

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF LABOR MOVEMENTS AND STATE INTERFERENCE: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Labor movements are known to exist for the primary purpose of protecting the interests of labor in the society. They ensure members' welfare and interests are given priority attention by employers and government. However, in Nigeria, labor movements have emerged as champions of causes that exist outside the walls of corporate employment. They have become the voice of the voiceless, platform for the unheard and downtrodden, and the hope of the masses. Situated within the context of a belligerent climate of repression, exploitation, and subjugation by the political and economic managers of the state, labor movements have turned around to push for reforms and transformation of the Nigerian society in different spheres. This study therefore examines the dynamic and phasic evolution of labor movements in Nigeria, and how they have transformed from being a strictly industrial relations actor to a dynamic force for social change in the face of an unwilling, repressive, and indifferent state.

**Keywords:** Labor Movements; Industrial Relations; State; Nigeria; Governance

### **INTRODUCTION**

Traditionally, trade or labor unions are constituted to protect and champion the cause of workers (Fashoyin, 1992). As one of the important social partners in the Industrial Relations system, labor unions have helped to collectivize, project, and protect the views, yearnings, interests and aspirations of workers in a bid to improve their terms and conditions of employment within the industrial relations system. Negotiation and collective bargaining, which are modern and effective machineries for ensuring industrial peace and harmony within an industry, are also part of the mechanisms put in place to regulate the relationship between labor, employers, and the state with labor movements playing a central and critical role in the process, especially on behalf of employees. Apart from the traditional role of securing better "deals" for its members, labor unions have also had to expand their industrial relations role to include looking out for the welfare of workers and citizens within the larger society (Alalade, 2004). As Iyayi (2008) contends, labor movements in Nigeria have evolved into a robust, intellectual, vibrant, militant, national liberator movement in the country, taking on successive military and civilian regimes. Such issues include, among others, minimum wage, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), electoral reforms, political party issues, education-related issues, fuel price hikes, negotiated conditions of service of workers, external debt, cost of living, corruption, globalization, (GATT, Jobs and industrial capacity utilization) (Anyanwu, 1992; Asiodu, 1980).

In fact, all over the world, labor movements through their activities and constant defense of workers and members of the society, have forced sit-tight, dictatorial and fascist regimes to accede to the demands of labor. This paves a way for the gradual increase in wage earnings, improvement in the employment conditions of workers, change in draconian

government policies, election of popular politicians, and installation of popular mandates and the adjustment of harsh economic policies, like the 1980's SAP in Nigeria; thus making such policies more humane and supportive of the lives and economic interests of the generality of the citizens. As Iyayi (2008) avers, labor unions in Nigeria have gone beyond their traditional role of championing the cause of workers by wielding much political and social influence and acting as a vigilant watchdog for the people. Although this has brought labor unions and their leaders into ugly confrontations with the political and ruling classes, most times it leads to convulsive repressions and strangulation of labor leaders and the proscription and de-proscription of labor movement activities, however, the difficulty in keeping faith with their role as the vanguard of labor and an advocate of the people's cause is justified by the many victories won in the process of vicariously serving their constituencies.

### **WHAT IS A LABOR UNION?**

Several attempts have been made to conceptualize labor unions based on the viewpoints of some apologists colored by their experiences, environment, prevailing economic and political ideologies, and so forth. Thus, different definitions have been advanced in an attempt to elucidate what a labor union is. A few of these viewpoints shall be considered in order to adopt a working definition that best represents this paradigm.

“A labor union is an organization of employees formed to bargain with the employer” (Wordnet, 2009). A labor union has also been conceived as an organization of workers formed to protect the rights and advance the interests of its members concerning wages, benefits, and working conditions (Labor Relations Commission, 2009). From the Stewards Dictionary (2009) a labor union is defined as “Workers organized into a voluntary association, or union, to further their mutual interests with respect to wages, hours, working conditions and other matters of interest to the workers.”

Labor Union (2009) rather gives us a more lucid and elaborate description of what a labor movement is: “A trade union or labor union is an organization of workers who have banded together to achieve common goals in key areas such as wages, hours, and working conditions. The labor union, through its leadership, bargains with the employer on behalf of union members (rank and file members) and negotiates labor contracts with employers. This may include the negotiation of wages, work rules, complaint procedures, rules governing hiring, firing, and promotion of workers, benefits, workplace safety, and policies. The agreements negotiated by the union leaders are binding on the rank and file members and the employer and in some cases on other non-member workers.”

Also the Trade Union Act of 1926 and Trade Union Decree of 1972 in Nigeria define a trade union as “Any combination of persons, whether temporary or permanent, who come together for the purpose of regulating the relations between workers and employers, worker and worker, or for imposing restrictive conditions on the conduct of any trade or business.”

Interestingly, the International Confederation of Free Trade union (ICFTU, 2009) adds a little more professional dimension to the conceptualization of Trade union when it calls it “a continuing and permanent organization created by workers to protect themselves at work, to improve their working conditions through collective bargaining, to seek better conditions of their lives and to provide a means of expression for the workers' view on the problems of society.”

