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## Popular Struggles in Nigeria 1960-1982

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### Abstract

*The paper examines some of the dominant social movements in Nigerian politics since independence; the causes and character of the struggles waged by them - students, workers, peasants and the Nigerian Left. It argues that these struggles constitute the mainstream of the struggles of the popular masses and achieved significant political, social and economic results. They were however limited in their overall impact on the Nigerian political economy because they lacked unity and political largely as a result of the weakness of the Nigerian Left.*

At Nigeria's independence in 1960, it became apparent that the emergent petit bourgeoisie, the merchant class and the elite who mounted the political turf were set to run a neo-colonial state; the promises and hopes of independence were dashed; and all the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist campaigns by the Nigerian peoples - workers, peasants, women, students, the professionals and indeed the left were compromised. The political energies of the popular forces — as expressed, for example, in the Egba women's revolt, the 1945 workers' strike, and the revolt following the Iva Valley massacre — were squandered. Our objective in this paper is to show that the struggles of popular forces assumed a general tenor and thrust that had as its goal the transformation of the Nigerian social structure. However, these struggles either remained unsystematised, unharnessed, sectarian and uncoordinated; or they were not captured and channeled within the framework of a vanguardist political movement. This, to us, is the tragedy of the Nigerian socialist movement.<sup>1</sup> By popular struggles we mean the struggles waged against the Nigerian state and its ruling class by the social forces located in the lower levels of country's social structure, where the majority of its citizens subsist — workers, peasants, students, unemployed, small commodity producers, and petty traders. But first a brief statement on the nature of the Nigerian state and social classes.

## **State and Class in Nigeria**

The Nigerian State has been described as neo-colonial (Ake 1985). That the state is neo-colonial does not mean that it only serves the interest of the metropolitan capitalist class. Indeed, it serves the interest of some local beneficiaries. The exploited classes remain the working class and the peasantry (Toyo 1985). It would seem therefore that the arguments about the relative autonomy<sup>2</sup> of the neo-colonial state are superfluous. For example, the Nigerian state is far more dependent on a network of internal and external classes than can be imagined. In this connection, Ekuertare has identified three major ways in which this dependence is manifested. First, there is the tax on rent from natural resources. The second is the appropriation of workers' social surplus through the price system.<sup>3</sup> These are complemented by a third mechanism — prebendalism.<sup>4</sup> Because the organised private sector is dominated by the multinationals, the state sector is used as an agency of economic development and hence capital accumulation.<sup>5</sup> That the pattern of accumulation is along capitalist lines and consolidates neo-colonialism, is both a reflection of the general dependence of the emergent dominant class on the bourgeoisie of the centre as well as the weak and embryonic nature of the Nigerian national bourgeoisie.

The foregoing raises questions about Ake's notion of the state as being characterised by limited autonomy, and more especially his view of the Nigerian peasantry as living in externality to civil society<sup>6</sup>, marginalised in the context of the limited development of commodity relations, and thus characterised by the politics of anxiety and normless political procedure (Ake 1985: 13-14). This view is contestable because, as Ake himself acknowledged, the peasantry has political consciousness, but their politics has been shaped or redefined by the dominant values of the Nigerian state. For as Emekwe notes, the peasantry maintain links with their relatives in the towns who patronise them; they view the "success" of such relatives as "theirs" (Emekwe 1986). In effect, the nature of the Nigerian state can only be expressed through an understanding of the social structure and the class struggle.

Classes are formed by groups related to the ownership or non-ownership of the means of production. This basic qualification is the basis upon which forms of power, control, appropriation, and domination are exercised. It is also the basis upon which struggles are waged, consciousness aroused and changes brought about. The dominant classes in Nigeria have to be identified within the dominant mode of production; viz., capitalism restructures social relations of the Nigerian society. The dominant classes are the national bourgeoisie and the absentee metropolitan bourgeoisie (both productive and unproductive) who until 1946, were in commerce (import/export), banking, shipping, and mining. Since political independence, and their agitation for indigenisation, they have gradually been shifting into manufacturing and the service sector (Aina 1986: 23-24).

Between 1946 and 1975, the activities and character of these classes were transformed. This followed the policies and processes of Nigerianisation of management staff, partnership between Nigerians and metropolitan capital which included American, Japanese and South Korean interests, in addition to British, French, German and Dutch interests. At the outset, they compromised traditional rulers, who helped to reinforce and strengthen colonial domination through repression, tax collection, and commerce. The new middle class of professionals, civil servants, and Western educated Nigerians were also a source of class recruitment into this class. There was also the emergent merchant class, produce buyers and middle men or distributors. A great majority of them gained from the devolution of political power to indigenous politicians and parties from whom they received favours such as government contracts, access to credit and other accumulation-enhancing facilities (*Ibid.*: 25). Prosperous individuals who rose through the private corporate ladder or professions such as law, architecture, and accountancy were also incorporated into this class. Lastly, there are the Levantine and Asian wholesale and retail traders in textiles, hotel and catering, pool betting, and entertainment. A few of them have gone into manufacturing and have integrated socially and naturally into the Nigerian dominant class. The relationship of the metropolitan bourgeoisie to these classes is characterised by conflict and cooperation, with a disproportionate margin of economic power in the hands of the former and political power in the hands of the latter. Domestic capital expansion undergirds this relationship between local and metropolitan capitals. Domestic capital formation has, however, been affected by the scope and limits of technology, skilled manpower, imperialism and the neo-colonial state apparatus.

Below the dominant classes are the middle classes comprising professionals (teachers, lawyers, journalist) at the top, and supervisory staff and some white-collar workers, including secretaries and stenographers at the bottom. They are followed by the petit bourgeoisie made up of small property owners, distributors, urban slum landlords, small scale transporters, craftsmen with apprentices under them, and middle peasants in the rural areas (Aina 1986: 27).

