

# Personalities and labour activism in Nigeria: the contributions of Michael Imuodu and Adams Oshiomhole

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## Abstract

The role of individuals as the locomotive of history and labour activism is well stressed in Marxist perspective of social change, which is anchored on the belief that vibrant and articulate labour leadership has often produced radical reactions and resistance to oppressive regimes and maladministration. This fact sheds light on the roles played by Michael Imoudu and Adams Oshiomhole in the struggles for national liberation and the advancement of the welfare of the working class and the masses of the Nigerian state through their selfless labour activism, organization of series of national strikes and mass protests that sometimes exposed them to risks and state brutality. This article offers a historical reflection of the roles played by both Imoudu and Oshiomhole in the history of labour unionism and activism in Nigeria and interrogates the impact of socio-economic forces and the consciousness of a humble background as indigenes of Edo minority group in Nigeria and how this helped to galvanize their relentless struggle for the enthronement of justice, equity and wellbeing for the helpless workers in Nigeria. It argues that both Imoudu and Oshiomhole were very important in creating the necessary impetus among the working class in their struggle against oppressive and exploitative socio-economic and political conditions in the Nigerian state.

## Keywords

Personalities, Labour Unionism, Activism, Nigeria, Michael Imoudu, Adams Oshiomhole

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Every time it has pleased God to place me in any position of authority, I have always exercised power in the interest and on behalf of the poor and the weak -Adams Aliu Oshiomhole. (in Egunyanga, December 15, 2008)

## Introduction

Scholars of labour relations and socio-political analyses have different views on the role of individuals in the advancement of society. For instance, both Hegel and Foucault differ slightly on their views that idea, not man, is the locomotive of history. Specifically, Hegel developed a complex theory in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1807, which bases the conception of history on dialectics: the negative (wars, etc.) was conceived by Hegel as the motor of history. (Clifford 1999, p.1) He argued that history is a constant process of dialectic clash, with each thesis encountering an opposing idea or event in form of antithesis, and then a synthesis. (Clifford 1999, pp.1-3)

On the other hand, Foucault's argument, which has been classified under German Idealism, puts forth a view of history which in many ways turns Hegel's views inside out, and in so doing anticipates the historical erasure of man. (Clifford 1999, p.1) However, despite their differences, both Hegel and Foucault offered a view of history which effaces man as the privileged agent of historical movement, as both maker and writer of history. On the opposite of these two is the idea of Karl Marx, which places man at the centre of change. In fact, in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels urged workers to unite and overthrow oppressive capitalist regimes that hinder the welfare of workers through their ultra fascist tendencies. (Sabirov 1987, pp. 122-137; Marx and Engels, 1978) Marx was convinced that unlike Hegel, philosophers had hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways but the point, however, was to change it, thus giving credence to the primacy of individuals as locomotive of history and agents of socio-economic, political and intellectual change in society. Both Imoudu and Oshiomhole find relevance in the light of the latter analysis.

Although writers such as Oyemakinde (1974, pp.541-561), Cohen (1977, pp. 345-362), and Cohen (1970, pp. 303-308) have documented some of the contributions of Imoudu and his resistance to oppressive measures and policies of government against the working class and the masses of the Nigerian state during the colonial era, no particular work has attempted to compare his activities with a latter generation of labour activists. This article therefore fills a gap in the comparative study of the contributions of Imoudu and Oshiomhole as labour activists in Nigeria's labour history and social movements.

It is important to start by stressing that both Imoudu and Oshiomhole pursued the spirit and letter of what was contained in the memorandum of the Supreme Council of Nigerian Workers, which stated *inter alia* that:

As an essential part of the economic life of this country, every workman must be given a minimum just wage. This should be such as to enable him to buy proper food to keep himself and family in good physical health, to live in descent healthy homes....Education must be provided for the children....Added to this the workman's wages should allow him to enjoy lawful recreations and a few of the luxuries of life regarded as necessary in particular places. Old age must be provided for so the workman's remuneration must guarantee that; if he is thrifty, he is in a position to lay aside a little for the time when he can no longer work. (Lindsay, June 1999)

In line with the message of the charter of the workers, Imoudu, Oshiomhole and other labour activists since the colonial period interrogated governmental policies and programmes and offered the well-articulated resistance when necessary. In the later part of this work, an attempt is made to draw a connection between Imoudu and Oshiomhole in the struggle by the labour movement to fight oppressive and exploitative regimes in Nigeria. The article also discusses the similarities in the strategies employed by both men and the factors that ensured their success in the quest to ensure workers' welfare, equity and justice in Nigeria.