We can safely therefore distil a worthy definition for a labor movement from the foregoing conceptualizations as “a continuous and permanent association of wage or salary earners formed for the purpose of maintaining (and enhancing) the conditions of their working life through the provision of several economic and social safety nets within and outside the work environment.”

Without much ado, this definition takes into consideration the very important variables that are central and germane to the existence of labor movements, capturing one of their overriding objectives for their membership, i.e. improvement of labor’s working conditions. It also points to the fact that labor unions, as we see in Nigeria, have gone beyond their traditional call of duty of protecting workers’ rights to fighting opprobrious and unpopular policies of government, thus putting pressure on government to deliver more social and economic benefits to workers and the citizens.

### **OBJECTIVES OF LABOR UNIONS**

The following summarizes the objectives for the creation or emergence of labor unions in Nigeria: to secure and enhance the general living conditions of workers and the economic well-being of their members; to guarantee individual and collective job security against all possible threats occasioned by market fluctuation, technological changes or organizational policies; to influence policies reached by the government on issues pertaining to the workers, through their relationship with politicians and the elites in society; to relate with labor unions at the local and international levels; to continually guarantee freedom of association and the recognition of labor union rights on all unionized workers.

### **IMPORTANCE OF LABOR UNIONS IN THE SOCIETY**

According to Fajana (2006), the resulting influence of organized labor in any economy could be substantial because of the functions they perform. He enumerated these functions as economic, social, welfare, political, psychological, and managerial in nature. Thus we can argue that labor unions play a multi-dimensional role in the society, especially to their members, creating social and economic safety nets with the aim of improving their working conditions and lives.

### **TYPES OF LABOR UNIONS**

According to Labor Union (2009), the following are different types of labor unions in the industrial relations system. First, a **closed shop** employs only people who are already union members. In this case, the employer recruits directly from the union. One would also find a **union shop** which employs non-union workers as well, but sets a time limit within which new employees must join a union. The union shop is the type of labor union practice found in Nigeria except that Nigerian workers also have the option of contracting out of the union (Fajana, 2006). Third, an **agency shop** requires non-union workers to pay a fee to the union for its services in negotiating their contract. This is sometimes called the Rand formula. It is particularly seen in some US states such as California. Lastly, an **open shop** does not discriminate based on union membership in employing or keeping workers. Where a union is active, the open shop allows workers to be employed who do not contribute to a union or the collective bargaining process. In the United States, state level right-to-work laws mandate the open shop in some states.

### **MEMBERSHIP STRUCTURE OF LABOR UNIONS**

Fajana (2006) has identified five membership structures of trade unions that exist today. One, **Craft Unions** boast of membership of workers who are largely artisans or blue-collar workers. Two, **General Unions** organize workers

regardless of skill or industry or various grades in a number of industries. Three, **Enterprise or House unions** are employee organizations usually of a single company or employer. These were the kind of unions in Nigeria between the years of 1938–1978. Four, **Industrial Unions** actually came to replace the house unions. This form of union consists of all the workers in an industry. This form of a union is also practiced in Nigeria. Five, **Professional Unions** are professional workers who form associations that are also meant to protect their interest e.g., Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities.

### **Brief History of Labor Unions in Nigeria**

In traditional African communities, social institutions, such as guilds and craft societies existed before colonial times (Fajana, 2006; Yesufu, 1968). These guilds were not as formalized in their operations like the modern labor unions, but as Fashoyin (1992) observed, they performed the same duties as they do today. They regulated their trades, such as ensuring that jobs were performed according to laid-down standards and rates were set for each job. They also served as a social and political forum for their members; they provided social services to members too. The only difference between these guilds and societies from the contemporary labor unions was the masters of these trades were not employers of labor neither were the journeymen wage earners (Fashoyin, 1992). The guilds had journeymen and pool-labor practices which enabled members to take turns at carrying out each other's assignments.

Thus the late development of labor unions in Nigeria as Fashoyin (1992) admits is traceable to the absence of wage employment and partly by the historical pattern of work relations. The prevalence of agricultural non-wage employment emphasized the leadership role of the head of the household or the traditional chief who operated a closely-knit family system. Wage employment was not fancied at the colonial era because it denied Africans their freedom, was not as profitable as returns from agricultural activities and posed a problem of adjusting to the world of industrial employment (Fashoyin, 1992; Seibel, 1973). The history of labor unions in Nigeria indicates that the first union, now known as the Nigeria Civil Service Union (NCSU), founded in 1912, emerged as a result of the growing wage employment in government establishments. It was not formed based on the ideals of labor union organizations like the need to fight for workers' rights, nor was it formed out of frustration or disaffection with their employment conditions. As Yesufu (1968) remarked, the NCSU was formed primarily to provide a forum for social interaction among African officers in the colonial service, as was the case in the other British West African Colonies. In 1931, two other unions were created: The Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Railway Workers Union (RWU) (Fajana, 2004). Industrial activities at this time were low as the colonial employer was seen as a father figure deserving the loyalty of the workers. Militant unionism was not a characteristic of labor unionism at this time. It was not until the 1930s, especially with the introduction of The Trade Union Ordinance of 1938 that led to the proliferation of labor movements in Nigeria.

