

A Critical Study of the Key Challenges of Trade Unionism in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

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ABSTRACT

Trade unions are basically an integral part of liberal democratic society. They are an important part of the fabric of the Nigerian society, providing social, economic, political and psychological benefits for their members as well as the platform for participation in managerial functions in government and work industry. It is worrisome that in recent times, trade unions in Nigeria are witnessing serious challenges that tend to militate against their performance. This paper therefore examines the challenges in Nigeria's fourth republic, using the Marxist theory of class conflicts as theoretical framework of analysis. A qualitative research method was adopted and was content analyzed in relation to the scope of the paper. The paper observes that lack of committed leadership, lack of internal democracy, government intervention, tribalism and nepotism, internal factionalism, apathetic attitude, poor economic climate and non-affiliation with foreign union are the major challenges that trade unions in Nigeria currently face. The paper recommends among others that trade unions should imbibe the tenets of democracy in their internal administration.

Keywords: Trade Unionism, Interest, Challenges, Prospects, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The early trade unions emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries in Britain and other industrialized countries as a defensive mechanism against the exploitation of employees and also to secure improved wages and working conditions for their members. This development made the modern industrial relations scene to be dominated by the trade unions and employers' organizations. The two parties set the pace and tempo in which the framework for industrial relations practices is drawn by the state in its capacity as the largest employer of labour and as the most dominant actor in the system. Trade unions emerged from the efforts of workers to seek improvement on existing working conditions through collective actions. They function to provide social, economic, political and psychological benefits for their members as well as the platform for participation in managerial functions in the industry. Trade unions are generally organized grouping of workers that relate with employers on various issues related to the conditions of employment of their members. They arose as a consequence of the industrial revolution which led to the development of industrial capitalism (Adefolaju, 2013). In the contemporary times however, especially in the developing countries, trade

unionism has become an indispensable tool in ensuring and guaranteeing industrial harmony between the employers and the workers.

In Nigeria, trade unions fought against colonial rule and exploitation of the Nigerian State during the colonial era. The activities of trade unions, under the umbrella of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) have been responsible for the reversal of government actions and policies. NLC now plays social, economic and political roles not only to the working class but to all Nigerians both the employed and unemployed (Okoroafter, 2013; Okechukwu, 2016).

According to Adewumi (2009), like its counterparts in different parts of the world, the Nigerian trade union movement has a glorious past, a past characterized by robust struggles and principled opposition to state policies that are inimical to the interests of the working class. It is also a past that was characterized by conscious efforts at mobilizing the rank – and – file members as a bulwark against state repression which also witnessed the building of alliances between trade union movement and various organizations within larger labour movement. This role can be seen clearly and appreciated by most Nigerians through their selfless services to Nigerian society as a whole.

However, it is disturbing that in recent times the trade unions in Nigeria have virtually lost their relevance. In the views of Anyim, Ilesanmi and Alaribe (2013:16): "since the transition to democracy in Nigeria in 1999, the emerging union leaders went to sleep and decided to align themselves with the corrupt ruling elites by playing games on the intelligence of most Nigeria working class through their maradonic ways of deceiving their rank – and – file membership. They are only interested in their selfish interests without considering the interest of the workers they represent". It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to examine the challenges of trade unionism in Nigeria's fourth republic.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted qualitative research design as it relies on secondary data collected from documentations through published books, journal articles and internet sources, and were content analyzed in relation to the scope of the paper. That is, a systematic review of extant literature on the challenges of trade unionism in Nigeria's fourth republic.

CONCEPT OF TRADE UNION

A British Couple Sydney and Beatrice Webb in 1897 were the earliest authors to give the definition of trade union. According to the Webb, trade union is a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining and improving the conditions of their working lives. Okogwu (1990) sees, trade union as an association of workers to promote and protect the welfare, interest and rights of its members, primarily by collective bargaining.

