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Irrigating the famished fields: The impact of labour-led struggle on policy and action in Nigeria (1999–2007)

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Between 1999 and 2007, a broad-based labour-led movement which focused most of its energies on its struggle against unpopular fuel price hikes in Nigeria was able to exert considerable, though limited, influence on an Obasanjo-led executive arm of government that was at best quasidemocratic in its orientation. This article argues that, despite the very important roles played by other factors (notably the presence of more democratic space in Nigeria post-1999), the movement’s adoption of a mass social movement approach facilitated its ability to exert such influence.

Keywords: labour; Nigeria; fuel price hikes; neo-liberal reforms; mass actions; social movements; impact; government policies

Between 1999 and 2007 a remarkable struggle was waged in Nigeria by a labour-led movement under the leadership of Adams Oshiomhole, the then president of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), which was able to exert a considerable impact on Nigerian government policy and action. This article examines the character of the movement, the various factors that facilitated or limited its impact, and the broader lessons which may be learnt. The struggle was mainly focused on the various attempts of the government to raise the price of motor vehicle fuel (a key economic factor in Nigeria) as part of its effort to deregulate Nigeria’s petroleum sector; a policy that, in the eyes of labour, contributed to the impoverishment of the vast majority of Nigerians.¹

The struggle was located within the context of the serious decline that visited Nigeria’s economy from about 1985 (Truman 1994, 28-30). This led to the intervention in Nigeria, in a much deeper way than ever before, of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Ihonbvere 1993, 143; Lewis 1996, 82-5; Panford 1996, 55-7) with devastating consequences for most Nigerians (Ihonbvere 1993, 142). The current situation remains as dire. According to the self-assessment of the Obasanjo regime (1999 to 2007), approximately 70% of Nigerians
are poor. By contrast, in 1980 only 27% of Nigerians were officially classified as poor (Nigeria 2004; Ogwumike 2002). Even so, during the relevant period, the Obasanjo regime continued to pursue basically the very same kinds of policies as its predecessors (Okafor 2007b). It is against this backdrop that the struggle that is of concern here must be examined.

The broad hypothesis that is explored here is that it was the movement’s adoption of a mass social movement approach that appears to have facilitated its capacity to exert considerable - if limited - influence on executive branch policies and actions on fuel prices. The key point of focus here is the close linkage between the ability of the movement to exert significant influence within Nigeria under the semidemocratic conditions that obtained during the relevant period, and its mass social movement character.

This conclusion will align this article with both the broader literature on social movements and the more particular literature on labour movements in Nigeria. For example, within the latter body of scholarship, Jimi Adesina’s work has long recognised the role of the labour movement in Nigeria’s social, economic and political development, even though ‘excessive power’ has been attributed to it by some scholars (Abimbola 2002; Adesina 1994; Adewumi and Adesina 1999; Barchiesi 1997; Ihonvbere 1997).

The focus on the years 1999 to 2007 is dictated by the fact that it was during that period that the relevant struggles were waged. The analysis is based on both primary empirical research in Nigeria and secondary data, the interviewing of selected key stakeholders, and the review of government and labour documents.

The conceptual character of the struggle

The three most important elements that constituted the conceptual apparatus of the
struggle were its focus on fuel price hikes; its human rights character; and its pro-poor orientation. Each of these is examined in turn below.

A focus on fuel price hikes

The principal element of the struggle was its strong and active opposition to the significant fuel price hikes that were imposed by the then ruling Obasanjo-led government. Almost from the very beginning of its tenure, and with the exception of a short period just before the 2003 elections, the Obasanjo government showed a determination (under much pressure from a troubled Nigerian economy, the IMF, and rich creditor states and corporations) to raise fuel prices to ‘international levels’ (Okafor 2007a, 79-80). For example, between 2000 and 2005 fuel prices nearly tripled while incomes remained at best stagnant for most Nigerians (This Day Online 3 September 2005). The introduction of these major increases in the fuel price over such a relatively short period of time had a marked deleterious impact on the already poor living standards of most Nigerians. Further increases between 2005 and 2007 compounded the situation (see This Day Online 13 June 2007). This is the chief reason why active opposition to these fuel price hikes occupied a central place in the movement’s struggle for the realisation of human rights in Nigeria.

