

## **Organized Labour and the Quest for Social, Economic and Political Emancipation of Nigeria: A Critical Analysis**

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**Abstract:** *Organized Labour in Nigeria has been in the forefront in the continuous struggle for the social, economic and political emancipation of the country. This has been the norm from the nation's political independence in 1960 till date. Organized Labour in the country is now seen as the mouthpiece of the majority of the citizens of this country as Labour rises to their defense especially during adverse times. This paper x-rays the role of Organized Labour in the country in their efforts towards the social, economic and political upliftment of the nation. While it commends Labour for its efforts over the years in the struggle to give a voice to the Nigerian masses, the paper is of the considered opinion that it is not yet over as more of such determined efforts and genuine unselfish struggles are needed to be put in for the betterment of the lives of millions of Nigerians who over the years have been pushed to the level of hopelessness and near despair by purposeless, visionless, selfish and self-serving political administrations in the country.*

**Keyword:** *Organized Labour, quest, social, political emancipation, Nigeria, critical analysis*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Organized Labour in the country over the years has become very popular right from the nation's independence till date. This has become more and more pronounced as a result of lack of transparent political leadership in the country over the years. This unfortunate scenario has pushed Organized Labour into the fray, always engaging governments in perpetual struggles mainly on issues bothering on the welfare of the workers in particular and that of the generality of the Nigerian masses in general. This aspect of its unique role in the country has become so outstanding now that Labour has become copiously synonymous with struggles for the welfare of the Nigerian masses whether they are workers or not.

This remarkable role of Labour has made it so popular that the masses of this nation now look up to it for guidance and leadership especially during adverse times like those times when government come up with policies and programmes that Labour and the people see as being anti-people. The opinion of Labour at such trying times is considered very germane especially when expressed profoundly. Unfortunately for Organized Labour in the country, it has been misunderstood time and again especially by government and some economically privileged Nigerians who see them as being irrational, confrontational and reactionary most of the times.

The frequent strike actions embarked upon by Labour in the country over the years to press home one or the other has been heavily criticized by government and some Nigerians as being selfish and self-centered. However, Labour on its part has viewed its work-to-rule actions as part of its weapons of legitimate struggles towards the eradication of all forms of oppression in the country and the enthronement of welfarism and egalitarianism in the nation. Labour argues very vociferously that it usually embarks upon strikes as a last option when all other avenues for dialogue and interchange of healthy and rational ideas have been exhaustively exhausted. It equally argues that the only language that government hears and respects most of the times is that of strike and nothing more. Whether Labour is right or wrong in these struggles is to be determined by history and posterity.

## **2. LABOUR: ORIGIN AND DEFINITION**

The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of The English Language, Encyclopedic Edition (2004: 710) defines labour as "physical or mental exercise, particularly for some useful or desired end".

However the concept of Organized Labour strongly refers to the Organized Trade Union Movement. The history of the Organized Trade Union Movement in Nigeria dates back to the year 1912 when the workers in the Civil Service under the then Colonial administration organized 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 late General Murtala Muhammed, the number of Trade Unions in the country had risen to over 1000 which included even 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 polarized into ideological divides which was creating problems in the country. Towards the end of 1977, the unions were restructured into 42 along industrial lines. The government also insisted on the formation of a Labour centre as there were various multiple centers. In February 1978, the Nigeria Labour Congress was formed and inaugurated. The then 42 industrial Unions became affiliates of the Nigerian 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.

## **3. ORGANIZED LABOUR AND THE ECONOMY**

Many labour watchers are agreed on the undisputable opinion that the Organized Labour in Nigeria has contributed immensely to the amicable resolution of major economic issues, development of appropriate national economic blue prints and prevention of more severe economic consequences for the country as a result of policy and action initiatives by those who control state power. Perhaps it may not be out of place to argue that Organized Labour has equally contributed to raising the living standards of not just Nigerian workers alone but that of the entire population. Some instances to buttress this argument will be apt. Let us take the issue of national minimum wage. It is a well fact that workers both in the public and private sectors in the country do not receive wages that are commensurate with their labour. However, the situation would have been worse but for heroic struggles of Organized Labour in the country. It is to the credit of Organized Labour that the issue of national minimum wage has become a legislated issue in the country. Agitation for increment in remuneration by workers remains a very critical issue in the country. First of all, workers offer their labour which to a very large extent help in the nation's development. In that context, workers deserve the very best of treatment from the very establishment they offer service for many years that they work. Again, the global economic meltdown has truly undermined the economies of virtually all the nations of the world. The workers are among the worst hit. Offering workers improved conditions of service can only improve their productivity. This is a well-known fact. It will also not be out of place to state that the Nigerian worker as a key player in the Nigerian socio-political sphere has so many dependents that rely on him for economic support. This is purely in line with the African philosophy of one being his brother's keeper. This is a duty placed on him by nature and tradition. He must not shrink from this time – honoured responsibility. He therefore deserves a living wage which will obviously spur him to greater productivity. Anything other than that is sheer impoverishment and in fact enslavement which must be stoutly resisted. Since we have a very poor reward system in the country, Organized Labour must keep up the struggle for improving the living conditions of its members in particular and Nigerians in general periodically.

