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UNDERSTANDING THE ROLES OF NATIONAL UNION OF ROAD TRANSPORTER WORKERS IN NIGERIA PUBLIC TRANSPORT OPERATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF OYO STATE

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Abstract

National Union of Road Transport Worker is an affiliate of the Nigeria Labour Congress with long history of labour activism. However, with the promulgation of Decree 22 of 1978, fourteen (14) unions were merged together to form what is today known as the National Union of Road Transport Workers. The main objective of the union is to protect and promote the welfare and interest of its members. The study main objective is to examine the roles of the union with particular reference to Oyo state, which has been the epicenter of western Nigeria politics. Relevant literature were reviewed. The paper also reviewed the history and activities of the union in Oyo State, while secondary data that include journals, newspaper and books were utilized, the method of data analysis was qualitative, while the study employed Relational Theory as theoretical framework. Findings from the study showed that National Union of Road Transporter has strong political allegiance with the politicians who use them as thugs to intimidate political opponents. Equally, it revealed that activities of the union lacks accountability and transparency. In summary, it was in the opinion of the paper that the leadership should step up its activities in order to change public perception. It therefore recommends that leadership of the union should promote members' welfare. Also, housing and vehicle loans should be made available to members.

Keywords: Trade Union, Collaboration, Transportation, Welfare, Accountability, Transparency.

Introduction

The National Union of Road Transport Workers (NUTRW) represents strong voice in the transportation sectors in Nigeria. As a national body , its activities are pronounced at local, state and national levels in Nigeria, In the Nigeria political space , members of the association formed strategic partner with the administration , as successive government has found

utility and relevance in the activities of the union. NUTRW roles in galvanizing supports for political parties, particularly the party in power has placed their executive members in position of influence. Besides, the electoral body, the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) often engage their services in the movement of sensitive election materials during elections. In many instances, members of the union have been alleged to have been used in promoting thuggery and other forms of electoral violence in Nigeria.

Activities of National Union of Roads Transport Workers is not limited to transportation alone. Historically, activities transport union in Nigeria, particularly Lagos could be traced back to 1932, but no visible efforts were made to coordinate the activities of its members. But with the enactment of first labour legislation in 1942, that heralded the formation of Trade Union Congress of Nigeria, (TUCN) However, the anonymous roles of drivers in the political and economic activities took a new turn in 1978 with the of the NURTW. There were two school of thought on the emergence of NUTRW in 1978. The first school of thought argued that emergence of the union was to protect their members from ill treatment that was being meted on them by vehicle owners, while another school submitted that even though NURTW was formed in 1978 under military administration its influence was strengthened by leadership of the defunct National Party of Nigeria (NPN) particularly in the southwest, where the leadership of the Union led by Adebayo Success openly identified themselves with the Party and carried out their operations with impunity.

As a union, it has strived to promote the interests of its members by collaborating with government in the promotion of efficient public transportation system. Inspite of other strategic partnership such as traffic control in the major cities, regular safety campaign with Federal Roads Safety Corps (FRSC) in major highways, regular sensitization in motor parks by National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) against drug abuse and consumption of illicit alcoholic drinks. Also another government agency that has been partnering with the union is the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) against the abuse or use illicit drugs couple with the alleged roles of members in the inter-city and inter-state transportation of drugs, the conduct of its members has brought about public criticisms and opprobrium.

No doubt, NURTW roles have gone beyond efficient management of transportation system to becoming a major partner in driving the security architecture of the country. Subsequently, its voice cannot be ignored by government at all levels, either at local, state and federal. While these roles are commendable, their activities have become clog in the wheel of morality and decency. Often times, their public conduct make commuters doubt if any decent person can be found among them. While majority of them may have courted public discontentment, there are many of them that are responsible family men with high level of personal discipline.

In Nigeria today, driving is no more restricted to the uneducated people. Male and female, University and Polytechnic graduates are found among them. Besides, many drivers have embarked on personal development by going back to school for higher studies. But this has not changed public perceptions about their attitudes as they still regard them as discourteous people with no regard for status, sex or age. The study is an attempt to examine the roles of NURTW in the context of the impacts of its roles in national development, with particular focus on Oyo State, in South west, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The National Union of Roads Transport Workers (NURTW) has come of age. From 1938, the union has established strong voice in the Nigerian labour movement. Its registration by the government of former President Shehu Shagari further strengthened their position as strategic partner, not only in the transportation sector, successive government at all levels have recognized the union as driving force in the maintenance of peace and political stability in view of the various agencies of government such as National Agency for Food and Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC), Federal Roads Safety Corps (FRSC) National Orientation Agency (NOA) among others, activities and conduct of its members have drawn criticisms and outright condemnation from the public.

