

Trade unions as social movements and political actors in Nigeria (1994-2004)

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the significant role of Nigerian trade unions within social movements and on the political scene between 1994 and 2004. The decade was marked by major mobilizations in which labour played an important part. Throughout a tumultuous democratization occurring under economic adjustment, the trade unions have spearheaded popular movements that have confronted both military and civilian regimes. Rallying the support of the great mass of the people against an authoritarian state controlled by a power-hungry minority, they have sized the opportunities of the times and used their strategic resources to make their voice heard. And despite the repression and the setbacks they suffered all along, they have been one of the main social forces able to consistently intervene in and influence the national debate. Whether striking to the transition process or, ten years later, to oppose neo-liberal policies, the Nigerian organised labour movement has been a prominent actor and valuable contributor to the social, economic and political developments of its country.

Introduction

In 1994, a strike led by Nigerian oil workers nearly broke the military hold on power that had stopped the transition process started in 1986. It was a turning point in the democratic mobilizations that showcased both the strengths and weaknesses of the trade unions political leadership. Defeated, they bore the brunt of the repression, but they survived and were ready to 'rebirth' when the transition was finally completed in 1999. Besides usual industrial disputes, they have since embarked on recurrent protests against oil price increases that question the strategic policies and ideological choices of the new civilian ruling power. In 2004, leading a series of strikes that

paralysed the country, the organised labour earned the reputation to be the only credible political opposition to the government (IRIN, 20 October 2004). How have the Nigerian trade unions been able to retain and exert such power both within the social movements and on the political scene?

My central argument here is that this has to do with the trade unions' strategic political, social and economic position in a specific context. Oil workers have their hands on the main tap of the country's economy and alone can unleash a general strike, plus multiple links unite wage earners with the rest of the people. Whether through overlapping between formal and informal economic activities or membership of community groups (religious, ethnic, regional or village networks), workers have contacts of solidarity, exchange, mutual aid or dependence with most of the popular layers. Their collective mobilisation thus concerns and affects, in one way or another, the majority of the population which shares similar difficulties and is then rather inclined to lend them support.

After presenting the main conceptual and theoretical references, I go on with a historical-descriptive analysis of the strike movements in 1994 and 2004 as part of broader political and economic contexts that shaped and influenced the unions' dynamics. I further focus on the socio-economic cleavage that enabled unions to polarize the struggles at their advantage. I then assess the strategic dilemma facing the trade union leadership before concluding on the relevance of the Nigerian example in the studies of social movements and democratization.

Conceptual and theoretical background: trade unions, political struggle, and democratization

According to the traditional definition given by Sidney and Beatrice Webb in *The History of Trade Unionism* (1894), trade unions are 'continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment.' But, as in the Nigerian case, their sphere of intervention is not confined to the workplace or the economic realm.

To defend the interests of their members, trade unions have tended to develop different sorts of political activities. They interact with the state (as employer or as co-actor of industrial relations), support or oppose legislations and policies, or by affiliating to a party they take part in the power struggle. This is part of a historical process that Charles Tilly (2004)

described as the 'politicization' of social movements of which labour was one of the first prototypes.

Following Georges Ubbiali (2005), I furthermore approach trade unions in their dual and contradictory dimensions. As institutions, they operate as units of social integration, bargaining tool and producer of social compromise. But as social movements, they are also part of social conflicts and contentious politics. They need to be studied in relation with the dynamics of the social group that they declare to represent; and they need to be understood in the context of specific political economies and social relations that structure their society at some given moment, that produce them and upon which they strive to act. This is where the concept of 'political struggle' as developed by Graham Harrison (2001) can be an added useful analytical tool.

Political struggle is conceptualized initially by understanding the ways in which capitalism creates contradictions and forms of exploitation in specific places and times. This provides a theoretical context within which to research forms of political mobilisation and resistance which will not yield clear schematic features of 'class action' but will need to be interpreted in terms of capitalist political economy. By employing class in a non-deterministic way, struggles can be understood not merely as effects of a broader political economy but as partially constitutive of that political economy as well¹. This means that the structures that shape inequality and disempowerment also contain within them grains of resistance.

The focus on political struggle reveals a wide range of political movements and mobilisation as labour, students, civil servants, women's groups, business associations and peasant groups emerged from the cracks in the authoritarian edifice and mobilise to infuse 'transitions' and democratization processes with a particular content.

