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Workplace Democracy and Industrial Harmony in Nigeria

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Abstract:

Evidences abound on the frequency in workplace disruption extremed, in strikes due to the breakdown of management-worker relations in Nigeria. This study seeks to unravel the immediate causes of this workplace social distance. In an effort to provide the antidote for workplace cooperation, selected manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt Nigeria were studied. The study revealed that there is a high prevalence of tall structured organization which creates a gap between labour and management, thus mutual cooperation seemed not to be existing. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used in gathering and analyzing the data and recommendations were obvious that some mutual conditions among which due process, voting and collective bargaining are palliative agents capable of reducing the evident relationship strain between labour and management which have frequently resulted in strikes as the extremes.

Key words: Workplace Democracy, Collective Bargaining, Voting, Due Process, Industrial Harmony.

1. Introduction

Industrial collaboration setting in the Nigeria context is far from the usual cooperation between the labour and management or owners of business as the case may be. The business social relations is creamed in master servant power chain to such an extent that the workforce has no close ties with the owners of work, or its agents. Orders are given using the steam shovel approach such that no one worker is allowed to know the reason for any decision that affects the tasks they do. Nigeria business managers see themselves as in a class far removed from the others. The ideal postulations of Karl Max obsession for capitalistic manipulation are seen to manifest in all facets of the organization. The workman who tills the ground and who do all the complex activities of bringing out the fruit, of production and service is just seen as a mere machine for use to the advantage of the interest of capital. Any near consultation with employees does not seem to be an issue in most firms across the nation's business world.

There exist closer tie between law enforcement agents or in the language of miliband, the repressive apparatuses of the state who benefits from business owners and their agents known as management for being used to force orders and decision on the workforce. Adequate representation in the affairs and councils are just abstractions even when it is shown in their mission statements. Tall structure organisations as is allowed in the context of Nigeria business practice does not see employees as part of the decision making system in the pursuit of enterprise goal. The worst case scenario is the public sector parastatals where government appoints members of the board of the departments based on their social lineages which sometimes may be traced to biological or cult relationship. Only members identified in these groups of social affiliations are entitled to give opinions which are not subject to query.(Fajana, 2000).

Management of universities is not left out as the development has enshrined the culture of clique teams who decides for the others and as Weber indicated, power relationship decides the side of the divide. Either you are a subject and subjected because you have no trace to the authority or you are in the business of decision because you are a member of the power clique. Distribution of resources and even voting is restricted to memberships of the various cliques. Industrial cooperation is seen to suffer since there is no cordial link between the worker and management. It is evident that there is no year that two or three sectors of the Nigeria economy are not on industrial action either to the extreme of strike or preparatory grievance manifestation.(Fashoyin 1980). Employee to employee relations also is greatly affected as one work or the other wants to play to the gallery in order to be recognised. It does not matter whether the interests of colleagues are affected or not, what matters most is which side of the divide that accommodates an interest. It is either you get yourself involved by any sycophantic drive or relegated.

Union membership in organisations are today seen as a no go area for all workman. The spirit of work which is always as in other developed economies kept alive by the union is in this clime seen as a taboo. Workers who want to remain at work signs yellow-dog contracts that make them individuals on their own and not individuals as seen in collective status with labour unions. The Nigeria Labour congress issues threat monthly to financial institutions, construction organisations, food and beverage firms and multinational

corporations on the issues of contract staffing which debar an employee from taking the long term employment relationship, a position that is key for union membership conditions of service. Contract works exist only at the mercy of a 'goodboy' management who keeps them when they see them in good light and drop them at will when they raise any sign of disagreement with the management of poor employment conditions. Collective bargaining does not exist in most organisations, except in the multinationals where collective bargaining is orchestrated as if it is a tool for employment engagement, but in actual sense, it is used as a mere satisfying measure to keep employees in obeisance of management orders.

