

The Continuing Quest to Rebuild NANS and the Students' Movement

Presented by Comrade Lanre Arogundade, NANS President, 1984 – 85; Chairman of Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Lagos State Council, 1995 – 99 and member Democratic Socialist Movement, DSM, at the National Students' Retreat in Memory of Comrade Chima Ubani @ Bayero University, Kano on September 21, 2015

Introduction

May I begin this discourse by registering my profound gratitude and appreciation to the Centre for Popular Education (CEPED) and Amilcar Cabral Ideological School (ACIS) for this timely and most welcome intervention. I sincerely hope it will achieve the purpose of helping to rebuild the students' movement.

I will in the course of this presentation not be doing anything essentially new but rather expanding on the scope of a theme which I have had course to address on at least two previous occasions.

The first was when I was invited by the Students' Union of Michael Otedola College of Primary Education (MOPED), Epe, Lagos State-Nigeria on Friday, October 31, 2014 to give a lecture on the role of students in the continuity of democracy for which I titled my presentation '**The quest to rebuild NANS and the role of students in the continuity of democracy**'.

The second was more recent when following the demise of Emma Ezeazu, a former NANS President, the Nigeria Labour Congress, the Committee of friends and the Students Union of the University of Lagos organized commemorative activities in his honour between June 30 and July 2 this year in Abuja and Lagos respectively. At both occasions I revisited the challenge of rebuilding the movement and updated my earlier presentation to read '**The Quest to Rebuild NANS - A TRIBUTE TO EMMA EZEAZU**'

For record purposes, I need to state that Emma Ezeazu was one of my successors in NANS having served as the President between 1986 and 1987. Preceding him was Buba Joda who had a short tenure between 1985 and 1986. I was NANS President from December 1983, when I was elected at the NANS convention in the University of Jos, to April 1985 when Buba Joda succeeded me at the University of Lagos NANS convention. Before us were Chris Mamah and late Chris Abashi who respectively, were NANS President in the 1981/82 and 1982/83 sessions.

Because this students' retreat offers yet another unique opportunity to deepen the previous debates, I have elected to speak on '**The continuing quest to rebuild NANS and the students' movement**' fully conscious though that the debate cannot be exhausted on this occasion but would definitely continue.

It is my hope however that there would be some positive aftermaths of this retreat that would manifest in ideologically and politically strengthened students' unions and a new NANS; that genuinely fights for the interests of students, workers and professionals in the higher institutions of learning, the education sector as a whole as well as the interest of the working masses in the larger society.

This retreat, just like the two previous occasions earlier cited, is taking place against the background of the perception that the current students' movement have failed to live up to the radical and ideological tradition of the past era such as our own. Along this line for example, there is always the talk of the so-called golden era of NANS in particular and the students' movement in general, compared with the degeneration of today.

Our reaction to this has always been that much as the so-called degeneration is a fact, it should not be stated in absolute Angel versus Devil terms; but rather that it should be situated within historical and ideological context as well as analyzed according to objective and subjective factors.

In any case, it should also be borne in mind that much as the degeneration seems all pervasive on the surface, the reality below is that there have always been pockets of students' activists and students' unions that remain committed to the ideals of genuine students' unionism and are constantly seeking a new NANS that is firmly rooted in the students' movement while being aligned with the working class movement to effect a radical and revolutionary change of society. The emergence of the Education Rights Campaign (ERC) bears eloquent testimony to this fact while I do know that the students' branches of the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM) never shy from the historical and political responsibility.

There have also been many individual students' leaders and activists who across the past and present generations have been victimized for daring to defend the right to independent students' unionism, non-commercialized education and the overall welfare of students. We need to salute the courage of all student elements involved in these struggles while emphasizing the fact that much more can, need to and should be done.

Brief historical recall

Historically, Nigerian students have staged major interventions and played critical roles in many of the important struggles that have one way or the other shaped the destiny of this Nation.

The defining character of these early interventions however was the fact that the prominent players or leaders were armed with either the socialist, Pan-Africanist or nationalist ideologies which largely shaped the radical struggles they waged.

In the colonial era for example, Nigerian students as members and co-leaders of the West African Students Union (WASU), fought alongside the nationalists to demand independence for Nigeria and other countries in the West African sub-region.

