

## **Labour And Nation-Building In Nigeria; 1979-1983**

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### **Abstract**

Existing studies on labour have not adequately addressed its contributions to nation-building efforts of the Second Republic led by Shehu Shagari. Such inadequate attention tends to trivialize the role of labour which probably contributed not insignificantly to nation-building drive in Nigeria. Work on this important aspect of Nigerian history is, therefore, unsatisfactory thereby leaving a lacuna in our store of knowledge of the period. The present effort is to fill the identified yawning gap. The paper is but a modest contribution to the grist for milling a macro history of Nigeria's nation-building. This paper has made effort to piece together bits of evidence scattered in Newspapers, Magazines, Government Gazette and Books. All the bits of information distilled from these sources were further subjected to rigorous content analysis to establish their reliability and validity. This attempt gives insight to the role of labour towards Nigeria's quest for nationhood during the period. This study postulates that labour as a corporate institution did not take active part in the politics of the Second Republic. Available evidence tends to point to the fact that the number of labour-legislators was insignificant to create an appreciable impact on the political process of Nigeria. The section of the 1979 constitution which inhibited labour from participating in the politics of transition infringed on the fundamentals of human rights of the labour activists and should be expunged. Labour as a strong institution that can bring about the desired change from bottom up should be encouraged to shape the destiny of Nigerians.

## Introduction

Nigerian governments from the colonial to post colonial eras have variously attempted to hold labour aloof from partisan politics through constitutional restrictions. Governments the world over have increasingly recognized the central position of labour in the execution of their programmes. There are divergent opinions as to whether or not labour's role should encompass both socio-economic and political realms. This is because labour and government are seen to serve two diametrically opposed classes of people – the mass of workers and the bourgeoisie, respectively. Labour, however, believes that a degree of political activism is necessary for it to protect and extend workers' interests. The objective of this paper is to assess the key role labour played in the process of nation-building from 1979-1983. In order to have a firm grasp of the subject matter of this paper, it may be permissible to define labour and nation-building.

## Definitions

According to Edith Osiruemu “labour means the Nigerian working class or those wage earners who are in a subordinate relationship to employers in the public and private sectors, who on the basis of this relationship identify a common interest and act accordingly”<sup>1</sup>. It can also be said to mean the human ability to do work. Labour unions are those organizations formed by those who depend wholly and entirely on the sale of their labour power for survival. Labour in the context of this paper is the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) which is the amalgam of various industrial unions in Nigeria. The NLC came into being through the promulgation of Decree No. 22, section 33, sub-section 1 of February 28, 1978 which states *inter alia* “on the coming into force of this section, and without any further assurance, the registrar shall register the Nigeria Labour Congress as the only central labour organization”<sup>2</sup>. The aim of this Decree appears to be to contain and control labour's political activism.

Nation-building means different things to different people. In a multi-ethnic nation, it can be said to refer to a process of national integration that creates a homogenous population with ethnic ties. In the opinion of Eleazu, nation-building is a “process of politically socializing the people into becoming good citizens of the political order; and making the citizens feel that they have a stake in the community worth fighting for”<sup>3</sup>. To some other commentators, nation-building is all about the modernization of infrastructural facilities such as good roads, viable industries, shelters,

potable water supply, uninterrupted power supply etc. This tends to see the term as meaning economic and social growth and development. D.C. Lazorchick *et al* have argued that “nation-building can be a deceptive expression if it is taken to mean simply developing a country’s economy in the direction of viability”<sup>4</sup>. The term means much more than this.

A. Riveyamamu contends that “nation-building can be said to mean a multi-dimensional complex process of building or establishing in an architectural, structural sense the pre-conditions of a polity and economy capable of moving with vigour the society”<sup>5</sup>. To this paper, nation-building is the concerted efforts geared towards taking the nation socially, economically and politically to the next level. In keeping with these definitions, labour agitation for equitable distribution of the nation’s resources which is intended to reduce the gap between the elite and the masses not only engenders economic development and political stability but also provides a good base for nation-building. Furthermore, labour’s active involvement in the elections of the Second Republic was a form of nation-building.

