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TRADE UNIONISM AS CATALYST FOR ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The existence of a virile trade unionism has been conceived to be a prelude to the effective attainment of organisational goal. An organisation with a virile and responsible trade unions would therefore be expected to be successful while another with a crisis-prone and irresponsible trade unionism is doomed for failure. The present paper therefore addresses the issue of trade unionism and organisational development in Nigeria. It traces the history and development of trade unions in the country, peruses the role of trade unions in pre-independence and post-colonial era and examines how organisational development can be effected through vibrant trade unionism while stressing on lessons to be learnt from the Nigerian experience.

Keywords: Employees; Government; Organisational development; Trade unionism

Introduction

The question of what trade unionism is, is a subject of debate among scholars. There are variations in the conceptions of trade unionism depending on the perception of workers and the definition imposed by the legal framework in many countries (Fajana, 2000). The word trade unionism connotes the activities engaged by individuals who are elected or selected to pursue the interest of the workers. Unionism in this respect implies activism with respect to workers affairs.

It would be necessary to follow-up the above definition with the clarification of the related concept of trade unions. It is important to note though that, the conceptual frameworks for defining trade unions are not universal. However, there is a general notion that trade unions exist basically to cater for the interests of its members, especially on matters that concern their work conditions. For instance, Webbs (1920) defines trade union as a continuous association of wage earners established for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives.

In Hyman's (1971) view, trade unions are not merely economic organisations concerned only with obtaining minimum hours of work and maximum pay for their members; Rather, they are social organisations concerned amongst other things with the quality of the daily working lives of their members.

Also, the International Labour Organization (ILO) defines the concept as an organisation of employees usually established beyond the confines of one enterprise, for providing or improving through collective actions, the economic and social status of its members. These definitions are seen to be restrictive in the sense that it limits trade unions' responsibilities to the workplace and union members alone.

In accordance, The British Trade Union Act of 1913 and the Nigerian Trade Union Act of 1938 shared the same legal notion of trade unionism as any combination whether temporarily or permanent, the principal objectives of which under its constitution are the regulation of the relations between workmen and workmen, or between masters and masters, or the imposing of restrictive conditions on the conduct of any trade or business and also the provision of benefits to members (quoted in Fajana, 2000:132).

Bean (1985) defined the concept as an institutional representative of workers' interests both within the labour market and in the wider society, and they accentuate the collective rather than the individual power resources of employees. In a similar vein, I.U.F.A.W.A. (1985) provided the following definition for trade union: continuing permanent and democratic organisation created and run by the workers with the view of protecting themselves at work, improve working conditions and seek better working life in the society in general through collective bargaining.

In other words, trade unions are organisations of workers who come together with the aim of bettering their lots. Conversely, there are five major substantive issues which are at the heart of the workers, these are: wages and other material remuneration; working conditions; job security; working time and; respect and dignity. Trade unionism is that drive, that quest for improvements in these substantive issues. This drive precedes even the formation of trades unions. Thus, it could be seen that trade unionism is that natural tendency of workers to economic self-defense.

The term organisational development is used to capture the developmental efforts or planned change that are made in organisations on an on-going basis to improve the vitality of the organisation and its members. In the field of management, organisational development (OD) is defined as:

A planned, systematic, organised, and collaborative effort where behavioural sciences and organisation theory principles and practices are continuously applied in order to increase the quality of life which is reflected in increased organisational health and vitality, enhanced individuals and group members' competence and self-worth, and the general well-being of society.

In this sense, organisational development reflects a state of things as they are currently and the strive towards a state of growing, developing and reaching new heights. Just as human beings grow and develop, so do organisations and even society. OD is then the science which focuses on planned growth and developmental strategy for organisations making use of the knowledge and techniques of other behavioural sciences such as Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology and even Mathematics. Attention is focused on interventionist mechanism for desired changes such that as more and more technological and demographical changes are taking place, the technical, structural, cultural and behavioural aspects are simultaneously explored and more comprehensive

interventionism mechanism have to be used. For instance, to help reduce stress at the workplace, adapting to the introduction of new machines and equipments etc.

For the purpose of the present paper, our concept of organisational development would be taken to mean the above in addition to practical attempt at achieving overall transformation in the workplace for the benefits of not only the workers and the organisation but also the host community.

