

Organised labour and democratic struggles in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of the Nigeria labour movement in the struggles for democratic restoration in Nigeria. The paper shows that the Nigerian labour is a forerunner of socio-economic and pro-democracy struggles in the country, providing the foundation for efflorescence civil society. The paper shows that the state played a key role in reproducing socio-economic and political inequality and generating, in the process, anti-state, anti-hegemonic activity from trade unions and other associational groups. In response to anti-state activities, the state intervened in the internal politics of these organisations. Where necessary, the state invented repressive laws to impose "order". In confronting difficult circumstances created by the repressive state – structural adjustment, retrenchment and militarism – the Nigerian labour movement demonstrated both organisational strength and weakness, whilst also forging difficult alliances in confronting a common enemy – the state.

Introduction

The Nigeria labour movement is often described as the "veteran" of democratic struggle in the country. It spearheaded the struggles, and endured stiff repression from the state, particularly in the early days of the struggle (1970s-1990s) when the state was still under military control. Indeed, the history of Trade Union movement in Nigeria and elsewhere is closely knit with the struggles for democratic values such as human rights, welfare, wage, equal franchise. However, because of its ideological stance as the defender of workers' right, the labour movement is often neglected when it comes to discourses on democratic struggles. This paper aims to rescue the "veteran" image of the Nigeria labour movement in the country's history of democratic struggles.

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The paper will broadly examine the conceptual discourses on civil society, state and democracy. This will be followed by a historical-descriptive analysis of the Nigeria labour movement and democratic struggles. The paper is divided into four broad parts. The second part of the paper deals with conceptual issues. The third part deals with the labour and democratic struggles. The final part offers some conclusive remarks.

Civil Society, state and democracy – conceptual issues

There is need to understand the concepts of the state, civil society and democracy with a view to comprehending the function of structure (state) and agency (civil society) in impacting political ends (democracy). The state is defined as an entity with a defined population, territory and monopoly of sovereignty, elaborate government, security and diplomatic structures arguably capable of providing welfare, security, unity and equity of its citizens. Above all, it is distinguished by its *ideal* attribute of providing a legitimate space for power struggles and, formal structures that lay claims to democratic principles, political participation, etc. Yet in *practice*, such ideal capacities become subject to contestation between and among its leaders and constituent elements – a key focus of this research (Crompton and Scott, 2000). The state is assumed to be represented by the dominant political class and institutional gatekeepers. It is not an abstract term; rather, an objective reality representing specific classes and interests. In its relation with “civil society”, the state is adjudged by the visions and actions of its “gatekeeper” institutions and ruling political classes.

The state is conceived as an institution whose character and behaviour are defined by the conflicting interests and agency of the political beings inhabiting it (see e.g. Beckman 1982; Osoba 1978; Forrest 1987, etc.). Beckman’s thesis, written in the context of power and state-building in Nigeria, seems to convey the key defining character of the state: the state promotes the interest of the ruling class and its metropolitan paymasters – that is, the ruling classes of industrial economies to which the former is beholden (Beckman 1982: 45).² At issue is the fact that the state is first and foremost an agency in the hands of the ruling classes who manipulate it in achieving desired objectives. Thus, phenomena such as democracy and development are at the mercy of dominant, albeit conflicting, political interests of the ruling classes. By implication, given that it represents the interest of ruling political oligarchies, the state is insensitive to the wishes and aspirations of the society. This explains why since independence, state policies only seek to promote the conflicting interests of the ruling class.

On the other hand, the term “civil society” is broadly defined as the participatory space between the formal apparatus of the state and informal settings of families and atomised individuals, where groups emerge to forge associational ties, articulate interests and participate in public affairs. Much has been written on the concept, yet it remains one of the most controversial concepts in social science (see Herbeson, Rothchild and Chazan, 1994; Hearn, 2001). There are debates between “Western” liberal and alternative

² Beckman advanced three sets of arguments, each relevant in its own right, but endorsed the third, holistic, one: (1) the Nigerian state as an organ of domestic bourgeoisie (i.e. the local ruling classes); (2) the Nigerian state as an organ of international capital (i.e. foreign capitalist states, classes and institutions); (3) the Nigerian state as an organ of capital in general. In endorsing the third argument, Beckman notes: ‘while the Nigerian state serves as an organ both for the penetration of international capital and for the emancipation of the domestic bourgeoisie, it cannot be reduced to either. Nor is it possible to comprehend the significance of either of the two aspects without examining such class functions of the Nigerian state for which the distinction between foreign and domestic is not relevant. The primary role of the Nigerian state is to establish, maintain, protect and expand the conditions of capitalist accumulation in general without which neither foreign nor Nigerian capital can prosper’ (Beckman 1982: 45).

constructions as well as between idealistic and realistic viewpoints. Whilst the term appears to be too vague and vast, it makes better sense if it is used in a specific context and streamlined to specific organisations within it. Therefore, in the context of this paper, civil society is limited to specific associations, particularly those struggling for democracy: pro-democracy groups, civil associations, professional associations, labour union (my focus in this paper is on labour unions, with reference to its relations with the state and other groups).

