

THE GUARDIAN, Thursday, August 1, 1991

THE Nigerian press has been undated in the past few years, and particularly since the state promulgation of the two parties — the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC) — in October 1989, with hysterical calls on the government to cancel the right of Nigerian workers and their organisations to be actively involved in the politics of their country. This insidious campaign has been led by three groups: Conservatives, reactionaries and misguided “liberals,” in the civil society; state agencies involved in the execution of the transition programme, with the National Electoral Commission (NEC) taking the lead; and sections of the Nigerian press.

The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) has, in several statements and actions, defended its political rights. Labour leaders and partisans of the working class have also entered this defence. The defence must now be deepened, generalised and transformed into an offensive against reaction and its organisational forms. And in doing this, a number of premises must be stated or clarified.

In the first place, the Nigerian working class movement has been, historically, a patriotic, nationalistic, democratic and revolutionary movement. The movement was born in the struggle to throw off colonialism. While bourgeois leaders sought to replace the colonialists and carve out regional and ethnic domains of control, the Nigerian labour movement fought for genuine independence, national un-

ity, popular democracy and social justice. The movement has, in the main, stood for these ideals — despite occasional periods of errors.

In its statement of May 15, 1991, the National Political Commission of the NLC said: “It is in the interest of Nigeria as a nation, unity ... that interest groups like the trade unions that are not ethnic or religious-biased by their history and orientation be able to seek to influence the country’s political process.” I challenge any group outside the labour movement and the *left* to make a similar claim, and prove it.

In the second place, the fact that there are disagreements on the *left* as regards (forms of) participation in the transition politics does not annul the historical rights of workers and their organisations to play politics. I shall deal with the nature and import of these disagreements in the course of this series of articles. For now, I merely insist that the right of the labour movement to play politics is historical and it is permanent. Bourgeois laws — which history has shown to be transitory — may attempt to curtail this right, but it remains and will again blossom with time. The right was won, through struggle, long before any members of the present regime was born. It will remain long after NEC

must have fulfilled its historical mission and disappeared. The right will survive misguided ideologues and

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journalists.

In the third place, the crisis in the socialist movement world-wide has not questioned the critical role of the working class and its organisations in the movement of history. What has been seriously questioned is the form of this role. Among the lessons that have been taught are: The working class movement must not be isolated politically; its politics must not be dogmatised; its leadership must not be alienated; and its practices must be democratic. But so long as capitalism and imperialism remain so long will the critical role of the working class remain; and the longer it takes the working class to absorb these lessons and resume its historical march, the greater the danger not only to civilisation, but to humanity as a whole.

It is with horror that I tried to absorb the contents of an article written by a fellow journalist, Tunji Bello (*National Concord*, July 19, 1991) and titled *The old Politics of Paschal Bafyau*. I invite anyone who wishes to appreciate the depth of the ignorance and decadences of our educated newbreed to read that article. Referring to the heroic struggles of Nigerian militant nationalists and socialists Tunji Bello said: “Right from the time of agitation for independence up to

the First Republic, some Nigerian marxists and unionists like Micheal Imoudu, Wahab Goodluck, Eskor, Toyo, Ola Oni, Mokwugo Okoye and Tunji Otegbeye, did make attempts, all with resounding failures”.

I ask: Is Tunji Bello a Nigerian? Has he read Nigerian history? Has he substituted programmed prejudices for serious study? Will it surprise him to hear that but for the heroic struggles led by the people he has slandered, and others, the course of Nigerian history would have been like that of South Africa, if not worse? He probably will be shocked to hear that but for the struggle led by these heroes, and others, he would perhaps be a migrant labourer perpetually hunted in his own land? As a fellow journalist and an older man, I advise Bello to retract his slander and apologise to these men. For I would not want this slander to be recorded for posterity.

Pursuing what appeared to be a personal grudge against Paschal Bafyau, the NLC President, Tunji Bello accused him of playing “the old politics”, for according to this strange political analyst, “Labour is beginning to seek harmony with capital”. I advise Bello to take a holiday, preferably a study leave. During his leave he should pursue the following hypothesis: Labour (that is, labour under capitalism) can never, never, seek harmony

with capital. The latter gave birth to the former, and the former has been compelled to increase and multiply the latter. The contradiction between the two are historical and fundamentally antagonistic. And it can only be “harmonised” by one abolishing the other. But capital cannot abolish labour since capital needs labour to exist and multiply. Labour can however abolish capital, and by so doing transform itself and become emancipated collective labour.

