

Opinion

Nigerian history through ASUU

By Edwin Madunagu

It was with immense pleasure and satisfaction that I obtained and read *ASUU Communiques, 1981-2009*, a 280-page collection of communiques released by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) between March 1981 and June 2009. Thirty of the 39 communiques were issued by the union's National Executive Council (NEC), while the remaining nine were released by its National Delegates' Conference (NDC). I say pleasure and satisfaction because I believe that we on the left should begin to document, collate and publish our own history and the history of our roles in the making of Nigeria. The *un-makers* of our country should not be left to monopolise the writing of Nigerian history - producing mainly falsifications and distortions - and also write our own history and the history of our efforts at checkmating their oppressive and destructive policies and actions.

The *ASUU Communiques*, just published, is a welcome addition to documentations of democratic and popular struggles in Nigeria - put together by individuals and organisations - that have appeared in the last few years. These documentations also include aspects of struggles within the popular organisations and movements themselves. This is as it should be - for more complete, objective and politically usable assessments. I salute ASUU for its latest publication, as well as previous ones.

This appreciation of *ASUU Communiques* can be separated into four parts, although for practical reasons I shall not be dealing with the parts separately. They will be combined. The first part is a comradely critique. In the second part, I shall trace the trajectory of Nigeria's political history, and that of ASUU, in the period covered by ASUU's publication. This is important because, as any reader will see, and as suggested by the title of this piece, each of ASUU's Communiques is a review and critique of aspects of Nigerian history, political economy, state and society. In fact, this, for me, is the main justification for this appreciation. In the third part, I shall take a closer look at

the communiques. And, in the fourth and final part I shall look at the author, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), because, as we have been correctly advised, society should not be divided into two parts - one that is educating, and the other that is being educated. The educator must be educated.

First, the comradely critique. There are two elements here: the minor, and the major. The minor critique has to do with the publication's introduction embodied in the *Foreword* written by the ASUU President. It is what a Foreword should be: a short, and sharp statement of what the publication is all about, and its objective. But I think the statement should have been a little more elaborate - to include a trajectory of ASUU's history. Alternatively, there could have been an *Introduction*, embodying a short history of ASUU or dated highlights of its struggle, in addition to the *Foreword*. More directly, I would suggest that an *introduction* should be added to future editions of this publication. The *Introduction* should also provide some contexts or backgrounds to the various communiques or groups of communiques. The reason for this suggestion is obvious: to enhance the appreciation of the communiques.

Now to the "major" critique. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) came into being between 1977 and 1978 under the military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo. The country's labour movement had, in the early 1970s, after the Civil War (1967-1970), initiated an autonomous re-organisation. But the military regime of General Murtala Muhammed which came to power in July 1975 intervened in this process of self-restructuring, disbanded the four central labour movements, and initiated its own restructuring of the country's trade unions. ASUU was one of the unions which emerged from the three-year process (1975-1978). ASUU was classified as a "senior staff" union, excluded from membership in the sole central labour organisation, the present Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC). (ASUU "forced" itself into the NLC in the early 1980s, but was excluded again by the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida.)

Now, the publication under appreciation *ASUU*

Communiques, 1981-2009, which covers about 28 years, leaves out 1978, 1979, 1980, and part of 1981, a total of just three years. Hence, if the period which the publication covers had been expanded backward by just three years, it would have covered the *entire history* of ASUU. I am saying this not just because I am in love with *completeness*. Of course, I am. The stronger reason for my comradely regret, however, is that the three years omitted witnessed great patriotic struggles by teachers in our country's tertiary institutions as they were emerging from the Nigerian Association of University Teachers (NAUT) to the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). These struggles were recorded in at least three ASUU communiques, two issued by the National Executive Council (NEC) and one by the National Delegates' Conference (NDC). These three important communiques - and may be others - were omitted from the publication.

I have decided to appreciate the three omitted communiques in some detail. The appreciation of those included in the publication will be more sketchy, because they largely speak for themselves in the publication. The first omitted communique requires some historical background. It will be recalled that in April 1978, University students across the country, organised under the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS), proscribed later that year, embarked on protests against increases in school fees and other issues. The protests were violently suppressed by armed police detachments - as ordered by the military government of General Obasanjo and ruthlessly enforced by the Federal Commissioner of Education, Colonel Ahmadu Ali. This explains why the main slogan of the students' campaign was: "Ali must go."

