

Organizing the Unorganized Workers in the Shop and Distributive Industry: Effect on Trade Union Strength and Membership in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study focused on becoming a union member and organizing the unorganized workers with focus on the Shop and Distributive Industry in Nigeria. Specifically, it investigates the conditions that influence workers' decision to join a trade union, and whether workers' organization provides a collective voice for the workers in the workplace in relation to representation and participation and how union membership affects overall conditions of employment. Three research hypotheses guided this investigation and one hundred copies of a questionnaire were distributed to employees and union leaders in the Shop and Distributive Industry. Out of these 100 copies, 93 were fully completed and returned, thus representing 93% response rate. The reliability of the research instrument was 0.854 using the Cronbach alpha technique. A descriptive and multiple regression analysis were employed in the analysis of data and hypotheses were tested at 0.01 and 0.05 significant level. The result showed that support for workers' organization has a significant relationship with poor conditions of work ($F = 28.952, P > .001$), workers' organizing decision has a significant relationship with the need for employees' voice ($F = 27.919, P > .001$), and union membership and improved working conditions are significantly related ($F = 10.389, P > .001$).

Keywords: *Union membership, trade union, trade unionism, wage employment, conditions of employment, collective bargaining, workers' organization, grievance, employee voice*

Introduction

Trade union membership and strength have declined over the last two decades throughout the world. From empirical findings, global trade unions had declined from 22% to 16% between 1980-1990, and to an average of 12% between 2003-

2013 (Addison, 2014; Wood, 2002; Wood and Harcourt, 1998). In Nigeria, the trend is the same. This is partly due to the union poor mobilization strategies and partly due to government and employers opposition to union formation and activities (Anyim, 2014). Government legislation such as the Trade Union Amendment Act of 2005, which removed automatic membership and check-offs for union while specifying voluntary membership reduced the powers of unions in their membership drive. Employers strategy of union membership avoidance through substituting union roles with human resource management strategies and offering most of the services union can offer are also aimed at discouraging workers from forming union or their organization (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart and Wright, 2003). Other activities of employers like union busting and direct opposition to any move by workers to organize into a group has equally constituted a problem to workers' organization. The Obasanjo administration in 2003 saw the Nigeria Labour Congress as a surviving opposition and therefore introduced a bill to neutralize its power, engaged in mass retirement and retrenchment to cut down the size and power of the union (Oyelere, 2014; Abdulrahman & Mato, 2014; Oyelere & Owoyemi, 2011). As evidence in Nigerian case had shown, employers in some occasions resort to the use of threat or victimization against workers spearheading the move to organize workers or form trade union.

Most employers in Nigeria still maintain the policy of union avoidance, and are ready to do everything possible to discourage their workers from organizing because many of them regard unions as counter-productive, dysfunctional elements or cogs in the wheel of progress of the organization (Olusoji, Owoyemi & Onokala, 2012). Beyond this, the failure of most employers to honour terms and conditions of employment and the outright disregard of employment regulations appear to have contributed to the low bargaining power of trade unions. Occasionally, there have been pockets of agitations against poor salary, promotions, allowances, long-hours of work, job insecurity and overall poor working conditions. The use of contract staff and casual staff, together with poor remuneration structure, are part of the issues responsible for workers conflict in recent times.

Notwithstanding, the latent and manifest oppositions to workers organization in Nigeria in the last two decades have witnessed increased agitations against poor conditions of employment and the call for unorganized workers to organize themselves. In some occasions, these agitations were carried out through the

institution of recognized workers' organization. In other cases, it occurred even without any recognized workers' organization. Thus, supporting the views in literatures that trade unionism can take place without the institution of trade union (Birchall 2016; Fajana 2006; Ootobo, 2005; Allen 1964).

Even, in a non-unionized environment, grievances are expressed at personal or group levels as workers seek different avenues to express their feelings, and in most cases such expressions could be confrontational. But to what extent can the worker acting alone influence his employer in a bargaining process? Therefore, this study aims at examining such agitation and the subsequent organization of union with a case study of recent development in the shop and distributive industry in Nigeria. This involves investigating the conditions that influenced workers decision to join a union, whether workers' organization provides collective voice for the workers in the workplace in relation to representation and participation; and how union membership affects overall conditions of employment.

