



# The Role of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) in Labour Advocacy and Policy Influence in Nigeria

<sup>1</sup>Bassey Ekpenyong Anam & <sup>2</sup>Offiong Eyo Essien

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Public Policy and Administration, University of Calabar

<sup>2</sup>Department of Public Administration, University of Calabar, Calabar

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## Abstract

The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) are major institutional actors in labour advocacy, workers' rights protection, and labour policy influence in Nigeria. They play significant roles in promoting employee welfare, negotiating improved working conditions, influencing government labour policies, and facilitating industrial conflict resolution. This paper examines the roles of the NLC and TUC in labour advocacy and policy influence within Nigeria's socio-economic and political environment. Using a qualitative research approach based on secondary data, the study analyses the strategies, achievements, opportunities, and challenges associated with the activities of both labour centres in advancing workers' interests and shaping labour-related policies. The paper discusses their contributions to issues such as minimum wage negotiations, job security, social protection, and policy implementation through collective bargaining, advocacy, and mass mobilization. Findings indicate that although the NLC and TUC have significantly influenced labour policies and workers' welfare in Nigeria, they continue to face challenges including government resistance, economic constraints, political interference, and globalization pressures. The study concludes that stronger institutional collaboration, constructive government engagement, and enhanced policy participation are essential for improving the effectiveness of labour unions in labour advocacy and policy influence in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** *Nigerian Labour Congress, Trade Union Congress, Labour advocacy, Policy influence, Workers' rights, Trade unions*

*Corresponding Author:* Bassey Ekpenyong Anam

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### **Background to the Study**

Labour unions are globally recognized as critical institutions for protecting workers' rights, promoting social justice, and influencing labour and socio-economic policies. Through collective bargaining, advocacy, negotiation, and industrial action, labour unions seek to improve wages, working conditions, social protection, and employment security for workers. In contemporary democratic societies, trade unions also serve as important stakeholders in public policy formulation, economic governance, and industrial relations systems (ILO, 2023). In Nigeria, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) remain the two principal labour centres representing the interests of workers across public and private sectors. The Nigerian labour movement has historically played a significant role in shaping labour relations, defending workers' welfare, and influencing public policies relating to salaries, pensions, taxation, fuel subsidy reforms, labour legislation, and economic management (Fashoyin, 2018). Despite these contributions, scholarly debates continue regarding the effectiveness, autonomy, and policy influence of labour unions within Nigeria's changing political and economic environment.

The NLC, established in 1978 through the merger of several labour federations, serves as the largest umbrella body for organized labour in Nigeria. It represents workers across diverse sectors and is actively involved in collective bargaining, labour advocacy, industrial negotiations, and policy engagement with employers and government institutions. The NLC has played visible roles in national debates concerning minimum wage implementation, fuel subsidy removal, pension reforms, taxation, privatization policies, and workers' welfare (Otobo, 2020). Similarly, the TUC, established in 2005, represents senior staff associations, managerial employees, and professional workers within both public and private sectors. The TUC complements the NLC by advancing the interests of professional and managerial employees, participating in social dialogue, and collaborating on national labour matters affecting the Nigerian workforce. Both labour congresses have significantly influenced Nigeria's labour landscape through advocacy, peaceful demonstrations, industrial actions, policy engagement, and strategic negotiations. Their interventions have contributed to reforms in labour standards, pension administration, minimum wage adjustments, job security concerns, and social protection policies. Recent labour mobilizations regarding fuel subsidy removal, inflationary pressures, electricity tariff adjustments, and minimum wage negotiations further demonstrate the continuing relevance of organized labour in Nigeria's governance and policy environment (Aremu, 2022; NLC, 2024).

