



RESEARCH ARTICLE

ACTIVISM IN DEMOCRACY: THE ORGANIZED LABOUR IN NIGERIA AND MASS PROTESTS SINCE 1999

Jatau David POLANG ¹, Changwak Emmanuel JONAH ²

¹Trade Unionist & Researcher, Association of Senior Civil Servants of Nigeria (ASCSN) National Secretariat Abuja. ² Department of History and International Studies, Nigeria Police Academy, Wudil – Kano State

ABSTRACT

It has been documented that labour Unions in Nigeria were part of the groups that fought the military regime for the return of democracy in 1999. The struggle by the labour unions was so intense that it invited the wrath of the military on the unions leading to the proscription and ban of some unions as well as victimization of trade unionists. Since the return of democracy in 1999, labour unions have taken to activism to protest certain government's policies perceived to be against the interests of the workers and masses. They seem to do this with a sense of ownership for the democracy they contributed in fighting for its return. The article aims at assessing the various struggles of the organized labour in Nigeria, for the rights of workers and masses during the twenty five years of Nigeria's democratic journey. The study adopts a multi-disciplinary approach. Data for the reconstruction was collected through oral interviews of some leaders and staff of the unions as well as data from the federal ministry of labour and employment, the body that mediates between the trade unions and employers in the event of industrial trade disputes and labour crises. These data was augmented with newspaper reports from the daily newspapers that reported some of the events between 1999 and 2024. The study finds that labour unions sustained their activism in advocating for a democracy that works for the benefit of workers and the masses throughout the democratic process of the fourth republic. The study recommends that trade unions should set aside leadership tussle and internal wrangling that diminishes its image before the public and focus on a sustained activism for the betterment of workers and the masses. Trade Union and Organized labour will be conceptualized for ease of understanding.

Keywords: Organized labour, trade union, activism, labour unionism.

Corresponding Author

Jatau David Polang: Email Address: jdpolang@gmail.com Telephone No. 08033916112.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

Following the restructuring exercise of 1978, trade unions in Nigeria became viable, active and vibrant. They participated in the democratic governance of second republic, getting the government to approve a national minimum wage, and for the declaration of 1st may as workers day in Nigeria for the first time in the history of trade unionism in the country. From 1984 however, the country returned to Military rule making trade unions and other civil liberty organizations to go underground. The return of democracy in 1999 has been attributed to the joint efforts and activism of trade unions, civil liberty organization and other pro-democracy groups. Since 1999, trade unions have jointly agitate for democratic governance and popular policies that impact positively on the workers and masses in the country.

This paper highlights the various efforts by trade unions and their labour centres-the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUC) in their quest for their members' welfare and popular government policies for the workers and generality of Nigerians. The paper is divided into six sections. The first section gives a focus for the paper in form of an introduction. The second section gives a conceptual understanding of the concept of trade union and organized labour. This is aimed at putting the key issues in perspective. The third section chronicles the various labour issues before 1999. The fourth section chronicles protests and struggles against government policies. The fifth section highlights organized labour's support for government policies perceived to be beneficial to the masses. Section sixth is the conclusion of the work and is so sub-titled.

Two concepts whose understanding would aid our discussion include trade or labour union and organized labour. The conceptualization of a Trade union by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the oldest agency of the United Nations Organization (UNO) established in 1920, to secure and maintain fair and humane conditions of labour for men, women and children, aimed at protecting the workers of all countries and to improve their working conditions (Buah,1974) is important in this discourse. The ILO sees Trade Union as "an organization of employees (Workers) usually associated beyond the confines of one enterprise, established for protecting or improving (through collective action), the economic and social status of its members" (ILO Report,1992). This definition of trade union among other things, explains why trade unions, despite their peculiar categorization in term of scope of membership, and their affiliation to trade centers such as in the NLC or TUC, act in concert collectively because if the economic and social status of workers of a particular sector, industry, or workplace is affected negatively, it will affect others socially based on the principle of inter-dependences of individuals in the society. This view is shared by Issa Aremu when he concurs that trade union are an organization formed mainly to protect workers at work through collective bargaining as well as serve as a means of expression for the workers view on the problems of the society (Aremu,1996). One of the oldest definitions of a trade union is the economic definition given by Sydney and Beatrice Webb. According to



them, the term refers to a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives (Sydney & Webb, 1961).

