

MASS STRIKES IN NIGERIA 2000-2016

STRUGGLING AGAINST NEOLIBERAL HEGEMONY

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N200

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Central Area-Abuja.

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MASS STRIKES IN NIGERIA: 2000–2016 STRUGGLING AGAINST NEOLIBERAL HEGEMONY

- Femi Aborisade & Drew Povey

Introduction

The Nigerian economy is the largest in sub-Saharan Africa. It grew at around six per cent a year for the decade to 2015, when the GDP was about \$600 billion, compared to only \$350 billion for South Africa. However, as the population is over three times that of South Africa – with around 180 million inhabitants or one in five black Africans – the per capita GDP for Nigeria is less than half of that of South Africa, at around \$5,000 a year¹. The Nigerian economy is dominated by the oil industry. Oil has been the main source of government revenues since the 1970s. Until recently, oil accounted for close to 90 percent of exports and roughly 75 percent of the country's consolidated budgetary revenues². The country is the largest oil exporter in Africa, with the largest natural gas reserves in the continent. Although oil's significance has declined with the fall in the global price of crude oil since June 2014. The most recent figures suggest that less than half of the Federal Government's revenue is now coming from the oil sector³.

Inequality in Nigeria may be less than that of South Africa, but contrasts are still huge. The richest person in Africa, Aliko Dangote, is Nigerian, but the World Bank estimates that over 60 per cent of the population are existing on \$1.25 or less a day⁴. Poverty is higher in the rural areas and in the north of the country (which provides the basic motivation for Boko Haram – the militant Islamic group that has been fighting the government since 2009). While the metropolis of Lagos is a magnet for the whole of West Africa, youth unemployment is still estimated as being as high as 50 percent. The monthly minimum wage in the public sector is only \$180 (PPP) and many workers in the private sector are paid less than this. Inequality is made worse by the huge levels of corruption. These are two sides of the same coin,

¹ World Bank (2015) *Little Data Book*, Washington DC: World Bank

² Buhari, M (2015) *2016-2018 Medium Term Expenditure Framework and Fiscal Strategy Paper*, Abuja: Presidency

³ op cit

⁴ World Bank (2015) *Little Data Book*, Washington DC: World Bank

inequality breeds corruption as the rich are able to buy so many of the poor. In turn, corruption, enables the rich to grow richer and the poor are denied basic social services. As a result, the rich elite have grabbed most of the oil wealth for themselves. Social spending and the statistics for health and education outcomes are worse than the averages for sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria is a rich country, but its people are mainly very poor.

ILO estimates that just over 20 percent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa are in waged or salaried employment, which would be 35 million Nigerians. As affiliates of the Nigeria Labour Congress' organise around 4.5 million workers and the Trade Union Congress (for more senior staff) has some two million members⁵, it might be suggested that nearly 20 percent of the Nigerian workforce holds a membership card in one of those trade unions. However, estimates by the National Bureau of Statistics⁶ suggest that the number of people in formal employment may be as low as four million. This indicates a very high level of unionisation and could be explained by unions over-reporting their membership.

In mid-2015, Muhammadu Buhari, a former military dictator, took office – the first time an opposition party had taken power through democratic elections since independence in 1960. Buhari was elected by promising to tackle corruption and use the money to significantly increase social spending. He promised a five-fold increase in health budgets and to devote 20 percent of his budget to education (a significant increase). He specifically promised to provide one meal a day for all primary school pupils. He also promised to provide a social wage of at least \$25 a month to the 25 million poorest Nigerians⁷. As part of his inauguration speech, he stated that:

No single cause can be identified to explain Nigeria's poor economic performance over the years than the power situation. It is a national shame that an economy of 180 million generates only 4,000MW [of electricity], and distributes even less. Continuous tinkering with the structures of power supply and distribution and close on \$20b expended since 1999 [on the electricity power sector] have only

⁵ Baba Aye (2013) *Which way for the Nigerian Working Class?* paper prepared for the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) International Colloquium, November, Johannesburg

⁶ National Bureau of Statistics (2014) *1st and 2nd Quarter 2014 Job Creation Survey Report*, Abuja: NBS

⁷ Buhari, M (2015) *My Manifesto and Vision for Nigeria*, Abuja: Buhari

brought darkness, frustration, misery, and resignation among Nigerians. We will not allow this to go on.⁸

All these promises have raised great expectations in the new government, and the trade unions generally supports its policies, albeit under the condition that a long scheduled increase in the minimum wage will finally takes place. Time will tell whether such and other expectations are met or whether they only feed the anger and frustrations of the mass of poor Nigerians. One of the most important aspects that will decide the future of the Nigerian labor movement, is its ability to contest anti-social measures introduced by the government. Since the 1990s, Nigeria has been one of the African countries with the most militant trade union activism. This article will provide information about this activism, by focussing on different forms of labor unrest that developed since the strike waves of 1990s.

