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Nigerian workers and the quest for workers' rights, 1978-2024

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Abstract

This paper explores the struggles of Nigerian workers and their rights in Nigeria from 1978 to 2024. Within the chronological scope, workers in Nigeria have faced inadequate wages that do not match their labour. Despite these difficulties, employers expected workers to perform their duties well. In 1978, the Nigerian Labour Congress was formed to unite workers against exploitation and promote better working conditions. This was seen as a positive step toward securing workers' rights in Nigeria. However, this progress was short-lived due to employers' stubbornness regarding workers' welfare. Using a qualitative method of analysis and sources such as primary and secondary documents, the paper finds that economic, political, and other priorities prevent employers from properly recognising and protecting workers' rights in Nigeria. The implication has been ongoing protests by workers and repressive responses from employers, especially during military regimes. The paper concludes that between 1978 and 2024, the government made little effort to enforce laws and reforms aimed at improving the living standards of Nigerian workers. It further argues that the NLC in Nigeria remains influential in advocating for fair labour practices, social justice, and human dignity, as it continues to push for better wages, improved working conditions, and social protections for Nigerian workers.

Key words: Nigeria, Workers, Quest, Rights, Government.

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Introduction

Nigerian workers have faced numerous challenges, including poor working conditions, low wages, and arbitrary employer dismissals. These issues arise from employers' failure to truly understand and uphold workers' rights as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Conventions on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR),[1] The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. These instruments are key in defining employer-worker relationships. The establishment of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) in 1978 as a unified labour union to advocate for and negotiate on behalf of workers marked an essential step toward promoting and defending workers' rights in Nigeria. Workers remain the backbone of any organisation, contributing to the production of goods and services across both the public and private sectors. Over time, their efforts have often gone unrecognised, leading to conflicts with their employers, which have frequently resulted in industrial action.

However, during this period, the NLC consistently positioned itself as an advocate for advancing workers' rights. The emergence of a new organisation ended decades of rivalry among the numerous Trade Unions, which had previously left the struggle for workers' rights in a fragile state. As the NLC became a rallying point for promoting workers' welfare and rights between 1978 and 2024, it used demonstrations and strikes to pressure governments to address demands such as higher wages, a better working environment, and policies perceived as harmful to workers and Nigerians. Typically, governments' weak responses to demands have often led to increased industrial actions. Labour organisations in Nigeria have repeatedly taken industrial action to ensure that employers' unjust policies, such as increases in petroleum prices without matching wage hikes, and other political and economic policies inimical to workers' welfare, are vigorously challenged. However, successive Nigerian governments have not acknowledged the contributions of labour movements in advancing workers' rights and welfare. Therefore, this essay examines the obstacles to workers' rights by placing them within their proper historical context.

Understanding Nigerian Workers' Rights from a Human Rights Perspective

Employer-labour relations since Nigeria's Independence have characterised the struggle for workers' rights. Between 1978 and 2024, Nigerian workers faced a poor working environment, low wages, and arbitrary dismissals. The poor working conditions of Nigerian workers and those of workers worldwide have led to several historical interventions. For instance, in 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) to grant labourers their rightful place, thereby avoiding exploitation or

[1] Akak Ekanem Etim and Steiner Bernard Ifekwe, A Discourse on the Police and Human Rights Practices in Nigeria, 1966 -1998, *The Calabar Historical Journal* Vol. 11, No.2 (2022), p. 164.

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dehumanising treatment by their employers. These rights outline the fundamental ways workers should be treated globally, including their wages and working conditions.

The UDHR anticipated a conflict between the owners of the means of production and labourers, stemming from the owners' perception of superiority over workers. Since workers participate in producing goods and services, employers who control the means of production often establish a master-servant dynamic rather than viewing workers as equal partners, as Karl Marx described. Marx argued that both employers and employees should "meet in the market and deal with each other based on equal rights with the only difference being that one is the buyer and the other the seller, making them equal before the law".[2] Nevertheless, employers disregarded the idea of workers' equal partnership with them in any setting. This apparent neglect by the employers had provoked several industrial disputes. Based on this neglect, the UDHR opines in article 23 (1,2, 3, and 4) that:

> Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment. Everyone, regardless of race, gender, or other factors, has the right to equal pay for equal work. Everyone who works has the right to a just and favourable remuneration, ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection. Everyone has the right to form and to join a trade union for the protection of their interests.[3]

The UDHR established a minimum standard for promoting respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all persons, including labourers. The framework emphasises the importance of fair labour practices, equal opportunities, and non-discrimination in the workplace, fostering a culture of responsibility and respect between employers and employees. Beyond that, it envisaged accountability between the sellers (employees) and buyers (employers of labour) with mutual respect.