As defined by Jean-Germain Gros (1998: 2-4), democratization is a transitional phenomenon involving a gradual transformation of the formal rules that govern a political system. It might be described as a stage in the evolution of a country where the rules governing power alternation and

¹ Graham Harrison (2001: 394) argues that this point has been summed up by Marx ('Men make their own history but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves'), and detailed in research on the capitalist state paying attention to the relationship between structure and struggle in the journal *Capital and Class*. See also David Seddon and Leo Zeilig (2005: 13-16).

state-society relations, though ostensibly based on democratic ideals, have not been fully internalized. Two distinct phases may be identified, although one does not guarantee the other. The first is political liberalization wherein leaders of a country open the political system to competition. The second one is more difficult and spans a much longer time period. It involves creating the conditions that will lead to the rule of law. But as a process, democratization is neither unilinear nor static: it can move forward, stagnate, or be reversed.

Furthermore, even though it is, in most case, elite-imposed political reform, the impetus for it does not need to come from the top. Indeed, democratization has often come about as a result of pressure from various sources: from the outside through international pressure, but also, or even more importantly, from inside the society through social movements. As such, it is shaped by the socioeconomic, political and ideological compact: formal structures like the economy, the military, labour unions; but also the norms, habits, and processes that govern the politics of the said country.

Historical background: unions and prodemocracy movements in the 1990s

In Nigeria, trade unions have been part of social movements that have created a dynamic of political struggles and have been a critical source of pressure for democratic change (Aiyede 2003; Bradley 2003). Both international and domestic factors facilitated the growth of social movement organizations that challenged the military state.

The democratic transition initiated from 1986 was repeatedly altered, while a World Bank-inspired structural adjustment programme (SAP) had impoverished millions of Nigerians (Agbese 1998). These conditions precipitated changes in political interests and identities as networks, opportunities, and strategies shifted to create one of the strongest opposition movements ever to emerge against military rule in post-colonial Nigerian history (Edozie 2002: 30). The combination of political and economic crises that emerged from the authoritarian implementation of the SAP and the military-handed transition programme provoked the emergence of pro-democracy movements.

Widespread poverty helped pro-democracy groups to mobilize the middle-classes and urban proletariats to challenge the military. Although the head of the junta general Babangida had been able to resist much of the international pressure thanks to the country's oil wealth and its position as a

regional power, it nonetheless filtered through. Human rights groups were emboldened to challenge the government. In addition, national conferences elsewhere instigated groups and individuals to demand this mechanism as an alternative to Babangida's voluntarism (Nwokedi 1997). Trade unions played a critical role in that process (Barchiesi 1997: 358).

The transition programme was supposed to end in June 1993 with the presidential elections. But on 23 June 1993, the military annulled the presidential elections results. This decision plunged the country into a crisis that trade-unions tried to solve by taking the initiative. Following the annulment, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), the main trade union confederation, issued a detailed critique of the regime's reasons for annulling the elections. It blamed the military government for derailing democracy in Nigeria. It had tinkered with the transition programme and tolerated the excesses and failures of the politicians. Then it turned around to use the issues it had tolerated (even encouraged), as excuses for precipitating a political stalemate in the country. The NLC declared that 'it was prepared to commit itself to that popular struggle for military disengagement from politics and the restoration of democracy' (Ihonvbere 1997: 83).

The congress rejected Babangida's call for new presidential elections and demanded the release of the results of the June 12 election. It stated that the Nigerian crisis had nothing to do with region, religion and tribe but was a 'struggle for democracy and national unity and the right of Nigerians to freely elect [...] who should be their president.' (*Sunday Concord* July 16, 1993) It called on the military to quit the political stage and ensure a 'return to full and unconditional democratic government by August 27, 1993', promising to 'challenge the legitimacy of the military' if it extended its tenure beyond that date. Finally, it called for the immediate release of detained activists and leaders of the prodemocracy movements and proclaimed the 'commitment of Nigerian trade unions to the unity and corporate existence of Nigeria;' and to 'the struggle for democracy, human rights, social justice and peace' (ibid.).