The 1990s: Trade unions, strikes and dictatorship

As one of the largest and most influential groups in the country, trade unions stood up for workers and the ordinary Nigerians especially during the various repressive military regimes. Much as government tried to suppress them by arresting their leaders and replacing them with government appointees and threats of proscription, labour stood its ground and this eventually helped contribute to the transition to democracy.⁹ In the 1990s, Nigeria saw an “explosive growth in [work] stoppages”.¹⁰ In this decade, two aims were on the top of the list of the strikers: the fight against poverty and the fight against military dictatorship. Firstly, in the early 1990s, huge pay increases were reached, but on the basis of real wages that had been much lower than in the 1980s. Results of the strikes included significant pay increases, for example, of 45 percent for public sector workers in August 1992 and 35 percent for textile workers in May 1993¹¹ (although inflation was high as a result of the March 1992 devaluation and by 1993, “Nigerian

⁸ Buhari, M (2015) *Inaugural Speech by His Excellency, President Muhammadu Buhari, following his swearing-in as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on Friday, May 29, 2015*, Abuja: Buhari

⁹ Toyin Adefolaju (2012) Global Economic Challenges: Trade Union Growth Implications in Nigeria, “The Journal of Pan African Studies”, vol.5, no.6, September (page 98)

¹⁰ L. J. Perry and Patrick J. Wilson (2004) *Trends in work stoppages: A global perspective*, Working Paper No. 47, International Labour Office, Geneva (page 16).

¹¹ Gunilla Andreae and Bjorn Beckman (1998) *Union Power in the Nigerian Textile Industry*, (Centre for Research and Documentation, Kano)

workers typically took home 20 percent of their 1983 wages in real terms”¹²).

In June 1993, the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida annulled the first elections for a decade¹³. These were expected to have transferred power to an elected, civilian government. MKO Abiola of the Social Democratic Party was assumed to have won the elections and later died in prison. By August 1993, Babangida had been swept away by protests and strikes led by the working class, but they did not go far enough¹⁴. He was replaced by an interim government. The Nigerian Labour Congress reacted by issuing a 72 hour ultimatum¹⁵, and thereafter commenced a general strike, that could perhaps be best described as a two-edged sword; for while it led to the collapse of that government, it ushered in the most dictatorial and corrupt military regimes in the history of Nigeria. Two days into the general strike, in November 1993, General Sani Abacha, promising an eventual return to democracy, seized power from the previous military administration. The general strike was called off after fuel increases were reduced from 700 to 400 percent.¹⁶ The subsequent Abacha regime was the seventh military administration since the country’s independence from Britain in 1960.¹⁷

In early July of the following year, the Nigerian Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) and Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) “began one of the most bitter and economically painful strikes in Nigerian history”¹⁸ to protest the annulled presidential elections. One month later, in August 1994, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) called a general strike in solidarity with the oil workers. Two weeks later, the crackdown finally began: the Abacha government responded to the workers’ strike by sacking the Executive Council of NUPENG and PENGASSAN, and NLC and appointed military administrators to run the unions. The military seized the unions' offices,

¹² Leo Zeilig, editor (2002) *Class Struggle and Resistance in Africa*, (New Clarion Press) (page 84)

¹³ Katherine Isaac (1995) *Nigeria - A strike for Democracy*

www.multinationalmonitor.org/hyper/issues/1995/06/mm0695_09.html

¹⁴ Leo Zeilig (2002)

¹⁵ Guardian, Saturday, 13 November 1993:1

¹⁶ Leo Zeilig (2002)

¹⁷ Kenneth Chukwuemeka Nwoko (2009) *Trade unionism and governance in Nigeria:*

A paradigm shift from labour activism to political opposition, Information, Society and Justice, Volume 2 No. 2, June: pp 139-152 (page 147)

¹⁸ Leo Zeilig (page 87)

bank accounts and dues-collection facilities. In early September, 1994, the oil workers eventually called off their strike.

Primarily as a result of these strikes, 1994 saw by far the highest number of strike days for any year since 1970. However, since the end of military rule in 1999 there has been the highest sustained strike wave in the last 45 years with an average of well over five million strike days and the lowest annual figure of 2.7 million¹⁹.

Table 1: Average number of strike days per year

Years	Strike days – thousands
1970-1974	106
1975-1979	700
1980-1984	3,000
1985-1989	300
1990-1994	48,000
1995-1999	1,200
2000-2004	4,700
2005-2007	6,000
2008 - 2010	4,854
2011 -2013	6,707

Mass strikes since 1999

Like many countries in Africa, especially South Africa, there has been a mass strike wave in Nigeria for the last decade or so²⁰. There are perhaps seven million trade union members in Nigeria out of a total population of around 180 million²¹, but when they take action, the majority of poor Nigerians actively supports them (see interview with Sam Ajufoh below). Unions played an active role in the campaign against military governments

¹⁹ Strike figures are taken from:

1970 to 2003:

Richard Ingwe, Julius A Ada and Rose A Adalikwu (2013) Industrial Relations Under Various Administrations in Nigeria: a political-temporal analysis of trade disputes, work stoppages and human work-day losses (1970-2004), *Annales*, University Marie Curie, Skłodowska, Lublin, Poland, vol 47.2

2004-2007:

CBN Annual Report & Statement of Accounts for the Year Ended 31st December, 2007 (Source: National Bureau of Statistics)

2008-2013

Bulletin of Labour Statistics, Federal Ministry of Labour & Productivity (annual)

²⁰ Baba Aye (2012) *Era of Crises & Revolts: Perspectives for Workers and Youths*, Abuja

²¹ Websites of the Nigerian Labour Congress and the Trades Union Congress - <http://www.nlcng.org/membership.php>

<http://www.tucng.org/about-us>

and for the return of democracy, eventually achieved in 1999. As a result, the Abacha military government had, for example, banned the two oil unions and the university staff union and, put the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) under a sole administrator in 1994.²² Thus, the trade union movement carries significant political weight, although there is still no widely supported Labour Party in the country²³.