Literature Review

The Concept of Trade Unionism

In his classical work, Allen (1964) stated that trade unionism is conceptualized as a universal phenomenon and is the collective act of protecting and improving living standards of suppliers of labour whose interest are most of the times conflicting with the interest of their buyers (Employers). Allen (1964) explained clearly that this protective, improving function can be performed in various ways, depending upon the precise nature of the environment in which unions find themselves, but before it can start certain necessary and sufficient conditions have to be present. Ootobo (2005) identified some of these conditions to include monetized economy, wage employment, wage and salary earners dependence on their salary for survival and wide spread grievances. These conditions exist in a free-market for labour in which it is possible for buyers to discriminate against, and therefore exercise power over sellers, and enough political tolerance to permit potential opposition groups to arise. Thus, the sufficient conditions can be almost any factor which injects realism into the lives of people who sell their labour (Allen, 1964; Chen, Bonner & Carre, 2015).

However, Fajana (2006) conceived unionism as “an ideological notion, held by individuals or groups, located in their psyche, that is illustrated in a

predisposition to collective acts that seem to further the protection of rights which are perceived to be threatened by a higher level participant in a social setting.” This definition captures unionism as an abstract concept. Therefore, it suggests that there could be pockets of trade unionism without a formal and recognized trade union institution. In this case, Fajana (2006) opined that “although unionism may be latent and less visible in people, it is often fuelled by accumulated and pent up angers which may be expressed suddenly or unexpectedly and such actions and their aftermaths may take very serious dimensions.” It is obvious from the above conceptualizations that collective acts that intend to protect rights and interests are common features of unionism. These acts are not without goal orientation as often times its goal is to improve conditions of living. In the view of Livengood (2013 and Aye (2010), trade unionism is the drive or quest for improvements in substantive issues. These substantive issues which are at the heart of the workers' quest for improvement include wages and other material remuneration; working conditions; job security; working time and; respect and dignity. Aye (2010) contends that this drive precedes even the formation of trades unions. Thus, that while trade unionism might be the “business” of trades unions, it is actually a working class phenomenon, which precedes and even leads to the formation of trades unions themselves. Trade unionism is the natural tendency of workers to economic self-defence.

Organizing Unorganized Workers

Organizing is a process by which trade unions recruit, consolidate, seek recognition for, formalize into a unionized group, negotiate for, and manage as a bargaining unit. The right of workers to organize is recognized by both national laws and ILO Convention. In Nigeria, as early as 1938, group of workers that were up to five were permitted to organize into a union. Trade Union Ordinance (1938) recognized the right of workers to organize. ILO Convention No. 87, Article 2 states that “workers and employers, without distinction whatever, shall have the right to establish and subject only to the rules of the organization concerned, to join organizations of their own choice without previous authorization.” According to ILO (2001), “The central issue in organizing is the effective protection of the right of all workers to organize. It is up to workers themselves to decide whether they want to form their own trade unions or other organizations or join existing unions, but it is wrong and counter-productive to confuse the right of workers to organize with the obligation of trade unions to organize.” This right to organize derives from the

Freedom of Association (ILO, Convention 87) which the workers believe should be recognized by the employers. Freedom of Association serves to protect the right of the workers to organize. Thus, ILO (2016, 2001) argued that rights are to be guaranteed to workers not trade unions. If the right of workers to organize is violated, it is not the fault of trade unions that workers are unable to form or join their own organizations. Therefore, it is important to properly frame the responsibilities of trade unions in the area of organizing. However, ILO (2001) added that “a common mistake begins by thinking of trade unions as already established institutions and not as something workers can bring into existence themselves through a process. It is up to workers themselves to decide whether they want to form their own trade unions or other organizations or join existing unions.” It should be noted that the history of the trade union movement is one of unprotected workers joining together to affirm their rights before employers and governments.

