
The Contribution Of Labour Towards The Restoration Of Civilian Rule In Nigeria, 1993-1999

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Abstract

The role of labour in Nigeria quest for democratic rule has remained a source of controversy between and amongst scholars, labour activists and government functionaries. Following the 1983 coup that swept off Shelu Shagari's government and subsequent imposition of military rule on Nigeria, the citizens had fervently yearned for the restoration of democracy in the land. 1993 therefore, marked the turning point in the struggle for democratization of the nation as there were increased agitations from various groups against the continued military dictatorship. Labour- government face- off was a direct consequence of the unjustifiable annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential Elections won by M.K.O. Abiola. There followed a regime of restrictions occasioned by Sani Abacha's government. With all the political structures dismantled, labour remained conspicuously the only rallying point for opposition against the Military. In spite of labour's vigorous contributions to the restoration of democracy in Nigeria in 1999 its role has not enjoyed robust attention from scholars. This study is, therefore, intended to give insight to the role of labour in the democratization efforts of Nigerians during the period. It is expected that it will stimulate further thoughts and investigations from historians as well as scholars of other related disciplines.

Introduction

Labour, as a concept, is man's ability to do work which is commonly referred to as labour power. This has to do with the physical interaction between the human person and nature as a result of which the former extracts a living. Labour can also be said to mean "a collectivity of people who are engaged in wage or paid employment, that is, people who rely solely on their labour power for survival"¹. For convenience and simplicity, the term labour, as used in this paper, is an amalgam of the legally recognized and registered trade unions in Nigeria.

The term trade union has stirred up varied definitions from scholars and governments. For instance, Sydney and Beatrice Webbs have defined it as "a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives"². This definition appears to suggest that labour unions' objectives begin and end within the office environment.

Kirpatrick Bingle defines trade union as "a group of workers either of the same or of different trades who join together to bargain with employers using the principle of collective bargaining for fair wages and better working conditions"³. R.B. Davison has defined trade unions as "organizations of workers designed to improve the working

conditions of their members”⁴. E.O. Egboh, in his opinion argues that the term “suggests the idea of people coming together for the achievement of certain economic and social objectives”⁵. The trade union Decree of 1973 on its own part defines the term differently. The Decree states that union is

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 Decree, be an unlawful combination by reason of any of its purposes being in restraint of trade, and whether its purposes do or do not include the provision of benefits for its members⁶.

Each of these definitions has one fundamental error or the other and therefore does not enjoy wide acceptance. However, Carroll’s definition of the term would seem to extend the functions of labour into political realm, thereby distancing himself from others. He argues that “in order to discharge their obligations to the members in the matter of wage rates and employment conditions, trade unions have to undertake responsibilities and commitments which are becoming more closely interwoven with social, political and economic affairs generally”⁷. This latter definition appears to be all-embracing and in tune with what labour has come to be associated with in Nigeria. It may be permissible to add that from its inception in Nigeria, labour has not only identified itself with the popular aspirations of the citizens but also wedded to the politics of governance.

The objective of this paper is to investigate the extent labour was able to influence the restoration of civilian rule in Nigeria from 1993 to 1999. It has to be noted that the Nigerian military government which mid-wifed the re-birth of civil rule in 1999 had attempted to contain and control labour’s political activism through spurious restrictive measures. The measures ranged from the imposition of a pro-government leadership on the labour movement to sacking its executives and sealing off its secretariat. This notwithstanding, labour’s resilience increased its relevance and utility in the struggle that brought into being civil rule in 1999. This paper is, therefore, an attempt to assess labour’s contributions towards political re-engineering in Nigeria.