Furthermore, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted in 1966 by the United Nations, and came into force in 1976, to which Nigeria is a signatory, also affirmed the rights of workers in articles 6,7, and 8, thus:

> State parties to the present Covenant recognise the right to work, which includes the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain a living by work that they freely choose or accept, and will take appropriate steps to safeguard this right. Everyone has the right to work, including the right to

[2] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1987). p.113.
[3] United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights", www.books.google.com.ng. (Accessed and retrieved, 3/6/2025).p .5.

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> gain one's living at work that is freely chosen and accepted. Everyone has the right to just working conditions, fair wages, a decent living for themselves and their family, equal pay for equal work, safe and healthy working conditions, equal opportunity for promotion, and rest and leisure. Everyone has the right to form and join trade unions, as well as the right to strike.[4]

These rights had been enshrined in the various Nigerian constitutions and several Decrees during the country's military regimes. Successive governments, whether civilian or military, had recognised that workers' rights were essential to sustain a viable workforce. Consequently, the contest between capital and labour had been reinforced by various Nigerian laws. For instance, section 17 subsection 3a, b, d, and e of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria stated that:

> The state shall direct its policy towards ensuring that – all citizens, without discrimination on any group whatever, have the opportunity for securing adequate means of livelihood as well as adequate opportunity to secure suitable employment; conditions of work are just and humane, and that there are sufficient facilities for leisure and social, religious and cultural life; the health, safety and welfare of all person in employment are safeguarded and not endangered or abused; there are adequate medical and health facilities for all persons; there is equal pay for equal work without discrimination on account of sex, or on any other ground whatsoever.[5]

These rights are non-negotiable. The 1979 Constitution of Nigeria, the UDHR, and the ICESCR envisioned a motivated work environment that fosters productivity and enables workers to give their best effort on any assigned task. Based on existing laws, workers are entitled to a safe working environment, the right to collective bargaining, the right to association, the prohibition of forced labour, and equal pay for equal work. These rights are legal claims in labour relations between workers and their employers, governed by labour and employment laws as outlined in the employment contract. A compromise could have severe consequences for workers. However, events in Nigeria regarding the human rights of Nigerian workers leave much to be desired. Workers are treated as if they have no rights due to low wages and threats of dismissal. By viewing workers' rights through the perspective of human rights, as highlighted in the UDHR and Nigerian laws, significant progress has been made toward safeguarding workers from exploitation, abuse, and mistreatment by employers.

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[4]ICESCR, Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People, https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/international-covenant-on-economic-social-and-cultural-rights. Accessed and Retrieved 3/6/2025.
[5] The 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

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Workers' Rights, State Responses and Human Rights Violations 1978 - 1998

Since the post-colonial period, successive governments have consistently prioritised workers' welfare in both civilian and military settings. However, the implementation of such welfare had always been a significant concern, as governments often reneged on their promises and viewed workers' demands for increased salaries and other welfare packages as confrontational to their administrations. With this in mind, workers' interests, without exaggeration, have been trampled upon by the Nigerian government. One notable example was the formation of the Nigerian Labour Congress.

Congress (NLC) in 1975.

Since independence, labour unions in Nigeria have been characterised by corruption, partisan politics, ideological differences, ethnic divisions, and leadership disputes.[6] Such had bred dissension within the labour movements, leading to labour unions' inability to effectively challenge the government's anti-worker decisions. When unions are divided, workers are unable to hold the government accountable for their rights, and governments usually exploit this to treat workers' rights with levity. But United Unions appear to pose a threat to government and employers because they could achieve their demands in unity. The fear of what the unity of unions might bring has led successive Nigerian governments to consistently strive to destabilise and undermine labour movements by issuing decrees to contain labour struggles and radicalism.

