

NAVIGATING THE ERA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF
ORGANIZED LABOUR IN 21ST CENTURY NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The study titled Navigating the Era: Challenges and Opportunities of Organized Labour in 21st Century Nigeria examines the evolving constraints, and prospects of trade unions in a rapidly changing socio-economic and political environment. Despite their historical significance in advancing workers' rights and socio-political reforms, organised labour in Nigeria faces internal weaknesses, including leadership crises, corruption, low membership participation, and factionalism. Externally, they contend with government suppression, economic instability, globalisation, casualisation of labour, technological disruption, and a decline in bargaining power. Anchored on Functionalism Theory, Equity Theory and Conflict Theory, the study adopts a qualitative, descriptive approach, relying on secondary data from scholarly articles, policy documents, and institutional reports published. Findings reveal that while organised labour remains a critical force in industrial relations, its relevance is undermined by internal governance issues and external socio-economic pressures. However, emerging opportunities exist in leveraging digital technology for mobilisation, expanding representation to gig economy workers, and forming alliances with civil society and international organisations to amplify policy influence. The study recommends strengthening internal governance through transparency and accountability, embracing digital tools for advocacy, broadening membership to cover emerging labour sectors, and building strategic partnerships for greater influence in labour policy formulation. Overall, the research underscores that the future strength and legitimacy of organised labour in Nigeria depend on its ability to adapt to the demands of a dynamic 21st-century labour landscape.

Keywords: *Organized Labour, Nigeria, Challenges, Opportunities, 21st Century*

INTRODUCTION

Historically, human societies have relied on various forms of social organisation to regulate relations between individuals, communities, and leadership

structures. In pre-industrial societies, occupational and trade-based groupings existed in the form of guilds, artisan associations, and communal labour arrangements that coordinated work, upheld standards, and protected members' welfare (Benson, 2002). These traditional organisations were often embedded in cultural norms and kinship systems, rather than in the formalised structures that later emerged. While they lacked the complex bureaucracy of modern unions, such systems played a critical role in negotiating the relationship between labour and authority, often using customary law as the framework for dispute resolution (De Ste. Croix, 2024).

The advent of industrialisation in the 18th and 19th centuries fundamentally transformed the nature of work and the organisation of labour. Mechanised production, urbanisation, and the rise of the factory system led to a growing disconnect between employers and employees, intensifying labour exploitation through long working hours, low wages, and unsafe conditions (Hobsbawm, 2021). In response, organised labour movements emerged in Europe and North America to advocate for workers' rights, fair pay, and safe workplaces, marking the birth of modern trade unions (Cole, 2021). These unions increasingly adopted collective bargaining, strikes, and political lobbying as tools for influencing industrial relations, ultimately shaping labour legislation and social welfare policies across many parts of the world (Frege & Kelly, 2021).

In the post-industrial and globalised economy of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, organised labour unions have faced both new opportunities and unprecedented challenges. Technological advancements, flexible labour arrangements, and the rise of the gig economy have fragmented traditional employment relationships (Standing, 2023). Global supply chains, neoliberal economic reforms, and corporate restructuring have weakened union bargaining power in many countries (Munck, 2020). At the same time, unions have been forced to address broader social issues such as gender equality, climate change, and the rights of migrant workers, reflecting the interconnected nature of global labour concerns (Fairbrother et al., 2021).

In Nigeria, the history of organised labour unions can be traced to the colonial era, with the establishment of workers' associations such as the Nigerian Civil Service Union in 1912

(Yesufu, 2023). These early movements played a significant role in anti-colonial struggles and in shaping the post-independence labour landscape. However, in the 21st century, Nigerian labour unions operate in a complex environment marked by economic instability, political interference, high unemployment rates, and a rapidly changing labour market. The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) continue to play prominent roles in advocating for workers' rights, but face significant challenges, including declining union membership, restrictive government policies, casualisation of labour, and public perception issues (Fajana, 2020). Understanding these challenges is crucial for assessing the relevance and effectiveness of organised labour in promoting workers' welfare and industrial harmony in contemporary Nigeria. **Statement of the Problem**

Organised labour has historically played a critical role in protecting workers' rights, improving wages, and influencing socio-economic policies. In the 21st century, however, the global labour landscape is being reshaped by rapid technological change, globalisation, and shifting employment patterns. Across the world, unions are grappling with declining membership, reduced bargaining power, and the need to address emerging issues such as the gig economy, climate change, and workplace automation. For countries like Nigeria, these challenges are compounded by local economic, political, and institutional realities that threaten the capacity of organised labour to remain an effective advocate for workers.

