

# **Working Class Movement: Quest for Freedom, Social Justice and Democratic governance in Nigeria**

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By

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## **Abstract**

The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or oppressive authority of another man, but to have only the collective power, which is established by popular consent, in the commonwealth, not under the dominion of any will, or restraint of any law, but as expressed in the constitution and international treaties or covenants. Without doubt, freedom is a basic value that is shared by virtually all political actors. Philosophers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx, as well as representatives of Critical Theory, have at various historical moments thought through and described how freedom might be realized (Locke 1988:213).

The global advocate of social justice is the International Labour Organisation (ILO). It functions in a democratic way by taking interest in the protection of working class throughout the world.

Fundamental principles of labour rights and human rights are set out in the ILO’s Constitution of 1919 and in the Declaration of Philadelphia of 1944 (appended to the Constitution). In particular, the Preamble to the Constitution refers to “recognition of the principle of freedom of association” to confront injustice, hardship and privation. The Declaration of Philadelphia reaffirms that “freedom of expression and association are essential to sustained progress” and that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” and that “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, ... birth or other status.”

The labour movement in Nigeria as represented by the two labour centres; Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUCN) in strong collaborations with the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and other social movements have wage a significant struggle to ensure social justice in the country. The solidarity exhibited by these movements had brought about collective actions in the struggle against all forms of anti-people and neo-liberal policies of the state over the years. Coalition’s platforms like Joint Action Front (JAF), United Action for Democracy (UAD), Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), Civil Liberty Organisation (CLO), Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM), Socialist Workers League (SWL), Safe Nigeria Group (SNG) and Occupy Nigeria Movement have been used at different times in the history of Nigeria to champion the course of the workers and masses, promoting human rights and democratic values.

The labour movement in Nigeria has over the years supported left wing political parties and made several effort to form a political party ideal for a social democracy; this eventually led to the establishment of Labour Party (LP) in the Forth Republic. Political links of trade union have been almost universal although the nature and extent of the relationship between trade unions and political parties differ from

country to country. While in many others, trade unions are tied up with many political parties through multiple federation of the Trade union. Unions have a vital stake in the political process and the decision that will change or restructure the balance of power within their society. The growth of the major political parties, which have different ideologies and approaches, top the distribution of power and the role of labour in society.

This paper seeks to x-ray the dialectical concept of economic and socio-political struggle in the Nigerian Labour Movement.

**Thematic area:** Political Parties, Alliances and Trade Union Organisations, and Political Power

**Key words:** freedom, labour movement, capital, neo-liberalism, state, social justice, trade union, class struggle, democracy,

## **Introduction**

The Working Class in Nigeria just like its counterpart anywhere in the world, is represented by the trade unions and working class struggle is epitomised by the ideology of trade unionism. The struggle of the Labour Movement in Nigeria is driven by the collective aspirations of the working class from colonial to post colonial or neo-liberal era. The Nigerian labour is a forerunner of socio-economic and pro-democracy struggles in Nigeria, providing the foundation for efflorescence civil society. The labour movement is often described as the ‘veteran’ of democratic struggles in the country. It spearheaded the struggles, and endured stiff repression from the state, particularly in the early days of the struggle (1970s-1990s) when the state was under military control... Indeed, the history of trade union movement in Nigeria and elsewhere is closely knit with the struggles for democratic values such as human rights, welfare, wage, and equal franchise (Tar, 2009b:165).

Trades unions have become key components of most modern societies. The nature and practice of trade unionism are however quite different, even in otherwise similar societies. The United Kingdom and the United States for example could be considered as similar as societies could be (being the leading “liberal market economies” in the world), but they have quite different types of trade unions and approaches to trade unionism. Similarly France and Germany, two leading “coordinated market economies” in the West, have clearly different trade union characteristics, while China and India with socialist market economy model do not have the same trade union structure and practice.

From the African trade union perspectives, there are distinct traits that mark the industrial relations systems and trade union practices as heritage of our colonial past that is; along English-speaking and French-speaking Africa lines. On the other hand, there are specific features of trade unionism and trades unions even in the closest of systems.

The labour movement is a broad category which covers the various efforts of working people, at combining their forces, by building collective organizations and solidarity. Labour regime buttresses the notion of formal and informal rules that govern the relationship between labour and capital (Gunilla & Beckman, 1999).

