

ROLE OF UNIONS IN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS: THE GUIDANCE COUNSELLOR'S INPUT

Dr. O.O.Pitan

¹,*School Of Education National Open University of Nigeria Lagos , Nigeria*

I. INTRODUCTION

The focus will be on the role of the unions in the management of industrial relations in the country. This role can be considered in terms of contributions to the welfare of their members, industrial peace, democratic processes in industrial relations, productivity, and economic and social progress in relation to guidance counselor in the industrial setting .Suffice it to say that all these are important elements in good industrial relations.The Southern Nigeria Civil Service Union formed in 1912 is believed to be the first trade union in the country. However, by 1976, when the trade union movement in the country was being restructured, there were nearly 1,000 trade unions dotted all over the country and registered with the Registrar of Trade Unions. The total membership had risen from 274,126 in 1940 to about 900,000 in 1976 (Sonubi, 1986).

Trade unions in Nigeria started as voluntary organizations of workpeople aimed at securing improvements in the wages and working conditions of their members. By 1938, the government persuaded itself or was persuaded to enact a law to regulate the formation and activities of trade unions. It was opposed to the British Common law which impinged on their activities; there was a tacit recognition of the role of the trade unions [the lives of their members and the community] (Joseph, Mire, 1956; Sonubi, 1987). In 1938, the trade unions showed interest in the wages and working conditions of their members including successful agitation for wage increase in the light of the rise in the cost of living after the World War I. The same pressure was kept up during and after the World War II leading to the grant of cost of-living allowance to the workers.

However, until recently, the trade unions were too weak and divided to make any appreciable impact on the lives of their members. By 1978, the trade unions were transformed into organizations of employees and employers, aimed at protecting the interests of their members. The self-employed artisans were dropped by the wayside. The voluntary principle underlining membership was modified in the following ways. Firstly, the intent of policy is that all employees should belong to one trade union or the other, but any employee is free to opt out. Secondly, employees are free to join designated unions , the appropriate unions for their industry or occupation. Thirdly, the 42 National trade unions of junior employees must affiliate to the single, designated, central labour organization. Fourthly, employees designated as projections of management were barred from joining the same union as their subordinates. Thus, although no employee is forced to join or remain in a trade union, the freedom to join or not is subject to the law of the land. Finally, employers and employees cannot join the same trade union.In a more detailed form, the benefits were expressed in the following words: “The union successfully got good collective agreement , for the members throughout the country”. “Better conditions of service housing allowance, transport allowance, leave allowance and gratuity benefits”. Others mentioned better leadership, education of members, same policy throughout the country, more positive responds by managements, greater independence by the union, borrowing from others, recognition by employers, implementation of Onosode Commission report, speaking with one voice, building own secretariat, termination of sub-contracts, (which was taking away the jobs of some members), eradication of daily paid system, financial buoyancy for the unions, building of houses for workers by employing and allocating to “even labourers”, extension of medical facilities, to ten members of employees’ family among others. The benefits to the members, which will be expressed in both personal and collective terms, were attributed to the new trade union’s structure. 48.9%, in fact, indicated that their trade unions were participating in socio-economic projects for the help of the members (Ghosh, 1957 in Sonubi 1987).The employers, without pressures from the trade unions, might not have conceded anything to their workers no matter the economic buoyancy of their organizations. Besides, the trade unions engaged in self-help. For instance, it was recently reported that items so far distributed by the NLC-backed Multi-purpose Consumer Co-operative Society as at April 1984 included:

*1710 bags of rice;
1018 cartons of milk;
302 cartons of sugar;
500 cartons of sardine;
204 cartons of corned beef;
81 bags of stock fish; and many other commodities.*

A period of rising prices and acute shortage of national commodities, workers' co-operatives are veritable insurance against drastic decline in the standard of living; Sonubi, (1987).

II. INDUSTRIAL PEACE

Going by the statistics of trade disputes and strikes, the years 1977, 1979, 1980, 1981 and 1982 were among the worst years in recent terms of industrial warfare. In obvious reference to this development, Mr. M. A. Tokunboh, a former General Secretary of the Nigeria Trade Union Congress and a former Permanent Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Labour, had this to say at a recent Industrial Forum: "The need for an open discussion of the role of unions in the life of this great country has become necessary because of the serious hardships that trade union action, by way of industrial unrest, have been inflicting in the past eighteen years" (Cook, 1958). However, while trade unions could not be absolved from responsibility for incidents of strikes and work-stoppages, the notorious fact is that, the quiet search of many trade unions for a dialogue and accommodation by the employers tends to be covered. For instance, while it is true that some trade unions sometimes invoke strikes and work-stoppages through vacillation, in the circumstance, it is misleading to put the responsibility at the door steps of the trade unions.

