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A STUDY OF LABOUR UNIONISM AND ECONOMIC GROWTH IN NIGERIA (1975-2004)

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ABSTRACT

This research work provides some review of unionism in Nigeria within the period of 1975 and 2004. Using regression analysis, a good explanatory variable was identified that explains economic condition which is reflected in the cost of living (which in the study is proxied by the rate of inflation) and nominal wage. The

impact of unionism was negative and the study recommends that labour unions in Nigeria should not be looked upon as agent of destabilization rather government and employers of labour should pursue policies in consonance with the changing economic condition which arise from within and outside the economy.

KEYWORDS:

labour unionism, economic growth, liberalization, productivity

1. INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian economy comprises of a large but mismanaged public sector, which shares a symbiotic relationship with a better-organized and managed private sector. Its public sector is primarily involved in the provision of supportive infrastructures, training and development of manpower, formation and implementation of social and economic policies and the provision of basic utilities. Unions have sprung up in these areas of activities. Naturally, the main unions in this sector are those organizing the civil servants, employees in transport services, teachers, local government employees etc.

Apart from the petroleum, iron and steel industries, major economic activities in the private sector revolve around trading. Other activities include construction, transportation and assembling of finished products generally referred to as manufacturing. Consequently, labour unionism in this sector blossoms in the transportation industry, the commercial/trading ventures and the assembling plants.

Labour unionism has been a part of the Nigerian economy since 1912 when government employees in the Southern Nigeria civil service together with Henry Libert, a Sierra Leonian on transfer from Freetown, founded the Southern Nigeria Civil Service Union. Following the merger of the Northern and Southern Protectorates of the present Nigeria in 1914, this union became known as the Nigeria Union of Civil Servants. The main objective of forming this premier union was for the improvement of the welfare of civil servants.

Since 1924, over 1,000 labour unions have existed in Nigeria. Each of these unions has sought to meet the aspirations of its members in terms of improving their economic well

being as well as fostering their profession.

Labour, being the creator of wealth, always agitates for a fair remuneration for their sweat and toils. Each individual employee has a weak bargaining power. Therefore, they need to come under the auspices of a union as collective effort often yields greater and better results. Empirical Studies conducted independently by Freeman (1979) and Medoff (1982) and jointly published in 1984 reveal that labour unions have been exerting enormous influences on the socio-economic cum political advancement of the United States of America.

Otobo and Omole (1987:39-40) affirm that an effective labour union movement is essential to industrial peace in Nigeria. In the views of Adolf Strumthal (1962:199-200), industrial peace translates into national growth and development when the employees and their employers are happy; that is each party through its representatives, participates in the determination of the policies under which they will consent to work. By so doing, each party unconsciously seeks the growth of their organization at the micro level and consequently the growth of the economy at the macro level.

The size of a labour union is one of the contributing factors to its militancy and the extent to which it can influence both socio-political cum economic variable at play within its host economy.

However in the recent past, there seems to be a growing antagonism towards labour unionism on the part of the Federal Government of Nigeria following its apparent misconception that the unions are rather dislocative instead of making a positive impact on the growth of the national economy. The government in order to weaken and discourage growth in unionism therefore has adopted some subtle measures.

This study is embarked upon in order to ascertain the strength of relationship between the growth in labour unionism and the growth of the Nigeria economy. By attempting to provide generalization about workers' unions with regard to productivity, this study hopes to make some contributions to both the substance and the impact of unionism of economic growth.

The study therefore hypothesizes that growth in labour unionism in Nigeria has a negative impact on the growth of the economy.

This paper is divided into four sections; section one briefly looks at the Nigeria economy with respect to the background of labour unionism in Nigeria and gives an insight to the purpose, relevance, scope and the research hypotheses used herein. Section two reviews both the theoretical and empirical literatures on which the study is based. Section three embodies the methodology, sources of data used in the study, analyses and the interpretations of findings. Section four summarizes and concludes the paper.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

For the purpose of the present study, a labour union is defined as 'a continuous association of workers who are willing to unionize so that their collective interest can be represented both in their workplace and the society where they exist and toil. In particular labour unions always seek to regulate their employment relationship through the direct process of collective bargaining with their employers. In general, labour unions seek to influence government in its socio-political cum economic reforms in a bid to positively influence the welfare of workers. The Conceptual issues remain that a labour union is a formal, democratic and voluntary organization made up

of employees who have the same ideology of improvement of welfare and maintenance of their rights at their place of work.

