

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JS-11  
Dennis Akumu -- Rising Labor Leader

P.O. Box 5113  
Nairobi, Kenya  
31 Jan 64

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Mombasa has for centuries been a refuge for those who sailed Africa's Indian Ocean coast: ancient Greeks, Arabs, Persians and Portuguese have all dropped their anchors in her waters. Today there is a definite taste of the past about her -- the brown, crumbling bulk of Fort Jesus, built in the 17th century by the Portuguese, broods over the entrance of the old, dhow-filled harbor while broad, brown women with saddle-bag breasts still pad bare-foot along the white beaches that stretch north and south of the town. Only a taste of the past remains though, for Mombasa is now a modern, vital seaport whose giant cranes lift 70% of East Africa's exports and imports.

The men who operate these cranes, who load and unload the ships, are members of the best organized and most efficiently run union in East Africa, the Mombasa Dockworkers. Their leader, James Dennis Akumu, is widely regarded as Kenya's ablest union official.

Dennis Akumu's charm of manner and directness make a good first impression. A man of medium height and build, he looks older than he is. He was born on 7 August 1934, near Lake Victoria in the Nyakach location of Kenya's Central Nyanza District. He went to primary and junior secondary school in Nyanza Province before going to the Aggrey Memorial High School near Kampala in Uganda. In 1951, he entered a medical training school in Nairobi in the hopes of becoming a doctor, but, "the Emergency interrupted everything so I had to leave school." Akumu then went to work for the East African Breweries as a laboratory assistant. There he joined the Distributive and Commercial Workers Union and soon became its representative in the breweries. "Employers discouraged union activities then, so I was asked to leave the company."



Dennis Akumu

After his dismissal, Akumu worked on the staff of the Local Government Workers Union as the district organizer for Nairobi. During the 1957 elections he supported Tom Mboya in his successful campaign against Clement Argwings-Kodhek. "After Tom won the election, 24 of us formed the Peoples Convention Party (PCP). I was its first organizing secretary and later its general secretary." Mboya, who also headed the Kenya Federation of Labor at this time, was impressed with Akumu's ability and asked him if he would consider taking charge of the badly disorganized Mombasa Dockworkers Union. Akumu agreed and took over as its general secretary in March 1958. Since then he has been re-elected four times.

Under Akumu, membership in the Union has grown from 500 to 6,500, its dues check-off system has become the most efficient of any in East Africa, the minimum wage has risen from \$20.60 per month to over \$64.00, and its overtime, paid leave (21 days annually), and sickness benefit (three months) provisions are unmatched in East African industry. Industrial relations in the port have also improved. "When I was first elected, the employers had a negative attitude so we organized a series of strikes during which they tried to force me out. As an answer to this, the union re-elected me unopposed in a special referendum, and from then on, the employers have respected us. We ourselves have matured; we've learned more about industrial relations and the importance of the port to East Africa."

Akumu has widened his horizons considerably since he joined the Dockworkers. He has visited the United States (his attractive wife is an American Negro schoolteacher), North Africa, West Africa, and Eastern and Western Europe. He is the Chairman of what he describes as "a loose federation of East African dockworkers," he runs the Coast branch of the Kenya Federation of Labor (KFL), and was recently appointed a Assistant General Secretary of the national organization. However, he has failed to get the job of General Secretary, the most important position in the labor movement, and the one he wants the most.

From the time he went to Mombasa Akumu was regarded as the heir apparent to Mboya. Then, in 1961, they clashed. Ghana had arranged a conference to launch its All Africa Trade Union Federation and Mboya sent a KFL representative with strict orders to vote against any motion that supported disaffiliation of African unions from the West-oriented International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). Akumu appeared in Accra, unsponsored by the KFL, openly supporting a break with the ICFTU. In the debate that followed, the KFL man, Gideon Mutiso, wavered and finally disobeyed Mboya's orders by voting for disaffiliation. When Mboya heard this, he angrily blamed Akumu's intervention.

After the break with Mboya, Akumu formed his own group within the KFL. It now consists of Ochola Mak'anyengo, leader of the Petroleum Workers Union, Walter Ottenyo of the Kenya Railway African Union, Were Ogutu of the Chemical Workers Union, Daniel Ngethe of the Hotel and Domestic Workers Union and Wilson Makuna of the Printing and Kindred Trades Workers Union. "We meet privately before the executive committee meetings and before the annual conference to decide our own policy." During last July's elections to choose a successor to Mboya and to elect new officers the group won all the top positions except that of General Secretary and all except Akumu were elected. The contest between Akumu and Clement Lubembe for the top post was extremely

close, and although Akumu is recognized as the abler man and had more popular support, Lubembe won because he had the backing of Mboya and of Kanu (the Kenya African National Union), the ruling political party. Recently, there have been strong rumors of what a retired KFL official described to me as a "coup d'etat" to oust Lubembe. If it occurs, the odds are that Akumu will succeed him.