Democratic Processes

The role of trade unions is influenced by their nature. Thus, they seek and bring more members into the union's fold, mostly, on voluntary basis. They represent the workers; engage in collective bargaining and annulations; take part in settlement of trade disputes; and they seek and participate in decision-making on matters of interest to them. As the London "Economist" (11th January, 1975) puts it: ". . . the right of working people to be informed about, to be consulted about and, yes, help decide about their working lives and that of the company they work for—whose success or failure normally matters far more to them than it does to any but, the most imprudent investor, who has all his eggs in one basket" is one of the critical factors in industrial relations. However, while the trade unions continue to press forward in their insistence on democratic processes, far too many employers are dodging or ignoring the pressures. Similarly, while trade unions are urging employers to follow democratic processes, far too many of them are refusing to submit to democratic processes within their organizations. As the report of the Adebiyi Tribunal clearly shows, the internal affairs of some trade unions were allowed to pass to the control of a few individuals leading to a situation in which the interests of the members and the nation were sacrificed for the interests of a few privileged groups in the Unions. This situation needs correction (Otobo, 1983). It can now be seen that the contributions of our trade unions to democratic processes are vital even though they are one-sided. A trade union that does not subscribe to democratic processes internally will lose any moral authority to urge democratic processes on the employers or the government. On the other hand, a trade union which subscribes to democratic processes both in relation to its members and the other side of industry is likely to contribute significantly to good industrial relations. This is so because good industrial relations are more likely to result from negotiated rather than imposed settlement.

III. PRODUCTIVITY

Good industrial relations are more likely to be achieved if the parties pursue a policy of economic abundance or increasing productivity. This is so because such a policy is the key to higher level of living for the workers, survival of management, and vitality of the organization. In fact, in an adverse economic situation as Nigeria finds itself now, commitment on all sides to increasing productivity can help to restore the health of the economy and provide impetus for growth and performance. A pertinent question is what has been the role of the trade unions in this matter?

Basically, many trade unions believe rather erroneously that productivity is a problem for the management. Nigerian trade unions are no exceptions. However, directly or indirectly, trade union policies and actions affect productivity either in a positive or negative manner. For instance, by indulging in restrictive practices, by failing to keep the peace during the duration of an agreement, by demanding and obtaining wage increases not related to productivity, by protecting corruption, by placing union security above the survival of management and their enterprises, by resisting innovation and change, and the like,

trade unions are said to be stumbling blocks to increasing productivity. However, such practices are found mostly in countries where the trade unions are strong and they have a long tradition. This is seldom the case in developing countries where the unions are relatively weak and the employers relatively strong. For instance, since the beginning of the current economic recession, trade unions and union members are mostly on the receiving end. From the practical experience of the unions and their members, they know that they stand a better chance when productivity is increasing and the economy is buoyant. As a result, there are many instances where the trade unions and the employers have come together to work out the survival of their enterprises. However, more importantly, although our trade unions like many others sometimes take actions which may appear to, or may actually impede productivity, they are contributing to increased productivity in some other ways. Firstly, by insisting on humane conditions of work, by putting pressures on employers to become more efficient, and by observing terms of collective agreement, our trade unions have helped to sustain good morale in industry, which is a pre-requisite to good industrial relations. Secondly, by supporting organized change in industry, less painful and therefore more acceptable. Thirdly, by protecting the workers against physical and other hazards in industry, trade unions are helping to ensure that workers are not rated as expendable items in industry. Evidence abound about these contributions before and during the present economic difficulties. With the erratic supply of certain inputs such as water and power, the shortfall in certain raw material, and falling standard of living in recent times, the flow of goods and services has come to depend, to an incalculable extent, on the resourcefulness of the people at work (Sonubi, 1992). It can, therefore, be seen that the trade unions affect productivity in many ways, though the policies and practices vary from one union to the other. It must also be admitted that the trade unions can do a lot more to encourage increase in productivity by taking direct as well as indirect interest in this matter. In this connection, negotiations should be based on realistic assessment of benefits to all. Similarly, the trade unions need to take a longer view of the situation which face them rather than a short-term view. They also need to discourage practices which undermine productivity.