What is clear for now is that the term trade union has been defined in many ways by different authors. As defined in section 1(1) of the Trades Unions Act, CAP T14, Laws of the Federations of Nigeria (LFN) 2004, a Trade Union is a body comprising workers or employees, whether temporary or permanent, formed for the purpose of regulating the terms and condition of employment of the workers (Trade Union Act, 2004). Similarly, a trade union (or labour union) is an organization of workers or employees who have combined together to achieve common goals in areas such as in working conditions and protecting and promoting their mutual interests through collective action (Shrestha, 2012). Usually a trade union, through its leadership, bargains with the employer or the management on behalf of the union's members and negotiates labour contracts etc. The process of negotiating wages, work rules, complaint procedure and workplace safety is called collective bargaining.

This study agrees with the view that sees trade union as an organization of workers or employers established primarily to protect workers at work through collective bargaining as well as serve as a means of expression for the workers view on the problems of the society. This best describes the struggle of the organized labour in Nigeria as they agitate for the welfare of workers in form of a new national minimum wage, regular promotion for workers as well as protecting workers rights to remain in gainful employment. The protection of these rights extends to checkmating governments policies as it relates to pricing typically of petroleum and electricity.

The term organized labour is often used to refer to labour unions, should they decide at any point in time, and on any worker or national issue, to present a collective or joint front to fight against the scourge of anti-workers policy in the society (Aremu, 1996). Such issues may include policy of casualization of workers in the informal and formal sectors, segregation or discrimination of categories of workers, lack of payment of workers' entitlements, minimum wage struggle, insecurity and survival of industry, military dictatorship and petroleum price increments. In Asian Countries this term is called "Shunto" which refers to a joint action by wage earners for wage increase (Damachi, 1989).

The idea behind collective struggle is predicated on the fact that trade unions are formed on the universal principle that only through a collective action, represented by a trade union will workers become a force to be reckoned with within the work place, as well as in the society. One of Marx's well known axioms suggest that workers make "their own history, but do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by them, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (Bernstein, 2009). The organized labour is widely recognized as one of the most powerful and effective organs of political expression, and to that extent a dependable vehicle for the



protection and advancement of the economic interest and aspirations of the less privileged members and working groups in the society (Oghorodi, 1995).

From the forgoing therefore, if two or more labour unions jointly agree to forge a collective course on behalf of workers, they are said to be organized labour. The unions in Nigeria are all organized under the two main labour centres, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUC). While the NLC was created as part of the 1978 trade union restructuring exercise, the TUC came into being as a registered and recognized labour centre in 2005. Actions by the two labour centres represent the organized labour in Nigeria.

2.0. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF TRENDS AND CRITICAL ANALYSES

The Organized labour and the Nigerian Government before 1999

Since their reorganization in 1978, trade unions in both the public and private sectors had to embark on joint actions in form of protests and industrial strikes to press home their demand. These strikes were coordinated by the joint labour centres of Nigeria Labour Congress NLC and Trade Union Congress of Nigeria TUC and were carried out in states, at private companies or at the National stage. The belief was that an injury to one worker is an injury to all (Emmanuel, 2018). Many of these protests and strikes were as a result of Government's policies on fuel increases which have been frequent between 1978 to date, and such other policies that the organized labour perceived as anti-masses. In August 1983, the NLC planned a nation-wide strike action aimed at disrupting the 1983 general elections. It was fixed for 1st August of that year to protest nonpayment of salaries in some states of the federation for about six months.

Labour unions are in the habit of mobilizing the public over subsidy on oil. Government's effort to raise the price of petrol from 70k to N7.50k per liter in 1993 met opposition from trade unions who organized a nation-wide strike against that policy. The year 1993 also witnessed a nationwide strike action by the Association of Senior Civil Servants of Nigeria (ASCSN) over 45 percent salary increase. The news and reports of the strike action was relayed by the British Broadcasting Service (BBC) and Radio South Africa. The national and international reactions to the actions of the striking civil servants contributed to the fall of the exchange rate of the Naira (The Bureaucrat, 2005)

The interim government of Shonekan that came to power in November 1993 was thus forced to negotiate with the labour unions and subsequently reviewed the price of petroleum downward to N3.25k. Although the price was later readjusted to N11 per liter in 1994, this was done only after the central labour organization, and the NLC was disbanded by the Abacha regime (Awoniyi, 1996). Further increase in fuel price was done by Abdulsalami Abubakar regime from N11 to N25 per liter. The organized labour continued their resistance to such increment up till the return to democratic rule in 1999.