In the view of Fajana (2006), trade union is an association of wage and salary earners formed with the objective of safeguarding and improving the wage and to raise members' social status and standards of living in the community. Section 1 (1) of the Trade Union Act (2004) defines a trade union 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 fact, be an unlawful combination by reason of any of its purpose, do or do not include the provision the provision of benefits for its members". Section 29 (1) of the Act, provides that a trade union can be described as an organization that either "consists wholly or mainly of workers or employers of one or more

descriptions and whose principal purpose is the regulation of relations between workers and employers or employers' association or consists of constituent or affiliated organizations or representatives of such constituent or affiliated organizations and whose established purpose is the regulation of relations between workers and employers or workers and employers associations". The radical school of thought gives a contrasting definition of the concept. Trade union is defined as the conveyor belt of the workers desires to put an end to wage slavery and radically transform the society (Hyman, 1975). This definition conceives as representing the means of actualizing the impending working class revolution which in the Marxian thought is inevitable in every capitalist society. The various definitions provided reflect the role of trade unions in the society.

OBJECTIVES OF TRADE UNIONS

The overall objectives of trade unions have been expressly stated by Yesufu (1984) as:

- To equalize the strength between workers and employers in matters of collective bargaining.
- The secure better terms and conditions of employment from employers or the state.
- To make demands and promote the demands by agitation, strikes or otherwise in other to ensure that the agreed terms of employment are not eroded.
- To attempt to create the permanent or continuous existence of the trade unions.
- To protect workers from humiliating jobs/unfair treatment by employers.
- To provide collective identity to workers (solidarity) and comradeship).
- To act as influencing agent to government's policies affecting workers adversely.
- To act as a vehicle for revolutionary social change and transforming the society
- To join hand with other groups in the society to advance the economic development in the larger society.
- To check the excesses of employers and provide workers with a measure of collective strength.

WHY EMPLOYEES UNIONIZE

Economic Needs

Whether employees select unionization will greatly depend on whether the employees

perceive the union as likely to be effective in improving various economic conditions of employment, often referred to as the union's instrumentality. Dissatisfaction with wages, benefits and working conditions appears to provide the strongest reason to join a union. This point is continually supported by research studies that found that both union members and non-members have their highest expectations of union performance regarding the 'bread and butter' issues of collective bargaining. It is these traditional issues of wages, benefits and working conditions on which unions are built (Hannay, 2002).

Dissatisfaction with Management

Employees may seek unionization when they perceive that managerial practices regarding promotion, transfer, shift assignment or other job-related policies are administered in an unfair or biased manner. Poor supervisory practices, favouritism, lack of communication and perceived unfair or arbitrary discipline and discharge are specific triggers of dissatisfaction with management (Bateman & Snell, 2011). This is particularly true when the favouritism concerns the HR areas of discipline, promotion, job assignments and training opportunities. Thus, the failure of management to give employees an opportunity to participate in decisions affecting their welfare may encourage union membership.

Social and Leadership Concerns

Employees whose needs for recognition and social affiliation are being frustrated may join unions as a means of satisfying these needs. Through their union, they have an opportunity to fraternize with other employees who have similar desires, interests, problems and grips. Similarly, employees may join unions for the same reason they would join a civic organization, club or sport team, mainly to enjoy the companionship of others and to benefit in the prestige and value that organization may provide. Additionally, the union also enables employees to put leadership talents to use as officers of the union stewards so that they could be seen as 'a fellow your buddies look to' and as a person who 'stands up to the boss'. Finally, the image of the union can determine whether a dissatisfied employee will seek out the union (Bohlnader & Snell, 2007).

TRADE UNIONISM IN NIGERIA

The development of trade unionism in Nigeria cannot be dissociated from the 17th century Euro

– African trade. This trade introduced the money economy which gradually replaced the system of barter and almost simultaneously marked the beginning of paid labour (Anyim, Ekwoaba & Shonuga, 2013). Apart from increased demand for employable labour which the trade generated, the gradual presence of the colonial administration and the emergence of other commercial concerns dictated the need for more infrastructures, which increased the pool of employed labour in Nigeria (Adebisi, 2004).