However, as with many of the issues in labour relations, union organizing is one where the perspective is completely different depending on whose interest is at stake (Ajalat, 2004). Many companies believe that joining a union is contrary to the best interest of employees, their families, dependant and their self fulfillment on their jobs. As it is often argued by many employers, unions typically drive up labour cost, compromise the profitability of the business, and thus jeopardize the security of the company and its employees (Ajalat, 2004). Employees are forced to pay union dues merely so that a third party has the right to meet and discuss workplace concerns. For management, the presence of the union does not guarantee the employees any additional monies, benefits or other terms and conditions of employment. Furthermore, according to management, the existence of a union eliminates the employees’ right to address their problems directly with the employer, as the union will be the only “voice” through which the employees may communicate (Ajalat, 2004).

In the opinion of Fajana (2000), the existence of union do increase employees’ right to better wages, employment conditions, social status and the standard of living in the community. In addition, unions existence gives better collective bargaining power to workers in terms of wages and conditions of service which in turn create reputation gains for management and their organisations (Visser, 2002; Adewunmi, 2007). Okene (2007), argued that unions exists to benefit workers and their organisations in terms of right to decent pay and

conditions of service for workers and greater output and growth for organisations.

Given the above arguments, Ajalat (2004) suggested that union's perspective on organizing is essential to defending or bargaining good terms of working conditions. Many union officials sincerely believe that they provide an invaluable service to their membership. They often cite the historically higher wages that union members receive. They emphasize that, without a union, employees do not have representation in the workplace and, unlike most unionized workers, they may be terminated at will (Visser, 2006; Waddington, 2005). The argument therefore, is that the union's primary motivation in organizing the unorganized is not always the revenue realized from union dues (Addison, 2014). Even in successful organizing drives, the union usually does not recoup the money it has spent for several years. The point is that unions are, in fact, motivated by their belief in a paternalistic obligation to working men and women who, in their opinion, would be better off if organized.

Hypotheses

Three hypotheses were formulated and tested in this study. These hypotheses are:

- i. Support for workers' organization does not have any correlation with poor conditions of work.
- ii. Workers' organizing decision does not have any correlation with the need for employees' voice.
- iii. Union membership does significantly influence working conditions.

Method

This study adopts the survey research design that involved the administration of copies of a questionnaire to gather primary data. Data were collected from a representative sample of one hundred shop and distributive employees of a multinational shopping mall in Lagos, including the leadership of the National Union of Shop and Distributive Employees (NUSDE). A total population of 100 employees were drawn using stratified random sampling technique.

The choice of this method is preferred to other methods because the population was arranged along regular and shift strata. Equally, the population of each stratum varied as one stratum has more workforce than the others. Thus, proportionate stratified random sampling ensured fair representation of the sample relative to the population and guaranteed that minority group was

represented in the sample. However, out of the 100 questionnaires administered, only 93 respondents fully completed and returned their representing 93% response rate.

Internal consistency was the reliability procedure that was used in this study. Internal consistency used the Cronbach alpha (Gay & Airasan, 2003) and it denotes the extent of interrelatedness among a group of items within a scale (Gay & Airasan, 2003). For research purposes, Wallen and Fraenkel (2001) view the coefficient alpha of 0.70 as acceptable; while DeVellis (1996) views the coefficient alpha below 0.65 as unacceptable. For purposes of this study, based on the above assertions, the acceptable coefficient alpha is above 0.65. Thus, in this study, internal reliability of a 16 item scale was assessed using the Cronbach alpha technique. The scale produced an alpha of 0.854, which is highly acceptable for an attitude scale (appendix 1). Data were analyzed using both descriptive and multiple regression statistics. The hypotheses were tested using multiple regression analysis at 0.01 and 0.05 significant levels with the aid of SPSS version 15.

Results

Hypothesis 1

H₀₁: Support for workers' organization does not significantly affect conditions of work.

Table 1. Multiple Regression Analysis of Support for Workers' Organization

Independent Variables	Pearson's Correlation
Long hours of work	0.390**
Non-payment of leave allowance	0.181
Lack of Promotion	0.321**
Poor Salary	0.782**
Lack of job security	0.300**

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.790 ^a	.625	.603	.530

- a. Predictors: (Constant). Longer hours of work, Non-payment of leave allowance, Lack of Promotion, Poor Salary, Lack of Job security.
- b. Dependent Variable: Support for Workers' Organization

A standard multiple regression was performed between Support for Workers' Organization as Dependent Variable (DV) and Longer hours of work, Non-payment of leave allowance, Lack of Promotion, Poor Salary and Lack of job security as independent Variables (IV's). The adjusted squared multiple correlation was significantly different from zero ($F = 28.952, P > .001$) and 60.3% of the variation in the Dependent Variable was explained by the set of Independent Variables. All the Independent Variables, except Non-payment of leave allowance, were found to uniquely and significantly contribute to the prediction of Support for Workers' Organization.

