

APPRAISAL OF THE ROLE OF ORGANIZED LABOUR IN THE STRUGGLE FOR NIGERIA'S INDEPENDENCE, 1945-1960.

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ABSTRACT

A modest acquaintance with the history of colonialism in Nigeria will show that from the onset it had provoked resistance from the citizens. Colonialism nullified dissent and political freedom hence it aroused attack from not just the politicians but also trade unionists who remained steadfast and unbowed all through the period it lasted. The various labour crises during our period of study, though economic in outlook had some political undertone; a rejection of the colonial system. The Trade Union Ordinance was one of the measures employed by the colonial authorities to whittle labour from de-colonization process. Labour leaders were also incarcerated to intimidate them from joining forces with the nationalist movement. Although there is a growing literature on labour movement, it does not seem to have sufficiently addressed labour's role towards the attainment of independence. This paper intends not only to interrogate such a role but to also put it in historical perspective so as to fill the noticed gap. Since the topic cuts across other disciplines such as political science, economics, sociology, public administration etc, the paper used inter – disciplinary approach for self-enrichment. It affirms that there was a synergy between nationalists and labour which gave rise to independence in 1960. It also avers that while the 1945 General Strike sowed the seed of labour independence struggle the blood of the colliery workers stain in 1949 watered it into fruition. From 1945 through 1960 witnessed a combative nationalism and aggressive labour activism which wrestled power from the colonial rulers on October 1, 1960.

INTRODUCTION

Labour unionism, as it is known today in Nigeria, was not evidenced before 1912. However, there were isolated organisations or guilds of craftsmen in various empires and kingdoms that were later to coalesce into the Nigerian nation. With the colonization of Nigeria in 1900, the colonial rulers introduced far-reaching innovations that would encourage the emergence of a functional labour force in the country. The monetization of the economy created the irresistible need for wage employment amongst the citizens who initially did not make careers out of the 'Whiteman's job' – *oru oyibo*. The introduction of capitalist monopoly firms and the tax policy of the Colonial Government with emphasis on raw cash dragged Nigerians to wage labour. Members of the emergent labour force were forced to form unions so as to protect, promote and defend their collective interests in the face of unbridled exploitation by their expatriate employers. In the opinion of S.O. Osoba, "one of the major manifestations of the disruptive and destabilising influences of colonial rule was the emergence of some form of working class movement nurtured on grievances and discontent"¹. It is possible that Nigeria workers were drawn and incorporated into the political economy essentially not for their benefits but for those of the metropolitan government. This created a class of men who owned neither property nor means of production and therefore relied on the sale of their labour power for survival. This created a scenario where the government was seen to represent the oppressors – the capitalists, and labour the oppressed. By and large, this appears to afford a striking confirmation that both bourgeois and the state were bound by common interest of exploiting the working class which inspires the resistance option of the latter. The paper will hopefully enrich our store of knowledge of the contributions of labour in partnership with the nationalists in dismantling, colonial role in Nigeria.

WHAT IS LABOUR?

It may be pertinent to start by defining labour so as to establish a firm grasp of the discourse of this paper. The term labour union has deservedly elicited divergent definitions as no one applies to all societies across time and space. For instance, Collins Modern Encyclopaedia has defined it as "an association of employees in a particular trade, formed principally for purpose of collective bargaining over terms of employment and conditions of work"². R.B. Davison appears to agree with this when he states that "trade unions are organisations of workers designed to improve the working conditions of their members"³. Emeka Wogu, the current Minister of Labour and Productivity defines the term as "workers who supply their mental, physical and other innate