The role of every labour union is in three folds: first its representative role, secondly its integration role and thirdly its economic role of facilitating production and equitable distribution of income.

A. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON UNIONISM AND PRODUCTIVITY.

Economic theorists, writing on the role of labour unions in the economic growth of the less development countries, have postulated certain idealized functions, which, to them, labour unions should play positively and actively in order to foster economic development. In the views of Fajana (1986:178), labour union activities can be classified as either 'consumptionist' or 'productionist' in nature. In its consumptionist role, a union's objective is to obtain for its members the greatest possible share of the national 'cake'. Hence, the focus of its policy is on the distribution rather than the growth of the national products. In its productionist role, a union is development oriented and sees as its primary objective to enter into cooperative partnership with the government and management and to ensure that the national product is as great as possible. This is the case of the labour unions in Britain who primarily represent their workers in politics with a view to controlling the generation of the Gross National Income (GNI) (Nwabueze 1985:183). To the productionist union, securing as large as possible of the national product for its members is still an important objective but it is secondary to that of increasing the size of its country's output and productivity. Mehta (1958) cited in Nwabueze (1985:183-186) ascertains that consumption oriented unions are well and good for the developed world but in the less developed

economies, the chief problem is economic growth. Therefore, the major task for unions is to subordinate immediate wage gain and similar considerations to the development of the country. In the words of Nwabueze (1985:183, 186), the British labour unions relate themselves to the problems of socio-economic growth rather than concentrating their efforts in the struggle for wage increment. The union leaders take into consideration their effect on the national economy, their support for improvement in industrial efficiency as well as their acceptance of productivity bargaining whose objective is to achieve inflation-free economic growth. This indicates the union's attentiveness to the demands for economic development through sustained growth in productivity. According to Tolentino A (1997:13) productivity is a measure of how efficient and effective resources are used to produce goods and services needed by the society. The importance of human resource as a critical factor in improving productivity and competitiveness is further accentuated by the high mobility of capital and technology across national boundaries. Good enterprises and quality jobs would go to locations where capital and technology can be combined with capable work force c, managerial and labour alike - to produce and distribute quality competitive commodities. A series of studies by Harvard economists led by Freeman and Medoff (1984:69) argued forcefully that labour unions raise productivity even after management had acceded to the worker's demands for higher wages. According to them, unions have two faces: a 'monopoly face' associated with their monopolistic power to increase wages and a 'collective voice face' associated with their representation of organized workers within the enterprises. While the Harvard economists stress the productivity-enhancing collective voice effects, the traditional neoclassical economic

theory tends to regard labour unions as monopolistic institutions, which reduce the society's output in several ways:

1. It is traditionally argued that industrial actions to enforce union demands cause substantial decrease in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). More so, labour unions are consumption-oriented thereby causing a misallocation of resources through incessant upward reviews of wages as against productionist tendencies, which seek to increase the overall economic output; unions generally inhibit investments.
2. Unions -negotiated contract provisions that establish staffing requirements limits firms from employing capital and labour in the most efficient wages. This reduces output and consequently increases unemployment.
3. Unions succeed in driving a wedge between the wage rates of comparable quality workers who are employed in the labour market. The net effect is a misallocation of resources: too many workers in the non-unionized sector with too few workers in the unionized sector of the economy. This breeds an uncontrollable income inequality (Ehrenberg and Smith (1994:485 - 487), Scmlabel (1990.16), The World Bank (1995:70-71, 79 – 81).

Freeman and Medoff (1979: 65-66) do not deny the three negative productivity effects of labour unions as described above. But they direct their attention to the positive effects of unionism, which should boost productivity. At the heart of their analysis is the notion of collective voice:

- a) A labour union is interpreted as a vehicle of collective voice; it provides a medium for efficient communication between management and workers- By so doing, it improves the morale and co-operation and also reduces discrimination and discontentment among workers as well as reduces turnover costs for employers.
- b) Its presence induces management to tighten up on work standard and to improve on the methods of production in order to make more profits in the anticipation of demands for wage increments.
- c) Its presence reduces inefficiency by playing a monitoring role on behalf of the employer; unions also provide a mechanism through which workers can point out possible changes in work rules or production techniques that will benefit both labour and management. It also monitors employer's compliance with government regulations.

Freeman and Medoff (1984:165) theorized that if industrial relations are good with unions and management working together to produce a bigger pie as well as fighting over the size of their slices, productivity is likely to be higher under unionism. This thesis is in line with Adam Smith's doctrine of natural law in economic affairs. If industrial relations are poor with management and unions ignoring their common goals while battling with each other, productivity is likely to be lower under a unionized setting.

B. REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL LITERATURES ON IMPACT OF UNIONISM ON PRODUCTIVITY AND ECONOMIC PERFORMANCES.

Freeman and Medoff (1984) cited in

McConnell and Brue (1986:217-218) have surveyed empirical evidences on union productivity issues and found out that a conclusive dramatic turnaround from a substantial positive to an equally substantial negative productivity effect in the bituminous coal industry in America was attributed to serious deteriorating industrial relations within the industry.

Empirical research conducted by Brown and Medoff between 1972 and 1976 and published in 1978 sought to estimate the extent to which the value of output per worker is associated with the level of unionization in the country after controlling for other factors expected to influence productivity. Similar studies by Cark (1980) and Allen (1988) used data on the physical value of output to check on how productivity changes after a sector of the economy becomes unionized.

The results of these two separate studies conducted on industries, contained in Ehrenberg and Smith (1991:483-485) suggests that unionized labour is more productive than non-unionized labour in the United States of America's economy. For instance the unionized manufacturing sector contributed 20-25% to the national productivity more than the non-unionized part of the sector. Again, the unionized establishment within the construction industry' contributed 19-22% to the national productivity more than the non-unionized establishments.

Wadhvani (1990:372-382) a German labour economist used two sets of microeconomic data from the manufacturing sector supplemented by information on union coverage and bargaining structure obtained from two questionnaire surveys to prove that some of the criticisms on labour unions have been unfair. He used the ordinary least square analysis with sales of firms as dependent variables and capital,

employment and union membership among other control variables as explanatory variables. He observed that there were clear evidences to support the views that unions neither inhibit investment nor productivity growth in the German economy.

Holding constant such productivity influencing variables such as labour quality, capital — labour ratio and scale of production, Allen (1984:251-273) estimated that unionized workers in the American construction industry were 2% more productive than their non unionized counterparts.

An analysis of Malaysian data provides some support for the view that unions can enhance productivity and efficiency - unionized Malaysian firms tended to train their workers and use job rotations to enhance flexibility and efficiency. They were also more likely to adopt productivity - raising innovations relating to technological change, changing product mix and reorganization of work (World Bank 1995:80)

Scholars in the fields of economics and industrial relations have questioned the generality of the thesis that unions raise productivity. For instance, Schnabel (1989:5,133-146) used the Brown- Medoff (1978) modified Cobb-Douglas production function to conduct an economy-wide time series analysis in Germany between 1955 and 1984. He used union productivity (GDP per employee who belonged to a union) to measure the effects of unionization on productivity and arrived at the conclusion of a negative statistically weak co-efficient for the unionization co-efficient (t-ratio: -1.6).

A similar study with a similar technique was conducted in Germany by a duo of economists: Addison and Hirsch in 1989:7,

72-105. They used a cross-section analysis for the year 1983 covering 30 industries organized by 12 different labour unions. The unionization co-efficient was insignificant (t-ratio:-0.6).

A negative co-efficient for unionization was also a finding of another cross-section estimate conducted by Lorenz and Wagner 1989 in Germany and cited in Schnabel (1991:18), for 29 manufacturing industries in 1985 (t-ratio: -1.5)

Ehrenberg, Sherman, and Schwarz (1983: 199-213) conducted a research in a municipal library in America in 1982. They found out that unionization had not significantly affected the level of productivity though it gave the workers a sense of security, contentment and commitment.

Elberts (1984:346-358) conducted a study in America on 'union effects on teachers' productivity'. He concluded that while unionization had a significant effect upon how teachers allocated their time, its overall effects upon their productivity was unclear.

Pencavel (1977) cited in McConnell and Brue (1986:243) presented evidences showing that the 1900-1913 period of growth in labour unionism in the British coal industry contributed a lot to the decline of their workers productivity.

On examining, 19 manufacturing industries in The United Kingdom, Hirsch and Link (1984:29-37) concluded that growth in productivity was slower in industries characterized by a greater proportion of union coverage and faster union growth.

On the balance, these studies enumerated above suggest that there are no consensuses on whether unions increase productivity or not. These studies suggest however that like most questions in

economics whether unions inhibit or promote economic growth is an empirical question and therefore needs empirical evidences.