Another recurring issue that leads to strike actions by joint labour unions has been the national minimum wage issue. Each time a minimum wage is increased after intense struggle by labour unions, the federal and state governments always disagree with labour union on implementation. This often led to industrial actions in form of strikes which is sometimes nationwide and most times peculiar to states due to different state government's position on implementation. For example, in 1999, civil servants in Gombe, Niger and Taraba States civil service went on strike to seek implementation of new minimum wage (New Nigeria, 1999). Such protests and actions could be spontaneous and violent. In Gombe state, workers matched on top civil servants, stormed into a crucial meeting and in the process manhandled a Permanent Secretary (New Nigeria, 1991).

It is clear from above that various states in the country have also had their peculiar labour issues with some snowballing into industrial actions and strikes. Some of these include the Kano struggles that led to the recognition of May 1st by the then Abubakar Rimi led Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) government of Kano state in 1981 and in Kwara state, where workers under the NLC state council went on strike in 1995 and 1998 over nonpayment of workers' salaries (Metiboba, 2010). In many such instances, the Labour Centres coordinates the strikes in the states. In 1983 for example, the NLC planned a nationwide strike to protest nonpayment of salaries in some states of the federation. Most of the states could not pay salaries for up to 6 months. The nationwide strike was organized to take effect as from 1st August so as to disrupt that year's general election. It was aimed at drawing the attention of the federal Government and to ensure full payment of salaries in the affected states (Damachi, 1989).

In the year 2000, after the first increase in fuel price by president Obasanjo from 20 to 30 naira (see table below), the Labour Unions led by the NLC embarked on strike. The success of the fuel protests and strike was based on the fact that oil workers linked up with transport and public sector workers to ensure the strike was effective. As a result of the formidable posture and struggle put forward by the Labour, the Federal Government reduced the fuel price from 30 to 22 naira. The strike turned out to be the biggest strike since the end of military rule (Anisha, 2010). The increase in the prices of petroleum products become so frequent and annual since 1973 so that all Governments in the country from General Yakubu Gowon to President Bola Tinubu all increased the prices of the products during their tenure in office from 6kobo during General Yakubu Gowon in 1973 to 145 naira by President Mohammadu Buhari in 2016. Thus, between 1978 and 2016 the prices of fuel have been changed 27 times. These changes have had attendant impact on the workers and their dependents, and made the unions, as a class to mobilize against it in self-determination (Bernstein, 2009). On 29th May 2023, the newly inaugurated President Bola Ahmed Tinubu announced the removal of fuel subsidy leading to an astronomical increase in fuel price from N198 to N540 on 29th May, 2023, and from N540 to N617 in July, 2023 (Adeniyi, 2024).



Each change has witnessed virulent reaction by the labour unions in form of protests and strike actions.

Table 1: Fuel Price Changes 1973-2023

Head of State/ President	Fuel Price
Gowon	6k
Gowon	8.45k
Murtala	9k
Obasanjo	15.3k
Shagari	20k
Buhari	20k
Babagida	39.5k
Babagida	60k
Babagida	70k
Shonekan	₦5
Abacha	₦3.25k
Abacha	₦15
Abacha	₦11
Abubakar	₦25
Abubakar	₦20
Obasanjo	₦30
Obasanjo	₦22
Obasanjo	₦26
Obasanjo	₦42
Obasanjo	₦50
Obasanjo	₦65
Obasanjo	₦75
Yar'adua	₦65
Jonathan	₦97
Jonathan	₦87
Buhari	₦86.50k
Buhari	₦145.00
Buhari	₦198.00
Tinubu	₦540.00
Tinubu	₦617.00
Tinubu	₦898.00
Tinubu	₦1, 030. 00

Source: Daily Labour Newspaper Thursday 2nd June, 2016, 17 ISSN 118-8960; Author's FieldWork (2024).

