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Trade Unions as Organisations: Key Issues and Problems of Internal Democracy in Nigeria (Pp. 146-155)

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Abstract

*The paper critically examines and evaluates **inter alia** Trade Unions as Organisations and the key issues and problems of **Internal Democracy** within them. It transcends this analysis to assert that these core issues apply equally well to Political Organisations. Thus, from an ideological standpoint, Trade Unions play a great role in representing members' interests in regulating labour market and Managerial Relations with employees. Similarly, it is the opinion of this article that theoretically speaking and to some extent, Trade Unions adopt democratic constitutions by giving their members ultimate control over certain policy decisions and the organisation of their own union activities. Achieving internal democracy within Trade Unions requires more than just member activism, and **ipso facto**, the paper contends that a democratic union must have a mix grill of three basic features – a (i)democratic constitution,(ii) institutional opposition and(iii) an active membership. Trade Union Organisations and by extension, political organisations, must build their governance around these democratic principles ad nauseam.*

Key words: organisations; internal democracy; member activism; mixgril; ideological standpoint, ipso facto, inter alia.

Introduction

In Nigeria, Trade Unions emerged at a time when representative political democracy was not even in existence; the British Colonial Government began making formal in-roads in the field of Labour Relations in the thirties, particularly after the Trade Union Ordinance in 1938.

On the issue of organisations, a lot has been written about it (Okojie 2001). Although all of us have spent our lives in various human organisations such as schools, hospitals, churches, clubs, community groups, companies and political parties, yet, it is difficult to give a simple definition of an organisation.

However, *Schein* (1980) defines an organisation as the planned coordination of the activities of a number of people for the achievement of some common explicit purpose of goals, through division of labour and functions, and through a hierarchy of authority and responsibility.

This is known as a Formal Organisation to distinguish it from two other types, a Social and An Informal Organisation. Social Organisations are patterns of coordination that spontaneously or implicitly arise out of the interactions of people without involving rational coordination for the achievement of explicit common goals, (Agha 2010).

On the other hand, an Informal Organisation refers to those patterns of coordination that arise among members of a formal organisation which are not called for by laid down rules or procedures.

Features of an organisation

Below, may be regarded as some characteristic features of organisations:-

- i. Human activities
- ii. Activities requiring coordination
- iii. Common goals
- iv. Integration
- v. Division of function
- vi. Authority and responsibility

Trade union as a concept and phenomenon

According to the Webbs (1894), a Trade Union “is a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives”. The Trade Union Decree (1973) of Nigeria (Now Act) defines a Trade Union as “Any combination of workers or employers,

whether temporary or permanent, the purpose of which is to regulate the terms and conditions of employment of workers, whether the combination in question would or would not, apart from the Decree (Act), be an unlawful combination by reason of any of its purpose being in restraint of trade, and whether its purposes do or do not include the provisions of benefits for its workers.”

Trade unions as organisations

If we match the features of an organisation as postulated by Schein (1980) in his definition of organisations, human activities, common goals, coordinations, functions, then, it would be sensible to argue that Trade Unions are indeed organisations as the definition of a Trade Union enunciated above shows the purpose in the regulation of the terms and conditions of employment of workers. Consequently, it is not the character of a Trade Union membership that is crucial. The Test of a Trade Union is its purpose, and not its personnel.

Registration of trade unions

The Trade Union Decree (Act) 1973 prohibits a Trade Union from carrying on as a Trade Union unless it is registered according to Section 2 of the Decree (Act). Therefore, Trade Unions are formal organisations recognised by statutes or laws of Nigeria.

Challenges and key issues of internal democracy in trade unions

In their treatise of “Challenges of Internal Democracy in Nigeria’s Political Parties: the bane of Intra-Party Conflicts in the People Democratic Party of Nigeria,” Ojukwu and Olaifa (2010) assert that “both Political Parties and Trade Union Organisations are some of the institutions that are carriers of democratic principles in any organised society.” These authors go on to argue that “thus, there are a number of “institutional guarantees” that parties have to fulfill if they were to effectively meet what is expected of them in a democracy.” According to them, one of such institutional arrangements or requirements is Internal or Intra-Party Democracy. Contributing to this argument, Magolowondo (n.d), hypothesizes that “this very important institutional dimension is lacking in many Political Parties and Trade Union Organisations particularly in emerging democracies” such as that of Nigeria. Mersel (2006) maintains that various Trade Union Organisations and Political Parties have faced the problem of nondemocratic unions and parties, a situation where most of these parties and union focus only on external activities, neglecting internal planning and organisation. Moreover, Mersel

