

TREND AND COUNTER TREND OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper examines the trend and counter trend of Industrial Relations in Nigeria using historical perspective. Industrial Relations is quite a relatively new academic discipline which has its major focus on union-management relations. It emanated from studies conducted on trend unionism in Britain but came into the Nigerian University in 1982 as a full-fledged department at the University of Lagos, offering both first and higher degree programmes. Critical review was done on Industrial Relations during the military and democratic rules in Nigeria. The paper also concluded by making recommendations on the way forward For Nigerian Industrial Relations.

Keywords: Industrial relations, trends, trade union, military and Democracy.

Introduction

Industrial relations are relatively new compared to other professions in management and social science. This can be attributed to the late experience of industrialization in our economy. In early times and to some extent in rural areas, labour services were rendered on family agricultural farms for the father as the head of economic unit. No wage was paid (Onasanya, 2005).

Also Nigeria's industrial relations were largely influenced by global development and of particular importance was the industrial revolution that effectively laid to rest the ancient feudal order. While dispersing the master and guild journey men, the industrial revolution brought in its wake the emergency of a new work relationship between employers and employees characterized by paid employment.

This singular event opened a new vista in redefining the whole concept of work as it gave birth to a contractual relationship, hitherto unknown in the world of work between an employer and employee. This new type of work relationship found its way into Nigeria through colonialism (Onyeonoro, 2005, Waston, 2012, Adewumi, 2007 cited in Nnonyelu, 2012). With industrialization and commercialization that started in the 1940s, came wage employment. This was first introduced in the colonial public services in the

early part of this century in Nigeria. This became predominant during the laying of railway track from Lagos to the hinterland.

It is also noteworthy that wage employment in Nigeria was facilitated by the monetization of economy and the introduction of taxation. The transition from the old barter economy to a monetary system of exchange ensured that the peasant and other traditional workers had to enter the work world to earn payments that will ensure their participation in the socio-economic order. This incidence of wage employment and payment marked the beginning of industrial relations in Nigeria.

Development of Industrial Relations

As organizations grew larger in the *igbo's* more sophisticated organization structure and management process were needed to manage them. Managing people became more complex and the need for specialized personnel department and trained specialist was realized in most organizations. Today, the role of the personnel departments include designing jobs to increase the motivational contents administering training, recruitment, selection, placement, compensation, consenting, counseling, labour relations etc. The development of industrial relations and personnel function in work organizations is a reaction of employer to the growing discontent of labour union and the activities of the state. A major factor that influenced the adoption of industrial relations as a function to be managed by specialists was the industrial activities of COLA trade unions, with highly political orientation. Before the legal recognition of trade unions in 1938, Industrial relations management was restricted to staffing and record keeping. But with the growth of industries and trade unions in Nigeria, the concern of industrial relations broadened to embrace extensive study of unionism, collective bargaining and trade dispute management. This will now lead us to look into the formation of trade union in Nigeria.

The Origin of Trade Unions in Nigeria

In traditional African communities, social institutions such as guild and craft societies existed before colonial times. What is unclear is the pattern of their transition, if any, to modern trade unions. Although earlier guilds and craft societies may not have transformed into modern day unions, they performed the same duties as they do today. It is on record, however, that as early as 1897, there had been a 3-day strike by artisan workmen in the Public Works Department (PWD) in Lagos, in protest against the workmen's hours of work. The reaction of Governor McCallum of Lagos, which reflected the public policy of the period, was unquestionably anti-union.

The first evidence of a trade union was the Mechanics' Mutual Aid

Provident and Mutual Improvement Association, formed in July 1883. At its inaugural meeting, its leaders noted that "it is surely lamentable that we have no 'big men' to set us examples in Lagos". While they expressed doubts about the immediate future of their young organization, they were nevertheless optimistic that future generation would benefit from their pioneering venture. Thus, one member, Mr. Haastrup, cautioned members of the Association not to look forward, because there was nothing to encourage them in front, but to look to the children and the coming generation. There is, however, no evidence at the moment to show that this union existed beyond the 1880s.

