TRADE UNION LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE AND THE CHALLENGES OF

SUCCESSION POLITICS

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INTRODUCTION
One of the key challenges facing trade union organizations today in Africa is that of leadership structure and the politics of succession. In its basic form, a trade union organization is not a democratic structure due to its methods of succession as far as leadership is concerned. Trade union organizations constitute integral part of the societies as representatives of the workers.

Several definitions of trade unions exist in the relevant literature. A few of these definitions will suffice in this paper. One of the earliest known attempts to define a trade union is that contained in the Trade Union Act Of 1913 which defines a trade union as:

Any combination, temporary or permanent, under the constitution of which the principal objectives are: the regulation of the relations between workmen and workmen, masters and workmen, or masters, or the imposing of restrictive conditions on the conduct of any trade union or business.

This definition derives from official statutes or laws of the British Government and this officially confers a legal status in trade unions in Britain. Sidney and Beatrice Webb (1920) define a trade union as a “continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of their working life.” The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines a trade union organization as:

An organization of employees usually associated beyond the confines of one enterprise, established for protecting or improving through collective action, the economic and
Having identified some useful definitions of a trade union, what then constitute the main objectives of the labour unions? Samuel Gompers (1850-1924) provided us with some useful hints:

To protect workers in their inalienable rights to a higher and Better life; to protect them not only as equals before the law, But also in ...their liberties as men, as workers, and as citizens;

To overcome and conquer prejudices and antagonisms......the Glorious mission of the trade unions.

This definition of Samuel Gompers, the longest serving president of the American Federation of Labour, AFL, will be amplified upon in the course of our analysis of the subject matter of this paper. At any rate, the leadership of the labour unions does carry the heavy burden of piloting the affairs of the organization and at the same time engage the governmental authorities in matters relating to salaries and wages, better conditions of work and the general well-being of the workforce, amongst other responsibilities. Several theoretical arguments have been presented by many scholars in respect of the structural characteristics, functions and challenges of the bureaucratic organizations of which trade unions are members. Some of the arguments of selected scholars are examined below in order to provide an objective theoretical substrate for the aims of this paper.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The structural pattern of a trade union organization is essentially bureaucratic, rigid and non-democratic. According to one of the leading theoretical exponents or authorities of formal organizations, trade union organizations, like all forms of formal organizations are subject to an ‘iron law of oligarchy’ (Michels : 1915). Given the fact that they are usually run by a few individuals who take most decisions, they have the tendency to develop ultimately into oligarchies. “Who says organization says oligarchy”, Michels laments. Michels identifies a number of reasons for this tendency towards oligarchic control. These factors can be listed as follows:

a). the fact that general political participation by the vast majority of the people is impossible;

b). the need for an efficient and expert decision making structure or system;

c). the natural human desire or avarice for power.

Consequently, Michels argues that as the organization becomes larger, the smaller the controlling elite becomes. Recruitment into the leadership structure of trade unions as formal organizations is drawn from the rank of those with experience and
expertise in union matters. Michels believes that only an elitist few can exercise control in these organizations. But as a result, there is a problem of the development of conservatism and elitist oligarchic structure of control which is responsible for recruiting its leaders, usually drawn from within its political gentry. This group is made of experienced and skilled unionists that have been groomed for leadership under the tutelage of the aristocratic union leaders.

Another major theorist on the rigid structure of organization is Weber (1947). Weber’s thesis is that the modernization of society calls for an increasing professionalism of leadership which leads to the concentration of power of control in a bureaucratic elite. This leads invariably and ultimately to a monopoly of power and control by a few bureaucratic ruling elite. In his own contribution to the discussion of the subject matter Pareto (1935) argues that the elites are generally those with psychological and intellectual superiority i.e. as far as intelligence, skill, character, etc are concerned, the elites are the highest achievers. Mosca (1939) in his argument lays emphasis on the importance of sociological, organizational and personal characteristics of the elite. Like Weber, Pareto and Michels, Mosca agrees with the fact of the inevitability of elite rule in the society or the organizations.

Meanwhile, a radical point of theoretical departure is C.Wright Mills’s contribution to the elite theory. Contrary to the foregoing positions, Mills (1956) had rejected the argument that elite control was inevitable in the society or that the masses are either incompetent or apathetic. Rather, he argues that, using America as
case study, societal power is located with some key institutions within the society i.e. the big corporations, the government (especially the executive branch) and the military establishment (i.e. the pentagon). He argues further that the elite rules society by manipulating and exploiting the masses, which they condemn into a state of ignorance and powerlessness. Mills states further that the elite perpetuate itself through selective recruitment from its own rank and those so selected are usually groomed in elite values and orientations.