### **The Role of International Labor Unions in the Development of Labor Union Activities in Nigeria**

Much controversy has trailed the role of Nigerian Unions in international labor politics. As Fashoyin (1992) notes, this issue has remained one of the destabilizing factors in the development of the labor movement in Nigeria. Nigerian unions have been involved with international labor unions since 1942 when the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUCN) sent representatives to the 1949 London Conference of the World Free Trade Union (WFTU), hitherto comprising both eastern and western labor unions. Following accusations and counter-accusations on the ideological preference of the

world body, the conference split into two. This split gave birth to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and both organizations have propagated the east-west ideological paradigms until the collapse of the ideological divisions in the late 1980s. However, as Fajana (2006) argued, international labor unions have been very helpful in the growth, expansion, training, education, funding, mentoring, and support of labor unions in Nigeria. Although, before the collapse of communism and the end of the cold war, the politics of patronage perpetrated by international unions in securing the affiliation of labor unions in Nigeria helped in no small measure in heating up the already hot industrial relations scene in the country leading to intra- and inter-factional divisions and schisms between and among Nigerian unions and labor.

### **Employer Associations and Labor Union Development in Nigeria**

Relative to workers' organizations, employers' associations were more recently formed (Fajana, 2006). In 1954, there were only eight employers' organizations in Nigeria. These associations were largely ad-hoc; they met as issues of mutual concern arose and kept no records of their activities. The late development has been explained by the fact that the first large employers, who were expatriates and were already exposed to advanced industrial relations, needed less encouragement to form employers' unions because there was no serious threat to cause them to band together. The proliferation of house unions also discouraged the formation of employers' associations during the 1940's up to 1970's. Many employers disliked dealing with union outsiders as they preferred domestic bargaining and other forms of internal dispute settlement procedures. As Fajana (2006) noted, initially employers were neither interested in forming an association nor in fostering the growth of national or industrial unionism that the emergence of employers' associations would have stimulated. However, because of the strength of the industrial unions and sophisticated senior staff associations, there has been fanatical readiness among employers to join forces to check any excesses of unions (Imoisili, 1994). As Imoisili described it, to stand out without collective action as an employer would be to risk becoming a hen-pecked employer, which means, the employer would be tossed around under the uncomfortable weight of significant power mustered by sophisticated labor unions and senior staff associations. The establishment of the Nigeria Employers' Consultative Association came as a response by the Federal Ministry of Labor in 1957 that there was need to have an employer's equivalent of a central labor organization (Fajana, 2006). The influence of labor on the formation and development of employers' associations is profound while employers have constantly worked with the state to undermine and check the perceived excesses of labor and their representatives.

### **SUMMARY OF DETAILS OF LABOR UNIONS' GROWTH IN NIGERIA BEFORE 1980**

As alluded earlier and in line with the position of many writers and industrial relations experts, the first organized and formalized labor union was the Civil Service Union established in 1912 (Fajana, 2006; NUPENG, 2009; Snelling, 2002). With the birth of the NUT and RWU in 1932, labor unions began to emerge on the industrial relations scene in Nigeria. However, there was insignificant development in industrial relations due to inadequate wage employment, repressive colonial labor policy, low level of economic activities, ignorance, absence of a legal backing for existing labor unions and so forth (Fajana, 2006). However, with the Trade Union Ordinance of 1938 which allowed at least 5 workers to form a union, this led to the proliferation of labor unions with most of them based on one employer or one enterprise and comprised few members indeed. This status quo continued until the 1970s. In fact, according to Fashoyin (1992), the unions then were close to 1,000 in number.

It was in 1978 that there was a restructuring of labor unions and that pruned down the number of unions from more than 1,000 to 70 unions; broken down as follows: 42 industrial unions; 15 Senior Staff Associations; 9 Employers Associations and 4 Professional Unions. This time started the era of industrial unions and sounded a death knell to the 1938-1978 era of ineffective house unions (Fajana, 2006; Snelling, 2002). It was also in February 1978, the Nigeria Labor Congress, a product of a merger of four labor centers, viz, Labor Unity Front (LUF), Nigeria Workers' Council (NWC), Nigeria Trade Union Congress (NTUC) and United Labor Congress (ULC), was formed and inaugurated (Fajana, 2006). This is arguable as (Fashoyin, 1992; Iyayi (2008) contend that the NLC had first been created in 1975 arising from The Apena Cemetery Declaration. According to Iyayi, unhappy with the fact that workers could resolve their differences on their own, the Nigerian state under General Murtala Mohammed, set up the Adebisi Tribunal on February 12, 1976 ostensibly to re-organize the labor unions. It was the Adebisi Tribunal that provided the grounds for banning many notable progressive and left-wing labor unionists, including Michael Imoudu, Wahab Goodluck, and S.U. Bassey, from participation in labor union activities for life. The workers-created NLC was thus dissolved, and by the Trade Union (Amendment) Decree No 22 of 1978, a new central labor organization with the same name as the Nigeria Labor Congress was created. Consequently, the then 42 Industrial Unions became affiliates of the Nigeria Labor Congress with a legal backing of the Trade Union (Amendment) Decree 22 of 1978 (Nupeng, 2009). The number of labor unions and associations in Nigeria is illustrated and captured below.

