

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Unity and division: the dialectics of the Nigerian trade union movement

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Accepted 31 May, 2007

**This paper takes cursory look at the development of the Nigerian trade union movement. Using the historical approach, it is argued that a combination of ideological, political, structural and personal factors has made it virtually impossible for the movement to attain a level of unity needed to secure concessions from the Nigerian state and the owners of capitalist industry. The paper then concludes that given the unfolding developments within the global and local economies which continue to confer advantages on capital, the Nigerian trade union movement needs to overcome internal divisions and confront the prevailing situation as a class for itself.**

**Key words:** trade unions, unity, capitalism, ideology.

## INTRODUCTION

“Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains”. That was the clarion call of Karl Marx and his comrade and collaborator, Friedrich Engels in ending the Communist Manifesto of 1848. That call was based on the enormity of the task before workers in the struggle between labour and capital, not just within the work place but also in the general class struggle to overthrow the yoke of capital. Because capital is concentrated social power, in a context in which the worker has only his individual labour power, it is considered imperative for workers to be united in confronting the enormous power of capital. According to Lozovsky (1972), “the only social force possessed by the workers is their numerical strength. This force, however, is impaired by the absence of unity”. It is in the same vein that Allan Flanders (1972) argues that the unity of workers makes the trade union a complete organisation and constitutes the foundation of the union’s strength. The call for united labour front remains valid today as it was then because of a number of factors both internal and external to the trade union movement. In fact the enormity of the task confronting Nigerian workers today is perhaps greater than those confronted by the workers of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The question at this juncture is that if unity is central to the survival of trade unions, why is it elusive or difficult to attain?

Ordinarily the issue of unity should be taken for granted in a trade union organisation. This is because for people

to agree to come together in any voluntary membership organization, particularly a trade union, there must be a unity of purpose and subscription to a set of ideals, which bring and bind them together. The fact that the question remains topical is an indication that it is a central problem. Otherwise, trade union unity either at the level of the individual union or that of the trade union movement, as a whole should not be difficult to attain.

The difficulty in having unity within the trade union movement arises in part from the inherent strength of the trade union organisation. In order to weaken the unions, efforts are usually made by those who feel threatened by this strength to undermine the union organisation. This is made more problematic because of the collaboration of elements within the trade union movement with enemies of the workers to ensure that the movement remains disunited. Since the formation of the first trade union in Nigeria almost a century ago, 1912, the history of the trade union movement has been a mixture of triumphs, intrigues, manipulations and tribulations. It is against the above background that we shall attempt to examine the prospects and challenges of trade union unity in Nigeria.

## **The essence of trade unionism and the imperative of unity**

In appreciating the importance of unity to the very survival of trade unions as well as the attainment of their prim-

ary objective of protecting the interests of their members it is necessary to ask the question; why trade unions. In other words, what is the essence of trade unionism? It is perhaps necessary to acknowledge from the onset the distinction that is made in literature between trade union and trade unionism. While a trade union is the organisation structure devised to bring together workers in paid employment, trade unionism refers to the principles and underlying philosophy that guide the conduct and activities of unions and unionists. It is not out of place to expect union members and their leaders to be guided by these principles and philosophy. This is because without imbibing them, achieving the objectives of the union may be difficult. The Nigerian experience suggests that many a union leader do not really embrace the principles and philosophy underlying trade union organisation and work. This explains why some trade union officials perceive working in a trade union organisation as just another work experience, with some of them easily picking up employment with member companies within the same industry. It is the contention here that the two terms (trade unions and trade unionism) flow into one another and as such at times they are used interchangeably in this paper.

Conceived as vehicles for the articulation and protection of the collective interests of workers in wage employment, trade unions, all over the world, have a chequered history. Their emergence at the beginning of the industrial revolution in Britain was largely in response to the harsh conditions of, and deprivations inflicted by, the new factory system thrown up as new centres of production. These factories created entirely new environments and conditions of employment. The early stage of industrialism was characterized by the tyranny of both machines and the rising industrial class and this was unbearable to the workers who were hitherto independent craftsmen and peasants from the countryside. They realized early enough their disadvantaged position, especially given the enormous strength of the employers.

There was a sense of job insecurity, which came with industrial work. The independence enjoyed by the craftsmen of old was such that they could pack their tools and move on to another town in search of a livelihood (tramping), was no longer there. This was in addition to the fact that they no longer owned the tools of their employment; neither could they boast of any special skills they could sell to the general public (no thanks to the process of division of labour). To crown it all is the exploitative character of industrial capitalism, which was a function of the profit motive of the factory owners. The fact of their common predicament and individual vulnerability made it imperative for them to think of presenting a common front against their common 'enemy', the employer. This reality has always made unity very central to the survival of trade unions and their ability to gain concessions from intransigent employers. In other words, the adversity of capitalist employment relations dictated, and continues to

dictate, the need for unity among workers.

