

EXAMINING THE ROLE OF ORGANIZED LABOUR IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS.

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ABSTRACT: The thrust of this paper is examining the role of organized labour in Nigeria: Challenges and Solutions. The paper argues the changing roles of organized labour from that of a union regarded as working in solidarity to achieve industrial peace, the dignity of labour, social justice for workers and fighting for poor masses. The paper avers that organized labour before now, through the instrumentality of strikes and collective bargaining, influenced the government's anti-people, pro-rich policies and practices that were perceived as obnoxious. The intentional fragmentation of organized labour or trade unionism by the government and slow reactionary measures towards workers' welfare, among other key issues, have necessitated this research work. The paper opined that organized labour has abandoned championing the course of the millions of Nigerian workers and poor rather than as an extension of the political party in power in the last few years. The main objective of this paper is to critically examine the role of organized labour in Nigeria and to what extent they have solved the problem of Nigerian worker's welfare in the face of the harsh economic situations and poor Nigeria in general. Also, determine the challenges faced by organized labour in Nigeria and proffer solutions. This paper adopted a qualitative research method. It is a purely descriptive study relying heavily on theoretical literature. The paper concluded that organized labour should be seen as a more viable and visible partner in the struggle to better the welfare of workers and poor citizens in Nigeria.

Keywords: Organised Labour, Workers' Welfare, Collective Bargaining, Trade Unionism

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of establishing trade unions, according to Sydney and Beatrice Webb (1911), as cited in Nwagbara (20014), is that workers initially join unions to pursue immediate economic goals but eventually pursue political, economic and social reforms such as nationalization of industries and the protection of infant industries. One major interest in labour is the effectiveness of these organisations to remain financially stable and its ability to work within established political, economic and social systems despite the supportive or disruptive features of the social environment to contribute to national development. Despite the efforts to contribute to national development, the political class has continued to accuse organized labour of interfering in the political and economic processes as it were. For example, labour fought against military dictatorship in the post-colonial era.

Arguably, organized labour had always lend its voice to issues of national interest, the debate for and against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans of 1986 proposed by the Military Administration of General Ibrahim Babangida and Labour's stance against the acceptance of

the loan; the Lacuna caused as a result of the absence of the late Nigerian President, Alhaji Umaru Yar'Adua for about six months from late October 2009 to March 2010 and the National Strike on Fuel Subsidy removal in 2012 by labour against the government of Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, recently in the Administration of President Bola Tinubu labour strike have crippled the economic activities of Nigeria severally, especially in their fourth nationwide strike (indefinite) which happened on Monday June 3rd, 2024 over the initially failed tripartite committee's inability to agree on a new minimum wage, and hike in electricity tariff, labour forced the operations of national electrical grid control rooms, shutting down at least six substations down, first in the history of Nigeria for many years, including shutting down entrances of offices, airport in the capital, Abuja, and in the economic hub of Lagos.

It is on record that hundreds of passengers were stranded after local airlines suspended flight operations. The labour revolt comes in the heart of President Tinubu's bold but unpopular economic reforms, which are aimed at causing the highest inflation in decades and soaring costs of living. With the fuel subsidies ended, unions have constantly pressured Tinubu to offer relief to households and small businesses, or alternatively return back the fuel subsidies. Labour efforts in performing their roles and ensuring good governance are not limited to these mentioned above mentioned cases. All over the world, organized labour has become an important agent of harsh economic policies, transformation, and class struggle, always trying to represent the working-class interest against persistent capitalist exploitation (Okechukwu, 2019). In contemporary times, however, especially in developing countries, labour unionism has become an indispensable tool in promoting and guaranteeing industrial harmony between the employer and employee. In Nigeria, labour unions fought the above-mentioned battles and more in the past and still fighting presently.

In another development, labour movements all over the world, through their constant activities and defence of workers and members of society, have forced sit-tight dictatorial and fascist regimes to accede to the demands of labour. This has paved the way for the gradual increase in earnings, improvement in the employment conditions of workers, change in draconian government policies, the election of the right popular politicians and installation of chosen mandates and the adjustment of harsh economic obnoxious policies, for example, the 1980's SAP in Nigeria, thus making such policies more humane and supportive of the lives and economic interests of the generality of the citizens (Okechukwu, 2019).

According to Iyayi (2008), labour unions in Nigeria have gradually gone beyond their traditional roles of championing the cause of workers by wielding much political and social influence and acting as a vigilant watchdog for the people. As a matter of fact, this welcome development can only be sustained with labour's continuous active involvement in politics because it is at the political realm that decisions affecting the economic wellbeing of labour membership are taken and again, there are strong linkages between democracy, good governance, national development and labour's better economic wellbeing as Ekpenyong (2016) puts it "the dividing line between economics and governance is very blurred".

