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An Interview With Nigeria's Awareness League

Awareness League

Winter 1997

Do you think there is a real danger of a civil war in Nigeria? Or is there a real chance for free elections, which have been promised several times?

The way things are going, there is a real risk of civil war. Many prominent Nigerians have warned about this. So have many foreign commentators who have recently visited the country for a first-hand assessment, such as American civil-rights leader Jesse Jackson. For the record, Nigeria fought a civil war from 1967 to 1970, when the eastern part of the country declared the Republic of Biafra and seceded. All the elements that were present in that crisis are equally present in the current imbroglio:

A. There were disputed federal elections in 1964, and canceled presidential elections in 1993. B. There was trial and imprisonment of one of the opposition leaders on treason charges in the 1960s; today we have the ongoing treason trial and incarceration of [opposition leader] Chief Moshood Abiola. The chances of conviction are high. C. There was the military coup in 1966. Now, the chances of a military coup are high in the

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country. D. The east seceded from the federal government in 1967; today the west and a host of ethnic nationalities in the east have openly called for a confederation, with the establishment of regional armies, which could be a prelude to another secession bid .

Overall, the civil war scenario is not inevitable. The lessons of 1967-70 point to the futility of war as a means of resolving any conflict. Internal and external pressures to force the military to hand over power within the next six months can avert the looming catastrophe.

As for elections, the experience of [ousted dictator General Ibrahim] Babangida shows that the military cannot be trusted. In the event of any future election, the military will want to hand over power to their candidate, or nothing. If they could annul the June 12 elections [believed to have been won by Abiola], which, by their own admission, were the freest the country has had, wherein lies the guarantee that they would allow free elections in the future?

Is the Awareness League involved in the strikes now shaking Nigeria? If yes, what are the activities of the Awareness League? If not, why aren't you involved?

Yes, we are involved in the strikes. Our members are principally university and polytechnic lecturers, journalists, students, civil-service employees, and other activists of leftist persuasion. The universities are currently on strike nationwide, and our members are involved. Civil servants in the Enugu state are presently on strike, and Awareness League activists are a part of it. Additionally, many independent newspaper houses are presently shut, and their premises forcibly occupied by soldiers and policemen. Again, our members are affected.

What is the position of the Awareness League towards the election?

The June 12, 1993 presidential elections pitted the Social Democratic Party candidate, Moshood Abiola, against Bashir Tofa, the candidate of the right-wing National Republican Con-

vention. The latter was clearly the candidate of the military. All progressive groups, trade unions, pro-democracy groups, and left organizations, including the Awareness League, rallied around the SDP candidate. This action was, in the main, a vote against military rule. The Awareness League, like many other left groups, was of the view that the installation of a left-of-center government was a minimum condition for the propagation and pursuit of anarcho-syndicalist struggle and ideals.

Is there cooperation with other groups in Nigeria and other African states?

The Awareness League collaborates with the human rights group Campaign for Democracy, but we are not members of the group. There is an emerging body in Nigeria known as the Left Coalition, to which the Awareness League belongs. Our next congress will, hopefully, ratify this step. We have been trying without success to establish links with other left groups, and preferably anarchist groups, in other African countries, especially South Africa.

What are the main fields of activity of the Awareness League? In which professions and social groups are members of the Awareness League from?

Our activities are mainly in the area of worker education, ideological re-orientation, creation of the necessary environment for political consciousness, propaganda, and mobilization. Our members are mainly university workers and teachers, journalists, civil servants, and students.

Are there many women in the Awareness League, and what are their main political activities and interests?

Unfortunately, there are not many women members in the Awareness League. This has to do with the structure of African society, in which women hardly take part in political activities. This is made worse by the fact that not as many women as men are educated. Most women, therefore, are not in a position to appreciate the program of anarcho-syndicalism. All that will

be a thing of the past with sustained political education and enlightenment over a period of time.

What can people in other countries do to support the fight of the Awareness League in Nigeria?

First and foremost, the Awareness League seeks fraternal international solidarity. We also seek material and financial support to be able to build a strong anarchist group in Nigeria by creating the necessary enlightenment and ideological consciousness for the mobilization of workers, leftists, and other activists. Our immediate needs include a printing machine, photocopying machine, electric typewriter, anarchist literature, books and other materials. These materials will enable us to carry out our educational and propaganda activities throughout the country, and facilitate our communication with other groups around the world.