

RESTORING TRADE UNION CULTURES AGAIN; THE ISSUE OF TRUST AND INTEGRITY

JOHN MARK, PhD.

Department of Management
Faculty of Management Sciences
Rivers State University, Port Harcourt

Abstract

The Nigerian Trade Union Movement has always been seen as a leviathan. In its earliest wake, the doctrine and principle of membership interest was her utmost concern. As such, regional membership culminated into federal unit. This no doubt again, was on the grounds that union members held on to the philosophy of the house. But whiles this traversed the times, it appears, due to regional values and various ideological practices of professions, the house is now faced with the issue of trust and integrity among incoming leaders. The paper then being an empirical one, avers that there is need that the Nigerian Trade Union return to the drawing board. The paper employs likert scaling method and secondary literatures and concludes that the house can still be formidable again if these cultures can be restored and reaffirmed by union members.

Keywords: Trade unions, trust, integrity, organization-structure, organization design.

JEL CODE 51 – SE

I. Introduction

While a trade union is the organization structure devised to bring together workers in paid employment, trade unionism refers to the principles and underlying philosophy that guide the conduct and activities of unions and unionists. It is not out of place to expect union members and their leaders to be guided by these principles and philosophy. This is because without imbibing them, achieving the objectives of the union may be difficult. The Nigerian experience suggests that many a union leader does not really embrace the principles and philosophy underlying trade union organization and work. This explains why some trade union officials perceive working in a trade union organization as just another work experience, with some of them easily picking up employment with member companies within the same industry (Liyod, 2000; NECA, 2009).

It is the contention here that the two terms (trade unions and trade unionism) flow into one another and such at times they are used interchangeably in this paper. Conceived as vehicles for the articulation and protection of the collective interests of workers in wage employment, trade unions, all over the world, have a chequered history (Mantoux, 2006).

Their emergence at the beginning of the industrial revolution in Britain was largely in response to the harsh conditions of labour and deprivations inflicted by the new factory system thrown up as new centres of production. These factories created entirely new environments and conditions of employment.

The early stage of industrialism was characterized by the tyranny of both machines and the rising industrial class and this was unbearable to the workers who were hitherto independent craftsmen and peasants from the countryside. They realized early enough their disadvantaged position, especially given the enormous strength of the employers. There was a sense of job insecurity, which came with industrial work (Mullins, 2005; Jose, 2002). The independence enjoyed by the craftsmen of old was such that they could pack their tools and move on to another town in search of a livelihood (tramping), was no longer there, This was in addition to the fact that they no longer owned the tools of their employment; neither could they boast of any special skills they could sell to the general public (no thanks to the process of division of labour).

In Torracco (2005), it is observed that all issues related to trade unionism are borne out of the exploitative character of industrial capitalism, which was a liinction of the profit motive of the factory owners. The fact of their common predicament and individual vulnerability made it imperative for them to think of presenting a common front against their common 'enemy', the employer. This reality has

always made unity very central to the survival of trade unions and their ability to gain Concessions from intransigent employers. In other words, the adversity of capitalist employment relations dictated, and continues to dictate the need for unity among workers.

In essence it can be said that trade unions arose to address the enormous problems faced at work, which include job insecurity, injustice, dependence and the inhuman conditions under which work is carried out. These are in addition to the fact that "at national and international levels workers Live in a society dominated by foreign capital and under regimes where injustice, oppression and poverty prevail (Sunmonu, 1998)". The logic of trade unionism theory appears to be that irrespective of their placing within the work hierarchy, lack of ownership of the means of production puts all employees at a disadvantage within the employment relationship.

II. Statement of the Problem

The trade unionism in the past protected membership interest. There was a smooth sailing between office holders in the union and members. This was on the account that trade unionists could be trusted . But now the union seems to be weak. The question then, is where has she missed it? The position among scholars, is that the issue of trust and integrity is lacking in the union. The paper then was saddled with the objectives to ascertain the reality of the problem having used an empirical approach of 40 union members as data.

Objectives

The objective of the paper examined the following objectives:

1. To see if the issue of truth and integrity is the problem of trade unionism in Nigeria.
2. To see the ways the issue of trust and integrity can be restored in the union.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were derived from the objectives

1. Is the issue of trust and integrity the problem with trade unionism in Nigeria?
2. What are the ways through which trust and integrity can be restored in the union?

III. Conceptual Reviews

Trade Union Design and Structuring

The 'proliferation' of trade unions in the era before the restructuring exercise that took place in the late 1 970s can be explained in light of the two tendencies earlier mentioned. The low level of development of the Nigerian economy and the fact that most union organizers survived on the number of unions organized by them and were interested in carving out exclusive territories or sphere of influence accounted for the smallness and proliferation (Garg Rastogi, 2005). Even though the restructuring exercise resulted in significantly fewer unions, from over 1000 to 42, the divisive tendencies remain within the movement. This is to be elaborated more on when we look at the divisive factors that can be said to be external to the trade union movement (Mullins, 2005).

