



Unity and Solidarity -  
how we can win strikes


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# Unity and Solidarity - how we can win strikes?

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# 1. Upcoming Workers Struggles



The Nigerian working class is facing a series of critical struggles in 2023. Society is in crisis. The ruling class is attempting to impose higher fuel (PMS) prices, higher inflation, unemployment rates, taxes, school fees, and electric tariffs.

The Government is continuing to strive to impose its “No work No pay” policy and postpone any increase in the minimum wage. The working class and the labour movement will be forced to struggle against these regressive policies in order to survive.

## **The Present Crisis**

World economic growth is expected to slow down in 2023. The World Bank, for example, has reduced its projection down from 1.7% growth to 1.62%. As a result, the Nigeria OPEC quota is likely to be reduced. The 2023 Federal budget is based on a bench mark oil price of \$70/ bbl and daily oil production of 1.69 million barrels. The projected budget deficit is more than N10 trillion. This may rise if the oil price and production reduce further.

Nigeria might enter a stagflation debt crisis. The ruling class will attempt to raise government revenue by increasing fuel prices, income taxes, school fees and electric tariffs. They will not want to increase the minimum wage any time soon.

## **Fuel (PMS) price increase**

There is no fuel subsidy. What we had was a subsidy of corruption. The ruling class wants to shift the burden of paying for this corruption from the government to the working class.

All the major presidential candidates (not including Sowore) promised to increase PMS prices (remove petrol subsidy) immediately they win, without putting the refineries in order.

They have promised to crush all opposition and privatize all publicly owned refineries. A test run for unrestrained petrol price hike was carried out in December 2022. The illegal petrol price hike met with no real resistance from the labour movement. If this policy is allowed to be implemented without



mass resistance the price of petrol may increase to as much as N1,000 a litre by the end of this year. The price in Ghana is now around N800 a litre.

Any fuel subsidy removal must only come after all the refineries are operational and must result in no fuel price increases. We will need massive resistance by the labour movement over the next few months to achieve this goal.

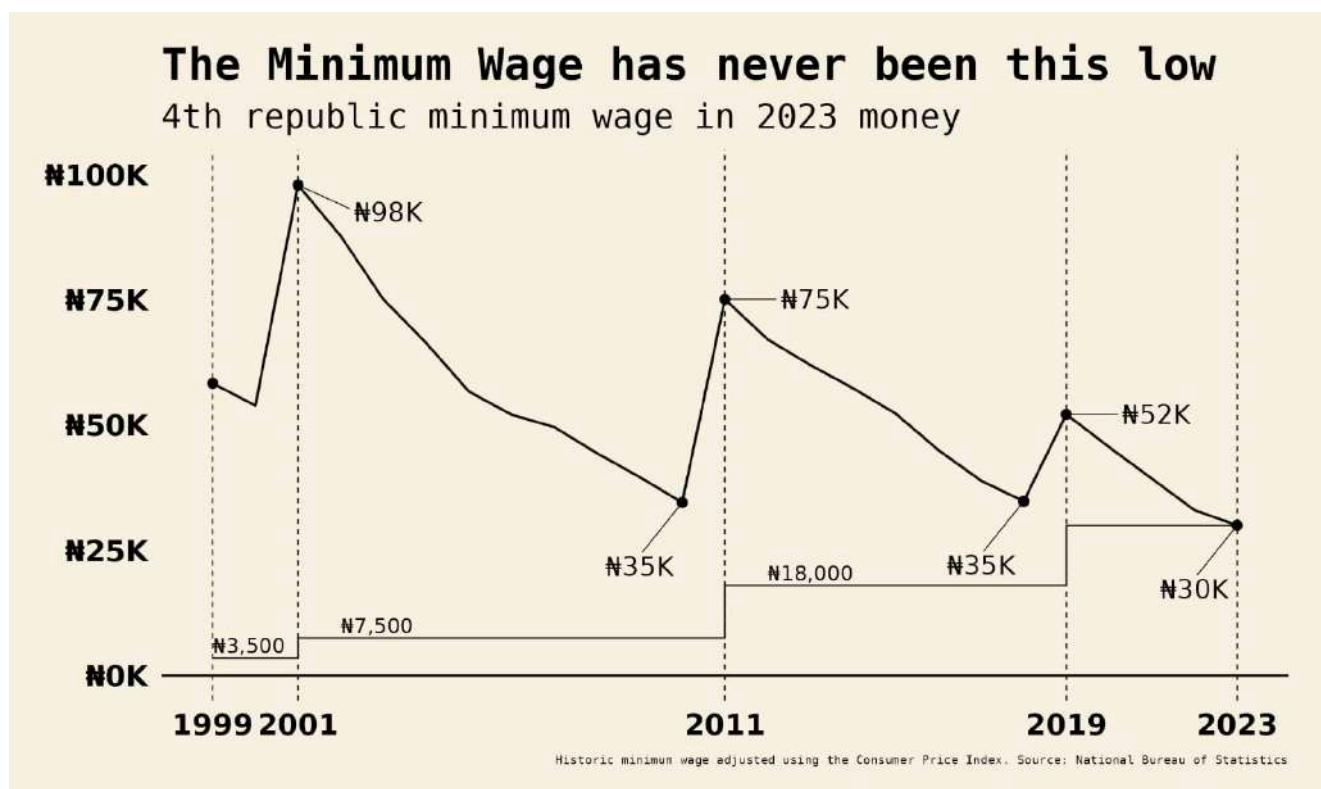
## National Minimum wage

N30,000 a month is not enough to meet the basic subsistence needs of working people. None of the leading presidential candidates has promised to review the national minimum wage. Rather, they have promised to officially introduce hourly wages (currently N187.5/hr).

The introduction of hourly work and wages allows employers to reject health insurance, industrial training, pension and other benefits. Hourly workers become casual labour and non-permanent contract staff.

The minimum wage has only been increased once since 2011 and this has not been fully implemented in some states. The ILO says that the minimum wage should be increased every year as happens in most countries. For more details see this briefing: <https://tinyurl.com/minwageng>

There is a pressing need for struggles to increase the national minimum wage and introduce an embedded cost of living allowance to capture inflationary and currency devaluation.