Until 1912, when the Civil Service Union was established, there were no trade unions in existence to fight for the interest of workers. The laying of the railway line from Lagos to Northern Nigeria with the attendant mass employment of natives into the railway system led to the establishment of Nigerian Railway Native Staff Union (NRNSU) in 1919. However, active trade unionism in Nigeria emerged 1931 with the establishment of railway Workers Union and the Nigeria Union of Teachers whose objectives were generally centred on obtaining better conditions of employment for their member. During the periods of 1912 to 1930, there were persistent workers agitation and restiveness spear – headed by the more radical railway workers who severed their membership of the Nigerian Civil Service Union (NCSU) and Nigerian Railway Native Staff Union (NRNSU) and formed the Railway Workers Union (RWU) in 1931 (Anyim & Soetan, 2018).

In 1938 came a big boost in the history of trade unionism in Nigeria with the passing into law of the Trade Union Ordinance which gave union's effective legal backing in their operations. Reasons for the enactment of the law cannot be unconnected with the serious riots, strikes and rebellions that plagued the British Colonies in West Indies and Northern Rhodesia first in 1933 and again the 1937, coupled with the general restiveness of workers occasioned by the hardships they had to content with (Anyim, Ekwoaba & Shonuga, 2013). However, the trade unions were too weak and divided to make any appreciable impact on the lives of their members (Orgi, Ringim, Boman & Akhimien, 2016). Anugwom (2007) lent credence to this view, that the rise in unionism was also aided by the nationalist struggle to free the country from colonial rulership. The trade unions aligned with the political groups to demand freedom from colonial authorities. The labour legislations in Nigeria from colonial times to the present day, including trade union ordinance, trade disputes

decree 1968 and 2005 labour reforms act were made to provide trade unionism in Nigeria. By 1978, the trade unions were transformed into organizations of employees and employers, aimed at protecting the interests of their members following the formation of Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) as an umbrella organization for trade unions in Nigeria.

In practice, the industrial unions are independent and autonomous bodies but the NLC in principle has disciplinary powers over its affiliates which it hardly enforces in order to avoid disagreement and rancor between it and its affiliates. The relationship between the parties appears to raise issue on loyalty as from experience; the leadership of individual unions seems to exhibit more loyalty to their individual unions, sometimes to the detriment of NLC where they ought to be active participants. The Trade Union (Amendment) Act (2005) however provided more central labour bodies. This new development gave birth to the registration and recognition of Trade Union Congress (TUC) as a second central labour body to cater for senior staff associations. As one of the important social partners in the industrial relations system, labour unions have helped to collective, 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. As Iyayi (2008) contends, labour movements in Nigeria have evolved into a robust, intellectual, vibrant, militant, national liberator movement in the country, taking on successive military and civilian regimes. Such issues include, among others, minimum wage, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), electoral reforms, political party issues, education – related issues, fuel price likes, better conditions of service for workers, external debt, cost of living and corruption.

In fact, all over the world, labour movements, through their activities and constant defense of workers and members of the society, have forced sit-tight, dictatorial and fascist regimes to accede to the demands of labour. This paves way for the gradual increase in wage earnings, improvement in the employment conditions of workers, change in draconian government policies, election of popular politicians, and installation of popular mandates and the adjustment of harsh economic policies, like 1980's SAP in Nigeria; thus making policies more humane and supportive of the lives and economic interests of the generality of the

citizens (Okechukwu, 2016). The labour unions in Nigeria have gone beyond their traditional role of championing the cause of workers by wielding much political and social influence and acting as a vigilant watchdog for the people. Although this has brought labour unions and their leaders into ugly confrontations with the political and ruling classes, most times it leads to convulsive repressions and strangulation of labour leaders and the proscription and de-proscription of labour movement activities, however, the difficulty in keeping faith with the role as the vanguard of labour and an advocate of the people's cause is justified by the many victories won in the process of vicariously serving their constituencies (Iyayi, 2008).