IV. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

Many trade unions normally focus attention on the industrial front in their activities and functions. Nigerian trade unions are no exceptions. To do otherwise may be to lose its identity and resource base. However, increasingly, the trade unions are getting more involved in broad social issues, depending on the degree of the consciousness of their members. This is particularly so in Nigeria where the role of the trade unions in the Independence struggle is widely acclaimed. The involvement of the trade union in broad social issues is rooted in a realization that social problems do not recognize industrial boundaries. Accordingly trade unions in Nigeria as elsewhere, seek to be involved in the consideration and implementation of social and economic policies at the national and state levels. Among the institutions which stand as embodiment of the participatory approach in industrial relations is National Labour Advisory Council, on which labour is represented, and which has done some work on the revision of our labour laws. In addition, trade unions have exerted themselves in various other ways to influence decisions at the national level, including the stand of our trade unions on some recent decrees by the Federal Military Government. Again, it can be seen that while trade unions are formed basically to enable the workers, on the basis of collective strength and wisdom, trade unions and their members have been acquiring to deal with labour problems and interest in larger social issues, be they human rights, the prevailing social order, or international relations. Trade unions are, in fact, being pressed into the service of the entire community for a number of reasons. Among them is the fact that government alone cannot carry forward the task of development. Additionally, there is increasing recognition that development must be negotiated and that social justice can be achieved through better management of resource and effective consultation.

Other functions of Trade Union

- 1) It provides a framework to co-ordinate the activities of trade unions in Nigeria
- 2) It consults with governments on matters affecting industrial relations – wage agreements, etc.
- 3) It represents collectively the trade union movement with regard to industrial relations and legislative and administration matters.
- 4) On the request of affiliated unions, it may negotiate at national level with employers' organisations on policy and principles relating to pay and conditions of employment.
- 5) It promotes unity within the trade union movement as a whole.
- 6) It aims to reconcile views and relationships of unions that have similar unions to help strengthen their structures.
- 7) It provides affiliated trade unions with advice and information like legal advice and educational information and facilities.

V. GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS INPUT

The Guidance Counsellor has the competency to facilitate career/life choices through the lifespan, educational choices, personal choices and to assess through the life span. The Counsellor will have knowledge of the major vocational guidance theories, understand the theoretical origins of career development work, and use a theoretical framework, through which to understand individual career development. This, he does in cooperation with the trade union. The Guidance Counsellor also has the ability to describe change and transition in the context of lifespan care development, help individuals adapt to and manage change and transition as well as helping individuals to understand and accept that change and transition are normal parts of life (OECD, Paris, 2004).The Guidance Counsellor has the ability to describe work/life balance in the context of lifespan career development such as understand the need to balance the multiple roles assumed by individuals throughout their career development. Integrate into practice that making a living is only one component of one's identity. Understand that individuals' values and the environment are interdependent, fostering career management strategies by helping individuals develop the skills to effectively manage their careers, helping individuals understand that career management is a lifelong process, understand how societal trends play a major role in career management, promoting individual's independence and self confidence. Increasing individual's awareness of opportunities and options, understanding and agreeing on possible outcomes and working out steps needed to make and implement a decision , so individuals can achieve goals (OECD, Paris, 2004).

The Guidance Counsellor can refer individuals to the appropriate sources by assisting clients in selecting services and resources to meet their needs, helping individuals to develop skills for research, assisting individuals in obtaining services outside the boundaries of the Counsellor's expertise, facilitating case management. The Guidance Counsellor can conduct a need assessment by assisting individuals to identify their career development needs holistically in the context of their lives, determine whether individuals' needs are within the scope of practice of the Counsellor and, if not, determine appropriate referral. He can also provide a context for the career development service, assist the Counsellor and individual to negotiate and contract the service to be provided, assist individuals to identify their work related interests, skills, knowledge and values and help individuals to become self-confident, self-reliant, resilient, enterprising and prepared to match the demands of knowledge based economies and fluid societal change(OECD, Paris, 2004).When working with young people, the Guidance Counsellor have the ability to consult and collaborate with parents in relation to their children's educational progress and development, assist teachers/tutors to enhance their formal and non-formal methodologies in the use of guidance resources in a school/adult setting, facilitate teaching colleagues in implementing appropriate aspects of guidance programme within the curriculum(OECD, Paris, 2004).When working with adult clients, the Guidance Counsellor has the ability to facilitate their successful engagement, with appropriate education/training, support the individual in long term planning and the guidance of a personal portfolio, provide continuity of support across modules and tutors/trainers, facilitates adult education colleagues to implement appropriate aspects of guidance within the adult education programme. The Guidance Counsellor is involved in personal/social guidance. This requires the capacity to assist clients to develop self-awareness of their personal values, attitudes, beliefs and those of others, help clients identify strategies for building self-esteem and that of others, facilitate clients in identifying and expanding existing coping strategies, assist clients to understand the importance of emotional expression and develop appropriate ways to express feelings in different contexts, assist clients develop their communication skills, help clients in understanding the importance of positive thinking and help clients develop the ability to use this life skill effectively and assist clients in understanding the impact of stress on emotional and social health and assist them in developing personal skills for managing stress. The Guidance Counsellor identifies when the use of an assessment is appropriate, which test instrument to use, test interpretation, which is, interpreting, and explaining to a client the results of an assessment and the implications thereof (OECD, Paris, 2004).