In summary it can be said that trade unions arose to address the enormous problems faced at work, which include job insecurity, injustice, dependence and the inhuman conditions under which work is carried out. These are in addition to the fact that "at national and international levels workers live in a society dominated by foreign capital and under regimes where injustice, oppression and poverty prevail (CSC, Belgium n.d.).

The logic of trade unionism would appear to be that irrespective of their placing within the work hierarchy, lack of ownership of the means of production puts all employees at a disadvantage within the employment relationship. In the employment relationship, the employer enjoys a lot of power, which is reinforced by a number of legal instruments limiting the control, which the individual employee can exercise within the work situation. Since workers constitute the largest single force in industry, it is only through their combined strength that they can conveniently challenge the dominance of capital. Through such a challenge, workers would be promoting their own interests, which are basically economic. In this regard, issues such as wages, overtime rates, hours of work, holiday and sundry conditions of work attract the attention of unions. The fact that workers have to struggle over these issues is a reflection of the inherent contradictions within capitalist industry and society at large. These contradictions are the products of the antagonistic interests of labour and capital as epitomized in the continuous accumulation on the part of the employers at the expense of the workers. It is in the context of this accumulation that the interests of workers are subordinated to those of capital. Herein lies the necessity for a united front on the part of workers if they are to improve their lot. The beauty of this lies in the fact that "one man can be ignored, but the entire workforce cannot be ignored" (Whitehead, 1977). In other words, trade unionism can be regarded as an investment in the strength of the collectivity as against the weakness, if not vulnerability, of the individual. In popular parlance such expressions as; "unity is strength" and "united we stand, divided we fall", underscore the essence of unity in any human endeavour.

### **Divisive tendencies within the Nigerian trade union movement**

If trade union unity is desirable it is appropriate to ask, at this juncture, why it is difficult to achieve. Even though the restructuring exercise that took place in the late 1970s was partly meant to address this issue, factionalisation within the different unions is a recurring issue. Unions such as the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT), the National Union of Banks, Insurance and Financial Institutions (NUBIFIE) and the National Union of Hotels and Personal Services Workers (NUHPSHW), for example,

have a not too long history of factionalisation. Divisions within the trade union movement are borne out of factors that are internal and external to the trade unions. The internal factors arise out of the patterns of union organisation, which are reflected in the criteria for inclusion, and exclusion of members. On the other hand the external factors revolve around political and ideological differences and state manipulation.

The internal factors relate to the nature of trade unions themselves. Workers from diverse backgrounds formed unions. As such, from the very beginning unions exist to "promote sectional interests-the interests of the section of the population which they happen to organize" (Flanders, 1972). Various structural arrangements have been devised to give organizational effect to trade union membership. In terms of union structure, two contradictory forces have always been in contention. The first is the move towards breadth, unity and solidarity. The second tendency is towards parochialism, sectionalism and exclusiveness. While the first tendency favours unionism, which is open and expansive, the latter encourages closed and restrictive unionism. It is the first type that the so-called general unions tend to promote as reflected in their slogan; "trade unions for all". The paradox of this situation is that these tendencies are not unconnected with the realities of capitalist industry in which we are confronted with a variety of work contexts and work relations. Arising from this is the tendency for those involved to be conscious primarily of their immediate work environment, what they experience on a daily basis, their direct and personal relationships. In this context workers easily identify themselves first and foremost as members of a given occupational category, an employing organization or of a particular industry.

Counterpoised against the above reality is the fact that most workers, manual or white collar, experience many common grievances such as job insecurity, lack of autonomy in work and unsatisfactory compensation and conditions of employment all of which should, ordinarily, provoke a common feeling of opposition and antagonism to capital, the owners of capital and their agents. By and large, the divisive tendencies that are internal to the trade union organization are expressed in their organizational boundaries and this shapes the lines of demarcation or jurisdictional scope among different unions. The issue of jurisdiction has been a major source of inter-union wrangling. This is a problem that the restructuring exercise of 1978 has not been able to resolve. For instance, up till now the dispute between the National Union of Shops and Distributive Employees (NUSDE) and Steel and Engineering Workers Union of Nigeria (SEWUN) over where workers of Mikano Company and those of Nigerchin Limited should belong is yet to be resolved.

