

TRADE UNION MOVEMENTS IN NIGERIA: THEIR ROLE IN DECOLONISATION AND DEMOCRATISATION, 1912-2022.

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the evolution, growth and development of trade union movements in colonial and postcolonial Nigeria from 1912 to present, against the backdrop of their indisputable and unforgettable role in the making and remaking of Nigeria within the study period. The study argues that the contradictions inherent in the global capitalist system, its expansionist drive and exploitative tendencies created the need for the formation of trade unions for the purpose of collective bargaining aimed at improving workers conditions of service and their protection against draconian laws during the colonial period. Thus, trade unions in Nigeria emerged in order to articulate the interest of all members and effectively pursue the realisation of same for the good of their members and the overall development of the country in the long run. It also contends that although the colonial government, their partners in the private sector and successive military administrations and even some civilian governments in Nigeria have antagonised and persecuted trade unions and their leaders due to the widely held view that they are agents of economic instability and are self-centred organisations, they have proven beyond reasonable doubt that they are partners in progress in both colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. In fact, their consequential role in the struggle for Nigeria's independence from British colonisation and the triumph of democratic governance over arbitrary rule is unquestionably outstanding, monumental and deserving of the attention of the intellectual community.

Key Words: Trade Unions, Decolonisation, Democratisation

Introduction

The idea of setting up trade unions was a corollary of capitalist expansion, occasioned by the industrial revolution which started in Britain in the late 18th century, climaxed in the 19th century and spread to other Western European countries and the United States. The revolution which led merchants to raise capital to build factories across Europe and the United States also engendered the growth of towns and cities across major industrial centres such as Liverpool, Lancashire, Birmingham, Manchester City and so on as well as pathetic working conditions for workers in factories. The moneyed middle class which emerged and gained control of the economy were said to have subjected the working class to long hours daily with meagre wages in order to make huge profits for further investment and to create surplus value. It was these prevailing conditions in bourgeois-proletariats relations in Western Europe and the United States of America that necessitated the formation and the growth and development of unions across the globe for the dual purpose of protecting and advancing the rights of workers in fast changing industrial relations.

From a little beginning in the late 18th and 19th century, trade unions/labor movements have grown exponentially through the 20th century and are now indispensable players in the government and politics of nations, the world over. This is because the politico-economic decisions of nations and their outcomes directly or indirectly impact workers standard of living and the general wellbeing of the people of a country. Although labor movements are a positive development in world historical movements, it has undergone tremendous challenges since its inception, ranging from regular persecutions and outright disbandment, especially under autocratic governments. It is instructive to note that these challenges have largely been surmounted due primarily to legal precedents as well as continuous amendments of labor acts aimed at the protection and betterment of the working conditions of employees. Thus, the proliferation of unions in Nigeria, Africa and the world at large is inextricably tied to the legal status they now enjoy which confers on them the right to collective bargaining with their employers. Against this backdrop, the role of workers agitations in the transformation and development of modern capitalism that takes cognisance of workers welfare and wellbeing cannot be overemphasised.

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This paper examines the origin and development of trade unions in colonial and postcolonial Nigeria. The objective being to bring to the fore their praiseworthy role in decolonisation and democratisation as well as their challenges and prospects.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The inclusion of conceptual clarification in intellectual discourses is meant to simplify and by implication eliminate all barriers to easy understanding of the key concepts/ ideas of the subject matter and also to provide an operational definition that guides the study. Therefore, trade unionism, the key concept of this study shall be thoroughly examined for the said objective.

From a legal perspective as reflected in the labor acts of nation-states, trade union is the association and organisation of workers on both permanent and ad hoc basis fundamentally for the regulation of relationships between employers and employees on the one hand, employees and employees on the other hand and also for the imposing of measures that restrict trade and or business relations in organisations.¹ The chief function of this legal framework is the realisation of orderliness in industrial relations for the mutual benefits of both employers and employees. Thus, the power of trade unions is situated in the legality of its collective existence and operations, which enable them to exert pressure on government functionaries, especially the executive, to pass resolutions that address or minimise to the barest minimum the challenges they are faced with over a given period of time.