The struggle by Organized Labour particularly the Nigeria Labour Congress against former President Ibrahim Babangida's obnoxious Structural Adjustment programme (SAP) is well known. The same union also resisted the then military government's subtle move to take a World Bank/IMF loan. The union actively took part in the debate offering a strong opposition to the government's view which was favourably disposed towards obtaining the loan. Though the military dictatorship then under General Babangida eventually adopted the SAP policies and

measures, Organized Labour provided not a lily-livered opposition to the imposition of SAP on helpless and hapless Nigerians. It is certainly true that the introduction of SAP and its anti-people components helped to greatly undo the nation's economy which is still crawling till today many years after independence.

Perhaps the most auspicious contribution of Organized Labour to national redemption and development can be viewed in terms of historic and momentous opposition to the unbridled quest by the ruling class to increase fuel prices at their own whims and caprices. It is on record according to Alubo (2007: 18) that from January 6 1978 to May 27 2007, the various regimes in the country increased fuel prices 18 times. Organized Labour led several protests against many of these increases in concert with other Civil Society groups. Indeed Organized Labour has become the rallying point against such ostentatious, irrational and incessant increases over the years which has ultimately served one major purpose which is to impoverish the common man and to increase the wealth of the members of the ruling class, their humanistic posturing notwithstanding. Though Organized Labour has lost much in terms of human and material resources on these struggles, it remains so strong and undeterred in its resolve to carry on the struggle unabated.

Perhaps, it will be irrational to talk about Organized Labour and the nation's economy without discussing the last nationwide strike by workers. The nation woke upon on the First of January this year with the news that petroleum motor spirit (pms) popularly called petrol has been fully deregulated in the country. The Petroleum Products Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPPRA) announced N141 as the new pump price of fuel in the country. The announcement threw the entire nation into a temporary turmoil as the price of fuel sporadically shot up with many filling stations adjusting their pump price to as much as N250. Nigerians groaned in utter anguish as life began for many of them on a very torrid lane on the first day of the year.

The reaction of Labour and Civil Society was prompt. They asked the Federal Government to revert to the old pump price of N65 to avert a total and indefinite strike.

The Federal Government was adamant and vowed not to bow down to Labour's threat. On Monday 9<sup>th</sup> January, the Nigeria Labour Congress, the Trade Union Congress and the Civil Society began an orchestrated indefinite strike and street protests which almost brought the nation to its knees. Despite all appeals and entreaties to Labour and Civil Society to call off the strike and street protests and open up negotiation with the government, they were adamant and refused to back down insisting that the Federal Government should revert to the old price of N65 before it can negotiate. However, after so many pleadings from well-meaning citizens, Labour eventually changed its initial hard stance and eventually decided to come to the negotiation table. After series of protracted negotiations with the Federal Government, the Federal Government unilaterally announced a reduction in the pump price of petrol from N141 to N97. Labour on their own came up with an announcement later suspending the one week old strike calling on all workers to resume work the next day.

The lessons derivable from the last nation-wide strike are many and varied. From all intents and purposes, the timing of the implementation of the deregulation policy was manifestly faulty. Government had started a process of consultations with stakeholders in the country and should have brought it to a logical conclusion before the hasty and ill-tempered implementation. Perhaps, government should have considered the option of implementing the deregulation in phases which many Nigerians were favorably disposed to. This perhaps would have given it the ample opportunity of fixing our refineries and also encourage willing investors to establish new ones and also put in place other deregulation incentives for the well-being of the masses.

It is astonishing to note that our political leaders have come to the sudden realization of the truism that accountability is the hallmark of any true democracy. It will also not be out of place to point out that in every true and enduring democracy, consensus is a key component. It is indeed a welcome development that immediately after the strike, Government started the long awaited process of sanitizing the Oil Industry in the country. The success of the current investigation will go a long way in giving Nigerians hope. No effort should be spared in unraveling the obnoxious activities of unpatriotic Nigerians in that sector and their unholy collaborators who through their dubious and shady deals have massively defrauded the nation of billions of Naira and left her in

the economic quagmire it has found itself today. It is highly unthinkable that Nigeria being the 6<sup>th</sup> highest oil producing nation in the world today has little or nothing to show for this natural endowment as her dubious citizens who over the years have found themselves in the corridors of power have recklessly cornered the nation's oil wealth, leaving millions of Nigerians hapless and almost hopeless and the nation in very pitiable and unimaginable condition.