The NLC strike action launched in late August 1993, in coordination with other pro-democracy groups' protests, virtually paralyzed the economy. Airlines were grounded, taxis and buses were off the roads and the electricity supply to the nation was jeopardized by the participation of oil workers in the strike. Banks were shut and other sectors of the economy felt

the direct impact of the strike action (Ihonvbere 1997: 35). Despite the brutal state repression, the social movements' agitation helped exiting the regime on the scheduled date of August 26. But before quitting office, the latter put in place an interim national government (ING).

On 15 November 1993, the NLC embarked on another strike action against a seven fold fuel price hike decided by the ING. Three days under the movement, the mobilisation was spreading outside its south-western epicentre while the negotiations between the regime and the trade-unions were in a dead-lock. The mounting political, social and military pressure finally forced Ernest Shonekan, chief of the ING, to resign. He was replaced by his defence minister, general Sani Abacha. Within 24 hours the new junta called the workers to go back to work.

Despite the demise of the ING, the NLC had initially declared that the strike was to continue because the price of petrol had not been reversed and the necessary fundamental changes (such as the military quitting the political stage once and for all and the return of a full democratic government...) had not taken place on the political structures of the nation. But, reflective of regional and ethnic divisions within the confederation, some state councils ordered their members to return to work. Some of the union leaders who had sympathy for Abacha were beginning to take a softer stand on the strike. And those who did not like the SPD presidential candidate Moshood Abiola whose supposed victory had been annulled, began to argue that a 'politically motivated strike was bad for the NLC which is essentially a trade union' (Ihonvbere 1997: 87). The military played on those divergences while agreeing to negotiate. Soon both sides came to an agreement and on 21 November the NLC called off the strike. The Abacha regime also co-opted leading pro-democracy activists into the government.

1994: a watershed year opening a decade of ebbing and flowing protests

In 1994, around the anniversary of June 12, the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), which was affiliated to the NLC, decided to get into more radical action. It embarked on a strike action regarding both specific economic issues about the oil sector and political demands included the revalidation of the June 12 elections and the proclamation of Moshood Abiola as winner. It also accused the NLC of having betrayed Nigerians by colluding with the military and the ING to subvert the transition (Aborisade and Onieyonuru 1998).

The NUPENG strike was very popular in spite of the hardship it imposed on the people. If the government and its agents were opposed to the strike, hundreds of prodemocracy organizations openly declared their support. The strike became a case of serious worries for the junta when the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association (PENGASSAN), a more conservative body of better paid educated workers, issued a seven-day strike notice in support of NUPENG's demands. Workers in other petroleum companies also joined the NUPENG and PENGASSAN strike. The oil industry and then the whole country came to a standstill.

The regime was helped in its counter-offensive by the indecisiveness of the NLC leadership toward the NUPENG strike. At a meeting of its national executive council on July, it was unable to come out in full support of the strike and to decide whether to embark on an action of its own. Chairmen of northern state councils, where the June 12 mandate enjoyed relatively lukewarm support, argued that such a strike would be politically motivated and could not be justified based on the NLC constitution. Then, whereas the regime accused the NUPENG of unpatriotic and 'political' motivations and deployed full scale repression, the NLC met the government and agreed to find ways of ending the strike.

The NUPENG and PENGASSAN stood firm for four weeks but without effective support from the NLC, they were unable to resist the pressure. Their presidents were imprisoned and both organisations put under sole administrators. Draconian measures were taken to destruct the apparatuses of the union leaderships and to prevent a coordination of rank and file action.

Context: the contradictions of the trade union leadership in 1994

The trade unions had long had an ambivalent relationship with political powers. After independence their alliance with nationalists quickly turned sour, but during the 1960s and 1970s the unions nonetheless defended the ideological perspectives of development and national 'interest' (Barchiesi 1997: 364). Two main tendencies traditionally disputed the leadership: one of collaboration affiliated to international bodies of the capitalist bloc, and a more radical and confrontational one influenced by Stalinism (Ananaba 1969; Otobo 1995). None actually questioned the fundamental nature of the nationalist project. Facing the economic and ideological crisis in the 1980s, new contradictory dynamics emerged: a tendency to cooptation toward the

state; but also in some sectors a persistent radical trade-unionism was very active at the rank and file level (Adesina 2003). When the political crisis came to another head in 1994, those two contradictory tendencies were embodied by Pascal Bafyau, the NLC president, versus Frank Kokorie, the NUPENG president, both men part of the trade-union leadership.