The middle classes, especially the petit bourgeoisie, are a vacillatory and ambiguous minority. They make up about 20% of the urban population and less than 60% of the population of the rural areas. Most of their members are in the public sector and enjoy subsidised housing and health care. They live in Government Reservation Areas (GRAs), and their children enjoy subsidised education [Aina 1989: 28]. However, as a recent study has shown, such privileges have been whittled away by the current crisis of the economy. This aside, the crisis has occasioned the decomposition and reconstitution of the middle classes, forcing some of them into unemployment, others into fully proletarianised jobs and yet others into small scale commodity production. Their political persuasion remains individualistic and opportunistic, but it has a potential for radicalisation [*Ibid.*: 180].

The dominated classes, include (a) the manual and other lower level workers in the rural and urban centers; (b) petty producers; and (c) the marginals [Aina 1986: 28]. The latter are the lumpen proletariat with no secure means of livelihood; some survive by engaging in anti-social occupations such as armed robbery, and prostitution. Among these the working class have demonstrated remarkable political acumen. The core of the working class comprises workers in two broad categories: first, there are those engaged in the raw materials producing industries such as oil extraction, coal and tin mining, rice mill, cotton ginneries, soap factories, groundnut and palm oil mills, sawmills, rubber processing and canneries. Second, there are the ones who are employed in the market-oriented production industries like the breweries, cigarette manufacture, furniture, steel rolling mill, metal and fabrication works, tyre and textile production, cement, asbestos and bitumen processing, biscuit and confectioneries, food and beverage manufacture, assembly plants for bicycles, motor-cycles, cars, trucks electrical appliances, etc.

The wage-labour force, estimated at less than 50% of the adult male population in 1959, was only 2% in the early 1970s, and about 4% in 1975 [Aina 1986: 28]. Consistently also, the Nigerian economic indices show that there is a high rate of exploitation of labour and the pattern of factorial income distribution in the industrial sector has been consistently biased towards the property income recipients. In 1962, the wages paid to workers in Nigerian industries constituted 22 million naira or 26 per cent of value added; but in 1963, this dropped to 24 per cent, and dropped further to 17 per cent in 1970 [Iyayi 1989: 35]. Since then, the average has fluctuated around 20 per cent of value added. The disproportionately small size of the returns from the economy to Nigerian labour becomes glaring when we compare labour incomes to entrepreneurial and property incomes. Iyayi [1989: 37] contends that:

In 1973/74, entrepreneurial and property income accounted for 73.7 per cent of total gross domestic factor income giving a range of 47.4 per cent between entrepreneurial and property income. In 1982, the share of entrepreneurial and property income in total gross domestic factor income had risen to 77.7 per cent leaving labour income with only 22.3 per cent a figure lower than what it had accounted for in 1973/74. Thus between 1974/75 and 1982, the range between entrepreneurial and property income increased from 40.6 per cent to 55.4 per cent. Correspondingly too, labour income as a percentage of entrepreneurial and property income decreased from 42.2 per cent in 1974/75 to only 28.7 per cent in 1982.

The Nigerian peasantry is engaged mainly in petty commodity production where small land holdings and cultivation is done essentially by household or family labour. The instruments of production are crude. Their social outlook is

affected by communalism, rural conservatism and illiteracy. Their ignorance is politically exploited by the urban-based politicians. "They have however shown evidence of resistance to perceived urban-originated repression which are often traced to the state." [Aina 1986: 29]. These include protests against taxation, fall in producer prices, and the seizure of land for state projects. The most active in such peasant resistance are the middle peasants who desire immense benefits from such struggles.

Other petty producers are the independent self employed persons and petty traders. There are also the street vendors and roving traders; the artisans and craftsmen engaged in occupations such as carpentry, tailoring, and bricklaying. They oscillate between wage employment and self-employment. The marginalised group themselves do not constitute a class but they are the products of urbanisation, urban decay and the capitalist crisis. They are the lumpen proletariat, destitute, street entertainers, touts, beggars, prostitutes, and petty criminals. They cannot be ignored because of their role in precipitating urban crises and revolts. This is particularly so when we analyse such revolts as the so-called "religious riots" in Nigerian where majority of members of this social category have actively participated in.

What is the implication of our analysis so far for the project at hand? First, it provides the social context to clearly articulate the response of each of the social classes to the political question. Such responses are often understandably discrete and even complex. It is even worse in the case of the peasantry whose political resistance is episodic, unstructured, often unpredictable. Second, our postulate about the state as neo-colonial, and the dominant social classes as essentially engaged in primitive capitalist accumulation also means that our interpretation of political issues should commence from such context and seek to identify the dominant classes and the nature of their relationship with the state. Although primordial values of ethnicity and religion are influential in the understanding of politics in Nigeria, by themselves, they do not explain the limitations and contradictions of the state and the Nigerian ruling class. At best primordial values are fostered by the dominant classes to consolidate their interest.

### **Objective of Popular Struggles**

For virtually all the social classes, including some fractions of the dominant class, the objectives of independence were compromised. This has occasioned a second form of struggle, which Nzongola-Ntalaja has aptly described as the struggle for "social liberation" or the second independence. [Nzongola-Ntalaja 1995]. In waging such struggles, the popular forces seek to improve their social conditions and resist neo-colonial oppression. This is what constitutes the agenda of popular struggles. In what follows, we will analyse the most important of such struggles — the struggles by students, peasants, working class and the Nigerian left.

## **The Nigerian Student Struggles**

Students do not constitute a class. They are a transitory social category whose members usually enter the labour market in various capacities. They come mainly from families of wage earners, peasants, artisans. But there are also children from families of the capitalist class. Because of the social class origins of the majority of university students they can appreciate the yearnings and aspirations of the dominated classes. Conversely, because of their aspirational objectives, they are seen as a "presumptive elite." [Altbach 1967:15; Lloyd 1966]. Indeed, a 1960 study by Lipset showed that quite a number of Nigerian students felt they could become ministers or some highly rated political leader. [Lipset 1960: 140].

