

ISSN 111-4898

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol. 6, No. 1 JUNE (2007)

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Trade Union Movement and Workers Emancipation within the Context of Contrasting Political Climate in Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT - The paper examines the trend of trade union movement in Nigeria and its impact on workers emancipation using contrasting political climate in the country as point of reference. It traces the history of trade union movement from two pre-colonial periods to contemporary time. It also considers the level of class-consciousness among the Nigerian workers including the extent to which their involvement in trade unionism has enhanced their socio-economic and political status. The paper demonstrates that trade unionism thrives better under democratic rule than military dictatorship. However, it observes some challenges facing trade union towards achieving the goal of workers emancipation. It concludes with emphasis on the imperative of responsible trade unionism as a means towards enhancing workers emancipation and overall development of the general population.

Key words: Democracy; emancipation; military; movement; union; workers.

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian workers like their counterparts in other developing countries have witnessed fundamental changes in their condition over time. To a large extent, trade unions have played significant role in this transformation. In most developing countries, government is the largest employer of labour with private individuals employing a minimal proportion of the working class. (Fajana, 2000).

In Nigeria, trade unions have become important agent of socio-economic transformation and class struggle (Aremu, 1996, Akinyanju 1997). This role began from the period of the colonial struggle and continued till the post independence era. In the latter period, trade unions play an important role in the struggle against dictatorial military rule and the restoration of civil rule in the country. More importantly, during the civilian era, trade unions were in the forefront in the struggle against unpopular government policies such as deregulation of the oil sector, retrenchment of workers and refusal to honour agreement on wage increase. The present discussion seeks to provide a critical assessment of the impact of trade unions on workers welfare in particular and on their overall emancipation in general.

MEANING AND ROLE OF TRADE UNION

Trade union has attracted variety of definitions from scholars. A particular definition depends on the perception of workers and the definition imposed by legal framework of a particular country. According to Akpala (1982) the exact definitions of trade union may vary from one situation to another depending on the economic and political situation encompassing the worker-management relations. The Nigerian Labour Law defines the concept as,

any combination whether temporary or permanent, the principal objectives of which under its constitution are the regulation of the relations between workmen and workmen or between masters and masters or the imposing of restrictive condition on the conduct of any trade or business and the provision of benefit to members (cited in Fajana, 1995: 132).

This definition would be seen to incorporate a large variety of organizations and groups under trade union. Another definition of the concept regards it as, an *association of wage or salary earners formed with the object of safe guarding and improving the wage and employment conditions of its members and to raise members' social status and standards of living in the community (Fajana, 2000).*

The preceding definition emphasizes on the purchase of labour power as a factor of production. Trade union is here differentiated from other organizations or associations by the emphasis on the pursuit of better improved condition of service for members.

Sidney and Beatrice Webb (1920) offer the following definitions of trade union:

A continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the condition of their working lives.

This definition emphasizes the dynamic essence of trade union being a continuous association of wage earners. However, it may be seen as too narrow since trade unions are not merely concerned with the improvement of working condition. Beanc (1985) maintained that trade union is best described as institutional representation of workers interest both within the labour movement and in wider society and they accentuate the collective rather than the individual power resources of employers. The radical school of thought gives a contrasting definition of the concept. Trade union is defined as the conveyor belt of the workers desire to put an end to wage slavery and radically transform the society (Hyman, 1971).

This definition conceives trade union 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 here reflect on the role of trade union in the society which include among others: checking the excesses of employers; forum for actualizing the revolutionary potential of labour; defend members' interest against management action or misdeeds; resistance against capitalist domination; providing an opportunity for workers to be equal partners to management; providing workers with a measure of collective strength; vehicle of revolutionary social change.

Many questions have been asked as to the role of trade unions. A number of such roles can be identified. First, is to improve the bargaining strength of the workers *vis a vis* the employer. This is achievable through regular consultation with the employer and management on issues relating to the terms of employment and general working condition of the workers.

Secondly, is to protect workers from humiliating job especially with regards to the treatment of workers by the management. Trade unions achieve this goal through rising to the defense of the workers whenever management policy tends to degrade their condition. Thirdly, the union provide collective identity to workers while at the same time representing a forum of collective bargaining for workers. Fourthly, trade union act to influence government on programmes concerning workers. As workers representatives, trade union becomes a virile pressure group in advancing the interests of members both within the workplace and in the larger society. Lastly, trade union perform social objective in cooperating with other elements the society in promoting social and economic development and advancement of the community.

TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN NIGERIA: THE HISTORY

The origin of trade union movement in Nigeria could be traced to the pre-colonial period. At this time, there existed guilds, mutual aid groups and professional or occupational craft unions all of which function to play the role of trade union. However, these associations are not in the modern sense of it full fledged trade

union. Rather, most of them are merely workers association. (Otobo, 1987: 12). The inception of modern trade union in Nigeria could be said to coincide with colonialism. Consequently, the first set of trade unions were modeled after British unions. Unlike the situation in most developed countries, trade union preceded industrialization in Nigeria. However, at the earliest period of colonialism, Nigerians were discouraged from belonging to unions as union membership was regarded as anti-colonial attitude (Otobo, 1987). The first legalized union in Nigeria was the Civil Service Union (CSU) was limited to public servants. The unions took after similar ones in the West African sub region.

At this period, trade union could not take the pattern of radical organization because of the paternalistic nature of colonial government which is the largest employer of public labour. Other unions which emerged at this period were the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) and Railway Workers Union (RWU). The latter broke away from the Civil Service Union (CSU) due to the non-militant nature of CSU. While trade union emerged from 1912, it was not until 1930s that significant development emerged for the movement. First among these was the enactment of Trade Unions Ordinance in 1939 which provided legal backing of trade unions. The law gave recognition to the formation of trade union by at least five persons.

Several reasons have been giving to explain the apparent late arrival of trade unionism in Nigeria. These include the limited wage employment. Since the largest proportions of the citizens are engaged in the informal work sector the few wage earners are colonial employers and these are restricted to the colonial officers as well as related parastatals.

Other reasons include the low level of economic activities which limit the recruitment into the formal economy and hence membership of trade union.

The repressive colonial labour policy also contributed to the late arrival of effective trade unionism in Nigeria. The colonial administration regarded trade unions as destabilizing activities. Consequently, it took measure to discourage its employees from membership of these groups.

Another important factor for the late emergence of trade union in Nigeria is the low consciousness of the workers as to the need of unionism. Most of the workers are employed either in the colonial office or other low-wage employment. These workers are not conscious of the need to employ trade union as a channel for group emancipation. The absence of legal backing also impeded the early realization of labour union in Nigeria. For long, the colonial government was reluctant to accord full legal status to trade union which it considered as anti-colonial movement. At this period, trade unions were regarded as illegal organizations.

However, with time these obstacles were overcome and this paved the way for the emergence of trade unionism in the country. For instance, the emergence

of small indigenous and large multi-national companies broke the monopoly of public sector employment in the country. This factor boosted the tempo for trade union movement. The influence of neighbouring countries like Sierra-Leone and Ghana also helped to boost the tempo of trade unionism in Nigeria. This factor for instance led to the enactment of Trade Union Ordinance in 1938 which gave legal backing to trade unions in the country. However, the law seems to give way to indiscriminate formation of trade unions which led to several unions until the 1970s.

The Second World War (1939-1945) also played important role in the growth of trade union in Nigeria. The war brought untold hardship to the workers and the general public in form of acute shortage of essential commodities, rise in prices, stagnant wage structure (Otobo 1987:21). These problems pushed many workers into joining trade unions which was seen as the only forum for improving their bad economic condition. Union agitation during the period led to the introduction of Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) as well as the first general strike in the country in 1945 with the participation of about 42,000 workers (Fajana, 1995: 146). The war heightened the socio-political consciousness of the workers. Ex-servicemen also joined in the nationalist struggle and also became local as union members and leaders. Closely related to the above is the contribution of the nationalist movement towards the emergence and growth of trade unions in Nigeria. Formal political associations were declared illegal by the colonial administration. These people then found their ways into existing trade unions as members and leaders. This action accentuated the radical posture of the unions.

CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND WORKERS EMANCIPATION

The notion of class consciousness dominates Marxian philosophy of class analysis. Class performs a decisive function in the evolution of human history. This is because it was through class struggle that society transforms itself. Every significant social change is therefore related. It is in this sense that Marx and Engel's (1969) assert that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.

According to the Marxian view, class can be conceived in terms of individual relation to the means of production. Class is here defined with respect to the position an individual occupy in the production process. For instance, capitalism produced two classes based on this factor: bourgeois (owners of the means of production) and proletariat (those who do not own this means but had to exchange their labour power).

These classes are fundamentally opposed to one another because of their different positions within the mode of production. The bourgeois exploit the proletariat by retaining part of the surplus value of the production create inherently antagonist class interest.