Table 3. Anova

Model	SS	Df	MS	F	Sig.
Regression	40.620	5	8.124	28.952	0.000
Residual	24.412	87	.281		
Total	65.032	92			

Hypothesis 2

H₀₂: Workers' organizing decision does not have any correlation with the need for employees' voice.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analysis of Workers' Organizing Decision

Independent Variables	Pearson's Correlation
Need for participation and involvement in decision-making	0.315**
Need for negotiation of wages and salaries	0.683**
Need for negotiation of Conditions of services	0.196
Need for independent voice for workers	0.450**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 5. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.748 ^a	.559	.539	.571

- a. Predictors: (Constant). Need for participation and involvement in decision-making, Need for negotiation of wages and salary, Need for Negotiation of conditions of service, Need for independent voice for workers.
- b. Dependent Variable: Workers' Organizing Decision

Table 6. Anova

Model	SS	Df	MS	F	Sig.
Regression	36.372	4	9.093	27.919	0.000
Residual	28.661	88	.326		
Total	65.032	92			

A standard multiple regression was performed between Workers' Organizing Decision as Dependent Variable (DV) and Need for participation and involvement in decision-making, Need for negotiation of wages and salary, Need for Negotiation of conditions of service, Need for independent voice for workers as Independent Variables (IVs). The adjusted squared multiple correlation was significantly different from zero ($F = 27.919, P > .001$) and 53.9% of the variation in the Dependent Variable was explained by the set of Independent Variables. All the Independent Variables except Need for Negotiation of conditions of service were found to uniquely and significantly contribute to the prediction of Workers' Organizing Decision.

Hypothesis 3

H_{03} : Union membership does not have any correlation with improved working condition.

A standard multiple regression was performed between Union Membership as Dependent Variable (DV) and Reduction in hours of work, Better leave allowance, Promotion, Job security and Salary increase as independent Variables (IV's). The adjusted squared multiple correlation was significantly different from zero ($F = 10.389, P > .001$) and 33.8% of the variation in the Dependent Variable was explained by the set of Independent Variables. Only three Independent Variables with the exception of Better leave allowance and promotion were found to have uniquely and significantly contributed to the prediction of union membership.

Table 7. Multiple Regression Analysis of Union Membership

Independent Variables	Pearson's Correlation
Reduction in hours of work	0.275**
Better leave allowance	0.137
Promotion	0.191
Job security	0.289**
Salary Increase	0.570**

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

Table 8. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.611 ^a	.374	.338	.684

- a. Predictors: (Constant). Reduction in hours of work, Better leave allowance, Promotion, Job security, Salary increase.
- b. Dependent Variable: Union Membership

Table 9. Anova

Model	SS	Df	MS	F	Sig.
Regression	24.313	5	4.863	10.389	0.000
Residual	40.720	87	.468		
Total	65.032	92			

A standard multiple regression was performed between Union Membership as Dependent Variable (DV) and Reduction in hours of work, Better leave allowance, Promotion, Job security and Salary increase as independent Variables (IV's). The adjusted squared multiple correlation was significantly different from zero ($F = 10.389, P > .001$) and 33.8% of the variation in the Dependent Variable was explained by the set of Independent Variables. Only three Independent Variables with the exception of Better leave allowance and promotion were found to have uniquely and significantly contributed to the prediction of union membership.