In Nigeria, organised labour movements such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) operate in a turbulent socio-economic environment marked by high inflation, rising unemployment, and persistent underemployment. Economic instability, coupled with structural adjustments, neoliberal reforms, and casualisation of labour, has weakened the traditional union employer relationship. Furthermore, government policies have often been perceived as restrictive to union freedoms, with instances of political interference,

suppression of strikes, and attempts to weaken collective bargaining frameworks. The 2024 nationwide strike and the 2025 dispute over the National Industrial Relations Policy underscore the growing tension between labour movements, employers, and government authorities.

Beyond structural and political pressures, organised labour in Nigeria also faces internal challenges, including leadership disputes, allegations of corruption, and struggles to adapt strategies to address non-standard forms of work. The rise of informal employment, contract work, and gig-based platforms has significantly reduced the reach of traditional union structures, leaving millions of workers outside the scope of formal representation. While these challenges are formidable, the evolving economic and technological landscape also presents opportunities for unions to modernise their operations, engage in digital organising, broaden advocacy to include vulnerable worker categories, and forge stronger alliances at both national and international levels.

The central problem, therefore, is how organised labour in Nigeria can navigate the dual pressures of global labour transformations and domestic socio-political constraints, while simultaneously seizing new opportunities to remain relevant and effective. Failure to address these issues could lead to further erosion of union influence, diminished worker protections, and a widening gap between labour representation and the realities of the modern workforce.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this paper is to examine the challenges and opportunities of organised labour in 21st-century Nigeria.

The specific objectives are to:

- i. Identify and analyse the key challenges facing organised labour in 21st-century Nigeria.
- ii. Assess the factors limiting the effectiveness and participation of organised labour in protecting workers' rights.

- iii. Propose effective strategies for revitalising and strengthening organised labour in contemporary Nigeria.
- iv. Explore innovative approaches to labour organising, collective bargaining, and social movement building in the Nigerian context.

Significance of the study

This study is significant for several reasons. It provides critical insights into the evolving challenges faced by organised labour unions in 21st-century Nigeria. Historically, labour unions have played a pivotal role in championing workers' rights, promoting fair labour practices, and serving as a check against exploitative tendencies within both public and private sectors. However, within Nigeria's dynamic political, economic, and socio-cultural environment, these unions increasingly face complex challenges that threaten their relevance and effectiveness. For policymakers, the research offers empirical evidence and analysis that can inform the formulation of laws and labour policies aimed at strengthening industrial relations, improving working conditions, and fostering peaceful engagement between government, employers, and labour organisations. By identifying issues such as political interference, dwindling membership, financial constraints, and internal leadership crises, the study can guide interventions that address the root causes of labour unrest and promote effective governance.

For labour leaders and union members, the study serves as a tool for self-evaluation. It highlights the need for strategic reforms, greater accountability, and transparent governance within unions to rebuild trust and mobilise collective action. Additionally, it underscores the importance of adapting to the realities of globalisation, technological advancement, and changing employment structures, including contract work and outsourcing. Academically, this research contributes to the body of literature on labour relations in Nigeria and the broader sub-Saharan African context. It bridges knowledge gaps by documenting present-day challenges in contrast to historical experiences, thus providing a valuable reference for future research and policy analysis.

For civil society organisations and the general public, the study raises awareness of the importance of a vibrant and effective labour movement in protecting workers' rights and promoting social justice within Nigeria's democratic process. In essence, this study is both timely and relevant, contributing to intellectual discourse while offering practical recommendations for policymaking and union revitalisation. It seeks to reposition organised labour in Nigeria for sustainable impact in the 21st century.