In addition to this basic hypothesis, let me try to explain, once again and in general terms, what has taken place in Eastern Europe. And I shall use Bello’s categories — labour and capital. Capital won a battle in a continuous war against labour. The battle was not restricted to the individual countries concerned. The battle was a global one.

It was national in form, but global in content. That the events in Eastern Europe are being used by Bello and others in political argument against the Nigerian working class movement is a demonstration of the global nature of the battle in Eastern Europe. Labour in Eastern Europe, and elsewhere, has lost a battle, but the war continues. And as I said in the preceding paragraph, the war will only end with the abolition of capital. The popular demonstrations against George Bush in Greece and Turkey during his recent visits to these countries were a pointer to the permanence of the war against capital.

• This is the first instalment of a six-part article on Labour and Politics.

Continued from Last Week

I ARGUED last week that the right of the Nigeria Labour movement to be actively involved in the politics of this country is a historical conquest. It was not bestowed on the working class by any regime or constitution and no regime or constitution can take it away. Attempts may be made, from time to time, to curtail this right, but the right will blossom again with time. This is a law of history; it is also an expression of faith.

The above is a general statement, a bottom-line statement, so to say. It is the labour movement's ideological, political and moral weapon against bourgeois pretensions. But the movement's political right and authority have to be asserted and demonstrated continuously, and at times, decisively. A right becomes dormant if it is not regularly affirmed and asserted and if encroachments upon it are not fought, as often as they threaten. In Nigeria, the opposition to workers' right to independent political involvement has passed through a number of definitive stages. But as often as this opposition has reached a peak, so often has the re-affirmation of the right by its possessor been made. Sometimes the re-affirmation is made under the official leadership of the labour movement, sometimes it is made in spite of the leadership or even against it.

It bears repetition that the fact

that there are disagreements with-in the *left* on the forms of participation or involvement in national politics does not cancel the NLC's right to play politics. Anyone on the left who opposes this right is in fact supporting reaction, and this is treason. In other words, NLC's right to play politics ought to be supported by all patriots and radicals. Correct forms of participation can be achieved through internal debate and struggle; they cannot be achieved through dictation, however perceptive the ideas.

The last five years, or more precisely, the period since Babangida came to power in August 1985 can be divided into three periods of assertion by the Nigerian working class movement of its right to play politics. The first period started with the National Political Debate (1986) and the ensuing political arguments and ended with the conclusion of the work of the Constituent Assembly in 1989. The second period began with the general preparation for the formation of political parties, saw the workers' Workshop at Calabar in April 1989 and the formation and proclamation of the Labour Party and ended with the politics of registration and the formal proscription of the party along with the others. The third period started with the state proclamation of the SDP and NRC in

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October 1989. We are still in that period.

But before proceeding it is perhaps necessary to make another clarification in the interest of some radicals who may be perplexed by my present position on the Nigeria labour movement.

The following categories have been employed in this discussion: The Nigerian working class; the Nigerian working class movement or the labour movement; the trade or industrial unions; the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC); the NLC leadership; the NLC leaders etc. It will be dangerous to use these categories, for even any two of them, interchangeably. More directly, it is necessary to distinguish between the working class and the working class organisations. Furthermore an organisation should be distinguished from its leadership; and the leadership from individual leaders. Since these categories are generated in the working class — a social group that cannot be compartmentalised sociologically — they are all linked or integrated on several levels. For instance, all members of the class are human beings and live in Nigeria!

The point however is that in political analysis levels of differentiation are as critical as levels

of integration. Tunji Bello in his scandalously backward article *The Old politics of Paschal Bafyau* (National Concord, July 19) betrayed an amazing degree of ignorance of levels of differentiation. He confused the labour movement with the NLC which is just an organisation of the movement; he confused the leadership of the NLC with Paschal Bafyau who is just one of the leaders. And he ended up assaulting his readers with his ignorance.

What we must assert and defend against the bourgeois state is the right of the Nigerian working class, its movement and its organisations to play politics. The right of the leadership of a particular organisation (e.g. the NLC) and the limits of the right are defined by the right of the organisation — and the right of individual members. If the decision of the NLC to be involved in the transition politics is **proved** to be internally undemocratic, this will not annul the right of political involvement. What can be annulled is the **form** of participating in the transition politics. In other words, it may be decided that instead of going into the SDP, the NLC ought to have taken some other political steps.

