

Africa: Helpless & Hopeless?

Solidarity Federation

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No, the Ogoni people and Ken Saro-Wiwa were not the exception to the rule. Yes, Africa is fighting back against capitalism, ethnicism and nationalism. This interview with Sam Mbah of the Awareness League in Nigeria reveals the reality of African resistance.

It was always a myth. The archetypal liberal view that Africa is a continent without hope or the spirit for resistance to its western exploiters – imperialist, colonialist or global marketeers – never held true.

So, are you curious to know how a resistance group in Nigeria views the outside world and the task ahead? How they view the involvement of Shell in the Ogoni heartlands? Samuel Mbah was interviewed during his recent speaking tour of the United States. This is what he said.

Mbah is a member of the Awareness League, the Nigerian section of the International Workers Association (IWA) – sister organisation to the Solidarity Federation in Britain.

Members of the Awareness League do not often get the opportunity to travel outside Nigeria. And inside, they are regularly hounded by the paranoid military regime which governs the country by brute force and blatant corruption. Survival of an organisation in these conditions is itself an achievement – steady growth is near-miraculous. The Awareness League is living proof that – in Africa as well as anywhere – resistance can flourish in the face of adversity.

The Awareness League describes itself as anarcho-syndicalist. What does that mean in the Nigerian context?

The Awareness League proclaims itself to be anarcho-syndicalist. It has not always been so; originally the Awareness League was more or less Marxist-Leninist, but following the turmoil and the collapse of state communism, we reassessed our position. The Awareness League is a social movement, it is not an official labour union. In Nigeria today there is a lot of frustration among the working class at the official labour unions because almost always they betray the cause of the workers at the last minute and so more voluntary unions like the Awareness League have begun to emerge. What we essentially do is we have outreaches in industrial organisations, the public service, the universities, and others. We take a stand on certain developments in the country, political, economic, and social. At times we just have to network with other left groups on specific issues. In the workplace, of course, our members are very active in trying to do political education, enlightenment, and lead in actual campaigns on issues – and these campaigns are usually against government because in Nigeria and Africa we find that the government is the largest employer of labour. Salaries are not paid for upwards of three months or more, and the official unions seem incapable of doing anything, so we come in and fill that gap and try to mobilise with the workers; maybe embark on a strike, maybe a demonstration, things like that.

Are you trying to build your own unions, or are you trying to invigorate and inspire workers in the existing unions?

We are trying to invigorate and inspire workers in the existing unions, but it has become apparent to us that we just have to build a beginning, an alternative to the official unions. It will take quite some time for it to be able to really mobilise and convince the workers of the need for this, but I think it is almost becoming inevitable in the context in which we find ourselves. Unions are

supposed to exist for the interest and welfare of workers, but we find that the contrary is the case in Nigeria. People actually see unions and union positions as a stepping stone to becoming a part of the elite, because once you get there the government gets to court you and give you bribes. It is no longer enough for us to just go ahead and reinvigorate the existing unions; we are moving beyond that to build an alternative union for the workers.

Could you describe the Awareness League?

Our membership is about 600 nationwide, that is, members who are paying dues. There are also people who come in and join in our activities. They are not really members but you could describe them as being friends or associates of the League. Now, if you call a meeting in Nigeria in a university, students will come. Although they may sympathise with your position and ideas, it does not mean that they are members. We find also that we can rely on them occasionally. If we're embarking upon a demonstration and they come it is good for us.

We have about 11 branches in different parts of the country, with at least 20 members in each. We try to see that each branch is autonomous, in the sense that it makes its own decisions within the specific environment. Then we have a working conference that brings together all the branches, and we have a national conference, which meets once a year. At this national conference we review the previous year's activities and set an agenda for the upcoming year. It is only where a decision taken by a branch is in conflict with our charter that it can be reversed, otherwise the branches are free to take their own decisions.

The government allows you to meet without too much interference?