Contemporary literature suggests that labour unions now operate in increasingly complex environments characterized by globalization, economic instability, labour casualization, technological change, unemployment, and political pressures (Webster, Lambert, & Bezuidenhout, 2020). In Nigeria, these challenges have intensified due to inflation, fiscal reforms, rising cost of living, and labour market uncertainties. Consequently, the ability of labour organizations to effectively influence policy and protect workers' interests has become both more necessary and more difficult. Scholars such as Fashoyin (2018) argue that labour unions remain important instruments for promoting industrial democracy and workers' participation in governance. However, studies have also identified challenges confronting

labour unions in Nigeria, including government resistance, declining union density, internal organizational weaknesses, fragmentation within organized labour, political interference, and the changing nature of employment relations (Aiyede, 2021; Okolie & Amah, 2023). These realities raise important questions concerning the extent to which the NLC and TUC can effectively shape labour policies and sustain meaningful labour advocacy in contemporary Nigeria. This study examines the role of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) in labour advocacy and policy influence in Nigeria. The study assesses the strategies employed by both congresses in promoting workers' rights, evaluates their impact on labour policies and workers' welfare, examines their collaborations with government and other stakeholders, and identifies the challenges affecting their effectiveness within Nigeria's industrial relations framework.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study seeks to:

1. Examine the roles of the NLC and TUC in labour advocacy and policy influence in Nigeria;
2. Assess the strategies employed by both congresses in promoting workers' rights and influencing labour policies;
3. Evaluate the impacts of NLC and TUC advocacy efforts on labour policies and workers' welfare;
4. Identify the challenges confronting both congresses in labour advocacy and policy influence and recommend measures for enhancing their effectiveness; and
5. Examine collaboration between the NLC, TUC, government, employers, and other stakeholders in promoting labour rights and influencing policy decisions in Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

#### **Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC)**

The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) is the principal umbrella organization representing organized labour and workers' interests in Nigeria. Established in 1978 through the consolidation of multiple labour centres, it represents workers across various sectors of the economy. The NLC engages in collective bargaining, labour advocacy, industrial negotiations, and policy influence aimed at promoting better wages, improved working conditions, social security, and workers' welfare. The Congress also mobilizes workers during industrial disputes, protests, and strikes while influencing national labour and economic policies.

#### **Trade Union Congress (TUC)**

The Trade Union Congress (TUC) is the central labour organization representing senior staff associations, professional employees, and managerial workers in Nigeria. Established in 2005, the TUC represents unions composed largely of professional and senior-level employees in both public and private sectors. It advocates improved labour standards, worker welfare, professional rights, and inclusive policy engagement. The TUC complements the role of the NLC by ensuring broader labour representation within Nigeria's industrial relations system and collaborating on major national labour issues.

### **Roles of the NLC and TUC in Labour Advocacy and Policy Influence in Nigeria**

Trade unions are globally recognized as key actors in labour governance, industrial democracy, and socio-economic policy shaping. According to Webster, Lambert, and Bezuidenhout (2020), labour unions function not only as wage negotiators but also as political and social factors that influence national development trajectories. In Nigeria, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) represent the institutional backbone of organized labour and play central roles in labour advocacy and policy influence.

The NLC, established in 1978, serves as the umbrella body for industrial unions, while the TUC, created in 2005, represents senior staff and professional associations. Together, they constitute a dual structure of labour representation in Nigeria's industrial relations system. Fashoyin (2018) argues that Nigerian labour unions have historically been instrumental in shaping labour policy outcomes, particularly in wage regulation, pension reforms, and employment conditions. Recent studies indicate that the NLC and TUC have expanded their roles beyond workplace bargaining to national policy engagement, especially in response to economic reforms such as fuel subsidy removal, electricity tariff adjustments, and tax policy reforms (Aiyede, 2021; Aremu, 2022). These congresses frequently engage governments through protests, negotiations, and policy dialogues aimed at protecting workers' welfare and influencing macroeconomic decisions. Furthermore, labour unions in Nigeria act as "countervailing powers" to state authority, ensuring that public policy reflects the interests of the working class (Otobo, 2020). However, scholars such as Okolie and Amah (2023) note that the effectiveness of these roles is often constrained by political interference and weak institutional responsiveness.

### **Strategies Employed by NLC and TUC in Promoting Workers' Rights and Influencing Labour Policies**

The effectiveness of labour unions in policy influence is largely dependent on the strategies they deploy. The literature identifies several key strategies employed by the NLC and TUC in Nigeria.