The labour movement is thus an integral part of “civil society” as defined above. The term “labour movement” is interchangeably used with “organised labour” and “trade unions” to refer to associations of wage labourers formed for the purposes of promoting and protecting workers’ interests and welfare against employers. As will be revealed in this study, in Nigeria, the rise of labour struggles and, indeed, other associational entities, is closely rooted in the process of colonial conquest, and dependent capitalist state and class formation. Traditionally, trade unions emerge as sites for promoting better conditions of work for their members through the usual channels of industrial relations and collective bargaining – union–management negotiations, work stoppages, militant strike actions, etc. However, in the context of Nigeria and indeed other developing societies, the petty-bourgeois-dominated state – often the dominant employer of labour – emerges as a protagonist of capital, local and international, little concerned with the conditions of labour. Hence, in addition to workplace struggles, trade unions are known for participating actively in wider socio-economic and political struggles, in particular, in contesting unpopular state policies and making demands for democratic change. This is obviously because the broad constituency which the Labour movement claims to represent – workers and masses – are often at the receiving end of those policies, which makes it necessary to organise and challenge them.

Finally, an analysis of the role of labour movement in democratic struggles requires a grasp of the meaning of democracy – one of the most contested concepts in Social Sciences. Democracy is defined as an institutional arrangement that involves open political competition, multi-party participation, legally sanctioned political rights, a mechanism for ensuring the transparent conduct of public affairs, all mediated by periodic elections where citizens elect, re-elect or depose their representatives. By extension, “democratisation” refers to institutional and attitudinal transformations aimed at providing maximum democratic rights and institutions for the people. It depends largely on dialogue and negotiation as well as actions and reactions (protests, policies, programmes, etc.) of citizens aimed at influencing the choices and behaviour of state institutions and actors. Also, democracy carries the potential for alternating governments. In this study, the emphasis is on liberal democracy,³ not least because it constitutes the recurrent political system (alternating with military regime) instituted in post-colonial Nigeria. Nigeria has never practised socialist democracy, even though it has often been advocated by some segments of the population, in particular students, workers, teachers and a radical “minority” in the military. The only time Nigeria fortuitously came close to adopting socialist democracy was in 1986 when a *Political Bureau* appointed by the government of General Babangida recommended social democracy, in conformance with

³ Adam Przeworski defines liberal democracy as ‘a procedural system involving open political competition, with multi-party, civil and political rights guaranteed by law, and accountability operating through an *electoral relationship* between citizens and their representatives’ (Przeworski 1991: ix). The core substance of liberal democracy is competitive electoral politics involving, on the one hand, regular, open and competitive elections whose outcome is ‘uncertain [and] indeterminate ex ante’ (Przeworski, op cit) and, on the other, a periodic machinery for making popular choices with the widest possible provisions for popular participation.

overwhelming public support. This too was ostensibly rejected by the Western-influenced military ruling class.

The Nigerian Labour Movement: Emergence and Struggles

The Nigerian Labour movement is closely associated with the process of class formation and, in particular, “proletarianisation” in the country (Barchiesi, 1996; Tar, 2006: Chapter 4). Workers had to develop a united front to confront and engage the exploitative excesses of owners of capital. The process started in colonial era, but was carried forward to the post-colonial era. The emergence of industries and bureaucracy led to the rise of migrant wage labour and it became necessary for workers to organise and protect their interests. By the turn of the 20th Century, a number of unions had emerged, particularly amongst railway men, teachers and factory workers, to advance the interest of wage labourers - key examples include the Nigeria Civil Service Union (NCSU) founded in 1912; the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NTC) formed in 1931; and the Railway Workers’ Union, (RWU) founded in 1931. These unions contributed to the struggle for independence, alongside other indigenous groups. Throughout the post-independence period, the labour movement has been at the forefront of workers’ struggles and anti-state movement – a key rationale for the military state to intervene in the reorganisation and control of the labour.

In 1978, the military state imposed a Decree which sought ostensibly to amalgamate hitherto acrimonious trade unions into a single labour federation, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC). Apparently, and for obvious reasons, the Decree aimed to contain labour struggle and radicalism: first, the Nigerian state acquired a stake in the labour sector being the highest employer of labour. Second, the petty-bourgeois political class (and its foreign capitalist financiers) have a vested interest in capitalist accumulation which they often promote through the state’s instrument of coercion and labour regulation. Nevertheless,

while it has had its own problems, and while military rule has seriously mediated its influence and autonomy, the labour movement remained one of the most persistent opponents of military rule in Nigeria. For this posture it suffered proscription, government intervention in its affairs, the promulgation of draconian decrees and edicts regulating union activities (Ihonvbere, 1997: 80).

