Diminishing and Disappointing Role of Trade Unions in the 21st Century: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract
Over the years, trade unions in Nigeria have evolved from formal to highly formal bureaucratic organizations. Although the relationship between individual members and unions still depends on a great deal upon the voluntary acceptance of the authority of the unions by the individual members, the unions are themselves structured partly as a response to the requirements of the law and also as a result of the push by rank and file members for real improvements in the performance of the union’s leadership (Iyayi, 2000). The disappointing role of organized labour in Nigeria in the 21st century coupled with their inability to safeguard the interest of their rank and file membership which they represent should be a matter of great concern to all labour observers, activists and practitioners alike. Trade unions in the 21st century are now like a double-edged sword protecting its members and dancing to the tuned of the employers and government at the same time. With these unwholesome practices of the unions, they are fast losing their value, integrity and trust of membership. With time and judging by the current trends unionism may likely become a thing of the past. This article attempts to examine the disappointing role of trade unions in Nigeria in the 21st century exposing their inability to safeguard the interest of their members which they claimed to represent. Having enjoyed a glorious past with strong dedication and commitment by its rank and file membership coupled with the support from the civil society, they evolved from formal to a very formidable movement with strong zeal and solidarity from individual members. However, they lost their main focus which is to maintain close ties with the civil society on struggles for workers’ rights, welfare and interest. With unions’ pseudo movement attitude and insincerity, members no longer believe in their ability to protect them in the struggle for their rights. Therefore, the paper in specific term examined the disappointing role of trade unions in employment practices and it adopted theoretical approaches in explaining both the positive and negative aspect of trade unionism in Nigeria in the current era.

Key Words: Civil Society Group, Elites, Labour Movement, Nigeria Labour Congress, Trade Union Congress and Working Masses

1. Introduction
All over the world, trade unions represents the vanguard of the working class’ interests against capitalist exploitations. In the contemporary times however, especially in the developing countries, trade unions have come to assume roles that transcend the traditional role of protection of workers’ welfare and class liberation. In Nigeria, trade unions fought against colonial rule and exploitation of the Nigerian State during the colonial period. The activities of trade unions, under the umbrella of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) during the military dictatorship in the late 1980s and the 1990s hastened the return to democratic rule in the country. One of the peculiarities of the new democratic experiment in the country, which started in 1999, is the absence of a vibrant opposition to the ruling democratic party in the country.

The role and relevance of organized labour has come to question in no other time than this period of recession and government’s insensitivity to the plight of the working masses. In addition to the problem are inconsistencies in policies, statements, actions, and corruption in the system. No wonder Mogensen (1999) posits that organized labor reached the zenith of its social and political influence during the 1950s and 1960s and Mosquera (2007) asked in his

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dissertation that “Is organized labour a decayed business model” while Denny and Muellbauer (1987) argue: ‘it is not the independent effect of trade unions but interaction of unions and management that can cause improved economic performance’.

The unpalatable development has made workers which the unions’ represent to lose confidence in their leaders. Most of the time, the issues in dispute seems to have been settled behind the door before calling on people to protest the unfair treatment. With strong determination from the workers to carry on protest on what they perceived as injustice and cheating, the same labour leaders will turn round to soft pedal and dance to the tunes of government when appreciable concession has not been achieved or made in the course of negotiation process in favour of the workers. The reason for this trend is based on the fact that organized labour exerts a strong influence upon the individual employees, their organization sand also socio-economic, psychological, and political climate in the country.

The 21st century is characterized as a period in which labour officials or leaders compete and compare themselves with capitalist properties and business owners in the society in terms of opulence living and riding the best cars from check-off dues paid by union members and organizing frivolous social gatherings and irrelevant educational training programmes just to squander union funds paid by the members who in returns do not get commensurate benefits for subscribing to union membership.