The history of trade unions in Nigeria indicates that the first union, now known as the Nigeria Civil Service Union (NCSU), founded in 1912, emerged from the growing wage employment in government establishments (Fashoyin, 2007). The NCSU was however, not the typical union, in that it was not formed with all the ideals of trade unions as organizations that felt the need to fight for members' rights. Nor was the union formed out of frustration or disaffection with their employment conditions. Indeed, as Yesufu remarked,

It is important to note that the union was thus not formed by a group of disaffected workers who wanted a platform from which to fight for amelioration of grievances or for the improvement of specific conditions of employment.

The NCSU was formed primarily to provide a forum for social interaction among African officers in the colonial service, as was the case in the other British West African Colonies. However, the NCSU joined other unions in militant activities. In Nigeria, between 1919 and 1932, four unions were formed: three in the railways and one in the teaching service. These include the Nigerian Native Staff Union, which drew its membership from the clerical cadre and was formed in 1919, and the Nigerian Mechanic Union, whose members were from the technical departments of the railways. This was also organized in 1919. The third union, which was organized by the daily-paid workers in the Mechanical workshop in 1932, is today known as the Nigerian Union of Railwaymen. It remained the most militant of all the unions of the period. Under the able leadership of Michael Imoudu, the union led about 3,000 workers protesting against poor conditions of work in a march to Government House. Given the scale of the protest and public support, the colonial government was compelled to concede the demands, and Imoudu became an instant hero. The Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) was formed in 1931 by Rev. I.O. Ransome-Kuti as President, T.K. Cameroon as Secretary and E.E. Esua as Assistant Secretary. From the onset, the NUT combined economic and professional functions. The union pressed for

harmonization of the working conditions of African teachers in mission schools with those in government-owned schools which were substantially better than the former. In March, 1947, the NUT served notice on the government to the effect that unless the disparity was removed, it would call a strike. On the other hand, the NUT sought to serve as a watchdog of government education policy and to maintain a high standard both in the quality of education and in the quality of its members. Consequently, it is noteworthy that up to late 1970s the NUT remained the best organized and most stable of Nigerian unions. The three unions - NCSU, the Railwaymen and the NUT dominated the industrial relations' scene of the 1930s, a few developmental and conceptual issues should however be noted as this represented the ideals of trade unions, as organizations whose purpose was the advancement of the employment interests of members. That the NUT in addition catered for the professional interests of its members illustrates a commitment to professionalism. Younger organizations, such as the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) have been much more concerned with purely economic functions. Second, the union that emerged before 1938 were all in the civil (public) service, reflecting the dominance of the public sector in employment. Indeed, up to the mid 1940s, the private sector was at its infancy. In the event, the domination of the government sector had far-reaching consequences for other actors in the industrial relations in Nigeria.

Emergence of Central Labour Organizations

Soon after the enactment of the Trade Union ordinance, union leaders foresaw the need for labour unity. In 1940, a generation of four unions in the civil service, the African Civil Servants Technical Workers Union (ACSTWU) was formed to serve as a bargaining agent for the Unions. Also in the process of forming a new Coal Miners Union following the Enugu crisis of the preceding year, leaders from both the defunct TUCN and NNFL fused with another body, the Federation of Government and Municipal Non-Clerical Workers Union, to form the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) in 1950 led by Imoudu and Eze.

The NLC and its leaders and in particular Eze, who was subsequently dismissed from the union fell into disrepute and by the end of March 1952, little remained of the organization. (Fashoyin, 2007). In fact, the transmutations of trade unions have been copiously documented that it does not bear repeating here. What is however instructive is that for reasons of ideological differences, ethnic cum religious divide, leadership squabbles, some of these also orchestrated and masterminded by the state, intra-class

struggles, greed and corruption, the working class could not form its own central organization until the wielding of the military stick. It was not until the promulgation of a Trade Unions (Central Labour Organisations) special provision Degree no 44 of 1976, that a sole Administrator was appointed, who now midwived the birth of a central Labour Organisation - known as the Nigerian Labour Congress with Alhaji Hassan Sunmonu as the first National President (Nnonyelu, 2012).

This has continued until 2005, when the Obasanjo presidency in its ill-fated march to a third term conspired to break the ranks of the working class movement by founding through an Act the Trade Union Congress ostensibly to cater for the interest of Senior Civil Servants (Nnonyelu, 2012).

