

# Nigerian Elections: No vote for bosses? parties!

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Violence erupted in Nigeria around the council elections on 14th April. Now with the presidential elections coming next week amid allegations of corruption, the hoped for democratic breakthrough looks doubtful. Unfortunately, there is no one party standing that will defend the interests of the working class and challenge the power of capital. Here Keith Spencer and Luke Cooper analyse the elections and argue that, such were the working class struggles of recent years, there should have been a working class party for whom to vote ? but this outcome has been sabotaged by the trade union bureaucracy.

The three main bosses? parties, the People?s Democratic Party, the All Nigerian People?s Party and the Action Congress all dominate the electoral lists. The outgoing president, after two terms in office, is Olusegun Obasanjo of the People?s Democratic Party. Umarau Yar?Adua is the PDP candidate in the upcoming elections. The Nigerian political system and its three main parties have a record of corruption and military rule.

The presidency of Obasanjo claims to have transformed Nigerian politics by reducing the role of the military and fighting corruption. Indeed, his eight years in office is now the longest period of democratic rule in post-colonial Nigeria. Shortly, after his election Obasanjo retired much of the country?s military top brass and the officers who also held role in the political establishment. He also set up the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) that has made a number of high profile arrests, leading to trials.

Obasanjo has cultivated close links with Western governments and has implemented the economic policy demanded by them ? in particular, strict fiscal discipline and the retreat of the state from much of Nigeria?s economic life. The effect on the economy has been disastrous with rising unemployment, spiralling food prices, higher rents and the near collapse of the energy sector.

These polices also put his ?anti-corruption? in context, as the competition for private contracts and state assets is a breeding ground for patronage. Indeed, the other opposition parties around the elections are already accusing the People?s Democratic Party, of using its ?drive against corruption? to attack political opponents. The elections have already been marked by a series of claims and counter-claims in the courts.

The economic policies of the People?s Democratic Party may have made them a darling of the West (including opening up the country?s oil-rich Niger Delta to foreign capital) but at home they have inspired anger and revolt. The political élites of the West encourage a view of Africa, which sees corruption as endemic and implies that it is ?something about Africa? that has made this so.

They never point to the more unpalatable truths ? the manipulation of ruling African élites and the economic bondage of the mechanisms of world imperialism, which has embedded corruption into the day to day life of the political system. Little would you know from news reports that African workers and the poor have waged mighty struggles for economic and political rights, and against neoliberal attacks.

Nigeria in particular has seen some titanic battles in recent years ? some seven general strikes in as many

years have shaken the country. In the impoverished Niger Delta region youth are involved in continual clashes with the military and armed contractors defending the oil interests of foreign capital. The youth are rightly demanding a share of the oil wealth that is systematically being siphoned out of the country, and have recently kidnapped a number of foreign oil workers. Fuel prices driving up the cost of living for workers have been the central grievance of the trade unions too.

Yet, despite these struggles there is no party to represent the interests of the working class in these elections and many workers will vote for bosses' parties. This is despite discussion in the unions in recent years around the need for a working class party.

### **Discussions around a workers party**

In 2001 the Party of Social Democracy was formed by some trade union leaders, based in the Nigerian Labour Congress offices (NLC, the largest, mainly blue collar federation). But it was never built. Even when the electoral commission refused to recognise it for elections in 2003, it was left to Chief Gani Fawehinmi of the National Conscience Party to challenge the electoral commission and fight for right of the Party of Social Democracy and other parties to stand. Several labour bureaucrats actually declared for bourgeois parties!

After the 2003 elections, the Party of Social Democracy changed its name to the Labour Party, and there was talk of standing candidates, including the head of the NLC, Adams Oshiomole, as presidential candidate in 2007. More general strikes followed in the intervening years, leading to the development of Labour and Civil Society Organisations (Lascos), which brought workers and community and ethnic groups together to organise and run the strikes. The trade unions could have won mass support for a new working class political party to fight for power.

Last year the leadership of the NLC asked Oshiomole to stand as president. But he has gone from talking about standing as president to standing for the governorship of Edo state, in the delta, on a Labour Party ticket, and recently going over to the bourgeois Action Congress on a joint ticket, while, in Ondo state, members of Action Congress, who didn't make it onto its election list, went over to the Labour Party. In Lagos, a banker, Femi Pedro, failed to make it as candidate for governor for the Action Congress and went over to Labour Party.