Despite the trade union role in the fight against military governments and the fact that section 40 of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria guarantees “the right of every person to form or belong to any trade union or any other association for the protection of his interest”, recent governments have not been sympathetic to the trade union movement. The Trade Unions Amendment Act (2005)²⁴ provides workers with the ‘freedom’ to join (or not to join) any trade union, but denies them the right to strike over socio-economic and political policies. In addition, strikes can be banned in ‘essential services’ and the law requires a secret ballot to be held by trade union representatives before a strike may take place legally.²⁵ As such, this law attempts to emasculate the trade unions in the same way that Thatcher managed in Britain in the 1980s. However, the militancy and the vibrancy of the trade union movement in Nigeria has meant that these reforms have not been successful in Nigeria. In addition, Nigerian presidents and governors of states regularly display their respect for the trade union movement by addressing the national and state May-day rallies of the trade union movement. However, trade unions have led an active struggle against governments, with ten general strikes since 2000:

- 2000, June – five day general strike reduces 50% fuel price increase to 10%
- 2002, January - labour leaders end a two-day general strike after they were arrested
- 2003, June/July - eight days, the longest general strike since 1964 against an increase in fuel prices, called off just before the US President visited the country

²² Baba Aye (2012) *Era of Crises & Revolts: Perspectives for Workers and Youths*, Abuja

This is not unusual in recent Nigerian history, (General Babangida did the same in 1988, then resigned five years later under the heat of a NLC-led general strike).

²³ Baba Aye (2012) *Era of Crises & Revolts: Perspectives for Workers and Youths*, Abuja

²⁴ Trade Unions Act, CAP T14, *Laws of the Federation of Nigeria*, 2010.

²⁵ Peter B. Abu (2007) *An Appraisal Of The Trade Union Amendment Acts Of 2005 In Relation To The Current Labour-Management Relations In Nigeria*, “International Journal of African & African American Studies”, Vol. VI, No. 1, Jan 2007.

- 2003, October – partial general strike called off as it was starting
- 2004, June - three-day general strike against rising oil prices
- 2004, October - four day ‘warning strike’ over fuel price increases
- 2007, June – four-day strike wins most of its demands. Stops a 15 percent fuel price increase and a doubling of the VAT rate to 10 percent. Stops, as well, the privatization of two oil refineries and wins a 15 percent pay increase for civil servants²⁶
- 2010, November – one day strike to increase the minimum wage from 7,500 naira to the current 18,000 naira a month
- 2012, January – eight-day general strike over a threat to increase the fuel price by nearly 120 percent, resulted in fuel price increase of less than 50 percent
- 2016, May – four-day general strike over the increase in the official fuel price.

Apart from the demand for an increased minimum wage, the main issue of these general strikes was the repeated attempts by the government to reduce or eliminate the fuel subsidy and so increase the price of fuel. The oil fuel subsidy – which some people now argue has ceased to exist – is one of the few benefits that the common people gain from Nigeria’s oil reserves. Most people, at least in the urban areas benefit from the reduced price of cooking and transport costs. The subsidy is the only visible form of state support for the poor in Nigeria. However, the oil price increased by 10–91 percent per annum since 1992. In 2012, it was more than four times higher than in the beginning of the century.²⁷ The January 2012 insurrection was the high point of recent working class struggles. Over the course of eight days, the general strike developed into the largest social movement in Nigeria’s history²⁸.

²⁶ For more details, see: <http://www.pambazuka.net/en/category/comment/42507>.

²⁷ Adapted from : <http://www.nairaland.com/845722/history-fuel-price-increases-nigeria>.

²⁸ Baba Aye (2012) *Era of Crises & Revolts: Perspectives for Workers and Youths*, Abuja

Millions struck and mass protests were held in every major urban centre, from Lagos in the south, to Kano in the north.

Banners reading “Occupy Nigeria” identified the struggle as part of an international movement in opposition to economic deprivation and social inequality. This following interview provides some background to the protests in one of the six major industrial centres in Nigeria.

Strike and insurrection in Benin City, January 2012

Interview with Sam Ajufoh (SA)²⁹, by Drew Povey (DP), 15th September 2014, Benin City.

DP: Who were the people who actively supported the demonstrations?

SA: There were thousands of people every day. People who came out on the protests were trade union members, youths, market women. There were also civil society actors and activists, members of the Traders Association of New Benin and Okada, the motorbike taxi riders, who came out in their hundreds.

DP: But most people stayed at home?

SA: Not really, there were times when some joined briefly. So, for instance when we were marching along a particular road, people on that road would tend to come out and join, then the numbers would be countless, covering the whole road. But by the time we moved out of their neighbourhood, they tended to go back. There were days when the crowd was indeed massive. One day, the entire Ring Road was filled up, perhaps close to ten thousand people. But that was just one of those very rare moments. Don't forget that there is a very huge informal sector. There are people who must try to sell something everyday in order to feed themselves and their families. So those people, protest or no protest, if they do not find a way to sell something they will almost starve to death. So these people always came

²⁹ SA is a local socialist and one of the leaders of the January 2012 in Benin City, one of the largest cities in Nigeria.

out, either very early in the morning or late in the evening after the protests to try to sell something.

DP: What about the left? Were they able to intervene successfully?

SA: The left was part of the *Coalition to Save Nigeria*. Our work was to see that things went peacefully. We were also to ensure that labour and the NLC/TUC played its role as the vanguard of the movement. The left's role was to meet with and encourage labour to play its leadership role, which it did very well. Left groups also tried to share leaflets here [in Benin City], but there was no conscious or deliberate effort to use the opportunity to identify and raise new cadres. That did not happen until towards the end of the protests when we tried to make efforts to do that. It was only when we were entering the second week, that we started thinking of the need to have some permanent gains. For the left in Nigeria, in Edo State, our primary focus was labour. So we tried to make interactions with labour and to hold lectures. But for the first three or four days, there were no such efforts to the best of my knowledge.