## **Higher Inflation Rate**

Inflation is currently at least 22%. Inflation for food is higher. The Federal budget is based on a 17% inflation rate. Given the expected poorer economic performance in 2023 and monetary policies of the Central Bank of Nigeria, inflation is likely to rise higher in 2023. In Ghana it is already above 50%. Poverty levels will increase and another 20 million Nigerian may join their fellow 133 million citizens in multi-dimensional poverty. Concrete struggles against inflation and the reduction of the purchasing power of workers will need to be initiated in 2023.

## **Higher Unemployment Rate**

In the face of higher inflationary trends, national demand will reduce, leading to further contraction of the economy and higher unemployment. The current unemployment rate is 33%. Youth unemployment is higher. The unemployed are unwaged workers. Their struggles are working class struggles. The large number of unemployed act as a downward pull on wages. The unemployed can be used as a battery ram against workers struggles by the ruling class if they are not organized. However, the unemployed can be the vanguard of struggles when they are organized. It is therefore in workers interests to struggle against higher unemployment.

## **Increased electricity tariff**

The ruling class plans to privatize electricity transmission and break it up. All the Gencos and Discos resulting from the past privatization exercise failed to improve the electric power situation. The electric power gap (difference between the electric power demand and supply) continues to widen. Only half of families even have access to electricity. Electricity prices have increased hugely since privatisation, but supply has not increased.

The ruling class insists that the IMF privatization strategy is the only way to develop the power sector. The technical nature of transmission makes its break up inefficient. The national transmission grid was not built as independent modules but as a single integrated unit.

Workers will have to resist the planned increase in electric tariffs.

## **Tax the rich!**

Fiscal policies in 2023 will include increased taxes to raise national non-oil generated revenue. The struggle to increase corporate income tax rather than

personal income tax might unfold if the state introduces strict penalties for failure to pay taxes as when due.

Nigeria has one of lowest levels of tax collection in the world. We need to ensure that it is the rich who are taxed more to pay for our public services. Increases in VAT are one of the worst ways of increasing taxation.

### **No work No pay**

Governments expect workers to work with no pay. Salaries are always late and fractional salaries are not uncommon. However, it wishes to impose a “No work No pay” policy on workers. This is directed at restricting the use of strikes as a tactical form of workers struggles.

The struggle against “No Work No Pay” will engulf all workers sooner or later. In the case of the ASUU strike, 8.5 months of work was done last year by academic workers and the state has refused to pay. There is a need for solidarity with ASUU.

The presidential candidates of the main parties have promised higher school fees, student loans and no strikes in the universities and other tertiary institutions. The struggles in the education sector promises to be multi-sectorial involving students, academic workers and non-academic workers.

There are many more struggles that might unfold this year (anti-police brutality, against ethnic nationalism etc). The working class and their trade union federations (NLC and TUCN) must prepare for a year of intensified struggles aimed at defending their interests and sustainable self-development.

## **2. Building Trade Union Unity and Solidarity**



Trade unions may win a few battles, but overall we are losing the class war. The value of the Nigerian economy is now around eight times larger than at the end of the military era. However, almost all the benefits of this growth have been grabbed by the corrupt elite. Most people are now poorer that they

were five, ten and twenty years ago. In dollar terms, the minimum wage was worth \$136 in 1998, now it is not even worth \$50.

The FAAC Committee in December 2022 agreed to distribute N902 billion. This means that the total amount distributed to the Federal and state governments in 2022 was the highest since 2013. The shower of dollars at the APC and PDP presidential primaries showed just how much they have looted.

All the states have plenty of money to pay their pensioners and a decent minimum wage for their workers, but the governors would rather spend the money on capital contracts where they make their 20% or more.

The Guardian newspaper did a survey of salary arrears for public sector teachers in mid-December, 2022. They reported that:

- Imo teachers yet to be paid two and half years
- Delta teachers receive old salary
- Rivers teachers not promoted in seven years
- Ondo teachers drive taxis to survive
- Ekiti owes four months
- Benue State also owes teachers 13 months salaries.

The main reason for the success of this attack on us, the poor majority, is the lack of successful trade union strikes, with unity and solidarity. We need to re-learn that a victory for one is a victory for all and make this a central part of our trade union strategy. Governments are failing to implement their agreements with trade unions or, as indicated above, even paying our proper salaries or pensions. And yet trade unions are still calling off strikes as soon as they are invited to negotiations.

The post-election prospects do not look good unless the NLC/TUC and their member trade unions prepare for action. Crude oil prices have declined over the last six months and so after a record year, oil revenues are likely to fall this year. All the main three contenders for the presidency are saying they will end fuel subsidy in June. Unless the trade unions fight against fuel price increases and for a decent minimum wage poverty, inequality, corruption and resulting insecurity will increase.



### **3. Implementation of “No work – no pay” for ASUU members is an Attack On Us All!!**



The last Government achieved the outrageous implementation of “No Work – No Pay” during the eight month ASUU strike in the universities in 2022. This is the largest group of trade unionists to ever suffer this policy. As such, this is one of the most significant attacks

on our labour movement, at least since the end of the military era.

ASUU members were on strike from 14th February 2022 and suspended their industrial action on 13th October 2022. During this period members of the Union were not paid their wages. They were last paid at the end of February. The return to work was based on an undertaking that the lecturers would be paid their salaries for the duration of the strike in two tranches. One was to be made immediately and the other half paid by the end of the year. Unfortunately this undertaking was never implemented, like so many of the previous agreements with the Government.

The wonderful protests the NLC delivered in every state capital in solidarity with the ASUU strike at the end of July 2023 provided an important boost for the strike.

However, the NLC also promised to organise a three-day warning strike if the Government did not implement its agreements with the tertiary education trade unions within two weeks of their protests. The NLC also threatened to organise an indefinite general strike to force the Government to fund education properly. Unfortunately, the NLC has yet to fulfill its promise of strike action.

We recognise that the fact that NLC affiliates with chapters in the universities that suspended their earlier strike may be a factor. We therefore call on all the university-based unions to unite, and appeal to the entire labour movement, including NLC and TUC for solidarity action. All the university-based unions face common deprivation of non-payment of salary from their strikes, among other shared demands. We have to re-build trade union unity across the sector

as part of the process of addressing this massive attack. We need unity to secure our combined victory.