abilities in exchange for wages and other benefits”⁴. In the Nigerian context, these definitions appear narrow just as that of F. Adewunmi which opines that “trade unionism is an investment in the strength of the collectivity as against the weakness, if not the vulnerability of the individual”⁵. To this paper, labour is an umbrella body of working class people formed to protect, promote, defend and extend socio-economic and political interests of its membership and those of the larger society.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The role of labour in the political process the world over has been a subject of debate between the Marxists and the non-Marxists who view such from different ideological prisms. The former believe that labour possesses an enormous political potential to remain apolitical as suggested by the latter which sees the role of labour as not only non-political but productive both in time and space. This is contrary to the view that man is more productive in an atmosphere of political freedom. Owing to labour’s strategic location in Nigeria’s economy, the colonial administration wanted it shielded from the ‘dissonant’ voices of the nationalists. However, it was difficult to confine labour unions’ activism to economic realm only because the colonial government’s attitude towards them was more political than economic. Furthermore, the economic woes of labour membership were believed to be a direct consequence of the political domination of Nigeria by the colonial rulers. Aristotle’s assertion that ‘man is a political animal’ would appear to have incensed the political consciousness of the workers all the more. Labour’s involvement in the anti-colonial struggles to end the system’s racial prejudice, deprivations and domination is, therefore, justifiable. This is because there existed organic linkage between labour’s welfare and political freedom hence it synergized with the nationalists to bring colonialism to a richly deserved end in 1960.

LABOUR IN THE PRE-1945 GENERAL STRIKE PERIOD

The Colonial Government seems to have viewed the formation of labour unions in Nigeria with considerable disapproval as their activities were likely to destabilize the system. The enactment of the Trade Union Ordinance of 1938 which legalised the multiplicity of mushroom trade unions was probably to play one union off against another. It can further be asserted that “the ordinance was to enhance the separation of trade union activities from politics of nationalism and Pan-Africanism”⁶. It can, therefore, be said that the ordinance was no more

than a counterplot to dissuade labour from using its mass appeal in support of the nationalist struggles.

However, the post-Second World War economic hardship and the exploitative tendencies of the colonial government seemed to have stimulated the growing consciousness about unity among the three existing labour fronts –the Nigeria Civil Service Union (NCSU), the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Railway Workers’ Union (RWU). It should be recalled that the NCSU, an offshoot of the Southern Nigeria Civil Service Union founded by Henry Libertin 1912, came into being in 1914 following the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates, while the NUT and the RWU were formed in 1931 and 1932, respectively. Having developed some degree of consciousness, visible efforts were made by the labour leaders to forge one formidable central labour front to co-ordinate the activities of the movement. It was in the Trade Union Congress formed by 1942 that the NCSU, NUT and RWU sunk their identities. Hitherto, the NUT having drawn its membership from mission school seemed opposed to the material things of this world and was therefore less militant and less-vibrant. This new position of the NUT was all the more surprising because teachers had earlier been “anaesthetised into accepting that it was godliness working without caring for gain and the greatest good of a labourer was storing up rewards only in heaven”⁷.

In what appears to be a reaction to this development, Osoba persuasively argued that “a number of factions combined from the beginning of the 1940s to change drastically the tenor and tempo of trade union activity from the timid, almost laissez-faire passivity of the earlier decades to the combative uncompromising style of the 1940s onwards”⁸. Put differently, the attitude of both the colonial government and the expatriate firms to the Nigerian worker would seem to have stirred up the revolt instinct in the latter. According to E.E. Urieghara, “the Nigerian worker had to face, and so reacted and fought against not only unjust unemployment conditions but also against foreign rule, foreign employers and sometimes racial discrimination”⁹. It has further been argued that “the interest of organised labour in the de-colonization politics was rather predicated on the belief that the expulsion of foreign rule was a necessity since workers had come to view their low wages, poor working conditions and indignities at the hand of white employers both public and private, as arising directly from the colonial situation”¹⁰.

The nature of role of labour in the Nigeria is predicated on the historical experience and political culture. Its colonial experience would seem to have greatly influenced labour activism in

Nigeria. The colonial authorities in Nigeria as elsewhere, saw labour not just as an instrument but also an object of exploitation. Such a development appears to have created a mutual feeling of separation and distrust between the two groups of people. W.Oyemakinde, probably in reaction to these frosty government –labour relations observed that “the former reads subversion into the conduct of the latter and the former is suspected of economic exploitation”¹¹

THE IMPORT OF THE STRIKE TO NATIONALISM

The post World war years provided a litmus test for the government –labour interface. The war unleashed spiral inflation as a result of which the real wages of workers fell. This development not only emphasized the distinction between the white employers and the black employees but also appeared to have sharpened the combative instinct of the latter. The Nigerian workers’ demand for enhanced wages and salaries euphemistically referred to as the cost of living allowance (COLA) provided the *casus belli* for the 1945 strike. While the Colonial Government reviewed upwards the pay packet of white employees, it treated “the COLA demand as a Lagos agitation and not a Nigerian problem”¹². With the government failure to address the COLA demand, the RWU under the leadership of a young radical, daring apprentice turner M.A.O.Imoudu successfully spearheaded a nation-wide strike on June 21, 1945.

