

THE CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF TRADE UNIONS IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

Trade unions are established to bridge communication gaps that may exist between the employers and individual employees and to fight for the general welfare of the working class people. Beyond that, trade unions are fundamental to the development of secure, prosperous and democratic society. They are also the bedrock of civil society. In spite of these important functions, trade unions in Nigeria have had a chequered history mainly as a result of their ordeals in the hands of successive regimes in Nigeria. Trade unions in Nigeria have always been at the receiving end of obnoxious government policies, internal crisis and the impacts of globalization. Successive regimes in Nigeria from colonial, military to democratic regimes have always looked at trade unions with suspicion instead of partners in progress. As a result of this posture, trade unions have often been treated with disdain and even proscribed at some points. In spite of this situation, the political history of Nigeria underscores the continuing significance of the trade unions in Nigeria. In a country where there are no viable oppositions to the government in power, trade Unions have continued to fight for the interests of the ordinary people, and will most likely continue to perform this all important function into the unforeseeable future. Based on the foregoing, this paper examines the Challenges faced by trade unions in Nigeria from the colonial era to the present democratic dispensation and contends that trade unions will continue to be resilient and remain the voice of the voiceless in Nigerian society into the distant future provided they work out ways of grappling with the numerous challenges facing trade unions in Nigeria.

Key words: Trade Unions, Challenges, Prospects.

Introduction

The journey of trade unions in Nigeria from the colonial period to the present period has not been smooth

(Oyelere and Owoyemi, 2011). The organization of trade unions has had a chequered history surviving two instances of dissolution of its national organs under military juntas and a

third from a civilian administration (Oyelere and Owoyemi, 2011). Arbitration, prolonged and unlawful detention of union leaders, invasion and disruption of union meetings, seminars and other activities of congress and its components by security operatives and a vicious anti-union campaign by the state generally marked the military era of Nigeria's polity, while colonial, civilian and military regimes invoked legislative prerogatives to unleash all manner of legislations to check the activities of unions (Omole, 1991; Abu, 2007; Oyelere and Owoyemi, 2011). Successive governments in Nigeria are also known to abhor sincere dialogue in dealing with trade unions and their members. For instance, Ghosi (1989) observes that in the Nigeria context, collective bargaining is a form of direct intervention. Also according to Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) (2008), a large number of unionized workers particularly in the public sector are not covered by formal and well-structured collective bargaining machinery which often leads to ad hoc negotiations occasioned by industrial crisis. Most government parastatals with few exceptions have no collective bargaining machinery, nor do unions negotiate with their managements. In the case of civil service, the age-long negotiation machinery became dormant in the 1990s and was only resorted to during severe crisis (NLC, 2008; 2009). Successive governments in Nigeria have also had the penchant for dishonouring agreements reached

in previous negotiations whenever they deem it fit to negotiate with trade unions (2011). The newest case in point is the failure of federal government to implement the 2009 FG/ASUU agreement which is the cause of the current ASUU strike.

These interventions according to Abu (2007), are mainly through polices, decrees and laws enacted by government to regulate the formation, administration and operation of trade unions in Nigeria. Some of them include; the Trade Union ordinance 1938, Trade Disputes (Arbitration and Inquiry) Act 1973, Labour Policy 1975, Trade Disputes Act 1976 including Decrees No.4, 24 and 29 of 1996 and the recent Trade Union Act (Amended) (2005) (Abu, 2007). Most of these Acts and Decrees were either promulgated or enacted at various times by the colonial, military and civilian administrations in Nigeria (Omole, 1991; Abu, 2007).

Trade unions are also faced with problems arising from the internal organization of the different trade unions which range from inept leadership to general lack of focus which should not be among the major hallmarks of 21st century trade unions. Globalization has also thrown up problems that are altering the traditional ways of organizing work with grave implications for workers and their unions.

In spite of all these distractions trade Unions in Nigeria have made

significant impact on the nature, structure and implementation of government programmes. Although the political role of unions continues to increase in sphere, their impact diminished under the Obasanjo administration. Events evolving since 2004 in industrial relations reveal that the state in democratic dispensation is still coercive (Adewumi, 2007; Abu, 2007; Oyelere and Owoyemi, 2011). In June 2004, the government announced its plan to decentralize the labour union and remove the oil subsidy. Consequently a bill to amend the Trade Union Act was sent to the National Assembly. The bill sought to proscribe the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and fragment the trade unions; make strike action impossible; make recognition difficult; and, freeze, union sources of finance (Abu, 2007; Akinwale, 2011). Consequent to the immediate action taken by the NLC with support from the International Labour Organization (ILO), the National Assembly reworded the bill, and passed a law which was slightly different from what the executive had proposed. However, the executive's action, despite earlier setting up a stakeholders committee, including the ILO, to review the Industrial and Labour Relations Laws in the Country revealed the government's repressive and draconian **Stand** in Industrial and Labour Relations (Oyelere and Owoyemi, 2011). The paper therefore sets out to interrogate the challenges faced by trade unions in Nigeria with the view to ascertaining whether they

can retain the capacity to continue to discharge their constitutional roles in the face of numerous daunting challenges presented by the Nigerian political environment, internal organization of trade unions, relationship among the unions themselves and the impact of the global environment in an era of massive globalization.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Trade Unions are organizations of wage and salary earners formed for the purpose of maintaining and improving the employment conditions of their members (Fashoyin, 2005). According to Onyeonoru (2005) trade unions are associations of working people formed to pursue the welfare and desirable working conditions of their members. Abiala (2012) also regard trade unionism as a movement concerned with advocacy, defence and protection of workers' rights and the improvement of their material condition through pay and conditions of service. Although in our own setting trade unions usually go beyond this boundary in fighting for the rights of the down trodden and in contributing to national development (Tuman, 1994).

