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Nigeria

# Unions lead popular resistance

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**A 20% plus increase in the prices of petroleum products, announced by the government in August 2005 after several weeks of intense media softening up of public opinion, has generated anger and popular mobilisations in Nigeria. This is the ninth such increase in the six years since the restoration of civilian government, which was supposed to herald a new era for the country, an indication of the neoliberal policies pursued by the two successive Obasanjo governments, which themselves come on top of the structural adjustment plans the country has suffered for two decades.**

**These attacks have also led to resistance from the social movements and more particularly the trade unions.**

The latter are today at the heart of a social and political struggle which at the same time brings hope and raises many questions about the old models and the new strategies which the movement needs today.

## The "oil curse"

Absurd and paradoxical as it may seem, when the price per barrel of crude oil soars as it did last summer, the inhabitants of Nigeria, Africa's biggest producer, grit their teeth and cry with rage. While government income rises, they have to put up once again with an erosion of their purchasing power.

[[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/lagos\\_market.jpg](https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/lagos_market.jpg)] Prices of necessities go through the roof

Because of the inadequacies of basic infrastructures like electricity and water, and the lack of an adequate and functional rail network, 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.

This increase, like all the others, was justified by the need to put an end to the subsidising of prices at the pump in the framework of the new policy of deregulation of the oil sector. Nigeria, a big producing and exporting country, is obliged to import the biggest part of the fuel it consumes, largely because of bad management (a veritable organised pillage in fact) of local refineries.

To sweeten the pill the state has long had to concede public subsidies to stabilise prices. Today the international financial institutions consider this policy incompatible with the reduction of state expenditure. Thus, while they are supposed to be richer thanks to the income of their country, it is still the poorest that pay. The 70% of Nigerians who live on less than 1 dollar a day certainly appreciate the bitter irony of the situation [1].

In the wings the authors of this farce are clearly identifiable. In first place the imperialism of the great powers who wish to assign to the African countries a subordinate role and place in the system of international production.

Once exercised through the Bible and the bayonet, then under the civilizing yoke of colonisation, their domination has adapted to decolonisation and to independence. It has taken the form of a neo-colonialism which is today exercised by a monopolistic appropriation of raw materials and their markets and the implacable workings of the international financial institutions (debts, structural adjustment programmes, and so on) which nothing escapes [2].

Thus in Nigeria, the fifth biggest supplier to the US, Shell and British Petroleum fight it out for oil exploitation rights, still far ahead of the outsider TotalFinaElf, while US-British multinationals largely dominate the main sectors of the economy and the IMF and the World Bank orchestrate the country's permanent insolvency. These are also powerful international political supports who supported for years the authoritarian regimes who maintain order with an iron grip, before welcoming (far too noisily to be taken seriously) Nigeria's return to the "community of nations" during the institutional tidying up which passed for democratisation in 1999.

Their excess of zeal was certainly not unconnected to the strategic importance and continental potential of this country. The second biggest African economic power after South Africa due to its resources and its population, Nigeria, or more exactly its leaders, presents itself as the "giant" of the continent, as well as its policeman, and demands a seat on the Security Council of the United Nations.

The Nigerian ruling class is thus far from being simply a puppet in the hands of the great powers. It certainly occupies a secondary place in the "chain of command" of the world capitalist system, but its choices and actions respond totally to the own well-understood interests. President Obasanjo, a regular guest at various G8 summits, is one of the big promoters of the New Partnership for African Development (a kind of big structural adjustment programme "made in Africa"), and these neoliberal policies allow the continuation and the accentuation of the primitive accumulation of capital to the benefit of the ruling class it serves.

So when the trade union movement opposes the increases in the prices of domestic oil it comes up against the imperialism of the great powers as well as the interests of its own ruling class

## Political opposition

In putting their fingers on the highly sensitive question of the management of Nigeria's oil revenues, the trade unions have become the only real political opposition to the government. They have responded to the incessant increases with general strikes; and sometimes the simple call for a strike has been enough to force a government climb down, as in 2003 when a general strike paralysed nearly all the country for a week, despite severe police repression (eight dead).