3.0. PROTESTS AGAINST GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND ACTIONS

Trade unions across the public and private sectors are in the habit of struggling for their members' welfare in the workplaces. These struggles include bargaining for periodic national minimum wage for workers and asking for the implementation of promotions for members. In August 2001, the NLC mobilized one thousand protesters and besieged the National



Assembly to protest the Government's decision to provide between 25,000 and 35,000 dollars in furniture Allowances for each of the 469 members of the National Assembly at a time when the monthly minimum wage stood at approximately 30 dollar (Maier, 2000). This protest was well organized and coordinated. Already, trade unions had in the spirit of democracy activated a renewed zeal in engaging employers and government on the welfare of workers. Earlier in 2001, the joint unions of Petroleum and Tanker Drivers (PTD), Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas (NUPENG) and Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) protested in front of the headquarters of African Petroleum, AP located at the very busy Broad Street in Lagos over lack of promotion of the workers for over 10years. The chanting of Solidarity song made the newly appointed Managing Director (MD) of the African Petroleum (AP) to address the protesting workers. The gridlock caused by the protesting Unions made the then Lagos State Governor, Bola Ahmed Tinubu to invite the new Managing Director of the AP, Engr Abdullahi A. Sule to a meeting with the Lagos State Government (Sule, 2024).

In 2003, the federal government made moves to disengage workers in the public service. The Unions rejected the plan and staged a protest at the Office of the head of the Civil Service of the Federation. In 2004 alone, the organized labour declared a trade dispute against the Federal ministry of labour, Office of the head of Civil Service of the Federation and the Federal Civil Service Commission (FCSC) over lack of promotion in the civil service and the lack of vacancies in the Directorate cadre of the service (Polang, 2015).

Some of the trade disputes which later led to strike actions include 2004, when the Union embarked on strike that lasted for 1 week over the non-implementation of the monetization of fringe benefits, poor industrial relations practice and victimization of union officials as well as breaching of labour laws by the federal ministry of education (The Bureaucrat, 2004). In June 2005, the Federal Ministry of Labour and the Nigeria Bureau for Statistics were picketed and workers in Abuja protested over reforms in the Bureau that resulted in the sacking of some staff of the Bureau.

Again, in 2009, the Association of Senior Civil Servants of Nigeria union embarked on a 7 weeks strike over what the union termed 'unpatriotic project' initiated by President Obasanjo administration to 'auction the 104 Federal Unity Colleges'. For the Union, the unity colleges were a collective patrimony of all Nigerians to continue to nurture national unity while simultaneously serving as models for secondary education in Nigeria as envisioned by the first prime minister of the country, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa who founded the first three federal unity colleges in 1966.

In 2014 in particular, the Association of Senior Civil Servants of Nigeria declared strike and shutdown the Federal Ministry of Education and the 104 Unity Colleges in September, 2014. The strike action which was to press home the Union's demand for the payment of accumulated promotion arrears since 2007, lasted for over three weeks from September 19th



to October 17th 2014 involved all the senior staff of the Ministry at the headquarters and those at the 104 Unity Colleges. It was suspended on 17th October, 2014 when the Minister of Labour and productivity apprehended and made the parties to sign an agreement on the payment of the accumulated promotion arrears. Similarly, on 12th May, 2015, the Association also picketed and closed down the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) headquarters in Abuja and its state offices across the country over plot by the management to sack over 1000 senior officers. The action lasted for 4 working days involving all the senior staff of the Commission across the country. Seeing the resilience and determination of the union officials at the headquarters of NIMC, the police made an attempt to bring the strike to an early end after the second day. The Police picked up one of the union officials; tear gassed him and whisked him away to Maitama Police Station in Abuja (Chiamen, 2018). Yet, the action continued for another 2 days until the intervention of the Office of the Federal Ministry of Labour who apprehended the action and invited both the union and NIMC management for reconciliation and resolution.