Methodology

This study is essentially theoretical in nature and relies primarily on secondary sources of data. The research was conducted through a critical review of relevant empirical and theoretical studies carried out by scholars and experts in the field of labour relations. Data were sourced from a wide range of credible materials, including textbooks, peer-reviewed journals, periodicals, magazines, newspapers, and other reputable publications. These sources provided the basis for understanding both historical and contemporary perspectives on organised labour, with particular emphasis on developments in the 21st-century Nigerian context. The collected information was subjected to content analysis, allowing for systematic examination and interpretation of the materials. This process involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, and divergent viewpoints, which were synthesised to form well-reasoned conclusions. By integrating insights from diverse literature, the study ensures that its findings are grounded in a broad and reliable body of knowledge.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Conceptualisation

Organised Labour Union

Organised labour unions are formalised associations of employees established to safeguard and advance the collective interests of their members regarding wages, working conditions, job security, and other employment-related matters. They operate primarily through collective bargaining, enabling workers to negotiate as a

unified entity rather than as individuals, thereby strengthening their bargaining position (Fashoyin, 2023; Adewumi & Adenugba, 2020). The central role of organised labour is to act as an intermediary between employees and employers, ensuring fair treatment and advocating for improved labour standards. As Yesufu (2021) observed, organised labour constitutes "a continuous association of wage earners formed for the purpose of maintaining and improving the conditions of their working lives." This perspective underscores the enduring, proactive role of unions in safeguarding workers' welfare beyond short-term disputes.

In Nigeria, the history of organised labour dates back to colonial-era craft-based associations, gradually evolving into national federations such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC). Under the Trade Unions Act (2005), a trade union is defined as "any combination of workers or employers, whether temporary or permanent, whose principal objectives include regulating the terms and conditions of employment of workers." This legislative framework grants organised labour both legal recognition and a mandate to act in the interests of its members. Beyond workplace representation, Nigerian labour unions have historically been instrumental in nationalist struggles, public policy advocacy, and democratic governance (Akinyanju, 2022; Ootobo, 2023; Olojede & Fashoyin, 2021). However, their performance is influenced by both internal dynamics such as leadership competence, transparency, and member engagement and external pressures, including state interference, restrictive labour laws, economic instability, and the impacts of globalisation (Okene & Fajana, 2022).

Therefore, while several studies have examined the historical development, legal framework, and socio-political roles of Nigerian organised labour, there is a notable lack of recent empirical research exploring how contemporary challenges such as digitalisation of work, neoliberal economic reforms, political co-optation, and internal leadership crises are reshaping the effectiveness of unions in the 21st century. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to how these factors jointly undermine the bargaining power of Nigerian organised labour in an increasingly globalised and precarious labour market. Addressing this gap is essential for

understanding the evolving dynamics of labour relations and for developing strategies to revitalise union effectiveness in Nigeria.

Organized Labour in Nigeria

Organized labour unions are formal associations of workers that negotiate collectively on wages, working hours, job security, and conditions of work through mechanisms such as collective bargaining and conciliation. In Nigeria, these unions are governed by the *Trade Unions Act* (Cap T14, LFN 2004; amended 2005), which outlines their formation, registration, structure, and dispute-resolution mechanisms (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022; Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre [PLACNG], 2022). The Federal Ministry of Labour & Employment's Trade Union Services and Industrial Relations (TUSIR) department oversees union activities and provides mediation to ensure industrial harmony (Federal Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2022).

Historical Development and Structure

The Nigerian labour movement evolved from colonial-era craft associations into national federations, most notably the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC). The post-1978 restructuring consolidated numerous smaller unions into industrial unions under the NLC's umbrella, while the TUC emerged as a federation for senior staff (Wikipedia, 2022).

Traditional and Modern Roles

Historically, Nigerian unions have focused on wage bargaining, improving working conditions, and resolving disputes. In the modern era, they also engage in policy advocacy and sociopolitical mobilisation, often leading protests on issues such as fuel subsidies and cost-of-living crises (Houeland, 2022a; Houeland, 2022b). TUSIR provides conciliation services, while tripartite platforms allow unions to participate in labour policy-making (Federal Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2022).