In the Nigeria context, the Trade Union Act 1973 described a trade union to mean any combination of workers or employers, whether temporary or permanent for the

purpose of regulating the terms and conditions of employment of workers. Hence, both workers and employers are conceptualized as belonging to trade unions (Onyeonoru, 2005). In Nigeria, there have been conflicts relating to the scope of trade union activity. While the government prefers to limit trade unions to "workplace issues" typical of business unionism in the United States of America (USA), the trade unions prefer to define their role broadly as embracing political engagements, sometimes pursued through civil society alliances. They tend rather toward social movement unionism (Onyeonoru, 2005). Just as workers are organized in the form of labour unions for the purpose of protecting the interest of their members, through collective bargaining, for instance, employers also organize themselves into employers associations for similar purpose (Fashoyin, 2005; Onyeonoru, 2005). The Trade Union Act therefore recognizes them as trade unions. The major difference between the two however, is that while the former has individuals as their members the latter is usually made up of corporate bodies or organizations (that is the group of firms) often represented by the management of the enterprise. However, the paper essentially dwells on workers' trade unions.

The paper is theoretically hinged on the Marxist political economy approach rooted in the ideas of Karl Marx (1818 – 1883). The

Marxist political economy approach emphasizes a materialist interpretation of history, a dialectical method of analysis, a critical stance toward existing social arrangement, and a political programme of revolution or, at least, reform (Ogunbameru, 2008). The single most important element in Marx's sociological theorizing is the concept of class. Whereas contemporary sociologists sometimes use the term social class loosely to refer to the relative ranking of individuals on such dimensions as education or income, class for Marx refers to basic structural components of a society as a whole (Ogunbameru, 2008; Giddens, 2009). The class structure of a particular society is determined by the system of economic production that exists in that society at a given point in history. The division of different segments of the population into classes ultimately depends on their respective relationships of ownership versus non-ownership of the existing means of production. In the case of capitalist economies, the means of production are the factories, machines, and financial resources used in the manufacture of material goods to be sold for profit. As capitalist society develops historically, Marx argued that it is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other – the bourgeoisie and proletariat (Marx and Engels, 1958). The bourgeoisie or capitalist class is the owners of the manufacturing system who reap the profits from the sale of material goods.

The proletariat or working class is non owners of capital who are forced to exchange their labour for wages paid by capitalist employers.

This perspective helps us to have a better understanding of the ordeals of the trade unions in Nigeria, especially as it concerns its relationship with the successive regimes. Trade unions in Nigeria have never had it rosy with the different political regimes in Nigeria, be it military or civilian. The Marxist political economy which is essentially a view of society as a product of conflicts rooted mainly in the class inequalities and exploitative relationships between the powerful rich and the powerless poor captures the situation in Nigeria most appropriately. The poor working class people are represented by their unions while the powerful rich by virtue of their enormous economic power also controls political power and therefore lord it over the working class people. The repressive character of the Nigerian state with its rigid class structures that is reinforced at every point in time have always come into play in the relationship between successive Nigerian regimes and workers represented by their unions (Tajudeen and Kehinde, 2007). The role of government in the Nigerian Industrial Relations System and in the functioning of the labour-management relationship can be better understood within the framework of its position as the single largest employer which

matches its power and control in industrial relations (Fashoyin, 1980).

Governments in Nigeria, both military and democratic (civilian) are known to engage in harassment, intimidation and arrest of labour leaders especially when they are on strike (Yusufu, 2009). For instance, Adesina (1994) argues that since the military adopts an ideology that legitimizes its continuous supra constitutional role in politics, then repression is not an impossible outcome. In recent time, NLC led nation-wide strikes against hikes in fuel prices come to mind. During such strikes, labour leaders and their followers are physically molested and arrested by security Operatives (Yusufu, 2009).

Successive civilian governments in Nigeria have engaged in interference with trade union organizations in the country (Jeminiwa, 1996). As a way of preventing the emergence of strong unionism, these governments have embarked on decentralization policy, denied certain perceived radical unions from belonging to the central labour organizations and enacted legislations meant to weaken the existing central labour unions (Akinyanju 1997). The Labour Bill which was passed by the National Assembly in February 2005 is a recent example. The situation in Nigeria as it concerns trade Unions is in line with the Marxian analysis. This is because the distribution of political power is determined by power over

production (that is capital). Capital confers political power which the bourgeois class uses to legitimize and protect their consequent social relations (Schaefer, 2010). Class relations are political, and in the mature capitalist society, the State's business is that of the bourgeoisie (Ogunbameru, 2008).

Moreover, the intellectual basis of state rule, the ideas justifying the use of state power and its distribution, are those of the ruling class. The intellectual-social culture is merely a superstructure resting on the relations of production, which is on ownership of the means of production (Ogunbameru, 2008; Schaefer, 2010). The situation in Nigeria is that the political and the administrative elite, who form the ruling class and are also in the minority, have continued to marginalize the working class who constitute membership of trade unions. The idea is to make sure that trade unions do not become so formidable as to challenge the numerous obnoxious policies of successive regimes in Nigeria, in a setting where there are no viable oppositions to the government in power.