In 1975, for instance, Nigerian workers came together after many years of disunity owing to ideological differences. They formed the NLC, with Wahab Goodluck as President, and Olu Adegbesan, Aboyomi Ishola, Abubakar Abutu, and R. A. Ramos as Deputy Presidents. Others included Ezikiel Odeyemi, secretary; Paul Isagua, treasurer; Samuel Akpan; Solomon Olaolu Oduleye; Emmanuel Ijeh; and Okon Eshiet, Deputy Secretaries.[7] The idea was to form a front to avoid the oppression and the exploitation of Nigerian workers. When the government got wind of this before the inauguration of the NLC, the Murtala regime clamped down on the steering committee members and delegates of the newly formed unified union, brutally occupying the offices of the four unions that had decided to merge. The further invoked Section 1 of the Tribunal Decree of 1966 and established the Adejobi Commission of Inquiry to investigate the activities of the labour movement, following reports of a perennial conflict within it.

Moreover, barely twenty-four hours after signing the inquiry into law, Murtala Muhammad was assassinated. His successor, Olusegun Obasanjo, implemented the investigation's findings and banned trade union leaders for life, in an attempt to disrupt their activities and bring them into disrepute. Those banned

[6] S. O. Osoba, "The development of Trade Unionism in Colonial and Post-Colonial Nigeria" in I.A. Akinjogbin and S.O. Osoba (eds.) *Topics on Nigerian Economic and Social History* (Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press Ltd, 1980). p.206.
[7] The Nigeria Labour Congress, "Special Report: How *NLC Was Born", Labour News (August* 2004).p .14

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include the President, Wahab Goodluck; the Deputy President, R.A. Ramos; the General Secretary, Ezikiel Odeyemi; and the Treasurer, Paul Isagua. Others were: Deputy Assistant Secretaries, Samuel Udoh Bassey, Jackson Udofot Akpan, P.A. Nwaneri, and J.O. Orotunde. Labour leaders such as Michael Imoudu, M.J. Sule of the Railway Union, and K.A. Adeniran of the former Nigerian Workers' Council were instrumental.[8] In 1978, the Federal Government, under Olusegun Obasanjo, the successor to Murtala Mohammad, imposed its union on Nigerian workers by promulgating the Trade Union Decree, aiming to unite labour unions divided along ideological lines. That action undermined the trade unions' independence and violated Article 23(4) of the UDHR, which states that "Everyone has the right to form and join trade unions, and the right to strike."[9]

Moreso, there were several cases of human rights violations during the administration of President Shehu Shagari, such as the Black Maria tragedy, the Maitasin uprising, and the Bakolari massacre, among others. However, amidst these blatant, abysmal human rights abuses, the Nigerian workers had high hopes and expectations in the new administration of Shagari to correct the experiences they had with the military regimes. The military regimes,[10] particularly during Obasanjo's era, implemented anti-worker policies due to the oil glut. This led to the cancellation of car loans and other allowances, the imposition of a general wage freeze, and the adoption of several austerity measures that impoverished Nigerian workers.[11] Therefore, the workers had hoped that the emergence of a democratic dispensation in 1979 would correct the anomaly and better their economic positions. It was based on this understanding that the NLC members made themselves among the first set of groups to pay a courtesy visit to President Shehu Shagari in his Marina home, Lagos, to congratulate him on his victory at the polls and success at the Presidential Election Petition tribunal. The visit aimed to endear the workers to the new administration and to obtain assurances from the new government of its readiness to meet workers' demands in the future.

In President Shagari's residence, the NLC, through its national President, Mr. Hassan Adebayo Sunmonu, told the President, Shagari, that:

> It is particularly satisfying to note that you welcome and whole heartedly accepted to serve our country as its Chief Executive, realising that Nigerians have given you the mandate to build a truly united new Nigeria in which there will be peace, stability, prosperity and good government, that is not only responsible and accountable to the people, but also responsive to the needs and aspirations of the governed. Realising the maintenance of such a state of affairs will certainly qualify Nigeria to be, as we all hope, the pride of every Nigerian, every African, and all peace-loving

[8] *Ibid*
[9] The United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, .5.
[10] Akak Ekanem Etim and Onah Gregory Ajima, "The Imperatives of Nigeria's Economy as an Essential Element of Nigeria's Military Strategy and Commitment to Global Peace", *Bassey Andah Journal*, Vol. 15, (2022). p. 57.
[11] Bennard Steiner Ifekwe, "The Political Economy of Labour Strike in Nigeria's Second Republic, 1979-1983" (Uyo: Unpublished Paper, 2018). p .3.