The enactment of Trade Unions amendment Decree No.22 in 1978, finally led to the pruning down of the fourteen transporters union (14) that eventually led to the formation of what is today known as National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) as an affiliate of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). Members that were collapsed to form NURTW included drivers involved in public transportation business. However, members of NUPENG were excluded. (Adesuyi, etal.2024)

From its registration in 1978, members of NURTW have been enmeshed in various crisis. They have been fingered as instruments in the hands of politicians' in promoting political thuggery and in committing they have also been accused as tools of politicians in election rigging and other forms of political violence. Within its members, there is leadership struggles for political positioning and relevance has become the order of the day.. Over leadership struggles, they are reported court cases. Meanwhile accountability is lacking in the management of the affairs of the union. In a bid to take over a motor parks, they resort to all forms of violence, including killings and maiming of their members. (Kupoluyi, 2014). Because of the public belief that their actions receive political support, they are left with no option than to avoid them by locking their shops and stay away from the streets whenever there is intra membership clashes.

No doubt, this is not a dignified role in view of the strategic roles of the union in Nigeria economic activities. Apart from commuting workers to their various places of works, they are also involved in movement of farmers and their agricultural produce, in addition to the daily transportation of goods to markets through intra states and intercity. Therefore, whenever union members sneeze, it is the national economy that catches cold.

And it is against this background that the study will attempt to examine the roles of the union in driving economy growth and development, promotion of peace and the building cohesion among its members as its activities in many cases have led to dire consequences among its members.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the roles of the National Union of Roads Transport Workers in Nigeria in the context of national development as they represent strong force in Nigeria labour movement in terms of political roles and as union that generate employment for many Nigerians. Other objectives are to:

a. Interrogate the socio-economic and political roles of the union in Oyo State, Nigeria;
b. Examine the factors that influence public perception of the union; and
c. Identify the factors that have contributed to the inability of the union to have national cohesion among its members.
d.

Research Questions

Arising from the objectives of the study, the following questions will be addressed:

a. What are the socio-economic and political roles of the union in Oyo State, Nigeria?
b. How has the activities of the union affected its perception by the general public?
c. Why has it been difficult to achieve national cohesion amongst its members?

Literature Review

The National Union of Roads Transport Workers is an affiliate body of the Nigeria Labour Congress whose main objective is to protect the interest of its members, by ensuring social stability within the transportation sector in addition to promoting welfare of its members through collective bargaining. The roles of the union has been controversial in Nigeria because of the manner they conduct their activities. The objective of protecting the interests of their members have been questioned in view of their intimating and primitive conduct which is devoid of civility and with total disregard to the rights of members to fair hearing.

Road transportation was not popular in Nigeria until 1934. Prior to 1934, the main means of transportation was the rail system. Introduction of road transportation led to competition between the transporters and government who was in charge of rail system. Consequently, attempt was made to impose higher duties on vehicles, but this was resisted by transporters in southern part of Nigeria as they were the major players in road transportation. The other part of Nigeria were not left out in the development of road transportation system.(Olubomehin, 2012:231)

The NURTW is a member of the Nigeria Labour Congress whose main objective is the welfare of their members. According to Fourchard (2022) members of the union are not bothered by the welfare of their members, neither do they seek to protect the welfare of their members considering the extortion they battle everyday from agberos, who had become thorns in the flesh of the public.

From 1978, when the union was formed, it has witnessed shifting of roles from defending and promoting the interests of their members to the enrichment of their leaders. It has become strong voice in the political process of the country. It is believed that the leadership relationship with politicians has made them easy tools in the hands of politicians in the promotion of violent and intimidation of political opponents. The union leadership closeness to political class has further encouraged corruption, violent and extortion of their members without accountability. The relationship of the leadership of the union to the political class has further eroded the implementation of people orientation policy. Rather, the development within the union has gravitated to anti people's neo-liberal policy. Such policies that have strengthened NURTW grip on the transportation sector include the return of motor parks to the union. Similarly, government collaboration with the union on the management of public transportation has further made them a major beneficiary of a deregulated economy that has placed the survival of the public at the whims and caprices of the union. (Albert, 2007,

