

'We, workers of Africa...'

Labour Bulletin: When was the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) founded?

Summonu: In April 1973 when two previously ideologically opposed Pan-African trade unions merged. They were the All-African Trade Union Federation, formed in 1961, and the African Trade Union Confederation that was started in 1962 by the ICFTU [the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions] as an ideological counterpoint.

The OAU [Organisation of African Unity] was concerned that Africa could not develop with the Pan-African trade unions being divided and virtually opposed to each other. In 1972 it asked the two sides to unite for the benefit of Africa. And so the OAU started the process at the OAU summit in 1972 when it adopted a resolution on it. This led to the founding of OATUU. We were not founded by the OAU, but our unity was facilitated by them.

Labour Bulletin: Which countries are members of OATUU?

Summonu: Forty-nine of the 54 African countries are currently members. OATUU only affiliates national trade union centres (or federations) like the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and COSATU. We do not have affiliates in the Comoros and

Etienne Vlok interviewed Hassan Summonu, OATUU's secretary-general since 1986, during the organisation's seventh congress in Johannesburg.

Equatorial Guinea because they only have industrial unions, not national centres. Somalia was an affiliate before the warlords made that country ungovernable. The three Moroccan centres froze their membership when the UGT-SARIO, the trade union centre of Polisario of Western Sahara, affiliated to us.

The UGT-SARIO applied for affiliation. Our constitution states that any trade union centre of an OAU member country can be our affiliate.

As Western Sahara had been vice-chairman of the OAU and therefore a member of the OAU, we affiliated UGT-SARIO at our general council in May 1987 in Cairo. The Moroccans then froze their membership but did not resign. We still send them all our documents and we visit them.

During our meeting in Johannesburg we gave a red card to the imposed trade union leaders of Djibouti. The Djibouti government, which has violated trade

union rights, held a kangaroo congress where it imposed its own people as leaders of the unions. The original leaders were prevented by the Djibouti government from attending this congress so we gave them the red card.

Labour Bulletin: What have been OATUU's major victories?

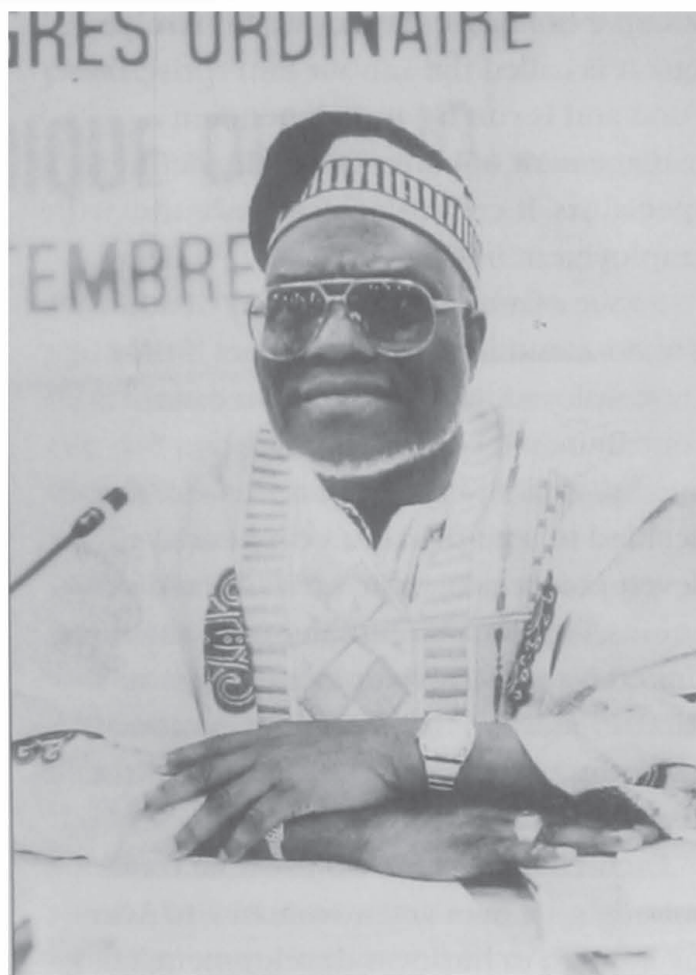
Summonu: One is the victory over apartheid. It was important because we fought apartheid in the ILO [International Labour Organisation] and elsewhere until its demise in 1994. The second victory is that we speak with one voice for all African workers and trade unions.