Class conflict occurs specifically then over the labour process and the authority relationship associated with it. This class struggle provides the force of social and economic development. Class refers to relationship based upon the position occupied in the production process. It is by definition an exploitative and antagonists relationship. It - is based on contradictory interest which stem from differing relation to the means of production.

Based on exploitation, the ability of one class to exploit the others is to a large extent defined by the capacity of the exploited class to prevent it. Hence, class struggle determines the development of the mode of production. Marx proposed two fold distinctions of classes:

A class in itself - a class consisting of those who occupy the same relation to the means of production irrespective of their acknowledgement or awareness of this. They are lacking in any common class identity, political mobilization or other ideological bonds. A class for itself - a fully fledged consciousness, a class pursuing its own interest against those of the exploiting class and members are aware of their common identity.

The low level of class consciousness among the organized working class is an indication of a class existing in itself rather than for itself. The central problem in any class struggle is class consciousness. The question remains: under which condition would the proletariat realize its true interest and mobilize itself politically on the basis of these interests? Marx (1977) argued that before a class could become engaged in the revolutionary struggle it is necessary for it to transform into class for itself - truly conscious of its own material interest and acting in accordance with them. Typically, the process of class identity involves recognition of individuals as belonging to the class. The proletariat consciousness involve the perception that capital and its agents constitute an enduring opponents to itself and the interest of one's fellow workers opposition helps to reinforce class identity and vice versa. That is, consciousness arises out of class struggle.

Another important aspect in the process towards class consciousness is the element of class totality. This class identity and conflict represent defining characteristics of contemporary capitalist society. The class struggle is regarded as a relationship which helps define and determine every aspect of society so that no element of social life is entirely immune to the consequences of class struggle. The last in the process of class consciousness is the conception of an alternative society, the goal to be achieved as a result of successful outcome of the class struggle.

Trade Union Consciousness

Marxists recognize that the oldest most spontaneously and simultaneously most puzzling manifestations of working class consciousness is trade unionism.

For Engel, trade unionism represented the first attempt of the capitalists to abolish competition. They therefore represent the vital nerve of capitalism, namely the dependence of the power of capital upon labour leading to a state of division and hence competition among workers. However, neither Marx nor Engel's expected trade to break the hold of market forces over the working class. What they did expect at least in their early works is that trade unionism would in due course develop into a wider struggle based on the development of political opposition. The importance of trade unions in the struggle towards workers emancipation include that it provides a potent forum for workers to effectively mobilize themselves against the repressive and exploitative actions of the capitalist class. In addition, trade unions provide a check against management prerogative which would have rendered the position of labour rather irrelevant. Trade unions are thus believed to afford certain protective function for their members in terms of its hopes for the future of the working class. Marx (1948) saw both danger and promise in the formation of trade unions. On one hand, he feared that they might be too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capitalism. That is, they could become preoccupied with furthering the interest of their particular members. Through this, they could lose sight of the overall struggle between capital and labour.

In spite of this, Marx still believed that labour have the potential to become organised agencies for superceding the very system of wage labour and capital rule. By uniting unions against employees on a local level could lead to class solidarity on a national level. In this way, unionism has the potential of eventually becoming the revolutionary political parties which could assume power from the capitalist.

While Marx was optimistic on the role of trade unions towards working class emancipation other later writers were less enthusiastic. For instance, Lenin (1917) argues that unions were limited to developing trade union consciousness. That is, members of a particular union have shared interests, there is less awareness of the common interest of the working class as a whole. This situation would tend to limit union demand for improvement in wages, hours and working conditions within specific industries.

Lenin (1969) contends that unions were in this regard, becoming increasingly self interested furthering the interest of their members at the expense of other workers.

However, he believes that trade unions were a tremendous step forward for the working class. He saw them as important part of the class struggle but argued that trade union to a political party representing the interests of the working class as a whole. Lenin thus believed that trade unions are in fact hindrances in the process of revolutionary change. Union activities are said to be narrow small group or sectional interests rather than the interest of the working class as a whole. Palmei I (1983) has equally argued that the growth of a bureaucratic leadership

and of collective bargaining lead unions to adopt bourgeois interests and ideology. Clegg (1976) conceives trade union as opposition that can never become government. Generally then, Marxists tend to believe that trade unions are not radically or organizationally different from capitalist institutions. In the words of Anderson (1967), "as institutions, trade unions do not challenge the existence of a society based on a division of classes, they merely express it. Trade unions can never be viable vehicle of advance towards socialism. They can bargain within society but not transform it".