The 45 -day strike paralysed the economy and also marked the beginning of the end of the structures of the colonial government. In other words, the strike gave a far- reaching flip to political activism of the nationalists. It has been argued that it “had a collateral impact on the anti-colonial struggles of the forties and fifties. The subsequent trial and conviction of the leaders of the strike invested them with a halo of martyrdom, turning them into heroes in the popular mind and providing further rallying point for nationalist struggles of the period”¹³. The struggle to actualise the COLA can be said to have fed into the popular agitation of the nationalist politicians as well as general discontent against the colonial authorities. E. Isichei, in her own contribution, argues that “... the General Strike of 1945 gave force to the demands of the nationalist movement”¹⁴. It may, therefore, be permissible to assert that the 1945 labour strike played a vital role in the mobilization and awakening of combative consciousness of Nigerians against colonial rule.

The resounding success of the strike would appear to have reinforced the general belief that concerted pressure was capable of dismantling colonial rule in Nigeria. This development engendered some sort of alliance between labour and the nationalist political parties which had come to link mass sufferings and deprivations with the colonial system of exploitation. Reacting

to this, T.Fashoyin observed that “the relationship between political parties and workers’ union during the colonial period was considerable”¹⁵. The overt support of the *West African Pilot* and the *Daily Comet* –the two media organs of the nationalist politicians to the workers’ cause all the more strengthened their anti-colonial posture. It is not unlikely that this development drew some radical and militant unionists like Imoudu and Gogo Chu Nzeribe into the membership of the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC).

On the other hand, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the leaders of the Action Group (AG) is said to have cut his political teeth in the Trade Union Movement where he served as the secretary/editor of *The Nigerian Workers*, the official media outfit of the Trade Union Congress¹⁶. The influence of the more leftist parties-the NCNC, the AG, and the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) on labour appears overwhelming that “...most of the member unions had decided to secede from the TUC if the Congress should sever its connection with the NCNC”¹⁷. It may, therefore, be plausible to observe that “this unprecedented mass rebellion (the General Strike) with unflinching solidarity accentuated the struggle for independence as the TUCN stood a ready instrument for nationalist movements”¹⁸. It can further be said that the strike derogated the sacredness of the colonial authorities hereby opening the floodgate of subsequent activities which weakened the fabric of British rule in Nigeria.

THE COLLIERY SHOOTING INCIDENT OF 1949 AND NATIONALISM

The success of the General Strike of 1945 would appear to have sent a clear signal to the Colonial Government that workers’ industrial agitations were assuming increasing political dimensions. In reaction, the colonial administrators came to view any labour’s threat of strike in furtherance of conditions of employment with suspect. To the colonial government, strikes were politically motivated to destabilise and dislodge the administration; hence instruments of violence were often resorted to browbeat the strikers. The colliery workers had been reeling under harrowing pains of exploitation occasioned by the post- Second World War spiral inflationary trend. The unheeded miners’ demand for upward review of their emolument left them with the option of strike. Akpala Agwu has persuasively argued that “workers at the colliery had learnt to use strikes in buttressing their demands as far back as in the 1920s prior to the official enactment of the Trade Union Ordinance of 1938”¹⁹.

The emergence of Okwudili Ojiyi and Russell Bracegirdles as the leader and the manager of the Coal Workers' Union and the Coal Industry, respectively, seems to have sharpened the labour-management conflict in the sector. It is to be noted that Ojiyi's rising profile and richness of thought as the miners' leader had become worrisome to the Colliery Management which sought to deflate same in the interest of the continued exploitation of human and natural resources of the country. In this regard, the Management used ubiquitous labour policies such as sackings, black-listing, lock-outs not just to hold down strikes but also to discredit union representatives. The wanton exploitation perpetrated by the colliery management irked also the nationalists whose support for the Nigerian workers was perspicuous. It has been noted that "in 1949 the NCNC demanded for a five shillings minimum wage for the Nigerian workers, a request which endeared it to the workers"²⁰.