It is clear that, despite Nigeria's poverty, its trade unions have an established bureaucracy with close ties of patronage to a number the bourgeois parties. In semi-colonial states the pressure of populism, i.e. the need to unite 'the nation' against imperialism, creates a powerful pressure for the working class to support bourgeois candidates and parties. However, such are the ties of the weak bourgeoisie of states, such as Nigeria, to foreign imperial domination, they will always acquiesce to the demands of foreign capital in return for preserving their own privileges.

### **The left**

It is for these reasons that the struggle for class independence in Nigeria remains the central question. The two organisations of the far left, the Democratic Socialist Movement (linked to the Committee for a Workers International) and the International Marxist Tendency, both in formal terms hold to this position. However, each of them believes that the new working class political party they are arguing for should go through a reformist stage first, before it may be openly revolutionary. The Democratic Socialist Movement has even flirted with the possibility of supporting Oshiomole, criticising his move to the AC but praising his campaigning around a 'people's government'.

Both of these organisations have their origin in Britain's Militant Tendency, which historically practiced deep entrism into Labour and accommodated massively to workers' illusions in bourgeois democracy ?

arguing that a parliamentary road to socialism was a practicable possibility. Marxists have always warned of the impossibility of a peaceful, parliamentary road to socialism. Any movement for radical change, let alone socialism, will have to confront a highly politicised and powerful military-police apparatus of the state.

The need to break up the bourgeois state and establish a workers' state is an essential strategic goal in Nigeria, as in all capitalist countries. The CWI and IMT do not simply drop this demand temporarily, but advocate a quite different one based on the nationalisation, through parliament, of the big companies, and on land reform, ignoring the threat of the state.

When it comes to the formation of a party, the IMT and CWI conceive of it as allowing workers to organisationally break with the openly bosses' parties. Such a position opens up a whole series of opportunistic adventures away from the Marxist programme, as amply shown in the CWI's adaptation to the 'People's Government' slogan, to which we might respond: what people? what class interests? bosses or workers?

In the late 1930s, there was also a move towards political independence of the working class in the United States. There, the Trotskyists in the Socialist Workers Party, with guidance from Leon Trotsky himself, participated in the building of a workers party and faced some similar problems. They had to deal with 'third parties' (usually farmer-labour parties), and trade union leaders backing trying to get the unions to back one of the two bosses' parties (mainly the Democrats). The Trotskyists were able to combine the united front call for the formation of a labour party with arguing for it to have a revolutionary programme. They were also able to intervene into the 'third parties' by calling for them to break from the bosses' parties and join the struggle for a workers party, and also campaign in the trade unions to tear up any joint tickets with the bosses.

Such a policy is more than feasible in Nigeria; given the poverty and inequality and domination of the western multinationals, it is absolutely necessary.

### **Where next**

The NLC said at its congress in February that it will hold panels where candidates could be questioned before recommending to its members who to vote for. But these panels or conferences should be used to debate what sort of programme workers need to fight the government and the bosses; not to decide what band of robbers to vote for.

Such union conferences could also be used to launch a campaign for an independent workers party. The campaign can also build among the Delta youth, who face multinational and government violence. It should also reactivate the Lascos.

The campaign should have the slogan of 'Break with the Bosses? Found a New Workers Party?'. It must involve the widest possible layers of workers, youth and poor in a discussion of strategy, in which revolutionaries must advance a programme, starting with immediate demands and linking them with the struggle for a workers' state, won through revolution.

The ***League for the Fifth International*** would like to discuss the programme with workers and activists in Nigeria. We believe it should include

? A living wage, jobs for all, free education and health care

? Give the land to the peasants! Expropriate the big landowners without compensation!

? For democratic rights for national minorities and ethnic groups ? for a constituent assembly, a new constitution and the right of minorities to secede if they choose

- ? Against communal violence! Separation of church and state!
  - ? Against corruption ? open the books to workers investigation
  - ? For nationalisation of the oil industry and big companies and workers control without compensation
  - ? Abolish the police and army ? for a workers? militia to defend the masses against the army, police and
  - ?private security? of the oil firms and big companies
  - ? For a democratic plan to organise the economy for need not greed
  - ? For world revolution and socialism!
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