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National Union of Electricity Employees in Nigeria: Political and Economic Reform Policies

Patrick Agbor Assibong

Abstract

National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) staff could not believe when the President first promised to privatize NEPA by handing it over to the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) because "successive governments had promised and failed". When President Obasanjo finally set up a committee to effect the transfer, he was castigated as a wicked President. The workers have failed to accept responsibility for constant power failure which negates the political and economic *raison d'être* for establishing NEPA and other public corporations like SONEL in Cameroon. Despite the fact that the paper took exceptions in blaming the Government for not supplying the necessary finances to help the workers improve their services, it however, opines that NEPA workers have not only failed the nation, they have failed themselves because most of them would be retrenched as a result of the privatization and commercialization exercise of public corporations. The paper concludes that for the President to rescind his decision of privatizing NEPA, the workers should try to be transparent, polite and responsive to customers' demands.

Introduction

When in 1868 the Trade Union Congress was founded in Britain, workers in Britain and others all over the world saw it as a right step towards the emancipation of the hitherto marginalized proletariat or working class which consists of electricians, lawyers, teachers etc. The above development has its antecedents in the Hegelian-Marxian international call for the "workers of the world to unite" and fight for the liberation of the working class (The Communist Manifesto).

The action of these unionists in Britain came during the Age of

Revolution in Europe and the workers power (the proletariat) was exemplified more in France than the rest of Europe. The Paris commune of 1871 (Grant and Temperley, 1971: 281) which was characterized by the erection of barricades on the streets of Paris against the bourgeoisie was conceived and executed by the workers. The workers agitation were so fierce that the French Third Republic collapsed. This singular act of collective "anger" by the workers frightened most governments in Europe hence the fear of workers' actions (strikes) throughout the world has remained to this day.

During the revolt in France, the workers who have been educated by the Pamphleters rose up against high taxation, poor conditions of service and the capitalist's accumulation of surplus value. The workers expected the capitalists who own the factories in which they were working, to sell the finished or manufactured products at the cost of production. For example, if the cost of producing a shirt is two hundred Naira and the capitalist decides to sell it for eight hundred Naira, the surplus value is six hundred Naira. The working class expects the six hundred Naira to be added to their wages or divided to them as bonus and not to be taken by the bourgeoisie class as profit. The workers are expecting the day the capitalist would give them the surplus or share equitably with them.

Some other workers are expecting the Proletarian Revolution which would usher in a government by the workers, for the workers and by the workers with the bourgeoisie becoming poor as a result of the nationalization of their industries. The above scenario happened in 1917 Russia where the Bolsheviks overthrew Tzar Nicholas II's monarchy. Since the state is considered an instrument of oppression, the workers in Russia and all others who subscribe to the Marxian dialectics, expect the institution of the state to wither away and mankind granted a stateless society. As the end product, the workers expect a politico-economic system, devoid of oppression and profiteering and this can only be possible via introducing communism through out the world – Communist Internationalism. Although this utopia of communist Internationalism has

become a veritable mirage in many countries, Cuba and China have remained faithful to the idea to this day.

Before Karl Marx (1818-1883) the founder of modern communism, there was communism (Assibong 2005:50). The concept of communism which the working class all over the world is now using to "fight" for their rights, emanated from very old Judeo-Christian ideas which held that before man's fall from God's grace, there was no government, no surplus value and there was no private property. In the Holy Bible, Leviticus chapter 25 verses 11 and 34, deals with "land redistribution on equal basis" and "common land which should not be sold." Deuteronomy, chapter 15 verses 1 and 3 deals with the "cancellation of debts every seven years", while Micah chapter 2 and 3, verse 1 to 4 talks about "wickedness and Justice." The Federal Government's political decision of privatizing NEPA and laying-off the workers without compensation is wickedness. The West refusal to cancel Nigeria's and indeed all Less Developed Countries (LDCs) debts after three decades is against even biblical prescriptions as already stated.

44-46,

The Acts of Apostles chapter 2 verses A, talks about "common fund, which served the interest of all according to need". Has NEPA not been serving the Nigerian people according to the available megawatts? Has the Federal Government of Nigeria provided the equipment to enable NEPA staff provide electricity to the over one hundred and twenty million Nigerians?