In another report from the ministry of labour and productivity, between 2016 and 2018, the Public Sector witnessed about 977 trade disputes. About 894 of these disputes were apprehended while 30 disputes were referred to the industrial Arbitration Panel (IAP) for arbitration and resolution (Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment Report, 2018). Many of these disputes are inter-union disputes over unionization of workers. These inter-union crises affect relationship among trade unions which in-turn affects how they relate in the labour centre. However, many of these disputes are the union's drive to ensure the welfare of its members is attended to by the employers. An example is the strike action embarked upon by the Association of Senior Civil Servants of Nigeria (ASCSN) in April 2017 in some selected Unity Colleges whose workers were owed various months of salary arrears. The affected workers were in colleges across the country which included FGC Nise, Anambra State; FGC Ikirun, Osun State; FSTC Ilesa, Osun State; FSTC Doma, Nasarawa State; FSTC Otukpo, Benue State; FGC Warri, Delta State; FGGC Omu-Aran, Kwara State; and FGC Rubochi, Abuja (The Bureaucrat, 2007).

As a body, between 2016 and 2018, the organized labour embarked on protests in major cities of Lagos, Port Harcourt, Enugu and Abuja to request for a new minimum wage for workers. Prior to the struggle for a new national minimum wage, the organized labour had had to intervene in some states such as Nasarawa where the State government attempted to unilaterally review the salary table and in Imo State where the State Government reduced work-week and forcing workers to go to farm as well as Kogi State where the Government attempted to lay-off workers.

The Imo State Government went ahead to sack over 6,000 workers in January 2016 (Centre for Labour Studies Advocacy, 2016). On Wednesday 10th February, 2016, the organized labour led by the National president of NLC, Comrade Ayuba Wabba and that of TUC



Comrade Bobboi Bala Kaigama stormed Owerri the Imo State capital to protest the mass sack of government workers of the state. According to the Worker Magazine:

The protest rally blocked major entrance and exit point into the State Government House, Owerri, took off from the Imo State Secretariat of the Nigeria Medical Association (NMA) along Port Harcourt road, shut down traffic at the Sam Mbakwe International Cargo Airport where flight operations were halted by NUATE, a Union from the Aviation sector (Centre for Labour Studies Advocacy, 2016).

That massive act of solidarity with the sacked workers of Imo State government paid off as the state Governor, Rochas Okorocha later rescinded his decision and reinstated the workers. The Imo protest and joint labour action showed harmony among labour leaders across the divide. Its execution- workers convergence at the Imo State Secretariat of Nigeria Medical Association (NMA) and the support received from the Aviator Union showed high level of inter union collaboration and labour solidarity.

The NLC resolved that Tuesday 23rd August, 2016 be observed as a day of solidarity and mourning of workers who lost their lives and those who were injured. The day was also to be observed as a day of protests of the obnoxious policies of various state governments and non-payment of salaries, gratuities and pensions. In Nasarawa State, workers under the organized labour had embarked on strike to protest Government's plan to slash workers' salaries. A protest on Friday 29th July, 2016 had led to an ugly situation where two members of the Union were killed by the police in front of the Government House (NLC, 2016).

Table 2: Summary of Industrial Disputes and Strike Action 1999 – 2015

Year	No. of Disputes Declared	No. of Disputes Resulting in Strike	No. of Workers Involved
1999	202	57	137, 858
2000	189	60	344,722
2001	172	51	34,567
2002	201	43	48,577
2003	131	30	39,680
2004	138	29	146,869
2005	121	15	29,152
2006	132	18	5,642
2007	150	17	875
2008	228	21	106,705
2009	262	22	128,705
2010	263	39	58,002
2011	252	30	9,092
2012	233	35	29,122
2013	225	22	35,666
2014	185	45	20,200
2015	37	4	132,228

Source: Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment.



From the table 2 above, about 1,307,662 workers took part in strike actions across the sectors between 1999 and 2015. Among the over one million workers who embarked on strike action during this period, were the teachers of public universities under their union, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) whose strike action was frequent during these years leading to loss of hundreds of over one thousand economic days as shown in the table 3 below. In some cases, an entire academic calendar was lost to strike action. This is besides internal strike actions by local chapters of the union over local issues. In some cases running into months. There was also the three-day nationwide warning strike of the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) from Tuesday 16th to Thursday 19th September 2008 (Tell Magazine, 2008).