In socio-economic context, trade union has been defined as wage earners association established to serve members interest with particular reference to wages and conditions of service.² On her part, Funmi Adewumi defined trade union as a collective interest groups of same occupation or profession that are well organised and positioned to promote the socio-economic welfare of their members.³ What can be deduced from this definition is that trade union, an association of workers, is most importantly established to improve on the pre-existing or existing socio-economic conditions of workers. Thus, trade unions exist in a particular trade or industry to achieve via the weapon of collective bargaining improved salaries, benefits and by extension

¹ See Fajana, S. (1980). *Industrial Relations in Nigeria: Development and Practice*. Ikeja, Longman Nigeria. P.p. 40-45.

² Zasha, J. (1982). *The State and Trade Unions*, in Adewale (ed) *Journal of Political Science*. Vol. 4. No 2, p.10.

³ Adewumi, F. (1997). "Responsiveness in Trade Unionism: The Challenge of the 21st Century" in, *Trade Unionism in Nigeria: Challenges for the 21st Century*. Adewumi, F. (ed) Lagos, Friedrich Ebert Foundation. p.7.

improvement in their social status. Wogu Ananaba, an outstanding scholar in trade union discourse sees trade union as a collection of workers of the same and perhaps different trade who come together to integrate their interest for a more effective collective bargain with their employers for increased wages and upgraded working conditions.⁴ Similarly, comrade Didi Adodo has observed that a trade union is an association of workers bound together by common interest whose ultimate objective is the protection of workers against the neglect and tyranny of bourgeoisies who own factories and employ labor for maximum profit⁵, which most often than not results in employers' inhumanity to employees. His view sees trade unionism as a veritable tool in the protection of the working class from exploitation and dehumanizing treatments inherent in the capitalist system due to its uncontrollable penchant for expansion and domination deeply rooted in its entrenchment of unequal relationships.

From the foregoing, what is unequivocal is the fact that the emergence of trade unions is borne out of employees' relentless effort to achieve comfortable conditions of service, conceivable only through the democratic instrument of collective bargaining and actions. Therefore, unions exist with a positive orientation and an unusual determination to represent their members in a complex short and long term negotiations and renegotiations with employers of labor in order to secure a more favorable human and material conditions of work for an enhanced standard of living.

For the purpose of this study, trade union is an employee advancement association that is independent of the employer and structurally designed and organised to protect and enhance the wellbeing of members through the principle of collective bargain and strategies deployed to influence legislation capable of fostering dignity in labor and satisfaction in workers. However, it is important to note that in order to realise their stipulated objectives, unions directly or indirectly develop intimate relationships with employers through agreements reached in accordance with their collective objectives and interests. On the whole, trade unions exist among other things to negotiate and renegotiate agreements reached with the government on salaries and other conditions of service; to relate employees dissatisfaction with government policies and programs and actions; manage conflicts between employers and employees; provide legal advice and

⁴ Ananaba, W. (1970). Trade Union Movement in Nigeria, New York, Africana Publishers, p. 10.

⁵ Adodo, D. Origin of Trade Unionism in Nigeria, in thisdayonline.com. Retrieved on 10/9.2022.
<https://ijase.org>

financial assistance when the need arises; provide education on workers' rights via regular awareness/enlightenment campaigns; to take industrial actions such as boycotts and strikes after all peaceful means have been exhausted. Finally, it exists to partner with the government in order to achieve stability in industrial relations, economic development and the overall goals and objectives of the state.

While decolonisation as used in this study strictly refers to the anti-colonial struggles that led to the independence of Nigeria especially after the Second World War when it became more intense, democratisation simply means the process of transition that brought about substantive changes in governance that ultimately resulted in the enthronement of democracy, its features and principles over tyrannical rule.

COLONIALISM AND THE EVOLUTION OF TRADE UNION MOVEMENTS IN NIGERIA

An understanding of the contemporary roles of trade unions in Nigeria and other parts of the world can only be thoroughly grasped and appreciated in the light of its historical evolution and development. The historical perspective will also be germane to our understanding of the complex historical processes that necessitated the formation of trade unions and their contemporary response and approaches to the challenges bedeviling their members.

