

# Interview with Hassan Sunmonu, OATUU general secretary

*interview*

JANE BARRETT IN  
ACCRA, GHANA

**H**assan Sunmonu, a Nigerian national, has an infectious laugh and a sharp intellect. He has led the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) for the past six years, and has brought dignity to the organisation. He has been instrumental in encouraging the organisation to develop an approach to trade unionism in Africa which recognises the relationship between politics and economics. Under his leadership, OATUU has developed an alternative to the Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed on the continent by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Delegates gave him a tumultuous welcome when he attended the special COSATU Congress in September



## ABOUT

THE Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) was founded in 1979 and held its first conference in Accra in April 1976. This marked the end of a disunited continental trade union movement. The organisation experienced a split in 1986, but this was overcome with the election of Hassan Sunmonu as its general secretary in 1987.

OATUU's affiliates are drawn from all the countries in Africa. Its regional arrangements on continental unionisation are encouraged, and there is one national centre in each country.

OATUU supports general trade union independence and social democracy. On an international level it is committed to the World International of Labour Unions (WILU). Most of its affiliates are independent of both the International Union of Pure and Applied Workers (IUPAW) and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). OATUU has close relationships with the ILO regional centres. It also organises the annual ILO conference on the use of the ILO's Convention 87.

OATUU's president, secretary, along with the members of the executive committee, are elected at the World Conference.

OATUU's headquarters are in the capital of Ghana, Accra. Here a small but industrious staff at provide educational, research, administrative and financial services to affiliates.

1993. But who is the person behind the title and behind his distinctive pencil-thin white beard?

Jane Barrett met Hassan Sunmonu in Accra to find out.

*Barrett: Tell me a little about your childhood, comrade Sunmonu*

**Sunmonu:** I was born in 1941. Me and my identical twin brother were the first of my father's sixteen children. And we weren't the only set of twins! My father had two sets of twins and set of triplets. According to the old Islamic custom, he had three wives.

My parents were Nigerian, but I was born in Ghana, where my father had become a successful cocoa merchant. My siblings and I were sent to school in Nigeria, where we stayed with my grandmother. She taught me so much about history and about people. She was full of parables and sayings for every situation. She influenced my life greatly. But she wasn't a highly religious person. So my brothers and I didn't take the Koran and those things very seriously, even though the family was Muslim. It was only when I was 15, when I went back to Ghana to be with my parents, that I had to catch up quickly. My father was an Imam in the village, and it was embarrassing that his children were so ignorant of their religion! At first I studied the Koran and prayed because I had to, but it soon became an important part of my life. To this day religion plays an important role in my life's activities and reflections.

*Barrett: Why did you go back to Ghana when you were 15?*

**Sunmonu:** Well, my father who, as I said had been a very successful independent cocoa merchant, made some very foolish investments. He invested his savings in diamonds but the industry never took off in Ghana. He lost almost everything. That was when he started to play a more important role as the local Imam. But it also meant that there was no longer money to support us children in Nigeria. So I finished my schooling in Ghana.

**Barrett:** *And your education after school?*

**Sunmonu:** I returned to Nigeria and went to study engineering at the Yaba College of Technology in Lagos. That was when I became politically active, via the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS).

**Barrett:** *Tell me more about that period — what were the issues?*

**Sunmonu:** Well, this was not long after Independence, which was won in 1960. NANS was effective in stopping the first and only proposed Anglo-Nigerian defence pact in the same year, as it was seen as neo-colonialist. NANS was very active in the period of consolidation after Independence. I became the president of the students' union at my college in 1967, and the second vice-president of NANS. I had previously been the president of the National Association of Technical Students. And, for six years, from 1961 to 1967, I was the treasurer of the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria. It was while I was active in the Muslim Students Society that I met my wife. However, I had to drive my motor cycle to see her on many occasions before she finally accepted my proposal! We remain partners and comrades to this day, six children later!

In 1966 Nigeria saw its first military coup. All organs of civil society were dissolved, except the trade unions. And the student organisations managed to survive.

**Barrett:** *And how then did you come to be a trade unionist?*

**Sunmonu:** By accident really! In June 1967 I left college and started working in the civil service as what was called a "technical officer". We were not recognised as engineers because we had a technical college training, and not a university degree. But we did the same work. I was elected the secretary of the Association of Technical Officers and was given the mandate by the executive to compile all the grievances of the technical

officers. The central grievance was the non-recognition of technical officers as engineers. Based on the grievances, we compiled a memorandum to the Federal Ministry and proposed that negotiations should take place. At that time I knew little or nothing about trade unions, so I was flummoxed when, on the appointed day for negotiations in January 1968, the management refused to negotiate on the grounds that our Association was not a registered trade union. We quickly investigated the options and found we could affiliate to the Public Works, Aerodrome, Technical and General Workers Union, which had a progressive reputation. The irony is that, had the management at that stage permitted in-house negotiations, I might never have been a unionist!