TRADE UNIONISM AND WORKERS EMANCIPATION WITHIN NIGERIA'S POLITICAL CLIMATE

There is a strong linkage between existing political climate and the extent to which trade unions are able to operate in achieving their objectives. In one sense, a liberal political system would allow for virile trade unionism leading to worker's emancipation and overall improvement in the condition of the working class. On the other hand, a harsh political environment would provide little opportunity for trade unionism to thrive. However, this situation could lead workers to realize the need for them to effectively mobilize against their common enemy, thereby leading to high working class consciousness required for their emancipation.

Poole (1986) has argued that the political system is very significant in shaping the choice of action taken by trade union. For instance, instrumental actions are very likely where the political system is very well developed. In societies with emerging political system, radicalism or revolutionary orientation will be attested by organized labour.

Akinyanju (1997) has argued that trade union organizations possess certain characteristics that normally make them suitable for engaging in democratic struggle. Those trade unions are mass organizations with capacity to mobilize mass actions. Again, that based on shared interest and class solidarity trade unions are cohesive and highly organized. The urban locations of trade unions enable them to play an effective role in championing the cause of members.

Members of trade unions are also capable of influencing the political opinion of a large number of people outside the union structure. Trade unions also have social position and have established international structures which are not under the control of local despots and which can be used to facilitate the struggle for workers emancipation. Trade unions therefore have inherent characteristic that confer and indeed dictate participation in workers emancipation.

TRADE UNIONISM UNDER MILITARY RULE

Nigeria's history is bereft with contrasting political climate. Since independence in 1960, the country has been under military dictatorship for twenty-

nine years while democratic rule span for the remaining seventeen years. The long years of military rule has had its impact on the nation's trade unionism and workers struggle in the country. Therefore, military regime though an aberration, has nevertheless featured prominently in Nigeria's political history. In view of the dictatorial tendency of such military administration, trade unions have an herculean task in responding to policies and unpopular programmes of such regimes. The first challenge posed to trade unions is with regards to how they can mobilize the members to agitate against unpopular and repressive programmes of military administration. Examples abound of instances of how trade unions successfully mobilized workers for action meant to achieve their emancipation and improvement in the general condition of members.

Trade union movement in Nigeria attained its highest crescendo of activities during military dictatorship. While trade union activities were heightened under previous military regimes of General Gowon (1967-1975) General Muritala / Obasanjo (1976-1979) General Buhari/Idiagbon (1984-1986), Gen Babangida (1986-1993), it was during Gen. Abacha's regime (1993-1998) that witnessed active involvement of trade unions in the struggle both for the improvement in the living standard of members and restoration of democratic rule. For example, In 1992, there was widespread discontent in the country in which citizens were harassed, repressed and hungry (Akinyanju, 1997). Wages were generally low. However, the leadership of the central labour organization (NLC) were collaborators of the military junta, hence could not muster any resistance against the military government. It was against this background that the Academic Staff Union of Nigeria Universities (ASUU) embarked on a nation-wide strike in 1992 to advance the improvement of the working condition of its members. The high level of poverty among members fostered unity of purpose among members. The strike was largely successful in terms of total participation of members and the military government was forced to negotiate with the union. The experience of the struggle towards revalidation of true annulled June 12 1993 presidential election is another instance of workers struggle during military era. The struggle was spear-headed by workers union in the oil sector, namely, National Union of Petroleum and Gas Workers (NUPENG) and Petroleum and Gas Workers Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN). While the strike was effective with regards to full participation of a large number of members, it nevertheless failed to achieve its goal of de-annulling the election. However the strike further strengthened the unions and made members conscious that they could achieve a lot by remaining steadfast with their unions.

Again, during Gen. Babangida's regime (1986 - 1993) trade unions were able to mobilize their members to protest against the negative effects of the Structural Adjustment Programme of the government. The protest led to the introduction of

some relief measures meant to caution the effect of economic policy on the citizens. Obasi (1986) has observed that SAP has led to economic privation of workers thereby heightening their consciousness which in turn leads to increasing militancy on their part. Such actions on the part of workers through their unions have forced government to adopt some relief measures especially in the areas of wages and salaries increment.

Trade unions also performed the role of sensitizing its members and the general public against government repressive programmes such as increment in petroleum price. Past experiences have shown that on each occasion that government desires to effect change in fuel price, trade unions have played significant role in mobilizing its members and the general public on the need to resist such action.