Agbiboa, 2022) In the same, government has identified members of NURTW as strategic partner in the climate change efforts by co-opting it into the campaign of conversion of vehicles into CNG. To promote this policy among NURTW members, government has subsidized installation of the kits by 50%. (Isenyo,2024)

In the eyes of the public, the NURTW is a body that has abandoned its primary roles of defending the interests of its members, in preserving and defending the rights of the citizens. Rather, it has become a convergence for self-seeking individual who has turned drain pipe for personal enrichment. The open display of affluence of its leaders is an indication that the union lacks transparency and accountability. According to Anudu, (2021) the Lagos chapter of the union makes an average revenue of the sum of N123.078 billion ($300.19 million) As a body that plays critical role in the transportation sector, it would have been expected that money realized from their members should have been deployed to infrastructural development such as roads rehabilitation and capacity building of their members. As a body that has relationship with state governments, they have become a force to be reckoned with as a non state actor. The influence of NURTW has been further boosted through collaboration with rival union, Road Transport Employers' Association of Nigeria (RTEAN)

The union has continued to expand due to its privatization, which has brought about creation of more motor parks. This expansion has also led to the NURTW becoming a complex bureaucratic organization with structures in local, state and national levels. Furthermore, it has strengthened the position of the union over public transport system in Nigeria, which has brought the union executives closer to grass root politicians and members of Nigerian police force. Relationship between the police and members of NURTW has come mixed bag. While some regard the collaboration as a strategic arrangement that will boost security of lives in motor parks and its environment as motor parks are seen as hideouts for all sorts of anti - social behaviours, others regard the partnership between police and NURTW as an avenue to promote impunity and lawlessness as such partnership come with regular financial benefits to the police. Erring drivers are apprehended when the necessary fees are not remitted directly to the Divisional Police Officers (DPO) or through his boys. With such payment, traffic offences and other misdemeanor are overlooked as it strengthens the bargaining power of NURTW executives, whenever they seek mitigation for lesser punishment for their members. (Anudu, 2021, Fourchard, 2023)

Across the country, government periodically intervene in the activities of the union in order to restore sanity and public peace as they are notorious for disruption of public order. For instance, state governors have had to intervene in the affairs of the union when it is cleared that their activities have led to the breaking down of law and order. Such interventions are often overturned by courts. Court rulings against the state is the affirmation of NURTW independence as a labour movement with its own laws and other internal mechanisms for the regulation of its activities. Disputes among drivers are caused by control over parks and leadership tussles which often resort to loss of lives and properties. There have been legal tussles over the leadership and control of parks have resorted to legal in states such as Oyo, Lagos and Ogun. While state chapters battle for control of the soul of the union, leadership at national level is not different with Musiliu Akinsaya and Tajudeen Baruwa battling for the control of Abuja office. Frequent conflicts and legal battles that characterized the activities of

the union is a reflection of the breakdown of law and order in our national polity. (The Nation , 2015, Onozure, 2025, Shobowale, 2026).

According to Albert (2007) the handing over of motor parks to the leadership of NURTW, which began in1980s when parks were handed over to thugs who are allies of politicians. This has deepened violent conflicts over the control of parks. As allies of politicians, government has taken its eyes away from the activities of the union, including the unabated corruption that has characterized their activities. The main objective of any union is the welfare of its members. But that is not the case with the NURTW as daily revenue collected by agberos, who are engaged as revenue collectors, by the leadership of the union has not reflected in the lives of its members, nor have they used the enormous financial resources to support government in its infrastructural development strides. Apart from the tacit support they enjoy from politicians, NURTW operations do not encourage accountability neither does it promote transparency. However, government has continued to collaborate with the union because of its strategic power in ensuring and achieving efficient public transportation system. In the regard, government policy in collaborating with the union as they control over 70% of the public transportation operations. (Oguremi,1978) It is therefore ironical that the leadership of the union has not used its numerical strength and financial muscle to promote the welfare of its members and infrastructural development of the country.