### **Labour And The 1979 General Elections**

The April 1978 students’ unrest would appear to have acted as a catalyst to the hasty democratization process. This assertion is premised on the fact that no sooner had the crisis died down than

the military hurried the pace at which various bodies dealt with constitutional issues with a view to handing over power to an elected civilian government. Thus both 1978 and 1979 were taken up by the constitution drafting constituent assembly, ratification of the constitution, various elections....<sup>6</sup>

It should be noted that “on the September 21,1978, the Federal Military Government lifted the ban on politics and the Federal Electoral Commission imposed a December 18 deadline beyond which no application for registration of political associations as political parties would be considered”<sup>7</sup>. As was to be expected, these measures hastened the tenor and tempo of political activities in the country as the political class formed a hasty jumble of associations known as political parties. Veteran labour activists were not left out in the race for formation of political association. It is reasonably clear that the popularity of these labour hot heads was causing the government great alarm and misgiving. Labour’s antecedents especially

during the nationalist struggle had continued to haunt the imagination of both the political class and the government.

Therefore, in what looked like a conspiracy between the political class and the government, some labour's 'arrow heads' such as Michael Imoudu, Wahab Goodluck, Odeyemi, S.U. Bassey, J.U. Akpan, R.A. Isagua, N.J. Sule, J.O. Orotunde, S.O. Odeniran, P.A. Nwaneri<sup>8</sup> etc were banned for life from the NLC. Furthermore, through a constitutional provision, labour as a corporate body was prohibited from taking active part in the politics of transition. The 1979 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Chapter VI, Part III Section D Sub-section 201 states *inter alia* that "no association other than a political party shall canvass for votes 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"<sup>9</sup>. It can be asserted that all these constituted a ploy to scheme labour out of the politics of the Second Republic. The constitution was intended not only to paralyze labour's political activism but also to deprive it of any real concerted efforts towards nation-building.

According to W. Ofonagoro, "pubic officers were equally banned from contesting the elections unless they had previously resigned their appointments at least four months to the date of the elections"<sup>10</sup>. By these measures, labour could neither form its own political party nor join collectively any one formed by politicians for the purpose of democratic process. It is perhaps against this backdrop that S.A. Oduntan, a one time unionist, who won election on the ticket of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), criticized the NLC "for taking multiple 'standards' that is for not identifying itself with any political party"<sup>11</sup>.

It is to be noted that some labour leaders went beyond a mere card-carrying level in the on-going political experiment. This stand could be said to have prompted Michael Imoudu and Austin Ezenwa to attempt to form the Nigerian Workers' and Peasants' Party and People's Progressive Party, respectively. Although these parties suffered a serious reverse as they did not enjoy broad support even from workers themselves, the efforts of their founders were not only laudable but had a far-reaching effect on the post-military politics of the country. The option open was for them to individually ally with any of the five registered political parties-the People's Redemption Party (PRP), the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Great Nigerian People's Party (GNPP) or the Nigerian People's Party (NPP). In PRP and GNPP respectively, old warhorses, Imoudu and Nduka Eze, the latter a firebrand Zikist as a youth... secured party posts<sup>12</sup>. As

was expected, it was because "...effective union participation in the process of nation-building required a more closely ties and co-operation between union and political leadership than was present during the era of nationalism"<sup>13</sup>. It may be permissible to surmise that some labour activists were convinced that labour's role in nation-building should transcend the socio-economic realms to encompass the exercise of political power.

It is interesting to note that labour leadership encouraged its interested members to run for the elections into various state and federal legislative chambers. It has been argued that "one labour leader elected into any state assembly in Nigeria or federal parliament will be more useful to the Nigerian workers and their trade union movement than twenty non-labour parliamentarians"<sup>14</sup>. Between July 7, and August 11, 1979, as many as ten labour leaders who submitted themselves for the rigours of electoral process into various legislative chambers were declared victorious. For instance, S.K. Babalola, S.A. Oduntan and Senator R.A. Adeleke won elections on the ticket of the UPN, Sidi H. Ali won on the ticket of the PRP, Awa Ekpo, S.U. Bassey, Y. Kaltungo (House of Representatives majority leader) and E.B. Etienam on the platform of the NPN. Senator J. Ansa won on the ticket of the GNPP while Edem Okoh rode on the ticket of the NPP"<sup>15</sup>. For these men, trade unionism provided a good training ground for politics. This tended to demonstrate in unmistakable terms that some labour leaders, despite all constraints, were prepared to give content to the politics of transition. In the present circumstance, it seemed difficult to conceive any step of greater wit than this.

