



Socialist Workers & Youth League

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The Secretary

ASCAB

DISAFFILIATION FROM ASCAB: OVER ITS ANTI-DEMOCRATIC REGIME AND ATTACKS ON SWL

We received your last communication with us, dated 5 May. That SWL General Council deliberated it that same month, within the context of our series of correspondence from June 2020. A principled decision was reached to withdraw from ASCAB. This position was however set aside in the light of the 31 May nationwide demonstration scheduled by ASCAB, which was announced on the heels of our GC meeting.

Subsequent to this, a number of leading figures in ASCAB engaged with us. This gave the basis for hope that the alliance would be democratically run, and the persistent attacks of the neo-SL against SWL in ASCAB would cease. This hope was further kindled when it appeared that at last, organs of ASCAB such as the “Interim National Steering Committee” would be constituted.

Events thereafter make it clear that this hope was misplaced. Anti-democratic practice continues unabated as the norm, with attempts to cover this with a thin veil. SWLers have also been verbally assaulted by leading neo-SLites, and publicly too.

Thus, after further democratic discussion within the League, the 9th Socialist Workers & Youth League Convention held in August endorsed the stand for us to disaffiliate from ASCAB

We have been consistent in arguing our two-pronged position from the very beginning. First, the central importance of democratic ethos in a coalition such as what ASCAB is supposed to be. Second, that attacks on our organization and its members by neo-SLites be stopped.

There is no need to repeat ourselves on several issues as these have been clearly put forward in our earlier letters. However, it is pertinent to debunk some of the distortions articulated in the formal response we received from the ASCAB secretariat (and the initial email response from a leading neo-SLite at the same time), in your last communication.

Your formal letter claimed it would “refute” our assertions “in no uncertain terms” but on all subjects concerned, it failed to address the concrete positions we raised. Rather, we find a series of obfuscation.

On democratization of the alliance

We pointed out “the urgent need for democratization of the alliance”, because ASCAB was being run in an undemocratic manner, and its anti-democratic regime was getting ossified. Our position was not presented in abstract terms. The concrete bases of our argument, most of which were being raised for the umpteenth time, were put forward in clear and straightforward terms, thus:

* After a year as an alliance, there were neither democratically constituted structures nor rules collectively arrived at by affiliates.

* The only leadership body i.e., the Coordinating Committee was never democratically constituted by the affiliates in whose name it acted. And this was despite the position in your 5 June 2020 letter that an Interim National Steering Committee comprising all paid-up affiliates would be constituted, “soon”. And this INSC was then to elect such a Coordinating Committee. Meanwhile the CC which lacks any democratic mandate whatsoever that has been meeting and taking decisions on behalf of the alliance on a weekly basis, for well over a year.

Your response to this was that ASCAB has been “democratic, in its work and actions, since its foundations” because:

- * it has grown to include more organizations beyond its founding members
- * it has been able to take collective decisions to engage with the working peoples of Nigeria
- * it was able to work with other left political initiatives in an open and inclusive planning process to convene “The Peoples Alternative Political Summit [TPAPS]”.

First, we note that not one of these points speaks to real issues which we raised. Declaring ASCAB or any entity for that matter as democratic does not necessarily make it democratic. North Korea describes itself as the Democratic Republic of Korea and claims that its work and activities are democratic. That does not make it any less the absolutist anti-democratic regime that it is.

Second, on taking a closer look, each of the points in your argument belies your argument, as we shall show below.

Assuming that the alliance has grown as fantastically as you claim, that still does not necessarily tell us anything about the democratic content of its internal life. The Nazis in Germany and the Fascist party in Italy grew at astronomical rates in the 1920s. This did not make them democratic.

Furthermore, the supposed growth is a myth, and the numbers in the first place were packed. ASCAB continues to report having a membership of “more than 70 affiliates” as it did fifteen months ago. And this list does not hold up to scrutiny.

NLC is still listed, despite the fact that the trade union center refused to join on account of some of the same anti-democratic practices we have condemned.

At least one of the “affiliates” is an individual whose political organization is also registered as an affiliate. At least one organization is defunct (i.e., the Movement Against Unemployment and Destitution, MUD, which has transformed into the All Workers Convergence, AWC, which is also listed as an affiliate). And not less than five “affiliates” are front organizations or offices of neo-SLites).

This disambiguation is not exhaustive but enough to make the point that there is much more to look at than bandied figures of the alliance’s affiliation base. Our analysis of this “affiliation” form of astroturfing – for want of a better word, is merely in response to your disingenuous claim. We do note, though, that there are a few genuine and credible organizations which are at least listed as affiliates.