Some trade union leaders also get carried away sometimes mainly as a result of lack commitment to the ideals of the unions they lead and vested interests and start dining with the powers that be, and in this kind of situation they don't see themselves as still belong to the same class with the workers that they lead (labour

aristocracy). In this kind of situation, they become willing tools in the hands of people in the corridors of power in the exploitation of poor workers. The global stratification system that has polarized the world economic system into peripheral, semi-peripheral and the centre or the core has not helped matters with the workers in the peripheral nations such as Nigeria being at the receiving end of most of the negative consequences of globalization.

Marx's emphasis on class conflict as constituting the dynamics of social change, his awareness that change was not random but the outcome of a conflict of interest, and his view of social relations as based on power were contributions of the first magnitude (Ogunbameru, 2008). However, time and history have invalidated many of these assumptions and predictions. Capitalist ownership and control of production have been separated. Joint Stock companies forming most of the industrial sectors are now almost wholly operated by non-capital-owning managers. Workers have not grown and subdivided into different skill groups. Class stability has been undercut by the development of a large middle class and considerable social mobility. Rather than increasing extremes of wealth and poverty, there has been a social leveling and an increasing emphasis on social justice (Ogunbameru, 2008). Many of Marx critics have argued that history has

failed to substantiate Marx's views on the direction of change. Thus, they claim that class conflict, far from growing in intensity, has become institutionalized in advanced capitalist societies. Rather than moving toward a polarization of classes, they argue that the class structure of capitalist societies has become increasingly complex and differentiated. In particular, a steadily growing middle class has emerged between the ruling class and working class people (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). These historical events and trends notwithstanding, the sociological outlines of Marx's approach have much value. His emphasis on conflict, on classes, on their relations to the state, and on social change is a powerful perspective that remains as relevant as when Marx wrote.

Historical Development of Trade Unions in Nigeria.

From the view point of the craft/trade guild thesis, the emergence of modern trade unions is traceable to the existence of pre-colonial guilds of self employed African workers including blacksmiths, carvers, weavers, hunters and so forth. The position is that there is a likely connection between the African guilds/crafts associations and the modern trade unions (Yesufu, 1984) cited in (Onyeonoru, 2005). It has been variously observed, however, that the

pre-colonial craft unions or guilds could not have transformed into modern trade unions in Nigeria because they had been destroyed by centuries of slave trading, colonialism and the flooding of these areas with cheap European products. Moreover, the functions of the guild/craft associations were mainly in the area of organizing mutual assistance for members in the trade and the regulation of trade practices. Invariably much of the members were owners of craft enterprises. Hence there were no wage labour involved, and wage labour is widely associated with the emergence of trade unions (Fashoyin, 1980; Otobo, 1987).

The relatively late development of trade unions in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa can partly be explained by the absence of wage employment and partly by the historical pattern of work relations (Yesufu, 1984; Fashoyin, 2005). The prevalence of agricultural non-wage employment emphasized the leadership role of the head of the household or the traditional chief who operated, and still operates, a close-knit family system. The head of the household and traditional chief are, so to speak, the forerunners of the type of managers we have today, but they were hardly employers in the modern sense. Neither the palace staff nor the children of the head of households were paid for the services offered in their concerns. These relationships were largely family affairs (Yesufu,

1984; Fashoyin, 2005). According to Ananaba (1969), paid employment is a comparatively new development in Nigeria, when it started and who started it is not easy to say with accuracy. There is little doubt, however, that very few Nigerians, if any, worked for wages before the advent of Europeans. The reason is not far to seek. The economy of the various states which make up modern Nigeria was basically a subsistence economy, and custom had established the practice that people should service their parents, family and village heads, and the community without remuneration. Peasant farming, which was the main occupation of the people, was carried out on a co-operative basis (Ananaba, 1969; Ubeku, 1986). Another reason for the non-existence of paid employment before the advent of Europeans is the total absence of a standardized or universally accepted currency (Ananaba, 1969; Fashoyin, 2005).

It is probable that wage employment started with the activities of the early European explorers, who needed guides and carriers for their exploits, and would therefore, not hesitate to engage any person offering his service (Ananaba, 1969; Yesufu, 1984; Ubeku, 1986). Paid employment gained momentum after 1830, when Richard Lander and his brother solved the mystery of the River Niger. This served as an invitation for traders to penetrate the hinterland and trade in Nigerian products, particularly the

palm oil (Ananaba, 1969). According to Fashoyin (2005), the development of wage employment in colonial institutions and commerce was not in itself a sufficient inducement for a break with the tradition of work relations in the family system. First, agriculture offered more incentive than wage labour. It offered freedom, which was much valued in traditional societies that found wage employment not only undignifying but also a form of slavery. Second, there was the problem of adjustment to the world of industrial employment. So the view that natives always maintained a temporary affiliation with the labour market must be seen, not as a cultural lapse, but as an indication of maladjustment to modern work environment. Even today, the problem of worker adjustment to industrial work patterns faces our emerging industrial concerns (Fashoyin, 2005).