The nature of the state to a greater extent determines its relationship with the labour and wider civil society. Labour regime also implies an area of state - civil society relations. In the era of neo-liberal globalization, this often tends to reduce the power of the state to mere enforcer of policies or decisions which emerge from the world market. Series of contestation and agitation arose; trade unions and generally labour movement represent the aspiration of the popular demands for social justice and fairer globalization. This shows how labour goes beyond its traditional role of protecting wages and working conditions, but often embedded with issues of power relations and democracy (Williams, 2004).

It is based on this background that this paper seeks to examine the role of Nigerian Working Class movement in the struggle for freedom, social justice and democratic governance.

### **Historical Perspective of Working Class Movement and Class Struggle in Nigeria**

In the early colonial period, the major employer of African labour was the state, and the earliest experience of organised class struggle in sub-Saharan Africa, whether in the form of popular protest or workers' action, was among public sector workers (notably dockers and railway men). One of the earliest strikes in Africa took place in Freetown harbour, Sierra Leone, in 1874. This was only two years after the congress of the International Workingmen's Association in The Hague, the culminating point in the development of the First International, which considered economic struggle to be a prerequisite (the 'lever') for the struggle of the working class against the political power of its exploiters (Seddon, 2002).

The historic abolition of slave trade and the introduction of wage labour brought a new dimension to the struggle for freedom, socio-economic and political rights in Nigeria. The early workers' collective action in Nigeria was the Lagos strike of 1897. In April of that year, the governor of Lagos decided to cut wage rate of public sector workers and to increase productivity by altering the structure of the working day and came up with new terms and conditions of employment. This action triggered off a major strike by workers especially in the Public Works Department (PWD). Gradually, across Africa, more developed forms of resistance to exploitation and oppression were adopted as the numbers and self-consciousness of the working class grew.

However, the first organization that is known to have had interest in trade union activities was the Mechanics Mutual Aid Provident and Mutual Improvement Association formed in July 1883 in Nigeria during the colonial era (Otobo,1987) in (Olanrewaju, 2012).

Fashoyin (1992) in supporting Otobo's position went further that, the first major attempts made by Nigerian workers to assert their rights was by Artisan Workmen in the Public Works Department (PWD) who went on a 3-day strike in 1897.

The first attempt at union formation was first noticed in Nigeria early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century during the British colonial era. The first of this was the formation of the Southern Nigeria Civil Service Union, which is said to have been inaugurated on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August, 1912 (Ananaba, 1970:10). The union later changed its name to the Nigeria Civil Service Union (NCSU) after the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates which gave birth in 1919 to what is known today as Nigeria-the most populous country in Sub-Sahara Africa.

The working class struggle using the platform of Nigeria Civil Service Union assumed a classical dimension from 1912 to 1919 when the main preoccupation was the agitation for 'war bonuses', which was some sort of relief payment to reduce the hardships arising out of the First World War. This led to the implementation of 30% of the pre-war salary as war bonus to African staff in addition to prevailing salaries. The period of the great depression from 1929 also witness another agitation by workers to agitate for increased wages and the demand for Africanisation of various posts some of which had been grudgingly granted, opened the flood-gate for the emergence of other unions (Adewumi, 1997).

Other unions subsequently formed include the Nigerian Railway Native Staff Union which was formed in 1919 and the Nigeria union of Teachers in 1931.

The colonial administration in 1938 enacted the Trade Union Ordinance which marked the formal recognition of trade unionism Nigeria. The ordinance laid down mode of registration of trade unions and prescribed the rights and obligations of unions in the employer-employee relationships.

By 1975 during the Military regime of General Murtala Mohammed, Trade Unions in the country have risen astronomically thus necessitating in 1976, the government establishment of a Commission of inquiry into the activities of the various Unions and appointed an administrator to administer the unions and come up with a structure for the proper administration of the Unions. This became necessary as the Unions were polarized into ideological divide (the east and west bloc) which was creating problems and industrial crises in the country.

Towards the end of 1977, these unions were restructured into 42 along industrial line. The government also insisted on the formation of a Labour Centre as there were various multiple centers. In February 1978 under the Military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) was formed and inaugurated. The then 42 Industrial Unions became affiliates of the Nigeria Labour Congress with a legal backing of Trade Union (Amendment)

Decree 22 of 1978. In 1989, the Trade Unions were again further restructured to become 29 affiliate unions to the Nigeria Labour Congress making it the only labour centre in the country.