It should be said that this was on the eve of George Bush's African tour, which was to begin in Nigeria, and a general strike would have been an embarrassment. The movement nonetheless cost more than 100 billion nairas (636 million euros) [\[3\]](#).

But the strike weapon also perturbs the international financial markets. Thus during the strike of October 2004, in a situation rendered still more sensitive by the damage caused by Hurricane Ivan in the Gulf of Mexico, the nervousness of the traders pushed the price per barrel up over 50 dollars for several days.

If the unions are generally in a situation of having such an impact (and this has been the case one way or the other since 1999) it is less by their size than by their particularly strategic political, social and economic position in the Nigerian context. Certainly, with its three big confederations (the most significant, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) has 29 affiliated unions and 4 million members and is one of the biggest trade union organisations in the continent), the Nigerian union movement is far from being negligible [\[4\]](#).

But what really gives it strength is both its central economic position and its implantation in diverse strata of society. On the one hand the workers in the oil sector, organised either in the blue collar union NUPENG, or the management

union PENGASSAN, have their hands on the main tap of the country's economy [5].

They alone can unleash a general strike. On the other there are the multiple links (social, economic, familial, ethnic and so on) which unite wage earners with the rest of the population. Whether through overlapping between formal and informal activities [6], or membership of community groups (religious, ethnic, regional or village networks), workers thus 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 whole of the population, which in its majority shares similar difficulties and is, then rather inclined to give them their support.

Trade union mobilisations take on a political character both objectively and subjectively. First, as the state is still the country's main employer, each mobilisation of public sector puts workers in direct confrontation with the government and each struggle thus has a strong political dimension. But the trade union movement has always made more or less explicit political demands. From the outset, the first Nigerian trade unions (which date from the 1910s and which developed first in the public sector) opposed the state politically under conditions of a colonial domination which institutionalised racial discrimination.

The first wage demands targeted systematically the differences in treatment between white and black employees and were a first form of political resistance to the colonial order, even if they were mostly expressed in rather moderate and conciliatory terms. At the same time that economic concessions were made here and there the colonial authorities were often obliged to concede more political freedoms, under pain of seeing the strike movements take on too radical a turn.

Thus the strike in 1920 of carpenters in the Nigerian Mechanics Union, which extended to the entire protectorate of Lagos, had as direct political consequence the formation of a new legislative council including this time the indigenous delegates. Three years later in 1923 the first Nigerian political party, the Nigerian Democratic Party, was founded.

Starting from 1945, the trade union movement acquired a more distinctly political dimension with the emergence of the anti-colonialist nationalist movement. It was in that year that the first general strike in the country's history took place: for more than six weeks 43,000 workers in "essential" economic and administrative services went on strike for wage increases.

Two years later, the first constitutional reform, establishing the bases of tripartite regionalism which would fundamentally deform the political development of the country, was adopted. But it was some years later, in 1949, following the bloody repression of a miners' strike movement in the east of the country in Enugu, that trade union agitation and anti-colonial politics reached its apogee with the demand for an immediate autonomous government.

After independence, obtained in 1960, the trade unions would again play a prominent role in a certain number of significant political developments. In 1964 for example a new two week general strike won wage revisions and for a time a real inter-ethnic workers' solidarity existed, in a context of growing political and institutional crisis which would lead to civil war in 1967.

For a number of historic reasons no significant left force, which could give a political expression to class cleavages, has ever emerged in Nigeria. The three current main political formations in the country [7], like most of those who existed under the four ephemeral first republics, are only coalitions of various sections of the ruling class, often reflecting ethno-regionalist divisions. This fact, which explains the place that the unions occupy as sole organised form of the working class on a mass scale, is the result of the specific political conditions which have presided in the

development of the country and have strongly influenced the trade union movement.