> people worldwide. The Nigeria Labour Congress admires this quality in Mr President.[12]

After showering the President with encomiums, the NLC made known the expectations of Nigerian workers to the new administration. In response, Shagari told the NLC, thus:

> I am gratified that we have, today, a very responsible trade union body in our country. I sincerely look forward to a very fruitful cooperation with the NLC. I have a great deal of respect for the workers of this country who have toiled in silence to improve the economic position of this nation. Without doubt, the NLC has helped in no small measure to bring about this development. We believe that every worker is entitled to the fruits of labour, bearing in mind their responsibility to their employer and to this nation.[13]

The statements made by the NLC and Mr. President indicated that both the NLC and the new administration were ready to demonstrate mutual understanding, support, and cooperation. However, events later proved otherwise, as workers began to pile pressure on the new NLC executive to take action against the Shagari administration. Within one year in office, the NLC issued two ultimatums, culminating in the presentation of The Workers' Charter of Demands to the administration. This signalled the end of the romance and honeymoon with the new administration, demanding the establishment of a *Welfare State*[14] and a minimum wage of ₦300.00. The breakdown of what the ₦300. 00 minimum wage would cover for Nigerian workers were: ₦10.50 for food, ₦60 for accommodation, ₦30 for transportation, ₦15.00 for fuel and electricity, ₦15.00 for entertainment, ₦10 for healthcare, ₦20 for savings, ₦10 for education, ₦5 for drinks, ₦5 for kola and 25 for miscellaneous.[15] The administration became obstinate in its approach to workers' welfare, resulting in a strained relationship with workers that led to strikes.

It took relentless efforts for the administration to raise the salary structure and wages of Nigerian workers from ₦70 to ₦125. However, this was the same administration that later mismanaged the economy through frivolous spending and widespread corruption. Nevertheless, it reluctantly increased workers' wages from ₦70 in 1979 to ₦125 in 1981 after a prolonged battle with the labour union.[16] Richard Bourne corroborated this when he said that "a key factor in the undoing of the Second Republic lay in economic mismanagement, and the government's failure to respond to the oil glut of the early 1980s. It had been misled into extravagance by a doubling of the oil price from US$19 a barrel in 1979 to US$38 a barrel," without saving for the rainy days.[17] When oil prices

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[12] Umoh James Umoh, "Solving Workers Problems", *Daily Time Publication* (1 October 1980). p.46.
[13] Umoh James Umoh, Solving Workers' Problems. p.46.
[14] Bennard Steiner Ifekwe, The Political Economy of Labour Strike in Nigeria. p.7.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] Richard Bourne, Nigeria: *A New History of a Turbulent Century* (London: Zed Books, 2015).p .147.
[17] *Ibid.*

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fell, it wasn't easy to finance the budget. Workers were asked to make a sacrifice instead of the politicians. The politicians frittered away the country unchecked. A notable example was Umaru Dikko, Shagari's Minister. Osaghae explained that Umaru Dikko was the chairman of the notorious task force on rice, through which several millions of naira were believed to have been misappropriated.[18]

President Shagari and his men devoted too much time to politics and paid lip service to workers' welfare. His priority was the welfare of the politicians because he wanted to win a second term. They forgot that workers toiled day and night to produce the resources that served the nation, yet they continually struggled with paltry wage increases that could not meet many of their needs. Instead of acceding to the workers' demand, President Shagari claimed the NLC's demand was politically motivated. Henceforth, the Shagari-led Federal Government and his National Party of Nigeria (NPN) viewed workers' struggles for welfare as a political attempt to wrest power from him, suspecting that all demands and utterances of the NLC were capable of destabilising his administration. The frosty relationship between the NLC and the civilian administration continued until Muhammadu Buhari toppled the government on 31 December 1983.

The emergence of Buhari and Ibrahim Babangida did not yield any meaningful results for Nigerian workers. Their regimes were a telltale experience of suffering and unprecedented violations of workers' rights. The Buhari regime placed restrictions on the use of government vehicles in offices on an hourly basis, outlawed and banned workers from exercising their legitimate right of protest (industrial actions) against the breach of workers' rights, and embarked on massive retrenchment of workers and a plethora of decrees that impoverished the Nigerian workers until he was overthrown.[19] For IBB, his regime raised expectations among Nigerian workers by promising to abolish obnoxious anti-labour decrees promulgated by the Buhari regime, expand workers' freedom, increase their salaries, and improve their socioeconomic conditions.[20] This was later seen to be mere talk as the regime not only embarked on the withdrawal of subsidies on basic products and retrenchment of workers in the public sector in line with IMF dictates, but promulgated more decrees to repress protesting workers, including proscribing the NLC. In October 1985, the regime declared a national economic emergency that was to last for 15 months. As part of the emergency, the regime announced massive pay cuts for public sector workers, ranging from 2 to 20 per cent.