Trade unions under democratic reforms in Nigeria have transformed from social self-help associations, mere bargaining agents or just lobbyists and are now part of a social movement through which the working class has entered and promoted mass democracy. This is further established by the fact that trade unions are now among the largest and most influential special interest groups in democratic societies (Adefolaju, 2013). Therefore, following the democratic reforms in the country, some of the anti-union regulations were abolished in January, 1999. The same month Adams Oshiomhole was elected president of the reformed Nigerian Labour Organization (NLC). In recent times, industrial crises are assuming unprecedented proportion in Nigeria. The incessant crises in the private and public sectors have more than ever before been publicized in the manifestation of negative consequences such as decline in economic growth, pervasive irregular school system and massive poverty (Agba, Ushie & Agba, 2009). Albert and Yahaya (2013) lent credence to this view, that the pattern of industrial relations in Nigeria has been conflictual in nature with disruptive consequences and significant work stoppages. Various reasons have been adduced as to why the relationship between labour and management is conflict ridden. Arguably, it is observed that management practice of exclusionism, neglect of power sharing mechanism which ensures partnership amongst stakeholders in the workplace and derogation of organizational communication pattern may breed disharmony in contemporary organization (Iheriohanma, 2007); Nwokocha (2015).

It is worrisome that in recent times, the powers of the trade unions to influence wages, working conditions and to defend workers have eroded

enormously and tend to be quite weak nowadays. In many countries, trade unions remain a political force to reckon with, as they continue to be one of the very few societal organizations in the world with a sizeable constituency. Odey and Owan (2014) claimed that a sizeable proportion of Nigerian workers receive starvation wage, and over 75 percent of them live in abject poverty. The precarious situation of workers is even more worrisome as they have to support relatives and dependents that are unemployed. As the proportion of the unemployed youth increases in the face of disproportional increase in wages, the hope of workers surviving with their relatives/dependents dwindles. Wage situation especially in the public sector are particularly worse off, that being a civil servant today seems signing bond with poverty. The fear of retiring at the instance of low income and facing uncertainty in a society with poor social security system, escalate and intensify all forms of agitation and corrupt practices even among law enforcement agents (Agba, Ikoh, Ushie & Agba, 2008; Nwagbara, Pidomson & Nwagbara, 2013). This paper sees wage induced industrial disputes in Nigeria as becoming alarming in proportion and frequency.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical bedrock of this paper is the Marxist/class conflict theory. The Marxist theory has its origin from socialist ideologies. It assumes and emphasizes within a capitalist society where productive systems are owned and profit is the key influence on company's policy (Hyman, 1975). Marxism is a method of socioeconomic analysis, of class relations and societal conflict. The Marxist perspective to the understanding of industrial relations has a history that dates back to the Marxist conception of history and society. This thesis simply posits that society is divided into two major contending classes, namely: the bourgeoisie (that is, the haves) and the proletariat (that is, the have not's): the wealthy class which owns the means of production and as such constitutes the capitalists class which exploits the proletariat class (Hyman, 1975). With respect to organizations, the employers or owners of the organizations constitute the wealthy class while the employees or workers constitute the proletariat. The Marxist perspective in its perception or notion sees the bourgeoisie giving rise to a revolutionary dictatorship of the working class which will gravitate to socialism and later communism. This approach constitutes

of two major classes and that these classes are involved in social unrest which culminates in social revolution. Those who are exploited are angry while those exploiting them are happy. Thus, there is a class struggle. The class struggle will only end when the exploited class overthrows the capitalist arrangement of the employer so that production and companies will be taken over by the working class thereby bringing the society to classless one since means of production and resources are collectively owned by the citizens and not individually to institute an egalitarian society.

The theory is applicable to Nigeria, where workers under the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) are beset with imperialist policies which strengthen capitalism and lead to poor working conditions, distributional inequalities, unemployment and lack of welfare Programmes. Therefore, if the government and agents of capitalism continue to be insensitive to the problems of workers in Nigeria, it could result in revolution.

