

Looking back: 40 years ago

By Edwin Madunagu

LATE in the evening of August 6, 1977, eight Nigerian socialists, resident in Calabar, met in that city and formed the Calabar Group of Socialists (CGS). Calabar was then the capital of "old" Cross River State covering the present Cross River and Akwa Ibom states. Attending this foundation and inaugural meeting were Eskor Toyo, Eboney Okpa, Udo Atat, Assim Ita, Ita Henshaw, Basse Ekpo Basse, Bene Madunagu and Edwin Madunagu. The meeting took place in an apartment which today houses the Senior Staff Club of the University of Calabar but which at the time was a guest house allocated to Bene Madunagu as a newly confirmed lecturer in that university's Department of Biological Sciences.

At the time CGS was formed Eskor Toyo had just moved from the University of Maiduguri to the University of Calabar as Senior Lecturer in Economics. He was, even then, well known as a Marxist intellectual in Nigeria and had been active in nationalist, labour and socialist politics since 1947. Eboney Okpa was a leading labour organiser and activist resident in Calabar and had been prominent in Nigeria's labour movement since the First Republic. Assim Ita was a China-trained cadre of the Nigerian Left who had seen combat and had been imprisoned in Ghana, Nigeria and Biafra. Udo Atat was a Cuba-trained cadre of the Nigerian Left. He was professionally a television cameraman. Ita Henshaw was a labour unionist and a boxer. Basse Ekpo Basse was a journalism graduate of the University of Nigeria, a socialist activist and political editor of *Nigerian Chronicle*, a state-owned newspaper. Bene Madunagu was a revolutionary socialist and a Botany lecturer in the University of Calabar. To complete the list, I was a revolutionary socialist and had just emerged from a peasant-based revolutionary commune in Ode-Omu in present Osun State, and was seeking employment with the University of Calabar as a lecturer in Mathematics.

Although none of the eight founding members of the Calabar Group of Socialists - one

female and seven males - could be said to be a "new recruit" into revolutionary struggle at the time the organisation came into being, there were significant variations and differences in their backgrounds: formal and professional education, revolutionary experience, social circumstances as well as means of livelihood. Their ages also differed significantly; so were their specific routes to socialist consciousness, and roads into the Nigerian Socialist Movement. The oldest was Eskor Toyo (48 years) while the youngest was Basse Ekpo Basse (28 years). A researcher may rightly attribute part of the turbulence the organisation went through in its early life to these variations and differences; but the researcher will also discover the absence of three maladies of Nigerian politics: "proprietary-ism", ethnicity and sexism.

The formation of CGS was partly inspired by the July 1977 All-Nigeria Socialist Conference held in Zaria and which Eskor Toyo, Basse Ekpo Basse and I attended. I said "partly" because even if the conference had not taken place, and we had not met there, the very fact that history had brought a substantial number of Marxists and revolutionary socialists together in Calabar at that point would have led to the emergence of a political group sooner than later. This was how I described the Zaria Conference 25 years later: "The 3-day conference can be described as the largest gathering of Nigerian Marxists, socialists and revolutionary democrats - at least since the end of the Civil War. It was the first encounter between the old generation of socialists (those who operated before and during the Civil War) and the new generation (those, like myself, who joined the movement after the war)."

At inception CGS conceived itself as what some Marxist intellectuals would call an external vanguard: "external" in the sense that it was self-constituted and had not yet inserted itself into the struggles of the masses, especially those of the working people. It was "an external vanguard" rather than "the external vanguard" because there were other vanguards in the Nigerian Left. CGS was

Marxist in character and methods; its strategic objective was socialism; it was underground and therefore acted openly only through formations that Marxists called fronts (a non-derogatory term in Marxist politics), allies and collaborators. CGS's fronts, allies and collaborators included the labour movement and its organisations, students movements, women's movement, rural communities, professional organisations and unaffiliated individuals.

But what and who are vanguards in Marxist politics? Vanguards represent and promote the common interests of all sections and all strata of the working and toiling people and all stages of their emancipatory struggle. They are selfless and courageous. Vanguards worry for the present, but also point to the future. And beyond this, vanguards are conscious of their place and role.

The newly-formed Calabar Group of Socialists (CGS) went to work immediately. The political temperature of the country was rising. The way the transition programme was going, it had become clear that General Olusegun Obasanjo who succeeded General Murtala Mohammed as military ruler after the latter's assassination in February 1976 would try to turn the country over to the most conservative and reactionary crop of bourgeois politicians. The Nigerian Left was determined to prevent this by all means possible. One of these means was general mass mobilization towards the formation of a single, nation-wide revolutionary socialist party structured to be able to engage in electoral and non-electoral political struggles. This was a key decision of the July 1977 Zaria Conference and, as indicated above, the decision partly inspired the immediate formation of CGS on our return from the conference.

Since each foundation member was an activist, the first step that was taken was pulling together and rationalising the various pre-Conference engagements and commitments and proceeding from there. One of the first re-organisation steps was the decision to transform the Movement for Progressive Nigeria (MPN), University of

Calabar, whose formation two comrades had inspired before the Zaria Conference, into a purely students' movement.

Within a month of formation, CGS ran into internal crises on a number of questions - the most acute and urgent being those of organisational discipline. Later, there developed ideological and doctrinal differences as well. Prominent in the array of ideological and doctrinal questions were the roles of two large social groups - women and middle classes - in the socialist revolution. When new recruitments were made, the problems became more acute - and now dangerous - because most of the new members, being relatively much younger and less experienced, could neither fully understand the questions nor fully appreciate the differences between the foundation members. By the end of the third month, the internal crisis had reached a breaking-point. In the last week of November 1977, the Calabar Group of Socialists (CGS) broke into two factions. Of the eight founding members, Eskor Toyo, Eboney Okpa and Basse Ekpo Basse fell into one faction while Assim Ita, Ita Henshaw, Udo Atat, Bene Madunagu and Edwin Madunagu aligned with the other faction.

An underground revolutionary movement breaking into factions is a dangerous affair at the best of times. But it is more dangerous under a military dictatorship, and much more so when the members of the movement are known activists who had had "brushes" with the state. The reprieve in 1977 came from the fact that the "combatants" were conscious of their primary responsibility in this matter: protecting the struggles they had inspired and protecting the working and toiling people involved in them. In April 1978, during the "Ali Must Go" students' revolt, four CGS members - Eskor Toyo, Basse Ekpo Basse, Bene Madunagu and Edwin Madunagu - were arrested by the police and locked up in the same room. There they re-affirmed that primary responsibility and took the first decision on unification. A successful review and unification meeting was hosted by Comrade Assim Ita as soon as the detainees were released.