The amount accruing from this deduction was to be paid into the National Economic Recovery Fund (NERF). He fraternised with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and adopted the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) as a significant economic plan to drive Nigeria's economy. In the end, the Bretton Woods economic policy decapitated Nigeria's economy and wiped out middle-class earnings. Within the SAP policy framework, the regime created a foreign exchange market called the second tier, which was later renamed the

[18] Eghosa O. Osaghae, Crippled Giant.p .173.
[19] *Ibid.p.181.*
[20] Dan Agbese, *Fellow Nigerians: Turning Points in the Political and Economic of Nigeria* (Ibadan: Umbrella Book, 2000).p .92-7

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interbank, for weekly auctioning of the naira, abolished the import licensing scheme, liberalised trade, deregulated the economy by reviewing the indigenisation decree that was promulgated in the 1970s, and tightened monetary policies. The IBB regime devalued the naira, thereby making importation difficult. The devaluation of the naira led to inflation, which ultimately wiped out indigenous businesses that lacked the financial capability to compete with the dollars.[21]

Furthermore, the regime privatised and commercialised all state-owned businesses and removed subsidies on petroleum products, leading to higher inflation. However, the consequences of the regime's economic misdirection fell disproportionately on Nigerian workers, particularly through inflation stemming from the naira's devaluation. The value of salaries and wages was eroded, coupled with the removal of petrol subsidies. The cost of transportation skyrocketed, and the imposition of new fees, taxes, tolls, and levies drove food prices to unprecedented heights, making life difficult for low-income earners in Nigeria. These issues set the NLC and the government on a collision course. To have the government rescind its policies and to increase salaries and wages, the NLC embarked on strikes between March and April 1988. Instead of considering the NLC's demands and treating them as a partner in nation-building, the IBB regime saw the NLC as an "enemy to be crushed". The regime sought to infiltrate the NLC by imposing Mr. Takai Shamang, but was roundly defeated by the majority-backed Ali Chiroma. Since the IBB could not have its way, he banned the NLC and appointed an administrator, Mr. Michael Ogunkoya, to run the affairs of the union in 1988.[22]

Without a doubt, Nigerian workers and their unions have suffered all forms of human rights violations, proscription, and outright meddling in their internal activities, leading to a quest for freedom, social justice, and better living conditions. This quest necessitated the interests of the NLC, the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), and the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) to spearhead the revalidation of MKO Abiola's June 12, 1993, presidential election that the IBB government invalidated. Abiola received overwhelming support consequent upon Abiola and his party, the Social Democratic Party's (SDP) belief in "Socialist Welfarism", encapsulated in Abiola's "Hope 1993"[23] Campaign manifesto. He promised to reform the oil sector and provide prosperity for all Nigerians. His message of hope resonated widely across the country, particularly among Nigerian workers, who saw it as the only safe path to achieving economic liberation after years of military misrule.

With high hopes and expectations, the annulment of the election on June 26, 1993, followed. The annulment of the presidential election was a setback and a disappointment for the NLC, which had hoped that its political and economic liberation had arrived. Consequently, the Central Working Committee (CWC) of the NLC met in Lagos and, on June 28, 1993, issued a statement criticising the

[21] Julius O. Ihonvbere, A Critical Evaluation of the Failed 1990 Coup in Nigeria,p .612.
[22] Nigeria Labour Congress, Special Report, p.15.
[23] Frank Kokor, *Frank Kokori: The Struggle for June 12* (Ibadan: Safari Books Ltd, 2014).p .40

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IBB regime for annulling the election amidst deepening political and economic hardship in the country.[24] From that moment, the NLC and its affiliates worked together to have the Abacha government restore Abiola's mandate after removing Ernest Shonekan, the Head of the Interim Government (ING). The struggle to reclaim the mandate was voluntary. The NLC and its affiliates set aside all interests and pursued the retrieval of the June 12 mandate. Frank Kokori noted this when he opined:

> The struggle for June 12, you are not going to claim allowances. You are not going to claim arrears. You will not have salary increases. You are going to fight a political fight – a fight that will liberate your children and your children's children. You will not gain any monetary benefit. In fact, you will make sacrifices. Gain first political freedom, and everything else follows.[25]