It was in pursuance of the political values of equality, egalitarianism, fraternity and justice to the working class that the National Union of Electricity Employees (NUEE) was founded which is now serving as one of the many adjuncts to the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). The Brother Comrades (Brocoms) and Sister Comrades (siscoms) in NUEE and all other members of the NLC are often seen by Government and sometimes management as greedy workers who are led by a hand-full of die-hard radicals and fire-eating unionists who are prepared to be on the necks of their employers throughout their working life in order to exact

unreasonable concessions. Sometimes they are also seen as a group of "disgruntled elements" who know nothing but the language of riots, strikes and mayhem and are prepared to resort to violence at the slightest provocation. The above descriptions of the Nigerian worker are loaded with bias just as Nelson Mandela was called a terrorist by Botha of South Africa.

The definition of a Trade Union became polemical in Nigeria. Just as the white supremacist regimes in America refused to recognize the Black Panther Group of Malcom-X, the contributions of Dr. Martin Luther King, that of Jese Jackson, Michael Jackson who was almost imprisoned recently (Mark, 2005:9) and the Black Americans fighting prowess during their 1776 war of independence and the First and Second world wars. This lopsided definitions were the order of the day in Nigeria, Cameroon, Kenya and Rhodesia where genuine African patriots like king Jaja, Awolowo, Andre Marie Mbida, and the rest were been branded anti-capitalists hence by extension anti-West. Was Nkrumah not over thrown in Ghana by the west in an operation code-named "cold-cat"? Was Andre-Marie Mbida not deprived of being the president of Cameroon because "he was too nationalistic", was Jomo Kenyatta not castigated in Kenya for using the Moi-Moi to defeat the British imperialist in his country? Is Robert Mugaabe of Zimbabwe not blamed by the West for giving land to his black brothers who had no land before independence? Did the West not support Cecil Rhodes to colonize the ancient kingdom of Monomotapa (which Cecil Rhodes renamed Rhodesia) the present Zimbabwe? Was Patrice Lumumba of the Congo not beheaded via "Operation Rumpunch" by the CIA because he was seen in the west as one who would fight for the rights of the working class? Was...

The faulty definitions and dirty actions and inactions of the West and the bourgeois class in Nigeria, have guided the direction and tempo of Trade Union Reform policies over the years in Nigeria. Just as Britain has

Just as Britain has never done anything correctly in her colonies (Britain fumbled in the middle-East, India, Kashmir, Pakistan, Zanzibar and at Bakassi) so also Nigeria has never made any reform policy which has raised the standard of Living of her people. "Like colonial masters like Nigerian elite's."

All reform policies in Nigeria could not be implemented because the Civil war started barely six years after the "policy reform gurus" (Britain) left Nigeria. In Kashmir, Bakassi and Palestine, Britain intentionally blundered to keep the native population perpetually at war with themselves. So also have the Nigerian elite's been churning one obnoxious policy after another which has often traumatized the national psyche and provided no job satisfaction to the proletarian class.

The National Trade Union in which the National Union of Electricity-Employees (NUEE) are members, could be defined as a association of wage earners in any craft or trade organized to protect their interest i.e. to fight for higher wages, good conditions of service which include appointments on merit, promotion, transfer, housing, transport, meal subsidies, pension and gratuity, low taxation, less working hours etc. in any establishment.

Political Reform Policies

Since Political Economy is a mélange of politics and economics, it goes without saying that if politicians have the political will to consummate firm political decisions or initiate people-centred policies, the economic reform policies be it in NEPA or any other public enterprise in Nigeria, will stand the test of time and would be acceptable by all and sundry. On the contrary, the working class would reject (via strike actions or revolutions any political and economic policies which do not protect the interest of the national bourgeoisie and the proletariat including even the lumpen variant. The policy of retrenchment was a political one, prescribed by the International Monetary Fund.

The initial Federal Government of Nigeria's policy of retrenchment of the NEPA employees immediately after the privatization of the company was considered by the proletarian class as sadistic and genocidal since the entire Nigerian population conceives of the proletarian class as the lowest class in society possessing neither capital nor property and living solely by the sale of their labour power.