The Nigerian labour movement endured years of sustained repression particularly during military era when the state took punitive measure to rein in workers protests and struggles for socio-economic and political justice. As further noted by Adesina, “organised labour in Nigeria had since 1940s developed a reputation for militant defence of workers’ rights and policy advocacy in issues that concern the working people – even if fractiously so” (2000: 143).

Organisational Structure

The Nigeria labour movement is led by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) which as we have seen, was formally constituted as a single federation of trade unions in 1978. Its mission is generously radical and ambitious:

to organise, unionise and educate all categories of Nigerian workers; defend and advance the political, economic, social and cultural rights of Nigerian workers; emancipate and unite Nigerian workers and people from all forms of exploitation and discrimination; achieve gender justice in the work place and in NLC; strengthen and deepen the ties and connections between Nigerian workers and the mutual/natural allies in and outside Nigeria and lead the struggle for the transformation of Nigeria into a just, humane and democratic society.⁴

NLC has developed “as the sole national labour centre” with a strong membership base over 1,000 national industrial unions and state councils (Beckman, Akwetey and Lindström, 2000: 25). Before the emergence of NLC, there were four labour centres: the Nigeria Trade Union Congress (NTUC), Labour Unity Front (LUF), United Labour Congress (ULC) and Nigeria Workers’ Council (NWC), each with several affiliated unions. Relations between these labour federations were highly acrimonious during the colonial era but compounded in the decades following independence. When it came to confronting the state and/or employers, these federations exhibited both unity and disunity.

With a membership of about 4 million and spanning Nigeria’s public and private sectors, NLC emerged as the key labour organisation in post-colonial Nigeria, representing 10 percent of Nigeria’s total labour force (an estimated 50 million).⁵ It has 29 affiliate unions and 37 state councils – each affiliate also has a corresponding structure at the industrial/state levels. There is “internal politics” both within NLC and between its affiliated unions. Given Nigeria’s oil economy, oil sector unions have been more assertive and stronger compared to non-oil sector unions. This became apparent in the aftermaths of the annulment of June 12 1993 Presidential Elections, when the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) and the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association (PENGASSAN) complemented NLC’s anti-military and democratic struggles, when the NLC national executive was infiltrated by state influence. Ihonvbere (1997) notes these oil-sector unions coordinated series of industrial actions which brought the Nigerian economy to a halt, demanding the military to withdraw from power and restore democratic system. Similarly, compared to NLC’s northern branches, those in the industrialised southern part of the country have demonstrated a more resilient anti-statist profile, particularly in the post-1993 period.

Given the potential strength of the labour movement in Nigeria, the state has long sought to control it. In 1978 the military regime of General Obasanjo brought the four labour federations together into the single Nigerian Labour Congress, under state domination. Since then, it sought to stop the formation of unions in key strategic sectors. For instance, successive Trade Union Decrees have excluded military and para-military personnel as well as some public sector establishments (designated as “essential

⁴ NLC “History of the NLC” Available: <http://www.nlcng.org/PROFILE/historyofcongress.htm>.

⁵ NLC “Policy on NLC and Unionism”, available: <http://www.nlcng.org/PROFILE/policyonunionism.htm>.

services⁶) from forming industrial unions, let alone joining the NLC – this is reinforced by the Essential Services Decree of 1977 which states that these organisations cannot form labour unions or participate in industrial action. Paradoxically, the state failed in its bid to declare the Nigerian oil sector as an “essential service” or stop oil sector workers from joining the labour – as it previously did in the education sector through the Teaching etc (Essential Services) of 1993 which effectively (but temporarily) banned the national union of university teachers, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), and disaffiliated it from the NLC.

Thus, the Nigerian labour movement comprises a variety of unions that represent the specific interest of workers. They engage in struggling for the rights and welfare of workers, in particular, for decent wages and improved conditions of service, where negotiations fail to achieve the desired result, labour unions are noted for resorting to *militant action* – such as stay at homes, work to rule, demonstrations and street protests – which are capable of not only grounding the particular production process but, sometimes and more crucially, the economy. Such struggles are directed at both private and public sector employers and at the state and its alliance of ruling classes who generally protect the interest of capital whilst seeking to regulate labour. Apart from struggling for workers’ welfare, most labour unions in Nigeria claim to represent the interests of the socially marginalised and oppressed segments of society, in particular, the masses and peasants who, like workers, are seen as standing at the receiving end of unjust state policies.