And this brings us to the second point. How can the ASCAB secretariat dare say that it reached “collective decisions” on anything whatsoever, in the absence of democratic structures of the alliance? As we pointed out earlier, the so-called “general meetings” of affiliates are at best farcical.

They have merely been public zoom meetings which were used to try providing the unelected Coordinating Committee’s resolutions with some cloak of assumed legitimacy. And that is when this parody of consultation was even conducted at all.

We make bold to say that our letter of 26 April 2021 jolted the anti-democratic regime in ASCAB to take some steps that it had avoided. It was only after the letter that a supposed Interim National Steering Committee was constituted. But even this was done with a card up the sleeves of those who run the alliance. Contrary to the INSC being a governing body of paid-up affiliates, without prejudice to an all-inclusive

platform of all affiliates as we have always demanded, what has now been constituted as an INSC is more of a general assembly of all affiliates.

A major impact of affiliates' list packing and the anti-democratic regime in the alliance is the inactivity of most affiliates. The two major interventions that A-SCAB initiated reflect this state of lethargy.

Less than one third of the barely sixty persons that attended T-PAPS were from ASCAB affiliates. The bulk of participants were from the African Action Congress (AAC) (and the hall became almost bare when they left) and the Joint Action Front (JAF). The second intervention was the 31 May nationwide action against insecurity. In the handful of states where any action whatsoever were taken, one could barely count the number of people that turned up on both hands. Lagos was an exception, but even there, those on ground which included SWLers, were barely thirty persons.

These developments should be food for thought for the self-imposed leadership of the alliance, instead of chest thumping on what is not. More importantly, for us, these myths of what being democratic means is nothing but a strawman argument in the face of our genuine and concretely put identification of the alliance's anti-democratic regime.

On SL's role in ASCAB and attacks on SWL

We do see yet further attempts at obfuscation on both the role of the new SL in ASCAB and the group's attacks on SWL and its leading members. Your response did not address a single one of the facts and concrete examples we have tabled. In the place of this, your position was to:

“Categorically reject the notion of ASCAB being dominated by one single organization” and try to buttress this argument by pointing out that the group i.e., the new SL was not a founding organization of Alliance and “had perhaps not been formed at the birth of ASCAB”.

But we never said that the group had formally come into existence before ASCAB was formed. It is however a statement of fact, which is on record, that its members even before they were formally constituted did bar leading members of SWL from the ASCAB WhatsApp group – which at the time, and even till now, has been the platform via which non-CC members of the alliance get to share their views and relate as a community.

It must also be noted that we did not mention the new SL when we reported on this rather petty inanity in our letter of 9 July 2020, precisely because of this formal fact, that is now being used to try obscure the more malicious truth of the first of what has become a pattern of attacks against SWL by the same set of people.

We squarely identified those attacking us as the new SL for the first time only in our 11 September 2020 letter, after the group had become formally crystalized. We equally clearly stated the attacks that several members of our group faced from them.

It is also, in our view, playing on the intelligence of anybody that has more than a passing knowledge of ASCAB to say that the new SL does not play a dominant role in the alliance. Its members include Drew Povey, J. Gaskie, Femi Aborisade and Ade Atambi. Who does not know that these are pivotal personages in the politics, organizing of activities and power dynamics of the alliance? Which other organization has such constellation of leading members playing such central roles in the alliance? And to add icing on this tendential cake, the ASCAB secretariat is equally the neo-SL's office. So, who is fooling who with this empty “categorical” rejection?

For the avoidance of doubt, this is not even our main concern. There were dominant, organizations in earlier radical coalitions such as CD and JACON, even if they were more subtle in exercising their hegemony. And there are in contemporary ones such as JAF and CORE, which is not to that they “control” these coalitions, as a leading neo-SLite wants to see it.

The problem here is that the neo-SLites have used their dominance to consistently attack the SWL. In all the coalitions we mentioned, the founding or dominant organizations did and do not utilize their position to

attack other affiliates. We have pointed out that Drew Povey tried to stop a leading member of our group from speaking at an ASCAB webinar supposedly for affiliates.

And when the SWLer put it in the chat box that he was being prevented from speaking, Drew went into a tirade that he should not expect to be called to speak, adding in the public chat box that the said comrade had forced him out of the leadership of the SWL!

Apart from the fact this was false, why should something extraneous to our affiliation to ASCAB be used to bar us once again, this time from speaking? How was it possible for him to have been able to do this if not for the neo-SL's dominance in the alliance?

This is just one of many examples of the attacks we have faced within ASCAB from neo-SLites after they formally constituted their group. Apart from others we have listed earlier, a leading member of the SWL who also served as chair of ASCAB Abuja branch was tongue-lashed by the ASCAB secretary during the T-PAPS in March. You might want to ask that what was her "crime"?

