

TRADE UNIONISM IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

In developing country such as Nigeria, trade unions are veritable instrument for socio-economic transformation and class struggle. The major concern of trade unions is the improvement of working conditions of their members and safeguards their job security. It is worrisome that in recent times, trade unions in Nigeria are witnessing serious challenges that militate against their performance as agents of the protection of workers interest. Thus, the basic thrust of this paper is to examine the problems that undermine the functioning of trade unions in Nigeria and suggests appropriate measures to address these problems. In the methodology, the study relies on the use of secondary data as its source of information and the analysis was done qualitatively. The Marxist theory of class struggle was adopted as framework of analysis. The paper observes that lack of committed leadership; internal factionalism; government interference and absence of internal democracy are the major challenges of trade unions in Nigeria. The paper recommends the need to have dedicated leaders and strengthening internal democracy in the management of the unions in Nigeria.

Keywords: Trade union, Nigeria Labour Congress, Leadership, Internal democracy

Introduction

The trade unions have emerged as strong defender of workers interests in many countries and protect them against capitalist exploitation. In developing country like Nigeria, the role of trade unions has gone beyond the traditional role of protecting workers welfare and “class liberation”. In Nigeria, the trade unions contributed in fighting colonial rule and exploitation of Nigerian State during that period. The activities of trade unions, under the umbrella of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) during military dictatorship of 1980’s and 1990’s hastened the return of democratic rule in the country (Okoroafor, 2013, p. 79). According to Adewumi (2009) “like its counterparts in different parts of the world, the Nigerian trade union movement has a glorious past, a past characterized by robust struggles and principled opposition to state policies that are inimical to the interests of the working 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 trade union movement and

various organizations within larger labour movement. This role can be seen clearly and appreciated by most Nigerians through their selfless services to Nigerian society as a whole”.

The first organized trade union in Nigeria was established on 1912 when workers in the then civil service organized themselves into trade unions as was done in Sierra Leone (Olusoji, Owoyemi & Onokala, 2012). In 1931 the Railway Workers' Union and the Nigerian Union of Teachers were formed and by 1975 over one thousand unions were in existence. However, in the same year, the then military government restructured the trade unions into 42 unions along industrial lines. The Nigerian Labour Congress was later formed in 1978 and the 42 unions became its affiliates (Olusoji et al, 2012). Presently, the Nigerian Labour Congress Affiliates include: Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), National Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE), Medical and Health Workers Unions of Nigeria, Academic Staff Union of Polytechnic (ASUP), College of Education Academic Staff Union (COEASU) etc. These affiliate unions are aimed to cater for the welfare of their members.

It is disturbing that in recent times the trade unions in Nigeria have virtually lost their relevance. In the opinions of Anyim, et al (2013, p.61) “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 “marodonic” ways of deceiving their rank and file membership”. They are only interested in their selfish interests without considering the interests of the workers they represent.

Therefore, the basic objective of this paper is to identify the challenges and prospects of trade unions in Nigeria and suggest appropriate strategies to address the problems of trade unions in Nigeria.

Conceptualizing Trade Union

Scholars have defined trade union in various ways. According to Onwuchekwa (1995) a trade union is any organization of workers formed to promote, protect and improve through collective action the social economic and political interests of its members. In the opinion of Fajama (2000) trade union “is an association of wage and salary earners formed with the objective of safeguarding and improving the wage and employment conditions of its members and to raise members' social status and standards of living in the community.” Trade Union is therefore “a voluntary association of employers or employees with similar interests who come together for the purpose of protecting and promoting their members interest including improvement in the living standard of members. It must operate within the ambit of the law otherwise its action(s) shall declared as unlawful, null and void” (Ezeali & Esiagu, 2009, p. 303).

Theoretical Framework

The importance of theories in the political discourse cannot be overemphasized as it proffers empirically based general explanatory laws through synthesizing and integrating of empirical data for maximum clarification (Raphael, 1978, p. 2). Marxist theory of class struggle could be used to study the challenges of trade unions in Nigeria. According to Karl Marx, “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of the class struggles’. He observed that liberal democracies were agents of exploiting the owners of property. Marx advocated the abolition of private property and predicted the demise of

capitalism. The abolition of property and class exploitation would make a situation in which individuals would contribute according to their abilities and according to their needs (Ibrahim, 2013, p. 19). The state would wither away after the transitional period which results in the rule of working class.

The Marxist approach stipulates a materialistic interpretation of history, a dialectical method of analysis, a critical stance towards existing social arrangement, and a political programme of revolution (Ibrahim, 2013). Marx maintained that everything of value in society results from human labour. Thus, working men and women as engaged in making society, in creating the conditions for their own existence (Ibrahim, 2013). According to Karl Marx, the exploitative, economic arrangements of capitalism will result in revolution by the working class which will usher in classless society.

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

Methodology

The design of this is descriptive and historical because it aimed to discuss and describe the challenges and prospects of trade unions in Nigeria. Also, it focuses on the past events or activities in order to justify the problems of trade unions in Nigeria. The data were sourced through secondary sources like journals, newspapers, textbooks etc. The data were analysed qualitatively through narrative discourse.