Funding and Autonomy

An independent and sustainable source of income is important for any organisation that seeks to fight against the state. This, unfortunately, proved in the Nigerian labour movement. In spite of its large membership and impressive profile of worker militancy and anti-state activism, the NLC lacks independent and sufficient sources of funding. There are two sources of funding, each controlled by either the state or the employer (public/private sector organisations). The first source is membership subscriptions, but these are normally collected by the employer and then handed over to the union leadership. The money is then shared between the national body and the local branch. The second source of funding is government subvention, which is common when the union is in serious financial crisis. Military regimes have exploited NLC’s paucity by underwriting its bankruptcy and awarding it monetary incentives in return for conformity. This has come close to regime “take over”. At the slightest of excuses, regimes have capitalised on NLC’s financial and other vulnerabilities to sack union leaders and appoint Sole Administrators under state orders. Regime interventions were often justified in terms of intra-union skirmishes, corruption etc, but in reality they were intended to contain dissent and ensure government control of the Congress.

The Nigerian labour policy grant significant leverage to employers and the owners of capital. For instance, in times of industrial action, employers are empowered to withhold the collection and/or handing over of union dues to the union leadership, as a means of

⁶ Examples include the Central Bank of Nigeria and the Nigeria Security Printing and Minting Company. Workers in these organisation are forbidden from forming active industrial unions ostensibly because should they embark on a strike, the Nigerian economy will come to a stand-still.

compelling a return to work. This has often left union leaders with two stark choices: either to submit or to make do with no funds. Another key problem is the manner in which membership dues are spent which sparks-off issues of transparency and prudence. NLC leaders are often accused of financial impropriety, leading to disunity and lack of trust, especially within local branches. This creates opportunities for the state to intervene

NLC's so-called socialist stance, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, had affected its capacity to obtain external funding. At the peak of the military era when the state was implementing western structural adjustment programme, the NLC was branded an anti-capitalist organisation, effectively serving as an evidence to exclude it from western donor funding. Until recently, the NLC and, in particular, manual workers, have not been beneficiaries of foreign donors, who viewed them, particularly in the 1980s and 90s, as a "radical", "socialist" or "anti-capitalist" force (see Adesina, 2000: 515). Because donors channelled their resources to civic associations, one way in which labour activists tried to overcome this was through networking with civic associations or forming new organisations under union control. Following Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, the NLC allied with some civic associations and became part of joint bids for donor funds. For instance, during the 2003 elections, the NLC's flagship network, the Civil Society pro-Democracy Network (CSPN), was granted funding by the EU, the United Nations' Development Programme and the National Endowment for Democracy. Donor funding has enabled the NLC overcome its over-dependence on the scarce membership dues and state subvention. However, as expected, donor funding carried serious implications in terms of their capacity for autonomous action.

Internal Democracy

On face value, the NLC demonstrates an elaborate organisational framework which seeks to accommodate the diverse interests of its members and affiliates. As a large-scale organisation, it has been prone to conflict and fragmentation. At the topmost level, there is the National Delegates' Conference (NDC), which brings together delegates from all industrial unions affiliated to the NLC and which takes crucial decisions on constitutional matters. A highlight of the NDC is the election of a new executive who run the congress for two years. The second organ is the National Executive Council (NEC) charged with the responsibility of formulating key decisions and policies of the union. Members of the NEC represent the NLC in industrial negotiations and collective bargaining with employers and the state. The Central Working Committee (CWC), a third organ, is charged with "strategic" responsibility, in particular, the planning and staging of industrial action. The National Administrative Council (NAC) oversees the administrative matters of the union. Finally, a Secretariat, headed by a General Secretary (GS), is responsible for the daily operations of Congress and executes policies and decisions of organs. Deputy and Assistant General Secretaries (DGS & AGS) oversee specific departments⁷ which are run daily by paid professional staff.

⁷ The Departments are: Education and International Affairs; Organisation, Industrial Relations and Gender; Research and Statistics; Administration and Establishment; and Finance.