Labour in Nigeria, like in most other developing nations, has taken a front seat in the nation-building efforts. The role of labour in the de-colonization struggle is too well known to be repeated here. The Trade Union Act (CAD 437) No 22 of 1978, which presumably created the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), was to all intents and purposes to ‘unite and control’ labour. This Act which was to prevent labour from active political involvement became rather its source of strength and resilience. Labour’s involvement in the struggle for the return of civil rule from 1993 through 1999 has remained largely unexplored by scholars. This involvement deserves scholarly attention in order to fill the gap existing in the knowledge of the subject.

The topic cuts across other disciplines such as political science, sociology, economics, public administration, and anthropology, among others. Thus, using interdisciplinary approach, the paper distilled from other areas of study ideas and information which were further subjected to rigorous logic of content analysis. This is necessary to establish their reliability and validity. Apart from documentary sources, some labour leaders

and the general membership, politicians, traders, farmers etc were interviewed for corroborative evidence. The author also made use of both protocol or self-report technique and observation method to fill the missing links in the primary and secondary sources of information.

Government's Efforts to Control Labour

Labour, especially the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) which is the focus of this paper, has had a chequered history. Since its emergence in 1978, government's intervention in its internal affairs has become an act of practical politics. It has often been a victim of politically-motivated proscription, dissolution of its executives and or their incarceration by various Nigerian governments, both military and civilian. Each government had imbibed the ideological residue of the erstwhile colonial rulers to maintain a 'non political' union. It seems clear that the efforts of governments have been to distance labour from active partisan politics so as to forestall any concerted opposition against government's anti-labour and anti-people's policies and programmes. This is in order to channel labour militancy along the well known economic path of collective bargaining and thereby remain submissive to political authority.

When the military staged a come back to Nigeria's political scene in 1983, they sullied the democratic credentials of the country's Second Republic under Shehu Shagari. With this development, all democratic ideals such as freedom, justice, equality and popular participation were abrogated. This left labour as the only viable or credible opposition centre to the military dictatorship. The deepening economic crisis which culminated in the December 31, 1983 coup also saw the end of Muhammad Buhari's regime on August 27, 1985. The new regime of Ibrahim Babangida seemed to have struck the right cord from the onset by exhibiting some sort of consultative leadership which captured the mood of labour.

However, the hope of revamping the battered and traumatized economy for sustainable national growth and development remained elusive. When, on October 2, 1985, the Babangida administration threw open the national debate on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan, it was no more than a confidence-building measure intended to enhance his consultative leadership rating. The home-grown Structural Adjustment Programme, introduced in the wake of the rejection of the IMF conditionality with the attendant harrowing stress, pitched labour against the government. Labour's anti-SAP struggle appears to have whetted the discontent within the military power-bloc vented through Maman Vasta/Gideon Orkar coup attempt. It can be said that labour's anti-SAP agitations fed into the wider social and political grievances that threatened the nation's political stability.

The government decidedly involved itself in the December 19, 1988 labour convention that brought in Pascal Bafyau as the NLC leader. It seems the government went a step further to drag some notable labour activists such as Pascal Bafyau, Halilu Ibrahim and Frank Kokori into its unending transition to civil rule programme. When the ban on political activities was eventually lifted, the NLC joined the political class in presenting a hasty jumble of associations as political parties. According to Yusuf Bangura, "it ...decided to encourage the formation of labour party to fight for political power in the transition to civil rule"⁸. When the government imposed two political parties – the Social Democratic Party and the National Republican Convention - on the nation, labour leadership directed its membership to register with the former which appeared to be a leftist party.

Labour and June 12, 1993 Elections

After his unsuccessful bid to be the running mate of Chief M.K.O. Abiola, reputed to have won the Presidential election on the SDP ticket, Bafyau became all the more less militant in the popular struggle for democracy. The annulment of the June 12, election may derive partly from the romance between the radical labour leaders and the party. It should be noted that Babangida annulled the results of the elections at a point when the SDP was clearly leading with “8, 323, 305 votes against the NRC’s 6, 073, 612”⁹. This fear informed the statement of A.O Oluokoshi that

apart from the fact that the political transition programme itself was laced with the objectives of adjustment, the military regime went to great lengths to ensure that the most strident opponents of the market reforms—officially labelled radicals and extremists—were excluded from the competition for succession¹⁰.