The name trade union itself implies sectionalism. It is about the inward looking unity of people who practice a common craft/trade or possess common skill. As such, it would take a major motive force beyond the mere fact of

a common membership of the working class to broaden organization beyond the narrow limits of a specific occupational group. This, for me, is one of the greatest challenges to trade union unity. We shall return to this point later.

The 'proliferation' of trade unions in the era before the restructuring exercise that took place in the late 1970s can be explained in light of the two tendencies earlier mentioned. The low level of development of the Nigerian economy and the fact that most union organizers survived on the number of unions organized by them and were interested in carving out exclusive territories or sphere of influence accounted for the smallness and proliferation. Even though the restructuring exercise resulted in significantly fewer unions, from over 1000 to 42, the divisive tendencies remain within the trade union movement. We shall elaborate more on this when we look at the divisive factors that can be said to be external to the trade union movement.

The external factors revolve around politics and ideology and are more evident in the activities and positions taken by the trade union officials and union federations than those of individual unions. This is largely due to the fact that trade unions are organised on the basis of where people work or on the basis of what they do. There is little or no room for the individual worker's preference. In the case of trade union federations or centres, affiliation is usually voluntary and consciously done on the basis of political and, or ideological compatibility however roughly defined. In actual fact, one of the reasons for the ban imposed on the four labour centres in 1976 and the legislation of a single labour centre in 1978 was to ensure ideologically neutral trade unions (as if that were possible)(for details see the Report of Michael Abiodun on the restructuring of Trade Unions in Nigeria).

The circumstances that prompted the formation of unions, made it impossible for them to be ideologically neutral, the reality of the colonial project made it more compelling for trade unions to be ideological. The colonial project was in furtherance of capitalism and as such anti-colonial struggles must be based on a counter ideology in order to effectively mobilise those under colonial subjugation, including workers and their organisations. In other words, ideological undertones cannot be removed from trade union activities. In the first place the imposition of colonial rule facilitated the development of wage employment with all its inadequacies and attendant deprivations suffered by the workers. Even in a post-colonial situation, in so far as the capitalist relations of production prevail, ideology would still be relevant in defining the responses and programmes of trade unions to developments not just within the employment relationship but also within the polity as a whole.

With particular reference to the development of trade unionism in Nigeria, Otopo (1986) argues that "British strategic and global considerations, peculiar problems confronting the colonial administration and the needs and

activities of British and other European firms were all to impinge on the course and development of the Nigerian trade union movement". If all these were tied to the ideological undercurrents that propelled the colonial enterprise, then there is no way the response(s) of those at the other (receiving) end of the consequences of the colonial project could be ideology-free. There were other developments that led to ideological polarisation not only within the trade union movements in the colonial possessions but also within protest movements generally. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and the subsequent emergence of the old Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as a world power were some of such developments, which had far reaching implications for the international trade union movement and the struggles of workers as well as the generality of people under colonial rule.

During the cold war era in particular, national trade union centres in colonised countries enjoyed the support of Soviet bloc countries. Such support was meant to undermine the influence of world capitalism by quickening the decolonisation process. This was in line with the commitment of workers in tsarist Russia "to propagate the idea of emancipating the workers from the yoke of capitalism and the privileged classes" (Phillips, 1988). Correspondingly, the western countries and their trade union federations as well as the international trade secretariats (ITS) were, in the words of Otopo (1986), interested in "containing what is generally announced to be communist-style trade unionism". The two ideological blocs were then ready to win the souls of the national trade union centres in the colonies. It was in this context that leaders of the fledging trade unions in colonial Nigeria were seeking affiliation with international trade union federations (the details of these can be found in the works of Otopo 1986; Offiong 1983; Ananaba, 1969). The Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUC) emerged in July 1943 as the first major trade union federation in Nigeria. The TUC successfully prosecuted the 1945 general strike, forcing government to make major concessions. Of course the government was not happy with this and sought ways of getting even with the federation. Its next move was to decimate the TUC and some less radical unions became ready tools in this regard. In a move that apparently enjoyed the backing of the colonial administration, the Federation of Nigeria Civil Service Union, the Nigeria Union of Teachers and the Federated Union of Native Administration Staff established the Supreme Council of Nigerian Workers. This development marked the beginning of a long drawn process of division and unity that has not totally abated till present. The fact that this new formation was allowed to make representation at the Tudor Davies Commission set up by government to address some of the issues thrown up by the 1945 general strike would appear to confirm the fears that it enjoyed official backing.