# The trade unions and the nationalist project

To fully appreciate the type of general environment in which the Nigerian trade union movement has been built, it is important to make a rapid review of the political history of the country which throws light on the problematic of the current situation. Nigeria in this sense is not an exception, but rather a typical example of the crisis of the African postcolonial state [8].

Its particularities reside more in the extreme forms that intra- and inter-class cleavages take. The African elites (in this case Nigerian) have inherited a state built by the colonial power with the sole aim of exploiting the country and controlling its people, without challenging its bases.

In fact one ruling class (black, postcolonial) replaced another (white, colonial). But the contradictions of a colonial state built artificially on the arbitrary unification of territories and peoples as diverse as they are varied complicated the nationalist project of the new Nigerian ruling class, as it was unable to maintain within itself the initial consensus. Its different sections tore each other apart in the struggle for control of the state apparatus, the main instrument of political and economic power, which determines the sharing out of the means of primitive accumulation.

This intestine war of the ruling class would virtually lead to the collapse of the object of the conflict, namely the Nigerian entity, through the experience of a long and costly civil war. At this time a new ruling actor appeared: the army, and more specifically the top (initially middle) military hierarchy.

In a process of a Bonapartist type, this new actor "reconciliated" the ruling classes in conflict, refounding the nationalist project. Posing as an arbiter and rallying the support of a majority of the social, political and community groupings of the country, the army would lead and win the war against the Biafran secession and rebuild the state on the basis of a consensus which established the hegemony of the centre (the federal government and the centralised state apparatus) and its control over the oil resources which became the essential and indispensable fuel of state and national development.

But from the mid-1980s, the machine began to seize up. The world crisis struck the dependent countries of the South more harshly and sapped the economic bases of the nationalist project, already deeply damaged by the rapacity of the Nigerian ruling classes. A formidable level of corruption which infected the whole system was for a while contained by the arbitrage of the military, but they quickly got stuck into the process themselves. The nationalist model has failed.

This situation is reflected by a growing dominance of the international institutions which precisely at this period changed their orientation completely with the beginning of the neoliberal "conservative revolution".

This period saw the beginning of the implementation of the first structural adjustment plans, local version, in 1986. The trade union movement was hit hard by this turn of events. If at the political level the alliance with the nationalist leaders quickly turned sour once independence had been obtained, the unions had nonetheless taken part in a certain fashion in the nationalist project by defending the underlying ideological perspectives of development and of the national "interest".

That has not stopped class conflicts with the Nigerian ruling class. On the contrary, the shortcomings of the

nationalist model of development adopted after independence only increased tensions. But with a few exceptions, they have most often been diverted into ethnic or religious cleavages by the elites. Two main tendencies have traditionally disputed the leadership of this movement: a trades unionism of consensus/collaboration affiliated to international bodies of the capitalist bloc, and a more radical and confrontational trades unionism influenced by Stalinism. None of these two orientations questions the fundamental nature of the nationalist project, being either content to quite simply accompany it, or only opposing it in relation to the effects and consequences of its malfunctioning on the living and working conditions of workers.

## Democratic engagement

In the 1980s two contradictory tendencies emerged inside the trade union movement. On the one hand the collaboration of the union leaderships, symbolised in the person of Pascal Bafyau, considered certainly as one of the worst presidents of the NLC.

On the other hand, a persistence and strengthening in some sectors of a unionism which was very active at the rank and file, following the example of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). This union of teaching personnel in the universities emerged from the mid-1980s as the spearhead of trade union radicalism, fiercely opposing budget reductions, attacks on the autonomy of the universities and more globally, the privatisation of higher teaching. Showing a principled attachment to the working class, of which it considers itself an integral part as an organisation of intellectual workers [\[9\]](#), the ASUU would become the *bÃ¢te noire* of the Nigerian regimes.

After the fall of the second civilian government and the return of the military to power, the new head of the regime, Ibrahim Babangida, tried to sell the population the structural adjustment plan demanded by the IMF and the World Bank by organising a kind of great national debate. The ASUU would actively lead a campaign against the draft structural adjustment plan, circulating analyses challenging the official propaganda on all points. It also supported the student movement against government attacks.