Akumu has had political ambitions since the 1957 elections and the days of the PCP. When he moved from Nairobi to the Coast, he tried to affiliate one of the local parties with the PCP. "I had no luck so eventually I became the leader of one of the three political associations in the area. We merged with Kanu when it was formed in 1960." Before the 1961 national elections, Akumu had his eye on the Mombasa West seat, but the Kanu leaders thought that because tribal feelings were running high, only one Luo, Mboya, should be a candidate for the three open (for voters of all three races) town seats of Mombasa West, Nairobi East and Nakuru Town. In Mombasa, Kanu chose T.M. Chokwe, a member of a Coast tribe with the politically attractive status of an ex-detainee, and sent Mboya to ask Akumu not to run. The memory of this time still stirs Akumu; "we were in a stronger position, but Kanu betrayed us by adopting Chokwe. When Tom asked me to stand down, I did so only to preserve party unity."

As an inducement to get Akumu to withdraw from the campaign, Mboya had offered him his help in getting the Kanu nomination in the next elections. It was a difficult promise to keep. After winning in 1961, Chokwe served as a Minister in the Coalition Government and had no intention of relinquishing his seat. Once more, Mboya went to Mombasa to ask Akumu not to run. This time, Akumu flatly refused, saying that he had been put off once too often and that if Kanu would not support him, he would run on his own. "I felt I had to run. I am convinced that labor doesn't have a strong enough voice in politics." Standing as an Independent, Akumu polled only 212 votes out of a total of 25,600.

"I lost because in the minds of the voters, the issues in the election were thinned down to the single question of who would run the country, Kenyatta or Ngala. As an Independent with no party affiliation, I was left out. Also, I did not have the finances or the facilities that the party candidates had. I will stand again in the next election and I should win because many people are realizing that the new Government has not kept its promises and are dissatisfied."

His participation in the election was to cost Akumu dearly in his bid for leadership of the KFL. Chokwe too was beaten and the Kanu leaders bitterly accused Akumu of diverting votes to the successful Kadu (Kenya African Democratic Union) candidate. When the time came to choose a new General Secretary for the KFL supported Lubembe instead of Akumu.

Akumu has been somewhat more successful in local politics. He won a seat as a candidate on the Mombasa Municipal Council in 1960 and kept it the following year. He was defeated in his attempt for reelection the next two years because, he says, "I was on the Kanu ticket and the party was hopelessly split by factions. All our candidates lost to Kadu people."

After saying this, Akumu stopped talking and sat quietly for a moment. He turned to me suddenly and said, "I want to make my position on the ICFTU clear. Let me say first that the KFL's tie with it has helped in the past. Without assistance from outside the country we would never have been able to build the union movement here. But, if we remain tied to the ICFTU, a group rivalling the KFL will spring up claiming that we are stooges of the West. We in Africa want to mediate between East and West and we must be free of ties to one side or the other. We must be separate, yet what we need in Africa is not a supposedly 'All African' trade union movement that is really manufactured and centered in some corner of Africa like Ghana, but an organization located centrally in the continent to which every African country will belong without coercion."

I asked Akumu what kind of economy Kenya should have. "I have read widely and have thought a lot about this. We can't get bogged down in rigid Marxism because it hasn't worked everywhere, but there are certain steps we must take to build socialism here. I believe in a reasonably planned economy which initially would be a combination of private and government-owned enterprises. The point of building Kenya's economy is to help our people and the leaders know this, but it is becoming increasingly clear that some of our government officials are not remaining neutral. They are taking money from potential investors. Chokwe did when he was Minister of Works.

"Our biggest economic problem at the moment is unemployment. It can only be solved by putting more people on the land. The Government must buy more European farms and turn them into cooperatives; also, people should fill the unoccupied land. The worst unemployment is obviously found in the towns and if town people won't move onto the land after a reasonable amount of persuasion, they should be forced to go. We'd better get rid of the thugs on the streets or there will be big trouble in Kenya. Could we take more people on the docks? I suppose so, but they'd be excess and we would just be carrying them."

Akumu has definite ideas about how the KFL should be run. "If I were elected General Secretary of the KFL, I would spend a year building it up. I would impose an annual cess of three shillings (\$.42) on every union member to give us financial strength to acquire an adequate staff with a good research section. I would then produce a series of documents which would set forth our position on various issues and give us a basis for discussions with the Government. We must fight any move by the Government to control unions the way Tanganyika's has. Right now, the biggest stumbling block to building a strong labor movement is the present General Secretary, Lubembe. His leadership is weak and he doesn't know whether he is in the Government or out; in labor such a position is impossible. He won't last long."

I left Akumu impressed by his drive and his independence, yet questioning how strong his ties to labor really are. The post-colonial struggle for power is at its height and opportunism shreds loyalties that once seemed indestructible. Still, wherever he goes, whatever he does, Dennis Akumu should be a success. He struck me as that kind of man.

Sincerely,

*John Spencer*  
John Spencer