

## A Tribute to I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson

# A TRUE SON OF AFRICA

*Bankole Akpata*

IT WAS WITH a sense of deep shock and sadness that the opening session of the Fourth Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference at the Kwame Nkrumah Ideological Institute, Winneba, heard of the death of the veteran African revolutionary nationalist fighter and journalist, Mr. I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson following a car accident in which he was involved on Saturday, May 8th in Accra.

Isaac Theophilus Akunna Wallace-Johnson was born seventy-one years ago in Freetown, Sierra Leone. After receiving his early education in both primary and secondary schools in Freetown, the young Wallace-Johnson first entered the then Colonial civil service in Sierra Leone as a Customs Officer.

It was in the Customs that he first saw the great disparity between the salary and service conditions of African employees and their European counterparts.

The African was, of course, paid a pittance as compared with the huge salaries received by the Europeans. When Wallace-Johnson protested at the obvious injustice of this facet of the colonial system, he was promptly dismissed.

From about the year 1928 Wallace-Johnson travelled abroad as a seaman. This voyage took him to India, China, Japan, the U.S.A., South America and finally ended in Britain.

During his sojourn in Britain he took a course of studies in political science and journalism. It was at this period that Wallace-Johnson met Mr. Jomo Kenyatta (now President of Kenya) and the late Mr. George Padmore.

The three men became firm friends and in 1931 they went to the Soviet Union where they studied first at the People's University of the East, later finishing in Moscow University.

From being a rebel against the colonial system, Wallace-Johnson through his study and experience in the U.S.S.R. became a Marxist.

After their sojourn in the Soviet Union, Wallace-Johnson travelled back to England from where he returned to West Africa in 1933. During a short stay in Lagos, Nigeria, he organized the first trade union in West Africa—Nigerian Workers' Union.

This Union also published a weekly newspaper—*The Nigerian Worker*. Within a few weeks of its appearance the colonial authorities

became so scared of Wallace-Johnson's influence among the Nigerian masses that the governor deported him. By the end of 1933 Wallace-Johnson arrived in Accra.

With characteristic energy and drive Wallace-Johnson went about his political and trade-union work in Accra. In February 1934, he organized and founded the Gold Coast Motor Drivers' Union. In March, 1934, he founded the West African Youth League, a political organization which later established branches in Nigeria, Gambia and Sierra Leone.

It was during the same month, i.e. March 1934, that Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe arrived in the then Gold Coast from the U.S.A. and took up the editorship of the *African Morning Post*.

Wallace-Johnson was a regular contributor to the *African Morning Post* and through this association he and Dr. Azikiwe became firm friends.

It was through their work and collaboration on the *African Morning Post* that led to the now famous sedition case against both Wallace-Johnson and Dr. Azikiwe following the publication of the article 'Has the African a God?' in the issue of June 3rd, 1935, of the *African Morning Post*.

From the latter part of 1935 when Wallace-Johnson went back to England till his return home to Sierra Leone in the summer of 1939, he organized the 'International African Service Bureau' with Mr. Jomo Kenyatta and the late Mr. George Padmore.

This organization disseminated information to the British public about the inhuman conditions prevailing in the British Colonies and demanded reforms.

On his return home to Freetown in 1939 Wallace-Johnson founded the *African Standard* as the official organ of the West African League (Sierra Leone section). With his trenchant pen and incisive language Wallace-Johnson championed the rights of the African people and demanded freedom and independence for the colonies.

A former colonial governor of Sierra Leone was so openly sympathetic to Nazi Germany that he was recalled to London following startling disclosures Wallace-Johnson published in the *African Standard*.

After the outbreak of the second world war on September 3rd, 1939, the colonial authorities interned Wallace-Johnson as a dangerous agitator in Sherbro island (just off Sierra Leone mainland). From his internment camp Wallace-Johnson continued to write for his newspaper the *African Standard* at Number 7, Trelawney Street, Freetown. This office of his paper became the centre of nationalist activities even during his internment.

As he had done both in the Gold Coast and Nigeria, Wallace-Johnson also organized the workers of Sierra Leone and established the Sierra Leone Trades Union Congress.

Towards the end of the war when workers' leaders from the allied countries and their colonies met in London in February, 1945 to lay the foundation for the formation of the World Federation of Trade Unions (W.F.T.U.) Wallace-Johnson as the leader of the Sierra Leone T.U.C. was invited by the organizers of the conference, and as a result of pressure by African organizations in Britain assisted by some progressive British organizations and people, the colonial office ordered the release of Wallace-Johnson who attended the conference.

The end of the war found Wallace-Johnson still in England. He led the Sierra Leone delegation to the Fifth Pan-African Congress held in Manchester in October, 1945.

In December 1945 when the West African delegates to the Fifth Pan-African Congress met and formed the West African National Secretariat, Wallace-Johnson was elected its Chairman and Kwame Nkrumah was elected the Secretary-General.

On his return home to Sierra Leone in 1946 Wallace-Johnson intensified his efforts in the struggle for freedom and independence for his beloved Sierra Leone. He was for many years a member of the Sierra Leone Legislative Council and later a member of the House of Representatives.

Wallace-Johnson was a man of many parts—author, journalist, poet, politician and a fearless fighter for African Unity. With his death Africa has lost a great son, a man whose integrity and dedication to the cause of African liberation and Unity was always a source of inspiration to the younger generation.

Wallace-Johnson like a soldier of the African Revolution died in the front-line of battle on his way to attend the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference in Winneba. The greatest monument we can erect to his memory is to work indefatigably for the early realization of a Continental Union Government of AFRICA.

From *The Spark*, Accra