However, the Obasanjo's administration in 2004 sent a bill to the National Assembly for the amendment of the Trade Union Act 1990. The bill was eventually passed into law as Trade Union Amendment Act 2005, the Act led to the democratisation of labour centres, given birth to Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUCN), thus, breaking the monopoly of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) as the only labour centre since 1978. The Trade Union Congress of Nigeria has existed before without official recognition under different names; first as Federation of Senior Staff Associations of Nigeria (FESSAN), then as Senior Staff Consultative Association of Nigeria (SESCAN) and, finally, was registered as a labour centre with the name, Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUCN) on 8th of August, 2005. The two labour centers modus operandi is similar to that of American Federation of Labour (AFL) and Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO) of the United States of America.

The evolution of working class movement will be incomplete without the mention of the struggle for the official declaration of International Workers' Day as a work-free day in Nigeria. The labour movement in Nigeria after a long period of agitations was able to achieve the declaration of May First as a national public holiday during the second republic to celebrate International Workers Day. The first official declaration of May Day holiday was made by a pro-worker political party; the Peoples' Redemption Party led government in Kano State; Northern Nigeria on May 1, 1980. The then Executive Governor of Kano State; Late Alhaji Abubakar Rimi stated that "Today, May 1, 1980, is been celebrated in Kano State as a work-free day in recognition of the contribution of the Nigerian working class to the material, social and political progress in Nigeria. I am proud to say that my government in Kano State is the first to declare May 1 a work-free day in honour of the working class the world over" (Rimi, 1980). A major victory was subsequently won when May 1, 1981 was declared as a national public holiday by former President Shehu Shagari of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; a government centrally controlled by the defunct National Party of Nigeria (NPN).

### **Social movements, Collective Struggle and working class solidarity against dominance of state power in Nigeria**

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 (Adewumi, 2007).

Trade union is the most obvious foundation of workers collective actions. It is an organization voluntarily formed by workers to protect workers and improve their conditions of work. The working class solidarity across the world draws its strength fundamentally from the famous final phrase of the Communist Manifesto, **“Working Men of All Countries, Unite!”** in the original German is: **“Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!”** Thus, a more correct translation would be **“Proletarians of all countries, Unite!”** or **“Workers of the World, Unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains!”** That was the clarion call of Karl Marx and his comrade, Friedrich Engels at 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 or her individual labour power, it is considered imperative for workers to be united in confronting the enormous power of capital.

The unity of workers makes the trade union a complete organisation and constitutes the foundation of the union’s strength. The concept of collectivity or social character of trade unions means that to a great extent, union’s power rests upon the willingness of members to unite. For Karl Marx, the working class was the only revolutionary class facing the capitalist class. In the *Communist Manifesto* he said: “Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product.” (Marx, 1933).

In the struggle against all forms of oppression and dominance of state power, the working class movements in Nigeria have over the years formed a formidable alliance with other social movements. Indeed, Nigeria has had a vibrant civil society in which the mass media, trade and professional unions, students’ associations, human and civil rights groups have been able to act as an effective counterweight against the state. The Labour Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) provided a platform for these social movements to work together and wage a collective struggle against anti-people policies of the state and imperialist exploitative agenda.

The struggle for expanding Nigeria’s democratic space and the promotion of the welfare of ordinary Nigerians demonstrates “a wide spectrum of actors”- labour unions especially Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), and Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUCN); professional associations such as Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), and National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), Campaign for Democracy (CD), National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), among others. These groups have not only been active in the democratic struggle but also tend to contest the relations of domination and arbitrariness of the Nigerian state (Nwoke, 2009). They have been an active

mobilisational and agitational force in Nigeria's history and political development (Ikelegbe, 2005b:241).

Bratton in a broader African context lends voice not only the historic existence of civil society in Africa before independence but also acknowledges its capacity to mobilise popular support, when he avers: Far from being stunted in sub-Saharan Africa, it is often vibrant. While many pre-colonial cultures may have lacked states, they certainly did not lack civil society, in broad sense of a bevy of institutions protecting collective interests... Africans invented forms of voluntary associations during the colonial period as a response to the disruptive impact of urbanization and commercialization... they gave collective shape to new occupational identities (peaceful movements, labour unions, professional associations). Many of these voluntary associations became explicitly political by giving voice, first to protest the indignities of colonial rule, and later, to the call for independence (Bratton, 1989:411).