#### **4. ORGANIZED LABOUR AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE ENTHRONEMENT OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA**

According to Okaneme (2010:25), "democracy is the highest attribute of any political authority, regime or system". Democracy is simply defined as government of the people, by the people and for the people. Democracy is all about providing purposeful, caring and selfless political leadership. The basic task of political leadership is to increase the standard of living and the quality of life for all stakeholders in the polity positively. According to Dike (2009:10 -11)

A good leader weighs the pros and cons of any policy action and acts with restraint if the harmful effects of any policy outweigh the benefits and uses appropriate policies to ameliorate their sufferings.

Democracy indeed is a people-oriented system of government. In democracy, people determine to a large extent their political destiny. They choose those to represent them freely. Unfortunately the Nigerian democratic story has not been a very wonderful and positive one at all. Indeed Nigerian democracy has had a very horrendous history. Democracy has over the years served more the interests of our selfish and self-serving politicians who venture into politics not to serve but to enhance their economic well being and ultimately alleviate their debilitating poverty. It is for this singular reason that our democratic space is open to all manner of people who masquerade as politicians and look for every available opportunity to swindle the nation and her citizens. The qualities of people who make themselves available to vie for elective positions remain a serious source of worry to all right thinking Nigerians. Even appointive positions in the nation are not usually reserved for citizens who display rare aristocratic traits but are usually reserved for party loyalists whose moral and intellectual capacities and proven ability to deliver are not duly taken into account. Needless to say that the nation is the greatest sufferer, as it continues to wallow in unmitigated underdevelopment and cannot compete favorably with other nations of the world.

Organized Labour in the country has contributed severally and significantly towards the enthronement of genuine and people-oriented democracy in Nigeria. Alalade (2004: 25) firmly agrees to this assertion. Organized Labour was in the forefront on the clamour for the democratization of the nation during the dark days of seemingly endless military rules. It has also contributed massively to the growth of democracy in the country through massive education of its members on the need for them to vote during elections. It has equally taken part in several electoral debates towards enthroning a healthy democratic culture in the nation.

Perhaps, Nigerians will not forget in a hurry Labour's role on the ill-fated 1993 Presidential election conducted in the country. On June 12 1993, the nation had a presidential election which was widely believed to have been won by Chief M.K.O Abiola who contested under the platform of Social Democratic Party (S.D.P). Unfortunately, that election which was adjudged to be the freest and fairest election ever held in the country then was annulled under very bizarre and hazy circumstances by the then military ruler, General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida. Organized Labour and Civil Society rose to the occasion and massively pressured the government to de-annul the election. Though the campaign could not achieve its ultimate purpose which was to get the government to rescind its decision of annulling that election and respect the wish of the citizens as was expressed in the result of the election, it surely cleared the way for that particular government to vacate office as it had lost the confidence and acceptability of the people. Perhaps it could be said without fear of contradiction that that particular struggle set the stage for the enthronement of democracy which was finally achieved on May 29<sup>th</sup> 1999 when the military finally handed over the leadership of the country to a democratically elected government thus bringing to a perpetual halt, the long reign of the military in the country with its attendant harmful effects.

Organized Labour has really assumed the position of the defender of the oppressed and common man over the years in the country. It has indeed given hope to majority of Nigerians who have

overtime been excluded, traumatized, marginalized, oppressed, exploited, abused, and short-changed. It has through its actions and utterances made Nigerians to believe strongly that a better and resurgent Nigeria is both possible and realizable. Indeed Organized Labour has become a bastion of hope for the masses of this nation. This is explained in terms of the fact that whenever there is an unfavourable government policy, people usually waits for Labour's reaction before they know their next line of action. This surely paints a clearer picture of Labour's leadership role in the nation.

## **5. LOW POINTS**

It has not really been all rosy for Organized Labour in the country. While it has achieved much in the struggle for the economic and democratic emancipation of the country, it has equally had its low points as a human organization. Organized Labour's lack of consistency in policy support in some cases is a source of worry. In 1983, the Nigeria Labour Congress mounted a serious opposition to the plans by government then to privatize some establishments in the country. 20 years after, precisely in 2003, the same union changed the tune of the music by accepting the policy of privatization. Its members even served on government's privatization committee. Perhaps it was this tacit approval by the union that encouraged Obansajo's regime to engage in the brazen and scandalous privatization exercise that smacks of greed and orchestrated and wanton distribution of the nation's assets to cronies and loyalists. Again the NLC got it totally wrong in the build-up to the 2003 general elections when it declared that it would support whatever results that emerged from the elections. Of course, the build up to the 2003 general elections was totally faulty and it surely produced one of the worst general elections the country has ever witnessed. The 2003 general elections which were massively rigged led the way to the shambolic display which was witnessed in 2007 general elections where votes were arbitrarily allocated to contesting parties and their candidates making nonsense of the efforts of millions of Nigerians who trooped out to exercise their civic duty.