The suppression of the students' protests recorded several deaths - students and non-students. Several more people - students and non-students - sustained injuries and universities were closed down. Several peoples, including students, lecturers, university administrators and a prominent activist journalist were arrested. The military government set up a Commission of Inquiry, headed by a High Court Judge and made up of government functionaries -

serving and retired. The other "parties" to the dispute - students and university teachers and administrators - were not consulted. Four months later, in August 1978, the military regime published the Report of the Commission, together with its own White Paper.

The punitive actions taken by the regime, with *immediate effect*, included: the dismissal of two Vice-Chancellors, several University lecturers, a Polytechnic lecturer, a University Medical Director, a senior University administrator and a prominent journalist working in a state government-owned newspaper; the rustication of several leaders of the students' movement; the banning of the apex students' organisation, the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS), and the removal of NUNS President from the Constituent Assembly that was then considering the Draft Constitution to usher in the Second Republic (1979-1983). It is also known that "disciplinary" actions were taken against several senior editors of the *Daily Times* then owned by the Federal Government.

It was against this background that the National Executive Council (NEC) of the newly created ASUU held an emergency meeting at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, OAU), Ile-Ife, on Saturday, September 23, 1978. The agenda was what military regime had just done to the University system and the country. A five-point Communique, signed by the National President, Dr. I. O. Agbade, and four other principal officers of the Union, was issued the same day. The Communique analysed and condemned the composition of the Commission, the "findings" of the Commission, the regime's White Paper, and the punitive actions taken against the University system.

In particular, ASUU condemned the military regime's plan to "define the concept of academic freedom" for the University system. It accused the regime of "culpable over-zealousness" aimed at stifling the "Universities" initiative in determining their own procedures of self-management and self-management" and reducing them to such sycophancy and toadyism as to make them laughing stick in every quarter where there is still a modicum of respect for the cultivation of minds that are free, independent and critical."

• To be concluded next Thursday.

Opinion

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THE second Communique which ASUU omitted from its publication, *ASUU Communiqués: 1981 - 2009*, was issued at the end of the meeting of the Union's National Executive Council (NEC) held at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, on October 24, 1981. It was signed by Dr. Mahmud Tukur, the Vice President (acting for Dr. Biodun Jeyifo, the substantive President) and Dr. T. Uzodinma Nwala, the General Secretary. The meeting was called to consider the Whitepaper which President Shehu Shagari's Federal Government issued on the Report of the Cookey Commission it had appointed, and to respond to government's action in taking the Industrial Dispute with ASUU to the Industrial Arbitration Panel. In its communication to ASUU the Panel had informed the Union that accepting the Panel's jurisdiction meant that ASUU would "return to the position in existence before the Commission was set up".

In other words, ASUU NEC argued, "the Cookey Commission's Report and the Whitepaper will be treated as if they do not exist". The Council, of course, rejected government's action and decided to continue its industrial action. But it instructed its lawyers to "consider and take appropriate legal action to establish the legality of the order of the Tribunal on the Union". The Union's definitive position was that "the Government Whitepaper, the Cookey Commission Report and ASUU Memorandum are the basis for negotiations". In the ASUU NEC Communique is this other important statement: "Government thinks we are a bunch of mercenaries who are interested in mere salaries and who would jump at the sight of figures. No! Our main concern is the totality of the conditions in the Universities who affect staff and students".

The third and final document which I am suggesting should be included in future editions of the ASUU publication under appreciation is the Communique issued at the end of the Union's 1982 National Dele-

gates' Conference (NDC) held at the University of Calabar from April 16 to April 17, 1982. The Communique was signed by Dr. Biodun Jeyifo (the out-going President), Dr. T. Uzodinma Nwala, (the General Secretary) and Dr. Mahmud Tukur (President-Elect). The Conference "critically examined issues affecting ASUU specifically and the nation in general, and passed resolutions on six key issues, namely: ASUU-Government Relations; Restoration of benefits to lecturers illegally dismissed in 1978; Death of Mrs. Ingrid Essien-Obot; Recent University of Calabar student crisis; Dismissed professors at the University of Lagos; and the state of the nation's economy. I shall be looking at the first three issues.