Trade Unionism and Organizational Development

The existence of a viable and recognised trade union is a pre-requisite to organisational development. One of the basic features of trade unionism in the organisational development is seeking a healthy and safe environment for both employer and employees through the process of collective bargaining and negotiations between the stakeholders. Trade unions have played a pivotal role in most modern societies whether in advanced capitalist, liberal democratic or mixed economy societies. Trade Unionisms vary from society to society even in otherwise similar societies. In the United States and United Kingdom (being part of the leading liberal market economies in the world) for example, which could be considered as similar societies, there exist variations in their trade unions and approach to trade unionism. In the same vein, Germany and France (exhibiting coordinated market economies in the West) also without a doubt have different trade unions. Navigating to African societies, Ghana and Nigeria, for example, (characterised with mixed economies) where trade unionism still has a leftover of colonial heritage, there are distinct mark of industrial relations systems and trade union practice.

Essentially, trade unions' role in organisational development cannot be over emphasised, a common slogan among trade unionists is that "one does not slaughter the cow that gives milk". This is a basic understanding among trade unionists because only if higher profits are made, will the organisation be able to pay higher wages and give better benefits to the employees. Building on this view, then one could say that "a cow can only grow healthy on a green paddock". An adaptable strategy is to keep the union and employees adequately informed of the state of organisation's affairs through regular labour-management consultations and briefing. Be that as it may, organisational development therefore, is of utmost importance to trade unions. A question that comes to mind is; what roles can trade unions play in this process? It is against this background that this presentation seeks to explore trade unionism as a catalyst to organisational development.

History and Development of Trade Unionism in Nigeria

Prior to the contact with the colonial masters, Nigerian people who engaged in craft or trade have organised themselves into various associations; these associations could be referred to as trade unions because they were organised to regulate trade practices, to offer mutual aid and to fix prices and wages for their services; such unions included associations of hunters, blacksmiths, carvers and weavers (Egboh, 1968; Ananaba, 1970). These associations consisted of tradesmen and their children or other blood relatives usually sons, there were no employment contracts as known today as the children learned the trades and took over from their fathers (Fashoyin, 1980). The

functions of these organisations some of which still existed today in the villages, included: settling of disputes, regulation of relationship between tradesmen, fixing of prices and organising the payment of tribute to the king (Lloyd, 1953).

The organised trade union movement in Nigeria officially started in 1912 when the workers in the civil service under the then Colonial administration organised themselves into worker's representatives. This then became known as the Nigeria Civil Service Union. This became a pivot with which workers in other sectors began the agitation for the formation of Trade Unions before and after independence in 1960. By 1975 during the Military regime of General Murtala Mohammed, trade unions in the country have risen to over 1000 which include mushroom unions. In 1976, the Government established a commission of inquiry into the activities of the various unions and appointed an administrator to administer the unions and come up with a structure for the proper administration of the unions. This became necessary as the unions were polarised into ideological divide which was creating problems in the country.

Towards the end of 1977, these unions were restructured into 42 along industrial line. The government also insisted on the formation of a labour centre as there were various multiple centres. In February 1978, the Nigeria Labour Congress was formed and inaugurated. The then 42 industrial unions became affiliates of the Nigeria Labour Congress with a legal backing of trade union (Amendment) Decree 22 of 1978. In 1989, the trade unions were again restructured to become 29 affiliate unions to the Nigeria Labour Congress. Also, the Obasanjo administration in 2004 worked on a Labour Act to again pave way for multiple centres. Up till date, various trade unions have sprang up as an affiliate of NLC to cater for members' interest. However, we cannot discuss the history and development of trade unions in Nigeria without making reference to their roles in pre-independence and post-independence era.

The Role of Trade Unionism in Pre-Independence and Post-Colonial Era

The employment relations prior to and after the independence had witnessed the practice inherited from the colonial masters by various Nigerian governments (military and civilians) (Fashoyin, 1980; Yesufu, 1982). Before independence the various colonial governments in Africa intervened in employment relations practice in order to implement labour policies already tested in their countries, these interventions were justified as a way of civilizing the people of these colonies (Northrup, 1978).