DP: So what happened, what went wrong with the protests?

SA: What happened that led to the end of the strike was that, unfortunately, labour leaders, the NLC/TUC called off the strike abruptly, without due recourse to the coalition and without seeking the views of the other members of the coalition at the national level. They just called off the strike.

DP: And that was accepted?

SA: When that announcement was made by the NLC, the majority of Nigerians felt betrayed. There were a few over zealous young people who wanted to continue the protests, but they could not, because that betrayal simply took the steam out of the engine. People did not feel that they could do any more.

DP: So what do you think are the lessons from these protests for the next time that they are organised?

SA: A major outcome of the protests is that people have been much more ready to protest. They now see that, somehow, they can gain a measure of success if they protest. This is because the protest showed the collective power of the people. Initially the President said he was not going to go back, it was final. He threatened that nothing would make him reverse the price. Then eventually he reversed it to 97 naira. If the protests had held on for another day or two, he would have reversed it much further. That is also one of the major lessons learnt – the people still have the power. It is just that co-ordinating and organising them is not easy. That is why it is important for there to be regular interactions between civil society and labour. Another lesson is that we should not allow the labour leadership to decide again on behalf of the people involved in the protests. We have to find a way to ensure that it is the true representatives of the protestors that decide on their behalf. Without the support of the masses, the NLC and TUC will not have the formidable resistance that makes government listen to them. So we hope that, in the future, that alternative structures and processes will be there and will be credible and formidable enough to negotiate directly on behalf of the people. Once that is created, greater victories will be won.

Public sector strikes

One major problem workers face in the public sector is that governments regularly do not honour the agreements they make with trade unions to end strikes. As a result, workers have to go on strike again and again for the same set of demands to be implemented. This is particularly the case in the health and education sectors. For example, a five-month strike by lecturers in public universities was called off in mid-December 2013 after their union, ASUU, had received proof that the government had deposited a significant amount of the \$800 million into a fund at the central bank³⁰. This strike was considered necessary, as the government had only implemented two of the nine issues agreed with the union since 2009. According to the National President of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nasir Issa-

³⁰ Media Nigeria (2015) *ASUU Condemned FG Over Failure To Release N1.3Trillion*, March 23

Fagee, an earlier strike had been suspended in early February 2012, “on the understanding that the Memorandum [...] that we signed with the government would be fully implemented within the shortest possible time”³¹. ASUU has raised the alarm over the Federal Government’s failure to release the promised funds meant for the revitalisation of the nation’s universities. The Chair of the University of Ibadan chapter of the union, Prof. Segun Ajiboye, said in March 2015 that only the first tranche of N200billion was released in 2013 before the last national strike was suspended. Since then, “no money was released in 2014 while a quarter of 2015 has passed with nothing from the government.” He added that the lack of integrity on the part of the government and its officials led to the 19 strikes which the union had embarked upon between 1992 and 2013³².

³¹ Channels Television (2013) *ASUU President Explain Reasons For Strike*, July 3

³² Punch (2015) *ASUU condemns FG's failure to release N1.3tr*, March 23
<http://www.punchng.com/news/asuu-condemns-fgs-failure-to-release-n1-3tr>.

Strikes of health workers, Summer 2014

Interview with Dr Osahon Enabulele (OE), former President of the Nigerian Medical Association, undertaken by Drew Povey (DP), 18th August 2014, Benin City, Nigeria.

DP: All the doctors in the public sector of Nigeria have been on all out indefinite strike since 1st July 2014, a total of eight weeks. Could you please give some background to the strike?

OE: The whole thing has to do with built up distrust between the doctors and the government. There were agreements that that were never implemented. Way back in January there were some agreements that should have taken effect. Six months down the line the doctors were saying: “Hey, you have not implemented these agreements, so why do we have to trust you?” So what is the guarantee that if we do not stick to our guns and ensure that there is some practical realisation of our demands that the government will not go back and do a different thing. So the doctors are asking the government to make more commitment. Once that is done, they will not think twice about going back to work.

DP: What are the main reasons for the strike and the doctors’ key demands?

OE: Our key demands centre on two areas, justice in terms of our salaries and clinical governance. For some time, the doctors had a problem with their pay and compensation mechanism. For every promotion the doctor gained, their overall income actually dropped. That was strange to them. For years, the doctors were fighting to correct this anomaly. I, as President of the Nigerian Medical Association, moved to try and get the government to correct this injustice. We told them that if they were able to do that, as promised, we were ready to forgo the arrears amounting to many billions of Naira. Up to now, the Government has not implemented this agreement. There are also core clinical governance issues which border on the relationship between the doctors, the other health workers and the patients. That has to do with the issue of whether or not the clinical directors in hospitals should be medical doctors or not.

DP: It seems to me that around two weeks ago the government

were close to agreeing to the doctors demands. And then suddenly they issued a notice to sack 16,000 resident doctors, more than half the doctors working in Nigeria.