Adaptation to 21st-Century Change

Globalisation, economic shocks, digitalisation, and the expansion of informal work have tested traditional union models. High informality in Nigeria limits the reach of collective agreements (ILO, 2022). Some unions have adapted by organising gig workers, such as the formation of the Amalgamated Union of App-Based Transport Workers of Nigeria (AUATWON) (Auatwon, 2022; Stren & Blan Partners, 2024). Despite ongoing mass actions over minimum wages and inflation, unions face constraints due to fiscal and policy limitations (Associated Press [AP], 2024; TRT Global, 2024). The ILO's *Decent Work Country Programme (2023-2027)* seeks to strengthen industrial relations and expand worker protections (ILO, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a sociological perspective and triangulates three theories to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing organised labour in 21st century Nigeria:

Equity Theory, Marxian Strand of Conflict Theory, and Functionalism.

Equity Theory

Equity Theory, developed by J. Stacy Adams in the 1960s, builds on the principles of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and social exchange theory (Homans, 1961). It posits that individuals are motivated by perceptions of fairness in the distribution of resources, rewards, and responsibilities (Adams, 1965). People assess fairness by comparing their input-outcome ratio (e.g., effort, skills, loyalty vs. pay, benefits, recognition) with that of others they consider similar or relevant (Deutsch & Gerard, 1979). When individuals perceive inequity, they experience psychological discomfort, which may lead to behavioural or attitudinal changes aimed at restoring balance (Okibukola & Anugwom, 2021).

Strength

A key strength of Equity Theory lies in its ability to explain how perceptions of fairness influence commitment, satisfaction, and engagement in both individual and collective settings. It offers valuable insights into workplace motivation and is

particularly useful in understanding the dynamics of solidarity and participation within labour unions (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978).

Weakness

One limitation is its narrow focus on equity in interpersonal or organisational contexts, without sufficiently accounting for macro-level structural or systemic inequalities, such as class-based exploitation, political repression, or institutional corruption, which may shape perceptions of fairness (Huseman, Hatfield, & Miles, 1987).

Criticism

Critics argue that Equity Theory tends to oversimplify the complexity of socio-economic and political realities by reducing motivation to a fairness-unfairness calculation (Colquitt et al., 2001). It also assumes that individuals are rational evaluators of fairness, overlooking situations where cultural norms, ideological influences, or economic desperation override equity considerations.

Application of the Theory

In the context of organised labour in Nigeria, Equity Theory provides a lens for understanding the apathy and disengagement of rank-and-file union members when they perceive a mismatch between their contributions (e.g., payment of dues, participation in strikes, loyalty) and the benefits they receive (e.g., improved wages, better working conditions, effective representation). When union members perceive leaders as corrupt, self-serving, or politically compromised, their trust erodes, leading to reduced participation in union activities. This erosion of solidarity weakens the bargaining power of organised labour and diminishes its capacity to advocate effectively for workers' rights in 21st-century Nigeria.

Marxian Strand of Conflict Theory

Karl Marx's conflict theory situates organised labour within the broader framework of class struggle, where the capitalist class (bourgeoisie) owns and controls the

means of production, while the working class (proletariat) sells its labour power in exchange for wages (Marx & Engels, 1848/1977). According to Marx, the capitalist class seeks to maximise profits by extracting surplus value from workers, whereas workers aim to secure higher wages, improved working conditions, and greater job security (Adekanye, 2005; Braverman, 2022). This antagonistic relationship is structural, arising from the fundamentally opposed economic interests of both classes, making conflict inevitable (Dahrendorf, 2022).

Strength

The Marxian framework offers a robust structural explanation for the adversarial nature of labour capital relations, clearly identifying the roots of conflict in systemic power imbalances and economic exploitation (Wright, 2022). It emphasises the role of structural inequality in shaping labour struggles, and it has been influential in understanding trade union movements, collective bargaining disputes, and strike actions globally (Hyman, 2022).

Weakness

A key limitation of the Marxian approach is its strong economic determinism, which can oversimplify the complexities of labour relations by downplaying the influence of social, cultural, political, and institutional factors (Collins, 2023). It also tends to assume that class conflict is the primary driver of historical change, leaving less room for the role of individual agency, technological innovation, or cooperative relationships between labour and management (Coser, 1956).

Criticism

Critics contend that Marx's analysis underestimates the potential for reform within capitalist systems, particularly through democratic institutions, labour legislation, and collective bargaining frameworks (Giddens, 2021). Furthermore, the binary categorisation of society into bourgeoisie and proletariat is often considered too rigid to capture the nuances of modern economies, which include a growing middle

class, professional workers, and complex employment arrangements (Therborn, 2021).