Onyeonoru (2005) opines that to adequately trace the origin of trade unions in Nigeria, we need to understand the nature of trade unionism itself, and the fundamental basis for its existence. This can be viewed from the European experience. The early trade unions which emerged in the first half of the 19th century in Europe did so in response to adverse working conditions associated with the private enterprise system that developed with the industrial revolution (Onyeonoru, 2005). In line with the above argument, Otobo (1987) identified four necessary

conditions connected with the emergence of trade unions which include; widespread wage employment; legal and physical freedom of workers and potential workers to move around in search of employment; dependence of workers and potential workers on wages and salaries as their means of sustenance or survival; and widespread grievances (Onyeonoru, 2005). In the case of Nigeria, the four conditions mentioned above which are also associated with the capitalist mode of production were fulfilled with the introduction, rise and development of western capitalist enterprise which led to colonial occupation and resulted in the growth of industrial capitalism and wage employment (Otofo, 1987; Onyeonoru, 2005). The colonial administration with its infrastructural activities targeted at the construction of residential and office accommodation, roads, bridges, ports and so forth for capitalist enterprises greatly accelerated the emergence of an African wage labour force. These may account for the origin of the growth of trade unions in the country, and may explain the fact that trade unionism in Nigeria first emerged in the public service with the formation of the Southern Nigeria Civil Service Union (SNCSU) in 1912, which changed its name to the Nigeria Civil Service Union (NCSU) in 1914, following the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Nigeria (Otofo, 1987; Onyeonoru, 2005; Fashoyin, 2005). The Trade Union Ordinance of

1938 legalized trade unions and in that sense served to enhance their effectiveness, while facilitating public monitoring and control of their activities. According to Omole (1991), the ordinance gave recognition to trade unions, it energized and encouraged workers to unionize and to enforce and fight for their rights. The ordinance accelerated the growth and development of trade unionism in Nigeria.

The Nigeria Civil Service Union became a pivot with which workers in other sectors began the agitation for the formation of trade unions before and after independence (Omole, 1991; Fashoyin, 2005). By 1975 during the military regime of General Murtala Mohammed, trade unions in the country had risen to over 1000 including Mushroom Unions. In 1976, the Government established a commission of inquiry into the activities of the various unions and appointed an administrator to administer the unions and come up with a structure for the proper administration of the unions. This became necessary as the unions were polarized into ideological divide which was creating problems in the country (Omole, 1991; Aiyede, 2002; Abu, 2007). Towards the end of 1977, these unions were restructured into 42 along industrial lines. The government also insisted on the formation of a labour centre as there were multiple centres. In February 1978, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) was formed and

inaugurated. The then 42 Industrial Unions became affiliates of the Nigeria Labour Congress with a legal backing of Trade Union (Amendment) Decree 22 of 1978 (Omole, 1991; Abu 2007). In 1989, the Trade Unions were again restructured to become 29 affiliate unions to the Nigeria Labour Congress. However, the Obasanjo administration in 2004 worked on a Labour Act that culminated to the enactment of the New Trade Union Amendment Act of 2005 that led to the recognition of the Trade Union Congress as a Labour Centre (Abu, 2007).

Achievements of Trade Unions in Nigeria.

The role of the Nigerian Trade Union Movement in fighting for improvements in the working conditions and general welfare of Nigerian workers and its contributions to national development can never be under estimated. It has even gone the extra-mile in protecting the general interest of ordinary Nigerians against harsh government policies in situations where the political class has reneged in its duty to provide viable opposition against some of these policies. Since independence, trade unions have led series of struggles for decent work agenda (Aremu, 2011). The notable achievement is in the area of National Minimum Wage, from the Harragin, Turdor-Davis, Miller Commissions of the pre-colonial period to Adebo and

Udoji Commissions, wage reviews and Minimum Wage Commissions of the recent times (Aremu, 2011).

Trade Unions had also led the resistance against policies such as fuel price increases without which the earning and purchasing power of the working class would have been eroded by inflation (Fabiya, 2011). Trade Unions had served as backbone for the first developmental effort of the newly independent Nigeria during the first and second Republics. Nigeria recorded dramatic growth rate in the first decade after independence, which averaged 12 percent and made it one of the fast growing economies, then surpassing Malaysia, India and even China (Ademiluyi, 2011; Aremu, 2011). This growth rate in non-oil sector especially in agriculture and nascent emerging manufacturing sector must be attributed to the productivity, patriotism and diligence of the country's first generation workforce. During the civil war of late 1960s, trade unions were a unifying force for national unity (Aremu, 2011).

Although the role of the trade unions was undermined by authoritarian rule, we cannot afford to ignore their social and political contributions in ousting the military (Oyelere and Owoyemi, 2011). Despite the decrees and other authoritarian tactics employed by the military, we found the movement organizing and staging national strikes and protests with significant outcomes and implications (Ihonvbere, 1997). In

1994, for instance, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), National Union of Nigerian Students and pro-democracy organizations masterminded a national strike to protest the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election (Ihonvbere, 1997). There was also the national strike ignited by Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) over demand for increased funding for universities, reinstatement of over eighty lecturers whose appointment were terminated at university of Abuja and the de-annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election. Trade unions organized a national protest against Decree No.12 of 1994, introduced to block any legal challenge by the NLC and oil Union executives against their dismissal by the government. A nationwide protest was held in disapproval to a decree empowering the military junta to arbitrarily detain without charge or trial any person considered a threat to national security (Ihonvbere, 1997; Oyelere and Owoyemi, 2011). There are numerous other strides made by the Nigerian trade unions with the potential to do more.

The role trade unions played during the subsidy removal saga in January, 2012 is still very fresh in the minds of Nigerians. When the masses led by the Nigeria Labour Congress

(NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) together with Civil Society Organizations (CSO) took to the street early January, 2012 to protest the removal of fuel subsidy, Nigerians spoke with one voice. It was actually union response to what was described as oppressive decision of the government in power led by President Goodluck Jonathan. Earlier before government's decision, the pump price of petrol was N65, but it was increased to N141. It was the success of the protest that reduced the price to the current N97 per litre. That was one out of several interventions of trade union movement as a pressure group in Nigeria.