2. Related Literature

Explanations of workplace democracy and related terms are varied due primarily to contextual issues such as unionization; yet, the large majority of definitions identified by the present study contained common themes and concepts. Related terms such as industrial democracy, organizational democracy, economic democracy, participatory democracy, worker participation, co-determination, works councils, and worker control, are terms either more narrow, less focused or broader than workplace democracy which has been considered by some scholars as a "catch-all phrase" (Collom, 2001a, p. 71-72). Common definitions of workplace democracy contain characteristics of equality, decision-making, and participation. Miller (1999) as cited in Holtzhausen (2002) added that its "more than participation, "it involves the realization in the workplace of our standards for a democratic society" (p.188). Broadly, Harrison and Freeman (2004) added that "any action, structure, or process that increases the power of a broader group of people to influence the decisions and activities of an organization can be considered a workplace move toward democracy" (p.49).

Unfortunately, one would be enthused to know that all sectors of Nigerian economy have had a greater share of industrial actions which have, as always, caused employees and their unions to down tools and disrupt productive economic activities in the Country. As at the time of this study, all universities in the country have been closed down for over five months. Government unity schools also took similar step as well medical doctors in government hospitals and health centres who shut down the institutions of medical service in the country. The manufacturing sector is not an exception. It is axiomatic that as work becomes more technological and workers have more access to information that democracy would emerge. However, workers freedoms have shown little sign of increasing and with globalization of the workplace the hope of democratic workplaces for many is an unrealized dream. The idea that workers have democratic rights and privileges in their workplaces evolved from the nineteenth century workplace of "exploitation...in laws and court rulings limiting the right to quit jobs, in vagrancy laws and coercive uses of the police and military, in stringent and punitive forms of private poor relief, in an urban real estate market that made most workers into powerless tenants in squalid neighbourhoods, and in a national political system that mobilized working-class voters without responding to the needs of working people" (Montgomery, 1993, p. 114).

Historically, workplace democracy has followed the labor movement (unions) both in the UK and the US. But with the decline in organized labor, especially in the US and in US controlled global firms, workers have fewer opportunities to experience workplace democracy. Unions have supported workers' rights to the tenets of democracy such as freedom of expression in the workplace. Swidorski (2000) pointed out that "from the end of the Civil War to the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935 the most significant institutional actor in the struggle for freedom of expression was the labour movement" (p. 319). But worker freedom is under attack. A recent ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court declared that speech by public employees in the course of their jobs is not protected by the First Amendment from disciplinary action (Trotter, 2006). "Democracy clearly stops at the workplace door. That's bad enough. What's worse is how bad that fact is for the health of our democracy at large (Sweeney, 2004, p. 102). In terms of scholarship, the 1970s, 1980s and into the early 1990's workplace democracy was an oft-cited and relatively important topic for industrial relations, management, labor, and social studies scholars. But, since the early 1990s, it has had a little cache, especially among business and human resources scholars and even less importance among scholar-practitioners. The discussion of workplace democracy "is but a faint whisper among contemporary scholars in the social and management science....and no longer relevant to our technologically advanced globally networked organizations" (Diamond & Allcorn, 2006, p. 56). And even in contemporary workplaces where workers have increased skills and competence, are self-monitoring and self-directed; embrace knowledge and responsibility, and in turn have become more empowered and self-motivated.

Still, "most employees are subject to managers they did not elect and to rules in which they had little or no say" (Mayer, 2001, p. 221). They are being spied on, drug tested, subjected to searches, and e-monitored. These and other management actions reduce workplace democracy. The contradictory and inconsistent nature of the workplace democracy literature suggests that all is not doom and gloom. For example, Melman (2001, 2003) has recently suggested that especially in high technology workplaces, worker participatory decision making is standard practice and is even on the rise. If the goal of contemporary enterprising is to improve social responsibility and to provide for humane workplaces, then it is necessary to align itself with research and practice that will afford democracy in the workplace. To date, the evidence of Human Resource Development having a vested interest in workplace democracy is limited, yet globally influenced workplaces show signs of fewer worker rights and more alienation. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the definition, historical, conceptual and practical characteristics of workplace democracy through a review of literature and then highlight those that are related to industrial harmony in the Nigeria context.

Workplace democracy encompasses a number of concepts such as participative management, employee involvement, employee empowerment, industrial democracy and self management. The literature appears to lack a clear consensus on the precise meaning of these terms, particularly in relation to each other, so an explanation of these terms is provided below. Industrial democracy was the original name for workplace democracy, and the two terms can be used interchangeably. The term was most commonly used in continental Europe, and originally referred to workplaces run directly by the workers. Both due to its history and the word

industry in the term, it came to be heavily associated with traditional manufacturing industries. Because the ideas it attempts to convey are not limited to those sectors, the term workplace democracy was adopted instead.