Finally, an examination of Marx’s class theory would enable us to understand organizational structure from the point of view of class societies. Marx (1978) is of the opinion that societal institutions are shaped by economic factors. Economic determinism is the basic feature of capitalist societies. Hence, from Marxian point of view, the structure of organization may reflect class relations or in a way the structural characteristics of capitalist societies.

The importance of this robust conceptual or theoretical analysis of organizational structure and power is to examine a groundswell of theoretical opinions and show how they help us understand the nature, structure and consequences of the intricacies of the politics of leadership succession in trade union organizations.

ISSUES IN TRADE UNION LEADERSHIP
A number of factors are involved in the structural composition of union leadership. These are:

- Challenges of Democracy
- The Political Factor
- Union – Government Relationship
- Aristocratic Authority and the Leadership Question
- Rank and File Question
- What is to be done

**THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRACY**

One major issue or challenge for trade union organizations is that of their structural rigidity and lack of democracy. Elections are usually held in accordance with democratic norms of political parties in general elections, but succession is usually determined by the fact that new leaders of trade unions are drawn from those that have undergone the school of unionism, i.e. those groomed and socialized into the aristocratic traditions of the minority elitist class of leaders and opinion shapers at the highest level of the hierarchical structure of power. These opinion shapers are usually made up of former leaders of the unions who have become referential, respected and consulted either as patrons or ex-officio members of the unions. Consequently, their views or opinion may be regarded or seen as sacrosanct and highly respected.

The *Nigeria Labour Congress (The NLC)*, the Umbrella Organization for the major trade unions in the public and private sector in the public and private sector in Nigeria, is extremely powerful and mostly effective as far as workers interests are concerned. The NLC and many of its affiliate members have benefitted from the
wealth of experience and technical or managerial skills of these former leaders. Some of these leaders are:

a). Comrade Hassan Sunmonu, Former President of *Nigeria Labour Congress* and now Secretary – General of the Organization of African Trade Unions (OATU);

b). Comrade Adams Oshiomhole, the immediate past President of the NLC, and now the Executive Governor of Edo State of Nigeria;

c). Chief Frank Kokori, the Former powerful leader of NUPENG – *National Union of Petroleum, Energy and Gas workers of Nigeria*, and a pro- democracy activist leader of NADECO- *National Democratic Coalition* (which fought for the de-annulment of June 12, 1993 General Elections, that was obviously win by the Late businessman, Chief M.K.O. Abiola (of the defunct *Social Democratic Party*), but was annulled by the military president at the time, General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida.

However, union leadership succession may sometimes present a façade of democratic process but in reality, those elected are usually the products of the training school of unionism under the political tutelage of present leaders and or ex-leaders of the unions. The immediate consequences of lack of democracy is the development of inter- personal or inter- group conflicts within the unions. Some of the decisions taken by the aristocratic and elitist leaders do not usually reflect majority opinions, especially those of the ordinary rank and file. The obvious reason is that the leadership of most of the unions had become aristocratic and oligarchic. This fear is expressed by Otobo (2006) in a paper *Social Dialogue and Sustainable*
Development in Nigeria, presented at the National Labour Relations Summit at Michael Imoudu National Institute for Labour Studies, Ilorin, Nigeria, that ‘Transparency and democratically arrived at decisions tend to reduce incidents of factions and intra-union conflicts…’

Therefore, at the union level, decisions arrived at on a pedestal of transparent and democratic structures ultimately have positive effects on union unity, strength and effectiveness and vice-versa. The extent to which this is possible among the various unions has been affected over the years by intra-union conflicts caused by political maneuverings within the circle of the elitist oligarchy of union leaders.

In a globalizing world where national economies are affected by the economic fortunes or misfortunes of the developed countries, the strength of trade unions has been severely dealt with (Trebilcock et al, 1998). This is due to competition in the international labour market, various economic and political crises and reforms in the developing countries, and the global financial crises, among other factors.

Finally, the inability of developing countries like Nigeria to properly entrench democratic values and institutions has bandwagon effects on the trade unions as constituent members of the larger society or the country.

THE POLITICAL FACTOR IN TRADE UNION LEADERSHIP.

The political authorities in Nigeria for instance have not helped matters as far as the extent of union effectiveness and leadership is concerned. State intervention in
industrial relations matters had aggravated labour-management relations, and in a way led to intra-union conflicts and divisions. According to Adebisi (2004),

the handling of industrial conflicts in Nigeria is characterized by exceptional governmental regulation through intervention in the manner of imposing solutions on labour.

Apart from the negative impact of the official policies and other forms of intervention from government, internal problems of the union oligarchs, sometimes due to ideological or tactical differences, do have effect on the selection processes and consequently creating entrenched political divisions and conflicts. The import of this analysis is to show how internal political bickering can impact on the succession processes of the unions, and ultimately the quality and credibility of their newly elected leadership. For instance, Adebisi (2005) while explaining the political situation in Nigeria observes that: ‘recruitment into the public sector and the armed forces is usually on quota bases’, hence, one cannot rule out political interference in union affairs because the composition of the leadership positions is influenced by ethno-cultural and geo-political considerations.