The trade union organisation was then subjected to ferocious repression, along with attempts at internal destabilisation through support to dissident factions. It was then banned for the first time in 1986 and forcibly disaffiliated from the NLC, in particular because of the radical intellectual influence it exerted on the union federation.

Generally speaking, the response of the successive military regimes towards the union movement was a cocktail of cooption and savage repression, notably under the military regime of Sani Abacha [\[10\]](#). Conflicts with the military twice led to the dissolution of the NLC, then the single official trade union federation, in 1988 and in 1994, Numerous union leaders were arrested and continually harassed; union meetings systematically attacked or banned.

This harsh state strategy did not stop the trade union movement from playing a significant part in the democratic movements which emerged from the 1990s onwards. An alliance of unions with "civil society" (mainly human. civil and democratic rights associations) was forged. Inside (or in collaboration with) broad coalitions - like the Campaign for Democracy (CD) or National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) - unions like the ASUU or the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) would mobilise for the drawing up and implementation of a genuine programme of democratic transition; then, after the cancellation of the electoral process in 1993, for the actualisation of the results and the end of the military regime.

In July 1994 the unions in the oil sector (NUPENG and PENGASSAN) organised one of the most significant strikes of the period against the military regime. The movement, allying explicitly economic demands and political slogans for the withdrawal of the military from power, generalised to all sectors and led to the paralysis of the country for more

than a month. The regime would bring down all its strength against the unions. The presidents of NUPENG and PENGASSAN were imprisoned and their organisations, like the entire NLC, put under the control of single administrators named by the government. A range of draconian measures was taken to totally destructure the apparatuses of the union leaderships and to prevent a coordination of rank and file action. Finally, the government defeated the movement, due notably to the ambiguities and weaknesses of the NLC leadership. Despite actions and movement here and there in the years which followed, it was only starting from 1998, with the death of Sani Abacha and the establishment of the transition, that the unions started to really move again.

## New resistance and perspectives

The "democratic" completed from 1999 finally 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. In that year, as the new civilian regime came to power, the Nigerian unions welcomed a new leadership at the head of the NLC. The new union president, Adams Oshiomole, had campaigned on the theme "Renaissance 99" and the Nigerian workers, like their millions of compatriots, really hoped to see the opening of a new era where they would reap the dividends of democracy.

Unhappily the democratic transition has only really allowed a continuation of the same neoliberal and anti-social policies under a democratic cover [11]. And the workers very quickly returned to the road of mobilisation. The movements which followed the transition fought on a broad spectrum of demands, from wage rises to struggles against dismissals. But the focal point of these movements was really the fight against oil price increases which began from 1999 onwards. It reconstituted the alliance of the unions with the other forces of the social movement and led to the emergence of NLC leader Adams Oshiomole on the public and national scene. Yet his personality and policies are not without ambiguities and contradictions which could constitute obstacles for the movement.

Elected in 1999 and re-elected in 2002 at the head of the federation, Adams Oshiomole is often presented as the unofficial leader of the opposition

particularly since the campaigns against the oil price increases. A charismatic leader, Oshiomole climbed the ranks of the trade union hierarchy during the troubled years of the 1990s. His strength resides in the constant linking of a sometimes very radical rhetoric and an attitude which is in reality much more conciliatory. Thus he has ambiguous relations with the government and Obasanjo.

In 1999 he tempered the ardour of the workers to "preserve" the transition and ended up negotiating a 25% increase in public sector workers' wages with Obasanjo. In 2002 he supported Obasanjo for re-election. But popular and trade union discontent in the face of government counter-reforms have also led him to confrontation with the regime, which is not without risk.

And if he has positioned himself as leader of the campaign against the oil price increases, he also participates 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 these ambiguities and contradictions mean that when faced with a government totally dedicated to the advancement of its aggressive neoliberal policy the movement has no real strategy. In recent years it has often confined itself to protest against price increases, deregulation and privatisation without challenging the global logic of this policy.