Historically, Nigerian students have been at the forefront of various political struggles beginning with the formation of the West African Students Union (WASU) in 1925. The students brought pressure to bear on the emergent nationalist parties to demand from the colonialist political concessions and formal independence. [Olusanya 1982] Indeed, at independence, most of the members of the emergent Nigerian political elites were once student activists — for example, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Samuel Akintola, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, and Kingsley Mbadiwe. Between 1944 and 1979 over twenty major students protests were recorded. The protests include the following:

- (1) The King's College strike of 1944; (2) the protest against the Western Regional Housing bill (May 1959); (3) the protest against the Eastern Regional Pension Bill (1959); (4) the protest against Harold Macmillan's government's attitude to Africans' condition in southern Africa; (5) the protest over Sharpeville shooting (1960); (6) the protest against the French for testing atomic weapons in the Sahara; (7) the protest against the proposed Anglo-Nigerian Defense Pact (November 1960); (8) the protest against the murder of Patrice Lumumba (February 1961); (9) the protest against the press law; (10) the protest against the proposed Preventive Detention Law (1963); (11) the protest against the census manipulations of national population figures (1962-63); (12) various protests preceding and during the civil war (1967-70); (13) the protest over the murder of Adepeju (1971); (14) the protest over the National Youth Service (1973); (15) the protest over police disturbance of Adepeju's memorial processions (Feb. 1974); (16) the protest against Gowon's detention of critics (1974-75); (17) the protest over promotions in the army (1975); (18) the students demonstration against the February 1976 attempted coup d'état, led by Colonel Dimka; (19) the protest over school fees (1978); (20) the protest over the Technical Education Programme (1978-79); (21) the protest over university admissions (1979). [Madunagu 1982: 46].

To this long list, the Abu rice revolt of 1981, and the Ife Massacre of 1981 should be added. In all of these cases, the students engaged in a principled struggle and not mere infantile outbursts as some scholars are wont to argue.

The National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) was formed in 1956 as a national and umbrella organisation for all Nigerian students. Emmanuel Obe (at one time Nigeria's ambassador to Sierra Leone), became its first president. Henceforth, the NUNS became the vanguard of student protest and radicalism. The NUNS attracted student activists like Osita Okeke and Ahmadu Alli. The later became Nigeria's Federal Commissioner of Education. By 1963, religious organisations and some moral re-armament crusaders had started to make appearances on the various campuses of higher institutions in the country. The aim of these imperialist agents was to slow down the radicalism of the student movement and direct their energies from politics. (Babatope 1986: 45). The politicisation of students spurred them to question the misdemeanor, squandermania and suffocating corruption that had become the norm of Nigerian political leaders. There was the Scania incident, the cement armada, the fertiliser deal, the 2,8 billion naira saga, and the rice scandal. All these involved the siphoning or squandering of enormous public funds and resources. Students spoke and condemned all these scandals.

It soon became apparent that the state and the ruling class were prepared to suppress the student movement. First, they made conditions of study unbearable and costly to students through the withdrawal of subsidy on basic teaching and research infrastructure as well as feeding. The second was the rationalisation of courses being taught at universities, and the reduction in students admissions. Third was the general militarisation of Nigeria's tertiary institutions and high-handedness of university administrators. Hence, whenever students made legitimate demands on the state, they were brutally suppressed. For instance, when the University of Ibadan students, in 1971, demanded campus reforms and improved welfare, the University authorities invited the police who unleashed terror on the students, leaving one student, Kunde Adepoju, dead [Ikime 1973: 257-58]. Again, in 1978, when students opposed the Obasanjo government's commercialisation of education, 18 students were killed on various campuses across the country. The dead included a pregnant woman, and a primary school child in Lagos. Radical lecturers who sympathised with the cause of the students and condemned the government's action — like Drs. Ola Oni, Bade Onimode, Onafunke Onoge, Bene and Edwin Madunagu were summarily dismissed. The NUNS was banned and its leadership rusticated from the University.<sup>7</sup> In all this, the students always emphasised the organic link between their struggles and those of the toiling people of Nigeria. At the same time they saw such struggles as anti-imperialist and against local surrogates of imperialism.

## The Peasantry and the State

More than 70 per cent of Nigerians live in the rural areas and are engaged in farming as small producers. Their life is one of constant fight for survival under harsh conditions of capitalist penetration. In the wake of capitalist penetration of the Nigerian rural economy, the land question has been exacerbated. The peasantry has responded with sporadic revolts. Under colonialism for instance there was peasant unrest at Iseyin-Okebo in 1916 and at Egba in 1918. In post-colonial Nigeria, peasants' unrest has intensified — e.g. the revolt at Agbekoya (1968-69), and at Bakolori (1980) in which the grievances of the peasantry found vent in "... massive, organised and partly armed struggles ..." [Beer 1976].