No. You wouldn't expect that, honestly. The government does not really allow people to meet freely. In the past five years it has been particularly difficult, but with the death of the former dictator Abacha, who died in June, the new man has been a lot more tolerant of activist organisations. We are now beginning now to meet openly but, prior to June (1998), most of our meetings had to contend with the activities of the security operatives who were all over the place. But this is not to say that unions and groups did not exist. In fact, the opposition groups in Nigeria are not just organisations like our own; there are pro-democracy groups and ethnic sub-national groups who are campaigning for autonomy, and the same treatment is given to all these groups. The government cannot possibly kill off all these organisations. So in our own way we continue to organise in defiance of government repression.

Could you say a few words about the political and economic conditions in Nigeria?

The economic situation in Nigeria today is very bad indeed — inflation is beyond control; there is massive unemployment; schools and hospitals are in very bad shape. In the midst of all this, the government and the military, which have been in power 31 out of 38 years of independence, we find that the military, the generals and top government functionaries are living in affluence. There is a lot of corruption. The defining characteristic of the Nigerian government is primitive

accumulation by means of corruption. A report in 'The Economist' in 1995 said that the then-government of Abacha was trying to achieve corruption parity with its predecessor; by 1998, when Abacha died, he had got around £3.6 billion over a 5-year period. So you can see the kind of looting and thieving that is going on in Nigeria.

If you want to really understand the economic problems in Nigeria you have to go back to the period of colonialism, and how the colonial powers sought to integrate Nigeria into the global capitalist system through the instrumentality of trade, investment, social-political interaction. By the time Nigeria and other African countries attained independence, the incorporation into the capitalist system was already halfway done, but the governments that came with independence – some of them were nationalistic – still tried to fight against it. The incorporation process was re-ignited again in the mid-1980s by the IMF and the World Bank, through the Structural Adjustment Program, which is an austerity program designed to re-colonise African countries once again.

The major plans of the Structural Adjustment Program are the deregulation of the economy, liberalisation of trade, devaluation of our currencies and withdrawal of subsidies. Two-thirds of Africa is under some form of this program, even the so-called leftist regimes that have no option but to submit themselves to the IMF, and the results have been anything but cheering; increased unemployment, no drop in inflation, and massive corruption on the part of the government. So that is the situation we find ourselves in today on the African continent.

On the political side, what we are seeing is a crisis of the capitalist system and the failure of the state system on the African continent. Most of what you call African states today were creations of the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, where colonial powers divided Africa amongst themselves. We know that these divisions were arbitrary, they did not take into consideration the cultural, ethnic, religious and language differences among different groups; they just welded groups together.

The attempt to construct liberal democracy in Africa has not worked either. Too much of what goes into liberal democracy is alien to Africa. The whole concept of elections, a government party and an opposition is not in sync with our culture, because we find that, when you elect people, the only point at which the electorate comes into contact with the representatives is at the point of elections. For the next four or five years the representatives can do whatever they like, and the people have no means of sanctioning or recalling them (*sounds familiar?! – DA*).

In Nigeria today, there is an attempt on the part of the military to hand over power to civilians. Irrespective of the outcome of elections, I think the critical problem in Nigeria today is economic – the poverty of the people, the inability of most families to have three square meals a day – and this is manifested everywhere in Nigeria. 90% of our foreign exchange revenue comes from oil, but over the past six or seven years there's been a lot of tension in these areas, which led to the trial and killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1993, who was trying to mobilise his people against Shell and against government and the other oil companies.

Even with the killing of Saro-Wiwa and his colleagues, tension in the area is because the oil companies have succeeded in despoiling the environment. This area has a very difficult terrain, we're talking about a multiplicity of islands, swampy vegetation. The activities of the oil companies have only worsened this. They virtually wiped out the farming and the fishing, so that people have virtually no means of livelihood. People who went to school cannot get jobs, and meanwhile the oil companies and the Nigerian government make millions of dollars from this region. And so people are shutting down the flow stations, holding the staff hostage, and the

government has responded by pushing more security into the region. A lot of people get killed and a lot of people get wounded in the process. Most of those who get killed we never hear about because the terrain of the region is such that there are areas that you cannot reach even in a day's time, sometimes you just have to rely on boats and ferries to reach them. So the crisis in the oil-producing region goes to underline the political and economic crisis in Nigeria.