WASU was the precursor of the National Union of Nigeria Students (NUNS), which continued with the radical tradition in the immediate post-independence period. In 1962, for example, NUNS protested and mobilized against the then proposed the Anglo-Nigerian Defense Pact which was intended to make Nigerian a military satellite of Britain, her erstwhile colonial master. The then Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa's civilian regime would have possibly signed the pact but for the protests of Nigerian students which echoed at home and abroad.

The civil war period possibly posed objective challenges for the ability of Nigerian students to seek common ground and organize under one umbrella but radical students unionism returned in the post civil war years especially when it became apparent that the military government of Yakubu Gowon was not planning to return the country to democratic rule. Moreover, it was becoming obvious that the military rulers were getting enmeshed in corruption with the nation awash with excess petro-dollars especially during and in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war which caused meteoric rise in the price of petroleum in the world market. That was a period when General Gowon was quoted to have said that money was not Nigeria's problem but how to spend it. The Gowon regime found the solution by looting and pocketing state resources, such that when it was overthrown by the Murtala Muhammed junta, there was jubilation in the streets and on the campuses.

By 1978 the down-turn in the world and Nigerian economy was already taking some toll on the country. One of the evidence of this was the decision of the General Olusegun Obasanjo regime to embark on the commercialization of education by increasing tuition and feeding fees in the Universities. NUNS under the leadership of late Segun Okeowo picked the gauntlet against the Obasanjo junta through a nation-wide protest in February 1978 that became famously known as Ali-must-Go, since the then Federal Commissioner for Education was General Ahmadu Ali.

The protests were met with brutal force and many students were killed across the campuses while NUNS was banned. It must be stated that the Obasanjo regime's brutality was not limited to the students' movement as leftist lecturers who were not only sympathetic to the course of NUNS but actively mobilized for the struggle were also sacked across the campuses.

It wasn't until the return of civilian rule in 1979, which the students had fought for, that fresh attempt was made to form a national students' body, this time around by radical or revolutionary inclined students' activists, who like their predecessors in the post colonial era were either leftists or pan-africanists. It was therefore not accidental that they operated on a political platform called the Patriotic Youth Movement of Nigeria (PYMN) whose membership consisted of socialist, Marxist, Black Nationalist and Pan Africanist students' groups. One of the groups was the Alliance of Progressive Students (ALPS) of which I was a member in the University of Ife. The body that emerged as a successor to NUNS was named National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS).

After a transitional period when its affairs were run by a caretaker committee, NANS could be said to have become fully fledged when its first executive led by Chris Mamah of the University of Calabar was elected at the University of Benin convention in 1981.

It was in order to give an ideological and political direction to the students' movement as a whole that NANS at its 1982 convention here at BUK, produced and ratified the NANS Charter of Demands, which under the overarching slogan of **'education a right and not a privilege'** essentially sought independent unionism, right to education and anti-imperialist

foreign policy. In subsequent years, the Charter was to serve educational and mobilization purposes.

The NANS of our time

As stated earlier, I served as NANS President between December 1983 and April 1985. The reasons for the prolonged tenure would soon become apparent suffice to say that by the time our original tenure was supposed to end in December 1984, NANS had been proscribed and the campuses militarized by the Buhari-Idiagbon and so it was difficult to have a NANS convention. It wasn't until April 1985 that the students union of the University of Lagos, then under the leadership of Niyi Akinsinju, agreed to host what could be termed an underground convention of NANS where Buba Joda was elected.

Time and space would not permit a total recall of the struggles that were waged during the period. But it is important to outline some of the features and phases in order to draw the correct conclusions.

First, it is necessary to recall that the country was still under the civilian regime of Shehu Shagari when our leadership took over the mantle of NANS on December 20, 1983. In those days, the budget used to be presented to the National Assembly at the end of the year for implementation from January of the following year. As it was the tradition, our first task was to study and critique the Shagari budget for the year 1984. We were on our way to the NUJ Lighthouse Press centre in Lagos to address a press conference on the budget on January 1, 1984 when the Buhari-Idiagbon coup occurred. Given the rampant corruption of the Sheu Shagari regime and its attacks on the rights of the people including students, the Buhari coup was 'popular' and students were among those who trooped out in jubilation.

Aware of the mood of the country then, NANS gave what could be best described as a conditional welcome to the regime by stating that students' support would only be guaranteed if the regime proceeded to introduce free education at all levels and urgently work towards the return of the country to civil rule. The regime did neither but instead attempted to increase tuition fees and remove subsidized feeding system on the campuses.