A human rights struggle

It is possible to conceptualise the particular kind of struggle waged by the movement during the period under study as a human rights struggle. As Baxi (2006, 69) has noted, labour movements have enjoyed a far longer human rights career than most of the contemporary human rights groups that tend to describe themselves as such. More specifically, the Nigerian labour groups have enjoyed a very long history of struggling in favour of important human rights causes such as decolonisation (Abimbola 2002, 40-1) and democracy (Truman 1994, 26). What is more, the current
labour-led movement counts within its ranks a significant number of human rights NGOs such as the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) and the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) (*Daily Champion Online* 2 September 2005). In any case, the NLC, the leading organisation within this movement and its principal engine, tends to conceive of its mandate and struggles in explicitly human rights terms. For example, its constitution mandates the NLC to ‘promote and defend trade union and human rights, the rule of law and democratic governance’ (NLC Constitution: Article 3).

*A pro-poor struggle*

Was the message of the struggle a pro-poor one? Did its conceptual orientation and outlook reflect the ‘voices of suffering’ (Baxi 1999) of ordinary Nigerians? Did it in this sense ‘seek to exercise representational power on behalf of the violated [especially the poor]’? (Baxi 2006, 83). Given the broad consensus that the vast majority of Nigerians are poor, any struggle that is clearly aimed at preventing the further deterioration of the basic living standards is by definition pro-poor. What is more, that this struggle was explicitly conceived by those who principally waged it as pro-poor is clearly reflected in the ways in which it has been portrayed by the NLC. For instance, in its profile document, the NLC celebrates the fact that partly as a result of its struggle it is now ‘widely seen as the voice of the oppressed people’ (NLC profile). In any case, as Onyeonoru and Aborisade (2001) have noted, Nigerian labour-led struggles have almost always been deeply rooted in the broad experiences of ordinary peoples of socio-economic deprivation and suffering.

The institutional and organisational character of the struggle

To examine the institutional and organisational character of the struggle it is
necessary to ask: How was the movement organised; who constituted it; who led it; and how did it operate?

The composition of the movement

As noted above, the bulk and core of the movement is composed of the NLC; it has 29 constituent labour unions, and tens of thousands of individual members. Other notable associates include human rights NGOs such as the CLO and MOSOP. A further component is provided by the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), which is the umbrella organisation of university student unions in Nigeria. Others include a host of grassroots informal sector associations that lay claim to thousands of members (such as associations of butchers, automobile technicians, traders, motor spare parts dealers, market traders, barbers and hairdressers, produce sellers, and motorbike ‘taxi’ riders); many opposition (and even some ruling party) politicians; and some prominent and highly popular religious ministers and church groups (Daily Champion Online 2 September 2005; PM News Online 5 November 2004; The Vanguard Online 12 June 2007).

The NLC’s courting and inclusion of informal sector workers was a deliberate policy to counter the negative effects wrought on the size of the movement’s membership by the shrinking of the Nigerian working class and the consequent expansion in the population of the ‘unwaged poor’ (a circumstance which had itself been precipitated by economic decline and structural adjustment) (NLC Profile).

The movement’s central powerhouse

The NLC has served as the principal engine of the movement. While the Trade Union Congress (TUC), the umbrella confederation of senior staff labour unions in Nigeria, has more recently become quite active in the movement, it is the NLC that called for and led the organisation of almost every single one of the mass actions that
have characterised the movement’s struggle during 1999-2007 (*Daily Champion Online* 2 September 2005). It is the NLC that, in the main, has articulated the logic behind that struggle (*The Vanguard Online* 15 September 2005). It is the NLC that has tended to lead the teams that negotiated with the government over the compromises that both sides reached over fuel prices (*Vanguard Online* 15 September 2005). Furthermore, it is largely upon the NLC that the government has focused in its sustained attempts to demobilise, and even crush, the struggle (*CNN Online* 17 January 2004). In short, the NLC has served as the undisputed leader of this movement.