Although, comparatively speaking, the number was inferior to that of the political class, the substance of the matter is that labour has related itself to the problem of nation-building. It has to be added that the National Executive Council (NEC) of labour set up a committee to study the manifestoes of the five registered political parties and draw up a Charter of Demands. It was on the basis of this charter that labour opposed all the NPN-led government's anti-people and anti-labour policies and programmes. Such opposition and criticisms were likely to have prodded the government to interfere in the purely internal affairs of labour during its February 1981 Convention at Kano.

### **State And Labour Convention Of 1981**

The fact that the government took active part in the formation of the new labour organization aptly demonstrated that its interest in the affairs of the NLC was much more than passive. In spite of its self-imposed role as an

impartial observer, the state tended to create room for conspiracy and manipulation in the NLC elections in Kano in February 1981. In essence, the government policy was to encourage rivalry and division within the leadership of labour and regard these as healthy in so far as they were a guarantee against concerted action which might undermine and erode its authority. However, it can be surmised that the splits and rifts experienced by the NLC during the Second Republic represented a response to the special conditions and problems associated with democratic experiment in the country. B.H. Millen appears to be reacting to this situation when he asserted that “whether the factionalisms result from real or feigned ideological splits, they are one of the reasons why political unionism may represent a threat to a fragile economic and political systems of the new nation”<sup>16</sup>.

It has to be observed that the government appeared poised to weaken the NLC by setting one leader against the other during its Kano quadrennial conference in February 1981. During the said conference, owing to the latent conflicts of ideology coupled with struggle for power, Hassan Sunmonu and David Ojeli, (both the NLC President and the Deputy President, respectively), were allowed to play themselves out. It has been argued that “the ideological differences exploded in 1981 when the Shagari administration made unveiled efforts to install Ojeli and his group as the NLC leaders”<sup>17</sup>. The leadership tussle reached a crescendo when each of the two contestants, was allowed an hour of air space on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) to canvass his manifesto to the prospective delegates to the convention. This was, perhaps, in the belief that Ojeli’s power of oration would be able to sway public opinion in his favour.

The one-day preemptive strike called by Ojeli and the release by the Industrial Arbitration Panel of decision on car loan and basic allowances which ostensibly favoured the Civil Service Union were no more than ploys to curry favour for Ojeli. As though this attractive package of incentives was not enough to change public opinion, Alex Ekwueme, the Vice President of Nigeria, who declared the Kano convention open, “used the opportunity to heap praises on Ojeli, a not-too-subtle hint that he was their man”<sup>18</sup>. It is hardly open to doubt that any labour leader who received lavish encomiums from the government in such a situation was most likely to have been compromised. The draffing of Ojeli by the government into the presidential race against fiery and persuasive Sunmonu was an incredibly graphic example of intolerance. It was the thinking of the Shagari government that Ojeli being a ‘moderate’ and also a ‘democrat’ would most likely temper labour radicalism.

On the part of labour, “the NLC majority saw the state’s ‘concern’ with the unity and virility of the congress as profoundly hypocritical”<sup>19</sup>. The drafting of the ‘Democrats’ in the NLC against the ‘Progressives’ was intended to reverse labour solidarity just as it was regarded as a clear symbol of government repression. At the Kano convention, the delegates demonstrated graphically their solidarity with the Sunmonu-led labour regime. Ojeli’s inability to command broad acceptance most likely stemmed from the delegates’ suspicion that he was pro-establishment. Were it not the government’s interest and intervention, the leadership contest between Sunmonu and Ojeli would have been no more than an experience of growth of a national labour centre poised for decisive struggle against the structures of exploitation of man by man.

Thereafter, Ojeli would appear to have worn belligerent attitude towards the organization on almost every issue. For instance, the unanimously adopted motion to embark on strike on the May 11, 1981 did not enjoy the support and approval of the Ojeli-led group. On the eve of May strike, the industrial unions affiliated to Ojeli’s Congress of Democratic Trade Union (CDTU) appeared not only to have dissociated themselves from the proposed strike but also expressed their unflinching confidence in its leadership. In what looked like a vendetta, “Edet B. Etienam, the NPN chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on Labour (and a one-time labour leader) sponsored a bill in the National Assembly to recognize other labour centres in the country”<sup>20</sup>. Other anti-labour parliamentarians (including also Dimis, Yinusa Kaltungo, Senators Uba Ahmed and Muhamud Waziri) either moved or supported motions for the decentralization of the NLC but to no avail. With the death of the bill, the battle line between labour and the NPN-led government appeared to have been drawn.