**UNION-GOVERNMENT RELATIONSHIP**

The relationship between labour unions and government in the developing countries is somewhat akin to that of strange bed fellows given the frequency
of disagreement between them. The lack of transparency and sincerity in their dealing with each other is the bane of any meaningful relationship between the two parties. According to Yesufu (1962: 140) “the workers are extremely distrustful of government”. While government has gained notoriety for reneging on its promises and statutory obligations based on signed agreements with the labour unions, the union leaders are sometimes guilty of complacency and militancy depending on the situation at hand. The absence of transparency and democracy in some union organizations as identified by Otobo (2006) could exacerbate union-government relationships. As a consequence, strains in relationship between the two parties, i.e. government and the labour unions, usually lead to constant industrial unrest with severe political and socio-economic repercussions.

**ARISTOCRATIC AUTHORITY AND THE LEADERSHIP QUESTION.**

The structure of any trade union organization is no doubt democratic as the officers of the unions are elected. However, leadership succession is usually governed by grooming and a period of tutelage, when according to C. Wright Mills selective recruitment and ideological grooming or socialization into the elitist values is carried out (Mills, 1956). Furthermore, the unions are not immune from the effects of modernization on the larger society where rationalization of thought is increasingly gaining ground. Weber (1947) states
that with the modernization of society, leadership becomes increasingly professionalized, and as a result power is concentrated in bureaucracies. According to this thesis of Max Weber, the stability of bureaucratic organizations is also bedeviled by an ‘intransigent’ and ‘unanswerable elite’ of power holders. The trade unions as bureaucratic organizations are affected by this structural malaise.

**RANK AND FILE QUESTION**

The rigid structure of power and its tendency towards oligarchic control of trade unions often leads to alienation, mass apathy and powerlessness among the rank and file members. This according to Mills (1956) makes it easy for the masses to be easily manipulated and exploited by the ruling elites who rule in their own interest. The estrangement that occurs leaves the masses of workers sullenly ignorant, powerless and molded by mass culture dictated by the ruling oligarchy. Weber in a similar vein argues that the concentration of power in the hands of a bureaucratic elite puts enormous amount of ‘human, material and intellectual resources’ under its firm and rigid control (http://stmarys.ca/~evanderveen/wvd/political_sociology/political_sociological_theories.ht...) This leads to the entrenchment of power in the hands of the elite at the top of the hierarchical ladder of control.

**WHAT IS TO BE DONE?**
As stated earlier on in this paper, intransigent and unanswerable elite of labour leaders may exercise too much power for the good of the trade unions. A number of steps could be taken to ameliorate this situation.

a). Democratization of the succession process is essential. Opportunity for holding elective office or position in the unions must be open to all members irrespective of their physical or ideological proximity to those in control of the power apparatuses of the organization.

b.) Transparency and accountability. The conduct of the business of the unions must be done in the most transparent and accountable way. The danger in not doing this is for the unions to become gullible to the corruptive influences of their social and political environments, especially from the governmental authorities. In fact this fear was exercised by Lenin and Trotsky in their intellectual contribution to the debate on the intellectual capacities of trade unions to lead the workers to the promised land. The concern is with the usual attempts by the governments all over the world to incorporate the leadership of the unions through corruption, either by material inducement or by offering their members juicy positions in government.

c.) Workers education. An intensification of educational opportunities and training especially among the rank and file will reduce ignorance, apathy and powerlessness. The emphasis must be on both liberal and technical education
in order to keep the workers well-informed and up-to-date. The establishment in Nigeria of *Michael Imoudu National Institute for Labour Studies* in Ilorin, in central Nigeria, is a positive step in the right direction. Amongst several functions, the institute was established by Decree No. 5 of 1986 to:

- to provide workers’ education generally so as to enhance the role of trade unions in the social and economic development of the country and equip trade union officials and managers with skills normally required for collective bargaining and joint consultation in fostering the growth of better labour and management relations. (Sokunbi, 1996).

Meanwhile, the institute has been involved constantly in the training of thousands of workers in both the private and public sectors and about to begin a diploma programme in labour studies in conjunction with a federal university.

**CONCLUSION**

The leadership succession problems of the trade unions in Nigeria is not lost, in spite of the fact that most of the unions have demonstrated a high degree of openness, accountability, democracy and exemplary leadership. The major unions such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), and a host of others had demonstrated these exemplary capacities as democratic unions of workers.

The basic socio-economic, political, ethnic and cultural problems of the larger
society are usually replicated in the unions. However, the extent of their impact on the labour unions in the future can be reduced to the barest minimum if the steps recommended above are considered in concert with other emergent and imaginable solutions in the future. Thank you.

REFERENCES