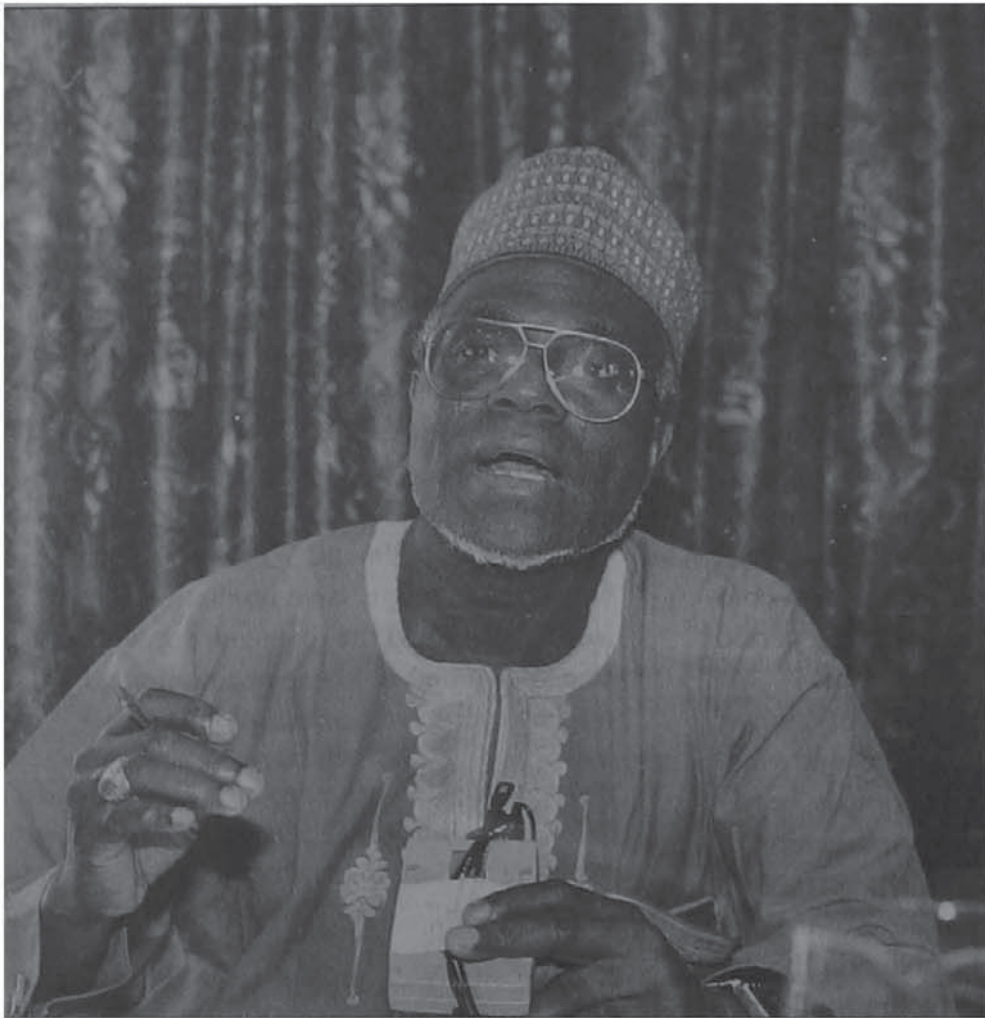
**Barrett:** *How long were you in the Public Works, Aerodrome, Technical and General Workers Union, and what role did you play in the union?*

**Sunmonu:** Well, in April 1969 I was lucky enough to be a delegate to the union's conference. I was much surprised when I was elected the second assistant secretary (which was not a full-time position). I was still very green then, and had a tendency to use civil service language. Comrade Goodluck, a principled leader who was the union's general secretary and much loved by Nigerian workers, soon put me right! He would return the draft letters I wrote and say "Comrade, rewrite this letter, it is full of civil service jargon!"

I was put in charge of international affairs in the union, mainly because I could speak French! It is essential that you speak French in Africa if you want to do any serious international trade union work.

**Barrett:** *By the way, how many languages do you speak?*

**Sunmonu:** Five — Twi and Yoruba, English, French, and Italian, which I learnt when I went on an engineering course in Italy.



Increasingly the military became threatened by the reality of trade union unity, and in 1976 they moved directly against the union movement. Bear in mind there were four national centres in Nigeria at the time. The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) was in the process of being formed as a unity move. Using the "red threat", the military banned the emergent NLC, ordered the dissolution of the four national centres and insisted on the formation of a politically neutral single national centre. Ten key leaders, includ-

**Barrett:** *To get back to your union, when were you elected president?*

**Sunmonu:** I was elected president in August 1970. I immediately took one month's leave from my job to organise new members into the union — especially in the western region which was previously unorganised. I was 29 and had just bought my first car. So I used it to move from town to town, village to village. I was still full-time, working in the Ministry of Works.

After 1970 the scope of the union changed to include the private sector, and the name became the Public Works, Construction, Technical and General Workers Union. Then a strange twist of politics changed the scope of the union again in 1977.