It is vital that the whole labour movement is successful in pushing back this major assault. This will require all trade union members to take action. We can all talk to university lecturers, other education workers, students and trade union officials. We need to try and ensure that our trade union branches send letters of support to ASUU nationally and at our local universities. We also need to encourage all local trade union branches to send letters and motions to their state and national trade unions demanding action to address this attack. We also need calls for resolute national action to be sent to the NLC and the TUC in our states and at the national level.

## **4.United We Stand – Divided We Fall!**

The last Government implemented “No Work – No Pay” during the ASUU strike. This Government has tripled the price of petrol. But this is only part of a general attack on the poor majority by the tiny corrupt elite. We need a united stand against all these issues.

Inflation continues to rise, but the NLC appears to be taking no action to increase the miserable minimum wage. The minimum wage was last increased in April 2019, since then general prices have doubled. Some prices like kerosene and gas have more than doubled in the last year. Who can now live on N30,000? For more details see our briefing on the minimum wage: <https://tinyurl.com/minwageng>

Fuel prices on the black market can now be double the official price. How can we afford to travel to work? When will the labour movement take action?

The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) had a strategy for solidarity with the university lecturers of ASUU. This was outlined at the NLC protest in the National Assembly compound by the NLC General Secretary. After the wonderful protests in every state capital at the end of last July, the Government was to be given two weeks to act, after that a three-day warning strike was to be held. If the Government still did not implement its agreement with ASUU then a general strike would be called.

The only problem with these sensible plans is that they were not acted upon. As a result, three months later ASUU suspended its strike in accordance with the court order. Not only that but the Government now has the confidence to

refuse to pay the ASUU members for the eight months of their strike and to refuse to pay their monthly subs to ASUU.

We need a united stand against all these attacks! Not only were ASUU members forced back to work, but workers at the research institutes also suspended their strike after over a year. Their strike was over an agreement that had not been implemented for a decade!! Divided we are falling! We need all trade union branches and executives to demand action from their state and national trade unions and solidarity from the NLC and TUC.

The division within the health and education sectors is making a bad situation worse. If the trade unions and professional associations work together and provide active solidarity, we are all more likely to win. When the doctors and other health workers fail to support each other the government is relieved. When the lecturers and other tertiary education workers argue over who should get the inadequate funds for earned allowances then workers across the sector suffer.

### *Divisions in Education*

In July, 2022, *all* the major trade unions in the tertiary education sector were on strike, but then most of the unions suspended their strikes and left ASUU to strike alone. Without the solidarity of the other tertiary sector trade unions and the promised action by the NLC, ASUU eventually suspended their own strike with little or nothing to show for their eight months strike and the implementation of the government's "No work – No pay" policy could be a major defeat for the whole labour movement.

In his 2015 manifesto Buhari promised "Targeting up to 20% of our annual budget for this critical sector". In fact, he reduced the proportion of the annual budget allocated to education each year from over 12% in 2015 when he came to power to less than 6% in 2021. Spending on education in Nigeria is now well below the average for sub-Saharan Africa.

We crucially need united action across the education sector and beyond to force the government to increase its budgets for public education.

### *Divisions in Health*

There have been a range of wonderful strikes by doctors, nurses and other health workers in various states. But these have yet to win their demands. They need to be brought together with a national strike by JOHESU and the doctors.

JOHESU organised a ‘warning strike’ in September 2021, but have yet to organise the necessary indefinite strike. We need a national strike across the health services with solidarity from the TUC and the NLC.

All health professionals in Nigeria suffer from low pay and occasional late payment of salaries. The marginal benefits enjoyed by the medical doctors should not be used as an excuse for preventing solidarity by workers across the health sector.



The current state of healthcare delivery in Africa is poor, in Nigeria it is a disaster. Nigeria has one of the lowest levels of healthy life expectancy in Africa and is the world capital for both maternal mortality and child

mortality. This is due to the low level of public health funding in Nigeria and the poor management of these funds and health facilities. In addition, Nigeria has one of the highest levels of out-of-pocket health expenditure in Africa.

This means that most of the 60% of poor people in Nigeria are excluded from access to modern health care.

## **5. Government of Nigeria’s Commitment To Reducing Inequality Is Extremely Poor**

In October 2022, Oxfam issued the fourth edition of its report on government commitments to reducing inequality. This report reviews the actions of most governments on spending, tax and labour policies during 2020–2022. Shockingly, Nigeria is the third worst country in the world. Only Liberia and South Sudan are worse.

COVID-19 continued to increase inequality worldwide, as the poorest people were hit hardest by both the disease and its profound economic impacts. Whilst the rich saw another huge increase in their wealth. Oxfam shows clearly that most of the world’s governments failed to mitigate this dangerous rise in inequality.

The Oxfam report measures governments’ commitment to reducing inequality across three dimensions. These are spending on public services

(health, education, and social protection); taxing the rich; and workers' rights (including women's rights and minimum wage).

The overwhelming majority of governments cut their spending shares for health, education and social protection. At the same time, they refused to raise taxes on excessive profits and soaring wealth. Women's rights in the workplace (legislation on equal pay, non-discrimination, rape, sexual harassment and parental leave) have generally improved on paper, but implementation is still an issue. 154 countries now have laws on non-discrimination, 145 on equal pay, and 137 on sexual harassment. Trade union branches have a key role to play in ensuring implementation of these laws.

Nigeria is next to the bottom after South Sudan on public service spending (worse than Chad and Niger, for example). Nigeria scores relatively highly on tax because despite the increase in the rate of VAT many petty traders are now exempt. **Nigeria is bottom on labour rights with very high vulnerable employment and weak labour rights.**

On average, globally, the minimum wage for a country is around half of the per capita GDP. In Nigeria it is not much more than a third. Oxfam recommends that the minimum wage should match the per capita GDP of a country. Thereafter there should be annual increases to the minimum wage to keep pace with inflation. This would mean a minimum wage of around N100,000 in Nigeria now with increases each year in future.