The labour disputes that occurred between 2015 and 2019 has further been buttressed by the statement from the Minister of labour and Employment, Dr Chris Ngige when he stated that by the end of President Buhari's first tenure which began on May 29, 2015 and elapsed on May 29, 2019, the Ministry of labour had intervened in 1,425 trade disputes and complaints; 788 disputes were completely concluded and resolved; 37 cases referred to the Industrial Arbitration Panel and 600 cases were at various stages of mediation and conciliation. (Daily Trust Magazine, 2019). Some of these disputes however emanated from states of the federation. ASUU alone went on strike about 17 times between 1999 and 2022, leading to the loss over 1,813 days as shown in the table 3 below:

Table 3 Strike Action by ASUU and Number of Days Spent 1999-2022

YEAR	NO. OF DAYS SPENT
1999	150
2001	90
2002	14
2003	180
2005	3
2006	7
2007	90
2008	7
2009	120
2010	157
2011	190
2013	150
2016	7
2017	35
2018/2019	97
2020	276
2022	240

Source: Author's field work 2018-2022



The industrial conflict of ASUU in particular became an issue in the political calculation of the 2015 elections (Jonathan, 2018). It also shows the extent to which industrial relation issues in the public service affects political governance and contestation for public office in Nigeria. That such magnitude of industrial disputes occurred during civil rule, underscores the fact that democratic rule encourages trade unionism and union activities. This has further been buttressed by the statement from the Minister of Labour and Employment, Dr Chris Ngige when he stated that by the end of President Buhari's first tenure which began on May 29, 2015 and elapsed on May 29, 2019, the Ministry of Labour had intervened in 1,425 trade disputes and complaints; 788 disputes were completely concluded and resolved; 37 cases referred to the Industrial Arbitration Panel and 600 cases were at various stages of mediation and conciliation (Daily Trust Newspaper, 2019). Some of these disputes emanated from states of the federation.

For example in Nasarawa State alone, between 2014 and 2018, over 22 strike actions were undertaken by various labour unions in the state (Dagusa 2019). These do not include other numerous industrial disputes between the employees and their employers that was managed and resolved without recourse to the minister of labour's office. The public sector has witnessed the greatest percentage of the industrial crises. These crises included the 2016 partial nationwide strike action led by the NLC, due to increase in fuel price from N97 to N145, strikes by many labour unions in the education, health and judicial sectors, (Jega, 2020), as well as the series of strike notices by the organized labour as a result of a new minimum wage negotiations and its implementation that dragged for about 3years at the federal level and several years at the state level.

However, despite the initial suspicion and inter-labour centre disputes, the NLC and the TUC have been jointly celebrating the Workers Day every 1st May and have periodically embarked on joint protests to protest anti-labour policies in work places and bad governance in the country. In many instances, the labour centres had cause to intervene and jointly prosecute union actions, especially if it has to do with sacking of workers by employers. One of the major objectives of labour unionism is not only to ensure the availability of jobs; it is also to save existing jobs (Lawal, 2019). Thus, sacking of workers invited the prompt attention of labour leaders. One of such instances was in 2014 when about 95 workers of the Cocoa Research Institute of Nigeria (CRIN), Ibadan were sacked after they protested non-payment of their salaries and refusal of the management to allow them join trade unions. The trade unions with legal jurisdiction to unionize the workers such as the Non Academic Staff Union (NASU), Academic Staff Union of Research Institute (ASURI), and Senior Staff Association of University Teaching Hospitals, Research and Allied Institutes (SSAUTHRAI), brought in their respective trade centres, the NLC and TUC.

The labour centres intervened and got the office of the Minister of Labour who ensured parties in the disputes signed a memorandum dated 17th February, 2015 to reinstate the



workers and allow them join trade unions (Socialist Democracy Newspaper, 2015). The labour centres also intervened in labour crises bordering on non-payment of workers' salaries and victimization of labour leaders in many states including Nasarawa state in 2016, Benue State in 2017, Kogi State in 2018.

Between 2019 and 2023 government took four major actions, decisions and indecisions that affected government-labour relations in the country. They included the concession of major Airports, increased electricity tariff, (The Nation Newspaper, 2020) and increased petroleum pump prices. There was also the strike actions in the education sector, some of which have been a recurring industrial issue of intense proportion since 1999. Prominent among these were the actions by ASUU when it went on strike on a total of 655 working days between 2016 and 2023. See table 2 below. Other Unions in the education sub sector such as SSANU, NASU as well as National Association of Allied Technologists (NAAT) embarked on actions during this time. These attracted protests and in some instances outright strike actions by organized labour. Between 2017 and 2019, the SSANU, NAAT and NASU went on strike jointly lasting for about 116 days (Ogwo, 2023). On August 31 2020, Aviation sector employees under their unions, the Nigeria Union of Aviation Employees NUATE and ATSSAN protested the planned concession of the airports (The Nation Newspaper, 2020). In the 2020 alone, the Government increased fuel price four times. N121.50k on May 1, N140.80k in July, 145.80k in August and 151.56k in September (The Nation Newspaper, 2020).