### **The 1981 General Strike And Political Stability**

The post-civil war economic expansion brought about by the oil boom of the 1970s appears to have sharpened the consumptive appetite of Nigerian citizens. It should also be noted that the economy which was becoming increasingly import-driven stirred up structural distortions in the expenditure pattern. In the face of the dwindling oil revenue or the last 1970s, the members of the National Assembly approved for themselves and members of the other arm of the government outrageously high salaries and allowances. For instance, “between October 1979 and January 1980, the Nigerian legislators had proposed for themselves N15000 per annum, the President N50,000, and the Vice President N30,000 per annum”<sup>21</sup>. While the market

forces had drastically undermined workers' earnings to a level far below the bread-line, the political elite's ambition was how to survive materially after their tenure in office.

The government efforts to stem the rising tide of economic deterioration through pay-cuts, retrenchments and imposition of austerity measures would seem to have backfired. One agrees that "cut costs in allowances by the civilian government and rising costs of living forced the trade unions, led by the NLC, to demand an upward review of the national minimum wage"<sup>22</sup>. The increased labour militancy occasioned by what appeared to be anti-labour and anti-people policies of the government set in motion a lot of opposition in the country. Contrary to the fear by the government, a vibrant and critical labour centre is a necessary ingredient for democracy to flourish as it allows for the alternative view. As was to be expected, labour constructive criticisms should have had deeper resonance in a democracy than during military dictatorship.

The subsequent approach and attitude to labour matters appeared predicated on the spur of the moment. For instance, the approval by the government for the May Day celebrations at the national level in 1981 was just a panic measure. This was one more way of forestalling the latent labour unrest from bursting into the open. It is important to note that the May Day celebrations "began with certain state governments making the day work-free. These states were Anambra, Oyo, Kano, Borno and Lagos in 1980"<sup>23</sup>. It is also instructive to note that all these states were controlled by political parties other than the ruling NPN, hence the political angle attached to the approval. These measures fell short of currying favour from the leadership of the NLC.

Although the state-labour face-offs were numerous such as the strikes by some industrial unions in 1980-1982, such conflicts were not effective. The leadership of the unregistered CDTU seemingly in conspiracy with the government accused the NLC of master-minding the series of strikes (from the Nurses, the Nigeria Medical Association (NMA) and Workers of the Central Bank) which preceded the May general strike. It is therefore not surprising that "confrontation with the state came to a head when on May 11, 1981, the NLC mobilized 700,000 of one million unionized Nigerian workers for a two-day strike, despite the opposition of a government supported faction"<sup>24</sup>.

There is little doubt that the CDTU led by Ojeli went a step further in its spirited effort to sabotage and discredit the NLC leadership by denouncing and boycotting the strike. This position is hardly surprising given the fact that

the Civil Service Union (CSU) which formed its nucleus, from its inception has always been pro-establishment and therefore a symbol of conservatism. The May 1981 strike would appear to have demonstrated in unmistakable terms the power of unified labour in the political process. Through the strike, it was expected that labour would assist the government set its misguided policies and confused priorities right, thereby strengthening and expanding the frontiers of the nascent democracy. Thus, the strike actions, which labour used to oppose bad policies, should be seen as its own legitimate political tools towards nation-building.

It has been argued that “through the strike, the role of trade union had extended beyond the narrow limits of collective bargaining *vis-à-vis* ‘bread and butter unionism’ to embrace the welfare and progress of the society as a whole”<sup>25</sup>. This can also be said to be an effort to forestall the economic policies that sought to make many more people poorer and a few richer. It appears obvious from the foregoing that political opposition in a democratic setting, as exemplified in the strike, was but a process of growth of democracy and nation-building-not an obstacle to it. At this time, as it were, labour would appear to have been weaned so as to take control of its destiny. It was expected that labour would provide election support network to monitor its administration in 1983.

### **Labour And The 1983 General Elections**

All considered, the erstwhile labour leaders who were in the legislative assemblies seemed to have abandoned their foremost constituency to pursue the manifestoes of the different parties on whose tickets they won their seats. It is possible that having become relatively comfortable and fallen into the elite class, some of them tended to compromise their initial stand. The struggle for the emancipation of the teeming voiceless citizens of the nation appeared subsumed in the elite ideology and was no longer heard. In consequence of this, some arrowheads in the labour movement came to increasingly identify themselves with the new political arrangement. For instance, M. Imoudu and Nduka Eze took up party posts.