Thus, the struggle by civil society in Nigeria for democracy clearly predates the upheavals in Eastern Europe and third wave of democracy in the late 1980s and 1990s. The struggle for popular empowerment had been a continuing phenomenon since the immediate independence years and the struggle of Nigeria's popular civil society organizations is influenced and engendered by the exploitative, hegemonic and dominant character of the state (Osiki, 2009:156).

Colonial rule especially its attendant harsh economic conditions imposed on the people by the colonial state was the initial basis for civil society activism in Nigeria. Colonialism made civil society particularly labour, professional, women, and student organizations, and the media active in the politics of the colonial era. Repressive colonial policies- forced labour, dispossession and commercialization of peasants' lands, increased taxation including on women, and urban-biased development became sources of local resistance which helped in no small measure to nurture and strengthen civil society organizations in Nigeria. As a matter of historical fact, the rise of labour struggles and, indeed, other associational entities, is closely rooted in the process of colonial conquest, dependent capitalist and class formation (Tar, 2009:167).

Thomson argues following a more general African experience but one that resonates in Nigeria that: It had been civil society that had actually overthrown the colonial state. Associational activity... trade unions, professional societies and community organizations had all contributed to make the nationalist movement the powerful forces that they were (Thomson, 2010:276).

Iweriebor reminds us that colonialism induced labour and youth activism in Nigeria leading to the formation of the labour union, Nigerian Youth Movement, and the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) now National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) to mention but a few. According to him, colonial exploitation of Nigerians was the catalyst for activism "as a component of the larger Nigerian anti-colonial freedom movement" (Iweriebor, 2003:113).

These social movements in strong alliance with the Nigerian Labour Movement also engaged in Pan-African liberation struggle and participated in various class struggle and resistance movements across Africa such as; class struggle against apartheid in South Africa, colonial rules in Angola, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Namibia, Guinea Bissau, and so on.

The establishment of the modern state by the British colonialists led to new social class formations including the new modern labour force used for the development of the capitalist system in Nigeria. This created segregation and engendered contradictions in the colonial economy that nurtured associational life among the exploited working class to challenge the obnoxious policies of the colonial state including forced labour, taxation, imposed agricultural development programmes, etc (Ake, 1981). So, “a domain of resistance populated by several indigenous groups often led by urban professional and wage labourers” emerged “to challenge the colonial state” (Tar, 2009). Civil society activism was a consequence of an anti-state struggle of indigenous people trapped by the contradictions of the developing capitalist system in Nigeria (Willems, 2012:15).

In Karl Marx theory of the state and class, the state is regarded as the instrument through which the ruling class dominates the masses. The theory explains further that the state is the executive committee of the bourgeoisie, so it (state) protects the property and interest of the bourgeoisie (Olson, 1971) as expressed in (Otobo, 2005). The state is far from being a benign entity rather it is an instrument of hegemony in the hands of the ruling class. The history of state formation in Nigeria dating from the colonial period and post-colonial era portrays the state as an arena of power struggle among various interest groups. “The state is an agency in the hands of the ruling class who manipulate it in achieving desired objective” (Tar, 2009: 2).

According to Grant (1980), Marxian theory of surplus value, Marx explains the price of production of commodities in that capitalist only gets the cost of production of his commodity plus the average rate of profit. Thus some capitalists will be paid below the actual rate, others above. Because of the different organic composition of different capitals, only in this complicated fashion does the law of value reveal itself. Marx posited that surplus value must necessarily be produced in order to develop industry to the point where the state, money, and the proletariat itself and all the other survivals of capitalism will have disappeared. So long as the working class exists as a class, surplus value will be produced.

The negotiation of a contract, formal or informal, between capital and workers, wherein workers sell their labour power, by no means guarantees, that labour power will actually be converted into work. And this is true of both sides of the question both of work as the production of use values and of work as the production of surplus value. The working day, Marx shows, is one in which each side has certain aims about how long, how intensely and under what conditions, the work will be performed. The capitalist seeks more work while the workers seek less work. There is thus a struggle that takes many forms.