OE: Let me let my comments be known on the sacking of the 16,000 resident doctors. This was an unwise and unproductive decision taken by a government that claims to be driving democracy. It shows that our leaders do not learn from history. These strong-arm tactics have been used before. In 1985, the military regime tried by sacking doctors and removing them from their accommodation and proscribing the Nigerian Medical Association and the National Association of Resident Doctors. But it never worked, if anything it had a negative effect on the healthcare system. Today we have not recovered from the loss of skilled medical staff to other countries. That is what started the mass exodus of doctors to other countries. All the democratic avenues were still available to the government to explore, but they chose to rush to extreme positions and strong-arm tactics. But fortunately for them we have a reserved association and I do not see any way that the doctors will buckle – it has even fired their passion to ensure that what was left outstanding will be completely fulfilled by the government. It also happened in 2012, when I was President of the Nigerian Medical Association, where the Governor of Lagos State sacked 774 medical doctors from the health service. Of course, we got him to reverse his position. The current [2014] Federal President, Goodluck Jonathan, was one of those who solidarised with us. He said that it was wrong for a government to have done that, recognising the dearth of medical staff in the country and in Lagos State in particular. So I was surprised that the same person, within two years, was now adopting the same agenda. I feel extremely disappointed and I feel let down. I honestly look forward to the President reversing his decision, calling back the doctors to work, understanding their point of view.

DP: The doctors have been on strike for eight weeks now. In this situation, is it not possible to get support from other health workers or the wider trade union movement?

OE: Essentially all public sector doctors are on strike, only the private sector medical practitioners are excluded for now, but, of course, it may come to a situation where those in the private sector environment may solidarize with the public sector doctors. That is why we are expecting the government to do the needful on time. With respect to solidarity within the healthcare sector, that is one sad sore point. As President of the Nigerian Medical Association in 2013, I called the first ever national summit of all healthcare workers. We began to re-build the confidence amongst health sector workers. But after the summit some of them went back to their trenches and it has been very difficult to bridge the gap and come to the table with some level of clarity of mind to re-stabilise the relationships.

DP: There are 70,000 doctors registered in Nigeria and less than 30,000 are actually working in the country. If the doctors do not win your strike then more doctors will leave Nigeria.

OE: Absolutely and in fact, they are already leaving.

DP: The World Health Organisation says that public health services require at least €35 per person, but in Nigeria the annual health budget is less than €8.50 per person. In Lagos, there was one original case of Ebola that was contracted by ten other people. Doesn't this suggest that this patient was not well managed?

OE: For me this a very sad tale in terms of public health system management. Here was a condition that announced itself in other West African countries. For me as a medical practitioner, I have been talking about Ebola since last year, trying to raise public awareness. But we had no similar efforts by the Government. It only started to take action when the first case entered the country. So the question is why weren't we more proactive? It was even a coincidence that the first case was discovered. It shows how disorganised and dislocated our public services are. Ebola has actually been around since 1976, so the healthcare systems across West Africa should have been undertaking planned research on how to treat and prevent the disease. But the lack of resources

devoted to health care mean that such forward planning has not been possible.

We have to ensure that our strike is victorious, as the first step to ensuring that the public healthcare systems are adequately funded to avoid other such disasters in the future.

Altogether, during the last two decades, strikes in public services became an important feature of the Nigerian landscape of social conflicts. There was for example a major national teachers strike in July 2008 that secured promises of a nearly 30 percent pay increase for all teachers in public schools³³. Three years later, the teachers were again on strike for six weeks over the failure of the government to implement the new salary scale. The implementation of this agreement, and the national minimum wage of N18,000, has rumbled on across the different states since May 2010 and was part of the background to the five day general strike in Benue State in August 2014. Additionally, there were strikes in universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education during most of 2013. In 2014 many universities attempted to significantly increase their fees, but the students fought back, with a resounding victory at Lagos State University where the State Government abandoned the astronomical increase in school fees that had been imposed in the last three or four years³⁴. In recent years, there have also been several strikes in the health sector, both locally and nationally, with a two-month strike by public sector doctors in mid-2014 and a three-month strike by health workers ending in early 2015³⁵. Unfortunately, disunity between the doctors and other health workers means that these strikes were not necessarily successful and public health funding remains abysmally low in Nigeria by international standards.

Unfortunately, soon after this interview was held, the doctors called off their strike without clearly winning their demands. From December 2014 the joint health worker trade unions held a two month strike that ended with agreement from the Government to implement the May 2012 Collective

³³ Socialist Bulletin (2008) September, Lagos

³⁴ Socialist Worker (2014) June/July, Abuja

³⁵ Socialist Worker (2014) June/July, Abuja and Socialist Worker (2015) March/April, Abuja

Agreement (there had previously been two strikes in 2013 over the same issue).

While health and education are the two most important sectors of strike activity, other public sector workers have recently started to take part in the strike movement as well. For example, judiciary workers in each of the 36 states were on strike in July 2014 and again from the beginning of January 2015. Like in the case of the medical staff, this struggle has political implications. It was over the independence of the judiciary and the implementation of the 1999 Constitution that requires the judiciary to receive its funding direct from the Federation Account (where all the oil money should be collected).³⁶

Although the constitution of Nigeria provides for an independent judiciary, the judicial branch is susceptible to executive pressure, particularly at the state and local levels. There have been numerous calls for a more independent judiciary over the years, both from the judiciary itself and from outside. In 2009, some prominent Supreme Court judges called for a more independent judiciary³⁷. In January 2014, the Federal High Court ordered the Accountant General of the Federation to deduct monies intended for the judiciary from the Federation Account and to pay such sums to the National Judicial Council for onward transmission to the Chief Judge in each state. Since then, judiciary workers at the Federal and state levels have been struggling for this judgement to be implemented.