Application of the Theory

The Marxian perspective is particularly useful in analysing the persistent tensions between Nigerian organised labour and the state. The Nigerian government, in many instances, acts to safeguard capitalist interests by enforcing restrictive labour laws, interfering in union leadership, and suppressing industrial actions (Otobo, 2023; Fashoyin, 2023). These actions align with Marx's assertion that the state functions as an instrument of class domination, mediating in favour of capital owners and political elites while limiting the bargaining power of labour.

Functionalism

Functionalism, rooted in the works of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer and later popularised by Bronisław Malinowski and Émile Durkheim, conceptualises society as an integrated system in which various institutions and structures perform specialised functions to maintain overall stability and cohesion (Durkheim, 1933; Spencer, 1896). Each institution, such as the family, education, religion, and labour unions, plays a role akin to organs in a living organism, contributing to the health and survival of the whole. In this perspective, organised labour functions to protect workers' rights, promote equitable distribution of resources, and mediate between workers and employers to sustain industrial harmony (Okebunor & Anugwom, 2021).

Strength

Functionalism underscores the necessity of cooperation, role differentiation, and interdependence for societal stability (Parsons, 1951). It helps explain how organised labour, when functioning optimally, contributes to social cohesion by ensuring that the interests of workers are represented and that potential conflicts are resolved through negotiation rather than disruption.

Weakness

A major limitation of functionalism is its overemphasis on stability and equilibrium, making it less adept at explaining rapid societal changes, power struggles, and systemic inequalities (Merton, 1968). This can result in the neglect of how entrenched inequalities within institutions such as leadership corruption in unions can erode their effectiveness.

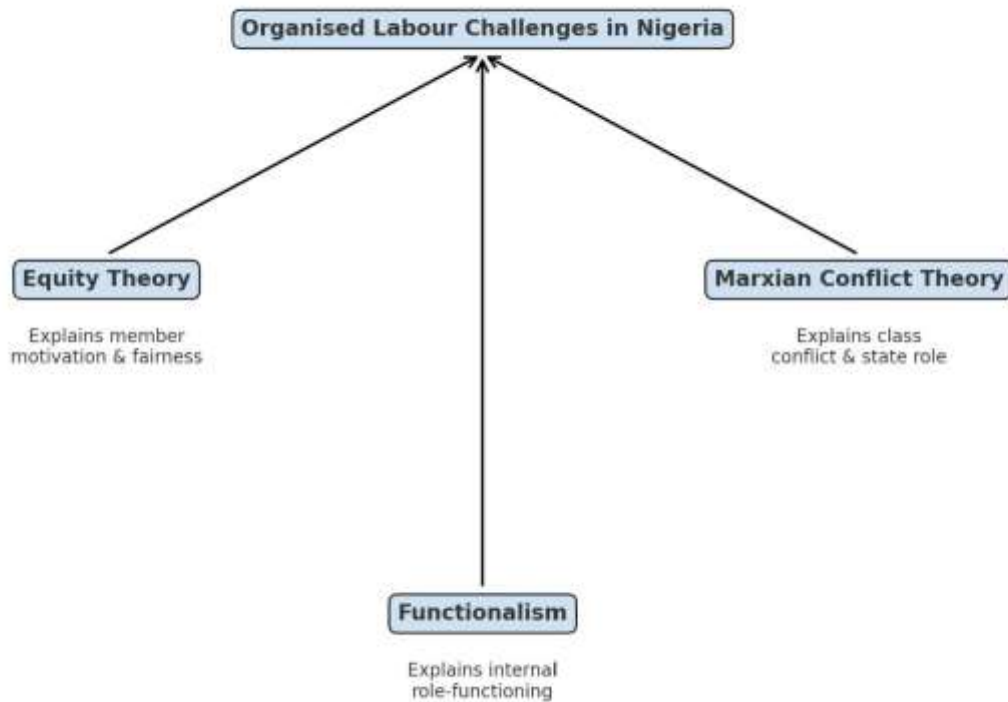
Criticism

Critics argue that functionalism can inadvertently legitimise the status quo by portraying existing structures as necessary and beneficial, even when they perpetuate exploitation or inequality (Haralambos & Holborn, 2021). By focusing on harmony, it risks overlooking the inherent conflicts and contradictions within social systems.