CHALLENGES OF THE NIGERIAN TRADE UNIONS

Trade unions have grown in relevance over the years especially in the light of the belief that a healthy and independent labour movement is essential to democracy (Godard, 2003). Also, there is a growing international recognition of the right to freely associate in unions and to engage in collective bargaining as a fundamental human right. Whenever this is ignored, industrial relations tend to be strained, ending up in industrial conflict (Bankole, 2000). There are a number of challenges that have actually undermined the efficacy of trade unions in Nigeria as instrument of social transformation of Nigerian workers. These challenges are:

Lack of Committed Leadership: Most of the leaders of trade unions do not understand properly the issues and techniques of complex negotiations. They are not well educated and are not skillful in the techniques and art of trade unionism and as such lack the expertise to leader the unions. According to Adebisi (2011), the problem of Nigerian trade union in achieving its goal is based on intransigent and unanswerable elite or leaders. Anyim et al (2013) lent credence to this view, that insincerity and poor commitment of the labour leadership has led to the diminishing and disappointing role of trade union in Nigeria. For example, the former labour leader in Nassarawa State, Alhaji Abdulahi Adeka was impeached by

its members for his inability to show committed leadership towards addressing the demands of civil servants in the state which made the workers unable to gain their benefits in terms of promotion, regular payment of salaries and payment of arrears (Oota, 2017). This is why Deery and Wash (1999); Osamwonyi and Ugiagbe (2013) echoed that the divergent gap in interest between the union leaders and the workers which they claimed to represent is becoming widening and noticeable in the sense that the trust and confidence which used to exist in the past between the lead and the led coupled with union solidarity is gradually fading away. Typically, in an organization where the trusts of the leaders are eroded, such working environment will be engrossed with conflict that undermines industrial harmony with the attendant resultant effect on organizational growth and productivity. Therefore, the union leaders must have a good sense of human relations and adopt approaches that stimulate, motivate, encourage and recognize their members in order to get key performance results and promote workers interest.

Lack of Internal Democracy: According to Fashoyin (1984), a greater challenge of trade unions in Nigeria is the non-institution of internal democracy in Nigeria unions due to the unwillingness of their leaders to acknowledge basic constitutional requirements such as respect for individual rights and to be accountable to their members. The place of union democracy cannot be overemphasized because any organization which provides workers with democratic rights and protection in the workplace should do so internally (Godard, 2003). Furthermore, Okojie (2011) observed that internal democracy in the Nigerian trade union is at its lowest ebb as a result of poor institutional opposition and high rate of inactive membership. In addition, Adefolaju (2013) conducted a study on five trade unions across Nigeria's South West and observed that the trade unions are yet to imbibe the tenets of democracy in their internal administration and this is reflected on low participation of their members in union activities.

Government Intervention: Nigeria has long been governed by military dictatorship which militated against the emergence of democratic culture that would have ushered in freedom of expression, free competition and exchange of ideas in the economy, e.t.c. The military dictators have used instruments of outright banning of trade unions, withdrawal of

registration, dissolution of unions and appointment of their own loyalists to manage the affairs of the trade unions and it continue in the Nigerian state to date. The issue of political interference has been a strong challenge towards strengthening the activities of trade union in Nigeria. The 2005 Labour Reforms Act has made membership of trade union voluntary. Also, the federal government in some cases proscribed the trade unions. In addition, trade union leaders are often arrested, harassed, and manhandled in order to subdue them. Such as the case of Frank Kokori of PENGASSAN during Abacha's regime; Adams Oshiomhole of NLC during Obasanjo's administration (Fayankinnu, 2015).

Tribalism and Nepotism: This is the worst plague that is besetting the trade union in Nigeria. Most important views are looked upon from tribal or ethnic implication and not in the interest of Nigerian workers. This plague affects almost the whole sectors of trade union operations including election of members. This had hindered trade union effectiveness in Nigeria today.