The president had the political will in deciding to privatize NEPA because he was guided by the guiding principles of the capitalist mode of production which is a political and economic system in which the individual as a resource owner or producer is free to introduce policies—including retrenchment. This would have cut down the wage bill and yielded profit. The president however, forgot about the unintended effects which would have provided a large army of retrenched or unemployed proletarians which could have been mobilized to over-throw his weak and unpopular regime. The only important import of his policy of privatization is his political will to accomplish what his predecessors could not and his insistence on Administrative Accountability and Responsibility. These policies were aimed at making public enterprises more results-oriented and to reduce the incidence of fraud and mismanagement.

Economic Reform Policies

The Political Economy of Nigeria has been that of reforms whether good or bad, reasonable or unreasonable. The civil service reforms of 1986 where permanent secretaries were renamed Director Generals (DG) (Directeur Generale in French) caused more confusion in the already confused Civil Service. The DG was both the Chief Executive and Accounting officer of his Ministry. This facilitated the looting of Nigeria's National Treasury by the so called elites.

The chief Jerome Udoji's Reforms which came in the form of the unreasonable increase in the salaries of Civil Servants ushered into the economic system hyperinflation which has continued

to this day. The "Udoji Awards" as it was popularly known by then, was not a good political and economic policy as there was no corresponding increase in the production and circulation of goods and services. The inflationary spiral injected into the Nigerian economy, turned all recommendations of political economists bottom-up.

The Better Life for Rural Women Policy which was intended to increase the standard of living of the rural women failed. We are all living witnesses of the policy being high-jacked by the wives of Governors and Director Generals in the cities. Better Life for Rural Women became that of the urban women.

Why Reforms in NEPA?

Reform policies all over the world; emerge as a result of the failure of many other previous policies (Ikelegbe, 1996:6), (Parsons, 2003), (Bickers, 2001:5). In the case of NEPA, the initial policy of providing regular power supply to a majority of Nigerians has failed. We are all living witnesses of the interminable series of blackouts occasioned by low capacity utilization and the fact that government has empowered NURE members to do their jobs by not only providing N100 Billion for the "revamping" of the enterprise or corporation but should have followed – up to see that the money got into the correct and safe hands and that it is used for the purpose it was intended. No worker in the industry knows where the above amount allocated for the revamping of NEPA was used or kept or who was entrusted with the money.

Reform policies are intended to correct any anomaly or loophole which is discernible from previous or existing policy. The Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) and the Universal Primary Education (UPE) all failed and the Government learnt nothing from these woeful failures because no second attempt was made to reformulate or readjust the policies.

In our case, NURE members and management should search their conscience and see if they have lived up to the expectations

embodied in the status or rationale establishing NEPA. Did all the staff collectively or singularly make NEPA to serve as a symbol of development in Nigeria? Is the corporation serving the interest of the common man? Is it making any profits? If yes, where did they keep the money, which could be used to revamp NEPA? Or is the money in private pockets or personal fixed deposits in Nigeria and overseas? Has NEPA implemented her social responsibilities by serving as a provider of employment to thousands of unemployed Nigerian youths roaming the streets? Can the money collected by the faceless leasing giants enable the corporation to break – even so as to help pay her way? Or use the profits to plough-back for increase productivity?

The “raison d’être” for establishing public corporations or Enterprises like NEPA, SONEL and SENEK is for them to at least Break – Even. That is, for it to provide employment, be able to pay the salaries of the workers, maintain the equipment, and purchase stationeries etc. without always asking for subventions from the Federal Government.

Are a large number of Nigerians (at least fifty to seventy five percent) enjoying uninterrupted electricity supply like those in Cameroon, Niger and Benin Republics? If the whole country can enjoy light during international football matches and when the President is visiting a particular state, why not supply same when there is no football match and when the President leaves the state?

Have the workers (the Brocoms and Siscoms) together with union’s officials satisfied the economic objectives for the establishment of NEPA by working out modalities for it to enjoy the benefits often associated with large-scale production? Is the standard of living of the working force higher than in the previous years? Has NEPA staff made the Naira to circulate in many hands so as to satisfy the accelerator and multiplier concepts in Economics? Has the Nigerian state invested much in NEPA before expecting higher returns? If not, what has the union done to address the above particular?

Is the accounting department in NEPA making profits so

hat private investors can emulate because Governments in the Less Developed Countries (LDCS) often lead for the rest to follow? If not, what has the union done?