State Involvement in Industrial Relations

In many cases in Africa, the state still plays a dominant role in driving industrial and economic development through institutional, state directed industrial relation systems (Horwitz, 2006, cited in Nnonyelu, 2012). In order to understand industrial relations, it is important to consider the important influence of the state. The functions of the state in industrial relations have been neatly surmised by Williams and Adam-Smith (2006:30) to include:

- a) Single largest employer of labour
- b) Make legislations in the area of employment relations
- c) State policies also have important implications for industrial relations.
- d) Help mediate conflicts between the different parties in an industrial dispute by way of arbitration and conciliation.

In Nigeria, the state's role in industrial relations is not necessarily that of intervention but involvement. This will be effectively discussed within the confine of military and civil rule in Nigeria.

Industrial Relations under Military Rule

By their nature, the military operates a totalitarian regime characterized by suppression, repression and suspension of constitutional rule, arbitrariness and unilateralism. Over the years, the first casualty of military coup is the trade union. As part of the pressure groups in the society the trade union has always been at the receiving end of harsh military policies. As the largest employer of labour, government involvement in industrial relations in Nigeria is pervasive. Under the military such involvement was manifested in the following ways:-

- i. **Restrictions and outright ban of Trade Union activities:** Along with other pressure groups in the society, trade unions are prevented from holding rallies, embarking on strike, picketing members during strike

and other legitimate activities of trade unionism. For instance, in the military regimes of General Ibrahim Babangida and Late General Sani Abacha, the government clamped down heavily on prominent trade unions in the country for embarking on strike to press for the actualization of annulled June 12 Presidential election. (Banwo, 1997; Olorode, 1997).

- ii. Denial of Right of Unionism:** In Nigeria, a large number of workers are denied their right of belonging to trade union of their choice. This development is most obvious during military rule.
- iii. Arbitrariness on Labour - Management Issues:** As an important actor in Nigeria's industrial relations system, military government often engaged in arbitrariness in dealing with labour-management issues (Babawale, 1997). For instance, in 1984, the then military administration led by General Muhammadu Buhari sacked a number of striking medical doctors in the public service (Howard, 1991).
- iv. Erosion of the Rule of Law:** Military rule is often characterized by flagrant violation of the tenets of the rule of law. Not only is constitutional rule suspended, but also more fundamental is flagrant disobedience of court judgments and obvious transgression of justice (Howard, 1991, Scheider, 1992).
- v. Promulgation of Draconian Labour Legislations:** The military era in Nigeria witnessed the enactment of some draconian laws which have negative impacts on the nation's industrial relations system. For instance, as a way of discouraging workers to embark on strike, the "No work, no pay" clause was intruded into the Trade Dispute Act.

Industrial Relations Under Civil Rule

The advent of democratic rule in Nigeria has left some impacts on the industrial relations system in the country. However, due to the fact that the country has a longer period of military dictatorship than civil rule, the impact of the military is more pronounced. More importantly, the country tends to be dominated by military culture even during civilian regime. The implication of this trend to the nation's industrial relations system is that democratic regimes in Nigeria exhibit similar pattern of military attitude to industrial relations (Hear, 1988).

Firstly, democratic governments like the military are known to engage in harassment, intimidation and arrest of labour leaders especially when they are on strike.

Secondly, successive civilian governments in Nigeria have engaged in interference with trade union organizations in the country (Jeminiwa, 1996).

As a way of preventing the emergence of strong unionism, these governments have embarked on decentralization policy, denied certain perceived radical unions from belonging to the central labour organization and enacted legislations meant to weaken the existing central labour union (Akinyanju, 1997).

Thirdly, in the current democratic dispensation, the dominance of retired military officers is obvious and profound. The effect on the industrial relations system is the evidence of intolerance of the government towards other principal actors, especially, workers and their unions. Such actions like the enforcement of "No work, No pay" clause, refusal of government to implement collective agreement attest to this fact (Sokunbi, et al, 1996). In spite of the obvious similarities in the attitude of military and civilian governments towards industrial relations, it must be stressed that democratic rule provides a healthier environment for the process of industrial relations. Democratic rule serves to limit arbitrary actions on the part of management, employer or government. For instance, political office holders who aspire to seek for political support from the people would be cautious in taking action which could jeopardize their political ambition. Since democratic rule seen to be more favourable for the thriving of industrial relations, the enthronement of democratic values is therefore suggested as a recipe for conducive industrial relations system which has a recent development as an academic field of study and in Nigerian University as a full-fledged department.