#### **STRUCTURE OF UNIONS: 1978 – 2000**

<b>Type of Union</b>	<b>1978</b>	<b>1986</b>	<b>1988</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2000</b>
<b>Industrial Unions</b>	42	42	41	41	29	29
<b>Senior Staff Associations</b>	15	18	21	20	20	20
<b>Employers Associations</b>	9	22	22	22	22	22
<b>Professional Unions</b>	4	4	4	4	4	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>75</b>

Source: Fajana (2006).

#### **GROWTH OF LABOR UNIONS IN NIGERIA (1980 – 1999)**

By 1980, there were 70 labor union organizations and associations in Nigeria. This was the labor union that Alhaji Shehu Usman Aliyu Shagari inherited.

<b>Nigerian Leaders In History</b>	<b>Administration</b>	<b>Date of Leadership</b>	<b>Designation</b>
Sir Lord Frederick Lugard	Colonial	1914 - 1919	Governor General
Sir Bernard Bourdillon	Colonial	1635 - 1943	Governor General
Sir John Macpherson	Colonial	1948 - 1955	Governor General
Sir James Roberson	Colonial	1955 - 1960	Governor General
Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe	Civilian	1 Oct 1960 - 16 Jan 1963	President of the Republic
Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa	Civilian	30 Aug 1960 - 15 Jan 1966	Prime Minister
Johnson Thomas Umurakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi	Military	16 Jan 1966 - 29 Jul 1966	Heads of the Military Government
Yakubu Gowon	Military	1 Aug 1966 - 29 Jul 1975	Heads of the Military Government
Murtala Ramat Muhammed	Military	29 Jul 1975 - 13 Feb 1976	Heads of the Military Government
Olusegun Obasanjo	Military	14 Feb 1976 - 1 Oct 1979	Heads of the Military Government
Alhaji Shehu Usman Aliyu Shagari	Civilian	1 Oct 1979 - 31 Dec 1983	President of the Republic
Muhammadu Buhari	Military	31 Dec 1983 - 27 Aug 1985	Head of the Federal Military Government
Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida	Military	27 Aug 1985 - 4 Jan 1993	Chairman of the Armed Forces Ruling Council Chairman of the National Defence and Security Council
Ernest Adekunle Oladeinde Shonekan	Civilian	26 Aug 1993 - 17 Nov 1993	Head of the Interim National Government
Sani Abacha	Military	17 Nov 1993 - 8 Jun 1998	Chairman of the Provisional Ruling Council
Abdulsalam Abubakar	Military	9 Jun 1998 - 29 May 1999	Chairman of the Provisional Ruling Council
Olusegun Obasanjo	Civilian	29 May 1999 – 29 May 2007	President of the Republic
Musa Yar'adua	Civilian	29 May 2007 -	President of the Republic

Source: Nigerian Leaders in History, 2009

This paper concentrates on the activities and growth of labor union within the highlighted period and governments.

### **Labor Unions Under The Shagari Regime - 1<sup>st</sup> October 1979 – 1983**

Labor unions before the Shagari regime had already become militant and forcible in their activities and demands as a result of their experience with the military. However, with a civilian regime in power, the leadership of the Nigerian Labor Congress thought they were going to fare better than they did under the military. To their dismay, that was not the case. According to Comrade Ali Ciroma, the President of NLC from 1984-1988, the government of Shagari introduced new challenges (Komolafe, 2008). There was recklessness in resource management. As Komolafe put it, the recklessness was so much “to the extent that States were failing in their basic responsibilities like paying salary and wages as at when due. The NLC’s attention was diverted to this scourge. National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and National People’s Party (NPP) states were the worst.” Labor unions were forced to embark on prolonged strikes with the situation very severe in Imo and Benue states where teachers were owed salaries for over one year. The civilian administration found itself increasingly unable to control organized labor, culminating in a two-day strike involving more than a million workers, mobilized by the NLC (Snelling, 2002). The Shagari government which promptly gave huge salaries to politicians and political office holders was unwilling to consider granting workers a minimum wage until the NLC threatened to call out workers on a national strike. It was only after the two-day national strike called by the NLC in May 1981, under the leadership of Comrade Hassan Sunmonu, that the Shagari government was finally forced to raise its unilateral minimum wage of N120 to N125 (Iyayi, 2008); a paltry increase of 4.2%. However, the Shagari government still did not respond to the rising unpaid salaries of workers until the NLC threatened to boycott the 1983 general elections. It was only then he provided funds to the states to clear the salary arrears. Ciroma claimed Shagari even tried to divide the NLC but couldn’t (Komolafe, 2008). As Momoh (1992) vehemently argues, “The Sunmonu-led strike was a success to the extent that the state and capital made concessions to labor and acknowledged the miserable social conditions of the working class caused especially by the rising cost of living, poor conditions of service, and workers retrenchment. The strike, in a political sense, showed the limits of economism. Although the issues upon which the NLC’s demands were hinged were welfare-oriented, the essence of their demands rose political and class questions. It became apparent that despite the populist or radical claims to be progressive, which were made by parties such as the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the parties did not align themselves with workers. In other words, labor unions under Shagari had to be radical and militant to secure the regular payment of their members’ salaries. The Shagari administration and state apparatuses also made efforts to garrote the labor unions and divide the NLC.

