



17 John Street • New York, NY 10038 • (212) 962-1210

Tilden J. LeMelle, *Chairman*
Jennifer Davis, *Executive Director*

Nigeria — A Strike for Democracy

*The following article is reprinted with permission from the June 1995 issue of **Multinational Monitor**. The article focuses on the role of unions and multinational corporations in the struggle for democracy in Nigeria. Since the article went to press the Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha has announced his intention to remain in power, and many labor and democracy activists, including Moshood Abiola, are still in jail. If you would like more information on how to support the struggle for democracy in Nigeria, contact *The Africa Fund*.*

by Katherine Isaac

A STRIKE CALLED BY NIGERIA'S OIL WORKERS' UNIONS in July 1994 galvanized Nigeria's democracy movement in its demand — now gaining international recognition — that the military government of General Sani Abacha relinquish power to a democratically elected government.

"The impact of the strike was devastating beyond a shadow of a doubt. Fuel for vehicles, cooking and lights was unavailable. The country was at a dead standstill," says Nigeria-based Thomas Medley, program director for the AFL-CIO's African American Labor Center.

The strike was a courageous act in the midst of harsh repression, including violence against strikers and imprisonment of labor leaders. The military government has managed by ever-more brutal methods to hold on to power in the year since the strike. But Nigerian voices calling for democracy have not been silenced, and they are increasingly being joined by the international labor and human rights movements.

Military annuls elections

Plagued by protests, strikes and riots, Nigeria has been hovering on the edge of economic and political chaos since June 1993, when the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida annulled elections that were expected to transfer power to an elected, civilian government. Nigeria has been under military rule for 28 of the 34 years since it won its independence from Britain.

Citizens of Africa's most populous country expressed their desire to return to civilian rule by voting for the Social Democratic Party candidate Moshood Abiola. When early election results showed Abiola in the lead, the military regime intervened, citing voting irregularities and declaring the election null and void without ever releasing voting results. In November 1993, General Sani Abacha, promising an eventual return to democracy, seized power from the previous military administration.

Katherine Isaac is a researcher and writer for the Alice Hamilton College of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union.



Protestors at the Nigerian chancellery in Washington, D.C. in April 1995.

Demands for democracy intensified when, on the first anniversary of the June 1993 election, the 56-year-old Abiola declared himself president of Nigeria. He was arrested promptly by General Abacha's military regime, and is still being held on treason charges without trial or access to lawyers and family.

A Nigerian High Court ordered Abiola released on the condition that he refrain from acts the government considers subversive, effectively barring him from addressing political rallies, talking to the press or traveling abroad. Abiola declined, saying he would accept nothing less than unconditional freedom.

The strike: call and response

The National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), followed by PENGASSAN, Nigeria's union of gas industry senior staff, engineers and administrators, called the

July 1994 strike to protest the arrest of Abiola and deteriorating conditions in the oil industry.

The workers demanded that the results of the June 1993 election be recognized and power turned over to a representative government. The oil strike was augmented by a general strike of the Nigerian Labor Congress (NLC), the nation's umbrella union with 41 affiliates, and the Senior Staff Consultative Association of Nigeria (SESCAN). A written statement of the oil workers' demands called on the government to "resolve the political crisis by respecting the democratic and sovereign will of the people as expressed in the last presidential elections. All democratic structures must be restored and the winner of the election [Abiola] installed."

The strike also protested the government's economic policy. "Economic mismanagement and widespread corruption on the part of the Abacha regime have plunged the country into deep economic crisis," says Folabi Olagbaju of the Washington, D.C.-based International Roundtable on Nigeria, a coalition of labor, human rights and Nigerian democracy groups operating under the auspices of Amnesty International.

With some 96 percent of Nigeria's 1994 foreign exchange earnings coming from oil exports, Nigeria's economy is completely dependent on oil, and, the unions charge, corruption and mismanagement of the oil industry—including failure to maintain refineries and pipelines or even to pay outstanding debts to joint venture partners—are undermining the foundation of the national economy. Oil production accounts for more than one third of Nigeria's gross national product and its oil export revenues are vital to the country's ability to import goods and services and to service its \$28 billion external debt.