C. TRADE LIBERALIZATION, PRODUCTIVITY AND UNIONISM

According to Camdessus (1996:1), the greatest fear of the labour unions is that a global labour market allows extremely low paid workers in the developing economies to undercut the wages of the less skilled workers in advanced economies. To quote Jordan, the Secretary General of International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (2003), 'Labour unions increasingly sense that trade liberalization, for all its potentials to spread prosperity, has been hijacked by the representatives of wealth and privileges in order to pursue their narrow interests.

Empirical studies conducted in Canada by Abowd and Lemieux in 1990 showed that in industries where unionism existed, increased product market competition had served to increase the price elasticity of their product. Since the union members' wages did not fall substantially in the face of the increased competition, unionized employment fell from 40% in 1978 to 22% in 1988. This suggested that trade competition (liberalization) affects workers' employment level directly (and consequently union membership).

As a result of this, they theorized that increased competition causes employers to resist unionism more vigorously; increased competitive pressures decreases the benefits accruing to workers through collective action hence shifting the demand curve for unionism to the left.

The World Bank (1995:57-59) and Tolentino (1997:3-18) maintained that liberalization in a

developing economy represents both some opportunities and threats to unionism. The opportunities include increase in employment, earnings and securities, improvements in working conditions and the general well being of the global society. They further advocated that these opportunities could be harnessed only through increased competitiveness not only in the international market but also in the domestic market; the key to competitiveness is in increasing and sustaining a high level of productivity with workers as the stakeholders.

The World Bank (1995:16, 18) stressed that developing economies (Nigeria inclusive) cannot sustain the growth rate they need without making the best use of their working population. Expanding employment opportunities and rising wages are the results of growth and economy-wide increases in output (Productivity). Camdessus (1996:2) hypothesized that if growth rate increases to a sustainable level, unemployment will reduce to its barest minimum because increasing output and diversification will continue to sustain employment generation. This in turn will result to increasing income and economic well being of workers and the society at large.

This generally supports the views expressed by Mehta (1958) cited in Nwabueze (1985), Freeman and Medoff (1979), Nwabueze (1985) and Fajana (1986), that except unions forfeit their 'protectionist (consumptionist)' tendencies and become 'productionist' in nature, liberalization would continue to pose a threat to employment, wages and general economic welfare of the people.

Liberalization has come to stay; unionism cannot fight it rather liberalization can dismantle union structures. In the opinion of the World Bank (1995:5), the only way a union can cushion the effect of liberalization on workers'

membership is to improve the skills of its workers and ease their transition to new jobs while staying engaged with the world economy.

3. DATA SOURCES ,ANALYSES AND INTERPRETATION

All data on labour union membership are taken from Fashoyin, (1991:35); Daily labour 2003 8(1) and Federal Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity Annual Reports for various years. All data on cost of living, work stop-pages, minimum wages, unemployment, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at current factor cost and investments, are taken from the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) Statistical Bulletin 2005 volume 16.

From the results obtained using the correlation matrix, the degrees of co-variability between union membership and economic growth in Nigeria proxied by these variables - Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Gross Domestic Investment (GDI), Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Balance Of Trade (BOT) are 0.832, 0.752, 0.822 and 0.547 respectively. These show a strong time trend between union membership and economic growth in Nigeria for the period under review. Based on the results of the correlation analysis, the correlation coefficient between union membership and each of- Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Gross Domestic Investment (GDI), Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Balance Of Trade (BOT) are 0.832, 0.752, 0.822 and 0.547 respectively, each with a significant level (2-tailed) of 0.0000. Since these significant levels are less than 0.025, this study accepts that there is a relationship between the growth in Union membership and each of these variables: GDP, GDI, FDI, and BOT. Since GDP, GDI, FDI, and BOT are proxies for economic growth.

This study therefore accepts that growth in the Nigerian economy is positively related to the growth in labour union is during the period under

review.

A. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Although the Harvard economists led by Freeman and Medoff (1984:69) argue forcefully that labour unions raise productivity in contradiction to the views of the traditional neoclassical economic theory which tends to regard unions as monopolistic institutions, the evidence generated from this research work is no enough to counter or support this proposition /thesis.

In comparison with this view cited in page 8 of this work, the correlation between industrial actions (Strikes) and GDP is negative (-0.515) confirming that all the unions seek to be consumption-oriented. In addition, though the evidences and reasons are not conclusive, the correlation between unionism and unemployment is positive (0.423). This suggests that unions might be responsible, to some extent, for in optimal combination of resources in Nigeria. The high positive correlation between unionism and Gross Domestic Investment (0.752) counter the opinion that unions generally inhibit investment. With respect to their collective bargaining roles, the activities of labour unions in Nigeria are not strong enough to inhibit economic growth. Unions herein have inadequate political as well as economic power to retard the growth of the economy because governments in less developed countries impose a lot of restrictions on union activities.