From the foregoing roles and more labour has played in the past that gave them their new name as a vigilant watch dog for the people, one can still pause for a moment to ask questions and assertions such as: Is labour still performing their roles of the past in practical terms presently? If yes, to what extent does organized labour consistently and genuinely involved in the workers welfare, social and political issues in Nigeria? If no, what could be their possible challenges

and how do we proffer solutions to labour in Nigeria. Simply put, this paper is significant to Nigerian workers, union leaders, and policymakers to examine the various contributions of organized labour to Nigerian workers towards good welfare, good governance, and national development. Our final thesis is that a government that does not respect or honour agreements entered with organized labour has no respect for its citizens and labour force. It is pertinent to mention that other researchers have studied the history of trade unionism in Nigeria. Few, if any, studies have examined the role of organised labour in Nigeria, including its challenges and solutions.

Conceptual Elucidations and Theoretical Underpinnings

Labour

The term labour lacks a universally acceptable definition. Meaning that it has no settled meaning as its meaning is elastic and inexhaustible. To some individuals labour simply means “a source of wealth” (Oyaida et al, 2014). According to Obasi (1997) a trade or labour union is a group of workers whose major aim is to seek for improvement in the material conditions of its members. But, the opinion of Toyo as cited in Eze and Chinwuba (2015), trade unions or labour unions are organizations of an under-privilege class for class struggle in a society characterized by privileged... The trade unions are organizations of the underdogs in modern production and service activities. These under dogs are refers to as employees, wage workers or salaried workers (Toyo 2008). Labour therefore is an umbrella organization of all workers whose only source of subsistence is the sale of their labour power. Audi (2009), seems to agree no less with this position when he argued that trade unionism all over the world emerged for improving the economic, living standard and working condition of workers. In this paper, we view labour as organization of workers in either public or private sector of the economy who sell their labour and resources to seek permanent solutions to menacing socio-economic and political problems in Nigeria. According to Section 1(1) of the trade union Act, Cap 437, a trade union, is defined as:

“Any combination of workers or employers, whether temporary or permanent, the purpose of which is to regulate the terms and Conditions of employment of workers, whether the combination in question would or would not, apart from this Act, be an unlawful combination by reason of any of its purposes being in restraint of trade, and whether its purposes do or do not include the provision of benefits for its members”

The definition of trade union stated above-described what trade unions are, which organization constitute a trade union, their roles and responsibilities and the goals that define them. From the definition, we can say that either employers or employees can form trade unions and this combination can either be temporary or permanent, which means that trade unions can be formed to achieve a defined goal and thereafter dissolved. However, their resolution must be to “regulate” their employment terms and conditions and the economic, social, and psychological condition of its members too. Labour is this discourse refers to the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and its affiliate bodies.

Good Governance

Governance is also subjected to varied definitions like many other concepts. Dozie as cited in Chinwuba and Eze (2015), observed that governance is “the totality of processes entitled in the exercise and management of the collective will of a people by a people under a defined authority or constitution. Alaba Ogunsawo, as cited in Chinwuba and Eze (2015), also asserted that good governance is a responsible and responsive government with the welfare of the people being the main purpose of the state and those who govern on its behalf. Good governance, therefore, has to do with those activities of the public office holders, such as policy making and implementation, which ensure transparency, responsiveness, accountability, and efficient service delivery to enhance the quality of life of the governed. Simply put, good governance is not the process but the result of governance.

Development

The term development is not an easy one to define. It is not easy to define because of the changing nature of its perception, arising from the fact that it can be applied in relation to diverse spheres of life and ideological lineage. For example, the concept of development can be applied with regard to economics, politics, culture, religion, technology, etcetera, such as economic development, political development, socio-cultural, religious and technological development, among others (Wilson, 2002). Yet these various dimensions are inextricably interwoven such that any attempt to look at development from one perspective will amount to compartmentalization of knowledge, which radical social scientists consider socially irrelevant. This calls for the current emphasis to approach the study of development from an interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary viewpoint (Ake, 1981; Todaro, 1992). According to Rodney (2005), development in human society is a many-sided process. At the level of the individual, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. Some of these are moral categories and are difficult to evaluate depending on the age in which one lives, one’s class origin, and one’s personal code of what is right or what is wrong, but what is undisputed is that the achievement of any of those aspects of personal development is very much tied in with the state of the society. At the level of social groups, therefore, development implies an increasing capacity to regulate both internal and external relationships.

