Book Review

Title: Labour Movement in Nigeria, Past and Present
Author: M.A. Tokunboh
Publisher: Lantern Books, Lagos, 1985.

Mr. M.A. Tokunboh is eminently qualified to write about the labour movement in Nigeria. He has been involved in labour union activities since 1936 when as a newly employed member of the staff of Nigerian Railways, he helped to found a new trade union. He later served Nigerian labour in many other capacities: as a secretary of a central trade union; as a leader of Industrial Relations at the University of Ibadan and as a Permanent Secretary in the Federal Ministries of Labour and Establishments (1962-1972).

Mr. Tokunboh is sympathetic to the cause of trade unionism. He regards a trade union as a progressive force essential both to the worker and the nation at large. He had access to highly valuable source materials (gazettes and official documents) on labour affairs. In this book, he discusses, in scholarly manner, the origins and raison d'etre of trade unions and documents his sources.

Mr. Tokunboh traces the origin of trade unionism in Nigeria to the last decade of the nineteenth century. The first association of labour men in Nigeria go back to that period. The Mechanics Mutual Aid Provident and Improvement Association, was formed (1893). It was also in this period that the first industrial unrest took place in the country. The Public Works Department (PWD) employees stopped work for three days in 1897 in protest against a change in working hours (p. 19). However, the formation of the first modern trade union in the country had to wait till 1912. This

was the Nigerian Civil Service Union. The convener of the inaugural meeting of this union was a Sierra Leonean civil servant who had been transferred to Nigeria from his native country, in which a Civil Service Union had been in existence, (pp. 19-20).

The newly formed labour unions in Nigeria were tolerated by officials of the colonial government. In Britain and most of the western world, newly emergent trade unions had to do many battles with their employers and governments before they were accorded recognition. By the time trade unionism began in Nigeria, British labour unions had won their fight for recognition and labour unionism had become accepted in Britain as a fact of the modern state. Coming from a country in which trade unions were recognised, officials of the colonial government could not have been surprised or unduly alarmed at the emergency of trade unions in Nigeria.

World War I slowed down the pace of trade union activities in Nigeria. When it ended in 1918, trade union activities picked up again, and soon became more intensive, as well as extensive, than in the pre-war period. The cost of living had risen considerably during the war, and it remained high after the war ended. Because of this, virtually all labour associations in the country, including a union of European civil servants which was founded in 1919, demanded increases in wages and better conditions of service. Many unions resorted to strikes. The first strike that spread to all sections of the country took place in January 1920 (pp. 23-24).

Nigeria workers found themselves in a grave situation when the Great Depression set in in the late twenties. As cost-saving measures, many employers - government and private - retrenched workers, adjusted working hours, cut pay, and treated trade unions with greater severity. But their high-handedness did not stem the tide of labour agitation. Many new trade unions, among them the Nigerian Union of Teachers (1931), were

founded. The period witnessed an increase in strikes, with the Railway Department (where Michael Imoudu was an outstanding leader) in the forefront.

The colonial government introduced a regulatory law in 1938 to guide the activities of labour unions. Mr. Tokunboh shows that this was a belated implementation of a directive from Colonial Secretary Lord Passfield in 1930 that British officials in the colonies should tolerate and supervise trade unions and introduce labour laws to regulate their activities (pp. 25-26).

The 1938 law (Trade Union Ordinance 1938) required the registration of trade unions, the inspection of unions' accounts by government and the training of union leaders in Britain. It set guidelines for the resolution of labour disputes and for regular consultations between employers and employees. By this law, trade unionism in Nigeria became firmly established.

The enactment of the Trade Union Ordinance of 1938 gave impetus to the formation (and registration) of many more trade unions, but it neither lessened the suffering of workers nor stemmed the tide of their protests. Following the outbreak of World War II in 1939 the suffering of workers increased, and so did their protest. To strengthen their bargaining position, workers began to work towards the formation of a central trade union. Their efforts culminated in July 1943 in the founding of the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUC). The general strike of June-August 1945 lasted for 45 days. The executive of the TUC neither called the strike nor made any meaningful efforts to bring it to an end. Dissatisfied with the

executive's performance during the strike, the Congress voted them out of office when the strike ended (pp. 44-47).

Following the formation of new political parties in Nigeria after the war, partisan politics became an important cause of fission in the central trade unions that were formed in the country. This tendency could be observed as from 1945 when the TUC affiliated itself to the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC), which since 1944 had been the only political party worth its name in the country. After Egbe Omo Oduduwa (forerunner of the Action Group) was formed and began to compete with the NCNC for workers' support, in the heat of antagonisms between the Igbo and the Yoruba in Lagos, some members of the TUC demanded that affiliation to political parties be ended. A majority of the delegates at the December 1948 congress of the TUC voted to end the affiliation. Dissatisfied with this decision, the minority who lost the vote pulled out of the TUC and in May 1949 formed a rival central trade union, the Nigerian National Federation of Labour (NNFL), which affiliated itself to the NCNC (pp. 45-50).