## **Background History of Imoudu and Oshiomhole**

Michael Imoudu is acclaimed labour leader 'Number One' in Nigeria, due largely to his unprecedented labour activism and radical unionism. These qualities did not emanate from any major educational background and training. Indeed, Michael Aitokhaimen Omnibus Imoudu had a humble beginning, which apparently did not give him enough opportunity to attend the best school in Nigeria that would have sufficiently prepared him for the onerous task that labour activism later thrust on him during the colonial era. But the circumstances surrounding his birth and childhood did not hinder his rise to prominence with respect to vibrant and articulate labour activism.

Michael Imoudu was born in 1902 in Oke-Old, in Ora Clan of present Owan West Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. He was possibly a precocious child, which explains why his parents decided to send him to a formal school despite their poor status in a community that was largely rural in his days. (Ogbomo 1997; Harunah 2003, pp. 2-70; Bradbury 1964, p. 90; Ogedengbe 1992) Formal education was a privilege and not a right in Owanland during the time of Imoudu's birth, although children and wards of church workers and those of colonial Native Authority's personnel had more chances of gaining admission to the few available schools in the area and its environs. (Osiki 2008)

Young Imoudu had his early education at various places, including Government School, Ora, Roman Catholic School, Onitsha, Roman Catholic School, Agbor and Government School, Agbor. (Nwachuku and Taiwo, July 23, 2005) The reason for his unstable educational background could have been due to the nature of his father's career as an employee of the colonial system or that of the church by virtue of which he was transferred from one station to another. (Ojehonmon, 23 March, 2008) In any case, those events and circumstances helped to shape Michael's disposition to life and the feeling toward the plight of the working class in a compassionate way. He also had the opportunity of getting contacts with several of the cultures of Nigeria and Nigerians from a broader perspective unlike many of his contemporaries who hardly stepped out of their localities. Therefore, his movement from one place to another helped to toughen and prepare him for the job of a die-hard unionist cum activist.

Imoudu started his formal working career as a lineman in the Department of Post and Telecommunications before moving to the Nigerian Railway Corporation. (Oyemakinde 1974, pp.541-561; Cohen 1977, pp. 345-362; Cohen 1970, pp. 303-308) It was why in the employment of the Nigerian Railway Corporation that he made his highest impact on the labour scene and climbed to national limelight.

The story of Adams Aliu Oshiomhole is not different from that of Imoudu in terms of relatively poor background and upbringing. He was born on April 4, 1953 in Iyamoh, a little community near Auchi in Edo State, Nigeria. Like Imoudu, Adams did not have the privilege of attending any of the best schools in the country. He was not born with a silver spoon, as his parents were peasant farmers and so could not afford to train him up to the university level. He left home as a

teenager to take up a job in one of the textile factories located in Kaduna, a major city in northern Nigeria. Viewed then as a 'sweat industry', the young Adams was considered 'unfit' to cope with the vicissitudes of factory work despite the fact that he demonstrated enough practical evidence of his determination to wring a livelihood from hard work. His activism became developed and sharpened because of his experiences at the factory in Kaduna. (Sahara, 2008) For instance, in 1969, he was sacked by a textile company where he got his first employment because the manager of the company considered him 'too short and frail to endure the reality of factory labour'. (Sahara, 2008) Sahara (2008) also remarked that 'this first hand contact with arbitrariness and cruelty shaped his (Adams') perception that justice and fairness are not always on display in the work place.' To Adams Oshiomhole, this was a big challenge that was later to inspire and spur him to vibrant labour activism in the interest of less privileged members of the working class in particular and the masses in general. The incidence inspired him against situations of injustice, authoritarianism, discriminations, brutality and all other negative attitudes of the bourgeoisie class in all forms against the proletariat in line with the inspiring urge by both Marx and Engels that workers should unite because the history of all hitherto society has always been the history of class struggle. (Sabirov, 1987, pp.122-137)

Unlike Imoudu, Oshiomhole later acquired higher qualifications as a part of his self-development programme while in active labour unionism. Thus, he gained admission to the Ruskin College, Oxford, where he studied labour relations, specializing in economics and industrial relations. As a senior labour leader in Nigeria, he also had the opportunity of attending the elitist National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, Kuru, near Jos, Plateau State. He was also at the prestigious Kennedy School of Government, Howard University, United States of America.