If Bafyau’s political ambition was stunted as a result of his radicalism, nothing was more erroneous than that decision as his subsequent activities would appear to show. Although the NLC leadership condemned the annulment and even threatened a strike action if the military stayed beyond their stated exit date of August 27, 1993, this was no more than a feeble threat. The strike embarked upon on August 28 was suspended on the 30th of August on spurious reasons. If Bafyau was a poor spokesman for labour, Kokori demonstrated that the economic power of labour could be used as a strong bargaining weapon in the political arena during the anti-annulment of election crisis. The NUPENG strike was embarked upon to protest against the unjust annulment of the 1993 Presidential election.

In spite of the limitations of the labour leadership, its earlier posture of opposition not only agitated but also contributed in forcing IBB to step aside. The position of the NLC on the annulment notwithstanding, the civil society’s disapproval and disquiet emboldened the prevalent anti-SAP riots which, in conjunction with other factors, were instrumental to the credibility crisis that was to ease off the Babangida regime from office. On the side of the military, the state-labour relations provided a graphic example of a paradox where the junta, in an effort to keep the civil society in a relay race of turmoil, manipulated itself out of power and authority.

The position of the NLC over the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election, as already noted, was somewhat shifty. The leadership of the labour at the centre would appear to have become less assertive than other civil society organisations which had coalesced into an ardent opposition to the issue. The reasons for this seeming ambivalence are still open to further investigations. All the same, it could be surmised that labour had been compromised. While the NLC had in a meeting in Port Harcourt in July affirmed the acceptability of the June 12 election results, the outcome of its Enugu meeting in August was anything but a heroic stand. The communiqué which merely stated that June 12 remained “a legitimate question that cannot be swept under the carpet”¹¹ suggested an abandonment of the earlier position. It was expected that the NLC would have provided an alternative forum for articulating popular interests against the military dictatorship that stunted the growth of democracy.

The unceremonious withdrawal of the Babangida regime on August 26, 1993, was an epochal victory for the civil society and labour movement. It could be said to have met

one of the political demands of the NLC that the military should disengage from the political stage before August 28. The Ernest Shonekan-led Interim National Government (ING), which was inaugurated following the 'stepping aside' of Babangida, was a product of the June 12 crisis. His appointment was a thinly veiled effort to assuage both the Yoruba ethnic group from where the winner of the annulled election hailed and the restive civil society over the patently unjustifiable action of the regime.

The ING was regarded as an aberration lacking in legitimacy, just as its predecessor. While the new regime was faced with legitimacy question on the political scene, on the economic front, the situation was not better. The Nigerian currency suffered disastrous downstream devaluation following every phase of the SAP. Towards

the end of 1993, eight years after SAP, the Nigerian economy experienced an exchange rate devaluation of more than 1800%, a foreign debt of about \$30 billion, a balance of payment deficit of about \$6.0 billion, a domestic debt of over ₦160 billion and a budget deficit of about ₦98.4 billion¹².

This development had not only vitiated the purchasing power of the working class, but also destroyed the goal SAP was initially set out to achieve. B. Sowunmi opines that "the economic measures taken to devalue income earnings ... are partly responsible for the frequency of general strikes and street protests as the living standard of most sections of the labour force across the country declined"¹³. The various strikes embarked upon by labour were intended to join issues with the state over the eroding impact of SAP on the real wages of the working class and deteriorating political climate in the country. The NLC strike of November 15, 1993 against the fuel price increase from 70 kobo to N 5 per litre helped to bring the ING to its knees. The judicial pronouncements of Dolapo Akinsanya and S.O. Ilori of the Lagos High Court on the November 10, 1993 which nullified the ING and its constitution strengthened the pro-democracy groups like the NLC. It is fair to suggest that

Akinsanya ignited a fire, which fuelled by the strike of workers from 15th November on the orders of the Nigeria Labour Congress over the increase in the price of petrol from 70 kobo a litre to N5, set the stage for the overthrow of the ING in a military coup on 17 November¹⁴.