Luhman, (2006) identifies alienation at work as the common condition of modern man and contends that it can be substantially mitigated by worker participation and that people want to participate in decision making that affects their work lives. Luhman finds that autocratic organizations treat employees as immature, which contributes to this alienation. It is an issue of fact that the design of jobs and organizations directly frustrate the normal adult human need for autonomy and control over one's own behaviour. Specifically, normal human development from infancy to adulthood involves a progressive increase in responsibility for one's own actions, whereas in organizations every effort seems to be directed toward treating employees as dependent and remove their control over their own behaviour. This infantilization of the worker is examined in some detail by Sievers: "It seems as if the only pattern most western workers can relate to is that of the child vis-à-vis its parents. Through the nature of the work provided for them, the employing institutions infantilize the workers. They do not allow them to develop or mature, but limit them to regressive and familiar reactions and even goes so far as to argue that participation is not the answer, but a further symptom of the problem, which can only be solved through democratization of work. Chomsky (1993: 4) argues that "Corporations are basically tyrannies, hierarchic, controlled from above. If you don't like what they are doing you get out", meaning all corporations contribute to alienation. He contends that participation in decision making increases the employee's power in the working environment, which in turn increases the status of the employee both in his own eyes and in the context of the organization which also leads to improvements in morale and productivity of the workforce.

Collective bargaining is a term that has been used by Webb (1919) to describe negotiations on conditions of service and terms of employment between employers and workers or between employers' associations and trade unions. It covers all arrangements in which workers do not negotiate with employers by themselves but do so collectively through their representatives. The issues covered by such collective bargaining are always very extensive and they include wages hours of work, increments, promotions, job grading and classification, annual leave etc. In fact, in the present dispensation, any matter which is capable of causing a trade dispute is negotiable. It has also been extended to socio-political matters like the election tribunal. (Sydney and Beatrice, 52) It has been argued that the terms which trade unions seek to get through collective bargaining, the process by which they are negotiated and the enforcement of the agreement, all depend on the size and strength of the bargaining unit. In the public sector, collective bargaining takes place at the national level. If the issues involved pertain to the whole nation, but if they concern a particular state only, the bargaining takes the procedure adopted in the private sector. (Sydney and Beatrice, 53) More so issues affecting the whole country that is those which involve both the federal and state governments are discussed between representatives of the federal and state governments and those of the Nigerian Labour Congress.

In Nigeria, the issue of collective bargaining was provided for under the labour Act Cap 198 Laws of the Federation 1990. Collective bargaining was defined by the Act as the process of arriving or attempting to arrive at a collective agreement while collective agreement means, "an agreement in writing regarding working conditions and terms of employment concluded between; a. an organization of workers or an organization representing workers (or an association of such organization of the one part and b. an organization of employers or an organization representing workers (or an association of such organizations) of the other part (S. 91, Labour Act 1990). However S.47 of the trade dispute Act 1990 provided a contrast definition. (Ubeku, 1983). This notwithstanding, both definitions refer to collective bargaining as negotiations between employers and their employees collectively, represented by unions, for the settlement of terms and conditions of employment. The end result is an agreement. As an aspect of labour relations, collective bargaining provides the forum for a bargain or negotiation and lead eventually to rule making or agreement between the parties, thus creating some form of social order in the relationship (Erugo, 1998). Collective bargaining requires patience by the parties' bargaining because it is usually long and tortuous and results are normally unpredictable. Decisions are reached after discussions. Such decisions are arrived at by unanimity and the parties usually agree that while negotiations are in progress, there should be no strike or lockouts and those participants on the union side should not be victimized for their part in the negotiations. The government rarely intervenes in collective bargaining and if voluntary negotiations break down, parties are expected to follow the requirement of the trade disputes Decree No 7 of 1990 that provides for an ideal voluntary collective bargaining and parties are required by the decree to exhaust their grievance procedures where they exist before resorting to other methods of dispute resolution. From the above facts, collective bargaining to a certain degree does work in Nigeria. (Uviehara, 2001). It is seen as a national alternative to strike and lockouts in the midst of collective bargaining. As earlier stated, the government does not intervene in any collective bargaining. The government merely acts as a watch dog for the enforceability of any agreement reached. More often than not most negotiations are entered into by an agent of the government on its behalf as well as the employees of the government. The main aim is not to make the government a judge in their own case which will defeat the principle of public policy. The agents acting on the permission of the government can contract on her behalf and the government must be willing to be bound by such agreement and of course affect its enforceability. The government must maintain its status as a regulatory body and ensure that agreements entered on her behalf are carried out successfully.