The strike had a dramatic effect in the country. It succeeded in shutting down Nigeria's refining operations, cutting crude production by 20 percent and disrupting fuel supplies within the country. "Living conditions came to a dead standstill" during the strike, says Medley.

Labor crackdown

General Sani Abacha's regime moved swiftly to repress the strike. The government removed the democratically elected leadership of NUPENG, PENGASSAN and the NLC and appointed military administrators to run the unions. The military seized the unions' offices, bank accounts and dues-collection facilities.

Frank Kokori, general secretary of NUPENG, was arrested, though no charges were filed against him, and other fired union leaders went into hiding to avoid arrest. According to the Brussels-based International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers Unions (ICEF), four trade union officers—PENGASSAN officers F.A. Addo and F. Aidelomo, NUPENG President Wariebi K. Agamene and NLC Chairman in Edo State, Deacon Olu Aderibigbe—have since been arrested and the four, plus Kokori, are still being held incommunicado and without trial.

Petitions from the union leaders have been dismissed under new decrees that proclaim that the military government does not fall under the jurisdiction of Nigeria's judiciary and that the courts lack jurisdiction to hear suits against government actions.

Harsh orders promulgated by Abacha in September 1994 intensified the crackdown. One decree removed *habeas corpus*

protection against arbitrary detention. Another, with a retroactive effective date of August 18, 1994—just prior to a number of arrests of government opponents—extends the permissible period of administrative detention. Newspapers and magazines that were shut down at the time of union arrests are still barred from publishing.

Amnesty International has denounced these decrees as "blatant contempt for the rule of law." The UN's International Labor Organization ruled that measures taken against Nigerian trade

Mobil Scabs?

MOBIL OIL ATTEMPTED TO AMELIORATE the impact of the July 1994 oil strike on its Nigerian operations by replacing strikers with foreign workers, according to the Nigerian Civil Liberties Organization (CLO). Olisa Agbakoba of the CLO called Mobil's action "contrary to the national interests and the democratization process" as well as "contrary to immigration regulations." Mobil denies the charges. "Mobil did not hire anyone to replace workers last summer," says Gail Campbell Wooley, a spokesperson at Mobil's headquarters in Fairfax, Virginia.

—K.I.

unions in 1994 were excessive and constituted a violation of internationally recognized standards.

General Abacha responded to the nationwide call for democracy by establishing a National Constitutional Conference (CONFAB) in August 1994. CONFAB's mandate is to make recommendations on how to end military rule. But large sectors of the population boycotted CONFAB; only 50,000 ballots were cast for delegates compared to 10 million votes in the quashed 1993 elections. Many Nigerian citizens have questioned CONFAB's credibility, charging that Abacha handpicked many conference delegates. Olagbaju calls the conference "a delaying tactic to prolong military rule, giving the appearance of a move."

Another Abacha tactic is to assert that the unifying force of the military is necessary to prevent the country from disintegrating into civil war amongst ethnic and regional factions. "That is a myth that needs to be debunked," says Olagbaju, "and is only an excuse to intervene. The pro-democracy movement has wide appeal among diverse ethnic groups, and the demand for Abiola's release is widespread. It is the bloated and politicized military that poses the greatest threat to Nigeria. If it doesn't give up power, Nigeria will have no chance of survival."

Political prisoners languish in jail

In October 1994, the Brussels-based International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) sent a delegation to Nigeria to demand the release of imprisoned labor leaders. The delegation demanded that "detained trade unionists should either be released or, if they were alleged to have committed any criminal offenses, should be charged, brought before a properly constituted court of law without further delay and given full facilities to defend themselves. In any case, their families, lawyers and unions must be allowed proper access to them."

Senior army officials assured the delegation "that Kokori and others would be released or charged, that union autonomy would be restored and fired workers returned to work," according to the ICEF, which participated in the ICFTU delegation. None of these promises have been kept. Troops still occupy union offices and leaders are in prison. Officials in the Nigerian embassy in Washington, D.C. declined requests for comment on the situation.