In this way, labour could be said to have contributed in shaping the political destiny of Nigeria.

Labour Under the Abacha Regime

Following the palace coup that dislodged the Shonekan-led ING from office, Sani Abacha, the most reviled dictator and another product of the June 12 crisis, contrived to assume the mantle of leadership of Nigeria. He would appear to have developed a novelty in the state-labour relations. The tenor and tempo of economic and political crises following the annulment of June 12 elections seemed to have remained rather unmitigated high. This appears to have increasingly drawn labour into fervid partisan politics in order to redress the deep-seated structural deficiency occasioned by the military. The reaction of the Abacha regime suggests that it was shaken by the anti-annulment struggle of the organs of civil society. In its rather stringent anti-labour attitude, the Military Government promulgated

Decrees 9 and 10 of 1994. Since the contents of the two decrees are more or less the same, it may suffice to cite Decree 9 by way of illustration. The Decree states, among other things, that since

the Nigeria Labour Congress has of recent and intermittently embarked on, and has persistently kept threatening to call for, nation-wide strike actions over political matters ... the National bodies of the congress specified in the schedule to this Decree are hereby dissolved¹⁵.

The appointment of sole administrators for these bodies was no more than a well designed strategy to keep progressive labour activism under check. It is therefore plausible to argue that the regime used the autocratic law to destroy legitimate rights of labour's agitation politics. D. Otobo's argument lends weight to this statement, namely that "in a political order largely based on force and thus lacking political legitimacy, organised interest groups, particularly trade unions, logically bore the brunt of government hostility, their activities being regarded as destabilising"¹⁶.

With the dissolution of the NLC structures, its leadership was put on a tight lease while its rank and file became war weary. In order to place both the unions and their activities under government control, the military government went further to incarcerate the NUPENG leader, Frank Kokori. It was obvious why the government took this decision as it viewed the unions' activities with considerable unease. What was more, the fact that labour had in 1992 built up a close relationship with the SDP in such a way that Bafyau contested the Party's Presidential primaries, eventually became the NLC's nemesis. In order to tame labour and the seeming leftist party SDP - the government used known members of the defunct National Republican Convention (NRC) to stragulate any more sturdy resistance to government's policies and programmes. According to M.H. Kukah, "all those it appointed to act as sole administrators after the sacking of the executives such as Samuel Ogbemudia, Uba Ahmed and Ason Bur were from the National Republican Convention (NRC)"¹⁷. While Ason Bur was the sole administrator of the NLC, Uba Ahmed was the Minister for Employment, Labour and Productivity. Ogbemudia was the predecessor of Uba Ahmed as the Minister for Labour while Ahmed Gusau (the ex-Deputy Governor of Sokoto State on NRC ticket) succeeded Ason Bur as the sole administrator of NLC. The appointment of the NRC stalwarts to run the affairs of the NLC could be said to be one more way of government trying to bend over backwards to co-opt the 'moderates'. Given the spate of proscriptions and or impositions of a pro-government leadership on the labour movement, it can be said with some certainty that the military was ill-at-ease with labour's political antecedents.

In order to 'weaken' some notable left-wing labour activists such as Adams Oshiomhole, S.O.Z Ejiofor, A.A. Salam, Dele Akilaja and several general-secretaries of industrial unions, the government, through Ason Bur and Uba Ahmed, insisted that only 'card-carrying' members of unions were qualified for elective posts¹⁸. These secretaries who were employees of their individual unions were regarded as members of the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) - an anti-Abacha outfit that should also be tamed. The government effort to control and or coerce the NLC was further demonstrated in the constitution of proxies as state councils of the NLC to launder government's image before the public. It may be observed that these right- wing labour leaders such as Fidelis Edeh of

the Civil Service Union, A.C. B. Agbazuere formerly of the National Union of Banks, Insurance and Finance Employees (NUBIFE), Uko Amuna of the Maritime Workers' Union, Mustapha Abubakar and Mohammed Magoro of the Railway Workers' Union (RWU) were also used to temper labour radicalism.