The Academic Staff Union Universities (ASUU) has also since the military regime of Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo and the civilian administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari, through the successive military regimes (Buhari, Babangida, Abacha and Abdulsalami), taken up the duty of intellectuals, throughout the world, to promote the development of education in Nigeria. ASUU has defended the right of Nigerian people to live in a society free of hunger, poverty, illiteracy, tribalism, and economic and social backwardness (ASUU, 2013). This duty requires the creation of first-rate higher educational institutions, especially universities; a well-funded system, with advanced and adequate teaching and research facilities, and internationally competitive

remuneration to keep Nigerian academics in their country and attract other academics from all over the world (ASUU, 2013). Since the 1980s, ASUU has been engaging the Federal and State Governments on the need to reposition the Nigerian University System (NUS) to effectively deliver on its mandate. This became imperative in the face of massive exodus of seasoned academics particularly to European and American Universities; the deplorable state of facilities for research, teaching and learning; gross underfunding; and steady erosion of university autonomy and academic freedom by successive governments. ASUU insisted that the virtually complete domination of Nigeria's economy and politics by the Bretton Woods Institutions (IMF/world Bank), and the inevitable erosion of our national pride since 1960, are direct consequences of the mismanagement of national resources leading, essentially, to the virtual destruction of the economy and the educational system (ASUU,2013). The trade unions in Nigeria have virtually provided the most formidable opposition to successive regimes in Nigeria in pursuit of a just society and their achievements in this direction are almost inexhaustible.

Challenges Faced by Trade Unions in Nigeria.

In the first phase of trade union development in Nigeria marked by the

introduction of paid employment during the colonial period, there were no laws regulating industrial relations practice, hence, the workers were at the mercy of their employers. Even in the public sector the situation was not different (Omole, 1991). The colonial administrators did not treat African workers fairly. Workers were prevented from active trade unionism, while those that were formed were not recognized. Despite lack of recognition by the government and employers, workers formed unions during this period (Abu, 2007).

With the Labour Ordinance of 1938, which was as a result of pressure from the British Labour Party and the Trade Union Congress of Great Britain, unions became recognized and could operate openly without any harassment, molestation and intimidation by government operatives (Omole, 1991). Despite the recognition and permission for the formation of trade unions, workers were still not treated fairly especially in the private sector. Workers continued to face hardships and difficulties because unions were too weak to put pressure on government to alleviate the sufferings of the workers (Aiyede, 2002; Fashoyin, 2005; Abu, 2007). Omole (1991) also reports that this situation was mainly because most union leaders lacked the required experience, education and exposure in the organization and administration of trade union. A large number of the union members were illiterates with

very little knowledge about modern trade unionism. Among the characteristics of the unions then were low membership, opportunity restricted to few selected workers, the unions were local and were not real unions in the modern usage of the word. Trade Unions were free to choose their own structures with the result that all sorts of unions based on plants, enterprises or industry co-existed (Omole, 1991; Abu, 2007). Much of the vitality and vigour of trade union in those early days could be traced to the activities of Michael Imoudu.

The colonial political economy was founded on the exploitative principle. The first generation of workers emerged from the nascent colonial economic and administrative structures. Colonial authorities preferred forced unpaid labour but were challenged by workers (Aremu, 2011). In essence, the colonial order prompted the emergence of early working class movement in Nigeria. In between the two World Wars (from 1919 and 1945) the British Colonial economy intensified colonial exploitation through direct increased taxation, retrenchment of the workforce, wage cuts, casualization and hourly payments. These periods also marked the radicalization of the country's labour movement (Aremu, 2011). The high point of labour's resistance was in 1941 when Nigeria's railway men led by Michael Imoudu

and the Union's Secretary, Mr. Adenekan marched through the streets of Lagos to see Governor Sir Bernard Bourdillion. The protest led to major victories for workers in terms of improved wages and abolition of hourly pay system. Some of the subsequent labour agitations include the 44 days strike of 1945 led by Michael Imoudu and the 1949 Enugu Coal Iva Valley Massacre in which 22 coal miners were brutally killed by the colonial police for daring to demand for wage arrears (Omole, 1991; Aremu, 2011).

The agitations linked the demand for better working conditions in particular with the demand for independence in general. Nationalists like Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Owolowo backed the demands of the trade unions, deploying their journalistic prowess to pressure the colonial authorities to improve the workers' lot (Aremu, 2011). Today Nigeria prides itself with a tested and robust labour movement led by two Labour Federations, namely; the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC).

In Nigeria the role of the government has become so prominent, and has continued to generate much debate over what should be the limits of Nigeria government's intervention in industrial relations (Tajudeen and Kehinde, 2007). Through this role, the government has also infringed on the rights of the average Nigerian workers to strike and their rights to freedom of

association. Contrary to this, an important role or duty of the state anywhere around the globe should be towards the protection and guarantee of the freedom of association to workers and trade union recognition as a basis for harmonious trade union – government relationship (Yesufu, 1984; Adesina, 1995).