Against capital's techniques of control such as the wage hierarchy, despotic oversight, and piece wages, the working class pits absenteeism, sabotage, loafing on the job, strikes, and so on. As in the question of whether the working class can be forced to sell its labour-power at all, we see that "predisposition" to crisis means the predisposition of the working class to struggle against capital's domination and exploitation. This phenomenon as expressed in Marx concept of "The Capital" is clearly x-ray class struggle against the dominance of the state and capitalist exploitation in Nigeria. Presently, the working class at various levels is agitating for payment of unpaid wages for months by some states and local governments. This unfair labour practice has led to series of protests by trade unions.

It is this manipulation of the ruling class express in terms of denying the society public goods through alienation, that raise the consciousness of the civil society to contest and articulate the national question. National question, represent the actual inequalities in the society, relations of ethnic domination and perceptions arising from these" (Seteolo, 2004).

National question here refers to the existing dominance of capital over labour and the consequent subjection of the working people into acute poverty due to neo-liberal policies and the way the civil society articulate to change it.

The attitude of the state further changes to respond to the yearning of neo-liberal globalization, the changes are outcome of marketisation of the economy which redefines the way the civil society and the labour movement relate with the state. In the new society, the state in particular is "rolled back", as state duties or responsibilities toward citizens and civil society becomes "dull and sluggish". On the other hand, the state becomes hostile and undemocratic in order to attain its goal" (Yusif, 2010). This process of globalization has affected the role of the state in terms of welfare provisioning, leading to economic hardship which erodes the basis of the state's authority and capacity to protect the social and economic wellbeing of its citizenry. With the deepening of neo-liberal globalization, via the integration of national economies, national borders have diminished, while national sovereignty became a highly contested term. Government macro-economic policies were geared towards neo-liberal reforms such as; currency devaluation, deregulation, privatization, withdrawal of subsidies on basic human needs, downsizing, amongst others.

The process of economic integration in Nigeria is deepened with the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), SAP marks a significant period in the state-labour-civil society engagement on policy issues, as informed by privatization, commercialization and the withdrawal of subsidy. Pro-democracy groups and trade union have protested its implementation. Structural Adjustment Programme as an austerity measure had severely affected the Nigerian people, employment and workers welfare. The strategy which is a blueprint

of International Monetary Fund and World Bank has as its core strategy, promoting free markets, including retrenchment of workers and across the board reduction in their salaries from November 1985 to September 1986. This policy was unpopular with the Nigerian Labour Movement as it saw the policy as nothing but “gloom for the workers” and was met with serious resistance (Bulletin No. 1 of the Nigeria Labour Congress, 1985, cited in Nwoko, 2009: 146).

The politics of labour especially in the twenty first century is engendered by growing challenges of the market forces, the growth of information technology, flexibility in the working condition and the rolling back of the state from economic activities. However, this trend has engendered the weakening of labour unions as underpinned in the post-fordist mode of accumulation.

As aptly captured by Lindstrom “a new regime of accumulation, the post fordist regime, was established and institutionalized in market-oriented political and economic reform under the aegis of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. It includes stabilization of price, privatization of the means of production, liberalization of trade, and deregulation and elimination of the price control” (Lindstrom, 2004: 103). The state was able to amend legislation so as to demobilize and contains the labour militancy as well as to ensure the primacy of capital over labour. The 2005 amendment of trade union act in Nigeria is a case in point; it tends to weaken the capacity of the trade unions to embark on industrial action such as strike and sought to undermine the collective bargaining rights of trade

### **Labour Movement Struggle for Workers’ rights and Social Justice in Nigeria**

Fundamentally, the International Labour Organisation declaration of Philadelphia in 1944 and its principle of promoting social justice gave birth to numerous international testaments and labour legislations for the protection of workers’ and people’s rights globally, such as expressed in:

- ***Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948:*** Promotes right to life and freedom, right to equality, right to desirable work and to join trade unions, freedom of information and association, right of peaceful assembly and association, Freedom of opinion and information.
- ***International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966:*** Embodies some of the most significant international legal provisions establishing economic, social and cultural rights, including, inter alia, rights relating to work in just and favourable conditions; to social protection; to an adequate standard of living including clothing, food and housing; to the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health.

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 as amended and the Nigerian labour Laws contain provisions for the protection of rights of workers in Nigeria. For instance; the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended provides in Section 17(3)(a)(b)(e); the state shall direct its policy towards ensuring that:

- ❖ all citizens, .....have the opportunity for securing adequate means of livelihood as well as adequate opportunity to secure suitable employment;
- ❖ conditions of work are just and humane ;
- ❖ there is equal pay for equal work without discrimination on account of sex, or on any other ground whatsoever (In consonance with ILO Convention 111)

Also, the Labour Act CAP.198 L1 LFN 2004 and Trade Union Act CAP T14 LFN 2004 contain general provisions for the protection of workers rights most especially in term of freedom to organise and collective bargaining, wages, contracts of employment and terms and conditions of employment, etc.