But it cannot be decided that the NLC should have abstained from politics as demanded by NEC.

The question may be asked: What happens if by any accident an organisation of the Nigerian working class (e.g. the NLC) decides, democratically, to annul its right to play politics — a right it earned historically and whose historical mission is yet to be fulfilled or dissolved? If this happens then we have to admit that a terrible accident has taken place in that organisation. It then becomes the duty of the incumbent leadership of the organisation, or even a number of individual leaders, to take steps to reverse the decision as early as possible. If they fail, then the rank and file will have to take on the task of reversing it and, if necessary, changing the leadership.

But if it becomes impossible to effect a reversal of the decision through an autonomous action of the organisation then it falls on the working class movement, as a whole, to terminate the decision. In this case, the relative autonomy of a single organisation has to give way to the long-term interest of the working class movement as a whole. What this means is that if the NLC had obeyed that National Electoral Commission (NEC) to stay out of politics, a struggle would have been engaged within and outside the NLC to reverse the decision and perhaps change the leadership, under which such a decision was taken. It would have been a duty for the working class, its movement and its allies.

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ON July 10, 1986, the NLC — an umbrella organisation of 42 industrial unions submitted a memorandum to the Political Bureau at a ceremony held at the National Theatre, Lagos. Attended by past and incumbent leaders of the labour movement as well as representatives of the Bureau, the ceremony drew a large number of workers. In the forward to its memorandum titled *Towards a Viable and Genuinely Democratic Future*, the NLC said:

"The numerous problems facing Nigerian workers, rural and urban poor, today have their origin in politics. Therefore, the problems of unemployment, insecurity of employment, retrenchment, factory closures, high cost of living, inability to control rent, exorbitant medical care, taxation, excessive school fees and all forms of deprivations are products of political decisions. Thus, it is clear that the problems of Nigerian workers have become multi-dimensional and as such cannot be resolved within the framework of industrial relations practice".

From that premise the NLC asserted its right to be involved in politics: "Labour in politics would broaden genuine political participation; it would halt the use of tribalism, statism and religious differences as instruments for manipulating the people; it would be oriented and above all, forge a truly united nation behind a definite ideological posture — which shall be socialism. For the realisation of this objective, workers and other democratic groups and progressive individuals

must pick up the gauntlet".

The memorandum made an unambiguous call for socialist transformation of Nigeria. Whatever may be the current ideological-political orientation or position of the NLC leadership, the memorandum has become a historical document drawn up after vigorous debates within the Congress and all the industrial unions allied to it. Delegations of the Political Bureau witnessed most of these debates. I was in the delegation that observed the debates in Borno and Gongola states. The socialist position embodied in that memorandum can of course, be reversed, or altered. But this cannot be done by the leadership of the NLC, but by a body of Nigerian workers as representative as the body that drew up the 1986 memorandum.

In the Introduction to the memorandum, the NLC said: "We start from the stand-point that Nigeria, during the colonial period and after, has officially, despite manifest pretensions, adhered to the capitalist philosophy in our social, economic and political policy options. We also acknowledge the fact that the adoption of capitalist ideology and culture, after independence, has transformed Nigeria from a colonial to a neo-colonial status and make us incapable of independent development, not even the development of basic and rudimentary units for technological take-off and self-sustaining development".

Again from this premise, the memorandum concluded: "The question of classes and class interests in our political equation, often rejected by the ruling class, is now a reality. Our submission therefore is a class one, representing the political position of the working class, and its traditional allies. Therefore, we believe that only a socialist option can ensure a viable and stable political and economic arrangements in Nigeria".

The Memorandum then dealt exhaustively with all the issues listed by the Political Bureau, including Revenue Allocation; Traditional Rulership; Philosophy of Government; forms of Representation in Government; Rural and Community Development; Interests of Minorities and underprivileged groups; Human Rights; Armed Forces; Federalism; Regionalism; Statism; Nationality and Citizenship; Role of Women; Labour in Politics; Youth and Students in Nigerian Politics; Administration of Justice; State and Religion, etc.