The success that attended the 1945 general strike was a big boost for the nationalists who stepped up the tempo

of their activities and it was against this background that the desirability or otherwise of political affiliation by the trade union movement became an issue. The contentious issue was affiliation to the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), which was the main political party then. The antagonists of affiliation argued, among other things, "overt political links were incompatible with trade union principles" (see Otopo, 1986). At its General Council meeting of 28<sup>th</sup> December 1948, the TUC decided against continued affiliation to the NCNC. In a counter move, the protagonists of affiliation made up of unionists like Michael Imoudu, F.O. Coker, P.O. Balonwu, Richard Aghedo and Nduka Eze formed the Nigerian National Federation of Labour (NNFL), which was formally launched in March 1949. Michael Imoudu and Nduka Eze emerged as President and Secretary respectively.

Some of the aims and objectives of the NNFL were clearly suggestive of its ideological disposition. These are:

- i) To foster the spirit of working class consciousness among all workers of Nigeria and Cameroons
- ii) To press for the socialisation of important industries in the country with a view to realising a socialist government where identity of the working class would not be lost.
- iii) To cooperate with all democratic federations of trade unions the world over in order to make possible the clarion call of "workers of the world unite" for the triumphant emergence of a World Parliament of the working class (Otopo, 1986).

Not surprisingly, the NNFL formed an alliance with the NCNC. The cold blooded massacre of protesting coal miners by agents of the colonial state at the Iva Valley, Enugu in 1949 provided a window of opportunity for reconciliation among rival labour leaders. The outcome was the emergence of the Nigeria Labour Congress (the first NLC) in 1950 as the new labour centre. Ideological division soon became a problem that the NLC had to contend with. With Michael Imoudu, Coker and Nduka Eze as President, Deputy President and Secretary-General respectively, the leadership of the body was under the firm grip of the more radical elements, thus making it much easier for the chieftains of the defunct NNFL to push their positions. Taking advantage of this, the NLC did not only establish formal political links with the NCNC, it also affiliated with the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) based in Prague, former Czechoslovakia.

One of the responses of the conservatives (who hitherto belonged to the TUC) to these moves was to withhold the transfer of the assets of the TUC to the NLC as earlier agreed, a development that was meant to weaken the financial base of the NLC. The rift within the NLC came into the open in March 1951 during the visit of officials of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) (the international trade union federation of the western world, which was a breakaway from the WFTU) to Nigeria. While the NLC opposed the visit, a pro

-ICFTU faction within the NLC supported it and these opposing positions resulted in an open clash at the Ikeja Airport (Otobo, 1986). This development marked the beginning of the end of the NLC.

The All Nigeria Trade Union Federation (ANTUF) emerged in 1953 as the successor to the Nigeria Labour Congress. While Michael Imoudu emerged as President again, a new entrant, Gogo Chu Nzeribe became Secretary-General. The ideological/political orientation of the new centre would appear apparent from some of its aims, which include;

- i) To seek for the state ownership of major industries in the country.
- ii) To establish and support the political wing of the workers' movement (political party) with a view to realising a socialist government (see Otobo, 1986).

Although ANTUF resolved not to affiliate with either the ICFTU or the WFTU, its orientation was clear from its aims some of which are mentioned above. Paradoxically, the decision to remain 'neutral' angered some elements within the body that favoured affiliation with the ICFTU. It was this group that spearheaded the formation, in April 1957, of the National Council of Trade Unions in Nigeria (NCTUN) with N.A. Cole as President, H.P. Adebola as his Vice and L.L. Borha as General Secretary. Not surprisingly, the body affiliated with the ICFTU and enjoyed official recognition of the government of the day. Government's recognition was a betrayal of its own ideological preference for conservatism.

Significantly, both the ICFTU and the colonial administration did not hide their preference for the NCTUN. For instance, even when the ANTUF sought affiliation with the ICFTU, the request was turned down. On the part of government, it supported the participation of the NCTUN's General Secretary at the ILO Conference in 1958 as opposed to that of ANTUF's Secretary General, S.U. Basse, who was actually stopped at the airport by immigration officials. As such, it can be said that from time immemorial, and perhaps, for understandable reasons, the Nigerian state (colonial and neo-colonial) has felt more comfortable with the conservative wing of the Nigerian trade union movement (after all conservatives are not expected to rock the boat).

As had become customary, efforts were made to reconcile the two sides and these efforts resulted in the emergence of Trades Union Congress of Nigeria (TUCN) borne out of the merger of the ANTUF and NCTUN in March 1959 with Imoudu of ANTUF as President and Borha of NCTUN as General Secretary. For the first time, the more radical elements found themselves in the minority. Apart from the position of president held by Imoudu all the remaining positions, including membership of the Central Working Committee, were occupied by members of the NCTUN. This scenario presented a perfect setting for discord. There was certainly no cohesion

within the leadership. For example, Imoudu still maintained a relationship with the NCNC and in his capacity as President joined Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe and other officials of the NCNC on a political tour of the country and later on a tour of Europe. His absence provided the remaining members of the executive the opportunity to make good their own game plan of affiliating the TUCN with the ICFTU in April 1959 even when the issue was yet to be tabled officially. Expectedly, this move did not go down well with the ex-ANTUF faithfuls.