Reflecting the normative coherence of human rights, our constitutional structure and lived human experience, it is possible to identify four inter-dependent clusters of human rights. The first are life and livelihood rights, such as the rights to life, liberty and movement, freedom from torture, health and labour protections. The second would be capability and community (civic) rights, including freedoms of information, expression, association, assembly, nationality, civic and social rights, and the rights to education. These rights facilitate our existence as social and civic beings. The third cluster would be guarantees of protection and remedies, including due process rights, equality and non-discrimination, safety and security guarantees (including the right to an effective and humane police service). A final cluster would be rights of humane survival, extending to green, environmental and natural resources guarantees (Odinkalu, 2013).

The International Labour Organisation came up with The Declaration of Philadelphia, 1944, which reaffirms the fundamental principles on which the Organisation is based and, in particular, that: labour is not a commodity; freedom of expression and of association are essential to sustained progress; poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere; and the war against want requires to be carried on with unrelenting vigour within each nation...with a view to the promotion of the common welfare” (ILO, 2009). This Declaration of Philadelphia as enshrined in the International Labour Organisation Constitution laid the foundation for workers’ rights globally, providing a legal instrument for the protection of workers and a shield from all forms of oppression and unfair labour practices.

The new global development agenda, enshrined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals, has since the early days of its negotiation been accompanied by the slogan and ambition to "leave no one behind". For workers and the union movement this means recognising and taking appropriate action on the ever increasing inequalities and social injustices people face in the world of work, within and between countries is inevitable. Social justice provides fair and just relationship between the individual and society. This is measured by the explicit and tacit terms for the distribution of wealth, opportunities for personal activity and social privileges. In most advanced societies, the concept of social justice has often referred to the process of ensuring that individuals fulfill their societal roles and receive what was their due from society. In the current global grassroots' movements for social justice, the emphasis has been on the breaking of barriers for social mobility, the creation of safety net and economic justice. Social justice assigns rights and duties in the institution of society, which enables people to receive the basic benefits and burdens of cooperation.

Nigerian Labour Movement has over the years in line with the principle of the International Labour Organisation and the Declaration of Philadelphia been committed to the struggle for social justice, freedom and respect for fundamental rights.

Through strong collaborations with the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and other social movements, trade union movement has waged significant struggles to ensure equal opportunity and social justice in the most populous country on the continent of Africa. The solidarity exhibited by these movements has brought about collective actions in the struggle against all forms of anti-people and neo-liberal policies of the state over the years. Coalition's platforms like Labour and Civil Society Coalition (LASCO), United Actions for Democracy, Joint Action Front and Occupy Nigeria Movement have been used at different times in the history of Nigeria to champion the course of the workers and masses.

The British colonial era in Nigeria was characterised with different forms of resistance by the labour movement and other social movements. Labour activists and nationalists notably: Comrade Michael Imoudu, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe amongst others; were at the forefront of the struggle for independence which was attained after a prolonged agitations and mass protests in 1960. The contributions of the Nigerian workers to the independence and economic and social development of Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. The trade unions contributions to national development have been recorded for posterity. The 45 days strike of railway workers in 1945 over the cost of living allowance (COLA), led by Nigeria's foremost Labour Leader, Comrade Michael Imoudu in a way triggered the nationalist struggle for the independence of Nigeria. In the same vein, the slaughter of 1949 of the 21 Enugu coalmine martyrs was the whistle that blew the start of the race for the demand for independence. After independence from British colonial rule, the role of trade unions was now to educate, promote, and protect the interests of their members in the independent Nigerian nation. In 1942, a government order, the General Defence Regulations outlawed strikes and lockouts. Workers

considered this an affront and an attempt to suppress their new and fragile organizations (Adewumi, 1997).

The struggle later took a different dimension when the military truncated the civil rule under the leadership of the then Prime Minister; Alhaji Tafawa Balewa in 1966 as labour movement has to contend with the brutal forces of the military. The unfortunate bloody coup d'état led by Major Kaduna Nzogwu which took the life of the Prime Minister and Some notable political leaders was a great set back to the structural and regional balance hitherto enjoyed in the country. This led the country to a civil war that is still threatening her corporate existence till date.