### **The Struggles of Imoudu and Oshiomhole**

Marx and Engels demonstrated in their works that the proletariat was not merely a suffering class, but a fighting class and society's consistent revolutionary force, which held the keys to the future. (Sabirov 1987, p.122) The consciousness of the working class is sometimes awakened by existing socio-economic systems that allow the powerful members of society 'to constitute themselves into the dominant, hegemonic and ruling political authority, or the state, creating the necessary appurtenances to reproduce the existing structure, expand and protect their interests and at the same time suppress and repress the interests of the deprived, lower strata in society'. (Onyekpe 2001, pp. 129-130; Engels 1972, pp.3-15) The colonial system in Nigeria represented exploitation and manipulation. Imoudu was fired by the colonial dialectics that exploited African workers on the one hand and encouraged European workers on the other hand. In the post-colonial era, he was motivated by his unflinching support for the liberation of the masses of Nigeria to participate in rallies, demonstrations and even to join like minds to form a labour oriented political party to help articulate the aspirations of the masses and wrestle power from capitalist inclined political parties of the period.

Imoudu was elected first president of the Nigeria Union of Railwaymen in 1940. Like in the case of Adams Oshiomhole's appointment about three decades later, the election of Imoudu started an era of coordinated and firebrand militancy that maximally confronted the government of the day all in the interest of the working class and the general public. (Oke 2008) Olusanya (1980, pp. 545-569) attributed the rise of Imoudu to the economic impact of the Second World War, which subjected a lot of people to all sorts of hardship, making them to desire a change in the status quo. After his successful organization and mobilization of the working class, Imoudu was elected president of the All-Nigeria Trade Union Federation from 1947 to 1958. He was also the first president of the first Nigeria Labour Congress.

Another major turning point in the life and labour of Imoudu occurred in September 1974, at the Apena Cemetery, Lagos where a group of labour activists at the burial of a deceased labour leader, J. Oduleye, one time treasurer of the United Labour Congress (ULC), made a declaration to harmonise the major trade unions in Nigeria to form what was described the second Nigeria Labour Congress, the first having been formed in 1950 after the success recorded in 1945. (Madunagu 2008, p.2) The famous Apena (Cemetery) Declaration united trade unions such as the United Labour Congress (ULC), the Nigerian Trade Union Congress (NTUC), the Nigerian Workers Council (NWC), and the Labour Unity Front (LUF), which had developed as a result of internal squabbles within the labour movement. It was signed by labour leaders such as Imoudu, Goodluck Wahab, S.U. Basse, A.J. Oluwese, H.P. Adebola, J.O. James, R.A. Ramos, F.O.A. Odeyemi and J.U. Akpan. (Madunagu 2008, p.2) The development further brought Imoudu to national limelight.

Oshiomhole's activism started in earnest in 1971 when his voice dwarfed those of his older colleagues at the Arewa Textile Factory. In that year, Oshiomhole distinguished himself as a man of the people when he successfully mobilised the workers to resist oppressive policies. Having made an inroad into labour unionism, Oshiomhole became a full time activist and unionist in 1975 as an active member of the textile union championing the cause of the working class. In 1982, he was appointed the General Secretary, Chief Executive of the National Union of Textile and Garment Workers Union of Nigeria. He extended his unionism beyond the textile industry and in 1988 he was appointed Deputy President of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), then the umbrella body of trade union in Nigeria. (Sahara 2008) He rose to the apex of the NLC in 1999 when he was appointed president of NLC, a position he held until 2007 after two terms in office. Oshiomhole's numerous positions in trade union offered him the opportunity to champion the interest of the working class. This explains why he was once described as 'a product of the Nigerian liberation struggle (which started) from the long chains of the Michael Imoudu, Nduka Eze, Goodluck Wahab, Raji Abdullah, Margaret Ekpo, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Said Zungur, Gambo Sawaba, and others.' (Sahara 2008)

## **Comparison between Imoudu and Oshiomhole**

Both Imoudu and Oshiomhole had several things in common in their struggles for the welfare of workers and as activists and unionists. Besides the fact that both men originated from the old Kukuruku Division of Edo State, Nigeria, they were from poor background. The parents of both activists lived a frugal life style that instilled in them the love of the masses and the desire to liberate the less privileged members of society.