The factionalisation within the TUCN was further aggravated by the visit of a delegation from the Ghana Trade Union Congress (GTUC) to Lagos in August 1959. The delegation had come to mobilise their Nigerian counterparts in support of the formation of the All African Trade Union Federation (AATUF). The GTUC delegation with an apparent soft spot for the more radical tendency, held discussions with both the officials of the TUCN and ex-ANTUF chieftains, a preference that was confirmed later that year (1959) when representatives of the ANTUF faction were given recognition over the official TUCN delegation during the preparatory conference for the take off of the AATUF in Accra, Ghana.

Moves and counter moves by the two sides finally led to the birth of a new central labour centre called the Nigerian Trades Union Congress (NTUC) (a breakaway from the TUCN) on 21 April 1960 with Imoudu as President and Gogo Chu Nzeribe as General Secretary. While it affiliated with the AATUF, the NTUC distanced itself from the ICFTU, WFTU and a third international trade union federation, the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (IFCTU).

The other faction of the old TUCN had, a day earlier, 20 April 1960, held its own conference in Kano where it expelled Imoudu as President and replaced him with H.P. Adebola while L.L. Borha retained his position as General Secretary. At this conference the TUCN received goodwill messages from the ICFTU headquarters in Brussels and the British Trade Union Congress. Naturally the TUCN reaffirmed its affiliation to the ICFTU.

It is important to note here that up till the emergence of the TUCN, it would appear that the more radical elements within the Nigerian trade union movement had a way of emerging to dominate the leadership of the trade union federations. It is probably an indication that the balance of forces, at least within the movement, was in their favour. In the aftermath of the new split, the Nigerian state again showed its preference for the conservatives. Just as it happened much earlier, the government nominated L.L. Borha as workers' delegate to the 1960 ILO conference along with 11 other members of the TUCN as advisers (Otobo 1986). The NTUC's protest did not change the position of the government.

Nigeria became an independent country on October 1, 1960. The new independent government pretended to be interested in the unity of the trade union movement. It was in this light that efforts at reconciling the two factions

were once again initiated. As a follow up to the All Nigeria People's Conference held in August 1961, a committee tagged the 'Labour Reconciliation Committee' was set up to resolve all disagreements within the trade union movement. The outcome of the committee's work led to the Ibadan merger conference of 3 May 1962. It is, however, instructive to note, "apart from Dr. T.O Lucas, the organisers and presiding officials were drawn from the parties that formed the new federal government (the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens)" (Otobo 1986:43). The composition of this committee had implications for the conduct of the conference itself.

The contentious issue of affiliation came up at the conference and contrary to what appeared as the consensus position that only fraternal relationships should be maintained with the international federations, an apparently stage-managed voting exercise favoured outright affiliation with the ICFTU. This development angered the NTUC faction, which staged a walkout and ultimately refused to participate in the elections to pick the office-bearers. This was the setting that led to the emergence of Alhaji H.P. Adebola as the President of the new labour centre known as United Labour Congress (ULCN), a name that certainly did not reflect developments at the conference (there was nothing to suggest that there was unity at the conference). The NTUC delegates organised their own elections and came up with a rival centre known as the Independent United Labour Congress (IULC) with Michael Imoudu as President. Paradoxically, an exercise that was meant to bring about unity further confirmed the disunity within the trade union movement. True to expectations, government gave exclusive recognition to the ULCN and as if to confirm this support government banned the Secretary General of AATUF (an apparent supporter of the IULC), John Tettegah of Ghana from visiting Nigeria.

From the two groups emerged new centres. First, those who felt disenchanted with both the IULC and ULCN formed the Nigeria Workers' Council (NWC). Prominent among them were N. Anunobi and N. Chukwura. The NWC affiliated with the IFCTU (a religious dimension?). This was in December 1962, the same time that Malam Ibrahim Nock left the IULC to form the Northern Federation of Labour (NFL), (an ethnic/religious dimension you may say), which decided to affiliate with the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions. This was the setting until the historic Apena Cemetery Declaration of 1974 and the consequent intervention of the state in the period between 1976 and 1978 when the restructuring exercise took effect.