In furtherance of the demand for better working and living standards, the coal miners embarked on 'a sit-down strike'. It has to be pointed out that within the colonialists' circle, there was a growing suspicion that strikes in the colonies were no more industrial disputes but political agitations. However, it would be wrong to believe that, although the miners' strike was not instigated by the nationalists, they (miners) were unaware of the ferment of nationalist ideas. To the British, the use of naked force was not only urgent but also desirable to separate the two. According to Isichei, "on 18 November 1949, decades of injustice and bad labour relations reached a bloody finale in what is euphemistically called the Enugu Colliery Shooting incident when 21 miners were killed and 51 were wounded"²¹. Not unnaturally, the shooting incident attracted condemnation from all the strata of the society. The entire Nigerian populace was outraged and there followed "a nation-wide furore over this dastardly act perpetrated by the colonial authorities in Enugu..."²².

The import of this incident lay not so much in the reforms for the industrial sector occasioned by it but in the political impact. The whole issue was no longer being seen from labour perspective but an act perpetrated because of the political domination of Nigeria by Britain. In consequence, R. Sklar has persuasively argued that "no previous event evoked a manifestation of national consciousness comparable to the indignation generated by this tragedy."²³. It has also been noted that "tragic as the events at Enugu were, there is a lesson to be learnt from them which if learnt by the government and the people will not leave that tragedy as a mere waste of life or a bitter memory"²⁴. It may be reasonable to assert that that event revolted the

minds of many nationalists and workers and gave impetus to the accelerated tempo of anti-colonial movement. At this point in time, the shooting incident which was targeted at nipping the perceived labour unrest in the bud turned out to inspire a political campaign against colonial rule in general.

The whole episode appears to represent a symbol of Nigerian heroism and opposition which encouraged labour and nationalist militancy of the 1940s and 1950s. Nduka Eze, one of the Zikists and a radical labour official, would seem to have captured the mood of the nation in his persuasive explanation of the situation. He asserted, that “the radicals and the moderates, the revolutionaries and the stooges, the bourgeoisie and the workers sank their differences, remember the word ‘Nigeria’ and rose in revolt against evil and inhumanity”²⁵. The publicity given to the incident aroused international condemnation of the dastardly violation of labour rights in Nigeria.

In Britain, the ruling Labour Party was openly embarrassed and had to face severe criticisms of both the USA and the Soviet Union which mounted serious pressure on Britain to quickly dissolve its empire in Africa. Given this, development both “politicians and nationalists found a new justification for their demand for an early termination of the British rule in Nigeria”²⁶. It is, therefore, hardly open to doubt that the shooting incident not only vitiated the already bad labour relations in the colliery but equally destroyed the very goal it was set to achieve.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE COLLIERY STRIKE

In the face of both local and international criticisms, the colonial authorities were forced to inaugurate the W. J. Fitzgerald Commission of Enquiry to investigate the labour crisis in the colliery. It is not surprising that the outcome of the enquiry was no less unfortunate than the event that gave rise to it. This is because, the result was no more than a formal vindication of the colliery management. This result notwithstanding, it can be asserted that the use of brute force against defenceless and helpless workers who, as it were, were using their legitimate instrument to hanker for better employment conditions showed that the police had the authority of the colonial rulers.

Frightened by the political impact of labour-nationalist alliance, the colonial rulers took other measures to hold down the tempo and tenor of independence struggles, for instance, the subsequent development in the area of the Nigerian Constitution seem to have been directed to douse and trim the labour involvement in the political process of the country. The Macpherson Constitution of 1951 was all in an effort to regionalise both political parties and labour.

Furthermore, the regionalisation policy would appear to have been targeted not just against the nationalists but also intended to weaken the operational capability of labour whose leadership was drawn from across the regional lines. In spite of all the British manoeuvres, events moved rapidly to their logical outcome as “on July 2, 1960, the British Parliament passed the Nigerian Independence Act of 1960”²⁷. Following this, colonialism was finally dismantled on October 1, 1960, when Nigeria became an independent and sovereign nation.