The government is in alliance with the multinational oil corporations — notably Mobil, Shell, Chevron — especially Shell. Shell accounts for almost half of Nigeria's oil production. It is no longer a secret that Shell even purchases arms for the Nigerian military, they also arm the police. As a matter of fact they have their own police who guard the oil installations.

What's your goal for the kind of society you'd like to build?

We want to see autonomous communities, self-managing, self-accounting communities managing their own affairs. This is an approximation of the African village system that was in operation before colonialism. These villages were autonomous and independent, and functioned on their own to decide what to produce and distribute. The decision-making process was such that no single individual lorded over others. In fact, decision-making was by means of consensus. You did not have vertical structures enforced by force.

So we strive to elaborate on the relationship between anarchism and the village systems in Africa, because by and large the village systems were democratic and autonomous and they delivered the goods. You know, the state system in Africa today has failed in delivering the goods. It has instead become an instrument of repression and the denial of freedoms of individuals and groups. So our focus is upon this basic principle of organisation of society, and we find that an attempt has been made in the past by the Tanzanian government to create these African traditional systems in what they called Ujamaa villages, where villages were invited to farm among themselves and shared the produce. Of course, whatever government attempts always ends up in corruption and bureaucracy. Corruption and bureaucracy are the two basic factors that led to the collapse of the Ujamaa system. But we believe that if government is removed from this process, it is surely going to work.

Would this work in the urban setting as well?

Yes, in the urban settings, actually, you still find elements of the village system, but of course the urban setting has its own logic. When people move to the urban area, life becomes governed by capitalist principles, but there are of course other aspects of their life. When people in a town lose their jobs, they still rely on the extended family to cover for the period they are out of a job. In a situation where salaries are not paid for upwards of six months, what sustains them basically is the extended family. You find that even in urban areas you still have town meetings, village meetings, going on as a way of keeping in touch with the village.

There is a tendency in the west to see every crisis in Africa as being ethnic or tribal in character. But essentially, most of these crises actually are economic in character. The tribe in Africa was constituted very much after the colonial state had come into being. Prior to the coming of colonialism, groups were organised on a village basis. But with the coming of colonialism and the imposition of the capitalist economy, with the cutting of community ties, all the groups begin

to come together because you had a situation where every social group within the state was in direct competition with each other. The larger you were the more able you were to compete. So it was this capitalist system and colonialism that led to the rallying of all these groups into what we now have as tribes and ethnic groups.

What brought the Awareness League into the International Workers Association?

The IWA is the anarcho-syndicalist international, so we put in an application. The IWA Secretary had come to Nigeria in 1994 to assess our work. I believe they were impressed with what we were trying to do given our own limitations, the fact that we had a rough time with the security forces. In one of our meetings, they swooped on us and we had a number of people arrested. We were able to come out of it, and the determination and solidarity displayed by our members in the face of this assault was something that really impressed them. It was about two years after that the Awareness League was admitted into the International.

How has this worked out?

It has given us a kind of understanding, and exchange with the affiliates around the world in trying to exchange ideas, information, and they have also tried to assist us. WSA (*US Section of the IWA*) did a campaign to help us buy a computer. We had thought that by now we would have an email facility but acquiring a telephone is a difficult matter. We hope as time goes on we can acquire a telephone so that we can be in electronic communication with all groups, including the IWW.

We do not really want to be dogmatic about what we are trying to do. We believe that there is a need for working in co-operation among workers' groups around the world, all workers' groups that are opposed to capitalism, anti-authoritarian, and opposed to the state system. That should be enough common ground, instead of splitting on issues of ideology and doctrines that don't seem to advance the cause of the working class. That is our position.

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