When OATUU says 'We, workers of Africa, ...' no other trade union can contradict it. That is an achievement that no other continent can claim. The third victory is OATUU's policy on genuine democracy in Africa.

Our members and affiliates are at the forefront of the fight, not only for democracy, but for the consolidation of democracy in Africa. An example is Mali where our affiliate, Union National de Travailleurs du Mali (UNTM), led Mali civil society to overthrow one of the most vicious and strongest military dictators in Africa. The secretary general of the UNTM was then vice-chairperson of the transitional government that brought democracy to Mali in 1992. We are proud of that.

Sierra Leone is another example. When the democratically elected government was overthrown I sent a message to the Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC) urging them not to co-operate with the dictators. So the workers of Sierra Leone went on strike for nine months.

Another example is Nigeria, where Sani Abacha dissolved the NLC and so the workers went on strike. I filed a complaint



against Nigeria with the ILO. As a result my Nigerian passport was not renewed until Abacha died.

Labour Bulletin: One of OATUU's slogans is the development of an entrepreneurial spirit. What does that mean?

Summonu: We, trade unions, want to debunk the fallacy that only business people should go into business. Our members are already doing it, for example the Union General de Travailleurs Tunisiens (UGTT) who have a 12-storey hotel on the Mediterranean Sea in Tunis. It is their own venture and it makes them financially independent. They also own the second largest insurance company in Tunisia.

Our affiliate in Egypt, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, owns a workers' bank and a workers' university in Cairo. The Ghana Trade Union Congress (GTUC)

set up a holding company about two years ago. It is called the Labour Enterprise Trust Fund and is run by an independent management of bankers and financial specialists. It creates enterprises and employment in Ghana.

So we asked what could OATUU do? Unions can only recruit workers if they are employed. Nothing says we cannot contribute to the solutions of unemployment in our countries - so we decided to set up an entrepreneurial development project in African trade unions. We received funding from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the ILO for a pilot project involving two countries from each of the five sub-regions of Africa.

Each country sent two full-time trade unionists - a man and a woman - to Accra for training in business development. They went back to their own centres and trained, especially retrenched workers, on how to set up their own businesses and where to access business ideas.

The programme is being assessed but the indication is that it was a success. We want to expand it to cover more countries.

Labour Bulletin: Thabo Mbeki said that we cannot have an African renaissance without social justice. What do you see as the role of workers and trade unions in the African renaissance?

Summonu: Workers' and trade unions' whole struggle is about social and economic justice. There can be no African renaissance without African workers and trade unions. And African workers and trade unions will not participate in a renaissance that does not contain social justice.

A renaissance without social justice is completely out of the question. There will

only be social justice if we have a participatory, people-empowered democracy in each African country. These must be accountable to the people, transparent, ensure social and economic justice and respect human and trade union rights.

We are going to work for that in every African country and we are not going to do it alone. We are networking with African civil society organisations. We are committed to the renaissance.

Labour Bulletin: What has been the impact of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) on Africa?

Summonu: The orthodox SAPs of the IMF [International Monetary Fund] and the World Bank are the greatest form of economic slavery of the 20th century. Its objectives are to deny our governments their sovereignty and ensure that the obligations our governments have to their people are not fulfilled: health, food, shelter, water and electricity.

SAPs deny governments their major sources of funding - government-owned enterprises - which they use to fulfil the needs of the people. It started with lies that the government-owned enterprises were inefficient and not profit-making. Then they went for the crown princes: the gold mines, the petroleum industries and the banks.

The money governments received from selling those assets went to servicing debt - the debt for which we have paid three times over.

OATUU is not opposed to adjustments but we are opposed to the orthodox SAPs of the World Bank and IMF. They consider only one aspect of adjustment: financial adjustment. They do not consider the economic and social impact, the responsibilities of our governments to its

people or the sovereignty of our governments. They are just adjusting in their favour only; not for development, economic integration or social upliftment.

Africa has its own SAP, adopted in 1989 by the OAU: the African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes for Socio-economic Development and Transformation (AAFSAP).

We wanted a popular version of it so everyone in the street could understand it. So we held a seminar with 25 trade union leaders and came up with the popular version that OATUU now uses for worker education.

Labour Bulletin: What is your view of the debt relief that has taken place?