Bryson and Blanchflower (2008) assert that “trade unions have seen failing membership across most advanced economies over the last 25 years”. The most significant and fundamental trend is the decline in the number of people joining trade unions and taking part in trade union activity (Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2008). In the UK, membership level reached a historic peak in 1979, when it was recorded that over 13 million people (58 percent of all employees) were members of listed trade union organisations. And in almost every year since then the number has declined as people have let their membership lapse, older members have retired, and younger people have not replaced them (Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2008). Based on this development, Nigeria experience is not different. Inflicting the present era, most workers no longer see their union as guardian of social conscience, protector of the workers’ interest against all forms of abuses and oppressions from the employers and government. For instance, the recent practice which focused on performance-related reward system as determinant of the level of salary and bonus system paid by the employers of labour in the private sector has rendered unions powerless and irrelevant (Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2008). From this perspective, the new industrial relations practices can be seen as a direct threat to union loyalty and participation, and to members’ ‘willingness to act’ (Offe and Wiesenthal, 1985). Also, individualistic human resource strategies may thus undermine the basis of effective trade unionism, namely, the capacity to mobilize members (Kelly, 1996). No wonder Fajana (2006) maintains that the potential of loss of membership and subscription is certainly going to attract research interest among union managers in the rest of this millennium.

2. Literature Review

The Origin and Reform of Trade Unions in Nigeria

The history of the trade union movement in Nigeria has been well documented. Its travails and triumphs as well as the potentials and shortcomings have been highlighted by such writers as Ananaba (1969), Cohen (1974), Offiong (1987), Otobo (1986) and Aborishade (1992) among others. Available records indicate that the first trade union to emerge was Southern Nigerian Civil Service Union inaugurated on the 19th August, 1912, and subsequently changed to the Nigerian Civil Service Union (N.C.S.U) in 1914 after the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates. One major issue addressed by the union was the discrimination between African and European civil servants.

Active trade unionism in Nigeria can be said to begin in the early 1930s, a period which witnessed persistent workers agitation and restiveness spear-headed by the more radical railway workers who severed their membership of NCSU and formed the Railway Workers Union (R.W.U) in 1931. The major arguments against the NCSU were that it was too soft-spoken and unresponsive to the economic hardship.

The rise 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 (Adewumi, 2004). 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, hence the construction of more roads, bridges, rail lines, ports and military bases. All these increased the pool of employed labour as well as took their tool on Nigerian workers (Ananaba, 1969).

According to Fashoyin (1980) one of the first major attempts made by Nigerian Workers to assert their rights was by artisans workmen in the Public Works Department (P.W.D) in 1897 who went on a three day strike to protest the
arbitrary change in their hours of work. The action was strongly countered by the then colonial governor who threatened to deal with the striking workers if they continued with their action. The workers were undaunted and the governor agreed to negotiate.

In 1938, Trade Union Ordinance, which formally legalized trade unionism and made for compulsory registration of unions in Nigeria was enacted. The law made it unlawful for any union to engage in collective bargaining or embark on industrial action without registration under its provisions. Reasons for the enactment of this law cannot be unconnected with the series of riots, strikes and rebellions that plagued the British Colonies in West Indies and Northern Rhodesia first in 1933 and again in 1937, coupled with the general restiveness of workers occasioned by the hardships they had to contend with (Adewumi, 2004).

Restructuring of Trade Unions in Nigeria:

Aside from the Trade Union Ordinance which gave legal backing to trade unionism in Nigeria, the example of the Railway workers’ union was one of the factors responsible for the upsurge in the number of unions. The concessions gained by the railway workers were pointers to other workers that similar possibilities could come to them. Added to the fact that any five workers could combine to form a trade union, many unions emerged leading to what has been described as the proliferation of unions with many of them having less than 250 members (Fashoyin, 1986).

The situation seriously militated against the healthy advancement of the interests of the working masses and this was by no means helped by the divisive strategies and acrimonious rivalry among the existing central labour organizations. It was within this setting that the Nigerian state got an excuse to promulgate the Trade Union (Central Labour Organizations) Decree No.44 of 1976. Among other things, it cancelled the registration of the existing central labour organizations, and placed an embargo on the registration of new trade unions. More importantly, an Administrator of Trade Unions was appointed and mandated among other things to effect the formation of a single central labour organization to which all trade unions in Nigeria must be affiliated, and to restructure the existing numerous house unions into fewer, stronger and more effective industrial unions.