On the Philosophy of Government, the memorandum tackled the question of the alleged foreignness of socialism. It argued that contrary to the allegation that socialism is alien to our culture, "Nigeria's social life is communalistic and more socialist inclined than the alien capitalistic system, based on alienation and cut throat competition, that strives to

break the social relationship of being our brothers' keepers". It was the contention of the NLC that for the working class, peasants, urban and rural poor — who constitute the overwhelming majority of our population — the basic problems of the Nigerian people are: Guaranteed stable employment; education; health; housing and "participation in deciding political and economic issues which determine their lives and the existence of the nation.

It was the contention of the NLC that these problems can be solved much more rapidly under socialism than under capitalism. Specifically, the memorandum demanded "full employment; free education at all levels free medical services for all the people".

On the *Forms of Representation in Government*, the memorandum argued that "mass organisations, which form the basic communication and mobilisation platforms of the people, should be the bases of representation at all levels". It therefore called for the organisation of the society into functional groups and mass organisations. It listed these organisations as Organised Labour, including the Armed Forces; Student and Youth Organisation; Organised intellectual groups; Organised peasants; and other organised social and economic groups.

The memorandum called for the institution of human rights. But it went on to argue that "human right is only meaningful where it guaran-

tees basic economic and social rights like the right to employment, free education, health services, suitable and cheap housing facilities. It is the provision of the above social and economic rights that give ample meaning to, and re-inforces, political and legal rights".

In calling for a multi-party system, the memorandum demanded the abrogation of "existing trade union legislations which restrict only trade unions from furthering political aims". The memorandum called these legislations "discriminatory". It put up a defence of women's right "to participate in social, economic and political activities of the country". Specifically, the presence of women "should be effectively felt in all organs of government and mass organisations". The memorandum opposed regionalism and statism, and argued for genuine federalism; it demanded an independent judiciary, a secular state and press freedom. It also called for the localisation of the "symbolic existence of traditional rulers".

On every issue the memorandum took a clearly democratic and patriotic position. It was the most exhaustive and thoughtful memorandum that the Bureau received. Moreover, it was presented by the largest organisation in Nigeria, representing those who toil to sustain the nation. Through this memorandum and the political mobilisation and agitation that took place in the course of its preparation, the NLC re-asserted its right to be autonomously involved in the politics of transition.

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THIS series of articles has been aimed at explaining, and then defending, the right of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), the central organisation of Nigerian workers, to be involved, as an autonomous group, in politics in general and in the politics of transition in particular. The nature of this involvement is primarily the concern of the working class and the political forces that share the broad aims of the class and are in alliance with it. The political forces under reference constitute what is known, as the *left*. Beyond the *left*, liberal democrats have an ideological obligation to defend this basic political right of the working class. The proclamation of the Labour Party on May 20, 1989, at the National Theatre, Lagos, was another assertion and demonstration of NLC's political right.

The first point that should be made clear here is that the idea of a Workers' Party in Nigeria was not created by this regime. This is a slander being peddled by people like Tunji Bello. In his article *The Old Politics of Paschal Bafyau* (*National Concord*, July 19, 1991), Bello permitted himself to make the following slanderous statements: "When a defunct Labour Party was floated in 1989 during the era of political associations, it was not Bafyau's or any of his labour aristocrats' idea. It was a government idea". This is false. And I am in a

position to say so, for I was intimately involved in all the stages of the formation of the party. The idea was not that of the government. The campaign for the formation of the party was not even a response to the government's invitation to Nigerians to form parties. I also affirm that the campaign for the formation was not a response to the transition programme of this regime. Bello's slander, whether made independently out of ignorance and mischief, or simply made through him, has to be decisively refuted. For it is slander on history.

The idea of a Workers' Party in Nigeria is at least 62 years old. Indeed the first Workers' Party was formed in Nigeria more than 50 years ago. The roots of the (1986-1989) campaign for a Workers' Party—a campaign which the NLC at a critical stage—could be located in the political crisis of the Second Republic (1979-1983). Many committed socialists and labour leaders had responded to that crisis with the proposal for the formation of a broad-based, and revolutionary, Workers' Party. The proposal was taken up, an effort at implementing it culminated in the formation of the Labour Party in May 1989. All that can be said is that the National Political Debate (1986) and the transition program-

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me added a new momentum to the campaign—in terms of the new forces it acquired—and helped to sharpen its strategic focus.