### **Labor Unions Under the Muhammadu Buhari Regime -31 Dec 1983 - 27 Aug 1985**

With the return of the military, the little fortunes of labor unions in the country turned from light gray to pitch black. The government went from non-payment of salaries to large scale retrenchment. As Komolafe (2008) put it, “The regime said if it could not pay salaries, it would retrench. From non-payment of salaries to non-retention of jobs, labor unions’ attention was diverted to safeguarding jobs.” It was during this period that Ciroma was elected as the NLC president in 1984. As Okome (1993) noted, the Buhari regime was typified by high-level authoritarianism. This view was supported by Soyinka (2007) who argued that the Buhari-Idiagbon regime enslaved the nation and transmuted Nigeria into a slave plantation. Isah (2006) whose comical analysis of that regime is worth considering lamented, “Horsewhip-wielding soldiers and policemen pounced on hapless Nigerians at the slightest opportunity, flogging them mercilessly for alleged acts of indiscipline. Mass retrenchment of Nigerians in the public service of the federation was carried out with impunity and a Decree No 17 of 1984 ousted the courts’ jurisdiction to enquire into the validity or legality of the whole exercise.” As Amuwo (2002) noted, there was a positive side to the Buhari authoritarian measures to the nation. The breakdown of



human rights of Nigerians due to the militarism of that regime led to the strengthening of key non-state unions such as Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU); National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS); Nigerian Bar Association (NBA); Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ); Nigerian Labor Congress (NLC); Women in Nigeria (WIN), etc. These unions and associations were primarily driven by the connection between sectoral agitations for a more qualitative living of their members and demands for more robust democratization process. For them, the former would be intelligible only as an integral part of the latter. Labor movements in this era increased their agitation and militancy and engaged the Buhari-Idiagbon regime in robust and intellectual confrontations.

### **Labor Unions Under The Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida-27 Aug 1985 - 4 Jan 1993**

The Babangida era slowed the growth of labor unions and decimated what was left of them after the Buhari administration. According to Comrade Abdulwahed Omar, the present NLC President, the Babangida regime brought the NLC the umbrella body for labor unions into serious setbacks and reverses (Soji-Eze, 2008). On the many forces against its survival, Omar said “10 years after its formation in February 1988, the congress was dissolved by the military junta of General Ibrahim Babangida, a dissolution that was to last for 10 months” (Soji-Eze, 2008). An administrator was appointed over the affairs of the NLC for 10 months before the election of Comrade Paschal Bayfau as the new NLC helmsman.

As Iyayi (2008) noted, “a radical wing of the Nigerian Labor Congress, led by Mallam Ciroma, was in control of labor affairs when Babangida came to power. Well-informed about the role of Labor in pre- and post-independent Nigeria, Babangida’s overall strategy was to replace the radical wing with a moderate, if not conservative, faction. The killing of four students of the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria (ABU) in May 1986 and the subsequent solidarity march against the genocide, as a section of the Press called it, provided an alibi for the first attack. NLC headquarters in Lagos was sealed up; it was there accused of provocation and insensitivity to the national economic emergency; the executive of the Congress was dissolved and a sole administrator appointed to run its affairs.” By 1988, there was a massive infiltration of the Union. At its national convention in Jos, government sponsored a group led by Shamang, who in order to regularize his membership, paid up his pending two-year outstanding union dues in one fell swoop. Having been used to cause schism within the NLC, Shamang withdrew from public consciousness. Comrade Pascal Bafyau, leader of the Railways Union whose members’ economic woes were well-known under Babangida, became the president of the Congress. As Iyayi (2008) argues, Comrade Paschal Bayfau was very close to the General; indeed several of the Congress’ policy somersaults both on labor union and political matters, before and after June 12 annulment, could be traced to Bafyau’s extensive informal networks with the military regime. Enumerating the missteps the NLC took under Bayfau, Iyayi (2008) noted that some of Labor’s political options were bizarre. This included the establishment of a political association that sought license from the regime to participate in Third Republic politics; decision to support Bafyau’s bid for Vice-president under Abiola with the attendant massive use of ethnic and religious cards (Christian Northern minority from Adamawa state); indecisions whether or not to support calls by Campaign for Democracy (CD) for public disobedience immediately after the annulment as well as vacillations in joining the oil unions, National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) as well as Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), which fought for the recovery of Abiola’s presidential mandate between July and September 1994.