The year 2020 was a pandemic year due to the global scourge of Covid-19 pandemic that eventually led to the death of 3,155 persons in Nigeria as at December 2023 (WHO, 2023). The Health sector workers who managed patients in the health care facilities across the country, agitated for hazard allowances. They were also among the victims of the covid-19 infection. In the year 2020 alone, Resident doctors went on nationwide strike actions two times between June 15- June 22, and on September 7th (The Nation Newspaper, 2020). That was not the first time for the strike by the medical Doctors. Between 2015 and 2023, the Doctors under their unions of National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD), Nigeria Medical Association (NMA) or Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU), went on strike for a total of 153 working days (Ogwo, 2023). The electricity tariff protest continued into the 25th year of the return of democracy in Nigeria, as on Monday May 13th, 2024, the organized labour made up of the NLC and the TUC picketed the offices of the Nigeria Electricity Regulatory Council (NERC) and electricity Distribution Companies (DISCO's) nationwide to protest increase on electricity tariff from N66 to N255 for a category of customers the Discos categorized as band A customers.

One of the most frequent issue that caught the attention of the labour unions in Nigeria, of which the considered very vexatious is the frequent increase in the prices of petroleum products. Similarly, in June, 2003, the Obasanjo Government further increased the price of



fuel prompting Labour to call out its members for another round of industrial protests and strike action. This lasted for 8 days forcing the government to revert to the old price. By December of the same year, the organized labour was on the streets of Abuja on protests over another increase in the price of petroleum products. The protest continued until the President had to intervene when he called a meeting with the organized labour at Aso Rock Presidential Villa. Following this meeting, the President agreed to an increase in the salaries of workers to cushion the effect of the fuel price increase on the workers and their families.

In most cases, the organized labour often forged alliances with other social partners and Civil Liberty Organizations (CLOs). In 1984, it collaborates with ASUU and NANS and embarked on street protests to force Mohammadu Buhari military regime to respect fundamental human rights (Iyayi, 2008). Similarly, in 1993 the labour unions notably NUPENG and PENGASSAN forged alliances with other pressure groups and exerted pressure on the Babangida regime during the famous June 12 annulment saga. The aim was to prevail on the regime to uphold the victory of MKO Abiola who they believed won the 1993 presidential elections.

Between 2003 and 2004, the organized labour in collaboration with civil society organizations engaged the President Olusegun Obasanjo government at four different occasions in mass street protests over the government's decision to increase prices of petroleum products (Akin, 2007). It was the outcry of the organized labour and its social partners that forced the federal government to set up the Justice Mohammed Uwais committee when the then President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua admitted that the 2007 election that brought him to power was flawed with irregularities (Iyayi, 2008). This agrees with Dung Pam Sha's position that trade union actions in form of engagement with government officials, street protests and demonstrations are among the activities from the 'streets' that influences actions by government officials (Sha, 2016). The struggle against the increase in the price of petroleum brought the two labour centres together in 2009 when the Government proposed the deregulation of the downstream sector of the oil and gas industry. The NLC and TUC held their National Executive Council meetings on 10th and 11th march, 2009 respectively. The TUC declared that:

Should the Federal Government go ahead with the policy of full deregulation and removal of subsidy without factoring the demands of the Congress, the leadership of the TUC shall be left with no other option than to carry out the directive of the congress to direct all affiliates and members of TUC to proceed on nationwide strike (The Bureaucrat, 2009).