Assessment of Oyo State Chapter of National Union of Road Transporter Workers (NURTW)

The first motor union, known as the Nigerian Motor Transport Union (NMTU) was formed in 1932 in the then Western Province. Some of the principal officers included Chief Samuel Akinsanya as the president and Chief Obafemi Awolowo as the secretary. Considering the caliber of the members, it will not be too far from the truth to conclude that it was formed as part of agenda to protest against the obnoxious policies of the colonial regime. The union was formed to protect the economic interest of their members as their business was affected by the colonial economic policies that created burdens on the smooth operations of their transportation business. By 1955, members had increased to 2000. The membership numerical strengthen was a boost to the adoption of strikes as tools against colonial obnoxious policies. It should be noted that the defunct western region had played radical roles in Nigeria politics with the emergence of the likes of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Chief Bola Ige, Chief Adekunle Ajasin from the region. No doubt, the region has been the hotbeds of radical politics. Oyo state as one of the states carved out from the old western region has continued to maintain its radical disposition to politics and one of the non state actors that has become a veritable participants in the state political process is the NURTW.(Adesuyi, et al, 2024).

Successive government in Oyo state, particularly since the advent of democracy has been collaborating with members of the union in promoting their political interests. Governors in the state chieftain of political parties rely on executive of the NURTW during elections. It is on record that Chief Lamidi Adedubu political trajectory relied on political thuggery and intimidation of members of opposition political parties. Governors such as Rasheed Ladoja, Alao-Akala, Lam Adeshina enjoyed collaboration with the leadership of the union such as Alhaji Taofeek Oyerinde (aka Fele) Salako Lateef (aka Eleweran) Mukaila Lamidi (aka Auxiliary) Lateef Akinsola (aka Tokyo) and Wasiu Abubakre (aka Tawa) before, during and after election to further strengthen their hold on power in the state. This collaboration often

resorted to political violence, loss of lives and disruption of economic activities in Ibadan municipality, particularly Ife Road where the operations of the union is more pronounced. Quest to control motor parks which is the main drive for violence is influenced by the urge for political visibility as this will bring the leadership to the governor. It is also a means to control the enormous financial resources that are available to the chairman and the members of his executive. According to Naira land investigation, the daily revenue generated by Oyo Chapter of NURTW is N1,939,200,000:00 with more than 70% of this amount shared by its chairman and other executive members. The money collected from the drivers are carried out under duress as they are done without the approval of drivers who felt that they are extorted by their executives without any benefit. To the drivers, the collections are meant to take care of the needs of their avaricious and gluttonous leaders. This system violates the rights of the drivers as no consideration is given to the ability to pay, even the driver has not made any trip (The Nation, 2013, Daily Trust, 2019, Ndigwe, 2022).

There seems to be a new lease of life for Oyo state NURTW as its leadership has realized the need to collaborate with government in operating efficient public transportation system. For instance, Oyo state government has collaborated with executive of NURTW members in the training of its members in manpower development. This level of collaboration has improved public conduct of drivers in their relationship with the public. (VON, 2019). In recent times, Oyo state NURTW has further strengthen the capacity building for its members through working relationship with the University of Ibadan. The MOU signed by the officials of UI and NURTW provides for training and retraining of its members. According to Oyo State NURTW, many of their members are now pursuing different degree programmes in the premier University with substantial financial support from the union. This is a departure from what its members are known for, as instruments of political thuggery. Also, the executives have instituted new policy for members to own their own vehicles through loan given to them by the leadership of the union (The Nation, 2015).

In recent time, members of Oyo State NURTW has embarked on revenue generation by unofficially performing the role of courier services. Items such as food, electronics items , letters and other important documents are sent through public inter- state transport operators. These services attract charges either from the sender or the receivers. However, these services carry its own risks as goods sent through the operators do not attract any compensation in the case of unforeseen occurrences such as armed robberies, terrorist attacks and accident. This arrangement only benefits transport operators as no compensation is enjoyed by the sender (s) or receiver. Another innovation that NURTW, including Oyo State Chapter has introduced insurance policy for motorists whereby motorists are made to pay some money. The purpose is to pay motorists or their families in case of loss of lives or properties. (s) (Laurent, 2022, Daily Trust, 2019) There is no record of any family or passenger that has benefitted from this policy.

Theoretical Framework

To assist the understanding of the roles of NURTW within the context of its relationship with government, this study will adopt the Relational Theory. According to this theory, the relationship between NURTW is defined by its political economy. While government identifies NURTW as a powerful trade union with national spread and with large members, who could give them electoral value and advantage, since politics is driven by self interest

and n sustaining this interest, members of NURTW has become willing instruments in the promotion of political violence and intimidation of political opponents. On the other hand, members of NURTW, including its executives has taken the advantage of this relationship to promote impunity and corruption. Its impunity has manifested itself in members' violation of traffic laws. Relationship between NURTW and government is based on power ,opportunities and interests that each party seeks to protect (Faleti,2018).