For Ali Ciroma, the SAP project was the mother of all evils that the Babangida junta imposed on Nigeria, where dissident voices like labor unions and the NLC were clamped down, arrested and muzzled by the military president (Komolafe, 2008). However, Ali Ciroma believes the evil intent of the regime was heightened after the annulment of June 12, 1993, where pro-democracy groups including labor, were victims of the burning repression unleashed on the Nigerian people. However, organized labor was getting stronger and more resilient in its activities at that time. It was also at this time, in 1989 precisely, that Labor unions were again restructured to become 29 affiliate unions to the Nigeria Labor Congress.

**The Affiliates to the NLC were as follows:**

1. Agric and Allied Employees" Union of Nigeria (AAEUN)
2. Amalgamated Union of Public Corporation, Civil Service Technical and Recreational Services Employees
3. Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria
4. Medical and Health Workers Union of Nigeria
5. National Association of Nigeria Nurses and Midwives
6. National Union of Air Transport Employees
7. National Union of Banks, Insurance and Financial Institution Employees
8. National Union of Chemical, Footwear, Rubber, Leather and Non-Metallic Employees
9. National Union of Civil Engineering, Construction, Furniture and Wood Workers
10. National Union of Electricity Employees
11. National Union of Food, Beverage and Tobacco Employees
12. National Union of Hotels and Personal Services Workers
13. National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas (NUPENG)
14. National Union of Posts and Telecommunication Employees (NUPTE)
15. National Union of Printing, Publishing and Paper Products Workers
16. National Union of Shop and Distributive Employees
17. National Union of Textile, Garment and Tailoring Workers of Nigeria
18. Nigeria Civil Service Union
19. Nigeria Union of Civil Service Secretariat Stenographic Workers
20. Nigeria Union of Journalists
21. Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees
22. Nigeria Union of Mine Workers (NUMW)
23. Nigeria Union of Pensioners
24. Nigeria Union of Railwaymen
25. Non-Academic Staff Union of Educational and Associated Insitutions
26. Radio, Television and Theatre Workers
27. Steel & Engineering Workers Union of Nigeria (SEWUN)
28. National Union of Road Transport Workers
29. Nigeria Union of Teachers

Source: Nigeria Labor Congress, 2009

### **Labor unions Under General Sani Abacha - 17 Nov 1993 - 8 Jun 1998**

Immediately after the puppet government of Chief Ernest Adegunle Oladeinde Shonekan gave way to a palace coup by General Sani Abacha, the General swung into action to consolidate political power. Like his predecessor, in 1994, Abacha assaulted NLC when it dissolved it and placed it under a sole administrator for four years (Komolafe, 2008). Abacha was not prepared to put up with the threat of a vibrant, virile, and vocal NLC and labor, forces that could threaten his political ambition. If Babangida was a terror, Abacha was a nightmare for Nigeria. Nigeria under him gradually slipped into an autocratic and closed state. It was during his time that Nigeria also became pariah. Immediately on assumption of power in November 1993, Abacha dissolved all democratically elected structures of government from the National Assembly to the local government councils. Interim military administrators were deployed to the states to take over from the sacked civilian governors while a total ban was placed on all political and labor activity. However, his immediate concern was how to deal with the renewed clamor for the revalidation of the June 12th election results and though such calls were initially ignored, the new military strongman had to take matters in his own hands when the clamor grew intense and desperate. In July 1994, two key union leaders of oil and gas workers, Frank Kokori and Milton Dabibi led their unions, the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) as well as Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), respectively on a strike to demand that Chief MKO Abiola's poll victory be recognized. General Abacha moved quickly to suppress the strike, emasculating the labor movement by replacing the leaders of the militant oil unions and NLC with state-appointed administrators (Graham, 1998; Snelling, 2002). Moving swiftly, Abacha clamped most of the pro-democracy activists into jail while other lucky ones escaped via the 'NADECO route' through Seme border (Isah, 2006). A number of labor unions like ASUU and professional associations were proscribed; movement around the country was severely curtailed while scores of activists were gunned down in mysterious circumstances including Mrs. Kudirat Abiola, Chief Rewane, Alhaji Suliat Adedeji, Chief Alex Ibru (he survived the onslaught), Abraham Adesanya (also survived) among others. Abacha imposed a reign of terror on the country and the country's economy nosedived as a result of the restrictive and exclusionary policies of the dictator which discouraged foreign investment and adopted an unrealistically hostile posture to most western governments and financial institutions. Nevertheless, Nigeria's lowest point in international relations came with the suspension of the country from the Commonwealth over the conviction and execution of Ken Saro Wiwa and 8 others over charges of murder and incitement to murder, etc. The killing of Ken Saro Wiwa, a renowned environmental rights activist and Ogoni freedom fighter, was roundly condemned both locally and internationally (Isah, 2006). Activities of labor unions and the NLC under Abacha were restrained as Abacha had zero tolerance for the opposition and was not used to accommodating any voice of dissent. For him, it was either you were for him or against him. He saw the opposition as enemies needing to be crushed or eliminated.