The Agbekoya revolt was in several ways inspired and indeed was a logical continuation of the Maigegun revolt of February 1948 in which the Akanran farmers in Ibadan division resisted the compulsory cutting down of their cocoa trees that had been affected by the swollen shoot disease. Cocoa prices had dropped from 160 pounds sterling in 1960. It was slashed to 120 pounds sterling in 1965 and to 65 pounds sterling in 1966. Col. Fajuyi, then Governor of Western region, acknowledged the "... depressing psychological effect on the minds of the cocoa farmers" as a result of a severe drop in cocoa prices, in addition to the 1966 political crisis and the adverse effect of the weather on cocoa. The government compounded the problem by sending corrupt officials to persecute the farmers; denied them benefits and amenities which had been promised to them, and demanded higher taxes from the peasant. [Beer and Williams: 1976: 147]. The peasants had attempted to use constitutional means to resolve the problems, by writing petitions and making representation to the governor, Adebayo and the Olubadan and his chiefs, all to no avail. [Beer 1976: 179]. When the government attempted to force the peasants to pay taxes, they resisted in a demonstration on November 26, 1968, and marched to Mapo Hall, resulting in the death of several people. By December, the peasant revolt had become more violent: several more people had either been killed or maimed, and officials and village heads had been forced to seek refuge in nearby towns. In the midst of all this, Tafa Adeoye emerged as the leader of the farmers who continued to meet and refuse to pay taxes. By September 1969, the revolt had become even more violent with daylight attacks on the Agodi Federal Prison at Ibadan and the release of over four hundred prisoners, mostly those who had been detained as a result of the earlier revolts against the imposition of taxes. [*Ibid.*: 187]. The government ultimately negotiated peace: "The flat-rate tax was reduced to 2 pounds and all motor parks and market fees, together with other local rates, suspended. Sanitation inspectors and town planning officials were withdrawn from all rural areas ..." [*Ibid.*: 187].

Such radicalism notwithstanding, the political class appropriated the effects of the revolt. For instance, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, leader of the Action Group, whose newspaper, *The Nigerian Tribune*, had previously condemned the action of

the peasants, became the mediator and commended the "justness" of the cause of the peasants.

The Bakolori peasant revolt of 1980, on the other hand, culminated in the now infamous Bakolori massacre of April 26-27 1980. Official records showing the actual number of casualties (including those who died) are difficult to get because the government had threatened medical doctors of the state hospitals at Talata Mafara and Gusau that should they release any records they would face dismissal. However, eye witness accounts put the number of the dead at 386. [Odeyemi 1982: 88].

Bakolori is a village which was perpetually flooded as a result of the construction of a dam on Sokoto River. The village has vast acres of land that could be cultivated for agricultural purposes. The objective for building a dam on the Sokoto River was to go into mechanised agriculture and agri-business. The Bakolori project was first conceived in 1975 by an Italian multinational company, Fiat, as an aid package to the government. Essentially, the state and the multinational interests were united in their disregard for peasants' interests, especially regarding resettlement and payment of compensation for damaged crops, access to land and food security. The immediate grievances of the peasants crystallised around four problems:

- (1) the failure of the project either to provide land or compensation for the people made landless in the reservoir area; (2) the destruction of trees and crops and the obstruction of farming in the area being prepared for irrigation, and the failure to provide compensation for such losses; (3) the manner in which land allocation was administered and losses incurred; (4) the enforcement of cropping schedules which conflicted with the established food economy of the area. [Beckman 1982: 82].

Although the peasant suffered some of these problems in varying degrees, they were united by a common determination to resist the state, and were unwilling to obey the management of the state in respect of their plan for the project which they correctly perceived as being detrimental to their interest. It was this growing contradiction that erupted into the Bakolori peasant revolt.

From November 1979 onwards, "roads were repeatedly blocked, standing crops were protected, and compensation for destroyed crops and trees was demanded. Project farming operations were obstructed, including the blockage of pumping stations; and project staff were chased away or denied access." [*Ibid.*: 83]. By early 1980, peasant militancy had increased exponentially. They now attacked areas in which project staff and labourers were engaged in cultivation. The state, in order to pacify the farmers, now agreed to compensate them for their lost crops in the irrigation area, but only those who had complied with the directive not to plant in

fields scheduled for the development of the project were to be compensated. This was a difficult task to accomplish and the crisis invariably escalated.

The federal government's ad hoc handling of the grievances of the farmers further radicalised the peasant resistance movement. By April 21, 1980, they had taken over the dam site for the second time. Then on April 26 the government unleashed armed soldiers on them. "The brutality and destructiveness of the police contrasted sharply with the organised and disciplined manner in which the farmers had pursued their campaign of armed self-defense against a state which threatened their survival." [*Ibid.*: 86]. The Bakolorin peasants' resistance remained another important landmark in the history of popular struggles in Nigeria. Here again the political potential of the revolt was not harnessed in support of the political struggles of the Nigerian people for social liberation. But its lessons remained useful.

### **The Nigerian Workers and Trade Unionism**

The emergence of organised labour and trade unionism in Nigeria by 1912 coincided with the emergence of the Nigerian state under colonial rule. Trade unionists took active part in the nationalist struggles; some of them were either initiators or activist in left-wing politics in Nigeria. The role of trade unions in Nigeria's political history is contradictory. But this is the general trend all over the world. Progressives are opposed to reactionary unionist, since reaction permeates issues of economism such as collective bargaining in the course of which union leaders are often opposed to the ideology of the working class. It is in this latter regard that the concept of the labour aristocracy still retains its relevance.

Despite the prevalence of a conservative tendency within the Nigerian labour movement, it must be emphasised that the labour movement has generally been progressive. Some Nigerian leftists became unionists and vice versa. This interplay profoundly affected the political orientation of earlier trade unions such as the Nigerian Trade Union Congress (NTUC) which was affiliated to the leftist international trade union organisation, the World Federation of Trade Unions. Furthermore, it was the NTUC and the Nigerian Youth Congress which collaborated and gave birth to the first leftist Political Party — the Socialist Workers and Farmers party (SWFP). [Tokunboh 1985].

The strategic importance of Nigerian workers cannot be over emphasised: they are a direct product of colonial capital, and both the state and capital depend on them for survival and expansion. It is this strategic position that has shaped the attitude of the state and capital towards the labour movement.