On the question of free education, the government had put the cost at N4billion Naira and said the nation did not have such money. But by, among others, calculating the monies the regime was automatically saving by sacking the civilian government in terms of salaries and allowances of the executives and the legislature as well as drawing attention to the submission of the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN) that out of import licenses worth N11billion issued by the Shagari regime only goods worth N2billion were actually imported – meaning that N9billion had been stolen - we were able to establish that the nation could indeed afford to fund free education at all levels.

Events were to happen in rapid succession. At the end of the University of Benin Senate meeting in February 1984 a decision was taken that the NANS Charter be presented to the regime alongside other demands of Nigerian students. We managed to reach the gates of Dodan Barracks, the then seat of power in Lagos, but got turned back and ultimately ended

up presenting the Charter and other demands to the government through a secretary at the state house in Marina.

But when the regime, through the then Minister of Education, Yerima Abdulahi, made known the intention to increase tuition fees while campus authorities intensified attacks on students' unionism via bans and victimization of students' leaders and activists, NANS had no choice but to give an ultimatum to the regime to reverse its commercialization of education and anti-democratic policies.

At the expiration of the ultimatum, a senate meeting was to hold at the end of April 1984 at the University of Ilorin under the students' union leadership of Sola Olorunyomi. However, because of the intention to frustrate NANS, the university was quickly shut down by the authority and the meeting had to be shifted to the University of Ife which of course was hosting the NANS secretariat.

The immediate aftermath of the Ife senate meeting was the issuance of a shorter ultimatum and the subsequent declaration of a nationwide boycott of classes that lasted eleven days in early May of 1984. Chima Ubani who we are honouring with this gathering was chief mobilize for the struggle. The action had to be called off following the intervention of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) under the leadership of Comrade Hassan Sumonu with which NANS had a political alliance and after the regime had announced that it would no longer increase tuition fees.

NANS was proscribed during the boycott but despite the fact and the victimization of the leaders through arrests, suspensions and expulsions etc, it still enjoyed the support of the majority of Nigerian students. Indeed, our response to the proscription was that NANS did not owe its existence to the benevolence of the government and that instead, it derived its legitimacy from the mass of the students.

This fact was put to test when in August 1984 an attempt was made to hold the NANS meeting at the Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria. Although many students' unions turned up for the meeting, armed soldiers and policemen stormed the ABU Samaru campus and forcefully dispersed the gathering. Ten students' leaders were arrested and detained at the Kaduna prisons causing a legal action for their release to be instituted by the chambers of late Fola Akinrinsola. Under such circumstances, it was not accidental that no other senate meeting could be held until that of UNILAG earlier referred to at which the baton of leadership was passed on.

Meanwhile, beyond the nation-wide boycott of classes, NANS under our leadership intervened in many other struggles within and outside campuses including support for striking pilots and medical doctors operating under the umbrella of NARD and NMA. It was a period of endless night journeys and day time rallies and meetings.

While the full story of that period will still be told, it should be explained that the methods of our struggle and the orientation towards the working class and its allies by our leadership derived from our socialist ideological background whose philosophical thrust

was constant linkage of campus struggles with that of the larger society with a view to having a social change from exploitative capitalist system.

It was a political philosophy that also arose from our understanding that attacks on the democratic rights of the people including students were and still are not mere happenstances but are often the manifestation of the crisis in the economy and the attendant efforts to shift the burden on the ordinary peoples in order to protect profit making interests of the billionaire elite.

Under such political economy, the working peoples can make gains – through struggles - whenever there is economic upswing and the ruling classes can be forced to grant concessions even if they are often mere crumbs from the table. But once there is economic decline, the ruling elites both in the public and private sectors would quickly seek to take away whatever concession had been granted and replace it with anti-poor austerity measures that could translate to cuts in wages and commercialization of social services including education and health.

In this regard, it should be explained that prior to and during our era, struggles boomed as the economy boomed during the economic upswing of the period that was occasioned by high petroleum prices in Nigeria. Even at that time however, the threats were emerging. Thus while our 11-day nationwide boycott of classes in May 1984 stopped the re-introduction of or increase in tuition fees by the Buhari-Idiagbon regime, it and other actions could not prevent the eradication of the subsidized cafeteria feeding system under which a meal was a mere 50kobo (mark you not 50 Naira) across the campuses.