Justice Adeniyi Ademola described the disbursement of funds for the judiciary by the executive as unconstitutional and a threat to the independence of the judiciary³⁸. He said the provisions of sections 81(3), 121(3) and 162(9) of the Federal Constitution of Nigeria were clear and straightforward and should therefore be complied with. According to the Judge, the judiciary should no longer have to beg the executive for funds. The Judge noted that both the National Assembly and the Independent National Electoral Commission enjoyed independence of funding and that

³⁶ Andy Wynne (2015) Nigerian judiciary workers fighting for good governance <http://pfmboard.com/index.php?topic=7532.msg22534#msg22534>.

³⁷ Ibrahim Abdullahi (2014) "Independence of the Judiciary In Nigeria: A Myth Or Reality?" *International Journal of Public Administration and Management Research*, Vol. 2, No 3, August

³⁸ (2014) "Ending Unjustice in the Justice Sector", *This Day*, 14 January

the same should apply to the judiciary in accordance with the constitution. The National President of the Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria (JUSUN), Marwan Mustapha Adamu said: “Remember that this judgment was delivered in January 2014, since then, government has engaged us in discussion about 20 times.”³⁹ Marwan lamented that despite the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which was signed to ensure the suspension of the judiciary workers strike in July 2014, the Accountants General of the states are insisting that they cannot meet the union’s demands, due to declining oil revenues. “So what is difficult, when the figure is there for everybody to see how much is budgeted,” Marwan queried⁴⁰. He alleged that since the MoU was signed the union has not been invited to any meeting to discuss how to implement the court order.

The judiciary workers and their union, JUSUN, finally lost patience and re-commenced their strike from the beginning of 2015. The Federal Government has since then agreed with JUSUN, as have around a third of the 36 states. However, the strike continued in the other states that declined to adopt the constitutional good governance demanded by the trade union. In Edo State, for example, the workers held a protest in mid-March 2015 and marched through the centre of Benin City to demonstrate their determination to continue their strike. The previous day the local JUSUN president, Uyi Ogieriakhi had met with the Governor of the state. However, the Governor had expressed his opposition to the strike and his determination not to provide greater independence for the state judiciary. In the time of writing this chapter, the judiciary workers are equally determined to continue their fight for good governance and independence of the courts. In an interview⁴¹, Uyi said that their demands were “sacrosanct in terms of good governance.” At their rally in March 2015, he said the strike would continue, even for two years, and was loudly cheered by his members. However, the State Governors held out and the workers eventually went back to work in all the states, although the dispute has re-ignited in some states.

³⁹ Wynne, A (2015) “Nigerian Judiciary Workers and the Pursuit of Good Governance”, 14 June <http://cppeblog.org/category/legal-theory/>

⁴⁰ op cit

⁴¹ op cit

Strikes against non-payment of wages and salaries

A major source of workers' resistance activities at the present time, particularly since 2014, is the general non-payment of wages and salaries across the states of the Federation. The major excuse given by governments at all levels, is the collapse in the price of crude oil in the international market. Since governments in Nigeria rely mainly on revenue from the sale of crude oil, not only for capital projects but also for recurrent expenditure, including payment of workers' remuneration, the sharp drop in the demand for Nigeria's crude has meant economic uncertainty, and governments tend to shift the burden of the economic crisis on the working class.

For example, in the second week of March 2015, workers and pensioners in Osun, Ogun and Oyo States trooped to the streets to protest non-payment of salaries for between two and five months.⁴² Apart from non-payment of salaries, deductions for pension, cooperative societies and trade union dues are not being remitted. In Osun State, the State government tends to make use of some leaders of the Osun State Chapter of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) to undermine independent unionism by workers belonging to the Osun State Chapter of the Trade Union Congress (TUC), which has been championing the cause of workers for regular payment of salaries. The State government in Osun State has also been victimizing workers by issuing queries to selected key leaders who are leading protests against non-payment of salaries. It must be stressed that what is happening in the three states specifically mentioned is merely symptomatic of the trend elsewhere. In May 2015, just before the new government took power, the NLC announced strikes in 18 of the 36 states over non-payment of salaries⁴³. Most of these disputes were settled within a couple of months as the Federal Government provided additional funds and arranged to back loans to the states concerned to enable them to pay the arrears of their workers' salaries. But the issue of arrears of unpaid pension and salaries remains in several states despite the bail out provided by the Federal Government. For example, lecturers in the Oyo State owned Polytechnic, Ibadan, resumed strike action in late July 2015⁴⁴.

⁴² See for example <http://dailytimes.com.ng/ogun-osun-workers-protest-non-payment-of-salaries/> and <http://www.punchng.com/news/osun-workers-protest-non-payment-of-five-months-salaries/>.

⁴³ Daily Independent (2015) *Nigeria: Workers in 18 States Begin Strike Monday Over Unpaid Salaries, Pensions*, 22 May, Lagos

⁴⁴ Ayoola Ponnile (2015) "Higher institutions' workers in Oyo State begin indefinite strike over salary", *World Stage*, July 22

Another feature of recent industrial disputes is the question of payment during labor disputes. Like many other workers across sub-Saharan Africa, Nigerian workers are still paid when they go on strike. The workers are not usually paid when they are actually on strike (as was the case with the recent judiciary workers strike, for example). However, the return to work agreement usually includes a clause against any victimisation, which is generally interpreted to mean that the workers will be paid for the duration of the strike. However, there are general moves to overturn this position. So, in Edo State the position of the current judiciary workers strike is being watched with interest as they have yet to be paid for their strike in July 2014⁴⁵. This is particularly significant as the former leader of the NLC, Oshiomhole, is the current Governor of the state.