Internal Factionalism: Factionalism undermines the performance of trade unions in Nigeria as instruments of promoting workers interest. Factionalism means the existence of small groups within the large ones that oppose some of their belief and activities. Sometimes, this internal division among the members may erupt due to poor leadership and other selfish interest of members, and when this happens it becomes easy for the management or owners of the organizations to penetrate into the ranks of the organization which may lead to some members of the union abandoning their collective struggle (Ananti, 2014). Ahiuma – Young (2016) argued that the 2016 nationwide strike which was intended to force the Nigerian Federal Government to reverse the N145 pump price of petrol was crippled as a result of the fractions within the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). The strike did not enjoy the support of their NLC factional leaders and Trade Union Congress (TUC). The emergence of this faction/wrangle in the NLC has weakened the activities of NLC and TUC towards promoting the interest of their members and the general public.

Apathetic Attitude: Poor attendance at meetings because members see meetings as a waste of time and resources is another serious challenge of trade unionism in Nigeria. The

union as a democratic organization cannot achieve the desired objectives when meetings are attended by small fraction of the membership. Also, the few that attend easily take wrong and selfish decisions. Some of the nonchalant attitudes displayed by union members are not without cause. The causes range from stage – managed meetings, personal attacks on members to bring them to public ridicule, disgrace and caricature. In addition, some of the majority of the members do not attend branch meetings and cannot participate in policy debates and election of the union leaders. Farnhand and Pillott (1995) argued that union democracy cannot flourish when a small number of powerful national officers manipulate union conferences for their own ends in order to retain power and authority.

Poor Economic Climate: The growths of trade unions go side by side with the growth of the national economy. The empowerment of the workers and their unions has been on the decline due to economic recession which has resulted in economic downturn, unemployment and retrenchment. Also, the economic hardship which is caused by poor governance posed a challenge to trade union activities thereby leading to poor cohesiveness and lack of focus of the union. Government sometimes threatens to use the means of no work no pay when trade union intends embarking on strike. This is because most of the workers cannot withstand such measures in this harsh economic condition (Izueke, 2008; Bamiwola, 2018).

Non-Affiliation with Foreign Union: The Federal Government banned any direct type of affiliation with foreign union. This is because they feared that the foreign union will meddle into the policies of the Nigerian trade unions. However, the affiliation with foreign union could have provided the needed financial assistance to our local unions here and their interactions with our local unions would have facilitate development of local union in the art of trade unionism. Hassan (2013) argues that the dwindling financial base due to manpower contraction has tremendous effect on the unions' ability to discharge their legitimate obligations to their rank and file membership. Oyelere and Owoyemi (2011) contend that lack of funds by the unions to mount educational programmes to sharpen the skills of the rank and file membership in order to match the sophistication of the management side during negotiation is a major challenge threatening the survival of trade unions in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper focused on the challenges of trade unionism in Nigeria's fourth republic. Trade unions in Nigeria have come a long way in enhancing the economic well-being of their members. The military regime was considered to demonstrate harsh attitude towards trade union activities than the civilian administration. However, both political environments were seen to pose serious challenges to trade union movement in Nigeria. These challenges include poor leadership, lack of internal democracy, government intervention, tribalism and nepotism, poor economic climate, internal factionalism and apathetic attitude. The aforesaid challenges have prevented the trade unions in Nigeria from discharging their functions as agents of economic and social transformation of the working class. In order to strengthen the role of trade unions in Nigeria, the study thus recommends that:

- Union leaders should ensure the education of members to remove ignorance and apathetic attitude. This will help them to be well-formed and conscious of their rights.
- Trade unions in Nigeria can effectively serve as a veritable instrument of protecting workers interest if the members shun all social vices that will tarnish the image of the trade unions such as corruption, bribery, tribalism and nepotism, e.t.c
- Trade union activities should be given a place of pride at workplace, their propositions should be objectively and judiciously considered, likewise their opinions and suggestions.
- Government should improve on social services, especially in the areas of education, housing, health care, transportation and other social infrastructure. This will go a long way to reduce the incessant agitation for wage/salaries increase.
- Union members should shun all forms of factionalism. This will enhance the efficacy of trade unions in Nigeria to function as agents of economic and social transformation of working population.
- Internal democracy in the management of unions should be given an adequate attention. Members intending or aspiring to leadership position should be given opportunity of holding elective office or

position in the unions irrespective of their physical or ideological stance to those in control of the power apparatuses of the organization.

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