A report from the *National Bureau of Statistics* issued in mid-November 2022 found that nearly two-thirds of Nigerians are now multidimensionally poor (63%). This is a huge increase in the 40% of people found to be poor by their 2018/19 survey.

As Oxfam says, "None of this is inevitable. Inequality is a policy choice. Even in the midst of these multiple crises, some governments are showing that another way is possible. That the road to greater equality is a practical alternative journey that can be taken by all nations. Never has taking this road been more urgent." But it will take pressure from the trades unions to ensure that this choice is taken. The Government has the money to fund free public services and provide a decent minimum wage. However, whoever wins the elections in early 2023, it is action by the labour movement that will be necessary to ensure that this policy choice is taken.



The full report is available from: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-commitment-to-reducing-inequality-index-2022-621419/>

## 6. Them and Us – What is the Best Approach to Trade Union Activity?

*The author Joe Burns says there are two different approaches to trade unionism. These are what he calls class struggle unionists and business unionists. The following extract from his book explains these two terms.*

“Seeing the payment of wages as theft leads class struggle unionists to view our unions locked in constant battle with employers. Class struggle unionists, rather than seeing the worker-owner relationship as primarily cooperative but with occasional flare-ups, recognize that conflict is baked into an economic system that pits the interests of the working class against the employing class. This leads class struggle unionists to create a combative form of unionism that places sharp demands on employers and promotes rank-and-file activism...

“Whereas class struggle unionists promote class struggle, business unionists seek to avoid it, Business unionists value their relationship with management, often identify with company concerns, and consider themselves more pragmatic than the workers. That's not to say they won't struggle or get into bitter strikes, but overall they tend to view these as fights against unreasonable employers...

“Understanding that our unionism is a struggle between workers and owners should be considered the cardinal principle of class struggle unionism. It is a simple idea that provides quite practical advice to guide our labour work:



- Understand that powerful financial interests are lined up against our unions.
- Understand that agreements with employers are temporary truces rather than alignment of interests.
- Understand that we have opposing interests on every issue.
- See ours as a struggle between classes.

“The concept of us versus them is at the core of class struggle Unionism.

“In contrast, business unionists see workers’ interests as aligned with those of employers. Having accepted the narrow framework of the wage transaction, business unionists tie the fate of workers to the success or failure of the firms they work for. Rather than believing labor creates all wealth, they accept the general framework that the employer controls the workplace and the fruits of labor. This forces us to negotiate from a position of weakness against an employing class that is constantly amassing greater power.

“Business unionists often see workers they represent as unreasonable and themselves as the realists. They seek a softening of struggle, they seek accommodation with owners, and they hate the unrestrained worker self-determination of open-ended strikes. Seeing their unionism not as class struggle but narrowly defined against particular employers, they often believe their role is merely to protect their members from rogue employers, rather than to fight for the entire class. This frequently leads to an exclusionary and often racist unionism that ignores the rest of the working class and sees immigrants and workers around the world as enemies rather than allies.

“At the core of business unionism is class collaboration, which means these unionists see their interests more allied with management and owners than with other workers. Rather than seeing bosses as exploitative and our natural enemies, they see the unions as allies of management. This leads business unions to see workers at a plant they represent as being in competition with workers at other plants rather than sharing common interests...

“For class struggle unionists this idea is simple—labor and management have opposing interests. However, powerful forces in society constantly

work to undermine this key principle. Government mediators and university labor educators like to promote what they call win-win bargaining, labor-management cooperation programs, or interest-based bargaining. These concepts all share the view that labor and management share common interests and we just need to figure out how what these are.

“But we know this cannot be true. On every issue in bargaining, labor and management have opposing interests. When bargaining wages, the billionaires will get a greater share of the wealth that labor produces, or the workers will. In shop floor struggles, workers will work harder and be more exhausted at the end of the shift, or work less. On safety, we want better equipment, and they want to save money. Labor’s gain is management’s loss.

“Despite this, many union officials support various labor cooperation schemes promoted by management. Sometimes management does this when unions are powerful to lull the unions to sleep. But often they will employ this strategy during periods of relative weakness when they know business unionists will jump at the chance...

“This allows employers to form alliances with the business union leaders to buy them off...

“Class struggle unionists coalesced around a different course for the labor movement centered on labor solidarity, strike support, resistance to labor-management cooperation, and worker internationalism. Central to left-wing trade unionism in the 1970s and 1980s was fighting against what these unionists saw as “sellout” union officials. Meatpackers, autoworkers, transit workers, steelworkers, truck drivers, and mineworkers all saw significant reform movements explicitly offering member control and militancy as an alternative path forward for labor...

“Class struggle trade unionism draws sharp lines between workers and employers. It engages in fierce battles, and frequently comes into conflict with the trade union national leadership.

“One can tell who the class struggle unionists are by how much they fight the boss and the intensity of the struggle. When the chips are down, and the

workers are fighting the boss, do they try to calm things down, or do they join in the struggle and seek to intensify it?”

The above is an extract from *Class Struggle Unionism* by Joe Burns (2022). This book is available for free download from:

<https://ivavalleybooks.com/2022/08/17/class-struggle-unionism-by-joe-burns/>

## **7. Why are strikes important?**

*Strikes are important, we need more successful strikes to frighten the President and governors. Strikes should not be considered the last resort, but the way that we begin to win back the wealth we have created. Where we manage to organise a strike this needs to be considered a sign of success, not of failure. The best way to build trade unions is to organise strikes. Many people join trade unions when they are organising major strikes.*

“Strikes are uniquely powerful under the capitalist system because employers need one thing, and one thing only, from workers: show up and make the employer money. When it comes to forcing the top executives to rethink their pay, benefits, or other policies, there’s no form of regulation more powerful than a serious strike. The strikes that work the best and win the most are the ones in which at least 90 percent of all the workers walk out, having first forged unity among themselves and with their broader community. To gain the trust and support of those whose lives may be affected, smart unions work diligently to erase the line separating the workplace from society.”

The above is an extract from Jane McAlevey’s book: “A Collective Bargain Unions, Organizing, and the Fight for Democracy”, 2021. Her other major book is available for free download:

<https://ivavalleybooks.com/2022/10/04/no-shortcuts-organising-for-power-in-the-new-gilded-age/>

Workers have only one strength — their collective ability to withdraw their labour and so bring the capitalist system to a halt. The great attraction of trade union power and the reason why millions of workers join unions is that they provide the organisation that can make this power effective.