Having said this, we have to go further to state, categorically, that the Nigerian radical forces (which include socialist, labour and popular-democratic movements as special detachments) cannot ignore the political programme of an entrenched neo-colonial state (military or civil). Given the present balance of forces, a radical movement that ignores the political programmes of the ruling class is simply not interested either in the amelioration of the condition of the masses or in the question of power. Such a movement is, at best, not revolutionary. At worst, it is irrelevant as a political force. The crucial question, therefore, is not whether the NLC or any other group on the *left* should respond to this regime's programme, but what the character of this response should be. Whatever the character it has to be active and political, not passive or abstentionist, as some misguided critics suggest.

One specific response which a section of the Nigerian left gave to the present transition programme was its decision—arrived at

through a long and vigorous debate—to take part in the electoral contest (proposed in the programme) as an independent political force. The NLC later made a similar decision thereby opting for a form of exercising its right, a right that is permanent. We may express the preceding points differently: The debate and campaign for a Workers' Party predated this regime's political programme. However, the decision to use this party to contest the transition election—in addition to its other uses—was the specific response to the regime's programme.

Having decided long before the transition programme—which was announced only in July 1987—to struggle for Workers' power and a Workers' Party as a means for attaining it, committed Nigerian socialists, labour leaders and activists embarked on a nation-wide campaign of uniting the political forces on the *left* including the labour movement—not in the abstract, but around the question of workers' power and workers' party. When the Political Bureau was established in January, 1986, the *left*, including the NLC, correctly used the platform of the national debate to intensify and broaden the campaign. A specific result of this utilisation was the emergence, in

Calabar in May 1986, of the trade-union sponsored Directorate for Literacy which thereafter played a leading role in the campaign.

The campaign for workers' power and a workers' party was carried directly to workers, peasants, women, students, the intelligentsia and their organisations. The results of this campaign is an open one: The NLC, in its memorandum (July 10, 1986) to the Political Bureau advocated socialism for the country, and the formation of Workers' Party as a road to it. Women-In-Nigeria (WIN) advocated socialism; the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) advocated socialism. Other popular-democratic organisations entered the same advocacy. Finally, the Bureau, came out after a 12-month nation-wide debate, with a verdict of socialism.

The verdict of the Political Bureau opened a new chapter in the campaign for Workers' Party, Workers' Power and socialism. The efforts of some partisans of the working class in the settlement of the crisis that engulfed the labour movement (February-December 1988) was aimed at uniting and strengthening the movement around these questions. The result of these efforts, and similar ones, was the emergence of a new labour leadership under which the NLC reaffirmed its earlier commitment to workers' power and the formation of a Workers' Party.

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A COMMUNIQUE issued at the end of the NLC-sponsored workshop on *Labour and the Transition Programme* said: "The workshop resolved that Nigerian workers, in collaboration with other patriotic Nigerians, will play a very active role in the Transition Programme and in the Third Republic. In seeking to play such an effective role, the workshop urges the NLC to actively sponsor the formation of a Labour Party to prepare and contest for power in the Third Republic. The envisaged Labour Party cannot, and will not, be an off-shoot of the NLC as this will be improper and compromise the independence of the NLC". (Calabar, April 4, 1989.)

This declaration not only reaffirmed workers' political right, but also clarified that relationship of the proposed Labour Party. The communique went on to say that "the envisaged Labour Party will seek to be rooted in the historical circumstances and realities of the Nigerian nation, and as a result should seek to create a National Democratic Society based on nationalism, democracy and social justice ... As such, the envisaged Labour Party would have its membership open to all Nigerians who accept its principles and programmes. In particular, the Labour Party should seek to attract its rank-workers, peasant-farmers, petty-traders, artisans self-employed, women, youth and other disadvantaged groups in the Nigerian society".

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The National Workshop was attended by representative of the NLC leadership, representatives of the 13 Senior Staff Associations, representatives of other mass organisations, leftist intellectuals, leftist professionals, veteran labour and socialist leaders, radical youths, etc. It was probably the largest and the most representative gathering of progressive forces in Nigeria since the All-Nigeria Socialist Conference held in Zaria in July 1977. Other comparable gatherings in the last 10 years will include the Bagauda (Kano) conference of December 1982 and the Marx Centenary (Zaria, March 1983).

The communique under reference was issued in the evening of April 4, 1989. The following day, April 5, the National Executive Committee (NEC) of NLC resolved, also in Calabar, to accept the decision of the Workshop and sponsor the formation of a Labour Party whenever the ban on organised partisan politics was lifted. The decision was a unanimous one after a meeting lasting several hours. A lot of confusion later attended the meaning of the word "sponsor." The correct meaning must now be defended against slanders and distortionists. This clarification is anchored on the difference between sponsorship on one hand and support or "transformation" on the other hand.