The struggle took the form of strikes. The NLC, National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), and the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) had embarked on a crippling three-month-long strike to compel the Abacha government to cede power to MKO Abiola, who legitimately won the June 12, 1993, presidential election. Abacha saw the move as a threat to national security and moved to contain it. Thus, due to the crippling strikes by labour unions in Nigeria, the Sani Abacha regime was compelled to promulgate Decrees No. 9 and 10 (Dissolution of National Executive Council Decree) in 1994.[26] The Decrees dissolved the National Executive Councils of NLC, NUPENG, and PENGASSAN, barred the executives from accessing their union offices, deprived them of the check-off dues, jailed them, and appointed Sole Administrators to manage the unions' affairs.[27]

Toyin Falola summed up the experiences of the Nigerian workers in their struggle for their rights when he opined that: "these groups were dissolved and proscribed at different times during the military years. Their major weapons were strike actions and boycotts, although some of the protesting staff were later dismissed, meetings were disrupted, and labour leaders were frequently arrested."[28] However, the unions were restored, and their executives were released from prison when General Abdulsalami Abubakar emerged as the military head of state after Abacha's death.

The Struggle for Workers' Rights in the Democratic Dispensation, 1999 - 2024

Since Nigeria transitioned to democratic governance in 1999, the country has been struggling to balance economic liberalisation with the protection of labour rights. Despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments,

[24] Usman A. Tar, Organised labour and democratic struggles in Nigeria, *Information, Society and Justice*, Volume 2 No. 2, June 2009: pp 165-181
[25] Ibid. p.50.
[26] Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Witnessed to Justice: An Insider Account of Nigeria's Truth Commission* (Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2011).p. 212.
[27] Frank Kokori, The Struggle for June 12,p .89.
[28] Ibid.p.461.

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Nigerian workers continue to face systemic violations of their rights, often aggravated by state responses that prioritise political stability over social justice. Nigeria's labor rights are reinforced by several legal instruments namely: the 1999 Constitution which guarantees freedom of association, the right to peaceful assembly, and protection from discrimination, the Labour Act of 2004 which is a principal legislation governing employment relations, even though its scope is limited to manual and clerical workers, The Trade Unions Act, amended in 2005, that regulates union formation and collective bargaining, the Employees' Compensation Act of 2010 that provides for compensation in cases of workplace injury or death.

Institutionally, there is also the National Industrial Court of Nigeria (NICN), which plays a vital role in adjudicating labour disputes, and the Ministry of Labour and Employment, which is saddled with the responsibility of overseeing labour policies and dispute resolution, even though its effectiveness is often undermined by political interference and resource constraints. Despite the existence of all the legal protections, Nigerian workers' experiences reveal a dichotomy between law and practice. There are widespread wage violations, particularly in the public sector, where delayed or unpaid salaries are typical.[29] The rise of informal employment, estimated to account for over 80 per cent of the labour force, has further eroded workers' protections, as informal workers often lack contracts, social security, or access to dispute-resolution mechanisms.[30]

However, with the advent of democracy, it was believed that the Olusegun Obasanjo administration would give workers a sigh of relief. Instead of providing a new lease of life for Nigerian workers, his government imposed a new national minimum wage in 2000 without consultation, leading to tensions with state governors and labour unions. The administration also introduced the Monetisation Policy, converting fringe benefits into cash allowances to reduce waste and improve worker productivity, removing subsidies and increasing pump prices of petroleum products.[31] The removal of fuel subsidy triggered conflict between the government and the NLC, leading to strike action. In response, President Olusegun arrested and detained the union leaders, particularly Adams Oshiomole, in Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport. In response to Nigerian workers who had demanded only increased wages and better economic policies to enhance their well-being, President Olusegun Obasanjo submitted a Bill to the National Assembly in 2004 to amend the Trade Union Act. In the letter to the assembly leadership, Obasanjo opined that:

> I am sending this Bill to Amend the Trade Union Act to promote the democratisation of Labour, further strengthen it, enhance choice for all Nigerian workers in the true spirit of the constitution, comply with ILO requirements concerning democratisation in the organisation of Labour