The most important contribution of unionism to economic growth is that without organization, the workers' deep-felt social and political frustrations would express themselves in a series of attempts to seek a radical change perhaps to overthrow a society, which in many less developed countries like Nigeria, denies them their basic rights of

respect and equality in opportunity. By organizing workers into unions, workers are helped to redress their grievances through constitutional processes. These processes can help build a happy and contented labour force through which national re-orientation (towards eradication of corruption and similar vices) can lend an arm towards moving the economy to a more desirable level of attainment.

B. ROLE OF UNIONISM IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING IN NIGERIA

Economic planning precedes economic growth. The Nigerian government adopts centralized development planning as the most effective means for bringing about rapid social and economic changes. Ideally, labour unions as representatives of a significant segment of the population should have an important role to play in plan formulation and implementation as in Tunisia, Algeria and India (Nwabueze 1985). Between 1975 and 2003, 2 national development plans and 6 rolling plans were implemented in the Nigeria economy but it is on note that the Organized Labour did not play any vital role either in the formulation or implementation of these plans. As Eyiuche 2000: 227 pointed out, for economic planning efforts to be effective and successful, there must be grassroots supports and understanding; planning should take a bottom-top approach so that the citizenry, mostly the workers, can contribute positively to its success by way of effective monitoring aimed at reducing inefficiency in the system. Drawing Labour unions into the process of planning would have helped divert their concentration from demands for wage increases and to rally their support at least for those portions of the plans that are in consonance with their own goals of keeping their real wages from falling. Furthermore, if unions are integrated

into the planning structure, they would help to ensure that the planning bodies pursue the goals of full employment and increased standard of living for the generality of the citizenry.

4. SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In recent times, various aspects of labour unionism have been the subject of numerous studies by economists, historians, lawyers, political scientists, psychologists and specialists in other disciplines but none of these have been able to empirically determine the major factors that propel employees into joining unions in Nigeria. Having reviewed a lot of studies in the economies of Europe, America and Australia, this research work attempted to establish the impact of unionism on economic growth in Nigeria proxied by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Gross Domestic Investment (GDI), Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Balance of Trade (BOT) and came up with the finding that there is a strong time trend between the growth in unionism and the growth of the Nigerian economy. Unions in Nigeria are more effective as defense mechanisms to keep the workers real wage from falling than they are in raising real wage faster than productivity increases.

The study further points out that the most important single contribution of unionism to economic growth is the organization of workers into labour unions.

This is a vital function whose significance becomes obvious when one considers the fate of unorganized workers in an economy like Nigeria, which is characterized by a large pool of the unemployed. Workers herein face an ever-present threat of exploitation and insecurity; a situation that inevitably generates frustration and sabotage. The presence and activities of the unions have helped very much in raising the incomes of the

workers in Nigeria

The following forms the recommendations evolved from the discussions of the findings of this study:

1. There is the need to put more effort into labour union education especially for the union officials so that they can be better equipped to use their strength and knowledge to bring about enhanced economic growth via increased productivity and suppression of sabotage. For a start, short courses should be organized for them in the appropriate departments of Nigerian Universities.
2. Government and employers of labour should not look down on the unions as agents of destabilization rather unions should be co-opted into the decision making/planning processes. This should be aimed at sustaining their interest on productivity.
3. Government policies including fiscal and income policies should reflect the changing economic conditions in Nigeria. Particular attention should be paid to the review of workers' remunerations as and when due.

Presently, there is no neat summing up of this discussion of efficiency effects of labour unions. A systematic analysis of the impact of unions upon productivity in Nigeria is a relatively new endeavor and there are no unassailable conclusions. The relationship between unions and productivity is complex and imperfectly analyzed at this point in time. However one issue stands out clearly and that is, if unions are to be productive, they must participate in economic planning and implementation of the formulated policies in their place of work and at the national level. A major economic function of a labour union should be to promote higher levels of productivity among its members. It pays the employer but it is also the surest and the most enlightened means of promoting the economic interest of the workers.

Unionists need not threaten employers through (or by) overt collective actions. Rather, they should always bear it in mind that the larger the pie, the greater the portion of the pie allotted to its creator: **Labour**.

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