According to Yesufu (1982: 36-38), the British colonial government interventions could be divided into phases: the first was the 1900 - 1920 era when the main labour role was about creating and maintaining from among the peasantry, adequate fund and supply of free labour to meet the demands of government administration; the second phase was from the 1921 - 1928 era, this was the period of the evolution of trade unions in Nigeria; the third phase, 1929 - 1938 started with the appointment of Lord Passfield Sydney Webb as the Colonial Secretary in the first Labour Government. Lord Passfield initiated moves to compel the colonial government in Nigeria and other former British former colonies to initiate, long-term labour and industrial relations policies, legislation and practice, in lines with those prevailing in the United Kingdom; the last phase was during the Second World War period 1939 - 1945 which was marked with the

establishment of a Labour Inspectorate and later a Department of Labour and the removal of the restrictive legislation on trade union activities.

By the 1950s the various Regional Governments had started making offers of wage increases so as to attract votes and the Federal Government of Nigeria had started introducing elements of economic-industrial democracy, that is, employers and trade unions started to negotiate as practiced in the United Kingdom, but the Federal Government of Nigeria reserved the right to intervene where wages were unreasonably low by reference to the general level of wages (Department of Labour, Nigeria: Annual Report 1954/55, paragraph 20). This situation continued until independent in 1960 and even till the military coup of 1966 which led to the civil war of 1967-1970. The military regimes either banned trade unionism or imprisoned the trade union leaders and this was easy as the constitution of the country was usually suspended as soon as the military take over government (Yesufu, 1982).

Summarily, trade unions as a large organised group in any organisation uniquely contribute to the organisational development been directly involved in the economic systems of production and distribution as well as influencing the course and content of employment, social and economic policies of the country. Specifically, the role of trade unions include the following:

- Platform for unionization of workers;
- Regulation of relations between workers and employees and between workmen and workmen;
- Establishing and maintenance of just and proper hours of work, rates of pay, and general conditions of service;
- Encouraging and maintaining high standard of production;
- Encouraging the participation of workers in an undertaking, industry and at national level;
- Protecting and advancing the socio-economic interests of the working class.

Wither Organisational Development Albeit Trade Unionism?

Generally speaking, trade unions in Nigeria are becoming weak couple with many internal problems, ensnared with corruption on the part of government officials, and an ongoing fluctuation in the global economies, which are often seen to be relics of the past. Historically, Nigerian trade unions, at first were an importing driving force of the anti-colonial liberation struggle, before they transformed into transmission belts of ruling parties and governments after independence. In exchange for giving up fundamental freedoms they received a secured status, secure jobs for their members and privileges for their leaders. A rude awakening was caused by the debt crisis in the 80s and the ensuing economic liberalisation, which led to massive job losses in the formal economy and a strong decline in union membership. To make matters worse, governments started to reform their labour laws to the disadvantage of workers. On the other hand, the concomitant political instability created the political space for breaking the close and dependent relationship with government, and provided for the emergence of new, independent trade unions. In a number of countries, trade unions played a decisive

in the removal of autocratic regimes. Nevertheless, trade unions' powers to influence wages, working conditions and to defend workers have suffered enormously and are becoming weak nowadays, thus, having attendant negative effects on organisational development. Above all, in many countries unions remain a political force to be reckoned with, as they continue to be one of the very few associations in Nigeria with a sizeable constituency, structures and the potential for mobilising members on social or political matters.

Some scholars have stressed that the nation's socio-economic and by extension, political development is directly linked to trade union activity (Adewumi, 1997; Yusuf, 2008). Such arguments have specifically adduced the relative economic performance of many advanced nations in the world to factors like the efficient management of the economy as whole, the level and availability of productive investment and the creation of a national pool of skills and ingenuity, among several others. However, more fundamental is the role of trade unions as a key factor in nations' economic and social development performance.

We need to point out at this juncture that while we are stressing on the important role played by trade unions in organisational, and by extension, national, development, a school of thought in the industrial relations literature contend that the nation's economic malaise can be directly linked to trade union activity. The advocates of this school of thought are policy-makers who are advocating for increased legislative restrictions on trade union activities. A prominent advocate of this policy was Keith (1979) who identified trade union power as one of the major obstacles to British national economic recovery. Consequently, he argued that in view of the above submission, the introduction of legislative measures to control trade union power was justified. He further contented that 'everyone knows' that trade unions are 'pulling the nation in the wrong direction'! Surely, this one-factor explanation for complex, long term socio-economic development which was here blamed solely on trade unions power have more to do with scapegoats than scientific explanation. A similar approach is taken by successive governments in Nigeria most of who regarded trade unionism as anti-establishment movement and its leaders as anarchists, radicals, who should be tamed or caged or eliminated.