Again, much of human society has been a fight for survival against natural hazards and against real and imagined human enemies. Development also means growth integrated with economic, scientific, political and home-based technological expansion (Oghuvbu, 2007). Kindleberger and Herrick (1977), therefore, define economic development to include improvements in material welfare, especially for persons with the lowest incomes, and the eradication of mass poverty, illiteracy, diseases and early death. The relationship between labour, good governance and development shows while labour’s role as a group is to checkmate the activities of the public officeholders against irresponsible and unresponsive acts of governance to ensure a good welfare package for its members, labour also guards against exploitation of its members against their increased skills and capacity, greater freedom, material wellbeing and growth with integrated economic, scientific, political and home-based technological expansion. These roles

of organized labour should be commended in light of the excessiveness of those in leadership positions over time in the context of Nigeria.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This paper explains two theories: system theory and elite theory. But elite theory was adopted because it is broad, holistic and relevant to the work

System Theory

The major proponents of this theory among others are David Easton (1959), Katz and Kahn (1966), Robert Ghin (1969), and Talcott Parsons (1951), but the system theory explained here is the one as propounded by Niklas Luhmann (1979), Luhmann saw the social system as functional units, whose survival and continuous existence largely depend on the relationship of individual units. Again, the entire social system occurs in an environment that is multi-dimensional, creating imaginable ceaseless entanglement that the system must deal with. According to Akikibofori (2018), for a social system to survive in a harsh environment, it must put in place an appliance to control the harshness; otherwise, the system will blend with the environment. These appliances are concerned with choosing approaches and methods for controlling complications. This alternative brings into being a circumscription by a system and its environment, thus letting the system continue the correlation process.

The central occupational precondition in Luhmann's investigation is the commitment to curtail the complication of the environment in connection with the system of interrelated actions (Turner, 2013). It focuses on complexity and interdependence. It describes a phenomenon, be it physical, biological or social; it is conceived as an organized structure which is functional and identifiable through interrelated parts or sub-systems. A System Theory is delineated by identifiable boundaries from the supra-system (the environment) in which it is embedded. Thus, a system is situated within a larger context and environment with which it engages, which involves input and output processes that can be schematically represented.

According to Haralambos and Holborn (2007), a system is an entity made up of interconnected and interrelated parts. Each of these roles is necessary for the continuation of the whole and the parts. Most often, these roles are not complementary. It may be negative; where it is negative, it means that the parts are working at cross-purposes with each other, and they become counter-productive for the maintenance of the whole. The parts of a system will act to maintain their interdependence while the whole will act to integrate the system.

Elite Theory

This paper adopted the elite theory which tries to explain the roles of elites in democracy and governance. The political elites have tended to utilise the advantage of the excessive power available to them and embark on unbridled amassment of wealth at the expense of the working poor masses whose only property is the labour that they offer with low remuneration. As they continue to control the structure of the state, the poor worker's interests have become synonymous with theirs. It has been opined that "the fact that Nigeria state is oscillating between democratic stagnancy and governance backwardness is a reflexive of the elite" pursuit of personal aggrandizement and promotion of egocentrism rather than altruistic policies, that

are nationalistic and people-centric in nature (Arowolo et al., 2012). This development, as it were, alienated the working poor and therefore encouraged the workers to coalesce and synergize with the civil society groups to seriously checkmate the powers of the elites in a democracy that advocates participation, transparency, accountability, justice, equity, and fair play. The role of labour in this context is to strengthen and deepen good governance as a means to ensure development in Nigeria.

Evaluation of Organized Labour's Roles in Nigeria

A critical evaluation of the roles organized labour played in Nigeria can be viewed from different areas, but especially from three core perspectives, namely, economy, politics, social cum educational.