*A generally democratic internal arrangement*

Importantly, the NLC’s leadership of this movement did not substantially deprive it of its broadly consensual, participatory, collegial character. Both the NLC and the movement it led were basically democratic in their institutional and organisational orientations. The NLC is itself composed of and directed by its 29-member unions which elect the NLC’s leaders, democratically decide its major policies, and declare all of its own general strikes and mass action campaigns. All of its constituent labour unions are similarly organised. These unions are all, by and large, as democratically run (see note 5). Furthermore, whatever the nature of their respective internal organisational arrangements, the other components of the movement (such as the human rights NGOs, NANS, and the informal sector associations) participated consensually and actively, albeit as relatively less central actors, in the conception, planning, and execution of the various campaigns (Abimbola 2002, 43-4). In any case, the NLC itself was without doubt a broadly democratic body. Despite room for improvement in its institutional record, the NLC is not one of those paradoxically ‘uncivic’ civil society groups that are run by unaccountable leaders (Aiyede 2004, 224).
However, given that it was the NLC’s leadership (albeit following consultations with its allies) that made the key decisions regarding the waging of the struggle (subject to ratification by its membership), this inevitably allowed these leaders some leeway to exert a disproportionate degree of influence. For example, the current president of the NLC attributed the decision of that organisation’s leadership to call off their June 2007 mass action to the personal intervention of Nigerian President Umaru Yar’Adua (*Punch Online* 24 June 2007). This decision was not cleared beforehand with the movement’s general membership.

*Alliances and coalitions*

Thus, in a sense, the movement can be imagined as a labour grouping that entered into broad consensual alliances with other like-minded groups as they sought to advance their common interest in pressuring the Nigerian government to reverse the fuel price hikes (*Aiyede* 2004, 229-30). To this end the NLC forged a relatively enduring set of coalitions with a broad sector of civil society groups such as NGOs, NANS, radical lawyers and ‘a radical, progressive and activist press’ (*Abimbola* 2002, 43-4). Other evidence supports this conclusion. One such was the Labour and Civil Society Coalition (LASCO), which is composed of the NLC, the TUC (which is the senior staff umbrella group), and many of the groups mentioned above. As consensual as these alliances largely were, they were usually chaired or cochaired, and thus, in effect, led by the NLC.

*A broadly unified coalition*

This leads to an aspect of the organisational character of the movement that distinguishes it from earlier iterations. The labour union community in colonial Nigeria and in the first 15 years or so after Nigeria’s independence in 1960 was ‘plagued by problems of factionalism [and fragmentation]’ (*Panford* 1996, 56-60).
However, the gradual consolidation since 1975 or so of over one thousand of these registered trade unions into only tens of them, and the existence in practice of only two central labour organisations in Nigeria (the NLC and the TUC) (NLC Profile), has fostered far greater (although not complete) trade union unity. Indeed, the fact that the NLC remains the pre-eminent central labour in today’s Nigeria testifies to the relative unity that currently exists within the labour union community. While such unity is not as readily evident within other member organisations of the movement, most other component groups have generally exhibited a similar coherence (Beckman 2003). This has had broadly unifying implications for the struggle. However, as will become clear, this did not mean that there were no internal disagreements within the movement.

Geopolitical location

Another important characteristic of the movement is its broad geo-political location within Nigeria. Although the movement is somewhat stronger in the south-west zone of Nigeria than in some other ‘regions’, the NLC and many of its constituent unions have been active within and have firmly established their presence in virtually all the geopolitical regions. For example, the NLC has offices in all the 36 states and Abuja (the federal capital territory) (see note 8). This extensive geopolitical coverage has given the NLC and most of these unions a national spread and helped to afford a pan-Nigerian feel to the struggles they have waged. While the same cannot necessarily be said of every single one of the other entities that compose the movement (Okafor 2006, 51-76), it is also true that many of them (such as NANS, many church groups, and even the rare couple of NGOs) have also established a national presence.
Funding

The struggle was funded by the elements which composed the movement. Whereas during the period 1988 to the late 1990s the NLC relied significantly on government funding (Aiyede 2004, 227), today the federation and its member unions are basically self-funded organisations. They raise the bulk of their funds from their respective memberships rather than from foreign donors. The same cannot, however, be said for virtually all of the NGOs which are part of the movement (Okafor 2006, 123-50), even though none of the latter rely on government funding.