In terms of labour market education and training, the Guidance Counsellor will have knowledge of the range of educational training opportunities and an awareness of the available. The Guidance Counsellor will have an understanding of how the labour market operates, its trends and likely future direction. The Guidance Counsellor will maintain up to date labour market information. The Guidance Counsellor will have the skills to facilitate individuals in their labour market preparation and job search explorations which could include interview preparation, CV preparation and letters of application. The Guidance Counsellor will have a knowledge of organizational and employment structures. Guidance Counsellors recognize, understand, and respect diversity and conduct their work in sensitive ways. Counsellors should pay attention particularly to the language they use in conversation with clients and avoid outdated words or terms which may stereotype or cause offence to individuals (OECD, Paris, 2004).

Guidance Counsellor has the ability to maintain client records, using planning and time management skills. He also has the ability to follow appropriate procedures and policies within their employment, establish and maintain collaborative work relationships, evaluate the service provided, liaise with the appropriate relevant bodies. In times of information and resource management, Guidance Counsellor recognizes the need for systematic, efficient, and effective information and resource management in their work, have a knowledge of legislation governing freedom of information, data, protection, and so on. He also has a responsibility to ensure that current information is gathered, organized and disseminated to provide clients with the widest range of options (OECD, Paris, 2004).

Counselling Skills

Counselling is central to the work of the Guidance Counsellor. Guidance and counselling is an interactive process between counsellor and client, which can involve working with the individual in a one-to-one or group setting. The skills of empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard facilitate clients in identifying options, making decisions, and resolving difficulties. These skills also include: active listening, clarifying, paraphrasing, setting boundaries, contracting, challenging, focusing, motivating, utilizing non verbal communications, probing, questioning, reflecting feelings, prioritizing issues, structuring and summarizing a session and reviewing progress. Guidance and Counselling may involve facilitating and assisting clients with emotional issues, social issues, cultural issues, relationship and developmental issues, developing self management skills, coping with transitions, coping with crises, promoting and developing personal awareness, working with feelings, perceptions, and internal and external conflict, economic and labour market issues.

VI. CONCLUSION

One of the conclusions which can be drawn from our discussion so far is that trade unions have a vital role to play not only in the management of industrial relations but in the progress of the community. This role has many dimensions, some of which were discussed in this paper A second conclusion which can be drawn is the role of the trade unions in relation to collective bargaining, various services to their members including education and information, and participation in social and economic decision-making can have positive or negative effect on industrial relations. However, in the Nigerian case, the effects on the whole have been salutary rather than otherwise. Without the participation of the unions in many areas of decision-making in industrial relations, some ingredients of good industrial relations which are mentioned earlier are likely to elude the country. Thirdly, although individuals are involved in industrial relations with or without the support of trade unions, trade unions provide an additional advantage of organized approach based on collective strength and wisdom. The trade union wields some power over its members and this power can be channelled to constructive use. Fourthly, a key issue in the role of the unions has been how to encourage innovation, flexibility, professionalism, a long rather than short-term view of their role and interests, and greater effectiveness in carrying out union policies and programmes. Resolution of these issues is critical to union-members, union employer, and union-government relations. Looking back on the role of our trade unions in industrial relations, in recent years, one can say there is reason for cautious satisfaction rather than despair. They have come up within a short period of time. They have learnt so much and so fast within this short period of time, and if the past provides any guide to the future, they are likely to excel themselves in the foreseeable future. However, the trade unions can be helped by a positive view that, they are assets rather than liabilities in the management of industrial relations.

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