A formal description of the organisational structure of the NLC reveals very little about the reality of internal democratic practice. Certain key factors adversely affect the NLC's structure. First, by law, the state has substantial legal control over the union. These powers are granted by the Labour (and Associated Matters) Decree and the Trade Unions Decree which are regularly reviewed to reinforce the state's powers. With these legal powers, the state can legally intervene in the affairs of unions. This was a common practice in both military and democratic era, although it is more severe under the military who often employ punitive measure of arbitrary action against union activities – e.g. proscription of unions, detention of leaders/members etc. Second, at some points in time, particularly during national political crises, the NLC turns out to be politically divided and fragmented, with different state branches and members from different ethnic groups and regions supporting conflicting tendencies. Equally important, the NLC has struggled to combine and unite these tendencies. Third, too often the NLC is resource-starved, leading to corrupt practices and internal crises. Finally, the space of autonomous and democratic action by the NLC is highly contingent, ranging from one political period to another. The NLC was more democratic during civilian phases of government (1960-65; 1979-83; and 1999-date) and vice versa. For instance between 1979 and 1983, when the NLC witnessed a great degree of autonomy, and was led by very popular unionists, there was a marked spirit of "solidarity" amongst members and democratic practice was regularly applied. Conversely, between 1985 and 1999, when Nigeria was under military rule, the NLC experienced the worst state of democratic practice. Even though state repression further agitated anti-state protest, it also diminished the space for autonomy and democratic action.

The NLC carries a suspect democratic credentials. On the one hand, it seemed to operate fairly democratically, both nationally and in local branches – particularly in terms of regular elections, meetings, constitutionalism and due process. Regular meetings are held to discuss union and societal matters. Elections are held regularly in which members participate in electing local and national officials. Local representatives to the NDC and other national events are drawn from, and elected democratically in, local branches. The NLC has a constitution, which is reviewed regularly and forms the legal framework of the union. It has a website and in-house newsletter, the Labour News, distributed to members, even though the flow of information is hampered by a host of factors, ranging from apathy amongst members to lack of resources to maintain publication. This foregoing modest democratic performance is a recent development. In the past, both officials and members agreed that the NLC had its difficult times when elections were abused, few or single individuals controlled the union and meetings were rarely called.

On the other hand, the NLC showed an inherent failure in the area of social inclusivity, especially of women and those from minority ethnic groups. In the case of women, a count of those currently in leadership position at the national level showed that out of 13 officers, only two were women – this lack of inclusivity has also been the prevailing trend in most individual unions. Given that women constitute a significant proportion of Nigeria's workforce and wider civil society struggles (International IDEA, 2000: 123), this distribution is indeed disproportionate.⁸ In other words, like other organisations in

⁸ However, the NLC has initiated measures to improve women's participation in the union. An example is the setting-up in 2003 of a Women's Commission in the Congress and its state councils and affiliates. Moreover, in the last two decades, the activities of the women's wing have expanded dramatically, especially in the area of education, internal agitation for reforms and advocacy. But these

Nigeria, the NLC is dominated by men. It is also weak in the area of consensus-building with members often divided by sectarian interests, in particular, religion, ethnic and regional differences. Another key problem of the NLC, until recently, was poor in maintaining transparency and accountability. Scandals involving the abuse of funds by union officials are common. Thus, the NLC cannot be said to be very democratic. This is confirmed by the NLC's own self-criticism, which emerged in the context of a post-military situation analysis:

- Internal operations of the trade union movement in Nigeria give cause for great concern. Military rule and the attendant might-is-right ethos have impacted on civil society, including unions, occasioning some acute imitative militarism. Some of the worst manifestations in the movement can be seen in an officership culture that is not founded on principles of democracy and union rules and values.
- Major decisions on policies are occasionally adopted without broad consultations or debates within the union and its various organs.
- Harmony and synergy between union leadership and membership have in some cases been subverted by poor officership, involving no consultation and legitimacy. Thus, the membership is not able to own the union or its decisions and tends to be apathetic.
- Observed lapses and sharp practice in relation to finances exact a heavy toll on resources and funds, with the attendant consequences of weakened capacity and trust.
- Modes of internal communication are inadequate (NLC, 2006).

However, while the lack of internal democracy constitutes a serious blow to claims of democratic struggle, the NLC does have the potential to generate worker and mass solidarity, in particular, to mobilise popular support for anti-state action. Aiyede argues that

The labour movement owes its prominence less to its internal democratic structure or its technical capacity than to its ability to mobilise as a vehicle to create space for democratic debate and contestation, or even constrain the state, especially when the leadership is urged on by pressure from below (2004: 226)

In spite of a strong profile of anti-statist, pro-worker and popular activism, the NLC has been "riddled with disunity, factional struggles and inter-union competition with consequences up to the present" (Barchiesi, 1996: 356). To be sure, the labour movement is relatively weak and fragmented, even though it is at the forefront of opposition against state policies (see next section). But fragmentation is context-specific: the reasons are found both within labour and in the state who continue to claim the monopoly of regulating labour. Within unions, internal conflicts and rivalries have resulted in dwindling, dividing and destabilising the NLC – this was apparent in times of national political crises, as examined below. On the other hand, successive governments

measures are aimed at improving 'participation' rather than reversing the disproportionate leadership ratio.

have often exploited the NLC's internal weakness: "civil and military regimes maintained an interest in fragmentation of the union movement [which increased] a general sense of distance and distrust between union activists and professional politicians" (Barchiesi, op cit). These problems are revealed in the dramas of labour-state relations which I examine below.