A mass-action-centred mode of struggle

Finally, the single most important organisational characteristic of the struggle is that it was by and large organised as a series of intimately connected mass actions. Although the movement labelled as ‘general strikes’ most of the ‘battles’ that it fought, every single one of those battles was at its core much more a mass action involving and earning the support of massive numbers of Nigerians (BBC Online 14 September 2005) than a traditional union strike that tends to be limited to the ranks of the affected workers (PM News Online 5 November 2004; The Vanguard Online 15 September 2005). In every instance, the clear organisational strategy of the struggle has been to validate the movement’s message among ordinary Nigerians; speak and be viewed as ‘the voice of the oppressed [Nigerian] people’ (NLC Profile); and then mobilise as many ordinary Nigerians as possible to participate in some kind of open demonstration of their frustrations with the particular fuel price hike that was in issue (The Vanguard Online 15 September 2005). In all these cases, the intent was to undertake mass action in a way that would help pressure the government into backing down from its expressed policy position (Daily Champion Online 2 September 2005).
At their core, these struggles often took the form of stay-at-home ‘strikes’ that were not limited to union members and which involved a large segment of the Nigerian population (Afrol News Online 11 June 2004; Vanguard Online 12 October 2004). Other forms that these confrontations took were mass street demonstrations (Vanguard Online 10 July 2003), and mass rallies (Daily Champion Online 4 November 2004). For example, in September 2005, the NLC announced a sustained mass action campaign initially consisting of two weeks of massive but peaceful demonstrations and rallies across Nigeria (BBC Online 14 September 2005). These protests were heavily attended (BBC Online 14 September 2005). In Lagos, for example, a mammoth crowd - numbering tens of thousands - was mobilised that at one point stretched for nearly 3 km (BBC Online 14 September 2005). Apart from then NLC President Adams Oshiomole, other prominent figures such as the Catholic Archbishop of Lagos Olubunmi Okogie, Nobel Prize winner Professor Wole Soyinka, and Governor Bola Tinubu of Lagos state also addressed this rally.

The fact that in virtually all cases significantly large numbers of Nigerians were persuaded to throw their weight behind the calls for mass action is clear evidence of the popularity of the movement among the vast majority of Nigerians (Turner and Brownhill 2004, 74). Further, as the latter can be characterised as a social movement (Crossley 2002, 4-5; Tilly 2004, 3-4; Truman 1994, 27), its focus on conveying in various ways the ‘voices of suffering’ of ordinary Nigerians is also evidence of their struggle’s broad mass social movement (as opposed to elitist) orientation. After all, is not a mass social movement one which arises from the actual struggles of peoples (Rajagopal 2003, 253), and which deploys mass mobilisation and action as a means to attaining its objectives (Stammers 1999, 980)?

In any case, many reasons exist for characterising the movement in this way. First, as has been discussed already, the movement imagines itself as a key voice and instrument of the Nigerian masses, as a principal agent of their struggle for socio-
economic and other rights. Secondly, the movement has led several mass actions within and outside the period under study.\textsuperscript{12} Thirdly, the NLC has devoted a substantial segment of its own Department of Organisation to the coordination of its mass actions (NLC Constitution, Article 19(3)(iii), Article 3).\textsuperscript{13} Fourthly, it is the explicitly stated objective of the NLC to attempt to influence the relevant Nigerian governments largely through its threat or deployment of the mass action mode of struggle - albeit accompanied by dialogue and negotiations.\textsuperscript{14} This latter feature is a key characteristic of a mass social movement (Stammers 1999, 980).

The impact of the struggle on executive policy and action

On virtually every single one of the more than ten occasions on which the Obasanjo regime sharply raised the price of fuel between 1999 and 2007, the movement struggled against that hike through a combination of negotiation, public warnings to the executive branch to rescind the price increase, and mass action campaigns (Okafor 2007a, 80). In almost all of those cases, the government backed down in the end and negotiated a rescission of a portion of the projected price hike, only to end up announcing another such increase within another year or so (see, for example, \textit{Afrol News Online} 11 June 2004; \textit{Vanguard Online} 12 October 2004).

In response to the movement’s mass action against the first June 2000 fuel price hike - a campaign that was extremely popular in its appeal - the Obasanjo government backed down from its announced fuel price increase and reduced the price of petrol from N30 to N22 per litre (\textit{BBC Online} 8 June 2000). The movement launched one of one of the most crippling and effective general strikes since the end of military rule in Nigeria. Some oil workers joined public sector and transportation workers in ensuring the success of the strike (Woodroffe and Ellis-Jones, 2000). Nigeria’s main seaport in Lagos and highways were blockaded (Woodroffe and
Ellis-Jones, 2000). International and domestic air flights were disrupted, and all fuel stations were closed. Sporadic police and protester violence was reported across the country and two police stations in the federal capital territory, Abuja, were burned down by irate mobs (Woodroffe and Ellis-Jones 2000).