Nigerian workers have often expressed their economist demands in political terms. The 1945 workers strike and the strike which was called in response to the Iva Valley massacre of colliery workers were part of the anti-colonial struggle. In the present conjuncture of post-colonial Nigeria politics the workers remain the

most strategically important political class. For example, workers action in the form of strikes has advanced the level of resistance to state repression and the ruling class is aware of this. This has increased correspondingly with capitalist penetration of society. In 1945, only one workers' strike was officially recorded by the colonial government. This increased to 13 in 1949, involving the loss of 1.8 million man-days. In 1949/50, the number of recorded workers strikes was 46, involving a loss of 57,700 man-days. In 1960, a total of 65 strikers was recorded, involving 157,373 man-days lost.

During 1960/61-1977/78, the period of the civil war recorded the lowest number of strikes — 29. In those years, workers were resisting the hardship they were subjected to under the war economy and to the philosophy and politics underpinning the civil war which they did not accept. In 1964/65 (this excluded the general strike in which 1.3 million man-days were lost), 195 strikes took place, with 253,460 man days lost. In 1970/71, shortly after the civil war, 124 workers' strikes, involving the loss of 224,470 man-days was recorded. This fell slightly in 1973/74 to 105 strikers with 148,130 man-days lost. The peak was in 1974/75 when 354 strikes was recorded with 357,028 man days lost. This dropped once more in 1975/76 to 264 strikes but with increased man days lost - 439,296.3. In 1976/77 this fell to 130 workers strike with 225,709.6 man days lost. In 1977/78, the number of strikes increased to 153, with an increased man days loss of 448,335. Most of the strikes were recorded in the manufacturing and constructing/engineering sectors. In 1979, 156 strikes were recorded involving 1,566,475 total man days lost; by 1980, the number of strikes fell to 181, and 1,453,893 was recorded as man days lost. In 1981, (with the famous workers general strike) the number of strikes recorded jumped to 210, and 2,606,083 man days lost. Whilst in 1982 321 strikes were officially recorded with an alarming record of 9,188,507 man days lost.\*

It is clear from this trend that throughout the period 1960-1982, there was a steep rise in industrial disputes resulting in strikes. During the same period the state promulgated various laws which were meant to check workers industrial action and political resistance. This aggressive form of state intervention against the labour movement culminated in the banning of certain unions which were perceived as a threat to the state, and to the restructuring and state control of the labour unions in Nigeria.

At independence in 1960, the state left intact colonial laws and regulations that restricted or controlled the activities of labour. These included "the *Trade Union Ordinance of 1938*, the *Trade Disputed (Arbitration and Inquiry) Ordinance of 1941*, the *Labour Code Ordinance of 1945*, and the *Wages Board Ordinance of 1957*. This action was partly responsible for the internal feuds, competition and crisis within the labour movement soon after independence in Nigeria." For instance, the *Trade Union Ordinance of 1935* encouraged any five people or more to form a union, and thereby promoted factionalism in the trades union movement.

In 1968, under the pretext of the so-called state of emergency necessitated by the civil war, the government promulgated the *Trade Disputes (Emergency Provisions) Decree 21 of 1968*, (with its amendments in 1969 by Decree 59). The decree banned any form of workers strike. After the civil war, the government further enacted the *Trade Unions Decree 3, 1973* (later amended by Decree 22 of 1978) which prohibited workers of the Nigerian External Communications, Customs Preventive Service, the Armed Forces and Police, the Central Bank and the workers of the Nigerian Security Printing and Minting Company from embarking on a strike or forming a union. (Falola and Ihonvbere 1985: 147). The state continued with its acts of intervention and control against the labour movement until, finally, it imposed its own version of a central labour organisation on unionised workers.

On February 12, 1976, the so-called progressive government of Murtala Mohammed appointed the Adebisi Tribunal to investigate trade union activities with a view to re-organising them. The outcome of the Adebisi Tribunal's Report included, first, the dismissal of left-wing trade unionists such as Michael Imoudu, Wahab Goodluck and S. U. Bassey from socialist-oriented trade unions such as the Nigerian Trade Union Congress, the Nigerian Workers' Council and the Railway Workers' Union of Nigeria. Second, the various factions of Nigeria's trade unions through the Apena Cemetery Declaration of 1975, had resolved their differences and formed a central labour union called the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). But the Adebisi Tribunal recommended its dissolution, and asked the state to form a central labour union for Nigerian workers. Consequently, the *Trade Union (Amendment) Decree No. 22 of 1978* was promulgated which formed and imposed on Nigerian workers a central labour organisation bearing the same name, the Nigerian Labour Congress. This state-created central labour organ had 41 industrial unions. About 34 of those affiliate unions belonged to junior staff, while 7 belonged to the senior staff category.<sup>10</sup> In spite of this imposition, Hassan Sunmonu, the man who emerged as the NLC President, was a leftist and radical trade unionist. He led the famous battle for minimum wage in 1981, which culminated in the highly successful strike of that year.

We shall now examine the two major strikes that occurred during the 1960-1982 period: the 1964 and the 1981 general strikes. The 1964 general strike took place over the issue of wages. In 1961 the Zudonu Committee Report was forwarded to the Federal government by the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria. The report formed the basis for various workers demands, which were supported by the NTUC. At a meeting with the ULC, the Minister of Establishments insisted that he would not negotiate with the congress but with its affiliate unions and that negotiations could not commence in view of the threat of a strike by the unions. In return, the ULC's delegation to the meeting maintained that the government could not build a sound economy by under-paying workers. In view of the alarming

increases in the cost of living since the Mbanefo awards, it demanded the government's declaration of commitment to an acceptable national minimum wage policy. In pursuit of their negotiating position, the unions set up a Joint Action Committee (JAC) and declared that if the demand was not met within the deadline of September 27, 1963, they would call a general strike. When the government reneged on the payment of a minimum wage, the unions declared a general strike in June 1964. The government was compelled by this action to negotiate immediately with the JAC, and the strike was called off on June 13. "The wage settlement that followed more or less fell between the government's white paper and the Morgan Report's recommendations." [Cohen 1974: 168]. As Cohen further points out,

... the General strike of 1964 replicated, at least in three respects the lessons of 1945. First, it was clear that given a reasonable unity of purpose the unions could represent a fairly formidable political force. Second, their ability to act together depended largely on a favourable coincidence between political dissatisfaction and economic grievance. Finally, the issue most likely to galvanise the unions to action was an increased perception of social inequality combined with governmental insensitivity, and arrogance in handling their demands. [*Ibid.*: 164].