In March 2015, the doctors in public hospitals in Lagos were on strike as a result of not receiving their salaries for the period of the strike that they held last year. Their Chair, Dr Biyi Kufo said that “so many other groups have gone on strike. Academic Staff Union of Universities have gone on strike for seven months and they were paid; polytechnics went on strike for four months; the magistrates went for more than one month; the judicial workers went at least for two months. And they were all paid.”⁴⁶ The strike was suspended after ten days following the support of the local parliament.⁴⁷ Doctors at the main teaching hospital in Lagos were on strike again in early July 2015.

Resistance to casual employment

Like many other countries in the region and around the world, casual employment has become endemic under the conditions of neoliberal politics. Under the conditions of mass unemployment, and especially unemployment of young people, this problem is sharpened. Since 2012, the Federal Public Works and Women/Youth Employment Initiatives (funded by SURE-P) have provided jobs for around 120,000 young people. The major problem is

⁴⁵ Wynne, A (2015) “Nigerian Judiciary Workers and the Pursuit of Good Governance”, 14 June <http://cppeblog.org/category/legal-theory/>

⁴⁶ Wole Oyeade (2015) *Crisis Deepens’ As Lagos Doctors Strike Enters Day Six*, Guardian (Nigeria) March 21.

⁴⁷ In May 2012, Lagos State Government had previously sacked 788 doctors for taking part in a three-day warning strike in the previous month. They were reinstated the following month. Christian Chizindu (2014) *The Extent of the Right to Strike in Nigerian Labour Law*, From the Selected Works of Christian Chizindu - http://works.bepress.com/christian_wigwe.

that these are temporary jobs and not paid as well as official civil service posts⁴⁸. Similarly, in Edo State, as in many other states, there was a Youth Employment Scheme (YES). Up to six thousand people have been employed on temporary contracts over the last six years in Edo State. This scheme was suddenly scrapped by Edo State Government in early 2015.⁴⁹ As well as the insecurity of not having permanent jobs, these staff are paid significantly below the civil service rates, too. For example, graduates receive N 30,000 a month rather than more than N40,000 they should receive as civil servants. This includes a wide range of staff including, teachers, office workers, bus workers, street sweepers and staff of the Information Communication Technology Agency. The additional problem is that the casual workers are not allowed to join the civil service trade unions. Several hundred of them have applied to join AUPCTRE (the trade union for state owned industries). However, this was blocked by Edo State Government and the union said that it would not officially act until at least 1,000 staff apply to join the union.

As a result, these workers have taken their fate into their own hands and have organised a series of meetings and protests⁵⁰. This has won some significant gains for some groups of workers. For example, workers in the Board of Internal Revenue have had their posts regularised and the recent recruitment scheme for teachers was re-arranged to ensure that YES teachers with several years of experience had a better chance of gaining proper teaching posts.⁵¹

With the creation of public agencies and youth employment schemes, many workers are, as mentioned, not allowed to join existing unions as these are restricted to official permanent civil servants. That increases the problem of disunity across many unions, at least in the public sector where there are two unions, one for 'senior' officials and another for other workers. It is a trend reflected by the main two union centres, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) for senior staff. Furthermore,

⁴⁸ Author's discussion with Victor, President of the Edo State YES Workers Association

⁴⁹ op cit

⁵⁰ op cit

⁵¹ There have also been moves against casualisation in the private sector. The NLC and other trade unions have organised picketing of some organisation involved in such activities.

disunity is clear at the national leadership level of the NLC where a formal split appeared during 2015. Ayuba Wabba, the National President of the Medical and Health Workers Union of Nigeria (MHWUN), was elected national president of NLC in elections that were held in mid-March 2015 after the earlier congress dissolved in uproar.⁵² However, his opponent was ‘elected’ president of NLC in further elections in Lagos the following week. It was speculated that the NLC would split into two bodies, but the leaders came together again later in the year.

The government is encouraging this disunity by attempting to decentralise collective bargaining with the trade unions. For example, in 2008, the government insisted that ASUU should negotiate with the state governments over their members in state universities.⁵³ More recently there have been moves in the national assembly for the national minimum wage to be devolved to the state governments and several of the state governors have claimed they cannot afford to pay the existing minimum wage.

Conclusions

Despite these magnificent working class struggles, the left in Nigeria is currently rather weak and for most people it effectively does not exist. This is in sharp contrast to the position in 1987 when the Political Bureau set up by the Babangida military regime reported that the majority of Nigerians declared a preference for socialism. The impact of the collapse of the significant presence and influence of socialist and radical forces within the trade unions, on the campuses and in partisan politics has been quite dire across the country.⁵⁴

There are now three or four small socialist groups with perhaps as many as a few hundred members each, the Democratic Socialist Movement (associated with the Socialist Party in Britain), the Socialist Workers League (associated with the British SWP), Committee for Workers Alternative (CWA) (associated with the late Ted Grant’s group in Britain) and the Socialist

⁵² Bimbola Oyesola (2015) *NLC disintegrates as 2 presidents emerge*, Sun, 23 March.

⁵³ Marcellus Ikeanyibe Okey and Anthony O. Onyishi (2011) Global Determinants and Contexts of Contemporary Industrial Relations Policy in Nigeria, “Labour and Management in Development Journal”.

⁵⁴ Baba Aye (2015) *War and elections in Nigeria*

<http://socialistworker.org/2015/03/26/war-and-elections-nigeria>.