Secondly, both Imoudu and Oshiomhole possessed uncanny strengths of militancy and radical activist dimension to labour movement in Nigeria. This is reminiscent of the struggles of the likes of Oba Ovonramwen of Benin, King Jaja of Okpobo, King Nana of Itsekiri, and others from the South-south or Niger Delta of Nigeria. Indeed, Oshiomhole prided himself as 'grandson' of Imoudu not only because they both hailed from the same state and geo-political zone, but because of the similarities in the nature of their militancy and radicalism. (Nwachuku and Taiwo July 23, 2005, p.1) A few examples will suffice to illustrate this point. There was an occasion when Imoudu challenged the then chairman of the Nigerian Railway Corporation, Sir Ralph Emerson for neglecting the welfare of workers and being insensitive to their plight. At a meeting called between labour and management to discuss the way forward between the two groups, Emerson was said to have left and delegated his deputy to continue from where he stopped after giving the opening remarks. Available evidence indicates that Imoudu immediately got up, called the meeting to an end and demanded Emerson's return before the proceeding

could continue. (Oke, 2008) When Emerson eventually returned to the meeting, Imoudu subjected him to a severe tongue-lashing that was close to humiliating the European official.

Imoudu's role in the 1940s crisis was considered legendary going by his zeal and fearless disposition to the issues that led to the crisis. Olukoju agreed that the era of Imoudu's leadership of the labour movement 'was one of radical nationalism and labour militancy, both elements being exemplified by the career of Imoudu.' (Olukoju 1997, pp.340, 337-366) He was able to lead over 3000 workers of the railway union to storm the colonial government house without much consideration for what would befall him. For that brave act, it is generally agreed among labour historians such as Abiodun (1997, pp. 113-136) and Iji (1997, pp.74-88) that Imoudu played prominent and pioneering contributions to the development of labour unionism and activism in Nigeria because he was fearless and resolute. Olusanya (1980, p.561) described him as 'a believer in positive action... (and one who) provided the nationalist movement with moral, financial and physical support...'

Oshiomhole was as fearless as Imoudu in all respects during preparations for national strikes. Like Imoudu, he was quite aware that with low wages, the working class would not be insulated from the disastrous effects of competitive capitalism. He believed that the wealth of the few would not be safe in conditions where majority of the people live in abject poverty. He also canvassed for a liberal system that would take into cognizance the impact of government policies and programmes on workers and the masses of the country. In line with the Marxist stipulations that workers should unite and fight against bad policies and programmes of government, both Imoudu and Oshiomhole mobilised workers and got maximum support from them. For instance, the leadership of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) between 1999 and 2007 fought against fuel price hikes, which was a hallmark of the Olusegun Obasanjo administration. Oshiomhole pursued his strategy in Imoudu's fashion of uncompromising patriotism to the extent that Obasanjo administration felt threatened and was forced to accuse the leadership of the NLC of attempting to form a parallel government. (Egunyanga 2008) In fact, in a nationwide broadcast, the former president remarked that 'the leadership of the NLC has engaged in a series of subversive activities, deliberately misrepresenting government policies to the public and to its members and using every opportunity to blackmail the government and others who hold contrary opinions or views.' (Egunyanga 2008) The announcement was followed with harassment, brutality and arrest of labour leaders. This did not deter Oshiomhole and his supporters. For example, when six trade union activists were arrested in one of the nationwide strikes and protests organized by the NLC under Oshiomhole and charged to court for 'criminal conspiracy and inciting public disturbance and for allegedly picketing at petrol stations', Oshiomhole stood by them and was never deterred by harassment and threats from the government. (Egunyanga 2008) He was reported as saying that the detention was unjust and:

an additional incentive to remind us that Nigeria is far from being a country of justice...that NLC would continue to picket petrol stations until a solution acceptable to all sides was found...unless and until they jail the last man, the picketing will continue. (Egunyanga 2008)