Development of Industrial Relations as a Field of Study

Industrial relations as a discipline can be traced to earlier work of economists and political scientists. However, the pioneering work of Sidney and Beatrice Webb cannot be overlooked. After a series of rigorous study of the experience of many countries, they published two books of particular importance. The first, examines the development of trade unionism in Britain; while the latter, looks at the functions of trade unions. For many years, academics following the work of Webb in United Kingdom saw industrial relations as the study of trade unions. As a result, much work was done in the form of detailed description of trade unions or union-management relations (Palmer, 1983).

Similarly, the social Science Association has published a report on Trade Societies and Strikes in 1860 (Bain and Clegg, 1974).

The Influence of Human Relations

The Human Relations School was made up of many social scientists concerned with organizational problems. They were led by Elton Mayo. He

asserts in his Hawthorne Experiment that man is a "Social man" and hence the necessity to study and understand the social and behavior aspects of management. Thus, the Human Relations school emphasis was on leadership, democratic supervision, and satisfaction of personal goals and creativity of employees. The school believes that scientific management principles maybe important only for job satisfaction purposes. They are not good enough to induce the workers to be productive. Other scholars that contributed to the human relations school are Douglas, McGregor, Lewin, Likert, Herbert Simon, Argyris and Selznick and so on. These scholars made significant contributions to the Industrial Relations on areas of motivation, leadership, productivity and management of people.

In most developing countries, academic study of industrial relations was done within the general management and social science studies. It was not until 1982 that Africa has its first full-fledged department of industrial relations at the University of Lagos, offering both first and higher degree programmes (Fajana, 2006). We should now look at the meaning and definitions of industrial relations by different scholars.

Meaning of Industrial Relations

In the term Industrial Relation (IR), Industry means any productive work or more specifically production process and Relation is human relation in the production process. Thus, industrial relations mean relationship between management and employees; and relationship among the employees in the course of running of an industry or organization. The concept industrial relation has been addressed as different terms i.e. labor relations, employee relations, organizational relation and work life relations in the study of HRM.

According to V. Agnihotri, industrial relation is industrial workers' relation with their management, which directly or indirectly refers to trade union and management relationship. Henry Richardson defines Industrial relation as an art of living together for productivity. Dunlop explained industrial relation as a sum total of relationship between workers, their organization managers and government or law (Ali and Khatun, 2009).

According to Kaufman, 2004, industrial relations encompass the study of all aspects of work and employment, thus spanning all industries, types of employment relationships, and topics and problems related to labour. It is also seen by Fajana, 2006, as the systematic study of all aspects of the employment relationship. Industrial relations therefore embodies the checklist of rules and regulations that govern conduct amongst employees, and between employees and employers (See Dunlop, 1958) and also the relationship between their respective associations and the state, as

represented by the government. Yesufu (1984) defines industrial relations as the whole web of human interactions at work which is predicated upon and arises out of the employment contracts. Onu (1989) defines it as a general term used in a classic sense to describe the relationship between an organization of workers and an employer or a group of employers. The common denominator of these definition is that industrial relations is concerned with the relationship between trade unions (of workers) and employers (individual or group) in the industry (paid employment) and government intervention (either directly or through its agencies) in that relationship.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The trend of industrial relations in Nigeria revealed that the growth and development of industrial relations depended heavily on state legislation. Trade unions and the state represented two opposing sides with clearly different interests. It is those opposing roles, interests and tendencies that form the core of Nigerian industrial relations. These tendencies are likely to persist and be replicated for a long time to come. For a peaceful and harmonious relationship in the Nigerian Industrial Relations to be achieved, parties to industrial relations should endeavour to demonstrate more sincerity in their collective bargaining principles on their various demands. And when a resolution is reached through collective bargaining, effortss should be made by parties involved in the fulfillment of such resolutions for industrial harmonious relations to exist in Nigerian industrial relations. Further studies on unionism and dispute resolution are therefore suggested for better management of industrial relations in Nigeria.

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