*“Strikes... teach the workers to unite; they show them that they can struggle against the capitalists only when they are united; strikes teach the workers to think of the struggle of the whole working class against the whole class of factory owners and against the arbitrary, police government. This is the reason that socialists call strikes “a school of war”, a school in which workers learn to make war on their enemies for the liberation of the whole people, of all who labour, from the yoke of government officials and from the yoke of capital.”*

**VI LENIN (A LEADER OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OF 1917)**

## **8. How Do We Reform Trade Union To Defeat Neoliberalism?**

Many comrades in the trade union movement became active to change the world, but neoliberalism has defeated too many and they have been changed – for the worse. This is especially the case for the trade union leaders. The combination of the dominant ideas in society, regular meetings with government officials and feeling that they deserve to be rewarded have eroded their original socialist values.

This is on top of the usual hesitation for trade union leaders to call strikes that actively involve the members and seek solidarity. And the too frequent practice of calling off strikes at the earliest possible opportunity – even just when invited to meetings with the government.

As a result, many trade unions have become the mirror image of government departments. The general secretaries, and especially the chairs, have become chief executive officers. They are the bosses and all significant decisions are reserved for them. They expect to be rewarded with large salaries, big official cars and expense accounts that can be used as the fancy takes them. Trade union presidents have become the bosses. Appointed general secretaries who before used to be more active and fearless have since been reduced to clerical officers.





This corrupting influence has then spread out to other trade union officials who defer to their leaders in the hope that they too will gain the rewards of high office one day. Trade union meetings are

regularly held in hotels where the delegates are also housed enjoying expenses that they would never afford from their own salaries.

This is the thin end of the wedge and makes more open corruption harder to resist. We all know that some trade union leaders have been actually bought off with brown envelopes, vehicles etc. Others have refused to retire at the appropriate age of arranged irregular congresses, as with the civil servant unions. We need to change the whole culture of trade unions to ensure that all leaders and members are not there for their own personal financial gain.

Government officials benefit from per diems and sitting allowances when they are members of official committees. This practice has spread to the trade union movement, especially in the case of negotiating meetings.

This means that it is in the financial interests of both the government officials and trade union delegates to endlessly extend the negotiating meetings. This could explain why the last increase in the minimum wage to N30,000 was due in 2016, but only became law three years later in 2019.

We need to defeat neoliberalism and return to a more egalitarian society. To do this, we need to change this approach and return to the view that all trade unionists are comrades, leaders are just the first amongst equals who are there to implement the collective decisions of their members. We also need to break the hesitation to call strikes with mass picketing that actively seek solidarity action from other trade unions.

Salaries of trade union leaders should reflect the average salaries of their members. They should only be slightly higher than the salaries of the other

trade union officials. This should ensure that the salary of the highest paid official or chair of a trade union is only 50% more than that of the lowest paid employee of the trade union.

It should not be the norm for general secretaries and chairs to have their own private cars. They should use pool cars at least, or just take public transport as do the members of their trade union.

Trade union meetings should not be held in hotels or conference centres etc. The NLC and other major trade unions all have conference halls and meeting rooms in Abuja and state capitals. These facilities should be used for all trade union meetings.

Trade union officials and representatives should be re-imbursed for official travel and accommodation to attend meetings in Abuja or other states. They should not be paid daily allowances (per diems) or sitting allowances for trade union meetings. Where trade union representatives are paid sitting allowances to attend negotiation meetings with government officials these should be immediately paid to their trade union.

If trade union officials are required to travel to Abuja they should stay in the hotels managed by MHWUN, for example. If this is not possible, they should stay in hotels that are no more expensive.

Decisions to call and to call off strikes should be taken by the full National Executive Committee of trade unions. These decisions should not be delegated to officers or the chair.

Trade unions should use gender sensitive language, for example, chair rather than chairman.

We should recognise that strikes are what win our demands, not endless meetings or negotiations with government officials. We need to rebuild a tradition of active strikes and mass picketing. The NLC led strike in Kaduna briefly indicated the way, with daily protests and many press releases to ensure mass coverage in the media. Stay at homes are not enough – and

coordination with other relevant trade unions across the sector is necessary. The division within the health and education sectors is making a bad situation worse. If the trade unions and professional associations work together and provide active solidarity, we are all more likely to win.

When the doctors and other health workers fail to support each other the government is relieved. When the lecturers and other tertiary education workers argue over who should get the inadequate funds for earned allowances then workers across the sector suffer.

We need to organise a campaign to make our trade unions more democratic, less susceptible to corruption and better able to organise effective strikes that work for solidarity with related trade unions and the general public.

## 9. Lessons From Kaduna - May 2021

The benefits of effective collective action were clearly shown in Kaduna in May 2021. The determined and resolute action of the working peoples, led



and co-ordinated by our trade union leaders, provided hope for millions. It is the loss of that hope that leads some to turn to crime and worse.

In only three days the lives tens of thousands of people were changed for the better and hope returned. The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) took the fight to one of the most powerful governors and won!

El-Rufai had boasted for years about how he was building a model, efficient, public service in Kaduna State. He used mass retrenchment to weed out the poorly qualified workers who, he claimed, did not deserve their severance payments and so he had no need of paying them.

So, for example, in June 2017 all the teachers in the state were required to undertake a competency test and later in the year nearly 22,000 were sacked.

The NUT organised a 10 day strike in January 2018, but the sackings were still implemented.

But then the workers of Kaduna, led by the NLC, finally took a stand. The courage and sacrifices of the workers of Kaduna State withstood the vicious attacks by armed thugs of the Governor of Kaduna State. The strike showed the power of labour in sustaining society with all necessities of life. For the three days that the warning strike lasted, water, electricity, schools, offices, trains, airlines, banks and more all came to a standstill. It shows that when the workers move in unity, everything grinds to a halt.

The three day strike was successful in that El-Rufai was frightened. He stopped further retrenchments and promised to pay the entitlements for the 22,000 teachers whose jobs he had taken from them four years previously. Thousands of the sacked staff have similarly been recalled all due to the active strike by the Nigeria Labour Congress.