The NLC resolved to embark on "focused rallies and protests as a first step of getting government to abandon the policy and that where such rallies failed to achieve the desired objective, the NEC would reconvene to decide the next line of action" (The Bureaucrat, 2009). On 8th August, 2016, the organized labour organized a mass rally against electricity



tariff hike. The workers were led by the NLC President Ayuba Wabba, the TUC President Bala Kaigama and Professor Dipo Fashina, former ASUU National President. The team presented Labour's position in a letter to the Presidency and leadership of the National Assembly. This combined resolution by both the NLC and TUC also repeated itself in the preparation and execution of a nationwide protest against electricity tariff hike on May 13th, 2024. This led to the picketing of the offices of the Nigeria Electricity Regulatory Commission (NERC) and electricity Distribution Companies (DISCOs).

4.0. Rallies and Street shows in Support of Government

The protests were not always only against government policies. In 2016, the organized labour matched in support of APC's government anti-corruption war. Throughout the Fourth Republic, the organized labour has advocated support for government policies aimed at repositioning the country for the better. This show of support also come in form of advocacy for the policies such as Union's support for Federal Government's policy of e-payment system in salary administration, (The Bureaucrat, 2009), as well as labour's support and participation in the 2014 national conference convened by the President Goodluck's administration. The organized labour sent representation to the confab. Delegates from the TUC were: Comrade Dinatu Assani, Comrade Bobboi Bala Kaigama and Comrade Olabode Johnson. The NLC was also represented by Comrade Ayuba Wabba, Comrade Issa Aremu and Comrade Peter Ozo-Eson. Thus the representatives of the organized labour were among the 492 delegates that were nominated from across the country converged at the National Judicial Institute Abuja and deliberated from March 17th 2014 to August 21st, 2014. At the Conference, the organized labour presented a joint position. The 277 page document contained Labour's position on issues such as electoral matters, national security, and devolution of power, public service, social welfare, public finance, and revenue generation (NLC/TUC National Conference, 2014).

According to the document, labour went to the conference "as a pan Nigerian organization". It believed that the people of Nigeria are not divided by ethnicity or religion, geography or demography. Therefore, labour will continue to collaborate with progressive forces, engage allies, make friends and interact with other delegates for the promotion of the progress, unity and equitable development of Nigeria (NLC/TUC National Conference, 2014). Similarly, it protested against what it called illicit financial flow out of the country in 2016.

5.0. CONCLUSION

The return of democracy in 1999 witnessed activism by the organized labour in the form of street protests and strike actions to press home demands for workers welfare and people oriented programmes ranging from salary increase for workers, protests against petroleum prices and electricity tariff hike, as well as agitation for periodic upward review of a national minimum wage. The minimum wage struggle by the organized labour in the states has been a



prolonged one. Many state governments refused to implement the thirty thousand minimum wage. The zeal by the organized labour dwindled between 2015 and 2021 mainly due to internal wrangling among the leadership of the organized labour particularly the NLC which was wrapped in leadership crises between the Ayuba Wabba faction and the Ajaero faction which broke out in 2015 to form the United Labour Congress (ULC). The fall-out was as a result of the 2015 delegates conference of the NLC that resulted in the pulling out of mostly private sector unions led by the National Union of Electricity Employees (NUEE) led by Comrade Joseph Ajaero and NUPENG led by Comrade Igwe Achese. This internal crisis diminishes public confidence on the organized labour and led to members of the public to lose confidence on the organized labour resulting in many unsuccessful actions.

Up till 2024 when the thirty thousand naira 2019 national minimum wage law expired and a new national minimum wage was being negotiated, the organized labour in some states were still in the trenches with their state government over the implementation of the thirty thousand naira minimum wage. In support of the local council in Anambra State, the NLC on 15th May 2024 gave a 7-day ultimatum to the government over its failure to implement the already agreed thirty thousand minimum wage and its consequential adjustment. Other issues in dispute included the deduction of contributory pension from workers' salaries without counterpart funding of government and remittance to Pension Fund Administrators (PFA's) since 2018 and stoppage of payment of 12, 000 Naira wage award as palliative to workers. The quadruple issues of fuel price hike, Electricity tariff hike, National Minimum Wage and the struggle by ASUU over remuneration and university autonomy, dominated the industrial space and accounted for many protests by the organized labour throughout the 25 years of the forth republic. The labour need to rekindle its pre forth republic zeal, reunite and look beyond petty leadership tussle, for a more viral activism.

Competing Interest

The authors have declared that no conflicting interest exist in this manuscript.

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