- (i) **Collective Bargaining:** Collective bargaining remains the most formal mechanism through which labour unions negotiate wages, working conditions, and employment benefits. According to ILO (2023), collective bargaining enhances industrial democracy by ensuring that workers participate in decisions affecting their welfare. In Nigeria, wage negotiations between the federal government and labour unions have resulted in periodic adjustments to the national minimum wage.
- (ii) **Industrial Action and Protest Mobilization:** Strikes and protests remain powerful tools used by Nigerian labour unions to pressure government compliance. Aremu (2022) notes that industrial action has historically been effective in influencing policy reversal or modification, particularly in cases involving fuel subsidy removal and wage disputes.
- (iii) **Social Dialogue and Negotiation:** Social dialogue between labour, employers, and government has become increasingly important in contemporary labour relations. The NLC and TUC engage in tripartite consultations to influence policy formulation, consistent with International Labour Organization standards (ILO, 2023).

- (iv) **Policy Advocacy and Lobbying:** Labour unions also engage in legislative lobbying, policy submissions, and participation in public hearings. This strategy allows them to influence laws such as the Labour Act, Pension Reform Act, and taxation policies (Aiyede, 2021).
- (v) **Media and Digital Advocacy:** Recent literature highlights the increasing use of media platforms and digital mobilization by labour unions to shape public opinion and increase pressure on policymakers (Webster et al., 2020).

### **Impacts of NLC and TUC Advocacy Efforts on Labour Policies and Workers' Welfare**

Empirical and conceptual literature demonstrates that labour union advocacy has had significant impacts on labour policies and workers' welfare in Nigeria.

- (i) **Minimum Wage Reforms:** One of the most visible impacts of labour advocacy is the periodic adjustment of the national minimum wage. Studies show that sustained pressure from the NLC and TUC contributed significantly to the enactment of the 2019 National Minimum Wage Act, which increased wages across public and private sectors (Aremu, 2022).
- (ii) **Pension and Social Protection Reforms:** Labour unions played a role in shaping the Pension Reform Act, advocating for improved retirement benefits and contributory pension schemes. Ndukwe (2018) notes that labour participation improved transparency and accountability in pension administration.
- (iii) **Improved Labour Standards:** Through advocacy and negotiation, labour unions have influenced improvements in workplace safety, job security provisions, and employee welfare policies. However, enforcement remains uneven across sectors (Okolie & Amah, 2023).
- (iv) **Welfare and Economic Policy Outcomes:** Despite advocacy successes, workers continue to face declining real wages due to inflation, subsidy reforms, and economic instability. This has led scholars to argue that while unions influence policy formulation, implementation outcomes remain weak due to macroeconomic constraints (Aiyede, 2021).

### **Challenges Confronting NLC and TUC and Measures for Enhancing Effectiveness**

Despite their relevance, labour unions in Nigeria face significant structural and institutional challenges.

- (i) **Government Resistance and Political Interference:** Government reluctance to fully implement negotiated agreements is a persistent challenge. Political interference also weakens union autonomy and bargaining power (Otobo, 2020).
- (ii) **Economic Pressures and Inflation:** Nigeria's macroeconomic instability, inflation, and fiscal constraints reduce government capacity to meet union demands, leading to frequent industrial disputes.
- (iii) **Casualization and Labour Market Informality:** Webster et al. (2020) observe that globalization has led to increasing casualization of labour, reducing union membership strength and weakening collective bargaining coverage.
- (iv) **Internal Organizational Weaknesses:** Fragmentation, leadership struggles, and inconsistent coordination between NLC and TUC sometimes reduce the effectiveness

of unified labour action (Aiyede, 2021).

- (v) **Declining Union Density:** The growth of the informal sector in Nigeria has reduced union membership, thereby limiting labour influence in policy negotiations.

### **Collaboration Between NLC, TUC, Government, Employers, and Other Stakeholders**

Modern industrial relations literature strongly emphasizes the principle of tripartism, which refers to structured cooperation among government, employers, and workers' representatives in shaping labour policies and ensuring industrial harmony. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023), social dialogue is a cornerstone of democratic labour governance and is essential for achieving sustainable labour peace, equitable policy outcomes, and inclusive economic development. Through tripartite engagement, labour disputes are reduced, trust is strengthened among actors, and policies are more likely to reflect balanced socio-economic interests.