The Abuja branch had been formally given the task of serving as "local organizing committee". She made several calls to the national secretary of ASCAB, and other leading members based in Abuja at the heart of organizing the summit, with the intention of discussing on logistics, particularly in the light of COVID-19 protocol. Her calls were neither picked nor returned. Using her initiative, she bought masks, hand sanitizers and such like with over fifty thousand naira from her pocket.

On getting to the venue with the materials she had purchased, she realized that the ASCAB secretariat had already taken care of everything (obviously the so-called "local organizing committee" was meant to be nothing but for show). All she wanted to do in the light of this was to have a discussion with Atambi. What she got was a public washing down for no just cause.

Atambi eventually apologized to her with the excuse that he was under pressure at the time. This was two months later i.e., after our 26 April letter! But it didn't stop there. Even as recently as a month back, Drew Povey also verbally attacked her while she was organizing a workshop at Abuja, on the most spurious of basis.

An important aside to this is the gender dimension. They obviously felt comfortable with his sort of nonsense because she is a woman. The neo-SLites have been "bold" enough to "shout" at other leading members in black and white only, and not to our face. Even as we leave ASCAB, we urge affiliates to ensure that this sort of verbal gender-based violence is not allowed to take roots. It is a female member of the SWL today, it could be any other woman tomorrow.

We must now ask, should any self-respecting affiliate or its members face such a clear trend of targeted attacks as we have faced thus far in ASCAB from the neo-SLites, in any coalition and keep quiet about it? Does such a trend show genuine promise of a pathway to "a new Nigeria"?

Representation on the Coordinating Committee and socialist tendencies

Yet another myth is woven around the procedure of undemocratically constituting the Coordinating Committee. There are several threads to this weaving. These include:

* every affiliate has had equal opportunities to participate in the work and leadership of ASCAB nationally and across the states where branches have been formed.

* it was made clear from the inception that representation on ASCAB's leadership would not be based only on socialist tendencies, since it is "not a tendential Alliance". In addition, your letter argues falsely claims that "no socialist platform is directly represented on the CC".

* "members of the interim CC are chosen in terms of their significant representation of important interest groups, for example trade unions".

* there are however socialists on the CC, including members of SWL who come in through front organizations.

First, our experience highlighted in the last section shows that not every affiliate is given equal opportunities to participate even in the alliance's discourse, not to talk of its leadership and decision-making processes. In terms of its work, yes, but simply on a master-servant or ceremonial basis, except it pleases the ASCAB nomenklatura otherwise, as was the case with the Abuja branch during T-PAPS.

Second, the argument on socialist tendencies is curious in several ways. First the question is who reached the decision? Should the rules and protocol of an alliance or coalition not be put forward to its affiliates for discussion?

We have chosen not to speak to the informal response we first received from a leading neo-SLite and A-SCABite, as it was not the official response to our letter. But it does speak more plainly about somethings. For example, he was unambiguous in stating his view that the "promoters" of a coalition have specific objectives they intend to achieve and so "no political alliance or coalition is neutral".

But to the extent that it is, at least supposed to be, an alliance or coalition should affiliates not have a say in defining the rules and objectives of such a united front body? Should the democratic norm not be for the promoters to present their positions and argue it with the political hegemony of being promoters?

It is unethical as well as anti-democratic to simply lord rules over the head of affiliates, and particularly so, dues-paying affiliates. As an aside, but an important one, at least three of the CC members we spoke with at different times said they were sure that a significant number of CC members or the organizations they are deemed to represent have never paid ASCAB dues.

Yet, SWL which paid its annual dues has no say in shaping the rules of the alliance! This is obviously preposterous. And while "socialist tendencies" are ruled out of representation on the CC, by the diktat of persons associated with a particular socialist tendency, that same tendency can have a plethora of members on the CC by dint of these representing fronts which are largely NGIs and their one- or two-person offices. This is an absurd way of squaring a putrid circle.

Third, the argument that "interim CC members are chosen" says a lot and hides a lot, particularly when it talks of constituencies with reference to the trade unions. The question of who does the choosing goes to confirm our earlier point that an anti-democratic regime reigns behind the scenes in ASCAB.

Members of a political organization's governing bodies should be elected in one form or the other i.e., by the constituencies they represent or by the entire body of membership. When a shadowy body does such choosing it assumes inordinate powers in an insidious manner.

What the position in your letter hides is about the involvement of trade unions. From the founding of ASCAB, the neo-SLites perspective on the unions have been to win the bureaucracy or at least the stamp of the names of unions as affiliates. Little regard was paid to democratic ethos that would entail unions affiliation *based on mandates*, or active involvement of rank-and-file members of these unions.