But while the boom and subsidy system lasted, students were able to easily pay the dues with which their unions as well as NANS were run and for which the union leaders had to account through committees composed by the democratically elected students' representative councils or similar bodies. The reverse was the case, when the attacks came.

Context of our struggles

If we are looking for the context in which we could best situate the struggles of our period, it cannot but be within the above.

Thus, if we make a reflection, we would see that the NANS of our time in the mid-1980s was a NANS that was also as radical as the mass and Labour movements not just in Nigeria but internationally that were witnessing left wing radical upswing in the defense of publicly funded social services that were coming under increasing attacks by rightist regimes.

Put in another way it was an era of popular mass struggles, in South Africa, in Latin America etc. It was within this radical context that the NANS/NLC alliance earlier referred to came into existence leading to joint battles for the right to independent unionism alongside ASUU and others.

It was also within the context that NANS under our leadership forged common front with the students' wing of the African National Congress (ANC) through meetings in Nigeria and Ghana for the overthrow of the apartheid system. In all of this, the underlining principle

was the similarity of ideological socialist orientation and political vision for change in the respective larger societies.

But it was also a period of transition to right wing economic and political ideology internationally and nationally especially with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which by the way had deviated from genuine socialism and was being bureaucratically run. So also the ascendancy of the international apostles of privatization and commercialization as symbolized by Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States.

Changing dynamics

In that dying era of public ownership and publicly subsidized education, mass organizations like the students unions that stood in opposition to neo-liberal policies came under vicious attacks from the state, which included the use of cultists against radical students' leaders. Only unionists that subscribed to the new right wing orientation would be tolerated. And that was the sole and ultimate purpose of post-students' crises panels like those of General Emmanuel Abisoye and Justice Mustapha Akanbi that were set up by the General Ibrahim Babangida regime following the nationwide protests called by the Emma Ezeazu-led NANS over the killing of four students of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria by security forces in 1986. The panels essentially recommended the dismantling of the right to independent unionism, through the so-called 'voluntary students' unionism', which, for example, meant that students were no longer going to pay automatic dues to their students' unions.

One of the long term effects is a NANS that in recent times is not actually funded by the mass of the students or the unions but could be rich enough to sometimes hold conventions and meetings at Eagles square in Abuja and sometimes inside expensive hotels.

On the other hand the recent state of NANS and indeed the larger students' movement, also significantly reflect the decline - ideological and political - in the mass movements particularly as it concerns the central labour organizations, the trade unions etc.

A case in point is the recent factionalization of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), which was not really based on any ideological differences, at a time when labor should be united in opposition to the continuing attacks on workers' rights.

These attacks have manifested in unpaid salaries at the federal level and in many states; continuing ruthless exploitation of workers in the name of casualization; imposition of high electricity tariffs even when power supply remains unstable; increase in cost of education, healthcare etc. If labour were to live up to its historical political responsibility, there should have been national warning strikes against the socio-economic injustices before the recent national rallies against corruption. While it is important to fight corruption which apparently leads to the primitive theft of resources that should have gone into development, it is much more imperative for labour to seek a political change from the capitalist system that breeds the same corruption .

From the past to the present

All said, one could testify to the fact that the cumulative struggles of our period contributed to the eventual collapse of the military and the return of civil rule in 1999, which has led to the common refrain that Nigeria is now under a democracy. Our struggles were waged against corruption; against anti-peoples capitalist policies including commercialization of education and health care; against the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP); against the denial of the political right of the people; against attacks on fundamental rights and press freedom; against attacks on the right to independent students unionism; against attacks on workers and trade union rights and in the later days against the annulment of the June 12 elections, etc.

Democracy however pre-supposes many things: that life would be much better for ordinary citizens especially as the country is abundantly endowed with vast natural and human resources; that the rights of students, workers etc would be respected; that ordinary working peoples would be able to come together, form political parties and contest for power without the encumbrance of costly registration fees and other obstacles designed to favour only the parties of the millionaires; that education and health care would be easily affordable; that there would be good roads and other public infrastructure etc.