**Barrett:** *And what was that?*

**Sunmonu:** As I mentioned earlier, there had been a military coup in 1966.

ing Comrade Goodluck, who was by now, the general secretary of the Civil Service Technical Workers' Union, were banned for life from participating in unions. A government appointed administrator was put in charge of the national centre. It was in protest against these measures that I first grew my beard! But the protest went way beyond my beard. Workers resisted the moves strongly, and in February 1978 relaunched the NLC on a democratic basis. The government tried to impose the name Central Labour Organisation, but workers insisted that the name NLC must be resurrected. I was elected the first president a position I held for two terms, until 1986. This was the first full-time union position that I held.

**Barrett:** *Were the bans on the ten leaders ever lifted?*

**Sunmonu:** Yes! they were finally lifted, but only in 1987, under the regime of Babangida.

*Barrett: And how did the military intervention affect your own union?*

**Sunmonu:** In terms of the military decree, not only was one national centre to be formed, but unions were ordered to merge. My own union merged with 27 other unions in 1977 to become the Civil Service Technical Workers Union of Nigeria, of which I was elected president. Unions decided strategically not to fight the mergers, but to use them to build maximum unity amongst workers. The military didn't know it was doing us such a favour!

*Barrett: What was the first major action of the united trade union movement after the NLC's relaunch in 1978?*

**Sunmonu:** In 1981 the civilian government of President Shagari refused to accept the notion of a national minimum wage, and the campaign of the NLC led up to a protracted general strike. It was a tumultuous time. Millions of workers were involved, and the power of organised labour was graphically asserted after a period of deliberate labour destabilisation by previous regimes. Remember that at this time Nigeria was joining the world oil market, and private individuals were making millions of dollars while the workers were being denied a basic minimum on which to live.

Corruption in high places was also a massive drain on the nation's wealth and this made workers angry and determined to succeed, despite the repressive measures imposed by the regime. Many worker leaders were arrested. I myself was a wanted man for a time. The general strike resulted in a victory for the working class, and afterwards, thousands and thousands of workers became more actively involved in trade union affairs.

*Barrett: What lessons did you draw from the general strike?*

**Sunmonu:** It was in the general strike that I learnt what for me was one of the most important lessons of leadership. During the

strike, I was approached by several eminent and wealthy individuals who let it be known that they were talking to me with the support of the most senior of politicians in the country. In clear terms, I was offered very substantial bribes to water down our demands and to end the strike. I was even offered a full boatload of rice by one supposedly upstanding dignitary. That was worth a fortune in those days. Of course I refused and asked this person to leave my office immediately! Imagine suggesting I and my comrades would exchange workers' basic rights for a boatload of rice! I would rather die than sell out the workers. I may not be rich materially, but I know that I have contentment and can look anyone in the face.

One of my central beliefs, inculcated into me by Comrade Goodluck in my formative years, is that you have to lead by example, and that, although we must be judged by those we lead, we are also ultimately accountable to God.

*Barrett: So when did you take office in OATUU?*

**Sunmonu:** At the 1987 conference.

*Barrett: What are the present challenges and tasks facing OATUU?*

**Sunmonu:** As I see it, OATUU has three principle tasks — and has had for some time. The first of these is mobilisation of labour and other forces towards the economic integration of the African continent. The second is the mobilisation of labour for popular participatory and people-powered democracy, in an era which not only marks the end of apartheid in South Africa, but the end of the one-party state and military regimes in many African countries. The biggest task of all is the fight against the "anti-development" strategies represented by the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the IMF and the World Bank. For only when we have a clear African alternative economic framework will we succeed in the first two tasks.

## INTERVIEW

**Barrett:** *What would you say are the biggest obstacles to achieving these objectives?*

**Sunmonu:**

Unemployment, poverty and misery (largely caused by Structural Adjustment Programmes) are the most serious obstacles. Political instability and civil war which characterise many African countries at this time are also major obstacles. But OATUU, and the leadership of its affiliates — from the grassroots upwards — have a role to play in the mediation of many of the conflicts. After all, the fundamental principle of trade unionism is the unity of workers. We have a successful example of the role of trade unionists in Togo.

**Barrett:** *Now that COSATU is an affiliate of OATUU (since 1993), what particular contribution do you think South African workers will be able to make to facing up to the challenge of the continent that you have outlined?*

**Sunmonu:** I believe that the South African trade union movement will bring with it the toughest it has learnt under the apartheid regime. In turn, South African workers will learn what their counterparts have learnt under the post-colonial period, where in many cases, after the fight for independence was won, workers were thrown away like rats.

**Barrett:** *You have sometimes suggested that you believe it will be time in the near future to stand down from the general secretaryship of OATUU, despite pressure from affil-*



*iates to stay in office. Is there anything special you would like to see achieved by OATUU before you go?*

**Sunmonu:** My dream is that, before I go, a labour college serving the continent will be established in Accra — the Kwame Nkrumah Labour College. I would like to see it develop as a centre of excellence, where labour can assert its role as the vanguard of the socio-economic future of Africa. We have already secured a large piece of land in Accra. It's only left to build the place! I have a fantasy that in my retirement I would come to the college to give occasional lectures, and to learn from the militant young leadership. ✎