Research Methodology

This study employed historical and qualitative method of data analysis while secondary data sourced from journal articles, books, and newspaper articles will be utilized.

Discussion of the Findings

The study has attempted to examine the roles of the National Union of Road Transport Workers in Nigeria with particular reference to Oyo state in South west Nigeria. The NURTW is a non-state actors that has continued to be relevant in Nigeria socio-economic and political equations. They have maintained rancorous relationships with government. In the eye of the public, the union has become an unavoidable partner, however irritating their actions might be.

From the totality of the findings, the study reveals that:

a. The National Union of Road Transport Worker was formed as a trade union driven by the objective of defending and promoting its members' interests. Prior to 1978 formation of the union, the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUCN) under which Nigerian drivers operated in 1942 was at the forefront of nationalist movement as they participated in protesting against obnoxious colonial policies such as the imposition of tariffs that was meant to squeeze out Nigerian transporters from public transportation business (Adesuyi, et al 2024).
b. Similarly, the National Union of Transport Workers has contributed immeasurably to the socio-economic developments of Nigeria. Apart from the movement of goods and services across the country, members of the union are also involved in the transportation of workers to their various places of works, this is in addition to providing jobs for thousands of Nigerians. This has made members of the union players in Nigeria economic ecosystem.
c. Findings from the study equally revealed that NURTW made huge sum of money from its members through daily contributions. Unfortunately, this humongous amount has not impacted in the welfare of its members as the money are shared among executive members of the union. No particular national or state welfare programme has been put in place to improve the welfare of their members. This may have been responsible for reluctance of its members to pay money to agberos. For the executive members, the union has become a conduit pipe for self enrichment (Anudu, 2021, Olubomehin,2012)
d. While NURTW has made huge impacts in the transportation sector, its members have become tools in the hands of politicians in Oyo state as they have been used by politicians to intimidate political opponents and forment troubles that have paralysed socio-economic lives of the citizens across the state. Also, members of the union and the police maintain cordial relationship, not in promoting smooth flow of traffic in Oyo state but to strengthen police rights of entitlement as they demand money from the union daily. This 'rights' has further deepen corruption and impunity of its members.

And because of huge money that are available incessant crisis to take over motor parks have become the order of the day (Daily Trust, 2019, Fourchard, 2022).

e. Negative perception of members of NURTW by Oyo State general public is informed by their conduct such as violent attacks on innocent citizens anytime there is intra leadership crisis, conduct of agberos particularly their uncivilized conducts to passengers. Another factor that has aggravated negative perception of members of NURTW is the lack of accountability of their leaders through primitive display of their ill gotten wealth (Albert, 2007, Anudu, 2021, Fourchard, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

National Union of Road Transport Workers is an influential and powerful non state actors whose influence in governance cannot be ignored. From its formation, it has demonstrated commitment to providing efficient transportation system for the teeming Nigeria population. Their influence is beyond the provision of public transport as they collaborate with government agencies in other sectors, such as FRSC in traffic control, NAFDAC in campaigning against drug abuse and with NDLEA in the fight against inter-state drug trafficking.

Equally, the study shows that there is general public opprobrium against the conduct of the members of NURTW, particularly the agberos whose conduct lack decency. The union relationship with politicians has further deepened their tendency to lawlessness and impunity as they have become instruments in the hands of politicians in the promotion of political violence and other forms of intimidation of political opponents. Also, enormous resources of the union has not impacted in the welfare of its members, nor has it encouraged accountability of the leadership.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made from the study:

a. There is need to organize training for the members of NURTW in inter-relationship management and customer services. One of the factors that has pitched the union against the public is poor customer services of the agberos and other members of the union.
b. The leadership of the union should promote accountability and transparency in the daily conduct of its operations. As a trade union, they are supposed to call regular meeting where record of their activities are presented before their members. Also, they should have been put in place policies that will promote the welfare of their members
c. Leadership of the union should, through education and enlightenment campaign, should strive to change the trade mark of violence its members have been known for. This will moderate public perceptions of the union as suckers of violence and manufactures of violence.
d. Since the central objective of Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) in which NURTW is an affiliate, is to promote the welfare of its members, it is strongly recommended that the national executive committee of the union should introduce welfare packages, such as building and vehicle loans for their members. Also, they should collaborate with government and the Central Bank of Nigeria in the establishment

of a Micro Finance for their union. This is necessary for transparency and accountability.

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