The NLC could not, and cannot, be transformed into a Labour Party,

or any other party, for that matter. This issue has already been settled. Sponsorship is different from support in the sense that one can only support an organisation that already exists. Where the formation of an organisation is only being contemplated, and hence does not yet exist one can sponsor it by participating actively in its formation. In this sense there can be one or multiple sponsors.

In the case of the Labour Party there were, of necessity, multiple sponsors. The labour movement (with the NLC as its leading organisational form), the socialist movement, mass organisations and individuals were all sponsors of the Labour party that was proclaimed in Lagos on May 20, 1989. The political weights of the various components of this array of sponsors were not the same, and could not have been the same. But once the Labour Party was proclaimed, the category "sponsorship" was expected to die in relation to the life of the party. It was expected to be replaced by "support."

The sponsorship of the Labour Party could not mean ownership. In other words, the sponsorship of the Labour Party could not translate into ownership after formation, it was banal to think, or act so. After the formation, the former sponsoring organisations could continue to support the party — in the ordinary

sense of the word — in one form or the other. Members of the former sponsoring organisations and other individuals who contributed to the sponsorship were expected to become members or mere supporters in the ordinary sense of the word. The party was to be owned by its members, and by no-one else.

To summarise: By NLC's sponsorship of the Labour Party we meant that the NLC would actively contribute in bringing the party into being by putting its organisational and structural weight behind the efforts to put the party on the ground, and ensure its take-off.

After the Workshop and the meeting of the NLC's National Executive Committee which unananimously endorsed the Workshops's decision, two organisations emerged as leading sponsors of the Labour Party. These were the socialist formation and NLC itself. The convergence, or alliance, of these two forces in the formation of the Labour Party was the only, progressive, and indeed practical course dictated by our own history. It was, moreover, the course supported by the working people.

Never have trade unions sponsored a workers' party alone. A Workers' Party sponsored by trade unions alone cannot be a party in the first place. It can only be another trade union, at best. The alternative to linking up with the socialist movement—a clearly betrayal course—is to align with various

shades of self-acclaimed social-democrats, petit-bourgeois opportunists and probably, the bourgeois state. The result, in this case, may be a Party, but definitely not a Workers or Labour Party.

A tragedy later befell the Labour Party long before it was proscribed, in October 1989. Before that date, the influence of the socialist forces had declined considerably. Two factors accounted for this. First, the leadership of the NLC, partly under the pressure of the "politics of registration" and partly as a result of opportunism, had mounted a campaign to purge "extremists" and "radicals" from the party. Secondly, the socialist movement had become bitterly factionalised on the question of how to respond to the party leaderships campaign against socialists. The death of the party was hardly mourned by Nigerian socialists. And I doubt if many workers felt any loss.

The lesson for the future is clear. The ideology of the working class, as a class, is socialism. It is an ideology articulated in the course of the long battle which the class has been waging for emancipation. It is the only ideology which protects and advances the interests of the working class. Furthermore, a socialist ideology without socialists is simply ridiculous. Once the working class is armed with the ideology of socialism and develops correct tactics under a clear-headed leadership, it has a wide terrain to manoeuvre. In particular, it can manoeuvre successfully through what is now going on in Nigeria.

● To be concluded next week

IN October 1989, the Armed Forces Ruling Council AFRC announced the dissolution of 13 political parties, including the Labour Party, which had applied to the National Electoral Commission (NEC) for registration. But as I said in the preceding instalment of this series, the Labour Party had been reduced to a shadow of itself long before it was proscribed. It had become a gathering of labour leaders and those who were bent on participating as official candidates in the transition politics by all means possible. Of course there were, in the now clearly degenerate gathering, opportunists whose political ambitions in the party could be realised only to the extent that genuine socialists were purged from it.

To be fair, one has to recognise that there were some honest progressives and democrats in this atrophied Labour Party. These were people who had been absent from organised politics for a long time or had never been in it. These people were brought into the Labour Party and used to legitimise it. But they were betrayed by the same people that brought them in.