Challenges of Trade Unions in Nigeria

The trade unions which have played important role in promoting social justice and economic well being of the Nigerian masses have in recent times lost their integrity in the course of discharging their legitimate actions. For example the failure of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) to reverse the recent removal of petroleum subsidy has left to “sour taste in the mouth of Nigerian masses. Some challenges which have undermined the efficacy of trade unions in Nigeria as instruments of social transformation of Nigerian workers are:

1. Lack of Committed Leadership

Leadership problem undermines the performance of trade unions in Nigeria as instruments of promoting workers interest. According to Deery and wash (1999) “the divergent gap in interest between the trade union leaders and the workers which they claimed to represent is becoming widening and noticeable in the sense that the trust and confidence which used to exist in the past between the lead and the led coupled with union solidarity is gradually fading away” Furthermore, Adebisi (2011) observed that the problem of Nigerian trade union in achieving its goal is based on intransigent and unanswerable elite or leaders. While Anyim, Ilisanmi and Alaribe (2013) added that insincerity and poor commitment of the labour leaders has led to the diminishing and disappointing role of Trade union in Nigeria.

For example, the former labour leader in Nasarawa State, Alhaji Abdulahi Adeka was impeached by its members for his inability to show committed leadership towards

addressing the demands of civil servants in the state which made the workers unable to gain their benefits in terms of promotion, regular payment of salaries, and payment of arrears (Oota, 2017). Also, the 30 percent cut of workers' salaries in Imo state was as a result of poor committed leadership of the Imo State Labour Congress (Igweanyi, n.d).

2. Internal Wrangling/Factionalism

Another serious challenge that prevents most Nigerian trade unions from getting their demands from the employers is factionalism which is prevalent among the unions. This means "the existence of small groups within the large ones that oppose some of their belief and activities". Sometimes, this internal division among the members may erupt due to poor leadership and other selfish interest of members, and when this happens it becomes easy for the management of the organizations to penetrate into the ranks of the organization which may lead to some members of the union abandoning their collective struggle. (Ananti, 2014, p. 49). Trade unions such as the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), the National Union of Banks Insurance and Financial Institutions (NUBIFIE) and the National Union of Hotels and Personal Services Workers (NUHPSHW) for example, have not too long history of factionalism (Adewumi, 2007, p. 56).

In addition, the 2016 nationwide strike which was intended to force the Nigerian Federal Government to reverse the N145 pump price of Petrol was crippled as a result of the factions within the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). The strike did not enjoy the support of other NLC factional leaders and Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUC) (Ahiuma-Young, 2016). The emergence of this faction in the NLC has weakened the activities of NLC towards catering for the welfare of its members and the general public.

3. Lack of Internal Democracy

The problem of achieving internal democracy is a serious challenge to trade union activities in Nigeria. The constitutions of trade unions in Nigeria require that democratic principles should be followed by those responsible for administering trade unions in Nigeria. It is worrisome that there is a wide gap between written documents and actual implementation. The union democracy cannot achieve the desired objectives when meetings are attended by small fraction of the membership. Some of the majority of the members do not attend branch meetings and cannot participate in policy debates and election of the union leaders. According to Farnhand and Pilmopott (1995) "union democracy can also not flourish when a small number of powerful national officers manipulate union conferences for their own ends in order to retain their own power and authority."

Union democracy is also undermined if union rules are used to prevent emergence of strong opposition within a union. For instance, at the venue of the conferences, the views and manifestoes of the effective opposition are not given adequate opportunity to disseminate them (Okojie, 2011, p. 151). In addition, Adefolaju (2013) conducted a study on five trade unions and observed that the trade unions are far from imbibing the tenets of democracy in their internal affairs and this is reflected on low participation of their members. Okojie (2011) also maintained that internal democracy in the Nigerian trade union is at its lowest ebb as a result of poor institutional opposition and high rate of inactive membership.

4. Poor Governance

Poor governance which has resulted in economic downturn and unemployment is a major challenge threatening the survival of trade unions in Nigeria. This is because the

membership of trade unions is fast declining. This is a critical issue since the strength of the unions lies on its large numbers and the present state of the economy has been wrecking havoc on the membership force of trade unions. (Tinuoye, 2014 p, 378). Also, the economic hardship which is also caused by poor governance posed a challenge to trade union activities thereby leading to poor cohesiveness and lack of focus of the Union. Government sometimes threatens to use the means of no work no pay when trade union intends embarking on strike. This is because most of the workers cannot withstand such measures in this harsh economic condition (Izueke, 2008).

5. Government Interference

Since the government in Nigeria is the largest employer of labour at the federal state and local levels, it is desirous in interfering in the affairs of trade unions by ensuring that its candidate emerges as trade union leaders. The leaders that emerge with government support cannot work for the interest of their members and hence the activities of the unions will be destroyed.