Engaging the State: from welfare to democratic struggle

The NLC is known for its "legendary" struggles for workers' rights and welfare. But this struggle cannot be disconnected from a bevy of interconnected activities – not least democracy, accountability and individual liberty – as well as and actors such as pro-democracy civic organisations. This proves that the NLC did not function in isolation: it has always forged alliances to promote its interest. In addition to the interest of labour workers, the NLC has always claimed to speak for other members of the Nigerian society. Thus, in addition to traditional workers' struggles, and closely associated with them, the Nigerian labour movement has a strong profile of acting as a bulwark of opposition against the excesses of the state and unjust policies, and remained relatively strong and autonomous until the 1980s. This profile is closely linked to Nigeria's relatively strong development of capitalism, especially the emergence of oil economy. Issa Aremu asserts that labour's political autonomy is manifest in the following: "direct party formation"; its measured cooperation with the "progressive national bourgeoisie in an attempt to improve workers' conditions"; and "contact with international communist movements which favoured the abolition of exploitation and the enthronement of a new social order", even where such contacts were against the wishes of the ruling state actors (1997: 174). These assertive measures were strong indication of autonomous action.

Closely associated workers' struggles, the NLC has been closely associated with party politics. The rationale for involvement in party politics is to build a united workers' front for promoting and defending the partisan interests of labour workers. In Nigeria's First Republic (1960-66), a section of the labour movement formed the Socialist Workers' and Farmers' Party (SWAFP) and the Nigerian Labour Party (NLP). In the aborted Third Republic, the NLC applied to the National Electoral Commission to register its own party, the National Labour Party (NLP) which was rejected. Currently, there is a movement within the NLC to revamp the NLP. Indeed, the NLC's policy on politics states that: (1) Nigerian workers desired their own party (2) Workers could be organised to create and develop their own party; (3) The leadership of a worker's party must emerge from the ideologically most advanced, committed persons having their deep roots within the labour movement; (4) The party of the working class must have a program one distinct from all other parties; (5) The party of workers should be based on working class membership and should be sustained by workers, not by assistance, or "alliance" with segments of the ruling class etc.⁹

In terms of engaging the state, the NLC united workers, especially in the 1980s and 90s against the tyranny of powerful political and economic classes, in particular military regimes. It also mobilised public opinion against the excesses of the state and its ruling

⁹ See NLC "Labour Policy on Politics" available: <http://www.nlcng.org/PROFILE/policyonpolitics.htm> accessed 20th January 2006.

political classes on issues of workers and public welfare – health, education, security, energy etc as well as democratic change. In the process, the NLC encountered several frontlines, with success and failures. Below, I examine three contexts of the struggle.

A classical example of labour-state stalemate is in terms of workers' response to austerity and adjustment measures adopted by the state which "aggravated deterioration in the quality of life of workers" (Barchiesi, 1996: 362). For example, the Babangida regime aroused the expectation of workers by promising to abolish obnoxious anti-labour decrees promulgated by the preceding Buhari regime, expand the scope of workers' freedom, increase their salaries and improve their material conditions. This was soon exposed as empty promise as the regime not only embarked on withdrawal of subsidies on basic products and retrenchment of workers in the public sector in keeping with IMF conditionalities, but promulgated more decrees to repress protesting workers, including one proscribing the NLC. Secondly, in the run up to the adjustment programme, the Babangida regime imposed on workers their own share of the adjustment, at a time when they could least afford it. In October 1985, the regime declared a National Economic Emergency which was to last for fifteen months. As part of the emergency, the regime announced massive pay cuts (between two and 20 percent) for public sector workers. The amount accruing from this deduction was to be paid in to the National Economic Recovery Fund (NERF). Jimi Adesina notes that

this decision was made unilaterally and without consultation of any sort with the NLC or any other union within the trade union movement. Over the next three years the general impact of adjustment fell severely on the working people. The defence of the occupational and pecuniary interest of its members brought the Congress into ever more open confrontation with the regime (2000: 145).

In 1987, NLC vigorously responded to General Babangida's argument on the removal of the oil subsidy, defending its position with comparative international data of minimum wages and real income. A middle-aged male worker recalled his experience:

We became one of the most pauperised segments of the society. Our salaries became very insufficient and were not reviewed despite several strikes, negotiations and agreements. The value of the Naira [Nigeria's national currency] swiftly fell; so also were our income level, purchasing power and living standards. In short, we became poor, very poor and constant strike actions became the only way to channel our anger and demands (Interview, Maiduguri, 15th March 2003).