With the legislation of a single labour centre and the possibility of new ones foreclosed, the different ideological tendencies had to find accommodation in the new NLC, with each struggling to take control of the leadership. The new ideological divide was expressed through the radical bloc (socialists/communists) and the democrat

bloc (conservatives/capitalists). In other words, the existence of a single labour centre has not stopped ideological polarisation within the trade union movement in Nigeria. Neither has it ensured unity and harmony within the movement. In actual fact, every election has been a spirited struggle for the soul of the movement between the two tendencies.

The problem created by political and ideological differences would appear to lend credence to such views as expressed by Allan Flanders that the unity of workers "must always be imperilled when they import political faction fights". Although this may be true but it is highly inconceivable that labour can survive by being apolitical. The critical issue is how the political involvement is managed in the overall interest of union members and not just to serve the interest of leaders who may not be more than political jobbers. This is why it is important to ask the question regarding the extent to which the rank and file members of the unions subscribe to or share the political/ideological positions, if not beliefs, of the labour leaders. The ease with which labour leaders change political/ideological camps suggests that members are hardly carried along. This much was admitted by a former President of the Nigeria Labour Congress, Comrade Ali Chiroma, when he says that Nigerian "unions and, or, labour leaders criss-crossed between the two (ideological) camps in the period before and after the restructuring exercise" (Adewumi, 2004). Unlike what obtains elsewhere where union members are directly consulted before major political decisions are taken, there is nothing to suggest that union members have inputs into deciding the political position of the unions and this has serious implications for mobilizing members in support of such positions.

Another dimension of the political factor is the unrelenting efforts of the Nigerian state, both colonial and neo-colonial to subvert the unity of the Nigerian trade union movement. The point to note is that confronted by the resolve of workers to organize themselves in trade unions, the capitalist state often resort to extra-judicial and political manoeuvrings to undermine the inherent strength of a united labour front. As indicated earlier, in the unending struggle between the radicals and conservatives within the trade union movement, the Nigerian state has always taken sides with the conservatives. In instances when the state fails to co-opt the unions, it resorts to provoking factionalisation, which provides some justification for taking over the running of the unions. This has been particularly so since the union leaders themselves took the initiative of coming together consequent upon the Apena Cemetery Declaration of 1974. Apparently not comfortable with the emergence of Comrade Wahab Goodluck as the president of the second NLC, the Nigerian state annulled the election of the new executive while refusing to accord recognition to the new labour centre. The Obasanjo military government hid under the petitions written by Pascal Bafyau and Hud-

Hudson Momodu purportedly acting on behalf of younger elements within the movement who felt left out of the power sharing arrangement in the new NLC. Unfortunately for government the new leader that emerged to head the NLC after the restructuring in 1978, Comrade Hassan Sunmonu came from the same tradition as Goodluck.

The committed and transparent leadership of Sunmonu did not go down well with the Shagari government and would support a rival candidate during the NLC's Delegates' Conference of 1981. Having failed in its bid to stop Sunmonu's re-election the state will sponsor the same person who lost election to him to spearhead the formation of a new labour centre. It was in similar circumstances that the Nigerian state truncated Comrade Ali Chiroma's bid for a second term as NLC's president in 1988, acting through members of the opposing camp to create an artificial stalemate and ultimately imposing a sole administrator on the NLC for a period of 10 months. There is a sense in which the Nigerian trade union movement has always been a victim of its own success and principled position in the hands of the Nigerian state. Each time the movement scores a major victory or forces the state to make concessions, the state usually moves to get even with labour. This happened in the aftermath of the victory recorded by the Trade Union Congress in 1945. In the post-restructuring era it happened when the Sunmonu leadership forced Shagari to fix a new national minimum wage in 1981. It also happened to the Ali Chiroma leadership for refusing to collaborate with the Babangida junta and more recently the minimal opposition provided by the Oshiomhole leadership has provoked the Obasanjo government to move against the NLC.

Lastly, it is worth noting with respect to divisiveness within the trade union movement, that the personal ambitions of individuals who are interested in leadership positions have not helped matters. It is not unusual to find such leaders trying to destabilize their unions once they failed to secure union offices. These unionists see their involvement in trade unionism in terms of personal gains and whenever there is anything that threatens these, such elements would go to any length to ensure personal survival. The crisis that rocked the National Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) in the period between 2004/5 was not unconnected with this attitude. It was this personal gain that was partly responsible for the stalemate witnessed in Benin in 1988 when the election of Ali Chiroma as NLC's president for a second term was annulled.

From the foregoing it may be right to say that unity and division constitute the dialectics of the trade union movement in Nigeria. Much detail has been provided here so that people would come to terms with the enormity of the reality confronting the trade union movement in Nigeria. Unfortunately it does not appear that the end of divisiveness is in sight. Having said this much the next task is to examine the prospects and challenges of unity within the movement.