Under the presidency of Pascal Bafyau the NLC adopted an inconsistent and conservative posture in the struggle for democracy. It was seen as a close ally of the junta (Ihonvbere 1997: 80; Jega 1994: 67-68). Numerous reports recounted how unwilling to confront the military government Pascal Bafyau was. He supposedly believed that it was unjustifiable for him to lead the workers on a political rather than on economic strike for the Nigerian political class was not worth fighting for. There was also the fact that Moshood Abiola had refused to pick Pascal Bafyau as his running mate in the 1993 presidential election. Second, the NLC suffered from ideological and personality conflicts. Bafyau's cozy relationship with the military, inconsistency in policy pronouncements, and conflicting postures on critical national matters created scepticism within the opposition and encouraged the state not to take the NLC seriously.

On the opposite side, the oil workers' unions had showed a much more radical stance from the beginning of the political crisis in 1993 and proved it again in 1994. But divided at that crucial point, the trade unions could not stand and fell, dragging down with the social movements².

Consolidating democratization while facing oil gloom and neoliberal policies

Oil was first discovered in Nigeria in 1956 by Shell and British Petroleum, and since then it has been the life blood of the country and of its political economy (Sebille-Lopez 2005: 158-159). But oil wealth accentuated and consolidated underdevelopment. The recurrent problems of the country are in many ways not unconnected with the massive inflow of oil rents, the low absorptive capacity of the economy, large-scale corruption and waste. Non-

² In the years which followed only few other trade unions – such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) – maintained an active level of mobilisation, fuelling a 'disguised' mood of rebellion against the regime (Adesina 2003: 66-67). It took until 1998, with the death of Sani Abacha and the establishment of a new transition process completed within a year by a more committed sector of the army, for the unions and social movements to rise back from ashes.

oil sectors remained under-developed. The ruling elites resorted to accumulation, not production, by constructing direct and indirect linkage to public treasury and looting it dry (Ihonvbere 1994: 19-20).

When the price per barrel of crude oil soars and while government revenues rise, the people have to put up once again with an erosion of their purchasing power. Nigeria is obliged to import the biggest part of its domestic fuel largely due to bad management of local refineries. And because of the inadequacies of its basic infrastructures, the country depends enormously on oil products for production and distribution. Higher fuel prices thus lead systematically to higher transport and production costs and then increases in the prices of basic products like services. To sweeten the pill the state used to concede relatively low fuel prices. But the international financial institutions considered this policy incompatible with the deregulation process, and increasingly pressured for it to stop.

The Nigerian state had long been engaged in neo-liberal policies. In the mid-1980s, to face the crisis of its distorted economy (collapse of international oil prices, over-indebtedness and financial mismanagement of the state), the military government adopted the first SAP. One of its main objectives was to pursue deregulation and privatization policies, leading to removal of subsidies, reduction in wage bills and the retrenchment of the public sector (Igbuzor 2003: 4). Policies were implemented such as the abolition of price-fixing agricultural boards, banking deregulation, partial liberalisation of the exchange rate. Next was deregulation of the oil sector and the government justified the oil price increases by the need to put an end to the 'subsidising' of prices at the pump. With the return of a civilian regime in 1999, this has been even more intense.

A couple of years before the transition, Oluwole Odumosu (1997: 3-4), assessing the tasks ahead for the trade union movement, argued that what was at stake included the ability of labour to champion national democratic development in the context of an apparent contradiction between its primary concern for improved conditions and the government's development strategy; the commitment of labour to resisting the discipline of state and capital; and the very survival of the trade union movement as an instrument for championing the critique of social inequality. Similarly, Dafe Otobo (1995: 61) states that if a multiparty situation were to emerge, that would be a positive development because trade unions could themselves play the fold and exploit differences among political parties. The

trade union movement was forced to generate alternative strategies for development in a more comprehensive form than it had been used to.

In 1998-1999, the labour movement was able to negotiate a national minimum wage. It also supported the government and called on its members to exercise their franchise in order to ensure the success of the transition programme. The unions gave their support to candidates from parties they believed would best serve the interest of labour (Oyelere 2007). As the new civilian regime came to power, the unions welcomed a new leadership at the head of the NLC. The new union's president, Adams Oshiomole, had campaigned on the theme 'Renaissance 99': there was a huge hope among the labour movement as well as general population that it was the opening of a new era where they would reap the dividends of democracy.