Mantoux (2006) opines that the external factors revolve around politics and ideology are more evident in the activities and positions taken by the trade union officials and union federations than those of individual unions. This is largely due to the fact that trade unions are organized on the basis of where people work or on the basis of what they do. There is little or no room for the individual worker's preference. In the case of trade union federations or centers, affiliation is usually voluntary and consciously done on the basis of political and ideological capability. One of the reasons for the ban imposed on the four labour centres in 1976 and the legislation of a single labour centre in 1978 was to ensure ideologically neutral trade unions.

The circumstances that prompted the formation of unions, made it impossible for them to be ideologically neutral, the reality of the colonial project made it more compelling for trade unions to be ideological (Adewumi, 1997). The colonial project was in furtherance of capitalism and as such anticolonial struggles must be based on a counter ideology in order to effectively mobilize those under colonial subjugation, including workers and their organizations. In other Words, ideological undertones

cannot be removed from trade union activities. In the first place, the imposition of colonial rule facilitated the development of wage employment with all its inadequacies and attendant deprivations suffered by the workers. Even in a post-colonial situation, in so far as the capitalist relations of production prevail, ideology would still be relevant in defining the responses and programmes of trade unions to development, not just within the employment relationship but also within the polity as a whole (Adewumi, 1997).

Model Developed by the Researcher for the Study

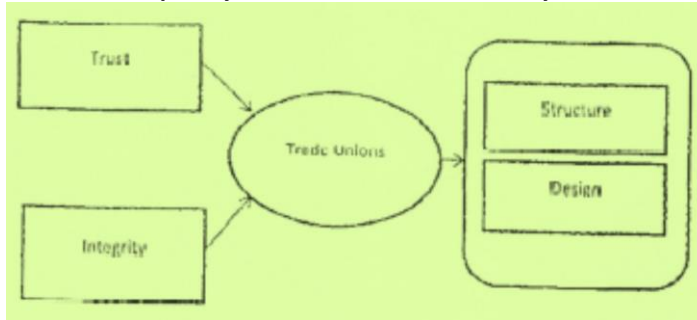


Figure 1: Mo

Trust and Integrity Issues n Trade Union Structuring And Design

Divisions within the trade union movement are borne out of factors that are internal and external to the trade unions. The internal factors arise out of the patterns of union organization, which are reflected in the criteria for inclusion, and exclusion of members. On the other hand the external factors revolve around political and ideological differences and state manipulation. The internal factors relate to the nature of trade unions themselves. Workers from diverse backgrounds formed unions. As such, from the very beginning unions exist to "promote sectional interests-the interests of the section of the population which they happen to organize (Brewster, et al, 2004 Croucher & Brewster, 1998). Various structural arrangements have been devised to give organizational effect to trade union membership. In terms of union structure, two contradictory forces have always been in contention. The first is the move towards breadth, unity and solidarity. The second tendency is towards parochialism, sectionalism and exclusiveness (Jose. 2002). While the first tendency favours unionism, which is open and expansive, the latter encourages closed and restrictive unionism It is the first type that the so-called general Unions tend to promote as reflected in their slogan; "trade unions for all". The paradox of this situation is that these tendencies are not Unconnected with the realities of capitalist industry in which we are confronted with a variety of work contexts and work relations Arising from this is the tendency for those involved to be primarily of their immediate work environment what they experience on a daily basis, their direct and personal relationship. In this context workers easily identify themselves first and foremost as members of a given occupational category, an employing organization or of a particular industry Counterpoised against the above reality is the fact that most Workers, manual or white collar, experience many common grievance such as job insecurity, lack of autonomy in work and unsatisfactory compensation and Conditions of employment all of which should, ordinarily provoke a common feeling of opposition and antagonism to capital, the owners of capital and their agents. By and large, the divisive tendencies that are internal to the trade union organizations are expressed in their organizational boundaries and this shapes the lines of demarcation or jurisdiction scope among different unions (Campion, & Stevens, 1991).

The issue of trust as well as integrity in Union formation and leadership has been a major source of inter- Union wrangling. This is a problem that the restructuring exercise of 1978 has not been able to resolve For instance up till now the dispute between the National Union of Shops and Distributive Employees (NUSDE) and Steel and Engineering Workers Union of Nigeria (SEWUN) over where workers of Mikano Company and those of Nigerchin Limited should belong is yet to be resolved (Adewunini 1997).

The name trade Union itself implies sectionalism As such emphasis is always laid or placed on the transparency and accountability of leadership with respect to the equitable dispensatjOO of duties it is about the inward looking unity of people who practice a common craft/trade or possess common skill. As

such, it would take a major motive force beyond the mere fact of a common membership of the working class to broaden organijOll beyond the narrow limits of a specific occupational group, and would also require heightened levels of members trust in character and the integrity of its leadership for its Success. This is as trade unions are being seen as an important instrument of social change, their core influence and activity still remains in the workplace (Brewster et al, 2004). Their main Concern is to maintain and improve working conditions assure increased leisure, bargain for higher salaries and benefits, create challenging Opportunities for career development and obtain job security for each employee.