The campaign of 2005 perhaps marked a turning point. Rather than call for a new strike (which may not have been

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able to maintain itself very long, in particular because of the difficulty faced by small and informal traders in surviving without liquidity), the unions and their allies inside the Labour and Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) developed a new approach.

This involved calling for demonstrations and the holding of big public meetings on the theme of opposition to an increase in prices at the pump, but also against the general policy of the Obasanjo government as the main factor in the impoverishment of the population. These demonstrations, organised across the country, attracted thousands of workers every time, around forthright and political slogans.

They have given expression and form to the politicisation of a broad layer of organised workers, and have radicalised opposition to the government.

If the concrete results of the movement are unhappily yet to be seen, due to the apathy of the union leaderships which seem to be happy with this first phase, the process, patiently and politically built, could lead to real perspectives of alternatives.

And this is urgent, because: the structural crisis of the Nigerian state has not been resolved with the opening up of the institutions. It seems on the contrary to be continuing, nourished by the transformations wrought by neoliberal policies (the dismantling of the state which had been the means and the site of primitive accumulation). Strong tensions and cleavages could grow, notably with the prospect of presidential elections in 2007.

The battles inside the ruling classes for control of what remains of the state apparatuses, like the attacks to extract still more profits from the rest of the population, could sharpen. In the absence of perspectives for the movement, these developments are already crystallising around other cleavages - regional, ethnic and/or religious - which are the source of violence and division between the exploited and the oppressed. The organisations of the Nigerian workers' movement thus have a heavy responsibility, but also the means, of avoiding new tragedies for the whole of the class, and offering genuine perspectives of emancipation.

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[1] Nigeria is the only country in the world with oil reserves to run a budget deficit.

[2] See on this point "The Strangling of Africa", "International Socialism", number 107, summer 2005.

[3] See in particular the article by Jean Nanga, "Nigeria: grèves générales en série", "Solidarités" number 39, January 19, 2004.

[4] The active population of the country was estimated in 2004 at 55.66 million people of which nearly 70% are in agriculture, 10% in industry and 20% in services

[5] The Nigerian economy is largely dependent on oil exploitation which generates nearly 95% of exports, 70% of tax income and a third of the country's GDP. The country is the biggest African producer of crude oil and the fifth biggest supplier to the US.

[6] The share of the informal economy in Nigeria is one of the highest in Africa, and represented nearly 75% of non-oil GNP in 2003 (by way of comparison, this share is only 11% in the US and 16% in France). This sector has undergone a real explosion in recent years, parallel to the development of the crisis and the implementation of structural adjustment policies which have led to massive lay-offs, notably in the public sector. Most of the dismissed workers, but also many salaried workers, have recourse to this economy of survival and "getting by".

[7] They are the People's Democratic Party (PDP) of president Obasanjo, which has a majority in the assembly and in the senate, the All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD).



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[8] On the crisis of the Nigerian nationalist project see Cyril I. Obi, "No longer at ease: Intellectuals and the crisis of nation-statism in Nigeria in the 1990s", "Revue Africaine de sociologie", vol. 8, number 2, 2004, pp.1-14.

[9] Thus, although being a "cadre" organisation, ASUU affiliated to the NLC and has maintained constant links with the union confederation which mainly organises blue-collar workers.

[10] See Jimi O. Adesina, "Relations État/syndicats au Nigeria: néolibéralisme, autocratie et dilemme de la démocrati", in Lebeau Yann, Boubacar Niane, Piriou Anne, De Saint Martin Monique (dir.), "État et acteurs émergents en Afrique", IFRA/Karthala, 2003, pp. 57-85.

[11] See Béatrice Humarau, "D'À une transition À l'À autre: classe politique et régimes militaires au Nigeria", in "L'À Afrique politique 1999. Entre transition et conflits", Karthala/CEAN, 1999, pp. 61-83.