The military government denied a December 1994 Amnesty International delegation access to detained trade union leaders and to pro-democracy activists including Moshood Abiola. The government did confirm that NUPENG leader Kokori was in detention, an allegation it had previously denied. "The authorities' failure to allow Amnesty International access to political prisoners suggests that they have something to hide," says Amnesty International delegation leader Tiebile Drame.

Worldwide push

Nigeria watchers fear the potential consequences of continued repression and worsening economic conditions. "We realize that the current escalation of repression by the government coupled with the determination of the pro-democracy and anti-military groups to continue the struggle to the end can only lead to the eruption of violence, civil war and perhaps, this time, even to the disintegration of Nigeria," says an August 1994 statement of the Nigerian Democratic Movement. If the crisis is not resolved, says Thomas Medley of the African American Labor Congress, "this country of 100 million people will make Somalia look like a cake walk."

Activists around the world are rallying to prevent the worst from happening. In the United States, labor, human rights and Nigerian pro-democracy groups have joined forces to pressure the Nigerian government. A rally sponsored by the African-American Labor Center, the Metropolitan Washington Council AFL-CIO, the Service Employees International Union, the Seafarers Union, the Nigerian Democratic Movement and the Nigerian Roundtable drew 6,000 protestors to the Nigerian chancellery in Washington, D.C. in August 1994. The coalition demanded the immediate restoration of Nigerian trade union leadership and protested the continuing abuse of trade union and human rights by the military government.

The executive council of the AFL-CIO delivered a statement at the rally condemning the Nigerian military's attempt to "smother democracy, muzzle the press and restrict workers rights and freedoms." The AFL-CIO urged the U.S. government, the United Nations and the world community to exert pressure to end the Abacha regime.

We need to harness the same enthusiasm garnered against apartheid in South Africa and bring it to bear on a new generation of issues facing Africa.

**Mike Fleshman
The Africa Fund**

Several affiliates of the ICEF, including the Communications Workers of America and the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union (OCAW), are participating in the ICEF's ongoing global Nigeria campaign, launched in February 1995. The campaign calls for the release of imprisoned Nigerian labor and democracy leaders. "It is our responsibility as trade unionists to support our brothers and sisters in Nigeria," says OCAW president Robert Wages. "We will continue to exert pressure to end the Abacha regime and restore full trade union rights."

TransAfrica announced a campaign in March backed by African-American politicians, scholars, entertainers and civil rights leaders to press for the restoration of democracy in Nigeria. TransAfrica sponsored an April 1995 protest in front of the Nigerian chancellery in Washington, D.C., in which several activists, including TransAfrica Executive Director Randall Robinson, were arrested

for handcuffing themselves together and blocking the entrance to the embassy. "If there is a difference between what is going on in Nigeria and what occurred during apartheid in South Africa, it is color," Robinson said at the rally. "The Nigerian regime is just as brutal," he added.

Activists also are weighing the effectiveness of pressuring the regime with economic sanctions. Support is growing for U.S. oil companies to transfer Nigerian oil royalty payments now being made to the military government to an escrow account. Once democracy is restored, these funds could be drawn on to rebuild the country. Nigeria's democracy movement has not called yet for an oil embargo, fearing it would exacerbate the country's economic crisis.

A November 1994 study by the congressional General Accounting Office (GAO) concluded that a multilateral oil embargo against Nigeria could have a significant economic impact, but little support exists for such a measure among national governments. "A U.S. unilateral embargo on Nigerian oil would have almost no impact," the study concludes. "Because the world oil market is highly integrated, it could quickly adjust to a disruption in the usual patterns of supply caused by a unilateral embargo."

Some activists believe that several factors at play in the Nigerian crisis — a military dictatorship, fierce repression, a strong U.S. corporate presence, strong cultural links and an active expatriate community — ultimately could be the basis of broad international support for economic sanctions. Organizing around these factors could "harness the same enthusiasm garnered against apartheid in South Africa and bring it to bear on a new generation of issues facing Africa," says Mike Fleshman, the Africa Fund's labor desk coordinator. Given the intensity of Abacha's resolve, it may take that kind of pressure to bring democracy to Nigeria. ■