives largely selected by the regime itself, where only one third have been elected in ill-prepared local elections held recently. The Conference is due to last for four months, and though the regime has said it will take seriously the eventual conclusions of the Conference, it has given no guarantees.

Several important unions, notably those in the petroleum sector, have given notice of a strike to restore democracy. The temperature in Nigeria is rising. Increasing numbers of ordinary people have realised that military regimes do not abandon power voluntarily – that they sometimes need more than a little push.

Solidarity

The Nigerian trade movement, with a culture and tradition of militant action not unlike that of COSATU, faces the difficult task of developing a coherent response to the absence of democratic government, and an economy which has been pillaged and mismanaged. One thing is certain – of all the institutions which are perhaps capable of developing such a response, only the Labour Congress has the power and resolve to ensure that it is implemented in favour of the working class.

If there ever was a case for cementing solidarity links, the experiences of South African and Nigerian workers confirm its necessity. As Oshiomhole says, "Sharing our rich experiences, and learning from both our successes and failures can only help to ensure that we are more prepared for the stormy days that lie ahead". ☆