Moreover, both Imoudu and Oshiomhole combined labour unionism with active politics, a trait that distinguished them from many other labour activists in Nigeria. With reference to Imoudu's political posture, Olukoju (1997, p.341) opined that the success of the 1945 general strike 'raised the political profile of Imoudu who became a nationalist leader in his own right'. His political activity was in consonance with the aspirations of the labour movement in Nigeria. Before the attainment of independence in 1960, the organized labour under the leadership of Imoudu and others had reasons to participate in politics because of the connection between politics and

workers' welfare. It can be said that the labour movement was strongly affiliated with the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC), which was later renamed National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) after the independence of Nigeria and the amalgamation of British Cameroon with French Cameroon to form a unified Republic of Cameroon. Specifically, in 1944, the labour movement aligned with the party and one of the outcomes of this union was the success of the general strike of 1945 because the leader of the party, Nnamdi Azikiwe deployed his intellectual, political and media resources to support and project the cause of the striking workers.

Imoudu was classified among politicians such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Herbert Macaulay, others, which Coleman (Coleman 1986, p. 291) termed 'Zimonists'. He was among the NCNC tour of the provinces of Nigeria that started in 1946. Remarking on the tour, Coleman said 'except for frequent tours previously made by governors, it was the first time in the history of Nigeria that large numbers of people were made conscious of Nigerian unity...all the southerners, and many younger northerners, were excited by this dramatic and visible intrusion of nationalism.' (Coleman 1986, p. 291; Olukoju 1997, pp. 337-339) Also, in addition to supporting the NCNC, some workers in 1962 needed a political platform like in the case of Britain to enable them articulate their common interests. This encouraged Imoudu and like-minded activists such as Eskor Toyo to found a short lived Labour Party. (Oke 2008).

During the Second Republic in Nigeria (1979-83), Imoudu was a staunch member of the People's Redemption Party (PRP) along with other radicals such as Aminu Kano and others. The PRP was an ideologically based party with socialist inclinations. When the military struck in 1983 causing a dislocation in the political landscape of the country, Imoudu participated in several rallies held in the 1980s to protest the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of General I.B. Babangida Administration. (Oke 2008)

In the same, Adams Oshiomhole pursued active politics in conjunction with labour activism as part of his belief that the promotion of the welfare of the working class and the general masses of Nigeria are related since leadership directs growth and development. He was among leaders and other like-minds who established the Labour Party prior to the 2007 general elections in Nigeria. (Osiki 2008, p. 67-98; Emordi and Osiki March 2008, pp. 34-52) In 2007, Oshiomhole contested the governorship election in Edo State, Nigeria under the platform of the Action Congress (AC) in an alliance with the Labour Party (L.P); his candidacy got the support of trade union and civil society groups in the state, the political leaning of members notwithstanding. At the end of the election, which was considered massively rigged by the ruling party in the state, the People's Democratic Party (P.D.P), Oshiomhole headed for the court, claiming victory at both the Election Tribunal and the Appeal Court. (Egunyanga, 2008, p. 2) He is currently the governor of Edo State.

Both Imoudu and Oshiomhole were strong mobilisers of human resource. Remarking on the impact of Imoudu on the success of the nationalist movement vis-à-vis labour activism in Nigeria, Oshiomhole submitted that 'the impact of the Nigerian labour movement on the nationalist efforts and the birth of modern Nigeria owed a lot to the meticulous networking and grassroots work pioneered by Imoudu...who stood shoulder to shoulder with the leading nationalist figures, projecting the working class banner in the struggle for independence.' (Nwanchukwu and Taiwo, July 23, 2005). The strong mobilizing prowess of Imoudu was basically hinged on his low profile status and his ability to appeal to the mass of the people. In one of his relationships with market women in Lagos as part of the preparation for the 1945 general strike, when all efforts were needed to make the colonial authority address some of the grievances of the working class, Imoudu demonstrated his rich organisational and mobilising

skills. In a letter to Mrs. Pelewura and Mrs. Langunju, president and vice president of the Women Market Association, Lagos respectively, to seek their support over cost of living allowances, strike actions and moves against the Pullen Price regime, Imoudu appealed to market women and urged them to note that:

The Yoruba have a common adage which says that 'there is nothing that affects the eyes that will not affect the nose'...The monthly income we are earning now is hardly sufficient for our wives to engage in trade and also to cook, much less to buy clothes or pay our children's school fees.... There is no language which the Europeans understand more clearly than the workers should go on strike. We know the implications of this for the people throughout Nigeria....God help us unless we unite our voices to enable the Europeans to increase our monthly pay as they should. It is your co-operation that we seek in this matter and the co-operation of our wives, children, senior and junior siblings and our relatives, many of whom are members of the Women's Marketing Association in Lagos and all its environs. We are asking you to desire a means by which you our mothers can make the white men realize that we their workers did not just descend from heaven, and also that our progress at work is the progress of our people in the markets and in the country; our strike is also your strike. Whatever effects (sic) the eye will also affects the nose, in fact, you, our mothers. God help all of us. (Lindsay June 1999)

It was the effort of Imoudu and others that ensured that the strike lasted for forty four days, paralysed the colonial economy, demystified the colonial authority and helped to prepare Nigeria for independence. Like Lindsay rightly observed, 'scholars have seen the general strikes as a turning point in Nigeria labor history as well as part of a larger movement of African nationalism, in which workers achieved a remarkable degree of class unity, broad segments of the population openly defied the colonial regime, and the government was forced to live up to some of its war-era developmentalist rhetoric.' (Lindsay June 1999). The issue of community support was given prominent position in explaining the success of the strike and the involvement of non-working masses was partly due to the appeal of Imoudu and his comrades.

The issue canvassed by Imoudu and his colleagues exposed the injustice perpetrated by the imperialist colonial authorities against indigenous Nigerian workers. Lindsay's study indicates that racism partly accounted for the differences in the salaries and emoluments paid to European workers in Nigeria. (Lindsay June 1999). According to her:

The small number of Africans holding what were known as 'superior posts' also became eligible for local allowances, but they were paid only three-quarters of the amount that a European received...that Britain's call for 'equality of sacrifice' during the war were hypocritical....1,631 European officials in Nigeria were earning a total of £1,077,390, while 14,866 African civil servants' yearly wages amounted to £998,640. (Lindsay June 1999)

When it was clear that the government was not ready to address the inequity in the system, events preceding the strike were, therefore, propelled by series of agitations from the working class. The workers needed to be treated like their colonial counterparts who enjoyed family allowances. What the working class agitated for between 1941 and 1945 when the strike occurred was simply an adjustment in the salary structure that would accommodate what they called Cost of Living Adjustment (Allowance) (COLA) (Lindsay June 1999; Oyemakinde, 1974, pp. 541-543; Cohen, 1970, pp. 303-305)

The case of Oshiomhole was not different from what obtained during Imoudu's era except that in addition to the support offered by the mass of the Nigerian populace, unprecedented collaborations and supports came the way of labour from the civil society, journalists and the student population. Available evidence indicates that a combination of the efforts of pressure groups involving the NLC, the civil society and the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) drew not only attention to their members but also worked for the goodwill of the larger society. (Abimbola 2003, pp. 39-48) It was in this context that Lagos became the hub of labour activism as it was in the colonial era but this time with higher intensity. Oshiomhole helped to mobilise millions of Nigerians across the country in protest against unpopular government policies. In major resistances in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, security operatives were deployed against Oshiomhole and other labour activists. (Sahara 2008) As the commercial capital of Nigeria and the most intellectually volatile city in Nigeria, Lagos was seen by labour as the window of Nigeria to the outside world and events in the city were used to draw the attention of the government in Abuja to the plight of Nigerians. Oshiomhole, as the president of the NLC made Lagos his strategic base from where guerrilla resistance against unpopular and exploitative government policies and programmes were launched.