Economy

From history and records, from the economic perspective, one can authoritatively say that organised labour has played roles immensely. Despite the periodic agitation for good remuneration and wage increases for workers of Nigeria in the form of a new minimum wage, it has helped to collectivize, project, and protect the views, yearnings, interests and aspirations of workers in a bid to improve their terms and conditions of employment within the industrial relations system. Labour took its resolute stand against securing the World Bank/International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan and austerity programmes which the military administration of General Ibrahim Babangida proposes. Labour ensured that its stand and voice were clearly communicated to the administration, stating that such loans would not only be misused but also be squandered by the government, as previous funds have been mismanaged. The position of labour was that the masses would suffer most from the austerity measures aimed at improving the economy. However, the federal government eventually implemented the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). The negative effects on the poor masses were so overwhelming, resulting in the nationwide spread of riots in 1989. Again, still, on economic roles, records have it that during the issue of increase in the prices of petroleum products, from 27th May 1978 to 2002, the federal government increased prices of petroleum products eighteen times and organized labour protested nine times and promoted civil protest nationwide three times (Okaka, 2010). The general strike called by labour in June 2007 to protest against the sales of the government-owned petroleum refineries in Port Harcourt and Kaduna, and the increased rates of value-added Tax (VAT) and Income Tax from five per cent each to ten per cent are also clear examples of labour's roles to the nation's economy. The strike by labour forced the then government to change its earlier decision to increase the rates of tax and value-added tax (VAT). In 2012, labour called for a national strike on the petroleum subsidy removal and the strike was suspended on the 18th day of January 2012, to press on the government not to remove petroleum subsidies. that strike was also successful as the government reversed its decision on fuel subsidy removal.

But today, especially after twelve (12) years, labour seems to be keeping mute against the government's irresponsible and insensitive activities that have led to high economic inflationary indices like NNPC sales of petrol from #650 per litre to #850 per litre, and other filling stations sale fuel a litre arranging from #1,300 to #1,500 causing motorists to increase the price of transportation, making life difficult for citizens, with high cost of living including foreign exchange rate hereby changing its roles from that of the championing the course of democracy

and good governance sustainability to rather a subversive organization. Though this paper is not intended to accuse or indict the present leadership of labour under Joe Ajaero looking at the roles of labour holistically least from Adams Oshiomole and Comrade Omar Abdulwaheed their obstacles and achievements, it appeared that the new roles of labour today may be unconnected with leadership and the elitist desire to struggle power with the poor working class.

Politically

According to records and history, in the area of politics, organized labour has contributed its own quota by constantly getting involved in the issues that concern Nigerians generally. Aladada (2004), observed that labour has contributed enormously to the emergence of democracy and sustaining of democracy in Nigeria, citing the efforts of labour towards defending democracy after the presidential elections that were declared and finally held in June 1993, but annulled by the military president, General Ibrahim Babangida even when the initial results of the election indicated that the Social Democratic Party (SDP) candidate and publisher Chief Moshood Abiola (late) had won the election by a large majority. Labour after waiting patiently and the government also seemed not too willing to release the entire election result, declared a general strike in 1994 to protest these developments and protect our democracy, first by the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas (NUPENG) and followed by Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association (PENGASSAN). The situation led to fuel scarcity, wide spread crises, and the entire country was almost grounded, with the masses calling for the release of the results and subsequent installation of Chief Moshood Abiola as the duly elected president of Nigeria. Babangida, however, claimed he still supported a transition to democracy and on August 26th, 1993, he transferred power to an interim national government under Chief Ernest Shonekan. During the 2003 general elections, organized labour had its own election monitors to ensure the freeness and fairness of elections; labour encouraged Nigerians to accept the 2003 general election results. During the public hearing for constitutional amendment held nationwide from February to April 2010, organized labour actively took part and held its own position.

Another case worthy of consideration is the roles played by organized labour because of the lacunae in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which makes no provision in case the president leaves office due to ill health without handing to his vice, as a result of the absence of the late president of Nigeria, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua for about six (6) months from late October 2006 to March 2010 and the then vice president was not able to act in the capacity of the president. Labour added its voice to that of millions of Nigerians who insisted that power be handed to Goodluck Jonathan. Recently, the country has witnessed religiously motivated killings like the herdsmen and farmers clashes, which have remained unabated, and labour seemed to keep its face the other way for reasons unknown to the masses.

Challenges of Organized Labour in Nigeria.

Organized labour is confronted with several challenges that are slowing their ability to perform and protect member's interests and society at large. The absolute overbearing influence of the government in the arbitration process. This has caused lack of confidence in the dispute resolution mechanism among organized labour. For example, according to section 9(2) of the Trade Dispute Act, the Panel shall consist of a Chairman, a Vice Chairman and not less than

ten (10) other members all of whom shall be appointed by the Minister. Subsection 2, provides that of the members, two shall be persons nominated by organizations appearing to the Minister as representing the interests of the employers, while another two shall be persons nominated by organizations appearing to the Minister as representing the interests of the workers. Organized labour has complained bitterly over the years that the government wields undue influence over the arbitration system, thereby eroding judicial trust.