In response to the equally paralysing mass action that the movement launched in June 2003 to protest the government’s refusal to rescind its latest fuel price hike - a confrontation which lasted eight days and involved a very large number of Nigerians - the regime eventually announced a partial rescission of that hike so as to persuade the movement to end that episode of its struggle (NLC 2003).

Again, in response to the two multiday, related, mass actions that were similarly conducted by the movement in February and June 2004, the government ordered fuel prices to revert to the original figure and in the end was persuaded by the movement to overcome its initial reluctance to enforce this order against noncompliant fuel marketers (Afrol News Online 11 June 2004). Even before it actually began, the looming spectre of a November 2004 mass action called by the movement led to a partial but significant reversal of a recently announced hike in the price of motor vehicle fuel (BBC Online 15 November 2004).

Turning again to the massive street procession-type mass action that was organised by the movement in September 2005 (outlined in the section above), this was the most immediate factor that led to what can be regarded as one of the most significant concessions that the government made (BBC Online 14 September 2005). The government’s concession was to announce an absolute 14-month freeze in the price of fuel from 1 October 2005 to 31 December 2006 ‘no matter what happens in the international oil market’ (Obasanjo 2005). This concession was most remarkable given its implications: in view of the fact that a very large percentage of the refined fuel that was consumed in Nigeria during the relevant period was imported, the Obasanjo regime was in effect announcing a massive subsidy on the cost of imported
fuel.

The government did not raise the price of fuel during the stated period. However, at the very end of its term of office in May 2007, it suddenly announced a N10 (15%) increase in the price of motor vehicle fuel (This Day Online 13 June 2007). In response, the movement gave notice to the incoming Yar’Adua government that it should rescind both increases and eventually launched a highly popular mass action that persuaded the new government to announce highly significant concessions (Daily Champion Online 24 June 2007). Among other measures, it reduced the increase in the price of fuel from N10 to N5 (that is, from 15 to 7%) and announced yet another freeze in the price of fuel, this time to cover the one year period between 23 June 2007 and 22 June 2008 (Daily Champion Online 24 June 2007).

Nevertheless, against the general trend, on a relatively small number of occasions, the relevant government has been able to avoid making any significant concession. This happened at least twice. The first time, in response to a mass action that was organised by the movement in January 2002, the government did not really make any significant concessions because the movement was forced to suspend its mass action when the government obtained an injunction to that effect from an Abuja high court (Socialist Alternative 2005). Secondly, it must also be noted that, as paralysing as it was to the economic life of the country, a similar warning strike-style mass action in October 2004, which had in effect been declared illegal by the federal high court, did not lead to significant concessions on the part of the government (BBC Online 15 November 2004).

However, on the whole, the movement’s activities have been impressive in its exertion of influence on government. For a start, the different governmental regimes have always made it clear that their various policy reversals have been in response to the efforts of the movement. For example, the pact that ended the June 2007 mass action was signed by a very high representative of the government (in this case the secretary to
the government of the federation) and the two foremost labour leaders in Nigeria (the presidents of the NLC and the TUC) (Daily Champion Online 24 June 2007). Indeed, in a letter to the latter about that same mass action, the president himself acknowledged that ‘both sides agreed’ to the concessionary measures announced by the government (Daily Champion Online 24 June 2007). As importantly, in a speech to the nation on the occasion of the October 1, 2005 Independence Day celebrations, President Olusegun Obasanjo promised that ‘through on-going discussions with labour, government will work out some adjustments in allowances to cushion the effect of increased fuel price’ (Obasanjo 2005).

A sceptic may be tempted to view the fuel price reductions that were achieved as a result of the struggle as minor. After all, it may be said, in June 2000 motor vehicle fuel sold for N20 a litre in Nigeria and in December 2007 (nearly seven years later) it sold at N70 per litre - a 350% increase over that period. However, given the fact that the government’s expressed objective from at least June 2000 was both to completely eliminate all fuel subsidies and to match the international pump prices of refined fuel (Owen 2004), the struggle can be viewed as having helped ensure the continued maintenance of a contextually huge subsidy on the price of fuel in Nigeria. This argument is buttressed by the fact that in April 2007 while fuel prices were in the N70 range in Nigeria, fuel sold for close to $1 dollar per litre in Canada (the equivalent at the time of approximately N120 per litre in Nigerian money) (Natural Resources Canada 2008).