After destroying the political class, liquidating and bastardizing labour movement, Abacha embarked on a self-perpetuation agenda. Following this development, labour needed much more time to re-organise itself so as to play the roles required of it in the unfolding circumstances. Meanwhile it may be said that labour was used against itself through the appointment of some labour leaders into Abacha's cabinet. The government's 'men' in the labour were to garner support for Abacha's anti-labour decrees as well as represent Nigerian labour front at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions in Geneva. But, precisely how far they would have succeeded in representing the NLC at Geneva conventions at the expense of the 'true' NLC representatives is arguable.

The promulgation of the Trade Unions (Amendment) Decree N0 4 of 1996 was in effort to ease off the left-wing labour leaders from the centre stage. The Decree stipulates that

no person shall be eligible to contest any elective post under the Central Labour Organisation unless he is a member of one of the 29 trade unions affiliated to the NLC: Membership of a trade union means a card-carrying member of a union who contributes money to the union¹⁹.

This was a deliberate effort to legalise a wrong. It must be remembered that the Decree further pruned down the number of unions from 41 to 29, and de-affiliated such unions as ASUU from the NLC in order to reduce their radicalism and intellectual support. Events moved rapidly to their logical outcome as Abacha died on July 8, 1998.

It is perhaps permissible to observe that

there are revelations in labour circles that the death of Sani Abacha saved labour from being co-opted into the Abacha for president campaign and the emergence of government-selected candidates as elected officers of the NLC. The death also stalled the elections of the NLC which was scheduled for July 1998. The idea was to ensure that President Abacha had a labour centre which would not disrupt the status quo²⁰.

The government had earlier promised each of its men in labour of becoming the NLC President as non-card-carrying unionists had been disqualified. Each of the government men could be said to be doing government biddings undisguised in order to subvert labour democracy. It is less open to doubt that that military rule from 1983 to 1998 constituted a more trying period for labour activism in Nigeria than was experienced all through the colonial era.

From the foregoing, it is discernible that within the labour power bloc, there existed a group of narrow-minded conservatives who more often than not were used by the state to maintain the *status quo ante* in which the basic structures of exploitation were upheld. The decision of the mainstream NLC leadership to link union struggles with those of the civil society would seem to have contributed significantly in undermining all the regimes previous

to Abacha's. Peter Lloyd seems to agree, opining that these "governments are fragile and strikes and mob violence may well lead directly to their collapse a consequence perhaps unintended by the poor"²¹. It is perhaps in the context of this fragility that the increasing spate of destabilisation and or co-option of labour leadership by the state can be explained. The military which always faced legitimacy crisis could naturally ill-afford opposition from such a pressure group with powerful political antecedents as labour. As has been seen, labour through its principled opposition, was able, to a large extent, to challenge some of the government policies such as SAP and the epileptic and tenuous transition to civil rule programmes.

State and Labour Convention of 1999

The death of Sani Abacha on July 8, 1998 ushered in Abdul Salam Abubakar's leadership of Nigeria. Comparatively, he exhibited much more charisma and leadership dynamism needed to steer the ship of the nation to political stability. Hitherto, labour activism had been censored and force had been used to coerce labour into submission as was exemplified by his predecessors while Abubakar recognised legitimate intermediate structures such as labour. In a national broadcast on July 20, 1998, he promised, among other things, that the democratization of the labour movement would be completed during the life span of his administration. This position would seem to have resulted in the withdrawal of the sole administrators as labour leaders. According to Chris Uyot, (of the NLC secretariat Abuja), by rescinding the decision to control labour movement, the government opened the opportunity for workers to control their union²². This brought a big relief to the labour leadership.