Are NEPA officials tapping from the natural resources like water falls in Agborkim in Cross River State etc, to generate uninterrupted and cheap power supply for alternative cheap sources of power supply instead of the Federal Government of Nigeria trying to "cut-down cost" by retrenching NUEE members? Are the workers in NEPA aware of the fact that government has no reason trying to privatize NEPA because this would compromise national security? The move to privatize NEPA came as a result of total failure of NEPA as an institution to provide the services.

There are three parastatals government must not privatize for security reasons (1) NEPA because electricity is the hub of industrialization and any nation that ignores the above provision, ignores the economic growth of the country. (2.) Armaments production placed in foreign lands, spells doom for any nation because production can also be geared at satisfying foreign interests and (3) the minting of currency must be consummated by Nigerians because foreigners can easily mess up the economy by mass producing Naira notes thereby making its value worthless.

It is unfortunate that the politics of rising expectations in the 1960, has degenerated into that of depressing frustration in 2007 because Nigerians have never experienced regular supply of (i) clean drinking water, (ii) drugs in hospitals, (iii) cheap and good food etc and yet NEPA comes in to worsen their plight by not supplying light. This has forced many people to develop hypertension and some have even died. What we see today are estimated bills, rude and callous NEPA workers, get-rich quick NEPA workers who have fraudulently developed so many ways of adjusting the meters for their own benefit, poor work ethics and the disappearance of large sums of money from the saves of NEPA.

It is precisely because the answer to most, if not all, of the aforementioned questions is no that the Presidency supported by

most Nigerians decided to try their hand on privatizing and commercializing NEPA if the workers in the National Union of Electricity Employees (NUEE) had emulated Madam Dora Akunyili's example of selfless and transparent leadership at NAFDAC, there would have been no reason for the privatization and commercialization of NEPA.

The union has also been slow to identify confused and conflicting missions of their General Managers hence the management of the corporation has suffered as a result. Orders have been issued and counter orders issued to the workers in the field thereby sending conflicting signals to most junior workers who are functional illiterates.

The workers and union members have tolerated, encouraged and even enjoyed undue political interference thereby exposing her members to intimidation and ridicule. Some union members may even connive with government by clandestinely collecting funds for their personal use. Verbally, they will portray themselves as radical unionists while behind the scenes, they will be fraternizing with government. This practice has been in the body-politic of Nigeria before and after independence. This "double talk" and "undercurrent deals" had her antecedents from 1957:

The draft minutes of an ad hoc committee meeting of NCNC ministers on board MV Apapa on 2 July 1957 are revealing. Zik was present as was Okotie Eboh. Both knew of the British machinations. They now persuaded their colleagues by saying "Experience has shown that in a country of our own level of political and economic evolution, open and emotional animosity towards Britain is not only a most expensive luxury but a great tactical error." (*Tell*, March 7, 2005 p.35).

Nobody would have believed that our "great Zik of Africa" who was openly against Britain in his speeches for independence, would turn around to get support from Nigerians for the British imperialists. For this, Zik was "settled" with the prestigious post of the

There is also available evidence that Okotie Eboh and Dr. Zik pretended to be nationalists and supporters of labour when in actuality the British oppressors were funding the NCNC. Mr. Harold Smith in his autobiography titled *Blue Collar Lawman* exposed these double standards thus:

... not all the party leaders were aware as Zik and Okotie Eboh of the fact that British firms were financing the NCNC and that the British Government was actively participating in election rigging and chicanery to ensure that the North, with assistance of the NCNC, ruled Nigeria in the British Interest after independence (Tell, March, 7, 2005:35).

Union leaders in NEPA have to be careful not to allow their unions to be high jacked by government officials or other moneybags. Sometimes Governments create these communication gaps intentionally in order for them to have advantage over the workers. Cave the Dragon!

Workers and union members in the energy industry have deliberately copied and transferred to the energy industry, the civil service mentality with the resultant effect that it has become over bureaucratized. Similarly, the Nigerian factor, which condones corruption, is also present in NEPA.

The above reasons precipitated the depressed or traumatized economy Nigerians are now experiencing and the collapse of NEPA as a corporate body. We are now living witnesses of the high rate of hyper – inflation, unemployment and low capacity utilization in all industries in Nigeria.