RESULTS

The discriminatory attitude of the colonial authorities to Nigerian workers with respect to their welfare *viz-a-viz* their white counterparts sharpened the formers combative instinct which resulted in the 1945 General Strike. The strike, it is interesting to observe, gave a far-reaching flip to the nationalists’ clamour for independence. It galvanized and conscientized both the nationalists and citizenry about the exploitation and deprivation occasioned by the colonial system.

The use of instruments of violence to browbeat labour into docility and submission backfired no exemplified by the colliery shooting of 1949 nor did sackings, black – listing, lock – out and never would. The reaction of the colonial government to the miners’ strike was political hence it drew condemnation not just from the miners but also the politicians as well as the international community.

The Macpherson Constitution of 1951 which regionalized the country was perhaps the last effort by the colonial rulers to cling to power in Nigeria. This notwithstanding, their days had been numbered as the British Parliament gave its nod to Nigeria’s independence a few years later. Given this, labour’s role in dismantling colonialism can, therefore, be hardly exaggerated.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

When in 1912, the first notable labour union -the Southern Nigerian Civil Service Union-SNCSU, was formed, it was but an effete elitist union dominated and controlled by high profile non-nationals who were pro- establishment, non-combative and non-militant. The 1938 Trade Union Ordinance intended to regulate and censor labour militancy backfired as it rekindled the spirit of vibrancy and militancy especially the RWU. The WWII brought about the revolutionary transformation of both the labour and the nationalist movements in Nigeria. The dislocation caused by the transition from a war time to a peace time economy and the dashed

aspirations heightened labour militancy. The attendant strike of 1945 led to some sort of inspiration to the political leaders. It has been argued that “emerging labour union struggles with the general political struggles has helped labour and opposition groups to exact certain gains along with general political progress.”²⁸

It can be said that the nationalist consciousness of Nigeria was stirred up and sustained by workers especially the Railway men who were more or less itinerant workers. From the Railway stations, the anti-colonial ferment permeated into the hinterland. The colliery shooting incident, just like the 1945 strike, set in motion a mighty voice of dissent that not only pervaded the nationalist movement but did a great harm to colonial rule in Nigeria. According to Gogo Chu Nzeribe, a one time General Secretary of the Labour Unity Front “the only real action for independence came from the trade union movement”²⁹. It may, therefore, be plausible to assert that the two events, more than anything else, enormously eroded the foundation of colonialism in Nigeria and gave impetus to the emergence of radical nationalism which earned the country independence on October 1, 1960.

It is clear from the findings of this paper that one of the areas of disagreement between labour and colonial government is located in the discrimination of the former by the latter. Labour should not be shielded from taking active part in the politics of land given the experience of the colonial era when both the nationalists and labour activists pool their energies, resources and wit to wrestle power from the colonial rulers. Governance is quite a serious matter to be left in the hands of politicians whose sense of patriotism is sometimes questionable. Labour because of its mass appeal can be seen to represent a force to work with rather than suppressed.

The colonial government had the tendency to see itself not just as an employer of labour but a state wielding the big stick. Because the government had a misconception of its role, it resorted to coercive instruments, intimidation and other obnoxious policies to short change labour instead of addressing its grievances.

It is hoped that the work would stir labour into taking a critical self-examination and prod it to further positive political activism which would serve as a stimulus to future labour activists.

Labour and politics critically examined can provide succinctly the inter-relationship between the two in Nigeria's quest for nationhood. Nigeria's political leadership should partner with labour for the growth and development of the country rather than sidelining it in the political process. This is all the more necessary because labour is not just a viable tool for the

implementation of government policy plans but also the vanguard of the agitation for democratic rule and good governance in Nigeria. It is in this way that participation which is the hallmark of democracy can be entrenched.

In recent years, the Ministers of Health and Works have had to be drawn from experts in the field. The same should apply to the Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity as a sure way of facilitating the state – labour relations management which is important for political stability.

It is suggested that occasional interactive fora be organised by the government. The boardroom dialogue will certainly afford the government an insight into the problems of labour and create fora for the accommodation of the interests of the party with superior logic.

ENDNOTES

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