[29] Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: Workers Protest Unpaid Salaries," HRW.org, (March 2021).
[30] National Bureau of Statistics, "Labour Force Survey Q4 2022," Abuja: NBS, 2023.
[31] Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Watch Political and Public Affairs Volume* 2(Lagos Kachifo Limited, 2014).pp.484-6

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> Unions and Centres, and consolidate the values of accountability and participation.[32]

Although Obasanjo told the National Assembly and the world that the amendment to the Trade Unions Act was primarily intended to provide other Nigerians with an opportunity to participate in union activities, a critical analysis revealed that the amendment had a political undertone. The fundamental aim was to break NLC's monopoly as the central union, which the government saw as too powerful and had caused the Obasanjo administration severe headaches due to its constant attacks and criticism of government policies and programs that were not labour-friendly. To corroborate this, the NLC, in their letter to the National Assembly, noted that:

> The Bill has profound implications for the NLC, including its very existence as a labour centre. He contains other provisions that seek to infringe on workers' unions' critical rights. This is in addition to the real threats it poses to democracy and national interest, which lend credence to the fears and anxieties expressed by Nigerians, including non-workers, about its provisions.[33]

For the NLC, it was believed the bill was meant to deregister the NLC as a central labour organisation, impose restrictions on workers' ability to use strikes to express their grievances with employers, ban strikes in the aviation sector, grant the power to register new unions, and give the Minister of Labour the authority to proscribe recalcitrant unions. It also aimed to give him leverage to impose restrictions on the administration of the check-off clause. However, the bill ultimately opened trade union activities. For example, the Trade Union Congress was established after the passage of the Trade Union Act in 2005, breaking the NLC's monopoly on determining the future of employer-employee relations.

Additionally, Jonathan's administration saw increased engagement with labour unions, including negotiations over minimum wage adjustments. The national minimum wage was raised to ₦18,000 in 2011. However, the implementation was not across the states. Protests over the removal of fuel subsidies in January 2012 later plagued Jonathan's government. This was done suddenly, without giving Nigerian workers notice to prepare for the hardship that was to follow. The sudden removal of the fuel subsidy without notice to the public caused untold hardship to Nigerian workers and those who had travelled for the New Year holiday. They faced increased transportation costs and higher living expenses in their communities—an occurrence they never anticipated. The subsidy removal led to intense protests across different state capitals, with labour leaders leading them. Besides that, the administration was also known for promoting democratic reforms, including electoral transparency. Still, it was stampeded by incessant insecurity and human rights abuses, especially in

[32] The Nigeria Labour Congress, Obasanjo's Letter to the National Assembly, Labour News (August 2004).p .4.
[33] The Nigeria Labour Congress, "NLC Writes the National Assembly", *Labour News* (August 2004).p .5

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Nigeria's North-East due to Boko Haram insurgency. The insecurity in the North East and opposition elements' corruption allegations led to his defeat in the 2015 Presidential Election.[34]

Consequently, the Buhari administration emerged in 2015 and introduced a new minimum wage of ₦30,000 in 2019, but many states failed to fully implement it. The government extended a ₦2 trillion bailout package to help states meet their salary obligations. Despite these efforts, Buhari's tenure was marked by widespread repression. The 2020 End SARS protests against police brutality culminated in the alleged killing of peaceful protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate. Besides that, arbitrary arrests were common, internet shutdowns and media censorship became standard tools of state control.[35] Labour unions were often sidelined, and industrial actions were met with legal injunctions and threats of proscription. The Union suppression was a significant concern. While the laws allow for unionisation, state agents often intimidate or deregister unions that challenge government policies. For instance, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) faced repeated threats of proscription during its industrial actions, particularly in 2022, as it aimed to end its eight-month strike.

When that did not work, the Federal Government approached NICN to compel ASUU to suspend the strike. When ASUU finally suspended the strike and resumed, the Federal Government responded by paying them half a month's salary because ASUU only worked for half a month, and invoked section 43 (1) – (14) of the Trade Dispute Act that stated, "an employer has the right to withhold salaries of an employee for work not done". Under the Trade Disputes Act, the Federal Government withheld academic staff's salaries for eight months after they went on strike in 2022.[36]