On the ASUU-Government relations, the Conference, according to the Communique, "commended both sides for the spirit of give-and-take demonstrated in the negotiation, especially by our own side", but insisted that the "very crucial" question of University autonomy was still to be addressed. The Conference therefore launched the Phase II of the Union's struggle which centred on the "democratisation of University administration in Nigeria, the principle of accountability by authorities within each University, efficient and economic management of University funds and the general principles of high professional ethics befitting those working within the University system".

On the question of lecturers illegally dismissed by the military government in 1978, the Conference noted with satisfaction "government adherence to its agreement" to unconditionally reinstate these lecturers, but called on the government and the University Councils concerned to restore the privileges of these lecturers and pay all their outstanding entitlements, in accordance with government agreement with ASUU on this issue "without any further delay". And on Mrs. Ingrid Essien-Obot, who was murdered on April 21, 1981, in her residence on the campus of the University of Calabar, the Conference called on the appropriate authorities to "ensure a prompt and thorough investigation": of the murder and release

the findings of the autopsy conducted and bring suspects, if any, to book "without further delay". Essien-Obot, a radical leftist and feminist, was the Secretary of the University of Calabar branch of ASUU at the time of her murder.

Between 1981 and 2009, the period covered by the ASUU Communiqués, the country passed through seven regimes: President Shehu Shagari (1979-1983); General Muhammadu Buhari (1984-1985); General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993); General Sani Abacha (1993-1998); General Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998-1999); President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007) and President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (2007-2010). Within the same period, ASUU had the following leaderships: Dr. Biodun Jeyifo (1980-1982); Dr. Mahmud Tukur (1982-1986); Dr. Festus Iyayi (1986-1988); Dr. Attahiru Jega (1988-1994); Dr. Assisi Asobie (1994-2000); Dr. Dipo Fashina (2000-2004); Dr. Abdullahi Sule-Kano (2004-2008); and Professor Ukachukwu Awuzie (2008-).

I had earlier said that ASUU Communiqués is a study in the political history of Nigeria. To further appreciate this, you may construct a composite ASUU leadership / regime chart by matching successive ASUU leaderships against corresponding regimes in the country. If you do this and then read or re-read the publication under appreciation you are most likely to learn more not only about ASUU's language and tactics of struggle - over time - but also the differences in the characters of the regimes the union had faced as well as the range of specific issues of struggle that developed between ASUU and the Nigerian state - again, overtime. You will, of course, also appreciate the range of leaderships that ASUU has had.

What is left for me to do here is to highlight, testify to, and commend two declarations in the *Foreword*. First is ASUU's "avowed mission of saving Nigeria from its local captors and their foreign collaborators at the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (IMF/WB)". And the second is its "commitment to remain in the vanguard of the struggle to build a Nigerian

nation founded on the irreducible principles of industrial democracy, socio-economic justice, and home-grown development'. ASUU would have added "popular democracy" which, as the publication shows, has been a constant element in ASUU's platform, over time.

We may now conclude this appreciation with a look at the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the author of the publication. What would be my reaction if someone, after reading what I have so far written, asks: "Are these not the same lecturers who sexually harass their female students; sell marks, grades and degrees; exploit their students in various ways, while doing very little teaching?" Suppose I am also questioned on the less-than-commendable performance of Nigerian academics - over time - in public office? I would not rush into stupid refutation and self-defence especially when confronted with concrete evidence and illustrations and demonstration of pervasiveness. Nor would I simply admit the charges. I would rather take my hypothetical interrogator through a dialectical analysis of his or her observations.

With luck, if tempers do not boil over, we may succeed in reaching the following agreements: First, that even if only a fraction of what is alleged against University teachers is true, this will only remind us that the academic community is part and parcel of the larger society and afflicted by some of the larger society's maladies. Secondly, that, if most of the allegations are true, it means that the academic community, once thought to be an island of exception, has sunk, or is sinking deeper, into the larger society. Thirdly, that the allegations being minimally or maximally true does not, by itself, erase the exemplary political achievements recorded by University teachers, organised under ASUU, although it might have considerably affected their sociopolitical credibility and impact, as a group and as individuals. And, finally, that ASUU should now open or re-open another front, a vigorous front, in its struggle. The front is that of moral and ethical self-reform.

• Concluded.