The above deplorable existential conditions amongst workers contrasted sharply with the surreal life styles enjoyed by the ruling class elites and their cronies. Consider the following personal observation from a retired male activist, who saw "the transition of wage labourers from better off in the 1960s and 70s to wretched of the earth in the 80s and 90s":

At the peak of structural adjustment, top soldiers, contractors, and politicians were leading lavish lifestyles buying expensive clothing, houses and cars to themselves and their kids, displaying their wealth in the streets, travelling abroad for their shopping as well as patronising private social service. (health, security, water etc), because those provided by government have deteriorated. On the other hand, our condition worsened as our meagre earnings were squeezed out through obnoxious anti-worker policies and programmes (Interview, Lagos, 10th November 2003).

In essence, the whole situation was extremely desolate and created real pressure for mass protest led by workers. In a study on the impact of structural adjustment on occupational groups in Nigeria, Sina Kawonise and his colleagues concluded that "SAP, though in an inverse manner, did much to arouse the citizenry to political action" (1998: 56). As noted by Otobo (1992) "the build-up to the (third triennial delegates' Conference at Benin) was largely influenced by events within the economy, notably the impact of the structural adjustment [programme], SAP on wage earners and citizenry in general, and the reaction of the NLC to these" (cited in Adesina, op cit):

The NLC expressed contrary views to those of the government on practically all issues:...unilateral deduction from salaries of public servants in 1987; cost of living indices; the official claims of the "gains" of the structural adjustment policy; the exchange rates of the Naira; removal of petroleum subsidies; educational policies; human rights records; to political appointments (Otobo, 1992, cited in Adesina op cit).

The above position displeased the Babangida regime in no small measure. The regime adopted different measures in responding to workers' protests and industrial action. First, it sought to neutralise the NLC itself. The 1988 NLC Delegates' Conference provided a potential opening for this "game play". In the election held at the conference, the regime put up a candidate for the NLC presidency, Mr Takai Shamang. He was woefully defeated, winning four votes as opposed to the winning candidate, Comrade Ali Chiroma's two hundred and eighty votes. The regime's candidates to other elective posts in the NLC suffered similar excruciating defeat, inviting an advanced, more decisive, phase of the "game play". Adesina puts it better:

The sealing of the NLC Secretariat by armed security personnel on Monday 29th February, marked a new shift in the government's overt effort to rein-in the NLC. This was followed with the Babangida regime evoking the National Economic Emergency Powers Decree of 1985, and dissolving the leadership of the NLC. A sole administrator was appointed to run the affairs of the Congress (ibid, 145-5).

Having succeeded in bringing the NLC under a pro-regime administration, the military sponsored a phoney election in which pro-regime candidate, Mr Pascal Bafyau, was handpicked by virtue of his status as a candidate acceptable to the regime, and on 30 December, Bafyau and others were sworn in as elected NLC leaders. Despite the repressive manipulation, in February 1988, labour protest against workers' deteriorating condition of living did not abate: if anything, the protests grew. Thus, in March/April, a series of strike actions staged by workers and students against increasing fuel prices compelled the government to negotiate with the same union leadership it dissolved six weeks earlier. Nevertheless, as noted by a former NLC activist, a man near retirement age:

The regime's mendacity to retain a discredited [NLC] leadership¹⁰, plus the hardships of SAP [structural adjustment programme] did not stop us from keeping the flag of strikes flying. We continued our strikes, which was more satisfying than returning to work with an empty stomach (Interview held in Abuja, 16th August 2003).

¹⁰ The extent to which military-imposed NLC leadership was considered as anathema, was expressed by another observer: "The congress leadership was a bunch of military lackeys who had no affinity with principles, integrity and democracy...Congress [leadership] was a sell out, one that could not be trusted and should not be supported" (cited in Kukah, 1999: 156)

While the Bafyau-led NLC continued to “do business” with the regime and defended its policies, agitation amongst shop floor workers and students continued to increase. Indeed by 1992, from Lagos to Sokoto and Port Harcourt to Maiduguri, Nigeria became littered with industrial action – these strike actions proved decisive as Nigeria prepared for the June 1993 Presidential Elections.

While it was reined-in by the military in the course of a painful socio-economic change, the NLC proved relatively assertive, at least in a different context – democratic struggle. That is not to claim, however, that the labour was incredibly “united” during in the course of democratic struggle. Indeed, the period appeared to draw labour’s image to the mud of partisan and sectarian politics – an inevitable avalanche in Nigerian politics carrying away groups and individuals. Nevertheless, the events following the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential Elections revealed that the NLC leadership was compelled by shop floor pressure to take anti-regime action, including strike action. A middle-aged female respondent still working in a federal ministry, one of few women labour activists in a domain dominated by men, described how the NLC’s style of engaging the state changed post-June 12:

Babangida and his cronies had many cards to play in our earlier encounters. By June 12th, his card had finished and his cookies had crumbled. Things were literally falling apart and Babangida was not able to come to terms with the damage he had done. He eventually lost control of our Union [NLC] and we became part of the angry wild cats who forced him to quit (interview, Abuja, 16th August 2003).