Colonialism, a critical stage in the development of capitalism which was entrenched through conquest and signing of dubious treaties, whose contents were not understood by the traditional rulers of the colonised peoples who signed them, brought about the subjugation, domination and exploitation of the human and natural resources of nations who fell victims to it and prematurely incorporated Africa and Nigeria in particular into the international capitalist system as a dependent partner. The domineering, discriminatory and exploitative nature of colonial rule relegated the colonised people to the background and also generated discontentment, which paved the way for trade union movements which started as protest movements against their pathetic working conditions and later partner with educated elite to demand independence from colonial domination. However, the history of trade unionism in Nigeria and parts of Africa predates the colonial period. Historical sources suggest informal trade unions were formed before the establishment and consolidation of colonial rule in Nigeria.

Although some scholars have argued that the first of these unions was established in 1883, others disagree but there seems to be a common ground that the first industrial action in the area now called Nigeria happened in 1897 for reasons that remain unclear.⁶ It is important to note that the most likely reason for the emergence of these unions is resistance to British imposed trade monopoly and their continued penetration into the interior of their territories for imperial purposes.

It is instructive to note that the history of modern trade unions in Nigeria dates back to the period of British colonial rule due to unfavorable labour laws characterized by forced labour, colonial taxation and stipends paid for paid labour. The first formal trade union, the Nigerian Civil Service Union, was formed on the 19th of August 1912 but had its name changed after the amalgamation of Southern and Northern protectorates in 1914.⁷ Prior to the global economic depression of the 1929, Nigeria's labour history was confined to the public domain but the global economic recession and its gross impact on the economy of nations which brought untold hardship in European colonies in Africa and elsewhere resulted in agitations for increased wages and the Africanisation of top positions in the civil service. The British positive response to the agitations, though grudgingly, furthered the growth and development of unions because it made possible the creation of more union such as the Nigerian Railway Workers (N.R.W) and the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT).⁸ The NRW was a splinter group from the civil service union. It has been argued that their breakaway from the parent union was due to its moderate and lackadaisical approach to key issues affecting workers and their poor understanding of the core issues of the period. Thus, the railway workers were radicals who wanted to see major/dramatic changes in workers conditions in the colonial civil service. The composition of this group includes skilled workers and artisans who have the capacity to cripple colonial economy via industrial actions.

⁶ See Yesufu, T.N. (1982). *The Dynamics of Industrial Relations: Nigerian Experience*. Ibadan University Press, p.59; Zasha, *ibid*, p.20. The mechanics Mutual Aids Provident and Mutual Improvement Association is said to be the first labour association in Nigeria's pre-colonial history. However, the reason for its formation is shrouded in mystery. While some believe they were formed in response to unequal trade relations during the period of legitimate others traced their origin as far back as the period of the slave trade, a resistance movement I presuppose. There are also other observers who argued that these informal trade associations were influenced by similar groups formed in Sierra Leone.

⁷ Yarom, B. (1998). *A Study of Student Unionism in Tertiary Institution*, Bsc Project submitted to the Department of Political Science, University of Jos, Nigeria.

⁸ Adewumi, *op.cit.* p.30.

The manual or unskilled labourers not included in the NRW established the Marine Daily Paid Workers Union five year later and renamed it Marine Workers Union in 1937. The proliferation of unions during the colonial period was informed by workers discontent with colonial labour wage rates and the general conditions of employment.

It is interesting to note that the year 1931 was a historic moment in Nigeria's labour history. The year saw the extension of trade unions to the private domain in furtherance of the wellbeing of workers in all sectors of the economy and the peoples of the country at large. This event was the inauguration of the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), an amalgam of Lagos Union of Teachers formed in 1925 and the Association of Headmasters of Ijebu Schools formed in 1926.⁹ The NUT was established in defense of non-public workers who had long suffered exploitation in the hands of colonial masters and their agents in the private sector. Their emergence and registration followed the colonial government's directives which made clear the procedural requirements for collective bargaining with employers of labour of which registration was the most important of all the requirements. This development led the rapid registration of 41 unions who had a total membership of 1717, 521 soon after the promulgation of the follow up trade union ordinance of 1938 which re-emphasized the stated requirement of 1931. Some of the unions that registered aside the ones that have been highlighted were the Post and Telegraph Workers Union, the Nigerian Marine and African Workers Union, Public Workers Department Union¹⁰ etc. What remained a hindrance to the actualisation of their aims and objectives within the colonial state was the absence of a central body that could integrate the interests of all the unions into a whole since all the unions pursued their separate goals except in areas where their interests coincided with those of other unions.