The transition gave the unions freedom of action (at least formally), following the lifting of most of the anti-union military decrees and the liberation of the imprisoned leaders. But it has also allowed a continuation of neo-liberal and anti-social policies (Humarau 1999; Amuwo 1999). The protests that ensued displayed a broad spectrum of demands, but the most emblematic ones have been the fights against fuel price increases, for it has had both deep economic and political resonances. Ten years after the 1994 showdown, in the democratized setting of 2004, Nigerian trade unions still embarked into social movements fighting political power.

Still striking after ten years

In 2004 Nigeria witnessed an intense process of class confrontations, with the state and its ruling elite custodians supported by the 'invisible hand' of the international market on the one hand, and the exploited masses on the other. That face-off between labour and the state led to disruptions in the economy following nation-wide strikes, tension between state and civil society, and a seeming disjuncture between 'political opening' and 'economic closure' in which most Nigerians are owning less, and fewer Nigerians and their foreign partners are buying over state assets (Obi 2004 a: 1-2). The protest movement had been preceded in June 2003 by another confrontation of the same sort when the government had announced around 50 percent increase in fuel and domestic prices (*Marchés Tropicaux* July 2003). The strike had lasted for eight days with the police violently

repressing the movement and twelve lives lost (*BBC News* online 8 June 2004; *Libération* 11 June 2004).

At the beginning of 2004 the government announced a new 1.50 naira (N) fuel tax. On 21 January 2004, after a 14-days ultimatum, the NLC embarked on a one-day strike consisting in a stay-at-home protest, until the Federal Appeal Court of Abuja ordered both the government to suspend the tax and the NLC its strike. Besides the removal of the tax, the NLC demanded that the government begun to phase out importation of fuel products in favour of local refining; that it stopped arbitrary fees in schools and all moves to sack 40 percent of public service workers. The press was mostly sympathetic to the daily plight of the common people who blamed the president; highly critical towards the government accused of behaving in an autocratic manner with a 'disdain for legislature', and friendly urging the NLC to find other means than striking. The government tried to defend its measure by arguing that the tax was meant to fund road maintenance, but it was made to back-pedal in what was described as a 'humiliation' in the face of general disapprobation. It was a symbolic victory for the labour leaders (*The Guardian* January 21, 2004; *Newswatch* January 26, 2004; *Newswatch* February 2, 2004).

In late May, another increase in prices of petroleum products from around N40 to N50 was announced. The NLC, joined by Trade Union Congress (TUC), and the Confederation of Free Trade Unions (CFTU) reacted swiftly by calling for a strike from early June. The two major oil unions, the PENGASSAN and the NUPENG, took part in the strike. The conflict finally settled down after three days of action (*Nigerian Tribune* June, 7 2004; *Newswatch* June 14 and 21, 2004).

In autumn, a third set of working class struggles developed around the issue of oil and fuel price. On October 7 oil workers initiated a walkout to protest against yet rising fuel prices (+22 percent). The next day the walkout ended, but in the meantime, the leader of the NLC was reportedly arrested by the State Security Services and kept in custody the whole day. The labour confederation and its allies went on a general strike on 12 October and for the next four days, workers refused to show up for work. The strike was suspended on 15 October, but labour gave another two-week notice to the government (*Vanguard* October 3 and 6, 2004; *The Guardian* October 11 and 14, 2004).

On October 27 the NLC threatened to hold another general strike. On November 9, the government issued a statement saying that workers who joined the strike might be fired and could not regain their old jobs. The NLC stated they would not give in to the pressure, and the PENGASSAN, the largest oil white-collar union, announced it would join the blue-collar workers in their strike. On November 15 the government finally agreed to lower domestic oil prices in a major concession to the unions. The NLC suspended the scheduled strike (*The Guardian* November 17, 2004; *Vanguard* November 19, 2004).

In 2004 as in 1994, labour spearheaded a popular movement that highlighted the illegitimacy of state policies and fuelled the democratization process by questioning, beyond its formal institutionalization, its socio-economic limits.

Polarizing the socio-economic cleavage

Nigeria is a plural society where different processes of identification and mobilization intertwine. Each of its members belongs, simultaneously and alternatively, to a framework of several collective spaces. These various configurations of social relationships do not form a mosaic of juxtaposed blocks. They are ordered on a 'magmatic' bottom according to a kaleidoscopic device, each subject being solicited by its various memberships or identities at the same time. Beside the national, ethnic, regional and religious configurations, the specific polarization linked to the socio-economic structure of the society opposes the ruling elites to the majority of the people. It nourishes a latent popular current hostile to the 'plunderers of the national wealth' (Nicolas 1990).