What were the political implications of the workers strike? First, it provided a leverage for the political parties and interests which were opposed to the government to press and win support for their views. Second, it exacerbated the political crisis in the country. Third, organised labour won more respect in the power equation of the country. However, the left, which was actively involved in the activities of the affiliate unions that took part in the strike, did not derive any political gains from it. Rather, it became engulfed in factionalism, and accusations of corruption and high handedness, all of which undermined its collective political integrity.

On May 11, 1981, during the civilian government of Shehu Shagari, the Nigerian Labour Congress mobilised about 700,000 workers for a 2-day nationwide strike, again over the question of a new minimum wage policy. The decision to embark on the strike was adopted at the Kano Conference of the Nigerian Labour Congress in February 1981. At the Kano Conference, Hassan Summon had been returned as the NLC President, defeating the pro-establishment candidate, David Ojeli.

The economy under the Shagari administration had witnessed hyper-inflationary trends, official corruption and a frivolous spending-spree by public officers. For the predominately compradorial political class hoarding, profiteering and unspeakable speculative trading activities held sway. The economy was caught in

hyper-inflation and uncontrollable crisis. It was in this light that individual trade unions started asking management to review their salaries and fringe benefits. In April 1979, an emergency meeting of the Executive Council of the NLC had given an ultimatum to the Military government on the need to review, within 21 days, rent and transport allowances, restore car loans and fix a national minimum wage. [Otobo 1981: 70; Tokunboh 1985:167-168]. The military government tactically dragged its feet during the negotiations until the new civilian regime of President Shehu Shagari was elected into office. On January 10, the NLC gave another ultimatum to the government to negotiate a settlement with labour on/or before March 31, or expect a workers' general strike. In the light of the general economic crisis and arbitrary increases in salaries and allowances which politicians had approved for themselves, and the pressure mounted by labour, the national parliament decided to set up a labour committee to look into the case. The NLC, therefore, suspended its decision to call a general strike. The Labour Committee recommended 120 naira as the minimum wage.<sup>11</sup> When all efforts to convince the government on a higher minimum wage than 120 naira failed, the NLC led by Hassan Sunmonu declared a general strike on May 11, 1981. Only seven unions which sympathised with David Ojeli took a contrary view and boycotted the strike action. The NLC ignored president Shehu Shagari's pleas to the workers to rescind their proposed action in the "Nation's interest". After several rounds of negotiations involving the two houses of parliament, a new minimum wage of 125 naira was agreed on by all the parties.

The Sunmonu led strike was a success to the extent that the state and capital made concessions to labour and acknowledged the miserable social conditions of the working class, caused especially by the rising cost of living, poor conditions of service, and workers' retrenchment. But the strike, in a political sense, showed the limits of economism. [Otobo *op. cit.*: 80]. Although the issues upon which the NLC's demands were hinged were welfare oriented, the essence of their demands raised political and class questions. It became apparent that despite the populist or radical claims to be progressive, which were made by parties such as the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the parties did not align themselves with workers or channel the workers' struggles into positive direction. Indeed, in the states which were controlled by these political parties, workers who went on strike were victimised. Such was the case of WRECA workers in Kano. The political gains from the strike were minimal due, largely, to the limits of the scope of trade unionism, both in terms of its legal constraints and the political consciousness of its rank and file.

### **The Nigerian Left and the Struggles of the Masses**

The Nigerian left has given impetus to the struggles of the masses, either through intellectual articulation, direct participation, or solidarity. And especially, most of

the labour leaders who steered the trade unions through the most turbulent periods in the history of labour belong to the Nigerian left. This notwithstanding, we would argue that the struggles of the Nigerian Left have remained factionalised, especially along sectarian, geographical, cultural and doctrinal lines. This has deprived the struggles of the Nigerian people of a strong and united Left wing movement that could also benefit from the political struggles of the masses. The energies of the various factions have been wasted on futile contests as there is often no meeting ground between the war of words and the war of positions. In what follows, we give an outline of the history and politics of the Nigerian left, and the issues around which it has struggled. We assess some of their major contradictions and issues of disagreement, and their attempts to unite.

Left politics in Nigerian has a rich pedigree dating back to the Zikist movement which was formed in 1945 with a membership that was largely radical, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist. Some of its members, became the leading activists and theoreticians of the socialist movement in independent Nigeria. The Zikists were able to make serious attempts to redefine the form and content of the anti-colonial struggle, and in several instances succeeded in putting working class demands on the political agenda in close concert with the trade union movement. [Abdulraheem and Olukoshi 1986: 65]. But the movement's achievements were minimum because of its inarticulate and inchoate ideological position, the dominant idealist tendencies within its ranks, and its alliance with the bourgeois reformist NCNC whose main political agenda was to secure the institutional transfer of power onto itself. The way some members of the left were disowned by the NCNC and Azikiwe showed not only the limits of their political ideas, but also of the political space in which they operated their capacity and their influence.

Following the emergence of regional politics in Nigerian, the politics of the left also became regionalised. It was in this context that the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) emerged with Saad Zungur and Aminu Kano as its least ideological representatives. Rauf Mustapha characterises the orientation and politics of NEPU as populist. [Mustapha 1984: 112-13]. Although it showed sympathy with workers, NEPU's fountain head remained the Talakawas, as nunciated in the Swaba declaration. Its peasant base was undeniable. Mustapha concludes:

The most profound contribution of NEPU towards the Nigerian revolution was the political education of the peasantry. In the face of the often brutal and savage repression through the Native Authority police, courts, etc. the NEPU was able to articulate and maintain a tradition of political intransigence. [*Ibid.*: 13].