It was against this background that the first central trade union in Nigeria, the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUCN) was formed and had T.A. Bankole and M.A. Tokumbo as president and Secretary General respectively. The newly formed central body added impetus to the struggle against colonial domination and exploitation and facilitated the formation of the Federated Trade Union which mobilised support for the 1945 general strike against the Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) and racial discrimination in remuneration, promotion and other

⁹ *Ibid*, p.35.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

benefits in the civil service. The strike action which involved 17 unions and two hundred thousand workers led by Michael Imoudu was a turning point in Nigeria's labour history and relations and added momentum to the anti-colonial struggles that culminated in the independence of Nigeria in 1960.

The 1945 general strike was seminal because it inspired another trade unions action against British imperialism in Nigeria. The most important was the one at Enugu in the defunct Eastern Nigeria. The Enugu colliery strike action of 1949, led by the African Mineworkers Union at Iva valley, Udi and Obwetti over poor wages, working conditions and unfair dismissals and the protest that followed the killing of 20 coal miners and one bystander¹¹ only heightened the anti-colonial struggles against British colonisation. It is also in records that the major nationalists who fought for Nigeria's independence were either trade unionist or had affiliations with the major political parties who were at the forefront of the country's nationalist struggles and negotiated independence with the British government. Trade unions commitment and contributions to Nigeria's right to self-determination was also extended to other African countries under the yoke of colonial rule. For instance, they commendably supported South Africa's apartheid liberation movements with 2.5% of their wages for several months as part of their voluntary support to the defunct South African Solidarity Fund, this is in addition to numerous assistance they have rendered to other challenged trade unions in other African countries and the world over.¹² This kind gestures have attracted international solidarity support for them in their times of great needs.

S.O Osoba has identified a number of interrelated factors that brought about the sudden transition from passive trade unionism to the combative approach of the 1940's. The factors included but are not limited to the following: the strong and dynamic leadership of Michael Imoudu, the pan-Nigerian milieu of aggressive nationalism, vibrant journalism led by Nnamdi Azikiwe and the skyrocketing inflation Nigerian workers suffered during and after the Second

¹¹ Agunbiade, T. (2021). Remembering Margaret Ekpo and the Enugu Strike Massacre. www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/12/12/remembering-margaret-ekpo-and-enugu-strike-massacre. Retrieved on 13/10/22.

¹² Sunmonu, H.A. (1996). Trade Unionism in Nigeria: Challenges for the 21st Century. A Keynote Address Delivered at the Conference Centre, Ogere, Nigeria, 23-24, September. P.p. 17-21.

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World War.¹³ From the foregoing, it is clear that colonial laws which discriminated against the host countries in employment, especially in the highest echelon as well as the general working conditions of workers in both private and public sectors were responsible for rise, growth and development of unions in Nigeria and other colonised African countries. It is therefore the contention of this paper that trade unions in colonial Nigeria were resistance movements who systematically, strategically, painstakingly and courageously worked for the emancipation of Nigeria from colonial domination and exploitation.

The fact of the matter is, colonial rule was not a charitable organization, neither was it a humanitarian adventure designed to better the lives of the colonised people; it was established and consolidated to serve European uncontrollable penchant for global hegemony through regular supply of raw materials and cheap labour that benefitted their industries at home at the expense of colonised territories. It is safe to observe that trade unions in Nigeria today are not just the brain child of colonial unequal relationships and exchanges but also the colonised peoples' equal and opposite reaction to colonial rape, banditry, marginalisation and outright disregard for the ethics and ethos of industrial relations.

