



## Some significant events in labour relations and labour unions in Nigeria

Emuobo Emudainohwo

Associate Professor, Department of Law, Delta State University Oleh Campus, Oleh, Nigeria

### Abstract

The paper examines some significant events in labour relations and labour unions in Nigeria. There have been events that had had significant effects on labour policy and labour unions in Nigeria. First after the Nigerian civil war in 1970, the government set up the Adebo and Udoji Wage Commissions to review and recommend wages for workers. It will appear that between 1970-1975 government (as the major employer and a model for smaller employers) did not encourage collective bargaining among workers but rather employed ad-hoc wage commissions for fixing wages and other conditions of employment in the public sector. Some of the regulations and policies made include: The Wages Boards and Industrial Councils Decree promulgated to assist workers where the unions were weak or non-existent, The Labour Policy of 4<sup>th</sup> December 1975 restructured the unions into 42 with one central union- the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC). Also, in the same year government banned affiliations with all foreign trade unions and ordered a probe into the activities and assets of the major trade unions. The National Economic Emergency Power (Nigerian Labour Congress) Order promulgated in 1988 had the effect of removing the executive officers of the NLC following an internal crisis, and then appointed an administrator for the NLC and further directed the administrator to organize a delegate conference within six months to set up a new National Executive Council. Another significant event which affected labour relations in Nigeria was the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986. Labour unions resisted the SAP through strikes.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, labour relations, labour law, history, labour unions

### Introduction

The history of labour relations in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial or even the pre-colonial era, when formal and semi-formal relationships were established with the British specifically and generally with the Europeans. Such relations led to the establishment or initiation of wage employment in a formal or official industrial context or location. In the conference of Berlin of 1884/1885, the British prevailed in formalizing its rights to the Nigerian Basin and the work and pursuits of some private industrialists were brought under authority of Royal Niger Company supervised by Taubman George Goldie. In the meantime, one administrative or state activity of the British eventually led to the amalgamation or merging of the Northern and Southern territories or protectorates in 1914 to form Nigeria. This new country or territory was headed by Lord Lugard, the British colonial officer or administrator. During this time and, in fact, for major part of the twentieth century, the British system of labour relations was introduced to wit voluntarism. Voluntarism is described as a system of collective representation planned to settle trade dispute. Voluntary collective bargaining between employees and employers. Associations were central feature of the system or scheme and the method of joint regulation was largely concerned with pay and essential conditions of employment, particularly hours of work in factories, legal abstention or refrain on the part or side of the state and also the judiciary. Apart from voluntarism there were also Ordinances promulgated by the British colonial government to regulate labour relations. Also, some of the ILO Conventions were ratified on behalf of Nigeria by the colonial government and subsequently confirmed by Nigeria at independence. In 1960, when Nigeria attained political independence or freedom from Britain both systems- voluntarism, and colonial government regulation of labour

relations were already in place. Thus, the Nigerian labour relations system is a union of two systems, voluntarism and government or state intervention, which began by the British colonialists and further shaped by various Nigerian governments (both civilian and military).

After independence, Nigerian government's (both civilian and military) intervention in labour relations became much more increased. The paper is discussed under the following subsections: Section is introductory. The concept of labour relations is the focus of section. Some significant events in labour relations and labour unions in Nigeria forms the discussion of section 3 and section 4 is the conclusion.

### Concept of labour relations

The expression labour relations, also recognized as industrial relations, indicates or means the system in which management, workers and their agents and indirectly or directly, the government engage to set the fundamental principles for the administration of work associations or relationships. It also describes or defines a field of learning devoted to analysing such relationships. The area or sphere of study is a consequence or result of or regarding the industrial revolution, of which the excesses or overflow led to the development of trade or labour unions to represent employees and to develop collective or group labour relations. A 'labour relation' or 'industrial relation' system indicates the interaction or collaboration between the main or key actors in it: the government, the employer or management (or an employers' association or group), trade or labour unions and workers or employees. The expression "labour relations" or "industrial relations" is also used in relation to types of workers' or employees' participation; the expression also encompasses the employment relationship between a worker and an employer in a contract of employment. There is a general understanding, still, that

the expression 'labour relations' or 'industrial relations' includes collective bargaining, types of workers' or employees' participation (for instance works councils, safety and joint health committees) and mechanisms for settlement of individual and collective disputes.