Secondly, the struggle also influenced the rate at which the 350% increase in the price of fuel over a roughly seven year period has been administered to ordinary Nigerians; it persuaded successive governments to administer their fuel price hike pills in markedly smaller doses. Since even slight increases in the price of fuel in Nigeria translate invariably to significant increases in the price of essential items and services such as food and transportation (Daily Champion Online 24 June 2007), the
fact that the struggle has ensured that such increases have been done in noticeably smaller amounts has prevented much of an escalation in the depreciation of the living standards of ordinary Nigerians that would otherwise have been the case.  

Our sceptic may also be tempted to view the fact that, despite agreeing to reduce prices, the government constantly increased fuel prices, sometimes within six months of the last increase, as evidence that the movement was not as strong as is claimed. However, this perspective would be inaccurate, for the government’s constant push to raise fuel prices was less a function of the presumed weakness of the movement and more of the incredibly strong forces that propelled the official policy orientation. These included local refineries failing to produce enough fuel for local consumption; world petroleum prices being exceedingly high at a time when most of the refined fuel that was used in Nigeria was imported; the added cost of transporting refined fuel from overseas refineries to Nigeria; and powerful global forces mounting pressure on Nigeria to initiate and maintain its fuel subsidy removal policy. In such circumstances (Amadi and Ogwo 2004), the movement could not reasonably be expected to win completely.

Overall then, the movement’s considerable achievement in at least slowing substantially the implementation of the government’s programme of fuel price hikes was a remarkable, if limited, success in reducing the negative effects that much higher fuel prices would have had on most Nigerians.

Factors that have facilitated the impact of the struggle

The availability of a measure of political space (especially after military rule)

As I have suggested elsewhere:

… deep cleavages within the Nigerian state have made Nigerian political culture much
more amenable to negotiation and popular pressure [and compromise] than is commonly acknowledged in the literature. Because of these deep cleavages, the ruling elite … have recognized the value of enjoying a modicum of popular legitimacy (or at least tolerance), however minimal in extent. (Okafor 2004, 45)

This compromise-based political culture helped ensure that the movement’s principal leverage, its mobilisation of mass support was taken seriously by the relevant governments. While this conclusion reflects the ebb and flow of pressure politics during the era of military rule, it is also descriptive of the nature of Nigerian political culture during the 1999 to 2007 quasi-democratic period. The increase in political space that was created by the democratisation of the polity during this period significantly enhanced the movement’s ability to rebuild itself, practise its mass mobilisation strategies, and secure the government’s ear.

*The prevailing social context of mass poverty and resentment*

Their poverty rendered the vast majority of Nigerian people highly receptive to the movement’s struggle.

*A committed leadership*

As ripe for mobilisation as the Nigerian public was during this period, it took the palpable commitment of the particular leadership of the NLC that emerged in 1999, just before the military’s handover of power to the Obasanjo government, to shed the prevailing scepticism about the legitimacy of an NLC that had been pocketed by some previous military regimes (including the notorious Abacha junta during 1994-8) and to re-earn, slowly but surely, the validation of the vast majority of Nigerians (*CNN Online* 17 January 2004). The constant harassment and occasional imprisonment which these labour leaders suffered, and their refusal to be cowed by government repression was a notable sign of their commitment (*CNN Online* 17 January 2004). For example, although the then president of the NLC and over 46 of
his colleagues were arrested and detained in January 2002, they defiantly carried on with the general strike until ordered back to work by the courts (CNN Online 17 January 2004). The committed leadership of the NLC was a key factor in the movement’s ability to advance and make a reasonable success of its struggle.¹⁸

*The strong resonance of their message*

During the period beginning in the 1960s and ending in the mid-1980s, when labour first earned its reputation as the foremost vanguard of the Nigerian people’s social struggles, the labour unions and their umbrella groupings ‘articulated the aspirations of the broad masses of society . . . [and] lambasted the widening gap between the affluence of politicians and the poverty of the majority of Nigerians. It raised questions concerning access to education, health, and other welfare services’ (Aiyede 2004, 225).

The movement that operated during the 1999 to 2007 period was as grounded and responsive in articulating the same kind of largely pro-poor message (Turner and Brownhill 2004, 79). Thus, their struggles tended to resonate strongly with the vast majority of Nigerians. For instance one poll commissioned by the reputable *Guardian* newspapers found that roughly over 85% of Nigerians supported the movement over the government (National Assembly Debates 2004, 0587).