TRADE UNIONS DEVELOPMENT IN POST-COLONIAL NIGERIA

Although colonialism is a thing of the past, no one is likely to dispute the fact that its legacies live on in colonised countries since their attainment of independence due to the development of pseudo-democratic structures that negate the essence of liberal democracy and its dividends as well as the frequent military intervention remotely connected to the impact of Africa's colonial past.

Soon after the attainment of independence in 1960, labour laws were drastically and swiftly amended to meet the postcolonial needs of Nigerian workers. This was as a result of the Nigerianisation policy introduced in the first republic aimed at putting an end to the colonial era discrimination in the civil service, which relegated Nigerian workers to unattractive positions.¹⁴ The policy succeeded in promoting Nigerian workers to areas that were hitherto the exclusive reserve of the whites and also elevated them to managerial roles for the first time in the country's

¹³ Osoba, S.O. *op.cit*, P.p. 50-55.

¹⁴ Wogu, A. (1979). *Trade Union Movement in Africa: Promise and Performance*. London: C. Hurst and Company, London, p. 14.

labour history. This positive development brought to an end combative trade unionism and ushered in a period of relative peace, stability and silence.

The period 1960 to 1976 witnessed internal wrangling and conflicts within Nigerian trade unions over the question of their affiliation with the All Nigerian Trade Union Federation (ANTUF) which was formed in 1956.¹⁵ The disagreements within the unions resulted in divisions and disunity which affected their cohesion and performance. The reason for the split has been interpreted differently. While some scholars opined that the split was externally masterminded by the government, others argued that it was an attempt by the leadership of both ANTUF and TUCN to impose the agreement they reached in 1959 on affiliation with the International Conference of the Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) on their members that led to the crises.

In 1962, ANTUF and TUCN agreed to consider the views of Nigerian workers on the affiliation question through election in order to deescalate tensions in the interest of all parties. The outcome of the election favoured affiliation to ICFTU and the African Trade Union Congress but was rejected by the leadership of the TUCN and their supporters who felt they were not bound by it.¹⁶ Their dissatisfaction with the outcome led to the establishment of the Independent United Labour Congress (IULC), which later split into four groups- the Nigerian Trade Union Congress (NTUC), United Labour Congress (ULC), the Nigerian Labour Unity Front and the Workers Council. Unity was however achieved at the burial of the former treasurer of the Unity Labour Congress (ULC) Mr. J.A. Oduleye, which is now popularly known as the *open cemetery declaration*.¹⁷ However, the refusal of the Yakubu Gowon led administration to register the proposed Nigerian Labour Congress on the ground that it was set up devoid of member's participation and adequate representation constituted another setback for trade union movements in post-colonial Nigeria. This unpleasant development was followed by a decree that banned international affiliations outside of the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) and the International Labour Organization (ILO).¹⁸

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.15.

¹⁷ See www.ifctu.com.

¹⁸ *Ibid*

It is important to note that these challenges did not stop the growth of unions in Nigeria. For instance, a total of 983 unions had been registered in 1976¹⁹ though majority of these wage earners, self-employed craftsmen, employer's organisation and petty traders unions were ineffective due to weak leadership and the absence of disturbing issues. It is equally pertinent to make clear the fact that in spite of the internal crises that brewed among the unions of this period and threatened their success, they had moments of cooperation and joint actions where their interests aligned. A good example was the setting up of the Joint Action Committee in 1963 to exert pressure on government to increase wages. The June 1964 organised strike action which paralysed the national economy for 13 days and the campaign for wage increase led by the United Committee of Central Labour organizations (UCCLO) which resulted in general wage increase for workers on the recommendation of a commission of inquiry led by chief Adebo were other examples of their joint actions.²⁰

The establishment and inauguration of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), an umbrella organisation for all trade unions in Ibadan on the 28th of February 1978 and the election of Hassan Summonu as president and Aliyu Musa Dangiwa as General Secretary marked a new dawn in the history of trade unionism in Nigeria. Sources have shown that NLC emerged after the successful merger of the Nigerian Trade Union Congress (NTUC), Labour Unity Front (LUF), the Nigerian Workers Council and the ULC.²¹ The newly established central body has played and is still playing a leading role in the advancement of workers interest in Nigeria.