The return to civilian rule in 1979 was a milestone in the struggle against the military when General Olusegun Obasanjo as military Head of State handed over power to the first civilian President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; Alhaji Shehu Shagari. The civilian rule again was terminated in 1983 by General Muhammadu Buhari the current civilian president; leading to another round of agitations by the labour movement and other pro-democracy groups, demanding for return to democratic governance. The democratic struggle was heightened when the military administration of General Ibrahim Babangida annulled a presidential election that was adjudged locally and internationally to be free and fair won by Chief Moshood Abiola in the June 12, 1993 presidential election. This development triggered a lot of protests and mass actions ever witness in the annals of the country's history. Labour leaders, human rights and political activists operated under the umbrella of National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) to wage series of agitations against General Babangida and later General Sanni Abacha administration respectively.

Many labour leaders and rights activists such as Chief Alfred Rilwanu, Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, Comrade Hassan Sunmonu, Comrade Frank Kokori, Comrade Pascal Bafyau, Professor Wole Soyinka, Chief Gani Fawehinmi, Dr. Beko Ransom-Kuti, Comrade Adams Oshiomhole, Mr. Femi Falana, and environmental activist like Comrade Ken Saro-Wiwa just to mention but a few were either assassinated, brutally assaulted, jailed, or forced on exile.

The struggle came to a logical end in 1999 after a general election that ushers in the fourth republic with Chief Olusegun Obasanjo emerging as the democratically elected president.

The return to civil rule in 1999 has opened the democratic space in the country which resulted into a new form of labour regime. With the widening of the political space, labour politics was engendered by new form of alliances that sort to engage the state.

The formation of Labour Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) in Nigeria was a watershed in forging alliances of popular forces aimed at addressing socio-economic and political inequalities in Nigeria. For instance the two trade union centers in Nigeria that is; Nigeria Labour congress, (NLC) and Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUCN) and their affiliates aligned at several occasions with the civil society to advocate for pro-poor macro-economic policies, good governance, social justice and respect for human rights and dignity.

The neo-liberal posture of the state under the current democratic regime since 1999 has been duly challenged by these social movements. Major issues at the front burner of their agitations and campaigns are: wage review (upward review of minimum wage), payment of arrears of salaries, pensions and allowances, electoral and political or constitutional reforms, fighting against privatisation of critical public enterprises and the deregulation of the downstream sector, protection of workers and human rights, curbing unfair labour practices, transparency and accountability in government, and other critical socio-economic issues.

This alliance becomes inevitable because, labour and civil societies “jointly provides an ideological alternative to the hegemonic pretensions of the neo-liberal positions and hold an alternative vision of national development” (Beckman, 2010:161).

The incessant hike in the prices of petroleum products, corruption, subversion of democratic procedures, election rigging, poor living wage of the work force, the selling out of national patrimonies through privatisation, and lack of ideological posture in political parties, have negatively affected good democratic governance in the country, and has subsequently dashed out the hope of the citizenry on nation building.

As the Nigeria Labour Congress was revived in 1999, having been banned by the General Sanni Abacha military junta, it pushed a broad based labour-civil society coalition through Joint action with other civil society organizations to resist recurring attempts to raise the local price of petroleum products, giving rise to the formation of Labour Civil Society Coalition (LASCO).

Strong unions are central to both social and economic progress, but without governments that share their values, unions cannot construct or sustain a more equal world where rights, opportunities and social justice are guaranteed.

There is a debate whether trade Unions should go beyond its narrow mandate of economic struggles (Akinyanju, 1987). However, the limit of narrow economic struggles has dawned on trade Unions and they have come to the realization that it is better to struggle at the political level where the fundamental economic decisions are taken. This was clearly articulated by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) in its memo of 1986 ( Olorode, 2011) to the Political Bureau of military president Babangida which stated The numerous problems facing Nigerian workers rural and urban have their origin in politics. Thus, it is clear that the problems of Nigerian workers have become multi-dimensional and as such cannot be resolved within the framework of industrial relations practice.