Again, in violation of the sanctity of collective agreement, organized labour has always cried about the failure of the government to keep the uniqueness and sacredness of such agreement, which is premised on the fact that it joins authorship. Strike in the Nigerian public sector often emanates from the repudiation of agreements signed by employer (government) negotiators who have no mandate to commit the employers to such agreements (See Fashoyin, 1992; Onyeonoru, 2004).

In a similar vein, the Federal Government inevitably sends Bills to the National Assembly to amend the activities of organized labour with the sole motive of grappling them and denying organized labour the opportunity to protect and promote their member's rights. Also, desperation and deliberate court interlocutory injunctions restraining organized labour from fighting for members' rights and the poor Nigerians in general. At times when these court injunctions are violated, organised labour leaders and members are faced with police brutality, arrests and detentions, etc. On the 9th day of September 2024, Joe Ajaero was arrested and taken to an unknown destination with several allegations on his head, just to weaken labour in order not to protest against the hike in fuel pump prices and the hardship associated with it. Currently, the federal government is still hiking fuel pump prices without considering the economic implications on the poor Nigeria Masses.

Solutions to Organized Labour Challenges in Nigeria.

Organised labour in Nigeria shares a similar narrative or challenges to the country itself. The country gained independence 64 years ago but still struggles with the same problems. Similarly, organized labour in Nigeria has suffered from the same problems since its inception, and it's quite a shame that despite different leaders coming to power, their problems or struggles, especially the issue of strikes, have remained unsolved in Nigeria.

Therefore, it is expedient that organised labour should jettison the language of strike, which the Government understand very well, and find another means of influencing government decisions and actions rather than strike. This is urgent because organized labour today in Nigeria arguably is changing to a political appendage of government in power. Strikes, in most cases, create opportunities for the government in power to induce union leaders financially, and this makes strike actions ineffective and unreliable in achieving its objectives. Organised labour must initiate a better strategy that will either aid or serve as an alternative to strike actions. Strikes have achieved a lot of results for organized labour in Nigeria, but they are only effective and forceful when the central nation's bodies engage them. To remedy the change the Nigeria state requires, it rests in our hands to show solidarity and tenacity to organized labour, which must begin to speak against unhealthy workplace situations, such as harassment, contract staffing, and wrongful dismissal, among other pressing issues, to force a change and reorientation of the masses in the Nigeria society. Sincerely speaking, the masses have lost a degree of trust in the NLC and TUC, which is why the masses engaged in nationwide protests

for ten (10) days against bad governance and hardship in Nigeria in August 2024. However, the trust lost can still be regained when appropriate measures are put in place.

Concluding Remarks

The primary objective of organized labour is to bring bread and butter to the table of its members and poor masses in Nigeria labour. The government and employers of labour have complimentary and contradicted exploitative relationships. Therefore, organized labour must be proactive to issues relating to their primary objective rather than reactive. If strike action cannot solve the problem of Nigerians, they should, as a matter of urgency, initiate a better strategy that will either aid or serve as an alternative to strike actions. According to history and records, the Nigerian government has made a series of promises after prolonged strikes but failed to comply with fulfilling their written or gentleman's agreement. For example, the just concluded strike agreement with the Federal government with organized labour on New Minimum Wage fixing and stable pump price of petroleum, surprisingly, till date the new minimum wage has not been implemented and fuel price increased from #650 per litre by NNPC to #850 per a litre, recently has increased again to #1,025 per litre, which received widespread criticisms from the Organized private sector, civil society organizations and Nigerians in general and some filling stations sale fuel a litre arranging from #1,300 to #1,500, this came as the Dangote Petroleum Refinery faulted the continued importation of petrol by oil marketers and NNPC despite the fact that the commodity was produced in the country by the \$20bn Lekki-based plant, causing motorists to increase the price of transportation, making life difficult for citizens. Experts and key followers of the Nigerian oil and gas sector fear inflation in the country may further skyrocket following the latest hike, after it rose to a 28-year high (34.2 per cent) in June, which could compound the hardship in the country. The organized labour is still watching like a dog.

Recommendations

The paper recommended as follows:

1. Organized labour should be seen as a more viable and visible partner in the struggle to better the welfare of workers and poor citizens in Nigeria. Labour should be proactive, not reactive, to issues of Nigerian citizens, especially in the midst of the present economic challenges.
2. The government and labour employers in Nigeria should, as a matter of importance, show a human face and ensure sincerity in all their negotiations and agreements.
3. Labour education is necessary for all stakeholders in the public and private sectors, labour unions, and their rank and file. This will expose all these stakeholders to the principles and practice of industrial relations in general. The need and value of labour education cannot be overstressed.

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