Trade Unions have historically had a strong impact and negotiation power in organization. Numerous research findings show how unions revise wages and benefits of unionized workers by almost 20%. Unionized workers are also more likely than their non-unionized counterparts to receive paid leave, to have health insurance provided by employer, or to be included in employer pension plans. Additionally results show that Unionized workers receive more generous health benefits, have better pension plans and obtain more vacation time (Brewster et al, 2004; Croucher & Brewster, 1998).

Adewum; (1997) argues that "British strategic and global considerations, peculiar problems confronting the colonial administration and the needs and activities of British and other European firms were all to impinge on the course and development of the Nigerian trade union movement" if all these were tied to the ideological undercurrents that propelled the colonial enterprise then there is no way the response(s) of those at the other (receiving) end of the consequences of the colonial project could be ideology-free.

Methodology of Study

The paper with the use of questionnaire, collected data from 40 union members from three universities in Rivers State. This was to avoid the prejudice of a single story. In what following then, likert's scaling system was employed for the interpretation of results.

Research Question 1

Is the issue of trust and integrity the problem with trade unionism in Nigeria?

		SA	A	U	D	SD	TOTAL	REMARK
Item		5	4	3	2	1	15	3
	Trade unionism in Nigeria is being weakened with the issue of trust and Integrity	15 (75)	13 (52)	2 (6)	3 (6)	7 (7)	40 146	3.65

The above mean score is reading in the value of 3.65 this shows that the major issue with the trade union system in Nigeria today is that of trust and integrity.

Research Question 2

What are the ways through which trust and integrity can be restored in the union?

		SA	A	U	D	SD	TOTAL	REMARKS
Item		5	4	3	2	1	15	3
	Membership trust and integrity can be restored in the union by stakeholders staying clear from politics	20 (100)	14 (56)	1 (3)	3 (6)	2 (2)	40 167	4.0

Herein the paper shows that the issue of trust and integrity can be restored to the union when stakeholders remain apolitical on the mean value of 4.0.

IV. Conclusions

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

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

The ultimate is that, as mentioned earlier, Nigerian workers should realize that they can only improve their lot in society when they appreciate the need to operate as a class for itself. They should understand the fact that, "the first and overriding responsibility of all trade unions is to the welfare of their own members. That is their primary commitment; not to a firm, not to an industry, not to the nation. The trade union remains the only organization that workers own collectively and it is the only body that can address their concerns; no other body or persons can do it for them. At every point in time what should be uppermost in the minds of union members and operatives is what can be done to strengthen the trade union organization and re-position the trade union movement in the overall interest of the working class. Nigerian workers should embrace the popular slogan adopted by the early union organizers that "an injury to one is an injury to all". This underscores the essence of solidarity as the foundation on which to build trade union unity.

References

- Adewumi F (1997).** Responsiveness in trade unionism: The challenge of the 21st century, In F. Adewumi, (ed.). *Trade unionism in Nigeria: Challenges of the 21st century*, Lagos: Friedrich Ebert Foundation 181-200.
- Brewster, C., Mayrhofer, W., & Morley, M. (ed.) (2004),** *Human resource management in Europe, Evidence of convergence?* Elsevier/Butterworth Heinemann, Oxford.
- Campion, M. A., & Stevens, M. J. (1991).** Neglected questions in job design: Flow people design jobs, task-job predictability, and influence of training, *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 6(2): 169 - 191.
- Croucher, R., & Brewster. C. (1998).** Flexible working practices and the trade unions, *Employee Relations*, 20(5): 443 -452.
- Garg, P., & Rastogi, R. (2005).** New model of job design: Motivating employees' performance, *The Journal of Management Development*, 25(6): 572-587.
- Jose AV (2002).** Organised labour in the 21st century. Geneva: International Labour Organisation.
- Lloyd, C. (2001).** What do employee councils do? The impact of non-union forms of representation on trade union organization. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 32(4), 313-27. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1468-2338.00201>
- Mantou,(P. (2006).** *Industrial revolution in 18 century: an outcome of the beginnings of the modern factory system in England* Black-well Publishers.
- Mullins, L. J. (2005).** Management and organizational behavior, Prentice Hall, Essex NECA. (2009). *Employers digest*, January-March.
- Sunmonu 1-1 (1998).** Development, democracy and trade unions, in F. Adewumj, (ed.), *Trade unions, national development and military rule*, Lagos: Friedrich Ebert Foundation.
- Torraco, R. J. (2005).** Work design theory: A review and critique with implications for human resource development, *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 16 (1): 85-109.