## Conclusion

The sacrifices made by the Nigerian working class from the colonial era till date are enormous, especially anchored in the stiff resistance against obnoxious colonial policies such as poor wages in the wake of global depression that resulted in the general strike of 1945 over the Cost of Living Allowance (COLA). Another key sacrifice made by the Nigerian working class in the process of our nation building was the tragic, callous and unforgivable massacre of innocent miners at the Enugu colliery in 1949 in what has become known as the Iva valley Massacre. The working class movement through strategic alliances with other social movements challenged the dominance of state power and brutal forces of oppressions since Independence in 1960. The major mass movement and class struggle in the post-independence Nigeria was evident during the military incursion into the political landscape and governance of the country.

The organized labour in Nigeria has for a long time developed a reputation for radical and militant defense of workers' rights and advocacy in issues that concern the working population and ordinary Nigerians (Adesina 2000:143; Adesoji 2003; Yusuf 2009:156). This radicalism reached its crescendo under military with its marshal decrees, imposed hardship occasioned by SAP, pathological corruption, misrule and insincerity of the military leadership towards genuine democratization. However, the collective struggle of the social movements has always been visited with state repression and brutal forces. Despite this, however, these organizations have remained consistent, undaunted, resilient and resolute in the struggle against anti-people economic policies of the state (Obono, 2011). Indeed, this is replicated in the contemporary era of neoliberal orthodoxy.

Trade Union Movement and other social movements in Nigeria have played vital roles in the vanguard for freedom, better working conditions, social justice, and democratic governance. Their roles could be traced to the various struggles during the colonial era, and even after independence. Most importantly, the several years of military dictatorship and despotic rules witnessed unprecedented challenges from the trade union and social movements. Working class movement in Nigeria has continues to pursue the need for good governance, accountability and transparency in government and adherence to the rule of law since the return to democratic rule on May 29, 1999.

In the Nigerian environment and world over today, trade unionism as with many aspects of the industrial relations system is now being subjected to what may be called external pressures, especially the globalization and the internationalization of labour. These are changing profoundly the image of the unions and more broadly the kind of industrial relations that the country has. These contemporary changes pose a great challenge to trade union movement in Nigeria thereby requiring adoption of new strategy to champion collective struggle in term of defending the

rights of their members to better working conditions, freedom of association, collective bargaining and social justice.

Carefully examining and analyzing the theory of state and class by Karl Marx, it is imperative that the state represent the bourgeoisie class, while the workers represents the proletariat, the oppressed class, who must sell the labour to the bourgeoisie, and the government on the other hand is always ready to serve as a tool of the bourgeoisie, by providing the legal backing to oppression through enactment of laws and promulgation of decrees. In general, the state is controlled by the economically dominant class, enabling it to maintain its control over the exploited classes.

As the state arose from the need to hold class antagonisms in check, but as it arose, at the same time, in the midst of these classes, it is, as a rule, the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class, which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the politically dominant class, and thus acquires new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class. Thus, the state of antiquity was above all the state of slave owners for the purpose of holding down the slaves, as the feudal state was the organ of the nobility for holding down the peasant serfs and bondsmen, and the modern representative state is an instrument of exploitation of wage labour by capital. Workers can only through collective actions defend their fundamental rights and demand for good welfare and working conditions. It is also of paramount important to stress that a political strategy must be adopted in working class struggle in order to catalyse the process of assuming democratic control of the state.

Today, the Nigerian Labour movement occupies a respectable place in the country's civil society. This is partly because its "veteran" status as an organisation known for pro-masses struggles. Though there is debate on its democratic credentials and even its efficacy to fight the state, the Nigerian labour movement is seen one of the most developed, coordinated, and hierarchical social movement. Its consistent but controversial profile in engaging the state on wide range of issues-workers rights, public welfare, social justice, human rights, and democratisation has been characterised by both success and failure. For instance, during the industrial actions and mass protests led by the Nigerian labour movement against removal of oil subsidy or increment in the pump price of Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) in January, 2012; there were spontaneous reactions by the state or government to suppress the actions. The state argued that it is not within the rights of trade unions to challenge such action of government, thereby using the National Industrial Court and other instruments of the state to stop the industrial and mass actions.

As revealed in the case of Nigeria, the emergence of the state through colonialism and capitalist penetration meant that the state emerged as an organ, in the hands of colonialists, imperialists and later the domestic petty-bourgeoisie, for class control. It also meant that the state played a



key role in reproducing socio-economic and political inequality and generating in the process, anti-state, anti-hegemonic and resistance reactions from the Labour or working class Movement.

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