It is reasonable to surmise that this development also resulted in the emergence of a caretaker committee with Godwin Wokeh and M. A. Kazeem as the chairman and the secretary, respectively. Although the appointment of the caretaker committee was not the best indication of democratization, Abubakar allowed it as a prelude to the rise of labour democracy. As was expected, the committee was charged with the responsibility of organizing labour a convention that was to bring into being a democratically elected leadership of labour. It is perhaps true that the government needed such a leadership to partner with in order to bring about enduring political and economic transformation. Viewed in this light, it was expected that

the labour movement would develop into a stable organization whose contribution to national development was urgently needed in the effort by the government to revamp the nation's badly battered economy brought about by the global economic recession and oil glut of the early 1980s²³.

In addition to the oil glut, the political class could be said to have recklessly mismanaged the resources of the country. Because of this, the government on January 4, 1999 abrogated Decree No 4 of 1996 which stipulates that "no person shall be eligible to contest any elective post under the Central Labour Organisation unless he is a member of the 29 trade unions affiliated to the NLC: Membership of a trade union means a card-carrying member of a union who contributes money to the union"²⁴. The Decree had come to be regarded as a reflection of the excesses of the immediate past military regime. It may be said that "following democratic reforms in the country, some of the anti-union regulations were

abolished in January 1999”²⁵. It seems the amendment not only healed the state – inspired septic wound of division that had characterized the labour movement over the years but also signalled a new dawn in the state-labour relations. Speaking on this development, E. Udogu, the then Minister for Employment, Labour and Productivity, stressed that “it would be out of character with the progressive policies and programmes of this Administration for aggrieved union members to continue to nurse grudges that should have been buried at the inception of this government”²⁶. The new-found unity was necessary for a virile and active labour leadership to emerge and fill the vacuum created by the military’s forceful occupation of the labour centre for over four years.

The January 30, 1999 labour convention at Abuja signalled the dawn of a new era in the labour movement in Nigeria. There was change and continuity in the labour convention of January 30, 1999 at Abuja. In the past, the leadership of the movement had always been drawn from the public sector of the economy. It was not unlikely that the state had used a section of such leadership as a proxy to create cracks in the labour front. It was perhaps on this account that the delegates gave the mantle of leadership to unionists from establishments other than the public ones. For instance, Adams Oshiomhole of the National Union of Textile, Garment and Tailoring Workers (NUTGTW) emerged as the new President while one of his vice presidents was Henry Adekweh of the National Union of Construction and Engineering Workers and an employee of Julius Berger Company. Other Vice Presidents elected at the convention included Mohammed Erena, Isa Tijani and Daniel Adekola while Deputy Presidents were Lucas Damlak and Precious Kiri-Kalio. John Onyenemere, the President of the Food, Beverages and Tobacco Employees, became the treasurer.

Oshiomhole’s victory “not only restored people’s confidence in the NLC but also made the union to fill the vacuum created by the absence of opposition parties in the present day Nigerian politics”²⁷. In the light of this, it could be asserted that with the re-structuring and democratization of the NLC under Abubakar’s military regime came the enthronement of a more stable and vibrant labour endowed with potentials to withstand the challenges of the new millennium. This assertion is premised on the fact that “the degree of relevance or irrelevance of any organized...association is seen to be related to the extent to which it struggles to advance the fundamental aspirations both of its member and of the majority of the nation”²⁸. In fact, from government point of view, the issue at this period was no longer whether or not to live with labour but on how to partner with it for sustainable national development.

What was more, the fact that the leadership was made up of non-governmental employees of the affiliate unions went a long way in injecting dynamism and virility needed for labour to be a fighting arm of the workforce. Trade unionism, the world-over, has been stronger where outside leadership has consistently been available over a long period of time. With this, labour can be said to have been re-positioned for the defence of its membership and the generality of the citizenry.