The issue of political inference has been a strong threat or challenge towards strengthening the activities of trade union in Nigeria. The 2005 labour Act has made membership of trade union voluntary. Also, the Federal government has in some cases proscribed the trade unions. And trade union leaders are often arrested harassed, manhandled in order to subdue them. Such as the case of Frank Kokori of PENGASSAN during Abacha's regime; Adams Oshomolhe of NLC during Obasanjo's Administration etc. (Izueke, 2008; Fayankinnu, 2015; Abdulrahman & Mato, 2014).

Ways to Tackle the Challenges

As already stated, the trade unions in Nigeria are beset with serious challenges that undermine its performance as an instrument of social economic transformation and class struggle. The following suggestions would go a long way in strengthening the role of the unions in Nigeria.

1. Internal democracy in the management of the unions should be given an adequate attention. All the members are entitled to hold any elective position in the union. According to Adebisi (2011, p. 13) "opportunity for holding elective office or position in the unions must be open to all members irrespective of their physical or ideological proximity to those in control of the power apparatuses of the organization".
2. The Trade unions in Nigeria should be handled by dedicated leaders who are always ready to work for the interests of the members they represent. This can be achieved by allowing the members to select those leaders who protect their interest instead of imposing leaders on them.
3. Another important strategy to enhance the efficacy of trade unions in Nigeria to function as agents of socio-economic transformation is to encourage them to do away with all forms of factionalism. This will enable them to achieve their desired objectives. In the opinion of Anyim et al (2016, p.17). "It is imperative to reduce to the barest minimum the incident of all forms of conflicts especially inter and intra conflict which is inimical to the good health of the union and weakening of its internal democracy/governance."
4. The trade unions in Nigeria will record remarkable success if the workers will be given the necessary training to remove ignorance and apathy. This will help them to be well-formed and conscious of their rights. According to Anyim et al, (2016) "it is

necessary for members to engage in lifelong education through continuous learning in order to adapt to global changes/challenges.” The establishment of Michael Imoudu National Institute of Labour Studies in Ilorin is a step in the right direction.

5. Bad governance associated with economic downturns, closure of companies and massive unemployment is a serious challenge to trade unions in Nigeria today. This is critical in the sense that the strength of the unions is in its numbers and the state of the economy has been wrecking havoc on the membership force of the trade union (Tinuaye, 2014, p. 378). On the other hand, good governance, which is a powerful instrument for economic and social progress of the country, will definitely enhance the efficacy of trade unions in Nigeria. The creation of employment opportunities under the revitalized economy will attract more members to the trade unions in Nigeria.

6. Lastly but not the least, the trade unions in Nigeria can effectively serve as a veritable instrument of protecting workers interest if the members shun all social vices that will tarnish the image of the trade unions, such as corruption, bribery, tribalism etc. Adebisi (2011) observes “the conduct of the business of the trade unions must be done in the most transparent and accountable ways.” This will strengthen the unions in Nigeria.

Prospects

The performance of trade unions in Nigeria will witness tremendous success if the aforesaid recommendations are sincerely implemented. The Nigerian trade unions will now play important role in promoting social justice, equity and economic well-being of the masses. The future prospects of trade unions in Nigeria will be bright because the unions will now be managed by the dedicated and sincere leaders who are always ready to fight for the interest of their members instead of their selfish interest.

The prospect of trade unions in Nigeria will improve because lack of internal democracy that beset most trade unions will be effectively tackled. The constitutions of trade unions would be restructured in such a way that democracy principles will be observed. Every member of trade unions will be given equal opportunity for elective offices, despite the ideological differences with those who administer the trade unions.

The prospect of trade unions in Nigeria will also be brightened if factionalism which bedeviled most trade unions in Nigeria is addressed. The emergence of fractions within trade unions has undermined the performance of trade unions as agents of economic and social transformation of the working class. The trade unions in Nigeria will rise to a greater heights if the unions shun factionalism and speak with one voice in order to get their demands from the employers.

Good governance is a powerful instrument to accelerate economic growth and social transformation of the country. This will enhance the capability of the trade unions in Nigeria to work tirelessly to protect the interest of their members. The creation of employment opportunities will enable the more members to join the unions. It is a fact that the strength of the unions depends on its large members.

The above mentioned suggestion will enhance the prospect of trade unions in negotiation or achieving favourable collective bargaining which will facilitate the protection of workers welfare and interest.

Conclusion

We have examined the challenges and prospects of trade unions in Nigeria. The trade unions are beset with series of problems such as lack of internal democracy, poor

leadership, government interference, factionalism and poor governance. The aforesaid problems have prevented the trade unions in Nigeria from discharging their functions as agents of social and economic transformation of the working class.

If these challenges undermining the trade union activities are effectively tackled, it has the prospect of strengthening the capability of trade unions in promoting the economic, social and political welfare of its members and also, make the trade union to be able fight against any capitalist exploitation in the state which can promote national development. To strengthen the trade union, there is need for promotion of internal democracy in the management of the union; presence of dedicated and transparent leadership; reduction of inter and intra conflict in the union; promotion of good governance; fight against corruption and social vices among union members etc.

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