Perhaps one other low point of Organized Labour in the country is the frequent and incessant recourse to work-to-rule action popularly called strikes. Many commentators on national issues readily argue that labour frequently embarks on strike at the slightest provocation. Labour on its part argues that government is not always favorably disposed to dialogue hence its constant recourse to strikes. No matter how plausible this argument may appear to be, it must be noted that there are still other available options which Labour should always explore before dabbling into strike. Labour should endeavour to use strike as the last option when all other options have been used and they fail to achieve meaningful purpose in resolving trade disputes.

## **6. THE WAY FORWARD**

Politics in Nigeria has followed a negative systematic pattern from the time of independence till now. It has largely been characterized by all manner of absurdities. According to Omoregbe (2007: 144)

Politics in Nigeria since independence has generally followed the Machiavellian line of separating politics from morality. We are made to believe that politics and morality do not go together, that once a person starts playing politics, he must ignore morality.

In view of the foregoing, Labour should consider being further involved in the nation's political sphere with a view to bringing sanity to the system. To this end, Labour should as a matter of urgency work towards strengthening of the Labour Party which is its own brainchild towards being a very formidable party in the nation's polity. With the mammoth number of workers in the country and the number of sympathizers to its cause, there is no gainsaying the fact that Labour Party can be a political force to be reckoned with. If Britain can have a Labour Party that is highly formidable, there is no reason why Labour Party here in Nigeria cannot also be formidable. It is hoped that Labour through its political party can provide the much needed political emancipation that the nation badly needs at this critical period of the nation's political history.

One of the greatest negative legacies that the present democratic dispensation has bequeathed to the country is that of having jumbo salaries and allowances being paid to elected and appointed political office holders. Despite all the hues and cries in the country against this obnoxious

phenomenon, it has continued unabated. Till date, the nation uses a larger chunk of its income to pay politicians and their cronies. Just last week, it was reported that the House of Representatives approved a new N38.8Bn jumbo allowance for its members, placing each of its 360 members on a quarterly special pay of N27m. This is aside other allowances that are due to them on a regular basis. This is simply outrageous and anachronistic for a nation that finds it increasingly difficult to pay a decent and living wage to its working class. Labour must take up the gauntlet and fight to prevent our greedy politicians from further milking of this nation. Nigeria belongs to all of us and we all must strive to save it from economic collapse through the recklessness of our greedy and self-serving politicians.

Labour should engage more in broad-based agitations that will benefit a greater majority of Nigerians other than embarking on struggles that will benefit its members only. In this context, it should be highly commended for its leading role against the fuel price increment last January. Labour stood by the masses and fought for their common interest despite all threats and even overtures. Standing by the people in such trying moments will continue to make Labour the hope of the masses in our nation. Labour should therefore endeavour to stand by the downtrodden masses of this nation who have been psychologically brutalized and traumatized by poor and deceitful administrations in the country.

## 7. CONCLUSION

It is an agreed truism that Organized Labour in Nigeria has made some critical and landmark contributions in the arduous quest and struggles for social, economic and political emancipation of Nigeria. This fact is agreed to by millions of Nigerians whose lives have been positively affected by Organized Labour's struggles over the years. However, more needs to be done since the nation is still under the tight grip of political mercenaries who do not have the interest of the nation at heart but are highly determined to bleed it to death economically using politics as a tool for this purpose. To this end, Labour should close ranks with its affiliate unions in order to produce a formidable front. Some of its affiliate unions like Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) which have a very strong intellectual and ideological base should be consulted regularly for progressive ideas on how to carry on the struggle.

Labour should be mindful and conscious of its relations with government. While it is not being advocated that it should have a cat and dog relationship with the government of the day, it should equally make sure that it doesn't consciously or unconsciously sell itself out to the powers that be by trying to show unnecessary allegiance. Labour should note that it owes allegiance to the masses and not necessarily to any government who may be out to deceive and cajole it into abandoning its legitimate struggles. While commending Organized Labour for a job well done so far in the country, it must be reminded that there is still so much work to be done. Nigeria as a country is still under the clutches of political brigands and mercenaries and therefore needs total and unconditional economic and political emancipation. The masses of this country look up to it for this '*miracle*'. It cannot afford to fail in this regard as the downtrodden citizens have no other hope than Organized Labour.

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