The elites and their power struggles

At the top of the society, the dominant classes, a powerful minority, are neither homogenous nor united. They are highly dependent on the state apparatus; they lack any clear common vision or ideology for a broad social project; and, as a consequence, they have series of deep divisions according to personal, ethnic, religious and faction-like lines (Ihonvbere 1994; Obi 2004b). Economically they are heavily dependent on the international market, and are rooted around indigenized foreign companies, a powerful state capitalist sector and a smaller private sector.

The state has a monopoly on the oil rent and has been the main avenue for primitive accumulation of capital and control of resources. The private sector is made of different groups. First there is the business bourgeoisie: it is involved in import-export, trade, finance and gravitates around the state and the foreign companies. Then there is the top bureaucracy, its senior civil servants and permanent secretaries. Finally, you find the highest levels of the military which periodically imposed its rule over the country and thereby got deeply involved in business. There has also been a phenomenon of integration of the leading military factions of the soldiers into the political elite via a starting process in retirement and 'civilianisation'. This has been a way to return to power by other means.

The elites inherited a state built by the colonial power with the sole aim of exploiting the country and controlling its people, which they didn't challenge. It became the core and the zone of reproduction of the upper classes. But the contradictions of a colonial state artificially built on the arbitrary unification of territories and peoples complicated the nationalist project. Having been structurally divorced from production, the dominant classes had no other option but to rely on the manipulation of politics and the control of public power to facilitate a form of primitive accumulation. Competition for state power became a life and death battle. Lacking a material base, the indigenous elites resorted to the manipulation of primordial loyalties – religion, ethnicity, and region (Ihonvberé 1994: 14). Their different sections tore each other apart in the struggle for control of the state apparatus, the main instrument of power.

Gaining economic independence required acquiring monetary capital, which the administrative and political class tried to solve by using corruption, a method which has 'remained the major source of the monetary accumulation of capital for the indigenous capitalists (Iyayi 1986: 36). The use of corruption led to an enormous capital flight, which reinforced the dependent and neo-colonial nature of the economy through the loans to international financial institutions. But this process did not impede the development of that class. In addition to the small share of indigenous capital in the industrial companies, the process of privatization engaged by the state as from the 1980s profited mainly with local capitalists who started to form a small but powerful new section.

It is this competition for control, direction and use of the state machinery that has accounted for the political instability of the Nigerian state. But

those power struggles have also been met with popular resistance that trade-unions were central to help build.

The masses and their powerful 'hybridity'

The great mass of the people with low income, struck by the economic crisis and austerity measures have given the democratization process and the social movements that pressured for it its main impetus. As explained by David Seddon and Leo Zeilig (2005: 12-13), although their composition is heterogeneous, their class character and their potential power for mobilisation cannot be denied. The heterogeneity of classes is a feature of their normal condition in the context of capitalism as it evolves.

The urban and rural working classes (consisting of those who have little or no control or ownership of the means of production and only their labour to sell) are two important categories among the popular forces. But the latter may also include others: those whom Marx refers to as 'paupers' as well as small peasants and tenant farmers, 'independent' craftsmen and artisans, small retailers and petty commodity producers, and members of the new petty bourgeoisie generally including the lower echelons of the public sector. Not only do these various social categories constitute, in effect, the relative surplus population, they often share a consciousness of their interdependency and common vulnerability.

The informalisation of the African political economy has been exacerbated from the 1970s by the dismantling of the state that required the retrenchments of the 1980s and 1990s. In Nigeria, those in employment were initially forced to enter the informal economy to supplement their salaries, whilst widespread unemployment among former public sector workers led to the collapse of previously solid class identities forged in the context of state corporatism. But, as argued by Harrison (2002: 114), one can see the decline of corporatism and the increasing informalisation of the urban economy not as a sign of the decay of the urban working class, but rather the reformulation of its political identities into a realm of fiscal austerity. Whatever the differences between the different popular sections of the society may have been at some time in history, they were increasingly made bound together on one side of the class divide by very similar and difficult both living and working conditions. In the late 1980s, inflation and wage controls had drastically eroded the incomes of the salaried 'elites' and in most cases they had to moonlight in the private sector through farming,

trade, consultancy, or business. This situation creates an inclusive process between the working classes and the 'other oppressed strata' (Aborisade 2002: 9).