### **Labor Unions Under Abdulsalam Abubakar - 9 Jun 1998 - 29 May 1999**

The Abdulsalami regime was a child of circumstance. The military Provisional Ruling Council (PRC) under Abubakar commuted the sentences of those accused in the alleged coup during the Abacha regime and released almost all known civilian political detainees. Two top union leaders, Frank Kokori and Milton Dabibi, who had been detained without trial under Abacha, along with many labor officials, were released (Africa Fund, 1998; Snelling, 2002). It was also during this regime, that the NLC was un-proscribed and the ban on political, labor and other associational activities was lifted. Even though, General Abdulsalami successfully transitioned the country into the Fourth republic, his government failed to

improve the economic fortunes of Nigerian workers and to strengthen the activities of labor union organizations (Komolafe, 2008).

### **Labor Unions Under Olusegun Obasanjo - 29 May 1999 – 29 May 2007**

Following the return to civilian rule under President Obasanjo in 1999, labor unions staged several protests culminating in a massive strike in 2000, which brought the country to a standstill. The strike forced the government to abandon an attempt to increase fuel prices (Alubo, 2007).

Following the arrest of NLC leader Adams Oshiomhole, the government showed strong willingness not to give in to union pressure (Snelling, 2002). To further put labor in disarray, the Obasanjo government introduced measures to create more central labor organizations (Igbokwe, 2003; Iyayi, 2008). Now the Trade Union Congress (TUC) has been empowered as a Labor Centre with Senior Staff Associations being affiliated to it. Also, membership of labor unions is no longer compulsory for workers as the new Trade Union (Amended) Act 2005 is built on the concept of voluntarism. All this was done by the Obasanjo administration to weaken labor, make it docile and divided internally so as not to be able to disrupt the ruling class or industrial relations system. However, like Iyayi noted (2008), the number of industrial unions now affiliated to the NLC has increased. The work of the NLC and labor unions in this regard is an example to the country of how unity can be maintained in the face of diverse, minatory and antagonistic policies of government.

### **STRIKES IN NIGERIA**

It is important to say that labor unions in Nigeria are alive to the pursuit and realization of their objectives to their members. One of the tools used to force employers or a group of employers and even the state to accede to their demands or come to the bargaining table would be strikes. Below is a data of disputes and strikes in Nigeria.

**Data Of Disputes And Strikes In Nigeria: 1970 – 2002**

Year	Trade Disputes	Work Stoppages	Workers Involved	Man – Days Lost
1970	165	44	14,784	27,072
1971	296	165	77,104	208,114
1972	196	64	52,748	145,125
1973	173	60	33,963	115,371
1974	338	129	62,565	144,881
1975	775	346	107,489	435,493
1976	230	125	52,242	148,141
1977	172	93	59,270	136,349
1978	142	78	105,525	875,137
1979	155	755	204,742	2,038,855
1980	355	265	221,088	2,350,998
1981	258	234	323,700	2,218,223
1982	341	253	2,874,721	9,652,400
1983	184	131	629,177	404,822
1984	100	49	42,046	301,809
1985	77	40	19,907	118,693
1986	87	53	157,165	461,345
1987	65	38	57,097	142,506
1988	156	124	55,620	230,613
1989	144	80	157,342	579,968
1990	174	102	254,540	1,339,105
1991	204	117	460,471	2,257,382
1992	221	124	238,324	966,611
1993	160	90	880,224	6,192,167
1994	199	110	1,541,146	234,307,748
1995	46	26	193,944	2,269,037
1996	29	24	19,826	94,664
1997	31	31	59,897	359,801
1998	16	11	9,494	47,631
1999	52	27	173,858	3,158,087
2000	49	47	544,722	8,287,733
2001	51	37	259,290	4,722,910
2002	50	42	320,006	5,505,322

**Source:** Federal Ministry of Employment, Labor and Productivity (Fajana, 2006).

### Strike Profile: Nigeria (1951 – 2002)

PERIOD	AVERAGE FREQUENCY	AVERAGE BREADTH	AVERAGE DURATION
1951-59	42.00	38,000.00	4.240
1960-69	10.22	34,082.71	3.485
1970-78	142.00	193,804.00	3.224
1979-83	327.60	850,068.60	6.288
1984-87	45.50	69,014.50	4.606
1988-92	109.40	233,259.40	4.410
1993-2002	44.50	998,001.60	11.087

Source: Central Bank of Nigeria (2002) in (Fajana, 2006).

