

Solidarity with Nigerian workers!

By Mark Sandell

NIGERIA'S military regime has stepped up its crackdown on the democratic opposition and the labour movement. Their most recent move is to conduct "fresh" elections in Nigeria's trade union federation, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers' Union (NUPENG) and the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association (PENGASSAM). All three trade union organisations are currently run by an administrator imposed on them by the military junta.

These elections will only be open to candidates who pass a "security check" which will be used to screen out any decent trade unionist who opposes the military dictatorship.

NUPENG and PENGASSAM launched a national strike last year to demand an end to military rule. The strike stopped the flow of oil — Nigeria's most important export — and brought the Nigerian economy to a grinding halt. The strike called for the acceptance by the military of Chief Abiola

who won the 12 June 1993 Presidential elections but remains unrecognised by the military.

The leadership of the Nigerian Labour Congress was pushed by its members into staging several general strikes in support of the oil workers. At this point the military junta stepped in, arrested the union leadership and other political opponents, closed down the national newspapers which oppose military rule and, finally, introduced stricter martial law. A national administrator was appointed to run the union. Elected executives were sacked.

The military take-over of recalcitrant unions is not a new departure for the Nigerian bosses. It happened in 1974. Moreover, for many years, the leadership of the NLC has been little more than a bunch of well-paid flunkies for successive military governments. Yet, even this leadership was pushed into fighting military rule by the trade union rank and file. These workers — over a million are organised in trade unions — have faced not only political repression but also increasing poverty, as a result of the IMF-dictated austerity-drive economic policies of the government.

The multinational oil companies and the western governments all colluded in the crack-down on the workers' organisations. First and foremost we have a duty to our Nigerian comrades to do all we can to organise solidarity in the European labour movement. But we also need to say what is needed in Nigeria.

Nigerian workers need more than a pro-democracy campaign. The labour movement must break the government's stranglehold on the unions, but it also needs to end alliances with the bosses' political organisations. It is understandable that Nigerian workers are outraged at the military over-turning of the 1993 elections, but these elections were not free or fair in the first place. Only two candidates were allowed and both of these were hand-picked by the then military ruler, General Babangida. Between 30-50 political parties that applied to take part in the election were banned! The victor — Abiola — is a millionaire capitalist and until recently a close friend of the military. He is not to be trusted.

The most powerful force for change in Nigeria is the workers' movement. It will not serve the long-term interests of the Nigerian workers to hitch their hopes to Abiola's bandwagon.

Nigerian workers need an independent workers' party based on the unions. This way the economic demands of the workers can be united with immediate political demands. This would not include a demand for Abiola to be made President but would include demands for an immediate end to military rule, and free and fair elections to a constituent assembly with the power to write a new constitution.

These are the demands of the Campaign for Independent Unionism (CIU).

"Only the labour movement has the greatest potential to unite the Nigerian working people in their struggle for democracy. With a well co-ordinated campaign of mass union actions and international solidarity the clampdown can be defeated to achieve victory."

- The immediate restoration of the dissolved executives of NUPENG, PENGASSAM and NLC.

- Industrial unions and union branches to adopt a policy of non-recognition and non co-operation towards the sole administrators.

- Labour movement solidarity actions and material support for NUPENG, PENGASSAM and other workers fighting for democracy.

- NLC and independent unions to adopt a clear fighting programme to defend the economic/political rights of workers and other oppressed strata.

- Democratisation of the structures of NLC and individual unions for rank and file participation in decision making and delegate conferences etc.

- Trade union officials to be accountable to rank and file members and subject to immediate recall by members if found wanting.

- An end to Structural Adjustment Programmes [IMF programmes], privatisation, retrenchment, commercialisation and other anti-poor policies.

- The release of all political detainees.

- An immediate end to all political trials and witch hunts, and withdrawal of troops from oil production.

- An immediate end to military rule, hand-over of power to the winner of the 12 June 1993 Presidential elections, a multi-party democracy and an independent mass workers' political party. ■

Sinn Fein goes respectable rights. But them will also see these junketings for what they signify on a deeper political level: the emergence of Provisional Sinn Fein on the high road already mapped out by other former "physical force" Republican politicians in the past — most notably Fianna Fail in the south.

Those who took the radical 'left-wing' talk of Sinn Fein seriously will be grievously disappointed.

So will those on the left in Britain who — forgetting alike Irish facts, Marxist criteria and class considerations — took the Provisional IRA — essentially because it had guns — for an irreconcilable revolutionary movement. That it never was.

Some on the left who backed the IRA, accepting, and exaggerating, its 'revolutionary' credentials right up until 31 August, now support the ceasefire — *Socialist Outlook* for example. They are caught in a massive contradiction.

If they were right to support the IRA's war in the past, then they should denounce Gerry Adams as a traitor now.

The point about Adams, of course, is that he follows, and always has followed, a long tradition of petit bourgeois nationalism in Ireland — the Fianna Fail tradition. When they have ceased to brandish guns then the romantic British left will, perhaps, be able to finally identify them for what they are and always were.

For ourselves, we are glad the Provisional IRA has stopped the war. Nothing good could ever come of it. The labour movement should demand that the British Government starts talking to Sinn Fein — now. ■

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