The nurse who was falsely accused in the media of removing oxygen from a child during the Kaduna strike has been absolved and reinstated. Lecturers and ASUU members in Kaduna State University who were initially sacked as a result of joining in the Strike have been recalled. Contrary to the threats of penalising workers who participated in the strike, no single worker has been penalised because of the successful strike.

The Kaduna strike was important as it showed a way forward. United action of all trade unionists with direct and public support from the national NLC was successful. Ayuba Wabba, the former NLC President, himself led the daily protests through the streets of Kaduna despite threats that he would be arrested. The size of the protests meant that when the hired thugs tried to attack they were quickly chased away.

However, this wonderful victory was spoilt as the strike was ended after only three days. The originally planned five day strike was suddenly ended on the Wednesday evening when the NLC was invited to talks with the Minister of Labour.

The NLC then organised no follow-up action. El-Rufai gradually got his confidence back and returned to his anti-worker activities.

As a result, the entitlements owed to teachers retrenched in 2017 were never actually paid although that had been agreed immediately after the NLC strike.

Over 7,000 teachers were recruited in July 2021, but were not posted to their schools until May 2022 and by December 2022 they were still to be paid.

Nearly 2,500 other teachers, including NUT National President, were retrenched in May, 2022 for either refusing to write a competency test or failing the test. No clear action has been taken by the NUT nor the NLC over these retrenchments.

## **10. NLC and TUC Need to Change Strategy – lessons from the last decade**

The strategy of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) over the last decade or so has included extended negotiations, limited threats and generally calling off strikes at the last moment. The assumption appears to have been that we have decent governments that only occasionally need reminding to do the right thing. In fact we have corrupt governments that only work to further enrich themselves and their elite friends. They rarely, if ever, actually implement any agreements that they have signed with the trade unions.

In this situation, we require class struggle trade unionism. This takes the view that we are at war with a vicious enemy who is looting on a daily basis. The government has no care for the common people and it will even gun us down in the streets if it considers necessary. The trade unions must talk to the government in a language that it understands, that hurts their pockets and frightens them. We literally have to terrorise the ruling elite if we are to gain significant change and to improve the lives of the mass of the people. This approach was successfully implemented in Kaduna State in May 2021, if only briefly, until the NLC suspended its strike and allowed El-Rufai to regain his confidence.

This article reviews the limited actions of the NLC and TUC over the last decade and demonstrates that the lack of action and solidarity has meant that the minimum wage, for example, has never been worth less in real terms than it is now. We then suffered months long fuel shortages and the current currency crisis with no action from the trade unions.

The minimum wage was increased to 18,000 naira by the Jonathan presidency in March 2011. It should have been renegotiated and implemented, at most



five years later, by March 2016 (in contrast to the ILO recommends annual increases). In fact it was not made law until April 2019 and then slowly introduced across the states. In January, 2023 it had still not been fully implemented in Abia, Zamfara and Taraba states, according to the NLC, although other states have yet to fully implement the increase and are not paying their pensioners on time. The NLC does not even monitor the actual position in each state.

The NLC called off a general strike with the TUC over an increase in fuel prices in May 2016 after four days. The unions went on strike after the government raised the price of a litre of petrol from 86.50 naira to 145 naira. The leadership of the NLC spent the final two days before the strike in talks with the government rather than mobilising the members and having sensitisation meetings at all levels. As a result, the strike was not widely supported.

In July 2018, the NLC picketed MTN offices in several state capitals over unionisation and an agreement was reached the following month. Similar action was taken against Bristow Helicopters, Arik Air, Air Peace, Corporate Affairs Commission, Chevron Oil and Gas and many others. But at least some of these may have been sweetheart deals, for example at CAC. In other cases the NLC President was alleged to have been settled. There remain a number of even Federal Government agencies where there is no union and many branches are not active.

The government threatened a fuel price increase from N148/litre to N162/litre and a doubling of electricity tariffs in September, 2020. The NLC and TUC threatened a general strike. But an all-night meeting deflated our hope when, without consulting with their organs, they called off the strike in the early hours of the morning of the day it was due to start.

Also in September 2020, Rivers State Government sealed the NLC office in Port Harcourt. A protest was promised, but an agreement was reached over the office and the implementation of the minimum wage. NLC proposed protest in Rivers State in 2022 did not even take off.

October 2020 saw the #EndSARS protests which the NLC refused to participate in or even voice its solidarity. These came a few weeks after the impromptu suspension of the general strike.

There have been a series of state level strikes over the implementation of the 2019 minimum wage and arrears of salaries and pensions. The NLC failed to provide effective national solidarity and so most of these strikes did not end in victory. NULGE, for example, called an indefinite strike in FCT in October 2020 over the implementation of the minimum wage.

In February 2021, the NLC NEC directed strikes in half the states over the minimum wage, but this was not implemented. Protests were held in at least 25 states in March. Taraba State NLC and TUC did strike, also in March 2021, over the failure of the state government to implement the new national minimum wage. But this was suspended less than three weeks later with merely an agreement to implement the minimum wage within three months. It had still not been implemented by early 2023.

Then we hoped the fight would start in Kano, where the governor reduced the minimum wage back to N18,000 with the payment of the March 2021 salaries, but the NLC pulled out at the last minute and cancelled a planned three-day strike. The governor merely had to promise to repay the illegal deductions.

In May 2021, a five-strike in Kaduna State, was called off after three days on the offer of talks. But eventually el Rufai regained his confidence. Nearly 2,500 other teachers, including NUT National President, were retrenched in May, 2022 for either refusing to write a competency test or failing the test. Neither the NUT nor the NLC took action in response to these sackings. At the same time, the judiciary and parliamentary workers were continuing their strikes for implementation of the agreements that they signed.

National and state level protests were again postponed, in September 2021 after a late night meeting the day before. There was a collective agreement between the Government and the NLC and TUC to suspend the doubling of the electricity tariff and fuel price increase from N145 per litre to about N161. NLC and TUC were given 133 mass transit buses and 10% allocation of houses from a Federal scheme.