### Inter-industry differences in strike profile: nigeria 1976-1988

Industry	Frequency	Duration	Breadth	Impact
Manufacturing	35.33	2.39	20.08	88.16
Construction	27.32	3.98	72.28	56.03
Community and Social Services	27.22	15.26	172.41	317.00
Other Activities	16.33	1.59	11.97	83.25
Financial Institutions	10.55	4.20	10.34	49.62
Transport	10.11	8.12	18.92	100.33
Mining and Quarrying	7.55	1.14	1.64	8.04
Agriculture and Forestry	7.33	12.07	4.25	44.33
Distribution, Restaurant and Hotels	6.77	0.83	2.48	5.88
Electricity and Water	2.88	3.98	1.49	9.24

Source: Fajana, 2006:251.

### LABOR UNION DYNAMISM IN NIGERIA

Labor union dynamism in Nigeria has actually been helped by the following factors:

First, the removal of moribund unions and the substitution of large and effective industrial unions: in Nigeria, today, there are industrial unions in place are huge, better financed and have a large sphere of influence that positions them better to negotiate with the government and employers or a group of employers. Second, the lessening or elimination of damaging ideological rifts among Nigerian unions has further helped to united labor unions in the country. Modern labor

unions in the country are more concerned with how to improve the lives of their members than be engaged in needless ideological rifts. Third, the employment of well-disciplined and experienced labor union leaders who started performing full-time duties has improved labor unions' performance and effectiveness. Modern labor unions in Nigeria have engaged the services of well-paid professionals to run their secretariats and activities. For instance, the present NLC Vice-president, Comrade Promise Adewusi is a well-trained and experienced lawyer in labor matters in the country. The assurance of dependable internally generated financial resources through automatic check-off dues has also placed labor unions and labor centers at a financial vantage position hence enabling them to engage the services of professionals, pursue their objectives, defend their members, carry out their educational and social functions, and be able to effectively run their operations. Fourth, the existence of one central labor organization, the Nigerian Labor Congress (NLC) is no longer the case with the empowerment of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) as a labor center. However, the NLC still commands a towering image in the industrial relations system. Can it be said that labor unions have fared better in the discharge of their responsibilities in Nigeria? This study contends that the labor union movement has evolved as a dynamic force for social change in the country. However, there are obvious measures that when put in place can further strengthen the present achievements of labor unions in the country.

### **Measures for Strengthening Labor Union Activities in Nigeria**

First, there should be qualitative education for all labor union leaders so they can match the intelligence and wits of employers, government and its agencies. Labor unions must meet the internal challenges facing them which include strengthening the leadership skills, abilities and competence of all levels of their leadership by deepening internal democracy in all areas of union work and ensuring that they are all provided with and adopt the working class position in all areas of union work. They should also strengthen their human resource base by ensuring that they have enough staff of the required orientation who will conduct union work at all levels. Second, accelerated action should be given to the unionization of all non-unionized workers in several sectors of the economy.

Third, labor is part of a wider working class movement and culture. Its strength therefore depends upon the strength of this wider movement. NLC as a body must cultivate, maintain and strengthen relations with the various interests in this wider movement; while it can do so in terms of the relations that are forged within the Nigerian Labor Party as a working class party, it must also forge these relations outside of the framework of the party. This work will need to be done at the organizational level as well as the individual level. In this regard, the existing links with civil society organizations such as has been realized in Labor and Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) must be maintained and strengthened. Relations with other labor centers such as the Trade Union Congress and labor unions like the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) must also be strengthened with the ultimate goal of uniting with these bodies under the umbrella of the NLC. Fourth, there should be a more disciplined and focused union dedicated to its traditional vision of protecting the rights of its workers and all working citizens. There should also be a corrupt-free labor union that can pass the moral test and cannot be bought with money.

Fifth, as Iyayi (2008) rightly noted, to further consolidate its gains, labor needs to galvanize the political expressions of workers and be adequately represented in every policy and political decision taken in the governance process of the country. According to him, labor needs to develop closer ties with the Nigerian Labor Party that it has contributed and helped to crystallize.

## CONCLUSION

Labor unions or organized labor in Nigeria has come a long way in enhancing the economic well-being of its members, i.e. unionized labor in the country. It has even passed through the burning and fiery flame doing so. Although labor union leaders in the past, in a bid to defend the rights and interests of their members and workers in the country, have been oppressed, victimized, and tyrannized by the ruling and political classes, nevertheless, the present industrial unions in the country are a reflection of a home-grown labor movement that has risen to interface with employers and their representatives, and the state and its representatives. This is done by striving to meet the ever-changing but ever present yearnings of the Nigerian workers and the Nigerian peoples, in the face of a stiff, odious, and difficult opposition by the state and its political and ruling classes.

With the anti-state and anti-government policies, especially as passed by the former government of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, labor unions in Nigeria must remain resolute and must collaborate with other non-state progressive actors to present a robust and sophisticated front in carrying out their functions towards their members and the citizens in the larger society.

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