This approach was based on an illusion that once the bureaucracy's assent to affiliation was won, neo-SL/ASCAB could through this win policy influence in the unions. It was also part of the broader "strategy" of affiliates list packing.

We do not make this assertion lightly. We make it from our experience at the foundation of ASCAB. Pressures were piled on trade union leaders who are members of SWL, particularly by Drew Povey, to support the Action Plan. And even before these union leaders presented the Action Plan to their unions for democratic discussions, the names of their unions were already included on the list of the Action Plan supporters and consequentially "affiliates" of the alliance.

The inclusion of NLC as an affiliate and immediate granting of its president a co-chair position followed a similar pattern. The NLC leadership saw through the subterfuge, leading to the federation's exit.

It is also noteworthy that unionists who are also members of SWL who did not secure a democratic position of their union to support the Action Plan or affiliate to ASCAB were encouraged by the neo-SLites to still come into the CC. When they pointed out that this would be unethical, they were told by Drew Povey, who was formally a member of the SWL at that time, that this did not matter because most people in the CC were mainly “chosen” on personal recognition. Now we see how these threads get bunched together.

Fourth, the suggestion that SWL members are on the CC of ASCAB through fronts is disingenuous. There is one member of the CC who happens to be a member of the SWL. He is not indirectly representing SWL through a front (as neo-SLites are doing). He is on one hand the General Secretary of a trade union affiliate of ASCAB and on the other hand, his union is a TUC affiliate and his presence on the CC is based on a TUC mandate. He reports to the TUC and not the SWL.

Interestingly though, this was the same person who was initially to be thrown out from a CC meeting by Drew Povey, as we pointed out in our September letter, because Povey assumed that he “gate crashed” as an SWLer. This was even though Povey sought the comrade’s union’s affiliation and even added the union’s name to the list of affiliates before the said comrade even initiated internal discussion within the union.

And he is not the only trade union member associated with SWL that has faced a similar fate. The national organizing secretary of his union was in fact thrown out of an earlier CC meeting as well. Yet, we are the ones being accused of sectarian squabbles!

For the records, we do not play the deceitful game of staking coalitions with fronts. At best it gives a coalition, or helps it project, a false sense of strength. Such tactics tend to reflect decay, as we saw in the later days of the radical incarnation of NANS, or they contribute to the rotting of coalitions as we saw in the CD.

Finally on this matter, we must reiterate that the “no socialist platform is directly represented on the CC” claim is false. Apart from the new SL (which claims its loud presence on the CC is strictly through fronts), there are two paid-up socialist groups that are affiliates of ASCAB. These are the SWL and the Socialist Congress of Nigeria (SCON).

Members of SCON (whom we hold in high regards) sit on the CC directly as members of a socialist tendency. Having socialist groups and other groups be these fronts of socialist groups or other groups does not amount to making ASCAB a “tendential Alliance”.

Conclusion

It has been important to take time to respond to you now, as we have done over the last fifteen months, with hope for today as well as with posterity in view. It has been said by the neo-SLites that SWL “initially rebuffed all outreaches”. In addition, we have been accused that all what we have done “at every turn, since the beginning of the ASCAB process” is to “wage internal fratricidal wars” and “question the viability of the process and project” of ASCAB.

Nothing could be further from the truth. We saw the importance of the Action Plan when it was drafted and endorsed it without any prevarication. This is on record and no extent of attempts to falsify this recent history can wipe that off. In April 2020 when ASCAB was deemed to have over 60 affiliates but with only just as many people on its WhatsApp group, 19 of those were members of our organization.

Despite the mischievous manner they were added, and the deliberate exclusion of other members which we insisted should equally be added, we continued to act in good faith within the alliance. It did not stop at that. As we pointed out in our letter of 9 July 2020, members of our organization were already “playing some role or the other in taking the ASCAB initiative forward” at that time.

However, we would not have been true to our traditions if we were to condone a regime of anti-democratic practice in a coalition we are affiliated to. We would also not be worthy of being considered as socialists if we could not speak to defend ourselves when faced with a ceaseless barrage of attacks.

To be quite clear, the point was never one of wanting to be on the ASCAB leadership. In the series of informal discussions, we held with some other leading members of the alliance, they offered to push for our inclusion on the CC. We declined.

Our stance has been for every affiliate to genuinely have a say in shaping the life of the alliance – including its programs, perspectives, and rules. We now have no doubt that this might be too much to expect in ASCAB.

We cannot and will not be a part of a coalition where an anti-democratic regime holds sway. We have thus taken the principled step of withdrawing from the alliance, for what it is worth. If we meet in the trenches, we will be ready to join forces in the struggle.

Yours truly,



Lai Brown

National Secretary