3. Research Methodology

The study is correlational and was conducted as a cross sectional survey. The study units were individual, organizational members and analysis carried out at the micro level. The population consisted of 588 workers of selected manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt and the sample size determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size table was 234 (Sekaran, 2003). Respondents were

sampled using the simple random sampling technique. After data cleaning, 231 copies of the instrument were considered useful for the analysis.

Workplace democracy was operationalized into three major empirical referents which depict actual democratic systems adopted in the workplace; these include: Voting systems, Due process and Collective Bargaining. These were each measured on a 7-item instrument which assessed feelings and opinions based on the availability, practice and adoption of these democratic systems. A Likert type scale ranging between (1) strongly disagree, to (5) strongly agree, was used to express the level of agreement with each of the items. Industrial Harmony was measured on a 12-item instrument and also scaled on a Likert scale of (1) strongly disagrees; to (5) strongly agree. For the test of reliability of the scales the following cronbach alpha coefficients were obtained: Workplace democracy (0.904) while for Industrial harmony (0.970) in accordance with Nunnally (1978) model which recommends a benchmark of 0.70. Content validity was adopted as the instrument was first examined by various scholars and necessary corrections made.

For our primary analysis, frequencies and descriptives were used, the use of percentages, mean scores and standard deviations which illustrated the nature of the distribution, first with the demographic data and then the study variables. The results showed that 85% of the respondents were male, while the remaining 15% were female, this figure, which as observed by Asawo (2009) identifies the inequality of gender distribution especially in the Nigerian manufacturing industry. 30% of the workers are holders of diploma certificates, 60% make up first degree certificate holders, while only 10% make up masters certificate holders. None of the respondents had obtained a Ph.D. degree.

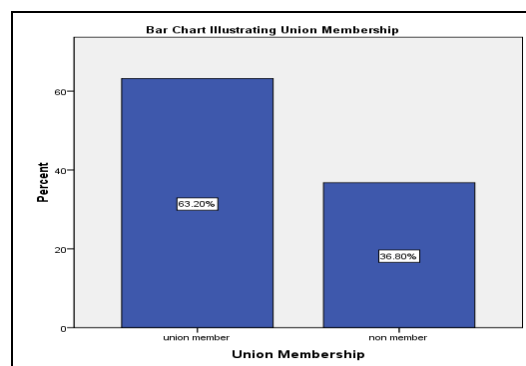


Figure 1: Demographic data of union membership

The bar chart illustrates that a greater percentage of respondents from the selected firms are members of unions. This accounts for 63% of the total number of respondents, while 36% are non-union members.

The univariate analysis shows the empirical referents of Workplace Democracy, starting with voting systems with a low mean score of 2.6401 (standard deviation is 1.45521) Due process has a mean score of 2.4768 (standard deviation is 1.35617), while collective bargaining carries a mean score of 3.0025 (standard deviation is 1.37405) which is the highest.

Workplace democracy as the latent predictor variable carries a mean score of 3.1394 (standard deviation is 1.31472) while Industrial harmony, the criterion variable, carries a mean score of 2.7065 (standard deviation is 0.87959)

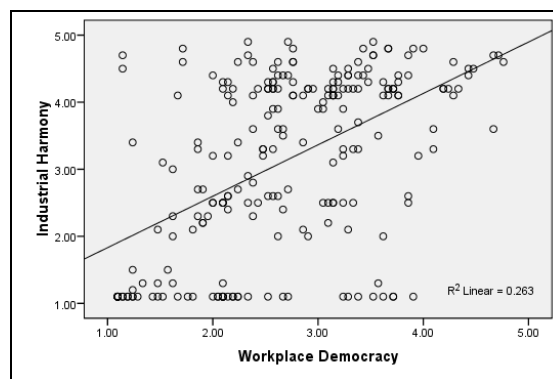


Figure 2: Linear Regression of workplace democracy and industrial harmony

The study also used linear regression to examine the relationship between Workplace democracy and Industrial harmony. The diagram shows a positive relationship between Workplace democracy and Industrial harmony with an R^2 value of 0.263.