Party of Nigeria (including such stalwarts of the Nigerian left as Eddie Madunagu and the late Festus Iyayi and Eskor Toyo). These small socialist groupings work in the coalition pressure group called the Joint Action Front (JAF), which has been active in campaigning around wider working class issues.

With a population of around 180 million, socialism does not appear as an immediate realistic alternative for most of the people of Nigeria. As a result, especially in the southern half of the country, churches, both traditional and revivalist, have a huge following, providing hope for many in the next life, if not for this. Similarly, in the north, Islam remains very strong and Boko Haram insurgents claim their goal is to Islamise Nigeria. Boko Haram showed that it could defeat the national army and controlled several medium sized towns for several months in late 2014 and early 2015. Especially with the action of the Chadian army, working in support of the Nigerian army, most of these towns were re-captured later in 2015. However, the sectarian attitude and widespread killings of both Christians and Muslims mean that many who would support a radical alternative to the corrupt regimes in Abuja are repelled by Boko Haram.

Especially across the middle belt of Nigeria, the widespread poverty means that significant numbers of people are turning to ethnicity and other disputes. Christians may be pitted against Muslims; pastoralist against cultivators; or so-called indigenes against new comers. All this shows the alternative forms of the barbarism of capitalism and the fate of the mass of miserably poor people when socialists are not able to provide a credible alternative leadership. However, in the few cases where socialists have been able to organise properly, with regular meetings and the production of regular publications they have shown that it is possible to attract significant followings. This can allow them to take leadership positions in working class struggles and begin to build a real socialist alternative.

However, despite this, and the repeated sell-outs by the top trade union leadership, the trade union movement has not suffered any major defeats, maintained a significant rear guard action against the reduction in the fuel subsidy and defeated a general move to the principle of 'no-work, no-pay'. As a result, in most cases, Nigerian workers (like many other workers across sub-Saharan Africa) are still paid when they go on strike. The strike wave of

the last 15 years continues and the trade unions remain a major force to be reckoned with.

In March 2015 Muhammadu Buhari was elected on a social democratic program of anti-corruption and using the funds saved for greater spending on education, health and a social wage for the 25 million poorest Nigerians. However, he does not appear to be delivering on his promises. His first budget actually provides for a reduction in spending on education and an eight per cent reduction in the government's personnel budget (when civil servants have not had a pay increase for five years)⁵⁵. In addition, the fuel subsidy has quietly been abolished.

This did not lead to an immediate increase in the price of petrol or diesel and so transport costs have not increased, but the official price of kerosene (used for cooking by many poor families) did increase by two thirds. The government has not reacted to the argument from several state governors that far from the minimum wage being increased (due in 2015) they cannot afford the current rate. In addition, there have been a series of sackings in several states, especially in Imo State where at least 3,000 job losses were announced in January 2016.⁵⁶

President Buhari has also ordered action “to halt frequent strikes in vital sectors of the Nigerian economy” and to end “the recurring strikes in the health, education, transport, oil and gas, power and other critical sectors of the national economy.”⁵⁷ Beyond the violence of the army in the fight against Boko Haram in the North East of Nigeria, soldiers also killed several hundred members of a Shiite group in Zaria in December 2015⁵⁸ and security forces killed at least a dozen supporters of the breakaway Biafra movement in two events in Onitsha in the South of the country.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Drew Povey (2015) “2016 Budget – what promises for working class-people?” Abuja: *Socialist Workers League* website: <http://socialistworkersleague.org/2015/12/2016-budget-what-promises-for-working-class-people/>

⁵⁶ Victor Ahiuma-Young (2016) “3,000 sacked workers: NLC unfolds strategies to tackle Imo govt”, *Vanguard*, 28 January, Abuja

⁵⁷ Our Reporter (2015) “Buhari moves to end frequent strikes”, 2 September, Canada: Gatewaymail

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch (2015) “Nigeria: Army Attack on Shia Unjustified”, *Human Rights Watch* website: www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/22/nigeria-army-attack-shia-unjustified

⁵⁹ Chidi Nkwopara, Ikechukwu Nnochiri, Chimaobi Nwaiwu, Francis Igata & Ugochukwu Alaribe (2015) “5 killed, 7 injured as IPOB, MASSOB clash with JTF in Onitsha”, 18 December, Abuja: *Vanguard*

The mass poverty, inequality and revulsion against the widespread corruption, coupled with the continued strike wave, should provide fertile ground for the re-growth of socialist organisations. However, the same poverty and corruption, in the sense of the main political parties paying their supporters to attend rallies and other meetings, makes this more difficult to achieve. There is a Labour Party in Nigeria with some support from the trade unions, but this has been largely hijacked by corrupt and careerist politicians.

In addition, the continued global dominance of neoliberal ideas, including the arguments around the need for austerity, continue to echo around Nigeria. The electoral success of socialist parties, including Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, the election of Jeremy Corbyn as the leader of the Labour Party in Britain and the relative success of Bernie Sanders in the US Democratic primaries may change the global hostility to socialist ideas.

Although the organised left within the trade union leadership in Nigeria is still small, some officials are still sympathetic to socialist ideas. This is shown by the few trade unions that have started to take out subscriptions to *Socialist Worker*, the newspaper of the Socialist Workers League which now has a small national circulation. This suggests that with patience and dedication an organised socialist left can be re-built in Nigeria. This, together with the success of the Economic Freedom Fighters and the possible formation of a socialist party by the largest trade union in South Africa, NUMSA, could see the significant growth of organised anti-capitalist and socialist organisations across the continent.