As pointed by David Seddon and Leo Zeilig (2005: 13), these relationships perpetuate cultural diversity within class formations. And in this situation *'there is a real political economy of hybridization: the real import of culture within the workplace can only be understood within this defining context'* (Harrison 2002: 113). This hybridity of the Nigerian working classes has offered the trade-union movement a large and popular social base to appeal to and to rely on during mobilization. But the very kaleidoscopic dynamics of the Nigerian society meant that they have had to compete with – and, most often than not, deal with the contradictory interferences of – the ethno-regional and religious polarisations created by the dominant classes, mostly *'men of power in furtherance of their own special interests which are, time and again, the constitutive interests of emerging social classes'* (Diamond 1983: 460; Barchiesi 1997: 350). In 2004 as in 1994 those social movements had also to deal with some strategic and leadership issues.

Conclusion: in search for a radical alternative trade-union strategy

From the time of its bitter defeat against the military to its successes in making the democratically-elected civilian regime back down on oil price increases, the Nigerian trade union movement seemed to have regained some major strength. This was reflected in the renewed popularity of its leadership.

During his tenure as the NLC president from 1999 to 2007 Adams Oshiomole was often presented as the unofficial leader of the opposition. Yet his politics and strategies were not without contradictions. For he was the very product of the conservative tendency in the contradictory dynamic that developed inside the labour movement in the late 1980's (Adesina 2003: 62-63). Oshiomole climbed the ranks of the trade union hierarchy during the troubled years of the 1990s. His strength resided in the linking of a sometimes radical rhetoric and an attitude which is in reality much more conciliatory. Thus, he had ambiguous relations with the government. In 1999, he tempered the ardour of the workers to 'preserve' the transition and in 2003 he supported Obasanjo for re-election. While popular and trade union discontent in face of the government's counter-reforms have also led him to confrontation with the regime, he also participated in the National

Council for Privatisation, the body charged with supervising a number of economic measures of which the oil price increase the unions are fighting is one of the logical consequences. All those ambiguities meant that when faced with a government dedicated to the advancement of its neo-liberal policy, the movement had no strong strategy.

Thus, as argued by Aborisade (2006), in the recent years, although the objective socio-political conditions have produced multiplicity of social movements, the process has not created strong mass based coalitions. The leaderships of the social movements are not sufficiently political, in terms of sharing the perspective of bringing about political solutions. The expectations and pressure on them to deliver some are strong nonetheless.

The Nigerian trajectory has been uneven and democratization has lost for now its appeal and impetus (Afrobarometer 2006a and 2006b). The crisis of the state has not been resolved with the opening up of the institutions. It rather is continuing, unabated and fuelled by the battles inside the ruling classes for control of what remains of the state apparatuses and its avenues of profits. The remaining capacity of the trade unions to mobilize popular protests against the state is thus one important factor in asserting popular sovereignty. They are valid studying objects through which one can analyse and understand the nature and dynamics of the popular struggles that keep ushering and revitalizing political change.

Résumé:

Cet article traite du rôle des syndicats nigériens au sein des mouvements sociaux et sur la scène politique entre 1994 et 2004. Cette décennie a été marquée par des mobilisations de grande ampleur dans lesquelles le mouvement ouvrier a tenu une place importante. Tout au long d'une tumultueuse démocratisation qui s'est déroulée dans de difficiles conditions d'ajustement économique, les syndicats ont été à l'avant-garde de mouvements populaires qui se sont opposés aux militaires comme aux civils au pouvoir. Ralliant le soutien de la grande masse du peuple contre un Etat autoritaire contrôlé par une minorité avide de pouvoir, ils se sont saisis des opportunités du moment et ont utilisé leurs ressources stratégiques pour faire entendre leur voix. Et malgré la répression et les reculs subis, ils sont une des principales forces

sociales capable d'intervenir avec consistance et d'influencer le débat public. En grève pour faire avancer le processus de transition ou, dix ans plus tard, contre les politiques néolibérales le mouvement syndical nigérian est un acteur de premier plan et un précieux contributeur du développement social, économique et politique du pays.

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