(2006) admonishes that in determining whether a Political Party or Trade Union is non democratic, attention should be given to their goals and practices. The rationale behind this mode of thought is that Trade Unions and Political Parties must be democratic not only externally in their operations, but also internally in their organisational functions Mersel (2006) identifies specific challenges in the internal management and functioning of Trade Unions and Political Organisations which include candidate selection, leadership selection, policy making, membership relations, gender and minorities

It should be emphasized that Internal Democracy enhances the image of the Union (Nwodo, 2010). Achieving democracy within Unions requires more than just member activism. A “Democracy Union”, according to *Stepan-Norris and Zeithlin* (1996:4), must combine three basic features:

- A democratic constitution (i.e. the freedom of members to criticise and political rights)
- Institutional opposition (i.e. the freedom of members to criticise and debate about union officials and to organise, oppose and replace officials through freely contested elections among contending political associations, or “factions”, and
- An active membership (i.e. maximum participation by its members in the actual exercise of power within the union and in making the decisions that affect them

According to *Stepan-Norris and Zeithlin*,(1996.4) referred to above, the governance structure of the Union must be built around these democratic principles. Using the above parameters as yardsticks for measuring Internal Democracy within Trade Unions, developed nations such as Canada, United Kingdom and United States of America are still short of meeting the requirements. In addition, Unions face high expectation of democracy (Lynk 2003).

Unions’ capacity to credibly campaign for greater democracy in employment is severely weakened unless they can demonstrate their own democratic credentials (Hyman, 1999; Lynk, 2003). Furthermore, Internal Party wranglings deny unions (both Trade and Political Unions) of credible Union Leaders (Metuh 2010)

For unions to respond to environmental pressures created by market-oriented policies and economic restructuring, labour organisations must tap into all of their internal power resources. Union Democracy represents one key element of achieving this goal http://www.the_free_library.com/union_democr11/4/2010.

Since Trade Unions are Organisations, they are concerned with protections. It has been argued (Mogolowondo n.d) proposes that what constitutes their interests should be decided by the members themselves. Union Democracy, therefore, has a very instrumental objective requiring practical representative organisations to achieve it.

Trade Union Democracy in Nigeria has become a matter of political concern to the State and/or Federal Governments. It is not merely an exercise in democratic self government for its own sake. (Suberu, 2004)

At their formation, individual Trade Unions have constitutions and rule books which emphasise the right of members. Union Organisation starts with Local level (branch), State Chapters and National Headquarters. For instance, the Nigeria Union of Journalists has the Local Level (Chapel, State Council (State branches) Six Zonal Offices and progresses to the highest policy making body (National) in Abuja, being the apex of the Union's formal authority structure.

The geographical and functional levels between the branches and the national office usually possess powerful rights and some degree of autonomy too. These structures help to ensure that the interests of individual members are not lost within an organisation (Magolowondo n.d) and Chambers, 2006). For example, The Nigeria Labour Congress has 29 Affiliate Unions with about four million members. The 29 Affiliate Unions are largely autonomous groupings, providing internal structures which take care of the interests of individual Union Affiliates. Majority of Unions hold annual conferences while others hold Biennial or even Triennial conferences. (Mimpen, n.d)

Branches send delegations to their National Conferences according to membership distribution, with the delegates often mandated to vote on major policy issues in accordance with the majority view of local members.

The Constitutions of Trade Unions require members to attend branch meetings if they wished to vote on policy issues or to elect their Union Officials. However, it is claimed, that such meetings are controlled by minorities of extreme and committed left-wing members. The vast majority

of members are not willing or able to attend branch meetings or to take part in policy debates and elections. The punch Editorial (2010)

Formal Democratic Constitutions by no means ensure that democratic principles will be followed by those responsible for administering them but there is a wide gap between writing documents and actual implementation. Farnham and Pimlott (1995) hold the view that Union Democracy cannot flourish when branch meetings are only attended by a tiny fraction of the membership, or if a politically determined and cohesive minority seeks to impose its politics upon an apathetic majority.

Farnham and Pilmopott (1995) further posit that neither can Union Democracy flourish when a small number of powerful national officers manipulate Union Conferences for their own ends in order to retain their own power and authority.

Union Democracy is also discredited if Union rules are used to prevent the emergence of an effective opposition within a union. For instance, at the venue of conferences, the views and manifestoes of the effective opposition are not given adequate opportunity to disseminate them. Another factor that hinders Union Democracy is when powerful General Secretaries change their Unions' Policies a short time after a Union Conference on the dubious grounds that the circumstances facing the Union have substantially changed.