The World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), for a long time the world's sole federation of central trade unions, split in 1948. Alleging that communist countries were using the federation to promote communism in the world, western nations pulled out of the WFTU and formed a rival federation of labour unions, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). Both the WFTU and the ICFTU wooed leaders of Nigerian central trade unions for affiliation.

The government tried from time to time to mediate in conflicts between the various central trade unions. But neither the government's efforts nor that of the labour leaders themselves could bring about lasting unity in the labour movement (pp. 52-59).

In very trying periods, however, labour was able to rise above its differences and present a united front. On such occasions leadership was provided, not by a single central union, but a committee of executives of all existing central unions. The most important of such committees was the Joint Action Committee (JAC), formed in August 1963 and 1964 which ended favourably for labour (pp. 61-64).

Taking a close look at the activities of the various central labour unions in Nigeria (pp. 68-79), Mr. Tokunboh shows clearly their common problems and weaknesses. Local unions affiliated to them hardly paid their contributions. Nearly all the central unions depended on funds from foreign labour unions or international labour federations to carry out their activities. These overseas labour organisations exercised remote control over Nigerian central unions. No proper records of constituent unions, or of the activities of the central unions themselves, were kept. There were many leadership squabbles. All this greatly reduced the capacity of the unions to champion the interests of Nigerian workers.

The bulk of Mr. Tokunboh's evidence on the activities of central labour unions comes from the report of the Justice Adebiyi Tribunal of Enquiry into the activities of trade unions in Nigeria. Appointed in February 1976, the tribunal submitted its report in the following August.

From September 1974 leaders of the four biggest central trade unions in the country started making serious efforts to form one central body. Their efforts led in December 1975 to the formation of a union called the Nigerian Labour Congress. However, the new military government led by Murtala Mohammed did not recognise it. Rather, it proceeded to appoint an Administrator to wind up the activities of all central labour unions in the country, and to work towards the formation of one central labour union. The new, government-recognised central labour union, the Nigerian Labour

Congress (NLC), inaugurated in February-March 1978, is "a child of government policy" (p. 106).

Highlights of the law establishing the new NLC (Decree No. 22 of 1978) as the only central labour union in Nigeria are: that trade unions be formed along industrial lines and be granted automatic recognition by employers of labour; that no trade union be affiliated to any foreign or international labour union except the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU); and that no trade union or the central union (NLC) should receive funds from any foreign or international labour organisation. Others are that all recognised trade unions be funded by the compulsory check-off method and that part of the money collected be used to pay each union's contribution to the NLC; and that all unions be headed by full-time executives (pp. 108-113).

Our author demonstrates (pp. 104-106) that there has been a new-found sense of unity as well as greater vibrancy in central labour unionism in Nigeria since the NLC was founded in 1978. But, as he also showed, some of the age-old problems that hampered the progress of past central unions reappeared: the failure (or refusal) of some unions to pay their dues to the NLC, and ideological differences between the left and right in the labour movement. At the NLC's triennial congress in Kano in 1981, a contest between the left (represented by incumbent Hassan Sunmonu) and the right (represented by David Ojeli) for the leadership of the Congress threatened the stability of the country's sole central union.

Perhaps the most topical issue in labour circles in Nigeria today is the recent exclusion, by Decree No. 17 of 1986, of the Academic Staff Union of University (ASUU) from the NLC. The Trade Unions (Amendment) Decree No. 22 of 1978 also disqualified Senior Staff Association from being affiliated to the NLC. In addition, the decree makes the deduction of

union dues from the salaries of members of senior staff associations optional.

Aside from bargaining with employers and government for better conditions of service for workers, trade unions also exist for the purpose of making workers better able to contribute to national development. While government would wish to have weak trade unions that cannot fight for higher wages for their members, it is unlikely that it wants trade unions that cannot contribute positively to national progress.

In the Preface to his book, Mr. Tokunboh declares himself "a narrator of events" and states that he "tried as much as possible to avoid giving a political stamp and interpretation to any of them". To a large extent he succeeds in doing this. While he condemns the corruption and ineptitude of some union leaders, he refrains from passing any definite judgements on the political and ideological conflicts in Nigerian labour history. Although he points out the setbacks caused by the conflicts, he does not condemn or approve of affiliation to political parties or international labour federations; nor does he take sides with any of the contending groups. He is an advocate of the independence of the labour movement from government control, yet he does not denounce the successful attempts made by the military governments led by Murtala Muhammed and Olusegun Obasanjo to attenuate that independence: it is only some specific provisions of the governments' labour policies that he criticises. He makes a number of suggestions intended to make labour unions more viable under the existing economic system. But he does not say whether the system is good enough for labour or whether it should be changed for another one.

To this reviewer, the author's effort to suppress his political and ideological interest in the book does not deserve applause. One would like to stress, in conclusion, that despite the author's avoidance of fundamental questions of

politics and ideology, Labour Movement in Nigeria is very rich in information about labour unionism in Nigeria. Mr. Tokunboh's book deserves to be read by all trade unionists, officials in the Ministry of Labour, and indeed, by any Nigerian who wants to widen his knowledge of this country's affairs.

Okechukwu Okeke