*Labour’s long experience of action for social change*

As a group, Nigerian labour unions, the core of the movement, have had a very long career of engaging in action for social change that dates back to the period before independence.¹⁹ While, as is exemplified by the weakness of the NLC during the mid-1980s to late-1990s, the length of their social action experience has not served as guarantee either of good or successful leadership, it has provided a measure of useful institutional memory on the ‘ways and means’ of earning the commitment of ordinary Nigerians and ultimately influencing governments (Abimbola 2002, 40-1;
Aiyede 2004, 226). As such, it augmented the movement’s capacity to carry out the 1999 to 2007 phase of its struggle successfully.

*Generally accountable and therefore responsive structure*

I think our democratic structure has benefited our organisation tremendously. I think it has benefited us because it has benefited workers. One reason our mass actions work is the democratic structure of our decision-making and organisational structure. Another reason is that Nigerians want welfarism as a kind of economic institution in the country. The NLC has been able to articulate and represent this welfarist instinct of the Nigerian masses and has as a result been able to carry them along.\(^{20}\)

The NLC’s constituent unions are themselves each composed of worker members who tend to share the experiences and sentiments of most underclass Nigerians.\(^{21}\) The relative accountability of leaders to these workers has meant that the NLC has tended to transmit the experiences of this underclass systematically to the broader movement (see note 21). This has enabled the movement to remain in touch with ordinary Nigerians. It has in turn allowed the movement to mobilise these subalterns more effectively.

*The mass social movement character of the struggle*

The government has often acceded to the movement’s demands in terms and circumstances that suggest that its otherwise more powerful hands were all but forced by the obvious success of the particular mass action at the time. Yet these actions owed both the decision to launch them and their very character to the mass social movement orientation of the movement and its struggle. Thus, while many other factors played important roles in producing the observed outcomes, this is why this particular factor was the most important of them all during 1999-2007.\(^{22}\)
Factors that have inhibited the impact of the struggle

*Government control and repression*

The most important of the factors that inhibited the success of the labour-led struggle was the attempts of various governments to repress the NLC, the labour unions, or one of the other organisations that compose the movement. This should not be surprising given the long history of such attempts by various governments (Aiyede 2004, 227-28). For example, the NLC has had to face at least two instances (in 1988 and 1994) of direct government takeover of its affairs (Abimbola 2002, 45; NLC Profile; Olowu 2006, 131; Truman 1994, 27). Both these instances, which were in each case accompanied by the repression of labour activists, weakened the labour movement considerably, but did not defeat it (NLC Profile).

It was against this background that the labour unions ‘reclaimed’ the NLC upon the death of General Abacha in 1998, and later held democratic elections in January 1999 to constitute a leadership for that body (NLC Profile). This was just a few months before the Obasanjo government was inaugurated in May 1999 (NLC Profile). It was also against this background that the new leadership of the NLC sought to rebuild that organisation and regain its erstwhile leadership position among the popular forces (NLC Profile).

However, the Obasanjo government still presented a serious challenge to the reinvigorated movement (*CNN Online* 17 January 2004). This regime often threatened and deployed against the movement a range of repressive measures (*CNN Online* 17 January 2004). Yet, given the counter-pressures produced by the deep plurality of Nigerian society, this regime chose not to interfere directly with the day-to-day running of the NLC and its allies. Nevertheless this did not stop the government from attempting (and mostly failing) to weaken the NLC by proposing a Bill to parliament which in its original form would have explicitly outlawed NLC-
declared strikes and suchlike actions (see the Bill for an Act to amend the Trade Unions Act as amended and for Matters Connected Therewith; and the Trade Union Amendment Act 2005).

The negative potential and actual impact of the Obasanjo government’s strategy of attempting to weaken and contain the movement is illustrated by the way in which that regime was able to diffuse two mass actions by obtaining judicial orders prohibiting the movement from prosecuting the ‘strike’ component of such actions. These events have already been discussed above.

*The inheritance of a weakened NLC*

As noted, the relevant NLC leadership inherited a weakened organisation in 1999 (Aiyede 2004, 227). This meant that these new post-1999 leaders were forced to put in more creativity and effort than would ordinarily be necessary to reinvigorate that organisation and revalidate it among ordinary Nigerians. This obviously had a negative effect on the rate and extent of their impact on the executive.