Oligarchy and union leadership

Michael's (1949) "Iron Law of Oligarchy" argues that democracy within Labour Organisations will inevitably become a casualty to leader opportunism and the negative consequences of staff professionalism and bureaucracy.

His conclusions have been applied to all Labour and Political Organisations (Muthuchidambaram, (1969). Voss and Sheman (2000)) note that this thesis contains two major components. In the process of time, organisations tend to develop Oligarchical Leadership, despite Formal Democratic Practices, because as organisations grow, they rely increasingly on "Professional Union Leaders" and a gap grows between the Leaders and the Members. It is a truism to say that Internal Democracy in the Nigerian Trade Unionism is at its lowest ebb.

Trade unions and political activities

Another factor which has inhibited democracy in Trade Union is politics, struggle for independence experienced during the formative stages of Unions. Such fixations have not been corrected or weaned,

According to *Ubeku* (1975), Trade Unions in Nigeria were not formed originally for political purposes. Political activities crept in later for obvious reasons not necessarily because of the political ambitions of Union Leaders. At the inception of Trade Unionism, Nigeria was under the Colonial Rule of Britain. Very few Nigerians were in the Legislature and even those few were not in a strong position to ‘attack’ the government on economic and political issues. Nigerians therefore were left with two platforms on which to “attack” the “Colonial Oppressors”. The platforms were the Trade Unions and the Newspapers”.

Therefore, many of the founding fathers of Nigeria and politicians started life either as journalists or Trade Unionists. These early Unionists such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo saw it reasonable to seek representation in the Legislature and to attack activities of the Government which they considered not in the interest of the people.

However, after 1960, following the independence of Nigeria, emphasis changed. The country was now been run by Nigerians themselves. Consequently, different issues arose. The Trade Union Leaders saw and still see themselves as “Socialists, the people’s advocates while they see any other person in Management either in Government or Organisation, as a Capitalist.

The “struggle” was therefore turned against this new group. Labour Leaders used the Unions to condemn laws which they considered were not in the interest of the people. And they organized political demonstrations some of which were done under the umbrella of the economic well-being of the workers.

Oppressor/oppressed divide

In spite of over eight decades of union activities or trade unionism in Nigeria, leaders of unions still perceive workers as the oppressed while Management or employers in any form are seen as the oppressors who do not have the interest of workers at heart. Employers on the other hand often see Union Leaders as irrational and unwilling to consider realities.

Consequently, this perceptual differences are the sources of many organisational problems –between employers and labour.

Internal democracy of trade unions under civil rule

Nigeria as a country although has had a checkered democratic history, it has nevertheless experienced twelve years of uninterrupted democratic rule (1999-2011) following over 30 years of her 50 years of nationhood. Democratic institutions and structures are still weak but developing. With the current environment, democracy, globalization and technological advancement, Trade Unions are facing renewed pressures to demonstrate Internal Democracy and accountability (Mersel 2006).

It is pertinent to note that due to the resistance of Trade Unions to adapt to changing democratic values, they (Unions) are perceived by many as been autocratic organisations run by “Union Bosses”.

The irony of it is that the Trade Unions are the most vocal; at times they violently cast aspersions on other bodies including government as undemocratic.

The internal affairs of the Nigerian Trade Unions are not highly regulated by the State. However, it is known that “pseudo-government agent” is used to infiltrate and interfere with union activities-Government (Federal, State and Local) being major employers of labour in Nigeria wittingly and unwittingly do not seem to allow the affairs of Trade Unions to fall into the hands of “anti-government” leaders. Whatever the merits or demerits of such actions are highly debatable.(Ojukwu, and Olaifo, 2010)

Conclusion

In Nigeria, Union Leaders are far from allowing full democratisation of Trade Unionism, thus Union Members have little say in how their Unions operate. Although the Laws of Nigeria, say that membership of a Trade Union is voluntary, Union Leaders ensure that such freedom of choice is never enforced by any individual hence membership check-off dues are deducted at source.

A recent national Canadian Public Opinion Poll found that the top reason (cited by 69 percent of non-union workers) for not wanting to join a union was that “members have no say in how the union-operates”(Agha 2010).

Trade Unions in Nigeria face new challenges that call for measures that will enforce internal democracy.

The interference by extraneous ‘agents’ and the unwillingness of Oligarchical Leaders within Unions will give Trade Union organisations the perception that they are autocratic unions ‘run by union bosses’.

Trade Union democracy in Nigeria has become a matter of political concern to the state or federal government

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