From the preceding discussion, one could observe that the activities of trade union movement in Nigeria were heightened during military rule. The dictatorial climate provided by military regimes has the effect of pushing trade unions towards increasing militancy. Such undemocratic government could not tolerate active unionism and hence had to resort to intimidation, repression through arrest of union leaders and outright ban of radical unions. These actions in return further fuelled radicalism on the part of the unions.

TRADE UNIONISM UNDER DEMOCRATIC RULE

Democratic government in contrast to military provides quite a different political environment for trade unionism. Under colonial rule, government did not grant recognition to trade union until 1931 with the enactment of Trade Union Ordinance. The colonial state relented the radical posture of trade unions. Moreso, since the unions collaborated with nationalists for independence struggle and therefore made concerted efforts to weaken the unions by harassing the leadership and divide the rank and along ethnic line (Ochefu, 1996). These repressions were heightened after the general strike of 1945 which marked a watershed in the anti-colonial struggle in Nigeria. The successful collaboration between nationalists and labour leaders during the strike led to the forging of link between the two groups and the radically transform the nature and of nationalist struggle for independence

According to Ochefu (1996) labour's venture into anti-colonial politics was borne out of the conviction that the colonial state as an agency of capital had to be removed if labour was to get a fair share of the contribution for production of goods and services. Similarly, its alliance with petty bourgeois elements like Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe and the NCNC was also informed by the concrete reality that labour could not do it alone.

Ochefu (1996) further argued that the colonial administration found it necessary to prevent the unity of forces between the nationalists and labour unions

because such unity constituted a greater threat to the colonial government. The colonial government reaction was in forms of intimidation, detention of union officials while preventing the formation of a central labour organization. They also fuelled sub-national sentiments within the ranks of labour and as well promoted ideological schism with segment of the leadership. The actions led to fractionalization within the labour unions which served to limit the effectiveness of the unions.

Cambridge (1989) and Rodney (1979) have observed that union leaders played a very significant role during the anti-colonial struggle and that though nationalist leaders may not emerge from the leadership of workers organizations, however, all nationalists' leaders sought and developed alliances with workers organizations in order to destabilize the colonial administration. This alliance made it possible for effective mobilization of workers for strikes aimed at seeking political goal.

Ironically, though the succeeding post colonial administration inherited the fear, suspicions and hatred for labour from its predecessor. Trade union activities were regarded by government as destabilizing to the interest of the state. Hence, right from the First Republic (1960-1966) the posture of government has been to regard trade unionism with suspicion and therefore took various measures to decapitate the unions. This deliberate action of the Nigerian government has resulted into state intervention in trade union movement in what is regarded as the principle of "guided democracy" (Olugboye, 1996).

A significant instance of trade union activities towards enhancement of workers welfare under democratic rule was in 1981 under the regime of Alhaji Sheu Shagari when trade unions successfully mobilize their members for general strike which forced the government to increase the monthly minimum wage to one hundred and twenty five naira (N 125.00k). The prevailing democratic atmosphere during this period enabled the unions to pursue its goal of improving the working lives of members through struggle for wage Increase.

During the current political dispensation, trade unions have had cause to mobilize members to embark on concerted actions aimed at resisting unpopular government programmes. For instance, since 1999, when democratic rule was restored in the country, the Federal Government has severally increased the pump price of petroleum products. On each of these instances, the control labour congress had to mobilize the workers for strike against the policy. However this did not go well with the government which responded by enacting what is now popularly known as anti-Labour Legislation- the labour bill of 2005. The law among other things seeks to decentralize the labour union in the country. Critics of the Bill have argued that the measure is meant to weaken the power of the Nigerian Labour Congress which has successfully mobilized the Nigerian workers for strike against the Federal government.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion has considered trade union movement in Nigeria and its on impact on workers emancipation with a focus on varying political setting in the country. It reflects that Nigerian trade union movement has a long history beginning from the colonial era to the present day. The post-colonial administration was seen to inherit the anti-labour policy of the colonial era. The military regime was considered to demonstrate harsher attitude towards trade union activities than the civilian administrations. However, both political environments were seen to pose serious challenges to trade union movement in the country.

Undoubtedly, trade unions represent one of the few era through what workers in developing country like Nigeria can articulate for the improvement of their work lives. It then becomes imperative for the organization to position itself well for it to meet these challenges. This may require reorganization of its structure paving way for increasing democratization aggressive policy of and mobilization for active participation of more members in union activities.

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