Workplace Democracy		Industrial Harmony
Voting Systems	Correlation Coefficient	0.276
	P-value	0.000
	N	231
Collective Bargaining	Correlation Coefficient	0.170
	P-value	0.010
	N	231
Due Process	Correlation Coefficient	0.523
	p-value	0.000
	N	231

Table 1: showing bivariate analysis using Spearman's rank order correlation coefficient

The table shows the strength and direction of the relationship between the measures of Workplace democracy and industrial harmony. Voting systems has the low rho value, 0.276, but a p-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$) which is less than our level of significance. This indicates a significant relationship, collective bargaining which has the lowest rho value of 0.170 and a p-value of 0.010 ($p < 0.05$) which is still less than 0.05 level of significance. Due process carries the highest rho value of 0.523 and with a p-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$) less than 0.05 level of significance.

All bivariate relationships indicate significant positive relationships and portray Workplace democracy as a relevant variable and concept in the pursuit of Industrial harmony. The model is as a result of the findings from our bivariate relations.

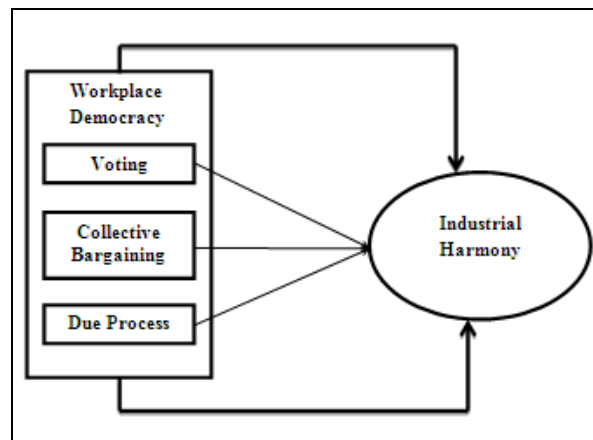


Figure 3: Model of workplace democracy and industrial harmony

4. Recommendations and Conclusion

From the findings of this study, it is vehemently observed that the Nigeria work environment is bereaved of all forms of workplace collaboration. Whether we see it from the lens of the employees or from that of the management, evident gross social disconnect exist among all actors in the industrial arena. Thus, it becomes expedient that management of business in Nigeria should as a matter of necessity provide the level playing ground for productive equality between the workforce who are directly involved in the business of production and the management who benefits from their total efforts. This is expected to bridge the relationship gap in business and reduce the existing tension that beclouds the entire economy.

Union density, which appears to be dwindling in scope and spread in all spheres of work should be encouraged as appropriate legislation should be embraced to ensure active enforcement of labour related laws to protect the workman from being subjected to the wishful manipulations of owners of work. The alienation at work which is evident in the way labourers are removed from being part of decisions that affect their work should be discouraged. No productive ingenuity can be achieved on the part of a worker when workman feels alienated and neglected. The satisfaction that is achieved from recognition can be buttressed by the works of Elton Mayor's Hawthorne Studies and the argument for employee motivation as presented by Frederick Hertzberg two factor theory. Union should be strengthened to protect members against abuse by management and owners of the business.

Collective bargaining is a tool that encourages a win-win situation in event any dispute scenario at work. Because employees have been dehumanised and the right of unionism deprived, collective bargaining becomes only a deceptive strategy to keep employees temporarily satisfied. There can never be any successful collective when there is the absence of union in all sectors or when union existence is only seen as a sacrifice and not a right of employees. Union should be encouraged at all instances to use the tool of collective bargaining to maintain workplace harmony between workers and management.

The practice of equity and fair play is fundamental to the existence of due process in organisations. When employees see transparency in all the spheres of organisations activities, there is bound to be organisational citizenship attitude among all employees and they will in turn see the organisation as a function of their existence. The spirit of merit and accountability should be imbibed by management of organisations to create workplace cooperation devoid of disagreement, grievance and social disconnect among all the actors in the workplace. Workplace democracy in its entire pronouncement is a function of an ideal workplace harmony.

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