Although the reformist regime of Olusegun Obasanjo which lasted from 1976 to 1979 carried out restructuring which ushered in more unions such as the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian University (ASUU), National Union of Nigeria Students (NUNS), Nigerian Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers, Petroleum and Natural Gas (NUPENG), Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSEN), Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN) and many others not mentioned, the government was noted to have persecuted trade unions in order to scare them off. Successive military regimes followed suit. The National Organ of the NLC was against this

¹⁹ Abdul-Hamid, T. (2002). Trade Unionism in Nigeria. Zaria, Department of public administration, A.B.U (M.B.A thesis). P.p. 75-80.

²⁰ Momoh, A. (1977). The Legacy of Military Rule over Democratisation Process in Jibrin Ibrahim (ed) Expanding Democratic Space in Nigeria. CODESRIA, Dakar, P.49.

²¹ *Ibid.*

background dissolved first in 1988 by General Ibrahim Babangida and secondly in 1994 under the General Sani Abacha led draconian regime.²² It therefore suffices to argue that trade unions had their darkest moments in Nigeria during the period of military dictatorship as labour leaders were frequently arrested and their meetings also frequently disrupted to intimidate members and their leaders, most importantly.

The regime of Olusegun Obasanjo for instance revived the Yakubu Gowon's era prescribed no work no pay and banned the central labour union based on trade union disputes decree of 1977. Also, in response to student's demands for reforms on the campus, improved welfare and opposition to increase in the costs of feeding, he was said to have ordered the killing of 13 students in Nigerian institutions of higher learning and banned the National Union of Nigeria Students (NUNS)²³, the apex union for university students at the time. Similarly, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of General Ibrahim Babangida banned some unions considered to be troublesome and subordinated those perceived to be moderate in their operations. ASUU and the central students' union of universities were banned on two separate occasions by the regime for opposing the regime's economic blueprint, SAP, which advocated economic liberalisation and privatisation and brought about a fall in the standard of living of their members. The NLC was also banned in 1988 due to its mobilisation of other unions in its campaign for an upward review of wages to cushion the effects of inflation in the country.

The political repression of unions continued into the 90's and only subsided after the return to civil rule on the 29th of May 1999. For instance, the oil union workers strike of 1993 led by Frank Kokori of the NUNPENG and Milton Dabibi of the PENGASSEN which lasted for twenty two days and spread to other sectors of the economy resulted in the arrest and detention of many labour leaders without trial. Both leaders were arrested and detained for several years without trials and were denied access to the services of lawyers despite their deteriorating health conditions.²⁴ This was after the four years jail term they had served before 1993. The strike action was as a result of Abacha's poor handling of the economy which resulted in the closure of

²² Olukoshi, A. (1995). The Politics of Structural Adjustment in Nigeria, in Olukoshi et al (ed) between Liberalisation and oppression. CODESRIA: Dakar, P.176.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See Nigeria after Abacha: Free the Detainees, Free the Unions. Retrieved from <https://www.industrialunion.org/archive/icem/Nigeria-after-abacha-free-the-detainees-free-the-unions> (10/1/22).

many factories and impacted the economy negatively as the cost of living soar very high and unemployment increased at an alarming rate and brought untold hardship on Nigerians.

In addition to this, the labour unions were displeased by the Sani Abacha's coup de 'tat which overthrew the Interim National Government (ING) led by Ernest Shonekan after the annulment of June 12 1993 presidential election presumed to have been won by the late MKO Abiola who was equally detained by the same military dictator for demanding that his stolen mandate be returned to him.²⁵

The strike badly affected Nigerians who could not afford the inflated price of gas and resorted to Kerosene stoves which they were not comfortable with due to its inconvenience. To make matters worse, banks and many business were shut down. The result was that many Nigerians across the country became broke. In solidarity with the oil workers, NLC, under the leadership of Paschal Bafyan declared a general strike in the month of August, 1994, which was halted by the regime and led to the dismissal of its leadership and the arrest of its prominent leaders considered to be threats to the brutal regime. Nevertheless, popular companies such as Nestle foods, Cadbury, Coca-Cola, Nigerian Breweries, Dunlop, etc. either slashed the scope of their operations or shut down temporarily due to the fuel crisis engendered by the strike. Given the fact that the strike action was pervasive and touched almost every sector of the economy, the then Minister of State in Petroleum and Mineral Resources, Dan Etete reported that the country lost 465,000 barrels of oil per day in sales because operations were almost grounded to a halt in key terminals.²⁶ As a result of the fact the country could no longer meet its citizen's oil demands,