A general strike in Nasarawa State led by the NLC and TUC was suspended after three weeks in June 2021 on the basis of promises from the state government. Cross River NLC organised a general strike for four weeks from October 2021 over minimum wage, promotions and pension payments. But the strike was suspended without achieving any of the four main demands. Much more could have been achieved if the NLC and TUC had provided active national solidarity. The same applies for the strikes by the workers at the research institutes and the university lecturers of ASUU during much of 2022.

In Niger State, the combined strike by the NLC and TUC for most of the first three months of 2022 was not able to win any significant concessions. One reason for this is that it was not an active strike as one of the strike alerts merely said: “Workers are enjoined to stay at home and pray”.

The threat of mass protests at Federal and state level by the NLC in January 2022 ensured that the fuel subsidy was retained, but the price of fuel still increased over the next year to up to double the official price of N165 (unofficially increased to N185). Joe Ajaero, now the NLC President had argued that the protests should have continued. But the NLC took no further action over these price increases nor the currency crisis in early 2023.

In July 2022 the NLC (with the TUC in some states) organised protests in every state capital in solidarity with the ASUU strike that had started in mid-February and was to last for eight months. At the protest in the FCT, the General Secretary of the NLC promised a warning strike in two weeks’ time and an indefinite strike after a further two weeks if the Government did not agree to the ASUU demands. The strikes were not organised and ASUU suspended its strike in October without gaining its demands nor being paid for the time its members were on strike.

The first meeting of the NEC after Joe Ajaero took over as the president of the NLC in early February 2023 agreed to mobilise for strike action in Abia State. Abia State NLC embarked on an indefinite strike from 28<sup>th</sup> February, following the failure of the state to clear the backlog of unpaid salaries and pensions arrears and its failure to fully implement the 2019 minimum wage. A protest was held in the state capital. Negotiations were held after two days and the strike was called off the following day. It seems to be a major step

forward, but there appear to be a number of loose ends, especially perhaps over the minimum wage arrears and the salary arrears for the state university that are not mentioned in the settlement. Negotiations were still to be held between the NLC and state officials to agree how the minimum wage is to be implemented. This is nearly four years after the minimum wage should have been implemented.

In February 2016, the NLC organised a one-day strike and mass picket in Owerri, Imo State. This won the reinstatement of 3,000 sacked workers and stopping the privatization drive. However, the pressure was not maintained. There had been complaints about the state again in 2020, but the NLC only reacted after thugs attacked the state delegate conference on 7<sup>th</sup> March, 2023. The electricity was cut off across the State, flights to the airport were stopped and NUPENG oil drivers stopped work. The demands also included arrears of salaries and pensions that had previously been an issue in 2016. Thousands of existing workers and pensioners had been declared as ghosts and so have not been paid for at least 20 months. The strike was suspended after a week for two weeks on 15<sup>th</sup> March as a result of “interventions by highly respected and well-meaning Nigerians from within and outside Imo State”.

The history of trade union struggle in Nigeria over the last decade has shown that we need a change of strategy by the NLC and the TUC. We need solidarity across the trade union movement and we need to continue the strikes until the government has actually implemented its agreements.

Strikes by individual industrial unions are not enough. ASUU closed all the public universities for eight months last year, but this was not sufficient for the government to implement its previous agreements. What is needed is solidarity across the NLC and TUC.

Similarly, strikes by NLC/TUC in individual states are not likely to win without active support across the working class. This was initially demonstrated in Kaduna State in May 2021, where one of the most powerful governors was brought to his knees. Similarly, the NLC General Secretary outlined a strategy that could have enabled ASUU to win their strike last year with solidarity action from the NLC, but this was never implemented.

Governments at the Federal and state level have repeatedly demonstrated that they are not prepared to implement agreements with the trade unions or even follow the law on payment of the minimum wage and pensions. Recently the Federal Government refused implement orders from the Supreme Court over the currency issue. The lesson from this is that strikes cannot be suspended over promises of negotiations or even when agreements have been signed. We have to remain steadfast until implementation of our demands has been achieved.

The outcome of the NLC/TUC strategy over the last decade is that the real value of the minimum wage has never been lower, salaries and pensions are routinely not paid on time and the costs of poor-quality public education and health services continue to rise. As a result, poverty rates have increased dramatically from around 40% to 60% and we have suffered a massive increase in insecurity. Our trade union strategy has to change. We need militant class struggle trade unionism and solidarity across the movement until we win significant changes.

## **11. “The shop floor only takes orders from the top at the national level” – we have to change this to have democratic trade unions**

The trade union movement has massive *potential* power to achieve major changes. The question is how do we ensure that this power is actually used? We last saw this happen in Kaduna in May 2021. One of the most powerful governors in the land was completely defeated within a few days. But usually the trade union leaders are pressurised or even settled into signing an agreement and prematurely suspending strikes before significant gains have been achieved.

The antidote to this is extending trade union democracy and having an active rank-and-file movement within the trade unions. As far as possible, general meetings or committees should take all the key decisions, especially when suspending strike action. In ASUU, for example, it is congresses in each university that take such decisions.

We need regular general meetings of all trade union branches. These meetings then need to pass motions and send letters to the state and national leaders of the trade union. Rather than waiting for the national trade union leaders to issue their orders, we need the initiative to be taken by the rank-and-file, ordinary trade union members. These meetings also need to hold the branch officials to account to ensure that they are actually implementing branch policy.

Similar structures need to be actively used at state and national level. We need monthly state and national level meetings of each trade union to ensure that the trade union officers at each level are held to account. We need to ensure that local or national strikes and other protests are actively run by the most open and democratic bodies that are available.

If key decisions are made by individual officers rather than democratic bodies, it is far easier for these individuals to be influenced or even settled. If we ensure that all our officials and leaders are held firmly to account it is much more difficult for outsiders to influence them. If trade union members do not attempt to influence their leaders there are plenty of other rich and powerful stakeholders who will be given free reign. Many strikes are suspended because "well-meaning and respected or traditional leaders" have intervened and put pressure on the trade union leaders. If we do not try to influence our leaders than other people certainly will.

We need branches and state trade union bodies to put pressure on the national trade union leaders and their federations. We have all suffered terribly over the last eight years and more as the NLC in particular has not provided sufficient solidarity to its state bodies, ASUU etc. How can we change this?