### **Prospects for unity within the trade union movement**

Without any fear of contradiction, it can be said that the prospects for trade union unity have always been there and would ever remain. All that is required is the willingness of union members to realize the full potentialities of the working class not just as a class in itself but, more importantly, as a class for itself. The very circumstances that necessitated the coming together of workers in trade unions during the early stages of the factory system are still very much present in these times. The need for unity within the trade union movement especially in dependencies like Nigeria has been made more compelling by unfolding developments within the world economy. What is referred to as globalisation has been identified as a major threat to workers, their organisations and other vulnerable groups in society (Sunmonu, 1997, 1998).

The emergence of a unipolar world economic order in which the might of capital has been strengthened tremendously, constitutes a major threat to the well-being of workers and other vulnerable groups in society. Nigerian workers must come to terms with this grim reality. This reality demands solidarity among workers, it demands collective action and it demands a united front from the labouring masses if they are to overcome the adversities they face not just in the world of work but within the larger society as a whole. It is a fact that workers individually or isolated in their respective unions cannot single-handedly confront the might of employers. Once workers come to terms with this reality and appreciate the social power which trade unions wield as collective organizations, the prospects for unity within the trade union movement are very bright. However, in maintaining this position, one is not unmindful of the paradox presented by the unfolding economic scenario. This paradox lies in the technological changes, which accompanied the "globalization" of the world economy. One category of the emerging workforce in the era of "globalisation" is made up of workers who are "better educated, career minded, individualistic and less motivated by class interests and solidarity" (Jose, 2002). Unfortunately this is fast becoming the dominant category across industries and has implications for unity and solidarity among workers. How to overcome this should reflect in the strategy adopted to achieve unity. The unassailable point is that a trade union movement in disarray cannot confront the reality presented by developments thrown up by world capitalism.

### **What are the challenges posed?**

Against the above background, the major challenge is for Nigerian workers to overcome the divisive factors that have been holding them down. In addressing this it is necessary to develop a programme base for building a united trade union movement. This would be a response to the question: unity for what? Unity in any organization

must be geared towards certain ends. Even when it appears obvious that people should come together, conscious efforts still need to be made to bring them together. As such in building a united labour front a programme of action should be developed around the needs and aspirations of workers and this should address all facets of national life and should constitute the minimum shopping list for Nigerian workers. A "Workers' Charter of Demands", similar to what was put together by the NLC in the early 1980s, would be appropriate. Such a package should flow from the members of the unions and should not just be the imposition of union officials, no matter the temptation to the contrary. The beauty of this approach is that a stop would be put to a situation in which "policies to be adopted or agreements (are) signed without any involvement of the mass of union membership or perhaps without their knowledge" (Hyman, 1975).

Such a package should cut across the political, ideological and occupational divides and be regarded as a mobilization document. Irrespective of whether one belongs to an industrial union, a senior staff association or any of the existing labour centres, this minimum labour charter should be seen as a rallying point for the protection, defence and promotion of the interests of workers as stakeholders in what is fancifully described as the Nigerian project. The charter should address issues as well as strategies and tactics to be adopted by the trade union movement in confronting its plight in the scheme of things. Such an approach allows issues to be seen in their proper perspective while it also encourages a holistic and comprehensive view of the challenges confronting the trade union movement and the complexity of the struggle for a better society. The above will go a long way in addressing the problem created by the artificial divide within the movement that distinguishes between senior and junior workers and the one, which compartmentalizes workers on the basis of where they work. It may take a long time to overcome the legal hurdle, which separates Nigerian workers into junior and senior for the purpose of union formation. This is because the present dichotomy was deliberately created to weaken the trade union movement.

A common programme or platform of action can also be used as a rallying point for the multiple labour centres. The existence of multiple centres is not necessarily a threat to unity within the trade union movement neither is the existence of a single labour centre necessarily an indication of a united labour front. As argued elsewhere (Adewumi, 1997) once a desperate government hijacks a sole labour centre as it happened in the second half of the Babangida dictatorship as well as in the Abacha years (1988 to 1998), the entire movement becomes easily de-mobilised. The fundamental flaw involved in imposing trade union structure or a single labour centre by legislative fiat is that it makes it virtually impossible for unions to set up alternative bodies when the existing structure does not live up to workers' expectations. It is, there-

fore, suggested that workers should enjoy the liberty to form unions, initiate mergers and establish federations or central labour organizations on their own as dictated by prevailing circumstances.