Application of the Theory

From a functionalist perspective, organised labour in Nigeria is a vital subsystem whose internal components leadership, members, and administrative structures must work together effectively to maintain its relevance and strength. When leadership fails due to corruption, or when members disengage due to apathy and mistrust, the union experiences systemic dysfunction. This disequilibrium weakens its capacity to advocate for workers' welfare, thereby undermining its role in the broader societal structure. In the context of 21st-century Nigeria, the decline in union cohesion and efficiency can thus be seen as a breakdown in functional integration, with implications for both industrial relations and national socio-economic stability.

Theoretical Triangulation for Organised Labour Challenges in Nigeria



Result and Discussion

Challenges Facing Organized Labour in 21st-Century Nigeria

Internal Challenges

Leadership Crisis and Factionalism

Trade union fragmentation and power struggles have eroded unity and effectiveness. For example, the formation of the United Labour Congress (ULC) by splinter groups in 2023 citing detachment of the NLC leadership from rank-and-file concerns highlighted internal dissent within unions. Although the ULC rejoined the NLC in 2020, the episode exposed deep fissures in union democracy and cohesion (Wikipedia, 2022).

Corruption and Mismanagement

Widespread corruption and abuse of union funds have fostered distrust among members, leading to disengagement and loss of legitimacy. While quantitative data on union corruption remains limited, pervasive national corruption trends suggest vulnerabilities within union leadership structures (Wikipedia, 2022).

Low Membership Participation

The severe expansion of Nigeria's informal economy leaves many workers outside union structures. About 92% of workers are informally employed and typically unrepresented, which diminishes unions' reach and collective bargaining strength (Wikipedia, 2022).

External Challenges

Government Suppression and Intimidation

Organised labour in Nigeria has increasingly faced state repression. In 2024, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) condemned incidents of police raids on NLC headquarters, intimidation of union leaders, and violent suppression of union protests actions that fundamentally undermine labour rights (ITUC, 2024; Guardian Nigeria, 2023).

Economic Instability and High Cost of Living

Persistent inflation and rising living costs have heightened union agitation, yet economic constraints limit their achievements. The 2024 indefinite strike by NLC and TUC over minimum wage demands, which disrupted the national grid and flights, underscores the stakes but also the fiscal limits of negotiated settlements (VOA News, 2024; Reuters, 2024; Wikipedia, 2023; Guardian, 2024).

Globalisation, Casualisation, and Technological Disruption

Global economic shifts have intensified employment precarity. The rise of casual and contract labour reduces union coverage, while digitalisation and the gig economy

challenge traditional organising models. Evidence on technology's displacing versus creating jobs underscores the need for reskilling and adaptive strategies (Hötte, Somers, & Theodorakopoulos, 2022).

Weakening Bargaining Power

Unions repeated industrial actions e.g., strikes in 2020, 2023, and 2024 (against tariff hikes, subsidy removals, and economic hardship) demonstrate their ongoing relevance yet also reflect diminishing leverage amid economic and political constraints (Pulse Nigeria, 2023; AP News, 2023; Reuters, 2024; Wikipedia, 2023).

Opportunities for Organized Labour in the 21st Century Nigeria

Leveraging Technology for Mobilisation and Advocacy

The digital era presents organised labour in Nigeria with unprecedented opportunities to enhance mobilisation, advocacy, and communication. Social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp groups can be harnessed for real-time information dissemination, member engagement, and collective action planning (Olatunji, 2021). Online petitions, webinars, and virtual conferences allow unions to bypass geographical barriers, reaching both urban and rural members.

Furthermore, digital tools can be employed for grassroots organising, creating secure communication channels for sensitive discussions, and tracking workplace violations. As observed by Anigbogu and Eze (2023), technology-enabled campaigns have already proven effective in galvanising public opinion and pressuring policymakers during protests such as the #EndSARS movement, suggesting that labour unions can adopt similar strategies to strengthen bargaining positions.

Strengthening Democratic Governance and Policy Influence

Organised labour has the potential to expand its role in shaping democratic governance and influencing socio-economic policies. Labour unions have historically

played a role in Nigeria's democratic struggles, but the 21st century offers an opportunity for more structured engagement in policymaking processes.