In actual fact, the NEPU's struggle was conceived as a struggle against Northern

feudalism or aristocracy. Thus within the NEPU itself, basic personal, organisational and ideological issues were raised that questioned the integrity and ideological clarity of its leader, Mallam Aminu Kano. However, within the bourgeois constitutional framework inherited in 1960, NEPU's politics continued to be progressive.

Within the Action Group, a party whose ideology of *Democratic Socialism* was first imposed on it by its militant youth wing in 1962, the leftwing members of the party pursued their activities "within the framework of the electoral factional rivalries and the fortunes or misfortunes of its leadership." [Abdulraheem and Olukoshi 1986: 69]. By this time, the Nigerian Youth Congress (NYC) had emerged and it had such leftists as Eskor Toyo, Baba Gmojola, Tunji Otegbeye and Wahab Goodluck within its ranks. The Congress allied with the workers and other democratic forces in political struggle including the struggles against the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Pact in 1961. The NYC also worked with the student movement. In August 1963, the NTUC and NYC agreed on the need for the formation of a political platform, and the Socialist Workers and Farmers Party (SWFP) was launched with Uche Omo as its leader, and Tunji Otegbeye as secretary-general. The SWFP formed the Patrice Lumumba Academy of Political Science and Trade Unionism in 1964 and launched a bi-weekly newspaper, *Advance*, during the same year. It went into economic ventures, starting a restaurant (Hotel De Executive), hospital (Ireti Hospital), chemist shop (Tutu Chemist), printing (Eko Printers) and vehicle maintenance (Eagles Garage). [Tokunboh *op. cit.*: 73]. They received subventions mainly from socialist countries. This became their undoing since financial accounting caused a major rift in their ranks, which was exploited by the factions of the Nigerian bourgeoisie during their own political wrangling.

The SWFP launched a political programme based on the principles of scientific socialism at about the same time as the Nigerian Labour Party was formed under Michael Imoudu with a membership of leftists such as Ola Oni and M.E. Lolaghodi. The two proclaimed socialism as their ideological goal. However, following the military coup of 1966 and the banning of all political parties, the "socialist" parties died. Madunagu laments:

One would have expected a revolutionary party, whose legal existence under a neo-colonial regime was an exceptional (and therefore a temporary) situation, to respond to this decree by going underground. This did not take place, nor could it have taken place. A political party with no mass base and whose leadership was bitterly divided over the issues could not possibly pretend to go underground — a process where absolute secrecy, discipline, courage and sacrifice are demanded. [Madunagu 1982: 61].

During the civil war (1966-1970) the left was divided between those who

supported the Federal government and those who supported the Biafran course. On the Federal side were those who saw the secessionist bourgeoisie as trying to divide the country, while the other faction of the left saw the civil war as an intra-class contradiction and a problem of the entire bourgeoisie which consisted of both the Federal and Biafran factions. For some leftists on the Biafran side the Ahiara Declaration was a way of mitigating the social crisis, anguish and privation, that the war had brought on the toiling people in the Biafran enclave. The declaration, if anything, attempted to legitimise and consolidate the cause of the secessionist faction of the national bourgeoisie. [Abdulraheem and Olukoshi 1986: 71; Babatope 1986: 57]. The Biafran Communist Party (BCP) publicly claimed credit for the Ahiara Declaration. The Nigerian Afro-Asia Solidarity Organisation (NAASO) led by Eskor Toyo and Aminu Kano, condemned the Biafran left and the propaganda which they had launched abroad. [Oni 1983: 54].

In 1970, after the civil war, some leftists gathered at the University of Nsukka to form a proletarian movement. The Biafran Marxists, at this meeting, denied ever supporting secession. The meeting did not yield fruitful dividends. [Oni *Ibid.*: 54] Another meeting was scheduled for Kaduna in 1970; but it was aborted. However, the Nigerian Academy of Intellectual Workers, which was formed in 1965, continued to align with workers and students and condemned the excesses of the military junta. In 1971, the academy set up an organisation called the "Movement for Economic Justice" which campaigned against price increases, police and army brutalities, and the reactionary character of the Adebo wages report. In 1972, the Academy set up the "Committee for Full Indigenisation" to educate the Nigerian masses on how to attain genuine indigenisation of the economy [*Ibid.*: 55]. Much later in 1973, the Committee for Patriotic Front emerged to mark the death of Kwame Nkrumah. The Committee was rather unwieldy and ill-defined in its character and objectives; but from it, the Nigerian Socialist Movement (NSM) was formed. The NSM's support-base was among the students and intellectuals and not the rank-and-file of shop floor workers. Its main activity between 1973 and 1975 was the fight to return the country to a constitutional democracy.

In 1976, the Movement for Peoples Democracy (MPD) was born in Benin. It served as a broad front of Marxists with the major objective of "how to influence the return to civil rule in a way favourable to the proletarian movement and how the proletarian struggles would continue under civil rule" [*Ibid.*: 59]. The MPD submitted a memorandum to the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) and, in 1977, the first all-Nigerian Socialist Conference was held in Zaria. This well attended conference resolved to form a common socialist platform when the ban on politics was lifted by the military government of Olusegun Obasanjo. The MPD members disagreed over a number of issues, including whether or not it was politically correct for the left to form a political party to participate in what was essentially bourgeois politics. Some members questioned Ola Oni's leadership of

