

The Economic and Social Crisis in Nigeria: The Workers' Movement

By [Kola Ibrahim](#)

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As workers in Nigeria celebrate this year's Workers' Day, the political challenges before the working and poor people is more vital today more than ever before. That the capitalist political class has severally and collectively plunder the huge resources of the nation, while the poor people go hungry, is no more news. For the past almost eleven years of civil rule, workers have fought tooth and nail to gain better living but every demand of workers in this regard is met with stiff opposition from the capitalist ruling class at all levels. While the Teachers' Salary Scale (TSS) the Nigerian government was forced to concede to has not been implemented in many states of the federation, the demand of the workers for substantial wage increase from the meager N5500 (about 37 dollars) a month to N52, 200 (about 234 dollars) is stubbornly opposed by all tiers of government.

Yet, despite unprecedented monetary resources that had accrued to the nation's purse since 1999, nothing fundamental has improved in the living standards of an average Nigerian, while there is seeming absolute infrastructural collapse. Hundreds of billions being sunk into road construction, power generation, funding education, etc have found their mysterious routes back to the private accounts of moneybag politicians and businessmen. Despite plethora of anti-graft agencies (EFCC, ICPC, Code of Conduct Bureau, Special Anti-Fraud Unit, the Judiciary, etc), pervasive corruption still remain the way of live of politicians and big business. Aside all this is the continued attacks on the working and poor people, the latest of which is the deregulation of the oil industry, and more importantly deregulation of the fuel pricing.

Commendably, Nigerian workers and oppressed have wages countless battles against malfeasance and attacks on their living conditions; but the more they fight a policy, the more anti-poor policies launched against them. In this milieu, the question then arise of why workers will allow looters, anti-poor politicians and bankrupt public officers to get to power in the first place. Nigerian workers, with their social, organizational and numerical strength, can change the political landscape in the interest of the poor people if their mass organizations (trade unions and their leaderships) are prepared to build a working class political platform that will challenge the bankrupt capitalist political class. Events have shown that when Nigerian workers and the poor enter the arena of struggle or politics, the atmosphere will definitely change. This is clearly shown by the power of general strikes organized by workers, where even the busiest roads are turned into football pitch. This shows the popularity and the strength Nigerian workers enjoy amongst the oppressed; if only this is turned into a vital asset to unseat anti-poor politicians and the system they represent.

However, as a result of the absence of a working class political party, various sections of the

capitalist politicians, who have been sidelined from centre of resource control, coupled with some big business funded NGO, have turned this into an opportunity to pose as alternative. In practical sense, there is fundamentally no difference between the ruling PDP and the opposition parties. Take Lagos State for instance, where the opposition AC is in control; education has been commercialized, health infrastructure is in comatose while roads are still in their deplorable conditions. The so-called Mega-city project of Fashola has meant destruction of livelihood of several poor artisans and petty traders, without alternative means of survival. The party itself is controlled by a few moneybags. Thus, such a party cannot be the alternative structure needed by the working and poor people to liberate themselves from the stranglehold of poverty and misery.

This brings us to the question of the Labour Party, which was founded by trade union leaders. This party, as the name suggests, is supposed to be the party of the working and poor people. But the trade union leadership, aside handing the party over to some traditional politicians, has refused to mobilize the forces of workers to build the party as a genuine working class political platform, with clearly different economic and social programmes. This has made the party attractive to many moneybag politicians, who have failed to achieve their goals in other corrupt political parties. The implication of this is that the Labour Party is gradually losing its pristine outlook. The same labour leadership that fails to build the Labour Party is conveniently having 'strategic partnership' with government that is attacking the welfare interests of workers and the poor people.

In fact, many capitalist parties, having seen the enormous strength that a Labour Party can pull in the coming period have started romancing the party with an idea of electoral collaboration or Mega-party project. This is unfortunate as the Labour Party itself is a Mega-party by orientation, if built in this line. What the Labour Party need today is a summit of labour movement, pro-labour organizations (especially in LASCO), students' movement, socialist movements, etc, where the task of building a viable, politically strong Labour Party will be charted out and work start in earnest as the 2011 elections is fast approaching. We need to build a Labour Party that will be completely different in its form of party organization and working. We need a Labour Party that will be democratically controlled and funded by rank-and-file members through a genuine internal democracy. This can only make sense when workers, youth, students, artisans, peasants, unemployed, etc join the party en mass. This can be achieved easily if the central labour unions (NLC and TUC) and other trade unions mobilize their members to the party.

More importantly, in order for the party to truly stand as strong opposition to other anti-worker, anti-poor capitalist political parties, including those claiming to be in the opposition, it needs to stand for economic and political policies that will be different from other parties. These include that:

1. The party must stand against all anti-poor policies of privatization of public enterprise and utilities, commercialization of social services like education, health and roads, deregulation of oil industry, retrenchment and casualization of workers, among others.
2. On the contrary, the party must stand for re-nationalization of all privatized public enterprises and utilities; massively develop them and put all public enterprises and utilities under the democratic control and management of workers, community (where they operate) and consumers, as a deterrent against mismanagement of these enterprises. This means that manager and officials of the enterprises, corporation and utility firms will come from the

democratic decisions of workers and communities and will be subject to recall if found incapable or unworthy. Furthermore, the party will stand for massive funding and development of social services like free and quality education at all levels, free health services at the point of use, massive and integrated road construction, massive public and cheap housing programmes, among others. With this millions of youth will be gainfully employed while the economy will be expanded.

3. The party must adopt a working class and democratic means of running the party. This means that the party officials, either within the party or in government will earn an average salary of a skilled worker, and will be subject to recall if found going against the party principle and manifestoes. Furthermore, a public office holder under the Labour Party platform will publish his or her asset to the public regularly.

4. The party from the grassroots to the national level will serve as a platform of struggle for workers, youth, students and the oppressed people, against all anti-poor policies of government. This means that Labour party in local government will agitate against and lead struggles lack of infrastructures, joblessness, and mismanagement of funds at local level. The same for state and national structures of the party.

5. The party must be built in workplaces, schools, villages and communities.

It is these kinds of programmes that can make the Labour Party become the real alternative and mega-party of the majority of Nigerians who are living abject penury, despite enormous wealth. This is the only way to build movement against rigging of election, because a genuine mass party of workers and poor people can hardly be rigged. The reason rigging is prevalent today is because workers and poor people have been ostracized from political role.

This is calling on working class activists and labour leaders to move towards building the Labour Party as a truly labourers' party by mobilizing workers, peasants, artisans, okada riders, petty traders, youth and students to the party. We must collectively ensure that the party is not handed over to moneybag politicians. We call on NLC, TUC and other trade unions to build the Labour Party as a workers' party. This is the only way to prevent anti-poor politicians from ruling us again.

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