*Labour/government collaboration and compromise*

It is well known that Adams Oshiomhole, the president of the NLC during the relevant period accepted a seat on the government-established National Council on Privatisation (NCP), and initially expressed support for some aspects of the government’s privatisation drive, for example, the privatisation of the state electricity company (Dawodu.com 2003; Oshiomhole 2007; Marxist.com 2003). It is also well established that the NLC leadership tended to negotiate compromises with the government rather than hold out until every single one of their demands had been met. Clearly, this tendency to compromise with the government limited the movement’s ability to secure its demands to the fullest extent.

*Internal tensions within the movement*
As unified as the movement generally was, it did experience a measure of internal dissension, notably over the NLC president’s initial support of the privatisation of the state electricity company and regarding the fact that he had agreed to sit on the NCP (NLC Profile). The NLC leadership was also criticised often and harshly by its more militant allies, especially the Democratic Socialist Movement, for their tendency to compromise with the government (Socialist Democracy 2005). These internal tensions weakened its internal coherence, mass appeal and effectiveness.

**External economic pressures**

The first main external pressure that operated to countervail the struggle’s potential impact on executive branch policy and action was the demands made on successive Nigerian governments to remove subsidies on the domestic cost of petroleum products (Owen 2004). The persistence and potency of this pressure and the high cost it involved meant that these governments were unlikely to accede to movement demands completely, however popular. Furthermore, the high cost of petroleum products on the international market during an era in which all of Nigeria’s oil refineries produced far less fuel than was needed also increased the pressures for a high percentage of the refined motor vehicle fuel that was consumed in Nigeria to be imported (The Guardian Online 13 March 2008). This meant that the petroleum marketers had to pay international prices for this imported fuel. As such, there was a fixed external cost of providing such fuel to the public that could not really be controlled immediately by the relevant governments. This inevitably meant that there was always a limit to the latters’ capacity to keep the pump price as low as the movement would have liked.

**Conclusions and broader lessons**

Whatever its limitations, the labour-led movement that operated in Nigeria during
1999-2007 has had considerable impact. The movement’s operation in a mass social movement mode appears to have functioned as the chief facilitating factor in its capacity to exert considerable influence on the government between 1999 and 2007. As fuel prices were a key determinant of the socio-economic fortunes and lived human rights experiences of the vast majority of Nigerians, the impact that the campaigns had on the oil price levels was a highly significant contribution to the wider struggle for the advancement of the socio-economic rights of Nigerians. Similarly situated movements will do well to learn from the experience of their Nigerian counterpart.

Acknowledgements
The author is grateful to his research assistants for their help and to two JCAS reviewers for suggestions that significantly improved the article.
Notes

1. See the views of the president of the Nigerian Employers Consultative Association (NECA), Mazi Sam Ohuabunwa (The Vanguard Online 13 June 2007); and of the Nigerian government, acknowledging the impact of ‘the price levels [of fuel] on the economy and social life and livelihood of Nigerians’ (Daily Champion Online 24 June 2007).
2. There is widespread agreement as to this fact. See Amadi and Ogwo (2004, 26); Nigeria (2004, 95); Ogwumike (2002; UNDP (1998, 34; 2001, 65).
3. Interview with informant 1, 19 July 2004, Abuja, Nigeria.
8. Interview with informant 1, 19 July 2004, Abuja, Nigeria.
10. Interview with informant 1, 19 July 2004, Abuja, Nigeria.
11. I owe the term ‘voices of suffering’ to Upendra Baxi’s fecund imagination (Baxi 1999).
15. On the potential effects of the VAT increase to harm the standard of living of ordinary Nigerians, see the views of the NECA president (The Vanguard Online 13 June 2007).
17. See the text of endnote 1.
18. On the devastation that poor and unresponsive leadership wreaked on the NLC and on their ability to wage such struggles successfully in an earlier era, see Aiyede (2004, 226-8) and Abimbola (2002, 43-4).
22. This conclusion builds on Aiyede’s argument that during the 1960s to 1980s the most important factor that facilitated the effectiveness of the labour movement in Nigeria was its mass social movement character (Aiyede 2004, 226)

Note on contributor

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References


A Bill for an Act to Amend the Trade Unions Act as Amended and for Matters Connected Therewith (on file with the author).