Discussions

As shown by the result of the analyses, certain conditions influenced the decision of the workers to organize and become union members. This finding is consistent with Otobo (2005) and Allen (1964) position that certain conditions “that injects realism into the lives of suppliers of labour” must be present for workers to organize. The finding showed that among these conditions that influenced trade unionism, 83.3% of the participants reported poor salary, 79.6% reported lack of job security, 52.7% reported non-payment of leave allowance, and another 79.6% reported longer working hours and 41.1% reported lack of promotion (See Appendix 2). A standard multiple regression analysis also revealed that longer hours of work, lack of promotion, poor salary and lack of job security are the major predictors of trade unionism among the workers. This also supports the view of Aye (2010), “that substantive issues such as wages and other material remuneration, working conditions, job security, working time, and respect and dignity are at the heart of the workers’ quest” for their own organization. It is therefore important to state that, workers’ organization is not just an end in itself, but a means to an end. Workers’ decision to organize and join a union often times arise from the perceived unfavourable conditions of service and the understanding that union provides them a strong platform to better their working conditions. Given that workers to a large extent, depend on their wages and salary for survival (Otobo, 2005), it is not unlikely that workers would seek for ways to improve their wages and salary. Most workers’ contentions concern bread and butter issues and often time responsible for widespread grievance. Thus, these contentions precede formations of trade union (Aye, 2010).

The study also found the need for workers to embrace participative management in organizing decisions. Even though many management claim that they act in the best interest of the workers, workers still want the opportunity for participative management. One of the striking findings was that 86% of the participants reported that trade union provides independent voice for the workers. Specifically, 79.6% reported that trade union gives workers voice in wages and conditions of service. Concerning workers participation and involvement in decision-making, 50.5% agreed that union membership enhances the involvement and participation of workers. It was also found that among other factors, independent voice was the major predictor of workers’ organizing decision. This finding concurs with Freeman’s (1976) definition of unions “as the institutions of collective voice in the labour market.” This is also in tandem with the view of Pattinger (1999), “that unions are independent representative bodies, and more

effective in raising broader issues concerning legislation, with the organization.” On the contrary, this finding disagreed with Addisson and Belfield (2004) argument, “that more formalized union structure may create a communication gap between workers and management.” Although, this might be possible, especially when union officials loyalty are more to the management than to the workers. Notwithstanding, 72% of the participants reported joining union because the management failed to listen to their voices as individual workers. This also explained the reason why workers join union, that is, that by acting alone it would be impossible to influence their employer in any bargaining process. Pettinger (1999) reported that this does not only benefit the workers, but organization “prefers to have a unionized set-up for „employee voice” recognition, rather than following individualistic approach, due to the fact that it consumes less time and resources.” Thus, this study found that the need for participation and involvement, the need for negotiation of wages and salary and the need for independent voice for workers are all predictors of workers’ organizing decision.

Concerning the outcome of workers’ organizing decision, it was found that 90.3% of the participants reported of salary increase, 79.6% reported job security, 74.2% reported of reduction in hours of work. This means that union membership can have direct benefit to the workers. This finding is supported by Freeman and Medoff (1984) who believed “that union plays a vital role in negotiating higher compensation packages.” Batt, Colvin and Keefe (2002) corroborated this finding by noting that employees in union set-ups are expected to have higher compensation than they could earn in similar jobs in non-union set-ups.” This is not surprising as Fossum (1992) has shown “that 79% of the issues in union campaigns border on improvement of unsatisfactory wages, and strengthening employees’ voice in wages and working conditions.” Although, there are other benefits workers derive from union membership, the researcher found that the obvious benefits concern wages increase, more benefits and improved conditions of service. Thus, union membership was found to be positively correlated to reduction in hours of work, job security and salary increase.

Conclusion

The results from this study have shown that workers do not organise themselves into trade unions and engage in union activities just for the sake of organizing but are pushed by the desire to achieve certain working conditions through a collective voice. Traditionally, bread and butter issues were considered the major reasons why workers decide to join trade union. However, current evidence has

shown that beyond bread and butter issues, workers seek for independent voice, greater participation or involvement in decision-making within the organization. Workers want to be heard and not just being handed down with decisions made somewhere without their input. Thus, Freeman (2007) puts it vividly, “that workers continue to want greater say at workplace.” Given these evidences and the findings of this study, the researcher concludes that workers’ organizing decision is due to poor conditions of work, the need to be heard (independent voice mechanism) and the need to improve or change unfavourable working conditions.

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