the MPD. Ola Oni for his part, and while the major issues and wranglings were still unsettled, went ahead to announce the formation of the Socialist Workers and Farmers Party (SWFP) along with some members of the MPD. Other members of the MPD pitched their tent with Wahab Goodluck who was believed to be in touch with workers, because several members of his political movement were in the trade unions. Yet others, such as S. G. Ikoku and Aminu Kano, joined the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), and later pulled out to join the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) when the stakes in the NPN were alleged to be small. In so doing, the left depleted its forces and lost some of its ideologues to bourgeois reformist parties. Goodluck proclaimed the formation of the Socialist Working Peoples Party (SWPP) and started the publication of a left magazine, *New Horizon*, [Oni *Ibid.*] in conjunction with the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO). Meanwhile, several left organisations blossomed; but basically they all had their roots on campuses, mostly at Ahmadu Bello University (Zaria), University of Ibadan, University of Ife, and the University of Calabar. As Tyoden rightly remarked: "The tragedy of the Nigerian left is that whichever group one looked at, there is nothing tangible . . . as far as the stated goal is concerned." [Tyoden 1983: 12]. In a nutshell, the squabbling and factionalism within the Nigerian left from 1976 to the early 1980s contributed immensely to its own weakness, and inability to advance the political struggles of the Nigerian masses.

## Conclusion

The period 1960-1982 certainly saw the growth of objective conditions for popular struggles that could have been channeled in a positive political direction. The inability of the left to unite its ranks and act as a consistent and reliable vanguard organisation was the result of a sociological failure: it could not structurally and organisationally be rooted in the working class. While most Nigerian left organisations accepted the working class ideology, their political practice occurred within the framework of petit bourgeois aspirations and bourgeois state institutions. The fundamental problem of the PRP, for example, was not so much because it participated in politics on a liberal democratic turf. Rather, the problem of the party originated from the fact that its principles and programmes were not based on the working class ideology. The party itself was not rooted in the working class; nor was it rooted in the amorphous Talakawas. It merely made symbolic appeals to and identifications with the latter for purposes of mobilising them for electoral politics.

In a nutshell, our study has brought to the fore some major issues. First, in spite of the repression and the various sanctions imposed by the state, the oppressed classes, especially the workers and peasants, could struggle and win some concessions. Second, the popular struggles waged by the oppressed classes have been limited or constrained by the fact that they did not form an integral part of a

political movement; nor did they have a defined political agenda. The Nigerian left, on its part, failed to offer the necessary leadership because of its own internal weaknesses. By so failing it lost a decisive political moment in the history of Nigeria.

## Notes

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- 1. A Nigerian socialist, Edwin Madunagu, wrote a book by the title, *The Tragedy Of The Nigerian Socialist Movement And Other Essays* (Calabar: Century Press, 1980), pp. 1-24. In the work, Madunagu laments the tragedy (as a calamity) rather than proffering scientific explanations for the political weakness of the left.
- 2. This view was forcefully articulated by Hamza Alavi, "The state in post-colonial societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh", *New Left Review* 74, (1972).
- 3. Bright U. Ekuereh, "Recent patterns of accumulation in the Nigerian economy", in Siddique Mohammed and Tony Edoh (eds.), *Nigerian: A Republic In Ruins* (Zaria: Gaskiya Corporation, 1986), pp. 206-207.
- 4. Richard Joseph, *Democracy And Prebendal Politics In Nigeria* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- 5. Eme Ekekwe, *Class And State In Nigeria* (London: Longman, 1986), Chapter 111.
- 6. "The Nigerian State: Antinomies of a Periphery Formation" in Claude Ake (ed.), *The Political Economy Of Nigeria* (Essex longman, 1985), p. 14.
- 7. There are varying views of the role of the bourgeoisie vis-a-vis its metropolitan counterparts and whose interest the Nigerian state serves. For the debate, see for instance, Claude Ake, "The Nigerian state: antinomies of a peripheral formation" in Ake (ed.) *op. cit.* p. 20; Mark Anikpo, "Nigeria's evolving class structure": in Ake (ed.) *ibid.* Sugun Osoba, "The deepening crisis of the Nigerian national bourgeoisie", *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 13, 1978; Bjorn Beckman, "Imperialism and the national bourgeoisie" *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 22, Oct.-Dec. 1981 and "Whose state? State and capitalist development in Nigeria" *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 23, 1992; E. O. Akeredolu-ale, "Private foreign investment and the underdevelopment of indigenous entrepreneurship in Nigeria"; in Gavin Williams, (ed.) *Nigerian: Economy and society* (London: Rex Collins, 1976); and Festus Iyayi, "The primitive accumulation of capital in a neocolony: Nigeria"; *Review of African Political Economy* No. 35, May, 1986.
- 8. *Ibid.*, 932.
- 9. The NUN was reconstituted as the National Association of Nigerian Students

- in 1981.
10. Okello Oculi, "The political economy of the planning of the Balolori irrigation project, (1974-1980)" in Usman (ed.), *Ibid.*: p. 99.
  11. Iyayi, *The impact of business companies*, op. cit., pp. 43-45.
  12. *Quarterly Bulletin of Labour Statistics*, 1983, Nos. 1 and 2 (Lagos: Federal Government printers, 1984), 9.33.
  13. Toyin Falola and Julius Ihonvbere, *The Rise And Fall Of Nigeria's Second Republic*, (London: Zed Books, 1985), p.147
  14. *Ibid.*, p. 211. For a liberal but a fairly good account of Labour repression under military rule in Nigeria, see Austin Isamah "Organised labour under military regimes in Nigeria" *Africa Development*, Vol. 15 No. 2, 1990.
  15. Earlier on the government had set up the Justice Adeyinka Morgan Commission in a bid to forestall the general strike. But it refused to implement that Commission's recommendations.
  16. Dafe Otoho, "The Nigerian general strike of 1981" *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.
  17. Cf. "Twenty basic questions on the NEPU-NCNC alliance" in *Myth Realities Of Our Struggle: Documents From The Nepu Days To The Prp*, Vol. 1, (zaria: gaskiya corporation, 1980).

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