It has also been pointed out that “when the progressive elements in the PRP decided to adopt a deeper ideological approach to politics, Imoudu became their rallying point”<sup>26</sup>. The entry of these men into the Progressive Parties’ Alliance (PPA) would seem not only to have radicalized it but also contributed to the collapse of the NPN-NPP coalition. It is said that “...a shaky coalition such as the one that held the government in power in the country was particularly vulnerable to the use of unions as battering rams to

precipitate a political crisis”<sup>27</sup>. The formation of the PPA generated hope for greater internal cohesion amongst the opposition groups including labour.

In the face of the political wrangling the economic crisis deepened thereby incensing labour and other pressure groups all the more. Otobo has succinctly argued that “the drastic fall in oil revenue brought home the extent of economic mismanagement and wanton waste of resources”<sup>28</sup>. While the federal and a couple of state governments left workers unpaid for months and disengaged some, the regime’s profligacy in the management of national economic resources remained unmitigatingly high indeed. The obviously wobbling political train of the Second Republic entered a crucial stage during the 1983 general elections that took place in an atmosphere of optimism and great expectations.

The role of labour in the unfolding democratic experiment was, therefore, expected to go beyond mere membership of the legislature to encompass some level of involvement in the exercise of executive powers. The *raison d’être* of political labour union in the prevailing circumstance appears valid and understandable. This may partly explain why Chief Austin Ezenwa of NUT, who lost the gubernatorial bid on the ticket of PRP in 1979, was the running mate of C.C. Onoh on the platform of NPN in the former Anambra State. The decision was because effective and active participation in the decision-making at the highest political level could enhance the relevance of labour in the nation-building effort. However, it can also be argued that for a labour leader to pitch tent with a more or less conservative party amounted to sacrificing ideology on the altar of interests.

The results of the general elections of 1983 indicated that the ruling party ‘won’ overwhelmingly probably because of the power of incumbency. The release of the presidential and gubernatorial elections’ results was trailed by thuggery, electoral violence and falsifications of electoral figures. It seems certain that through rigging, the NPN was able to dislodge governors of target PPA-controlled states such as Anambra, Oyo and Ondo where C.C. Onoh, Omololu Oluloyo and Akin Omoboriowo were declared victorious, respectively. It is, pertinent to observe that their ‘landslide victory’ was rather dubious and doubtful. The events following the 1983 elections showed some level of political convulsion and the futility of the efforts of labour engaging in a game without rules.

By the end of 1983, it had become increasingly clear that the civilian regime of Shagari could hardly build consensus round its policies and programmes. With respect to this third republic, it can be said that “the apparatus of governance began to crumble before it had been fully

consolidated”<sup>29</sup>. It has to be stressed that weak government is not only alchemy for political instability but also a fragile platform for sustaining the structures of democracy. Following the activities of the political actors, the brittle and fragile democratic credentials were effortlessly sullied through the coup of December 31, 1983. In other words, the civilian government instead of directing events, drifted with the tide.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing it can be asserted that the democratic experiment of the Second Republic proved a disaster because of the irretrievably deepening economic crisis into which politicians had dragged the country. An economy that was import-driven like that experienced during this period could hardly survive the global oil glut. What was more, the life of profligacy as led by the members of the political class exacerbated the nose-diving economy.

On the part of labour, it should have done much more than participating in the elections. It should have engaged in activities that could have forestalled the massive rigging which characterized the 1983 general elections. Labour should have been involved in the organization, monitoring and administration of the said elections in order to produce a more credible and rigging-free elections.

There should have been institutionalized interactive fora which certainly could have afforded the government an insight into labour’s problems. Dialogue creates a forum for the accommodation of the interests of the party with a superior logic. This is all the more necessary, as democracy has to do with the art of negotiating problems of governance. This is to uphold good state-labour relations management as very pivotal for nation-building effort. It is on record that in spite of the prevalent hostile political climate in Nigeria, labour has been able to produce towering and astute political figures, who have demonstrated rare patriotism and leadership qualities in Nigeria’s quest for nationhood.

### **End Notes**

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