The exercise culminated in the promulgation of the Trade Unions (Amendment) Decree No.22 of 1978, which provided statutory recognition for 70 unions including 42 industrial unions, which emerged out of the restructuring exercise. The restructuring exercise also led to the emergence of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) as the only central trade union body in Nigeria to which all the industrial unions (as defined by the enabling law) are affiliated. Further restructuring led to emergence of the present 29 industrial unions in 1999 (Anyim, 2009).

Trade Union Functions and Activities:

Despite sustained hostility from some employers and occasional state repression coupled with membership passiveness and indifference of the public, trade unions remain an enduring institution in the employment relations. This much is admitted by Mulvey (1978) as he acknowledges that in most of the industrial countries the most pervasive institution is the trade union movement. Trade unions developed in response to challenges thrown up by the new organization of work and production built around the factory system that emerged as the new centre of economic activities after the industrial revolution in the 17th and early 18th centuries. They emerged without the prompting of governments and employers and also as independent organizations of workers without any legal backing. They first emerged in England and it was not until 1824 that the legal encumbrance was removed.

According to Otobo (1996), unions carry on many different activities. Most visible to the average member are those which produce direct benefit-negotiations, grievance handling, community service, and uncertain trades, job search or referral. Another type of activity arises from the internal politics of the union. It consists of elections, meetings, conventions and similar forums in which members participate in governing the union. But to be effective a union must build and maintain itself as an organization. This entails bringing in members through organizing and keeping the union running smoothly through union administration and effective internal communications. Otobo (1996) further states that trade unions occupy a special position because they are organizations of wage earners, workers, and quite often they are about the only other group in society that has as its main duty or responsibility to react to the industrial and socio-economic policies of government and of private employers and try to protect the interest of members within individual enterprises. The industrial trade unions are by their nature and structure basically democratic institutions whatever their other failures. And within and outside of their executives and central working committees, state or zonal branches, members can always propose and oppose any line of action. From the foregoing, union leaders cannot be seen or taken as dictators that can impose an unpopular position or stance on members. Members would either throw them out, or when not possible because of union constitutional provisions can bypass such leaders. Okogwu (1996) also agrees with Otobo when he asserts that in addition to increasing wages and improving conditions of
employment, trade unions provide workers both with protection against arbitrary management decisions and with a voice at the place of work and in the political arena.

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 people. It is also a past that was characterized by conscious efforts at mobilizing the rank-and-file members as a bulwark against state repression. The past equally witnessed the building of alliances between the trade union movement and various elements and organizations within the larger labour movement. All these constituted the pillars of strength of the trade union movement (Adewumi, 1997).

Nigerian Trade Union movement comprises a variety of unions that represent the specific interest of workers. They engage in struggling for the rights and welfare of workers, specifically, for decent wages and improved conditions of service, where negotiations fail to achieve the desired result, trade unions are noted for resorting to radical actions — such as stay at home, work to rule, demonstrations and street protests — which are capable of not only grounding the particular production process but sometimes and more crucially, the economy (Tai, 2009). They have become the voice of the voiceless, platform for the unheard and downtrodden, and the hope of the masses (Imhonopi and Urim, 2011). Thus, there is no doubt that trade unions in Nigeria have come a long way in enhancing the economic well-being of its members. It has even passed through the burning and fiery flame doing so (Ademiluyi and Imhonopi, 2010).

3. Positive Contributions of Labour Towards Socio-Economic Emancipation of Nigeria

Labour unions have played a positive and huge role in the time past even before Nigeria got independence and during the Military rule. Mesfin (1986) posits that despite all the restrictions and controls, African trade unions played leading roles in the struggle for independence. Many national trade union movements and their leaders defied the bans on political activities and joined and in many instances, assumed leadership positions in nationalist organizations. According to Adewumi (2009), who claimed “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 people. 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 the trade union movement and various elements and organizations within the larger labour movement. This role can be seen clearly and appreciated by most Nigerians through their selfless services to the Nigeria society as a whole.