We need all trade union members to try and play a more active role in their trade unions. This can start by talking to our local officials and encouraging them to write to their leaders. We also need to demand more general meetings of trade union members so that we can all determine policy. Democracy is not something that is given - it is something that we have to fight for!



## **12. *Reforming the trade unions* - How Do We Stop Corruption in the Labour Movement?**

Some, so called, comrades distort the meaning of struggle and join trade unionism and activism just to loot the treasury. They illegally enrich themselves from the sweat of defenceless union members and sell their images to those in the corridors of power. Those that have not sold themselves are seen as enemies by the authorities. Government officials interfere in trade union elections to ensure that ‘their people’ win.

We have to accept that general corruption in society has spread into the trade union movement. Some trade union leaders are settled, others are following the lead from Oshiomhole, the former NLC President, and using their trade union positions as part of their career ladder.

General secretaries, and especially trade union presidents/chairs, expect to be rewarded with large salaries, big official cars and expense accounts that can be used as they fancy takes them. This corrupting influence has then spread out to other trade union officials who defer to their leaders in the hope that they too will gain the rewards of high office one day. They can be tyrants and dictatorial rulers. They pretend they are above the apex decision making body of unionism, that is the CONGRESS.

Trade union meetings are regularly held in hotels where the delegates are also housed enjoying expenses that they would never afford from their own salaries. This can be encouraged by civil society organisations that fund retreats in expensive hotels or conference centres. Even the Labour Party fell into this trap by accommodating trade union leaders in hotels for their retreat last October, in Abuja and giving them brown envelopes. The NLC and other major trade unions all have conference halls and meeting rooms in Abuja and state capitals. These facilities should be used for all trade union meetings.

This is the thin end of the wedge and makes more open corruption harder to resist. We all know that some trade union leaders have been actually settled with brown envelopes, vehicles etc from governors and other public officials. Others have refused to retire at the appropriate age and arranged

irregular congresses. We need to change the whole culture of trade unions to ensure that all leaders and members are not there for their own personal financial gain.

Government officials benefit from per diems and sitting allowances when they are members of official committees. This practice has spread to the trade union movement, especially in the case of negotiating meetings. Trade union delegates should be required to report such allowances and donate any money they receive to their trade unions.

In September 2021, the NLC and TUC were given 133 mass transit buses and 10% allocation of houses from a Federal scheme as part of the negotiated settlement to stop the threat of protests over the threatened doubling of the electricity tariff and another fuel price increase. Trade unions need to monitor and report such 'donations' on a regular basis. Salaries of trade union leaders should reflect the average salaries of their members. They should only be slightly higher than the salaries of the other trade union officials. This should ensure that the salary of the highest paid official or president of a trade union is only 50% more than that of the lowest paid employee of that trade union.

Trade union officials and representatives should be re-imbursed for official travel and accommodation to attend meetings in Abuja or other states. They should not be paid daily allowances (per diems) or sitting allowances for trade union meetings. If trade union officials are required to travel to Abuja they should stay in the hotels managed by MHWUN, for example. If this is not possible, they should stay in hotels that are no more expensive.

With corruption being so widespread, we cannot really blame a few poor workers for being tempted. We need to ensure such temptation is reduced to the absolute minimum. You may wonder how some comrades followed and compromised with capitalism and its animalistic principles. They joined hands with capitalists during the 2023 general elections. These politicians where did they get billions of Naira which they spent before and during their party primary elections?

# Readings on Trade Unions, Strikes and the Bureaucracy

## *Socialists in The Trade Unions by Alex Callinicos 1995*

Why is it that trade union leaders often need to be pushed into leading active strikes to improve the lives of the majority. How socialists need to organise in trade unions. Based on the experience in Britain in the 1990s, but broadly relevant for Nigeria today. <https://ivavalleybooks.com/2020/09/28/socialists-in-the-trade-unions/>

## *Workers, Unions and Global Capitalism : Lessons From India – Rohini Hensman 2011*

Using India's labour movement as a model, Rohini Hensman charts the successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses, of the struggle for workers' rights and trade union organisation. As Indian products gain wider acceptance in global markets, the disparities in employment conditions and union rights between such regions as the European Union and India's vast informal sector are exposed.

The book provides an excellent view of capitalism and how trades unions can fight it – in the Global South. Many of the issues Rohini raises from a South Asian vantage point are equally true for Nigeria.

<https://ivavalleybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Workers-Unions-Global-Capitalism-2011-Rohini-Hensman.pdf>

## *An activists' guide to trade union leaders and the Rank-and-file (2022, Britain)*

We need to organise a wider layer of trade union members to encourage the trade union leaders to lead more active strikes and improve democracy in each trade union. <https://socialistworker.co.uk/long-reads/an-activists-guide-to-trade-union-leaders-and-the-rank-and-file/>

## *Ian Allison (2022) Workers Can Win! A Guide to Organising at Work*

Drawing on more than 20 years of organising experience in Britain, the book combines practical techniques with an analysis of the theory and politics of organising and unions. It offers insight into tried and tested

methods for effective organising. It deals with tactics and strategies, and addresses some of the roots of conflict, common problems with unions and the resistance of management to worker organising.  
e-copy available on request

***Silver, Beverly (2003). Forces of Labour: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.***

Recasting labour studies in a long-term and global framework, the book shows how local labour movements have been related to world-scale political, economic, and social processes since the late nineteenth century. It demonstrates that labour movements have been deeply embedded (as both cause and effect) in world political dynamics. Arguing against the view that the global labour movement is in a terminal crisis, the book concludes by exploring the likely forms that emergent labour movements will take in the twenty-first century.

e-copy available on request

**Rank and File Organisation is Vital in The Trade Unions (Socialist Labour, Nigeria, 2021)**

The most successful rank and file organisations rest on a network of socialists or militants who understand that it is collective trade union action, primarily strikes, that ensures improvements not clever negotiating by trade union leaders. But also, that to be successful, strikes need to actively involved all members in regular protests, town hall meetings and calls for solidarity from other trade unions.

<https://socialistlabour.com.ng/rank-and-file-organisation-is-vital-in-the-trade-unions/>

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