The point to note here is that unity can be achieved based on an appreciation of the commonality of interests of workers derived from the fact of common deprivation imposed by the predatory capitalist system and a common enemy represented by the employer who enjoys the massive backing of the state. Workers must come to terms with the reality mentioned earlier that irrespective of their location within the industrial or work hierarchy, lack of ownership of the means of production puts every worker at a disadvantage both in industry and society at large. This is a major challenge that must be addressed in the quest for a united trade union movement.

Another challenge is how to forge an alliance between the trade union movement and the larger labour movement, made up of all those who live on non-exploitative income but who may not live on wage employment, including those who operate in the informal sector, as well as those who share their hopes and aspirations. Together they must work for the attainment of a united trade union movement and ensure a sustainable alliance between the two movements in Nigeria. In the context of this presentation, GDH Cole's conception of a movement is adopted. According to him, "a movement implies a common end or at least a community of purpose which is real and influences men's (and women?) thoughts and actions, even if it is imperfectly apprehended and largely unconscious" (Flanders, 1972). The trade unions in this context should be seen as "organizing centres of the working class" (Lozovsky, 1972) but do not constitute the working class in its entirety. A virile labour movement may make up for the shortcomings and inadequacies of the trade union movement and possibly save the trade unions from themselves and their official leaders. Relevant civil society organizations should be part of this movement. Ultimately, the target should be a re-invention of the tradition of social movement unionism, which was at play in the anti-colonial struggle. A recourse to social movement unionism means that through the trade unions, other disadvantaged groups in society will be given a voice within the polity. Through such a response, the labour movement will be put in a position to adequately address the socio-economic problems facing Nigerians.

There is also the challenge posed by the need to overcome self-centredness, egotism and petty rivalry on the part of labour leaders. This is usually borne out of the personalization of the union machinery by some officials who see their involvement in unionism as an ego boosting enterprise and a means to other ends that may not be in the interests of workers. Even when they are involved in joint or collaborative actions, other actors are left out in negotiations with state officials. This in itself breeds suspicion and jeopardizes the chances of successful actions. Some of the schisms experienced in the past are

not unconnected with this tendency. This was an issue during the joint struggles of labour and civil society organization over the incessant increases of the prices of petroleum products by the Obasanjo administration.

Closely related to the above is the lack of internal democracy within individual unions and the trade union movement. When membership organizations are run without the involvement of other members or by side-tracking due process or through the manipulation of existing structures for personal advantage, it is only a question of time before those who feel sidelined initiate counter-moves or connive with outside interests in order to get even with those that exclude them. This partly explains the indifference of many labour leaders to the Trade Union Amendment Act 2005, which allows for the emergence of multiple labour centres. At least it may give them some opportunity to steal some of the show that goes on with being in control. Enthroning internal democracy within the unions thus becomes a major challenge to address.

## Conclusion

The Nigerian trade union movement is presently at a crossroad, with lack of unity being a major setback for the trade union movement. The lack of deep-rooted unity, just as it obtains within the Nigerian polity itself, has made it virtually impossible for unions to realize their full potentialities. It is quite an irony that while employers and members of the ruling class understand the need for unity, the trade union movement is often involved in fragmented and incoherent actions.

Given the inherent weakness of individual unions, there is the need for the Nigerian trade union movement to respond collectively to developments within the polity and economy. This calls for inter-sectoral alliances in order to address socio-economic problems facing workers. Joint actions can be undertaken on an ad-hoc basis until such a time that a more enduring platform for common action would be put in place. Essentially, the strategic placing of strong unions should be used to mitigate the vulnerability of weaker unions. That is the essence of trade union solidarity. In all this, there is the need for a massive programme of workers' education with particular focus on the rank-and-file members. Such a programme should have a very heavy political content with the ultimate aim of developing the consciousness of workers. A conscious trade union membership would make it be more difficult for trade union leaders to manipulate the trade union machinery to serve personal ends.

The ultimate is that, as mentioned earlier, Nigerian workers should realize that they can only improve their lot in society when they appreciate the need to operate as a class for itself. They should understand the fact that, "the first and overriding responsibility of all trade unions is to the welfare of their own members. That is their primary

commitment; not to a firm, not to an industry, not to the nation (Flanders, 1972). The trade union remains the only organization that workers own collectively and it is the only body that can address their concerns; no other body or persons can do it for them. At every point in time what should be uppermost in the minds of union members and operatives is what can be done to strengthen the trade union organization and re-position the trade union movement in the overall interest of the working class. Nigerian workers should embrace the popular slogan adopted by the early union organizers that "an injury to one is an injury to all". This underscores the essence of solidarity as the foundation on which to build trade union unity.

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