But it is unfortunate just as Mesfin (1986) emphasized that after independence, the close ties between trade unions and the newly-formed African governments were often short-lived. In the same way, 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 thus fight for their pockets and shares of the national cakes. No wonder Deery and Walsh (1999) state that employees who are subject to policies of direct communication, individual appraisals and performance-related pay may become more organizationally committed and less likely to see their interests as being advanced through collective or group efforts. The divergent and gap in interest between the trade unions 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.

Unions as a Betrayer of Workers’ Hope

The trade unions that have played a significant role in promoting social justice, equity and economic well-being of Nigerian masses are losing their integrity and charisma in the perception of most Nigerians due to the current double standard role exhibited in the course of carrying out their legitimate functions. Infect, the situation has degenerated to the extent that the civil society groups that act as compatriot of trade unions during period of crises seem to be doubting the sincerity of trade union leaders in the prosecution of crises and due to their sluggish and “sell -out” attitude have labeled them as betrayal of common man’s hope. In the aftermath of the January, 2012 fuel subsidy crises in Nigeria, leaders of civil society groups and opposition political parties, who felt sidelined by labour over negotiations with government vowed to continue the action which was abandoned by labour. According to media reports, the critics of labour unions included Conference of the Nigeria Political Parties (CNPP), The Nigeria Medical Association, (NMA), The Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), Civil Rights Congress (CRC), Save Nigeria Group (SNG), Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), and notable Nigerians such as the former Petroleum Minister, Professor Tam David-West, Professor Auwalu Yadudu, and Professor Wole Soyinka among others.
The inability of Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) as a central Labour Organizations in January 9-16, 2012 to achieve what the Nigeria masses wanted which is the reversal of the illegal and unjustified hike of petrol pump price from N141 to N65in the face of their unresolved determination to fight on until their demand are met by the government left a sour taste in the mouth of the patriotic masses. More worrisome was the fact that government later settled for N97 per liter of fuel pump price as against N65 demanded by the masses. The scenario according to Adewumi (2009) can be likened to what happened in June, 2007 when the NLC threwaway a good golden opportunity of getting major concessions from a government that was yet to find its feet and lacking in legitimacy. The NLC in this instance had gone on nationwide strike over a number of work-related and national issues and at a time when many observers thought the NLC would hold on a little longer, it caved in to pressure from government and anti-labour groups/ organizations.

The betrayal of people’s trust and confidence is becoming a frequent re-occurrence within trade union circle. According to Adewumi (2009) “the sale of government houses was one of the sour legacies of the Obasanjo administration. This happened without any serious opposition from labour. The actual fact is that some labour leaders allowed themselves to be deceived that it was only government houses in Lagos that would be affected while those in Abuja would be left. Crass opportunism did not allow them to see through the dummy.”

The ageing of union membership is not merely the result of demographic shifts; it is an event that springs from the failure to mobilize young people. Survey shows that the likelihood of joining a union becomes increasingly lower and recruitment conditions are unlikely to improve in the future (Ebbinghaus, 2002).

The present day low mobilization within the labour movement might have consequences for decades to come, especially when the current crop of insensitive and corrupt leaders exit from the unions. This trend has further worsened and betrayed the hope of working masses and made Adewumi (2009) views to be valid that the travails of the Nigeria trade union movement in the past two decades or so have rubbed the giant’s strides made by the unions.

**The Significance of Civil Society Groups in Nigeria Development**

The significant of Civil Society groups in promoting socio-economic development in Nigeria cannot be underestimated. It is on record that promotion of human dignity, equality and evangelizing for better governance through an effective consistent and humane policies that would have positive impact on the well-being of Nigerians has been their major preoccupation over the years.