Measures taken by Nigerian governments to intimidate trade unions activists include the following:-

- Restrictions on the scope of legitimate trade union activities;
- Reducing the bargaining power of organised trade unions through massive unemployment by paving way for non-unionised low-waged workers;
- The proposed transfer of wage labour from residual list to concurrent list by the national assembly;
- The impoverishment of the Nigerian working class through anti-people policies by government – jumbo pay by political office holders in the country, youth unemployment, under-employment (Dangote's employment of graduates and Ph.D holders as drivers) etc;
- Refusal of government to honour agreement signed with organised labour (ASUU/Federal government 2009 Agreement, NMA/Federal Government disagreement);

- Outright ban or proscription of trade unions (especially during military regimes).

Lessons for Other Sectors

An important issue in the discussion of trade unionism is internal democracy. Agreed, virtually every nation in the world today is either a democracy or is aspiring to become one. In most of these countries, the struggle for democratic polity were championed by trade unions. Consequently, one would expect that trade unions would be model for democratic values in its practice. However, in most instances, this is not the case. Rather, experiences have shown that trade unions have failed woefully in the practice of internal democracy. Union leaders either forced themselves on the members who are rendered virtually impotent to effect change or they resort to the use of monetary and other inducements to remain perpetually in positions. In other clime, ethnic, religious and other primordial sentiments are adopted by trade union leaders or aspirants to either remain in offices or to attain such positions.

It is the contention of this paper that trade unions should represent the shining model of democratic values in the society. By its nature and history, trade union represents the only available channel for the strengthening of the otherwise 'weak' member of the industrial society. It is, therefore, incumbent on trade unions to always strive in the protection and safeguarding of its members.

In another sense, strong democratic practice in the workplace would inevitable lead to the strengthening of the practice in the larger society. In the words of Yusuf (2003), workers who are accustomed to democratic practice in their workplaces would be averse to the absence of the same in their country. The lesson for us here is that our dream to witnessing real democracy in our country can be made possible through the enthronement of democratic practice in our trade unions, work organisations and even other spheres of life.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has touched on pertinent issues bothering on the role of trade unions in organisational development. We have argued that in view of its important role, trade unions represent the instrument and rallying point for the protection of the interest and general welfare of the working class. More importantly, that organisational development could be enhanced through constructive and progressive trade unionism. The following recommendations are hereby put forward as ways to reposition trade unionism as catalyst for organisational development in Nigeria:

- (a) There is the need for organisations to establish a strong and effective communication with their various units;
- (b) Nigerian organisations should also ensure worker participation in the running of their affairs through regular involvement of trade unions in important decision making. For instance, on issues concerning implementation of new pay policy, rationalization of workforce, introduction of new technology, among others;
- (c) Organisations should regard trade unions as important stakeholders in the day-to-day management. Consequently, there should be institutional fora for regular engagement between them.

- (d) Both the management and the unions should establish mutual trust between themselves. The absence of such trust would spell doom for the smooth running of the organisations and hence would impede organisational development.
- (e) Trade union leaders should ensure that they engage in constructive activism rather than combative or antagonistic unionism.
- (f) Trade unions should guarantee internal democracy within its fold.
- (g) Union leaders should also demonstrate proven honesty, integrity, accountability and transparency in their activities. Aspirants to these offices should be individuals who have these qualities. There should be objective and transparent succession to union positions.
- (h) Recruitment into the unions should be on the basis of commitment. Trade unions should actively seek to recruit committed members and in large number so as to ensure that they attain the status of mass organisations. The larger the numerical strength of a trade union, the more effective it would be able to perform its mandated role of protecting and safeguarding the interest of its members.
- (i) Trade unionism would serve as catalyst for organisational development only with a deliberate policy of continuous worker education. Through this programme, workers would be continuously involved in the activities of their unions and would be readily available to partake in activities towards organisational development.
- (j) Lastly, all existing trade unions in every work organisation should establish close linkage so as to ensure collaborative, co-operative and inter-dependent unionism for the overall interest of members.

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