Elements of continuity can be seen in the retention of one independent labour centre which survived into the present civilian rule. The state encouraged the democratization of labour by providing an enabling environment on which the foundation of labour democracy was laid. It may be suggested that the intention of the government was for labour to be able to play the new role of protecting and promoting the nation’s democracy. On the other hand, labour, on its own, introduced an innovation by experimenting with leadership drawn from the private sector of the economy. It is probably on account of this that labour became more

vibrant and properly focused under the present democratic dispensation than was hitherto the case.

Labour and the General Elections of 1999

Since the colonial era, “the desirability of organised labour’s participation in the political process has always been a subject of controversy, especially, when it comes to using the platform of the trade unions”²⁹. This is why the issue has attracted varied opinions among labour activists as well as politicians. In consequence, there have emerged up to three different schools of thought on what should be the appropriate role of labour in unfolding democratic experiment in Nigeria. By 1996, some leading mainstream labour activists such as Adams Oshiomhole and S. O. Z. Ejiofor were not in agreement as to what role was expected of labour in future political dispensations. For instance, Oshiomhole tended to support the view point that labour should avoid entanglement in partisan politics, given the experiences during the Babangida-Abacha transition to civil rule programmes. He was of the opinion that nothing had ever eroded the labour in terms of organization, discipline and unity of purpose more than its partisan affiliation to a political party whose commitment to democracy was somewhat dubious. He, however, posited that “labour participation in the democratic process should rather involve greater supra-partisan responsibility to strive for a humane, just, patriotic and democratic society free from all forms of exploitation and human rights abuse”³⁰.

S.O.Z. Ejiofor and H.A. Sunmonu would appear to subscribe to the view that labour should take active part in partisan politics so as to be able to influence government actions and policies to the advantage of the working class. Sunmonu believes that what is important is the effective involvement of the trade unions in the democratization process while always ensuring that they are independent and do not compromise their cardinal mission of fighting for, protecting and defending the political, economic and social rights and interests of both their actual and potential members and allies³¹.

The recent actions of Oshiomhole seem to be tacit acceptance of Ejiofor’s and Sunmonu’s earlier position. This goes to show that his stand is somewhat shifty. It seems likely then that political involvement would enable labour to play an active and participatory role in national development.

The third school of thought included the government which felt that the labour movement should be apolitical. This is in line with the provisions of part III section D subsection 221 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The section stipulates that “no association, other than a political party, shall canvass for vote for any candidate at any election or contribute to the funds of any political party or to the election expenses of any candidate at an election”³². Given the antecedents of organized labour activism in Nigeria, the state has consciously, through the constitutional provisions, precluded labour from political involvement. It would appear “that conscious efforts were made to marginalise and exclude some groups and individuals, including labour, from any meaningful participation in the transition programme”³³. To this group, non-partisanship of labour in politics would likely restore its credibility and the clout to create the coalition to revive the struggle for good governance. Consequent upon this, in order to act within the

confines of the constitution, labour fielded no candidate(s) for the elections that ushered in civilian rule in 1999.

This notwithstanding, labour was directly a front-liner in educating and conscientising its teeming members and the general public on the gains of democracy and the need for participation in the political transformation process. It believed, as it were, that enthroning a free society and a democratic government was a matter for all the strata of the society. The return of a civilian government in place of the military was considered a panacea for the grossly dislocated social order. Even in the face of a threat to downsize the workforce by the government in January 1999, labour ruled out the strike option. In the view of G. Wokeh, the caretaker committee chairman of the NLC, "it is because we are patriotic Nigerians and do not want to derail the transition programmes that we have asked that discussions be concluded within 14 days"³⁴. It may, in fact be fair to assert that this was one more way through which labour contributed to the realization of the democratization of the polity.