It should be added that both Imoudu and Oshiomhole suffered incarcerations from the government as a result of their vibrant and infectious labour activism. Imoudu was arrested in 1943 because of his doggedness in fighting for the welfare of the workers and the generality of Nigerians. He was incarcerated in the Eastern part of the country as a way of weakening the resistance of the working class. In 1945 at the end of the Second World War when events in global politics forced the British government to repeal the wartime security legislation under which labour activists were detained, the government released Imoudu. (Lindsay 1999) His release from prison provided the final impetus for the strike of 1945.

The activism of both Imoudu and Oshiomhole were sometimes considered *ultra vires* by agents of the state. A look at the Criminal Code Act, especially the section on Trade Unionism could give the impression that both Imoudu and Oshiomhole were acting against existing law of the Nigerian state. For instance, section 366, which talks about compelling action by intimidation, stipulates that 'subject to the provisions of the Trade Unions Act, any person who, with intent to prevent or hinder any other person from doing any act which he is lawfully entitled to do, or with intent to compel him to do any act which he is lawfully entitled to do...is guilty of an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment for one year.' (Criminal Code Act (Cap 77), 1990, p. 146) But both labour leaders were convinced that the only language that the Nigerian state understood was for the working class to fight for itself, otherwise workers would have to live and grumble under the exploitative yokes of excruciating state policies and programmes that were antagonistic to the feelings and welfare of the workers. Going to prison or jail was therefore conceived as a part of the sacrifice they would have to pay for their selfless service to the working class.

Imoudu was among leading labour leaders that were banned during the Murtala/Obasanjo regime (1975-1979) following some interference by the government in the affairs of labour because of fear of radicalism within the labour movement. Specifically, in 1978 the administration introduced some reforms, which recommended 'a new trade union structure in the country which will ensure that workers can elect their leaders in accordance with a code of conduct, consistent with the government's overall national programmes of enforcing discipline in all facets of public life.' (Madunagu 2008)

In 1995 the military government led by the maximum ruler, General Sani Abacha hounded oppositions to his government including labour leaders. General Abacha dissolved the NLC and

Oshiomhole as one of the executive members fought the government through guerrilla methods. (Egunyanga 2008) The emergence of democracy in the country in 1999 did not mitigate state aggression against labour activists, but it gave labour the impetus to fight oppressive policies and programmes as recourse could easily be made to the court for possible protection unlike during the military era. Yet, there were cases of human right abuses against Oshiomhole and other labour activists. For instance, in one occasion, agents of the State Security Service and the police dragged Oshiomhole on the tarmac of the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, Abuja. (Sahara 2008) Several times, he was threatened of imprisonment but he, like Imoudu, was never deterred by such state repression.

## Conclusion

The activities of Imoudu and Oshiomhole have demonstrated that human beings are agents of change and motivators of socio-economic and political reengineering in societies. This work has shown that the history of labour unionism in Nigeria can be x-rayed through the eye of the contributions of vibrant and virile labour leaders and activists who at one point produced the catalytic radicalism needed to force oppressive regimes to change anti-people policies. This role was aptly played by both men whose dare-devil gut provided the impetus for labour struggle against unpopular regimes in the 1940s and 2002-2007 respectively.

The article also demonstrated that the limited intellectual attainments of the two labour personalities did not hinder their mobilizing prowess in the struggle against oppressive and exploitative tendencies and as agents of change and revolutionaries. Imoudu lived up to the expectations of the people and that of his name, which literally means 'a strong heart', while Oshiomhole also lived up to his name, which literally means 'God has created everybody to exist'. Both of them were extremely courageous and dogged in their fight for the welfare of workers and the general public. Because of the similarities in their unrelenting struggle for the betterment of the welfare of the workers and the emancipation of the masses of Nigeria, it is safe to affirm that while Michael Aitokhaimen Imoudu remains 'Labour Leader No.1' and 'the father of Nigerian labour activism', Oshiomhole should be seen as 'Labour Leader No. 2' and 'the father of contemporary labour unionism in Nigeria' because he was able to restore whatever credibility and legitimacy that Imoudu and his contemporaries established in trade union history in Nigeria. Lastly, both men displayed uncommon courage, inspiring strengths, commitment, mentoring skills, high capacity to organize, and genuine struggle for the cause of the working class and the oppressed members of the Nigerian society against the predatory and exploitative tendencies of agents of the Nigerian state.

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