²⁵ June 12 was a critical period in Nigeria's history. The year saw the country's failed transition program initiated by the then Head of State, General Ibrahim Babangida. After his eight years of military dictatorship, he decided to step down for the enthronement of democracy. A decision well received by Nigerians resulted in the establishment of two political parties; the Social Democratic Party (SDP) which had MKO Abiola as its standard bearer and National Republican Convention (NRC) with Tofa Bashir as its flag bearer. The election which was adjudged to be free and fair by international observers, was annulled by the Head of State before official results were released. The presumed winner, MKO Abiola alongside people from his region, the western part of Nigeria and trade unions protested the annulment but all to no avail. Nigeria's unity and corporate existence were threatened. The Head of state instead set up an interim government which had Ernest Shonekan as chairman. Within three months of the ING, General Sani Abacha toppled the government and ushered the country into what observers have described as the darkest moment in Nigeria's history. Activists, critics, opinion leaders and dissidents were either mercilessly murdered or incarcerated until his much celebrated sudden death on the 8th of June, 1998, which led to the emergence of his deputy, Abdulsalam Abubakar as Head of State. He graciously released Abacha's political prisoners and successfully transitioned Nigeria into its fourth republic on May 29, 1999.

²⁶ ILO (1998). *World Labour Report 1997-1998*. Geneva, International Labor Organisation, P.p.40-45.

bunkering, a process which involves the stealing of oil became the order of the day. Unfazed by the popular movement demanding a return to democracy, the dictator not only declared himself the absolute ruler of Nigeria, he also mounted tremendous pressure on the Nigeria people which enabled him crushed their resolve as the strike action was called off to ease the tense situation and its attendant effects on all citizens and Nigeria's national life.

Although the ICFTU and the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers Union (ICEM) pressed very hard for the release of imprisoned trade union leaders and even petitioned the United Nations International labour office to investigate the issue and perhaps leverage on the government, the Nigeria government repeatedly frustrated their effort and turned a deaf ear to their petition despite Amnesty International's consideration of both men as prisoners of conscience.²⁷ It is important to note that the unjustly imprisoned union leaders were only released after the death of Sani Abacha by the transitory regime of General Abdulsalam Abubakar.

Hence, it is apt to argue that the history of trade unions in Nigeria from the colonial period to 1998 was largely characterised by repression, subordination, alienation and gross exploitation of the working class. Its leaders suffered inordinate and unconstitutional use of the state's monopoly of the use of violence. But in spite of the seemingly insurmountable challenges that they faced within the period analysed, trade unions in Nigeria have undoubtedly played a critical and a major role in Nigeria's anti-colonial struggles during the era of colonial rule and the democratisation process of the country since independence. This could be seen in their determined and inexhaustible attempts to check the increasing intolerance and maladministration of the state throughout Nigeria's history of colonialism and military dictatorships. Their constructive criticisms and fearless protests in precarious situations were fundamentally remarkable, memorable, praiseworthy and invaluable in the triumph of democracy over dictatorship in Nigeria.

No one is likely to dispute the fact that trade unions perform better under a democratic setting. The reason is not farfetched; constitutional governments provide for and respect citizens' rights to freedom of speech, association, assembly and peaceful demonstration and protest. Therefore,