Historically, political developments in Nigeria have influenced the formulation and implementation of industrial relations policies at a degree that sometimes betrays the poor state of the political culture (Fashoyin, 2005). In colonial times, political consideration played a considerable role in evolving the voluntary policy. The voluntary principle was so conveniently breached as often as the political considerations of the ruling elite dictated (Yesufu, 1984; Ubeku, 1986). During self-government and after independence, regional and federal governments evolved industrial relations policies whose innovation or intellectual philosophies were largely influenced by the political dictates of the period and the political inclination of the elite (Fashoyin, 2005).

According to Olugboye (1996) and Yusuf (2009), the military operates a totalitarian regime characterized by suppression, repression and suspension of constitutional rule, arbitrariness and unilateralism. Over the years, the first casualty of military coup is trade union. As part of the pressure groups

in society, the trade union has always been at the receiving end of harsh military policies (Yusuf, 2009). More than any other time, trade unions suffer from harsh and repressive government policies during military rule. Along with other pressure groups in the society, trade unions are prevented from holding rallies, embarking on strikes and other legitimate activities of trade unions (Yusuf, 2009).

Democratic governments in the country like the military are known to engage in harassment, intimidation and arrest of labour leaders. In the current political dispensation (199 to date), the dominance of retired military officers is obvious and profound. This factor has an enormous impact on the nation's political climate and especially on the attitude and actions of political officeholders. The effect on the industrial relations is the evidence of intolerance of government towards principal actors, especially workers and their unions. Such actions as the enforcement of "no work no pay clause", refusal of government to implement collective agreements attest to this fact (Sokunbi, Jiminiwa and Onaeko, 1996; Yusuf, 2009). According to Tajudeen and Kehinde (2007), industrial relations policies are embodied in legislations, official pronouncements and direct action of government. In the case of Nigeria, an under-developed capitalist country, these policies are best understood in terms of labour control strategies. Although, government policies on

industrial relations are anchored on what is called guided democracy and limited intervention, the evidence on the ground negates this, rather what obtains is unguided authoritarianism and reckless intervention in the industrial relations scene.

Aderogba (2005) and Kester (2006) submit that collective bargaining plays a number of roles in fostering good labour- management relationship. One of such roles is its standard setting function. Together with the law it constitutes the main source of regulations governing wages, conditions of work, mutual relations and industrial relations generally. It provides a means of determining by voluntary negotiations between the parties concerned, the wages and conditions of work that would be applicable to the employees covered by the collective agreements. But rather unfortunately, successive governments in Nigeria seem to be unaware of this, because they believe they can do whatever they like in matters of collective bargaining. It is therefore a general opinion among scholars of industrial relations that the restricted and limited use of collective bargaining in union- management relations especially in the public sector poses a fundamental challenge to trade unions (Yesufu, 1984; Ubeku, 1986; Adesina, 1995).

A very important principle of collective bargaining is that under it, the employer and the employee and his union have equal rights and are seen as

equal partners. The employer cannot intimidate the employee nor can the latter threaten the employer (NLC, 2008). So collective bargaining provides a good basis and environment for industrial dialogue. Consequently, its outcome is usually a sincere product of dialogue and should therefore be respected. Also, under collective bargaining the union is not only accepted by the employer, but the rights and protection of the workers are also enshrined in the collective agreement (NLC, 2008). Consequently, the job of the labour leader is protected when he gives leadership to the workforce. On the other hand, collective bargaining also provides that the union does not interfere in management duties and prerogatives. Respect for collective agreements, the outcome of collective bargaining is usually written, and so its implementation is not dependent on the recollection of participants. However, the greatest danger to collective bargaining and industrial dialogue is when its outcome is not respected, or is treated with levity (NLC, 2008; Yusuf, 2009). Unfortunately, this has been the case in Nigeria's public service where government hardly respects any agreement reached with workers and their unions. For instance, based on an agreement reached between federal government and organized labour in 2000, wages were supposed to rise by 25 percent in May 2001 and 15 percent in 2002. However, the Federal Government did not keep to its side of

the bargain (Aiyede, 2002; NLC, 2009). When there were industrial rumblings in the country as a result of this, government set up a committee of five serving ministers to meet with the Nigeria Labour Congress. Both sides reached an agreement that the 25 percent wage increase be made with effect from 1st May, 2002, but again government reneged. When labour protested, the administration claimed no such agreement existed. The NLC had to publish the agreement in full with the signatures of the ministers and other government representatives before an embarrassed administration accepted that the agreement truly exists, but asked for new talks. Again, the new agreement signed by the government was declared a ghost document. The threat of a general strike (which actually took off in Abuja) forced government to own up to the agreement (Aiyede, 2002, NLC, 2009; Aminu, 2008). The current strike embarked on by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) which commenced on the 1st of July, 2013 is also as a result of government's failure to implement agreement it reached with the union in 2009, and many cases like this abound in the history of labour – management relations in Nigeria.

One big issue that appears to have contributed in constraining the capacity of unions is the moribund ministry of Labour, Employment and Productivity. It is moribund in terms of injecting new initiatives that have

capacity of strengthening the regulatory framework for the administration of labour and employment relations in the country (Uranta, 2012). Similarly, its officials like the unions, are also living in Taylorian age and therefore not able to address challenges associated with the rise of modern knowledge-driven work organizations.

Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains”, was the clarion call of Karl Marx and his comrade and collaborator, Friedrich Engels in ending the Communist Manifesto of 1848. That call was based on the enormity of the task before workers in the struggle between labour and capital, not just within the workplace but also in the general class struggle to overthrow the yoke of capital (Adewumi, 2007). Since capital is concentrated social power, in a context in which the worker has only his individual labour power, it is considered imperative for workers to be united in confronting the enormous power of capital (Adewumi, 2007). According to Zozovsky (1972), the only social force possessed by the workers is their numerical strength. This force, however, is impaired by the absence of unity. It is in the same vein that Flanders (1972) argues that the unity of workers makes the trade union a complete organization and constitutes the foundation of the union's strength. The call for united labour front remains valid today as it

was then, as a result of a number of factors both internal and external to the trade union movement. According to Adewumi (2007), the enormity of the task confronting Nigerian workers today is perhaps greater than those confronted by the workers of the 19th century Europe. If trade union unity is desirable, it is appropriate to ask, at this juncture, why it is difficult to achieve?. Although, the restructuring exercise that took place in the late 1970s was partly meant to address this issue, fractionalization within the different unions is a recurring issue (Abiodun, 1978; Adewumi, 2007). A union, such as the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), for example, has a long history of fractionalization. Divisions within are borne out of factors that are internal and external to the trade unions (Adewumi, 1997; Summonu, 1998). Internal wrangling within some trade unions hinged on personal interests also has debilitating effects on the capacity of such trade unions to perform. The internal factors arise out of the patterns of union organization, which are reflected in the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of members. On the other hand, the external factors revolve around political and ideological differences and state manipulation (Summonu, 1998).

According to Flanders (1972), the internal factors relate to the nature of trade unions themselves. Workers from diverse backgrounds formed unions. As such, from the very

beginning, unions exist to promote sectional interests; the interests of the section of the population which they happen to organize (Flanders, 1972). Various structural arrangements have been devised to give organizational effect to trade union membership. In terms of union structure, two contradictory forces have always been in contention. The first is the move towards breadth, unity and solidarity. The second tendency is towards parochialism. While the first tendency favours unionism, which is open and expansive, the latter encourages closed and restrictive unionism. It is the first type that the so-called general unions tend to promote as reflected in their slogan "trade unions for all" (Offiong, 1983; Otobo, 1986; Summonu, 1998). Adewumi (2007) argues that the paradox of this situation is that these tendencies are not unconnected with the realities of capitalist industry in which we are confronted with a variety of work contexts and work relations. Arising from this is the tendency for those involved to be conscious primarily of their immediate work environment, what they experience on a daily basis, their direct and personal relationships. In this context, workers easily identify themselves first and foremost as members of a given occupational category, an employing organization or of a particular industry (Adewumi, 2007).

Counterpoised against the above reality is the fact that most workers,

manual or white collar, experience many common grievances such as job insecurity, lack of autonomy in work and unsatisfactory compensation and conditions of employment all of which should, ordinarily provoke a common feeling of opposition and antagonism to capital, the owners of capital and their agents (Adewumi, 1997; Summonu, 1998). By and large, the divisive tendencies that are internal to the trade union organization are expressed in their organizational boundaries and this shapes the lines of demarcation or jurisdictional scope among different unions (Adewumi, 2007). The above analysis adequately captures the situation in Nigeria where proliferation of unions is a fundamental issue. According to Adewumi (2007), the name trade union itself implies sectionalism which is about the inward looking unity of people who practice a common skill. As such, it would take a major motive force beyond the mere fact of a common membership of the working class to broaden organization beyond the limits of a specific occupational group. This is one of the greatest challenges to trade union unity (Adewumi, 2007).

One issue that might be very disadvantageous has to do with the fact that there is very little focus on the internal workings of trade unions, except when national strike is looming. It will therefore be important that if truly we believe in the potency of the union movement to the process of

socio-economic and political transformation of our society, we need to subject the internal workings of the trade unions to greater national focus and in the process contribute to strengthening organizational capacity.

Given the challenges facing workers in the country, the desirability for strong and vibrant trade unions cannot be over-emphasized. In order to have strong and vibrant trade unions, there is the need for selfless leadership. Looking at some of today's leaders of Nigerian trade unions and their conduct, selflessness is largely a gimmick (Uranta, 2012). Many leaders of trade unions deploy strike as a means of self-promotion and relate with employers and government based on strategies for self enrichment rather than improving the welfare of workers. The consequence is inability to negotiate or review workers' condition of service (Uranta, 2012).

Moreover, with the emergence of civilian government, a critical challenge facing the unions is that of adjusting to the requirements of democratic practices. This issue would be desolate, particularly when taken in context of the internal operations of the trade unions both at national and state levels. What is very glaring is that internal union administration for instance, are undemocratic both at the level of the NLC affiliates at national and state levels (Uranta, 2012). This may be contested by some union members largely on account of instinct for self-defence. However, it needs to

be appreciated that democracy is about recourse to structures and ensuring that decisions of structures are complied with. This is very weak and in the case of the NLC, since 2000, regular meetings of these structures never held as and when due. If anything, this is in part accountable for the inability of the organization to focus itself to attend to new and emerging challenges and perhaps re-organize, re-configure or amend its structures (Uranta, 2012).

Furthermore, neo-liberal globalization presents severe challenges for the working class and union locally, nationally, regionally and internationally. These include reduction in formal employment due to capital restructuring (Sha, 2006). Work and work organization are also changing resulting in external numerical flexibility, externalization, internal numerical flexibility, functional flexibility and wage flexibility. These are also known as casualization of work and outsourcing and they include lay-offs, privatization of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and public service reforms which result in massive job losses. A major consequence of this is declining union membership and with depletion of the financial base of unions (Sha, 2006). The rising informalization and casualization of work is making trade union organization more strenuous, challenging traditional limits and forms of organizing by the unions.