However, Buhari's tenure ended on 29 May 2023, and President Bola Tinubu was ushered in. Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration began with the controversial removal of fuel subsidies without understanding its effect on Nigerian workers and ordinary Nigerians on the streets. The worst part was that nothing was done to cushion the impact of the fuel subsidy removal. The implication is that the removal of fuel subsidies has triggered hyperinflation and economic hardship nationwide. Labour unions, including the NLC and TUC, have criticised the move and demanded a new pay rise. In response, Tinubu approved a ₦70,000 minimum wage following a series of meetings, strikes, and actions culminating in the arrest and detention of NLC Comrade Joe Ajero in 2024. Even with a ₦70,000 minimum wage, workers complained of worsening living standards, workplace repression, unpaid salaries, and limited access to healthcare.[37]

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[34] Ikechukwu Eze, 10 years of Jonathan's Historic Call: Remembering Watershed Moment for Nigeria's Democracy, *TheCable (*31 March, 2025). www.thecable.ng
[35] Cheta Nwanze, "Buhari's Legacy: A Presidency of Unkept Promises", Business Day (16 July 2025). www.businessday.ng
[36] Frank Ikpefan, "ASUU Vs FG: Who Wins the No Work No Pay?" *The Nation* (26 August 2022). www.thenationonlineng.net
[37] Seyifunmi Abdulazeez, "Atiku Slams Tinubu Over Unpaid Workers, Rising Repression, The Guardian News (13 July 2025). www.guardian.ng

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It could be argued that Tinubu's economic policies have disproportionately affected low-income workers and increased inequality. This observation was reinforced by the United States 2024 State of Human Rights report, when it was reported that "The National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Act 2024 doubled the minimum wage to 70,000 naira ($47.90) per month. Despite the increase, currency devaluation meant the minimum wage was no longer higher than the poverty income level.[38] They further noted that, "while Nigerians are urged to endure economic hardship, some governors were splurging billions on new government houses. Such alleged lack of fiscal responsibility fuels inequality and erodes public trust".[39] There is no gainsaying that the majority of the burden of the economic misdirection falls on the Nigerian workers. It was upon this understanding that the NLC asserted that:

> On the whole, the NLC could not be an idle spectator in the nation's affairs, including the direction of public policy, governance, and the entire democratic process. Our mission in the stewardship of the NLC and corporate is to defend the interests of workers, their families, and the working people, pursue a decent work agenda in the world of work, as well as contribute to empowering the people and the nation to attain good and people-driven governance, peace, stability, and democratic participation.

It is this idea of speaking out against the unjust policies of many regimes and administrations that usually puts the NLC and the government in power on a collision course. Often, these governments don't believe the NLC and other unions are capable of engaging constructively on government issues and policies. Since workers' interests were not always central to government policies and programs, labourers' reactions are often viewed through the lens of the opposition. Most past and present governments in Nigeria loathe opposition; constructive engagements are not tolerated. The temerity of the labour union to constructively criticise the government is not what they should be allowed to do. Over time, these governments failed to understand that Nigerian workers bear the brunt of bad economic policies. Additionally, these workers are Nigerians, and they are constitutionally empowered to speak and advocate for what they believe should be theirs. Toyin Falola corroborated this when he said: "The Nigerian Labour Organisation (NLO), the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), and other professional bodies needed to resort to strike actions to make demands in their sectors. It was like a rebellion, and great for the country, because it forced elected officials to do the right thing for their constituents".[40]

Conclusion

[38] The United States, "Nigeria's N70,000 Minimum Wage Incapable of Lifting Millions Out of Poverty", The Sun News (21 August 2025). www.sunnewsonline.ng.org. (accessed and retrieved 24 August 2025).
[39] Emmanuel Addeh, "United States Embassy Throws Jab at Nigeria's Lavish Spending Amid Growing Poverty", *Thisday Newspaper (8 August* 2025). www.thisdaylive.com (accessed and retrieved 24 August 2025).
[40] Toyin Falola, Understanding Modern Nigeria: Ethnicity, Democracy and Development (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). p. 535.

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The study revealed that the quest for workers' rights has been clouded in continuous advocacy, strikes, legal suppression, and slow labour reforms in Nigeria between 1978 and 2024. Although significant milestones had been achieved, the outcomes are often not proportional to the scale of the struggle. Governments frequently fail to recognise that workers are entitled to fundamental rights under both international and domestic laws. These are rights not given as favours but earned through their labour and protected by law. The neglect of workers' rights has fueled a cycle in which wages and working conditions are arbitrarily set, and labour rights are denied or rolled back during periods of economic or political instability. Despite these challenges, Nigerian workers have persistently fought for better wages, improved working conditions, and social protections through different labour unions, particularly the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC).

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