Summonu: We do not talk about debt relief, only debt cancellation. We are worried about it as it is taking place under the same conditions as the orthodox SAPs. So we say 'Cancel it outright, unconditionally! Remove your orthodox SAPs and let Africa help Africa implement the AAFSAP!

It is in their own interest to do it because as the ILO Philadelphia declaration states: 'poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere'. Their prosperity is not guaranteed as long as it is at the expense of our poverty. Only co-prosperity can bring social stability in every country, north or south.

Cancellation of debt is not charity. We have instances this century of debt forgiveness. In 1953 Germany had 80% of its war time debts cancelled. It used only 3-5% of its exports to service the remaining 20% of the debt. Germany is now one of the hardliners in this debt cancellation.

Cancellation will not be charity because they have taken three times what they

loaned us and are keeping us in perpetual poverty.

Labour Bulletin: What is the future of African trade unions?

Summonu: Unlike most people, I am not, and refuse to be, an Afro-pessimist. A bright future awaits African trade unions if they can rise up to the challenges that await them. These include: poverty; HIV/AIDS; political and social stability; the consolidation of the new democracies; gender equality; and economic integration.

These challenges are not meant for African trade unions alone to solve, but for all African peoples and nations. As one of the best organised, among the African civil societies, African workers and unions should be at the forefront in the fight against poverty and corruption. This fight includes the fight for the cancellation of debt. The savings made from debt cancellation should then be invested in social development.

African trade unions and other civil society organisations should struggle for popular participatory and people-empowered democracies in all African countries. This is the type of democracy that puts the people in the 'driving seat' and not as mere passengers. Sovereignty should belong to the people.

'The democracy of the rich, by the rich, for the rich, on behalf of the people' which the IMF, World Bank and WTO [World Trade Organisation] are imposing on Third World countries is not what Africa wants. So, we reject it. African trade unions should also work hard to combat the scourge of HIV/AIDS, through mobilisation, education and information. The OATUU Health, Safety and Environment Programme, established over five years ago, has started special programmes to combat HIV/AIDS. This will

be intensified to cover all African countries.

The other area of struggle is the economic integration of Africa. The chains of the present economic enslavement of Africa through the orthodox SAPs and the WTO agreement can only be broken by Africa's economic integration. We should ensure that it is people-centred.

Labour Bulletin: How must African trade unions confront globalisation?

Sunmonu: African trade unions should mobilise and educate the international community on the dangers of the anti-people economic paradigms that the IMF, World Bank and WTO have been imposing, particularly on the Third World. Neo-liberalism has brought poverty, unpayable debt, hunger, environmental degradation and loss of sovereignty to the majority of countries around the world.

It has also empowered, beyond any democratic norms, the IMF, World Bank and WTO. These now have the power of 'life and death' over countries. The challenge facing the international community is the democratisation of these institutions. They should serve the needs of people, be participatory, democratic and transparent, be accountable to the governments, not multinationals. African trade unions should be at the vanguard of mobilising civil society around these challenges. Africans should be responsible for their own development, globalisation or no globalisation.

Labour Bulletin: OATUU has representatives for African workers in France. How did that come about?

Sunmonu: There is a large community of migrant African workers in France and other EU countries. Like all workers, they

encounter a lot of problems. To defend their individual and collective interests better, they formed the Federation of African Workers in France (FETAF) 15 years ago and affiliated to OATUU. It has extended beyond France to other European countries.

Through OATUU's contacts, they have received a lot of support, particularly from CGT-France, in their struggle against racism, discrimination and the violation of their rights.

Labour Bulletin: What is your own history?

Sunmonu: In July 1967 I was elected the secretary of the Association of Technical Officers of the Federal Ministry of Works and Housing. The ministry refused to negotiate with our association as we were not registered as a union or affiliated to a registered union.

This prompted the association to affiliate to a registered union. We joined the Public Works, Aerodrome Technical and General Workers Union. Within two weeks the ministry negotiated with us. We won all the points negotiated because we prepared a very good case.

In November 1977 I was elected the founding president of the newly formed Civil Service Technical Workers' Union of Nigeria. In 1978 this union and 41 others were the founding affiliates of the NLC. I was elected the first president of the present NLC in 1978.

I served as president from 1978 to 1984, after which Nigerian trade union leaders proposed me as secretary-general of OATUU in October 1986 at the Addis Ababa Congress. I was elected unopposed and have since been re-elected in December 1990 in Tripoli, May 1995 in Accra and September 1999 in Johannesburg. ★