There was yet a Presidential parley which was an expansion of the range of intervention strategies labour employed to influence governance in Nigeria. In this regard, the two presidential candidates of the three registered political parties, namely, Olusegun Obasanjo of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and Olu Falae of both the Alliance for Democracy (AD) and the All Peoples' Party (APP), met with labour leadership on February 16 and 17, 1999. The interaction was probably an attempt to exploit and galvanise all the strands in the society to ensure a return to democratic governance. This interaction was necessary because the transition from military to civil rule represented also a change in the political culture from that of force to dialogue, consensus and negotiation of differences. In reaction to this development, Oshiomhole persuasively argued that "the NLC would not declare its support for any political party but would not be apolitical"³⁵. This can be said to mean that in as much as the NLC did not pitch tent with any of the parties, it would assist in any other capacity to bring about a return of democratic governance in the country.

This stand would seem to be somewhat shifty given later developments such as participation in the 'Otta Farm Dialogue'. Labour's effort to distance itself from partisan politics would appear doubtful. This could be explained by Ezeja's argument that Oshiomhole, Ejiofor and Salam belonged to what was known as the 'Otta Farm Dialogue'³⁶. The 'Otta Farm Dialogue' suggested some of the policies and programmes which the civilian government of Obasanjo was expected to pursue. What seems to have swayed labour into this political camp included Olu Falae's defence of the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) by the military when he was the Secretary to the Federal Government. On the strength of this, labour could hardly be considered a non-partisan movement. All these, as was to be expected, helped to ensure PDP's victory at the February 27, 1999 presidential polls which were also monitored by labour. It is hardly open to doubt that labour's organisation of the 'Presidential Parley' through the 'Otta Farm Dialogue' exposed its inconsistency and cast doubt on its political neutrality. It is surprising that the Obasanjo-led PDP government was one of the most anti-labour civilian governments Nigeria has ever had.

Conclusion

With the emergence of Bafyan as the NLC president, the factors which had served to increase union militancy and relevance had deliberately been put into reverse. It is not certain why the NLC under the leadership of a presumed Marxist should appear to be pro-

government. The NLC leadership seemed to have lacked the savvy and moral authority to challenge the military over its epileptic and tenuous transition to civil rule programmes. It is not unlikely that the leadership had traded off labour militancy and vibrancy for personal gains. In fact, about the most that can be said of Bafyan's presidency is perhaps that it was a continuation of the sole administratorship.

Labour under Bafyau would appear to have reneged on its responsibilities to both its members and the general public. It failed to link the economic hardships unleashed on the working class with the political situation of the time. Its struggle against the annulment of June 12 election, adjudged most fair and credible, was feeble. This position appears all the more worrisome given the fact that Justice Dolapo Akinsanya of the Lagos High Court had on the November 10, 1993 quashed Decree 61 from which both Shonekan and Abacha derived their appointments. This apparent display of lack of boldness and vigour suggests that labour has been compromised.

Although labour under Bafyau did not seem to have represented itself well during the last days of Abacha, the situation in the post-Abacha days was quite different. The balance of evidence tends to show that the emergence of Oshiomhole's leadership repositioned labour on the path of militancy and vibrancy. Investigations have shown that in spite of constitutional inhibitions, its lean finances and limitations of its human resources, labour under Oshiomhole made laudable contributions towards the restoration of civil rule in Nigeria. In other words, it can be asserted that the year 1999 introduced a new era in terms of labour democracy and political relevance.

The work has, hopefully, also shown that labour's strike actions provided a stimulus to the exit of the regime of Ibrahim Babangida. It is also on record that labour under Oshomhole's leadership not only defended its statutory role of protecting the collective interests of its members but also constituted a check on some of the excesses of the government in power.

The trust of the argument of this paper suggests that the role of labour as a political development mechanism has remained unparalleled. The substance of the argument is that labour's resilience, in the face of all spurious restrictive measures by government, has been a source of its relevance and virility in the political engineering of Nigeria.

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