According to Ghaus-Pasha(2004), the concept of civil society goes back many centuries in Western thinking with its roots in Ancient Greece. The modern idea of civil society emerged in the 18th Century, influenced by political theorists from Thomas Paine to George Hegel, who developed the notion of civil society as a domain parallel to but separate from the states (Cerothers, 1999;Ghaus-Pasha, 2004).

The Civil Society groups in Nigeria has made indelible contributions directly and indirectly in the political arena i.e. the return of democracy in 1999 in Nigeria, just and egalitarian good governance, social and economic development through advocating for effective policy and infrastructural development to the living conditions of the poor masses. According to Ghaus-Pasha (2004) civil society has been widely recognized as an essential ‘third’ sector. Its strength can have a positive influence on the state and the market. Civil society is therefore seen as an increasingly important agent for promoting good governance like transparency, effectiveness, openness, responsiveness and accountability.

**Decline in Trade Unions’ Activity**

The decline in the activity of trade unions continues to occur due to some reasons such as the manipulative and interfering role of government in defusing the operations of trade unions economically, politically also in view of the structural changes that is taking place in the general economy and the globe. Peetz (1998) and Drago and Wooden (1998) attribute the decline to two main factors. Firstly, increase in government and employer opposition to unions that resulted in a substantial reduction in the incidence of closed shops and compulsory unionism. Secondly, structural changes in the economy.

The recent scenario became interesting with the question raised by Denisi and Griffin (2005) which asked “labor unions still necessary”? The questions have been raised perhaps, having realized that labour unions were at the onset formed as a vehicle to equalize power between management and labour due to the fact that management controlled more resource, labour had power only if individual workers united in a concerted effort.

Despite the bad shape of national economy according Omar (2011), the national economy has continued to underperform. Although the economy is said to have grown at the rate of over 6 percent, unemployment and poverty have remained as critical challenges facing the nation. Inflation has been on the rise, reaching a current rate of 12.8 percent. The inability of trade unions to achieve effective social transformation and wrestling out a good standard of
living for Nigerian workers at the same time achieving dividend of democracy for the entire Nigeria populace has left many in doubt of the relevance of trade unions in 21st century. For example, when over 87% of Nigerians live on less than N 184 or $ 1, 25 a day and life expectancy is 47 years compared to 60 years in 1960 appears to create a disturbing and worrisome situation.

According to Mesfin (1986) “judging by the general national economic trends, as well as the pattern of wage structures and income distribution in Africa over the last years, trade unions and employers cannot claim to have made significant impact on national output, real wages or in reducing the rural-urban gap or the inequalities among low and high income groups”. The decline in density and activity of unions will likely be based on the following premise:

- Corruption among the rank and file members
- Philosophy of economic policy
- The role of Multinationals
- The role of HR
- The state of the national economy
- Level of unemployment
- Lackadaisical attitude of labour leaders
- The role of outsourcing
- Effect of casualisation
- Globalization
- The life style of the elected members etc: The individuals form an opinion about their leaders through the life style they are living with their cheek-off dues. If it is reckless spending, it would affect member’s perceptions, instrumentality opinion and hence affect commitment to the cause and stability of the union.

The activities of labour and the role played by their leaders in the past gave Nigerians reason to support them, but in the current era, the perception of masses are changing negatively towards their activities and unless there is fundamental change in their attitude, workers/civil society groups would continue to have their suspicion on the integrity and sincerity of the trade union leadership in playing their legitimate role. These current developments gave reason for Fajana (2006) to emphasise that currently in union administration there are confusion about who is expected to do what in most African trade unions, as well as undemocratic formulation of demands by leadership for and on behalf of their membership.

4. How to Address the Situation and Make Trade Unions Relevant in 21st Century

No movement can survive without dedication and commitment of its members. Redressing the declining situation agrees with the question raised by Denisi and Griffin (2005), “Will unions disappear”? Probably not, but they may look different in the next century than they looked in the past (Flanders, 1972). Adewumi (2000) notes that trade unions exist to promote sectional interest the section of the population they happen to organize. There is nothing selfish or slightly disreputable about this; it is an essential part of the democratic process. Indeed once trade unions appear to be acting as servants of employers or servants of the government; they are bound to be written off by their own members.