The government on her part, continue to stress that the only way out of this depression is for Nigeria to encourage exports, devalue the Naira, adopt the Dollar as a store for value, join the World Trade Organization (WTO), continue to borrow from the IMF when Nigeria have not been able to complete paying the interest of the interest of all

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the loans the country collected before and after independence and lastly, accept the policy of Globalization which is not in the interest of Nigeria and other African countries.

NEPA and Economic Reforms

Economic reforms should not only end in government providing among other things: "The democratization of the labour movement through the expansion of opportunities for the registration of Federation of Trade Unions as well as the granting of freedom to employees to decide which unions they wish to belong" (Trade Unions Amendment ACT, 2005 p.1).

The whole idea of "democratizing the labour unions" is a fraud as what government intends to do here is to discourage Nigerians from joining labour unions, which the ruling class misconstrues as antagonistic. This despicable plan by government to weaken the unions is amplified in section 30 subsection 6 of the labour law thus:

No person, trade union or employee shall take part in a strike or look out or engage in any conduct in contemplation of furtherance of a strike or lock out unless...(emphasis mine).

And if anybody contravenes the above law he would "be liable on conviction to a fine of N10,00 or six months imprisonment or both" (section 30 subsection 7).

As can be gleaned from the above quotations, the whole essence for the People's Democratic Party (PDP) democratizing labour is to muzzle labour and opposition and not to further the principles of democracy. No government in the world is comfortable with trade union actions.

This idea of muzzling unions and opposition is not a new idea in Nigeria because Britain, Okotie Eboh and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe connived and muzzled chief Awolowo who was a torn in the flesh of

Britain by falsely accusing Awolowo of treason and imprisoned him in the Calabar Central Prison. Saddam Hussein has also fallen victim to Western intrigues when he successfully mobilized OPEC countries against American interest of getting oil at cheapest price from a fragmented OPEC.

Prognoses for Action

The "Siscoms" and "Brocoms" who make up the Labour Union should not fold their arms when the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) decides to abrogate all agreements entered into by NEPA because NEPA is a corporate body hence once you inherit NEPA's assets, you have to, as a matter of principle, also accept her liabilities.

If all members so desire, they should accept "en mass" to be paid off by NEPA instead of joining the PHCN without any compensation from NEPA. Members who know their jobs well and have little or no queries could be rehired by PHCN on a higher level and salary. The present crop of NEPA worker because of their technical expertise, are the best materials in generating distributing electricity and maintaining NEPA equipment hence, if they must sell their labour power to a faceless company as the PHCN, they must do so at a high cost.

The NUEE should probe via the press how the N100 billion which was suppose to have been sent to revamp NEPA disappeared in thin air. The people of Nigeria will like to know if the subvention even reached NEPA officials. If not, those who are responsible should return the money into the government treasury or be sanctioned.

The rehabilitation of NEPA plants all over the country should not be consummated by contractors chosen via political or PDP patronage but should be those who can perform creditable. Government should stop blaming the whole NEPA institution for corruption because the management of NEPA has not refused to release corrupt NEPA officials for trial.

The Federal Government of Nigeria should help NEPA to supply or generate more mega-Watts of electricity instead of blaming the

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workers for not performing.

Government should invite NEPA union leaders to educate government on how to improve the quality of service in the industry and not the Power Holding Company of Nigeria because it is only the present crop of NEPA workers who "know where the shoe pinches".

Strike actions should not always be viewed as anti-government because it is the only way the workers can express their feelings on certain issues all over the world.

Government should not disguise under the Rehabilitate, Operate and Transfer (ROT) syndrome to privatize the Afam power station which is the only one in the South because apart from the fact that machines there are new, government cannot afford to sell machines which have not depreciated. Those behind these despicable deals should consider Nigeria first before their individual interests.

It is ridiculous for a leasing company to collect revenue for NEPA instead of accounts clerks employed for revenue collection. What government should have done is to commission the leasing company to repair NEPA machines first before collecting revenue. We should learn to do first things first.

Above all, NEPA staffs dealing with members of the public should try as much as possible, to be transparent, polite and responsive to customer's demands. They should remember that NEPA is government sponsored business hence should always smile at the customers.

If NEPA workers, management and labour leaders take the above suggestions seriously, members of the Technical committee on Privatization and Commercialization (TCPC) would change their minds and NEPA will remain NEPA. In other words, the Federal Government of Nigeria's decision to privatize NEPA and vest control to the Power Holding Company of Nigeria could be rescinded.

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