Following the regime’s annulment of the election on 26th June, the Central Working Committee (CWC) of the NLC met in Lagos on 28th and issued a critique of the regime’s decision to annul the election. It argued that the deepening political crisis was exacerbating the severe economic hardships confronting workers and the masses. With this declaration, argues Julius Ihonvbere,

The NLC [in particular the CWC] showed that it was opposed to the military, supported most of the demands of the pro-democracy groups and other popular movement, and was prepared to commit itself to a popular struggle for military disengagement from politics and the restoration of democracy (1997: 83).

Subsequently, in July following the meeting of its National Executive Council (NEC) in Port Harcourt, the NLC released a list of demands which the Babangida regime was asked to meet or risk a general workers’ strike. The Congress noted that the country could not afford another round of “costly, expensive and time consuming” elections (suggested by the military) and its attendant wastages, and, therefore, demanded the immediate release of the annulled presidential election results (*Sunday Concord*, 16/6/1993). On July 9th, the NLC issued a strike notice in which it gave the military regime a 12-day ultimatum demanding the immediate release of Chief Mashood Abiola, the acclaimed winner of the election. It also called for cessation of politically-motivated arrests and detentions which the military began after June 12. The regime failed to meet these demands and, instead, invited the NLC for a dialogue. In a subsequent declaration released on August 15th, the NLC reiterated its determination to embark on the strike if the regime did not quit by August 27th. It also called for the “proclamation of the 1989 constitution and transfer of power to the senate” (Adewumi and Adesina, 1999: 56).

On August 27th 1993, General Babangida was forced to resign in the face of mass action led by the NLC. However, rather than conceding to NLC and popular demands, the regime handed over power to an Interim National Government (ING) – and not to the House of Senate as demanded by NLC. The NLC and its affiliates rejected the ING and directed all its members and affiliates to embark on a national strike against the ING with effect from August 28th. The NLC insisted that the leader of ING, Chief Ernest Shonekan, must hand over power to the Senate, in line with the provisions of the 1989 Constitution.

The key point that emerges from the above account is that the NLC was able to present an enduring front for anti-state, pro-democratic action. However, the nascent triumph was far from a cause for celebration. The resignation of General Babangida signalled a more challenging period for the NLC, not least because democracy was far from sight – it took another military regime and eight more years of austerity, repression and struggle (during the Abacha Junta, 1994-98) before democracy was eventually restored in may 1999. Throughout the struggle, the NLC gained and lost the confidence of its members and other Nigerians, but nevertheless provided perhaps the most formidable front for democratic struggle (see Ihonvbere, 1997). Indeed when the NLC was weighed down by internal setbacks, workers' struggles were carried on by the strategic oil sector unions, in particular, the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) and the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association (PENGASSAN), with all its associated risks.

Conclusion

This article reveals that the Nigerian labour movement is at the forefront of Nigerian civil society, and struggles for democratic restoration and consolidation. It questions neoliberal claim which emphasises non-partisan stance is *sine qua non* for a genuine pro-democracy movement, and arrogates the sagacity for such struggle to civic non-governmental organisations. The Nigerian labour movement defies both prescriptions. In the first place, the Nigerian Labour Movement has always maintained partisan position in national politics and public policy; it had even ventured into the establishment of workers' political party, albeit not so successfully. In the second place, and despite its partisan stance, the Nigerian labour movement had played a tremendous role in the struggles for democratic restoration both during military rule and in the current democratic dispensation. In doing so, it served as a forerunner to pro-democracy civic organisations which emerged in the 1980s to reinforce the democratic struggles of the NLC.

Today, the Nigerian Labour movement occupies a respectable place in the country's civil society. This is partly because its "veteran" status as an organisation known for anti-state struggles. Though there is debate on its democratic credentials and even its efficacy to fight the state, the Nigerian labour movement is seen one of the most developed, but also divided and hierarchical, social movement. Its consistent but controversial profile in engaging the state on wide range of issues – workers rights, public welfare, human rights, democratisation etc – has been characterised by both success and failure. As revealed in the case of Nigeria, the emergence of the state through colonialism and capitalist penetration meant that the state emerged as an organ, in the hands of colonialists, and later the domestic petty-bourgeoisie, for class control. It also meant that the state played

a key role in reproducing socio-economic and political inequality and generating, in the process, anti-state, anti-hegemonic activity from the Labour Movement.

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