The "politics of registration" embarked upon by NLC leadership ended disastrously. The leadership has taken over the regime's campaign against "extremists" and

"radicals" in the belief that this would earn them official registration by NEC. Socialists who had spent years campaigning for the formation of the party and who had played a crucial role in ensuring the success of the Workshop at Calabar

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defenders. They therefore kept severely away from further discussions with the labour leaders.

A little digression is necessary here. The Labour Party, as it was conceived by the Nigerian Socialist Movement, was not to be a marxist-leninist party. It was to be a mass party, popular-democratic, and with a strong socialist orientation. The core of the party was, of course, to be marxist-leninist, not by any constitutional provision, or by the party's structure, but by the political and moral authority of Nigerian marxist-leninists. Of course, if Nigerian marxist-leninists lost this authority-like their counterparts

did in Eastern Europe—their influence in the party would decline, and with this, the orientation of the party would change. In other words to say that the core of the Labour Party was to be marxist-leninist was merely to set an agenda, not to guarantee any position or role.

The Labour Party, as conceived, was to take part in what some people in the left call *bourgeois politics*, that is, electoral competition against bourgeois forces. But the role of the party was not to be limited to bourgeois politics. It was to look beyond bourgeois politics, while taking part in it. Hence the party was to be constructed in such a way that it could not be dissolved by any decree.

Soon after the April 1989 Work-

shop, however, it became clear to socialists that the labour leadership was pursuing an organisational strategy different from the original conception. But this new labour orientation, later known as *the politics of registration*, was not a matter of tactical manoeuvre to get the party registered, but a change in strategy. For obvious reasons—one of which was that the battle was fought in a bourgeois terrain and under bourgeois laws—the labour leadership gained an upper hand in the struggle to control the party. Thereafter, socialists left the labour leaders to play out their error. And it ended the way it did.

had warned that the politics of registration would end in disaster. In the first place, since the regime wanted only two parties it could not afford to register a party led by labour leaders when there were powerful bourgeois forces — the real owners of the state — to satisfy. In the second place, there was no guarantee that radicals" and "extremists" would not return and overturn the carefully laid table. The regime could not afford to take chances in such a possibility. In the third place, the regime knew too well that the Labour Party which applied for registration had very limited mass base, a base that would even wither away, with time. What was the point of registering a party that could not even sustain a militarised transition programmes, to say nothing of the envisaged civilian administration?

When the regime dissolved the labour leaders' hope of registration, and proclaimed the *little-to-the-left* and *little-to-the-right* politics, the question was again posed on the left as to how to respond to the new development. Once again the socialist movement and the labour leadership came face to face. Many socialists were justifiably bitter against, and distrustful of, the labour leaders. These socialists could not entertain any discussion involving those who, in their opinion, had betrayed the working people by campaigning against socialists—their strongest allies and

conditions of the masses and simultaneously strengthening their political organisation for a new stage of the struggle. If the answer is in the affirmative, then it is obligatory to pursue a policy of insertion. But it must be pursued with the twin objectives in mind.

It was clear to me that the opportunities for radical insertion in the SDP were available. Neither the SDP leadership, nor NEC, nor this regime can prevent the insertion. As I had argued in some gatherings, if the radical movement was actually revolutionary and clear-headed, it would have discovered that it had greater opportunities in the SDP than in the Labour Party. If a radical movement cannot wade through bourgeois contradictions like fish in water then it has only itself to blame. But the fact is that the radical movement in Nigeria has largely removed the question of political power from its perspectives. And whenever the question is raised, it was treated abstractly, that is, not as a realisable political project.

The leadership of the NLC has opted to support the SDP. It has the right to do so. As I have argued in this series, neither NEC nor the regime can remove this right. It was earned by years of heroic struggle, first against British colonialism, and then against its Nigerian bourgeois successors. Whether the NLC is playing the correct politics within the SDP is a different matter entirely.

Concluded
Next week: The case for socialism re-stated.

The question that was posed after the proscription of the Labour Party and the proclamation of the SDP and NRC was whether—with series of errors, tragedies and betrayals that had been the lot of the left—it was possible to find a place within the transition politics, and more specifically within any of the two parties. The question is not whether one has faith in this regime or its programme.

As I have repeatedly said in this column, the word *faith* has no meaning in radical politics where the working people are poised in a battle against the bourgeoisie. The question is, always, whether there are possibilities of *insertion* and whether this insertion can be used to promote the twin objectives of radical politics, namely, ensuring the amelioration of the material