### **Some significant events in labour relations and labour unions in Nigeria**

With respect to the history and significant events in labour relations and labour unions in Nigeria, this can be traced to the colonial era when formal and semi-formal relationship was established with the British. This relationship led to the introduction of wage employment in a formal industrial setting. At the Berlin conference of 1884-1885, the British succeeded in formalizing its claims to the territory which later became Nigeria and the activities of some private entrepreneurs were brought under control of the Royal Niger Company headed by Sir Taubman George Goldie. With time, one administrative or political action of the British led to another, and eventually led to the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 to form Nigeria. This new country was led by Lord Lugard, a British colonial administrator.

During this time and, in fact, for most of the twentieth century, the British system of labour relations was introduced to wit voluntarism. Voluntarism is described as a system of collective representation designed to settle trade dispute. Voluntary collective bargaining between employees and employers' associations were central feature of the system, and the process of joint regulation was largely concerned with pay and basic conditions of employment, especially hours of work in industry, legal abstention on the part of the state and the judiciary. Apart from voluntarism there were also Ordinances promulgated by the British colonial government to regulate labour relations. By 1960, when Nigeria gained independence from Britain, both systems- voluntarism, and government regulations- were already in place. Thus, the Nigerian labour relations system is a combination of voluntarism and state intervention in labour relations by way of regulations. Since 1970, it will appear that government intervention by way of regulations and labour policies is much more pronounced than voluntarism<sup>[1]</sup>.

There have been events that had had significant effects on labour policy and labour unions in Nigeria. First after the Nigerian civil war in 1970, the government set up the Adebo and Udoji Wage Commissions to review and recommend wages for workers. It will appear that between 1970-1975 government (as the major employer and a model for smaller employers) did not encourage collective bargaining among workers but rather employed ad-hoc wage commissions for fixing wages and other conditions of employment in the public sector. This had the effect of suppressing the right to collective bargaining both in the public and in private sectors. With the exception of the Mogan Commission of 1963/1964, which permitted considerable trade union input, both the Adebo and Udoji Wage Commissions unilaterally recommended workers' wages and by this disregarded the principle of collective bargaining<sup>[2]</sup>.

It is important to note that government regulations and policies at various times had violated workers and trade unions' rights to wit freedom of association. Some of the regulations and policies made include: The Wages Boards and Industrial Councils Decree promulgated to assist

workers where the unions were weak or non-existent, The New Labour Policy of 4<sup>th</sup> December 1975 restructure the unions into 42 with one central union- the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC). Also, in the same year government banned affiliations with all foreign trade unions and ordered a probe into the activities and assets of the major trade unions. At the end of which eleven union leaders were banned from trade unionism in the country. The National Economic Emergency Power (Nigerian Labour Congress) Order promulgated in 1988 had the effect of removing the executive officers of the NLC following an internal crisis, and then appointed an administrator for the NLC and further directed the administrator to organize a delegate conference within six months to set up a new National Executive Council.

Another significant event which affected labour relations in Nigeria is the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986. The SAP was planned to stimulate economic productivity and development, and also to ensure payment of external debts. This resulted in inflation Labour unions resisted the SAP through strikes demonstrations in the streets, public enlightenment rallies etc. The most prominent and vocal opposition against the SAP came from the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the NLC. In 1999 government consolidated the SAP by emphasizing privatization, deregulation restructuring of the economy. Labour opposition to these policies were increased and strikes became common place in Nigeria. The government responded by amending the Trade Unions Act which further curtailed the powers of trade unions and the NLC. In recent years there have been national strikes. Over economic policies adverse to workers. Since May 2007, government have often through policies and regulations continue to whittle down the power of trade unions. Sometimes this has been to no avail. For instance, in 2008 labour-conflict between the federal government and the ASUU, the federal government insisted (though to no avail) that the ASUU of state universities should negotiate with the various state governments while the ASUU of federal universities should negotiate with their various universities' councils. Government's insistence on this failed<sup>[3]</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

The paper examined some significant events in labour relations and labour unions in Nigeria. The history of labour relations in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial or even the pre-colonial era, when formal and semi-formal relationships were established with the British specifically and generally with the Europeans. Such relations led to the establishment or initiation of wage employment in a formal or official industrial context or location. There have been events that had had significant effects on labour policy and labour unions in Nigeria. First after the Nigerian civil war in 1970, the government set up the Adebo and Udoji Wage Commissions to review and recommend wages for workers. It will appear that between 1970-1975 government (as the major employer and a model for smaller employers) did not encourage collective bargaining among workers but rather employed ad-hoc wage commissions for fixing wages and other conditions of employment in the public sector. Some of the regulations and policies made include: The Wages Boards and Industrial Councils Decree promulgated to assist workers where the unions were weak or non-existent, The

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