²⁷ *Ibid.*

the working conditions of Nigerian workers have improved since the return to civil rule in 1999, which remains uninterrupted. This period of relative peace and tranquility in Nigeria's labour relations started during Nigeria's last military regime of Abdulsalam Abubakar which lasted from 9 June 1998 to 29 May 1999 and considerably improved under the successive democratic governments after him. This does not in any way suggest that trade unions were without challenges in the given period. What is unequivocal is the fact it was far better in relation to their past. The period brought appreciable increase in salaries, allowances and standard of living for workers, with little or no antagonism and persecution as was the case under colonial and military dictatorships. It is important to note that the most vibrant unions in the country between 1999 and 2022 are NLC, the central labour union of the country and ASUU, the major union of the country's academia, also under the NLC. The two unions have on so many occasions lock horn with the Nigerian government which often makes concessions that improves the lots of all government employees at state and federal levels. Unlike other unions in the country that focus almost entirely on their specific members needs and aspirations, NLC and ASUU have been able to achieve a lot within the period because of their effective organization, high level articulation of workers interests, dynamic leadership, systematic enlightenment and education of Nigerian workers across all government departments and their indefatigable confrontations with governments whenever agreements reached through negotiations and renegotiations are reneged.

To this end, industrial actions, strikes in particular, have been one of their most effective tools in driving home their demands. Between 1999 and 2022, several unions, especially the above mentioned ones have declared strike actions which exerted pressure on the government to make concessions in the interest of economic stability and the overall progress of the country. The economic unrests that result from the numerous strike actions led president Olusegun Obasanjo to split the NLC into two in 2002 (NLC and TUC)²⁸ because of his unfounded allegations that unions were acting against the laws that created them. The schism, which reduced the number of trade unions under the leadership of NLC, no doubt, reduced its power but failed to break its resolve to continue the advancement of worker's interest across the length and breadth of the country. Similarly, ASUU, which has been on strike for about 8 months in protest of government's poor funding of federal universities, failed university revitalization program and

²⁸ See <http://allafrica.com/stories/200406281012.html>.

poor salaries has also fallen victim to the state's divide and rule strategy of undermining the strength of union's collective actions. For instance, the Congress of university Academics (CONUA), ASUU rival, which claimed to have met all requirements for registration, has been registered alongside the Nigerian Association of Medical and Dental Lecturers in Academics.²⁹ This is after the government's failed attempt at using the industrial court of the country to force the striking lecturers back to the classroom after the activation of the 'no work, no pay' clause but all to no avail. The attempt to force the striking lecturers back to the classroom without addressing their legitimate concerns is a sad development in the history of Nigeria's labour movement and democratic governance and also a reminiscence of Nigeria's dark past under dictatorial governments.

CONCLUSION

Nigerian trade unions have undergone a long, complex and difficult process since its establishment in 1912, which current unions can draw lessons from for both the present and future. To this end, the history of modern Nigeria is incomplete without an appreciation of the multi-faceted and sustained contributions of trade unions in both colonial and post-colonial periods. Its doggedness and constant representation of the oppressed people by the colonial masters and their agents in the private sectors made them an agent of change and transformation that led to the birth, growth and development of the Nigerian nation-state. Their continued vibrant activism since independence in the interest of democratic governance as against tyranny which stripped them of their labour rights, freedom of assembly and expression, and landed many of their leaders in jail and others killed has secured an eternal place for them in the annals of Nigerian history. But in order to become stronger and better, they need to become more organized at all levels, select able, dynamic and charismatic leaders who are good mobilisers and disciplined, train and retrain their members to know their rights and be willing to defend them when violated, source for more funds to enable them embark on enlightenment campaign capable of disorienting and disarticulating members of the public from the wide held notion that unions are self-centered, self-seeking, entirely divorced from national interest. It is also very important

²⁹ Federal Government Registers Two New University Unions in Bid to Split ASUU (2022).
<http://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2022/10/04/fg-registers-two-new-university-unions-in-bid-to-split-asuu/>
retrieved on 13/10/2022.

that the NLC works very hard to facilitate the development of unions in private sectors and integrate them into the mainstream of trade unionism so that decisions reached with government can be extended to workers in the private sectors who are still victims of employer's dictatorship in Nigeria. The absence of this partnership has left employees in private sectors with little or no right and at the mercy of employers of labour. This has to change if the dignity of labour and the protection and advancement of labour rights are to be enforced at all levels in Nigeria. Finally, trade unions in Nigeria and Africa in general should be conscious of the fact that their governments have come to terms with the fact that they have come to stay and can no longer be ignored. Hence, the new strategy is to win them over through all available corrupt means and exert ideological pressure aimed tearing them apart.

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