If we make an honest assessment of the state of the Nation since 1999, these vital ingredients of democracy are largely missing and in some instances Nigerians are actually worse off. Doctors and other health workers have repeatedly gone on strike making the same demand for adequate funding to enable accessible and affordable health care delivery system; Teachers have repeatedly gone on strike making the same demand for adequate funding to make education affordable and accessible to the poor; Students, as was recently the case at LASU, OOU, OAU etc have staged protests and demonstrations against increase in fees; publicly owned institutions have been repeatedly privatized or commercialized and sold to private individuals or entities with the attendant increase in prices as it is happening to electricity and job losses; Pensioners are repeatedly protesting and dying as a result of non-payment of their pensions, etc

In general, poverty reigns amidst abundant wealth as corruption becomes the defining feature of this epoch. On the other hand, the campus hardships occasioned by near total submission to IMF and World Bank policies of education commercialization pose objective threat to vibrant unionism.

I had therefore wondered in the MOPED lecture whether we should be talking of continuity of democracy or the discontinuity of undemocratic rule. But whichever way one addresses the question, there can be no doubt, that Nigerian students have a role to play in the struggle to end oppression and replace the rule of the minority rich with that of the majority poor.

But the class actions as proposed above cannot be possible if we continue to have degeneration of values across the social strata; particularly the right wing shift in the

orientation of the labour leaders just like that of the political class. We need a radical and left wing shift in orientation in the labour and students movement.

Against this background, there is a very urgent need for the student movement to be rebuilt. One way to do this is for students to begin to organize from below to reclaim their unions and halt the right wing orientation. Local union leaders and the NANS leadership should start defending the interest of their members in more rigorous terms. Simultaneously, the mass movements, the trade unions, the NLC etc should return to pro-people ideology and philosophy so as to help the process of re-building NANS and enhance the ability of Nigerian students to ensure the continuity of democracy or the discontinuity of undemocratic practices. This is particularly important as the students' movement, nowadays, faces much more vicious attacks from campus authorities who seem to consider independent unionism an anathema and would not stop at anything to prevent such.

In the larger society, this would require counter-posing to privatization and commercialization, pro-people policies of public democratic ownership of the commanding heights of the economy to make available the resources needed for all round societal development.

Going forward

I associate myself with calls for the review and update of the NANS charter of demands especially as proposed by the Education Rights Campaign (ERC) at this retreat. Such review should lead to the incorporation of demands like the renationalization of the commanding heights of the economy that have already been sold to private profiteers in the name of privatization and or commercialization. These are common wealth that should be used for the common good of all.

In addition to these, I believe the present generation of students' rank and file activists and leaders can borrow from some of our attributes, characteristics, approaches, strategies and tactics which enabled our generation to live up to the spirit of genuine students' unionism. These include but are not limited to:

- Political, Intellectual and ideological self development (We sought and obtained knowledge beyond the classroom by reading and studying diverse literature that equipped us with the capacity to understand the dynamics of society, challenge dogmas and offer convincing arguments geared towards social change and revolutionary transformation of society)
- Consistent organization of symposiums and lectures on topical local, national and international issues that promoted robust political, intellectual and ideological debates. Even so-called non-ideological social groups were part of the process
- The democratic, accountability and mass participation approach to the running of the unions through the regular calling of congresses, the operation of a committee system that allows for the participation of rank and file congress members, the preparation and presentation of annual budgets to the students representative council, etc

- The constant expression of solidarity and engagement in united action with campus workers' and professional unions and associations especially ASUU. Sometimes there were joint statements and joint political actions. For example, when seven students of the University of Ife were massacred by the police during a funeral procession on June 7, 1981, the ASUU and the Students Union jointly constituted an Administrative Panel of Inquiry headed by the late Chief Gani Fawehinmi (SAN and SAM) with Mr. Labanji Bolaji, a renowned journalist as the other member.
- The commemoration of national, regional and international days and anniversaries relevant to the struggles of students and change in the larger society such as various students' martyrs day, Iva Valley Massacre day (November, 1949), the Soweto uprising day, May day, the day of the African child, Women's day etc
- The constant interrogation of government policies. (For example the Federal government budgets were subjected to rigorous analysis and critic primarily based on the demand that not less than 26% of budgetary allocation should go to education)
- The constant organization of protests within and outside the campuses to reject anti-people policies of the government and corruption as well as violations of the rights of students and the democratic rights of the people.

Finally, let me stress that being a students' activist and leader requires selfless commitment and sacrifice. That is why our sitting allowance as members of the SRC during our time was a just meat pie and a bottle of coke. There was nothing like sitting allowances.

Thank you