Through coalition building, strategic lobbying, and participation in public policy dialogues, unions can advocate for fair labour laws, minimum wage adjustments, and improved social protection systems (Obi & Akinbode, 2022). Labour's representation in tripartite arrangements, such as the National Labour Advisory Council, can be strengthened to ensure workers' perspectives are central to economic reforms. Strengthened political advocacy can also help counteract anti-labour legislation and safeguard collective bargaining rights.

Expanding into New Sectors such as the Gig Economy

The rise of the gig economy spanning ride-hailing services, online freelancing, and delivery platforms presents both challenges and opportunities for organised labour. While these sectors are characterised by precarious work and lack of traditional benefits, they also represent a growing segment of the workforce.

Labour unions can expand their membership base by organising gig workers and advocating for their recognition under labour laws (Okoye & Ogu, 2021). This could involve pushing for legislative reforms that extend minimum wage protections, health insurance, and collective bargaining rights to digital platform workers. According to Afolabi and Ibrahim (2024), gig worker unionisation in countries like Kenya and South Africa shows that it is possible to adapt traditional union models to emerging forms of work.

Partnering with Civil Society, International Organisations, and Youth Movements

Partnerships with civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and international labour bodies can amplify the influence of Nigerian labour unions. Such collaborations provide access to technical expertise, global advocacy networks, and additional resources for capacity building (ILO, 2023).

Working with youth movements many of which are digitally savvy and socially conscious can rejuvenate union structures and make them more appealing to younger workers. Joint campaigns on climate justice, gender equality in the workplace, and anti-corruption initiatives can broaden labour's appeal beyond wage issues, positioning unions as champions of holistic socio-economic rights (Ogunyemi & Adeola, 2022).

Conclusion

Organized labour in 21st-century Nigeria stands at a critical crossroads, navigating a complex landscape of challenges and opportunities that shape its relevance and effectiveness. Historically rooted in the struggle for workers' rights and socio-political transformation, unions such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) have evolved from craft-based associations to legally recognized entities with national influence. While their foundational roles in collective bargaining, workplace advocacy, and policy engagement remain vital, the rapidly changing socio-economic and political environment demands significant adaptation. On one hand, internal issues such as leadership crises, corruption, dwindling membership participation, and factionalism continue to undermine union credibility and solidarity. On the other hand, external forces including government repression, economic volatility, globalization, technological disruption, and the rise of precarious work arrangements pose formidable threats to their bargaining power and operational independence. These realities necessitate a strategic rethinking of labour activism in Nigeria.

However, the current era is not without promise. Emerging opportunities lie in the innovative use of digital platforms for mobilisation, expanding union representation into new and informal labour sectors such as the gig economy, strengthening democratic governance through policy advocacy, and building alliances with civil society, international organisations, and youth movements. By embracing these avenues, organized labour can reposition itself not only as a defender of workers' rights but also as a proactive driver of inclusive economic growth and social justice.

In essence, the survival and success of organized labour in Nigeria's 21st century will depend on its ability to balance tradition with innovation, maintain internal integrity, and seize new opportunities to remain a relevant force in shaping the nation's labour and political landscape. The road ahead demands resilience, adaptability, and visionary leadership qualities without which the movement risks diminishing influence in an era of profound transformation.

Recommendations

- i. **Strengthen Internal Governance and Transparency:** Organized labour unions in Nigeria should institute robust accountability mechanisms to address leadership crises, corruption, and factionalism. This includes enforcing term limits, conducting regular financial audits, and ensuring inclusive decision-making processes that promote trust and unity among members (Adewale & Olaleye, 2022).
- ii. **Leverage Digital Technology for Mobilisation and Advocacy:** Labour organisations should adopt modern communication tools such as social media, mobile apps, and virtual meeting platforms to enhance membership engagement, organise campaigns, and amplify advocacy efforts.
- iii. **Expand Representation to Emerging Labour Sectors:** Unions should broaden their reach beyond traditional industries to include informal and gig economy workers, who often lack adequate protection.
- iv. **Forge Strategic Alliances for Policy Influence:** Organised labour should strengthen collaborations with civil society organisations, international labour bodies, and youth movements to consolidate bargaining power and enhance influence in policy formulation.

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