Prospects of Trade Unions in Nigeria.

The history of this country will be incomplete without a wide mention of trade unions' role in the socio-economic and political circumference. Trade union movement remains today a formidable Pan-Nigerian organization that unites all Nigerian workers for a common purpose regardless of their states and status. Significantly, it championed the struggle against military dictatorships with enormous sacrifices. As a democratic independent organization that holds periodic elections and hold elected leaders accountable, the trade union movement is a leading civil society actor pushing for greater democracy in Nigeria (Aremu, 2011). The challenge lies in how the movement will contribute to the growth and development of Nigeria in many years to come. From all indication the trade unions still have a lot to contribute and will definitely continue to spearhead the struggle for Nigerian workers and the other ordinary Nigerians to have better living standards. But for Nigerian trade unions to gather more momentum they need to be more focused in the direction of solid union organization.

The greatest source of strength for unions in their responses has been solidarity. According to Sha (2006), the major strategy of trade unions across Africa has been the capturing of the informal sector as one method of building and strengthening the trade

unions. Trade unions in Nigeria are expected to adequately take up this task as a way of gathering more strength in discharging their duties to workers and Nigerians in general. Solidarity and cooperation between unions in some developed countries supporting capacity building for unions in countries that experience poverty and oppression is a major prospect for trade unions in challenging the hegemonic dominance of neo-liberalism and the consequent increase in violence, exploitation of labour, movements of capital and labour and repression of trade unions and human rights (Iyayi, 2006; Aye, 2008).

Trade unions have also had to diversify their sources of revenue to counteract the depletion of amounts generated from membership subscription as a consequence of declining membership. Several unions including the Medical Health Workers Union of Nigeria (MHWUN) now have economic investments which include businesses owned by the unions. This strategy must however be utilized in such a manner as will not turn into a double-edged sword (Iyayi, 2006; Aye, 2008).

Moreover, the democratization of most countries that hitherto were burdened by leviathan one-party systems or military juntas is a prospect that unions in Nigeria need to stretch by utilizing any and every available space open for policy engagement. Unions in this light need to tie extra-

parliamentary mass mobilization with parliamentary lobbying and presentation of well-researched memoranda to parliamentary public hearing (Aye, 2008).

Information and communication technology provides a veritable vehicle for trade union work in the 21st century. In advanced capitalist countries, members are recruited online and information digitally accessed and disseminated. Unions in Nigeria can also tap into this information highway (Aye, 2008). Newspapers, magazines and other periodicals mass-circulated in the public domain could be a major source of power for workers by playing a role in shaping public opinion which could be gotten through press conferences and statements. This brings us to the strategic place of building alliances and coalitions with progressive civil society groups. Unions should also engage in actions, campaigns, advocacy, protests, boycotts etc. Another Strategy that trade unions in Nigeria should employ is the intensification of trade union education directed at improving working class consciousness in the face of ravaging globalization (Aye, 2008).

Conclusion

Trade unions are established to bridge communication gaps that may exist between the employers and individual employees and to fight for the general welfare of the working

class people. Beyond that Trade Union Organizations are fundamental to the development of secure, prosperous and democratic society. They are the bedrock of civil society. Four necessary conditions identified as connected with the emergence of trade unions include; widespread wage employment; legal and physical freedom of workers and potential workers to move around in search of employment; dependence of workers and potential workers on wages and salaries as their means of sustenance or survival; and widespread grievances. In the case of Nigeria, the four conditions mentioned above which are also associated with the capitalist mode of production were fulfilled with the introduction, rise and development of western capitalist enterprise which led to colonial occupation and resulted in the growth of industrial capitalism and wage employment

The Nigerian trade unions emerged to fight for the interests of the working class people of this country. They have also gone beyond the protection of workers' interests to make enormous contributions to national development. They have also been able to constitute themselves into a formidable opposition to poor and unacceptable government policies in the Nigerian setting where there are no viable oppositions to the governments in power.

In spite of the numerous laudable achievements of trade unions in Nigeria, they are still faced with a

lot of challenges which are both internal and external that negatively affects their capacities to live up to their constitutional roles. Internal challenges emanate from crisis within and between unions themselves, poor leadership and lack of proper focus on the part of trade unions while the external challenges are linked to the unfavourable political environment occasioned by harsh and irresponsible governments' attitude towards trade unions and the debilitating effects of globalization. From the time the first trade unions emerged during the colonial era up to the present period, it has never been easy for trade unions, with the worst attacks coming from military juntas.

Throughout the two decades of military rule, public policies mirrored the political calculations of military regimes and equally the political values of the elites. Thus, the response of the military to union demands, wage issues and all forms of industrial action have reflected the political circumstances of military administrations. There is no doubt that the direction of industrial relations will continue to respond and be influenced by developments in the political environment in part by the political orientation of the ruling elite and in part by the leadership of the trade unions. Obviously, what impacts these have on the industrial relations framework will in turn depend on the broad political structures in place and the extent of political involvement of

the union. Also, it will critically depend on the degree to which policy makers and party politics interfere in industrial relations institutions.

In spite of all these challenges, trade unions have continued to work tirelessly for a better Nigeria. They will also continue to play the role of being the only opposition to the

governments in power in trying to fight for the rights of workers and the generality of Nigerians into the unforeseeable future. It must also be mentioned that for them to be able to continue to play these roles, they need to be better organized and remain more focused.

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