Irrespective of the gloomy trend, hope is not completely lost. There is need for trade unions to be proactive in collective bargaining, and other problems affecting the poor masses in Nigeria by pondering on the view of Iyayi (2000) through acknowledging seriously the crucial role that trust plays in interpersonal and inter-group relationships. The implication of this is that although the unions may believe in collaboration, the fact that they do not trust management may predisposed them to believe that they need to be militant. This belief may seem highly justified especially in a situation where the unions also believe that management/government will not act on their problems except when pushed or forced to do so.

Adewumi (2009) suggests that in appointing General Secretaries as well as other paid officials for the unions, candidates should demonstrate convincingly an abiding commitment to the ideals of trade unionism and needs to strengthen the union organisation and make them rise to the challenges of the time, including threats from government and employers.

Hyman (1975) and Adewumi (2000) pointed out that one reason trade union leaders jettison the interests of their members is because: the situation of unions leaders differ significantly from those of members they represent; and this leads in turn to differences in attitudes, interests, objectives and conceptions of what is good for the members and for the union.
There is also need to encourage active membership involvement at branch level through regular attendance at meetings and involvement in other activities of the unions. Attendance at meetings, for instance would allow members make in-puts into policies and programmes of the union. Such involvement would put the leaders/officials on their toes and make it difficult for them to mortgage the interests of members.

In regaining their lost glory, trade unions/organised labour need to see Civil Society group as an integral part of the institutional structure particularly for addressing the problems rising from governance, bad policy and issue of minimum wage which cut across all spheres of the economy and affects all members of the working class.

There is a need for parents of trade unions and organised labour in Nigeria which are Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) to explore means to cement their relationship with civil Society organizations that seems disappointed by their current posture in recent events.

The trade unions should work harmoniously with the civil society groups in addressing the problems affecting the generality of Nigerians, such as infrastructural development, labour casualization, minimum wage, deregulation policy and privatization amongst others.

A cordial relationship between the labour movement and the civil society groups is necessary to promote pro-union socialization effect of partnership and family which Martin (1986) Deery and Walsh (1999), maintained that individuals who perceived that their friends and relatives were predisposed towards industrial action were themselves more likely to express a willingness to strike.

5. Conclusion

Indeed and lately, the absence of element such as: lack of commitment, focus, corruptible union leadership etc, characterised the Nigeria trade union movement apart from others in African continent. This lack of capacity for resistance has not only portrayed them as not credible and sincere before the working masses, but has also made the workers to take unions’ opposition or fight against state policy as less than serious.

Consequently, the labour movement in Nigeria emerged as opposition to the excesses that characterised Nigeria politics from independence until the contemporary times. These include anti-workers policies, high handedness of the government especially the military junta, corruption and insensitivity of the political elites to the plight of the suffering masses. The labour movement appreciably articulated the aspirations of the masses in the society, raised their political consciousness and mobilized public sentiments against the abuses of the ruling elites, either military or civilian which are commendable contributions. Labour rallied the public around nationalist cause, and bawled at the ever-increasing gap that existed between the affluence of politicians and the poverty of majority of Nigerians. The labour movement raised fundamental questions regarding access to education, health, and other welfare services. Similarly, it challenged authoritarian tendencies as demonstrated by the call to create a National Government in which official opposition was abolished and by the Preventive Detention Act of the 1960s, and general repression by the military in the 1980s.

In particular in 1963, the then Prime Minister late Alhaji Tafawa Balewa sought a one party state by calling for a National Government in the cabinet system of government which would have abolished official opposition in the federal legislature. All these developments were rebuffed or supported by the movement as the case may be. However, the current attitude of the labour movement is nothing but a shadow of its past. The situation must be addressed to forestall the unions from being extinguished.

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