In Nigeria, this tripartite framework is reflected in institutional mechanisms such as the National Labour Advisory Council (NLAC), the National Minimum Wage Committee, and various ad hoc negotiation platforms established during industrial disputes. These platforms provide structured spaces where the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) engage directly with federal and state governments on critical labour issues such as wage adjustment, subsidy reforms, pension policies, taxation, and employment conditions. Employers' associations, particularly the Nigeria Employers' Consultative Association (NECA), also play a significant role in these negotiations by representing private sector interests and ensuring that labour policies remain economically sustainable for businesses.

Aiyede (2021) argues that effective labour governance outcomes in Nigeria depend less on confrontational industrial relations and more on continuous dialogue, mutual trust, and institutionalized negotiation mechanisms. However, empirical literature suggests that the effectiveness of these collaborative frameworks is often undermined by weak institutional trust, policy inconsistency, and poor implementation of negotiated agreements. For instance, government failure to fully implement wage agreements or delays in policy execution frequently leads to industrial unrest, strikes, and breakdown of trust between labour unions and the state. Beyond the state and employers, civil society organizations (CSOs), professional associations, and international development partners also contribute to labour policy governance in Nigeria. These actors support labour unions through policy research, advocacy training, governance monitoring, and capacity-building initiatives aimed at strengthening labour institutions. Webster, Lambert, and Bezuidenhout (2020) emphasize that inclusive governance frameworks—where multiple stakeholders participate in policy formulation—enhance the legitimacy, fairness, and sustainability of labour relations systems. In this regard, labour governance is increasingly viewed not only as a bilateral or tripartite arrangement but as a multi-stakeholder governance network.

Despite these collaborative mechanisms, the literature highlights persistent structural weaknesses in Nigeria's industrial relations system. One major challenge is the gap between

policy formulation and implementation, where agreements reached through negotiation platforms are not consistently enforced. This implementation deficit weakens confidence among stakeholders and often compels labour unions to resort to strikes and protests as enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, uneven power relations between the state and labour unions, combined with economic constraints such as inflation, unemployment, and fiscal pressures, further complicated sustained collaboration.

The reviewed literature therefore indicates that while the NLC and TUC remain central actors in labour advocacy and policy negotiation in Nigeria, their effectiveness is heavily dependent on the quality of institutional collaboration with government and employers. However, a recurring gap exists between policy influence and policy implementation outcomes, suggesting that formal agreements do not always translate into practical improvements in workers' welfare. Additionally, existing studies have largely focused on descriptive accounts of labour relations in Nigeria, with limited empirical analysis comparing the strategic effectiveness of the NLC and TUC in influencing policy outcomes. Much of the literature also treats labour advocacy in general terms without adequately examining the mechanisms through which collaboration translates into tangible improvements in wages, job security, and working conditions. This study therefore addresses this gap by critically examining how the NLC and TUC engage with government, employers, and other stakeholders, and how these interactions influence labour policy outcomes and workers' welfare in Nigeria's evolving socio-economic environment. By doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of labour governance beyond formal structures, focusing instead on the effectiveness of collaborative mechanisms in practice.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examined the role of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) in labour advocacy and policy influence in Nigeria. The study established that both labour centres remain central actors in Nigeria's industrial relations system, serving as key institutional mechanisms for protecting workers' rights, influencing labour policies, and promoting social justice in the workplace. Through strategies such as collective bargaining, industrial action, policy lobbying, and social dialogue, the NLC and TUC have significantly shaped critical labour outcomes, including minimum wage adjustments, pension reforms, and broader labour policy reforms.

However, the literature also reveals a persistent gap between policy formulation and implementation, which weakens the overall impact of labour advocacy on workers' welfare. While labour unions have recorded notable successes in policy influence, their effectiveness is constrained by structural challenges such as government resistance, weak enforcement of agreements, political interference, declining union density due to casualization of labour, and macroeconomic instability.

Furthermore, although collaborative frameworks such as tripartite negotiations exist, weak institutional trust and inconsistent compliance with agreements continue to undermine industrial harmony. Consequently, the capacity of the NLC and TUC to fully translate

advocacy gains into sustained improvements in workers' welfare remains limited within Nigeria's evolving socio-economic environment. In conclusion, the NLC and TUC remain indispensable institutions in Nigeria's labour governance architecture. However, strengthening their effectiveness requires addressing both institutional and structural constraints within the broader industrial relations system.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and literature reviewed, the following recommendations are proposed:

#### **1. Strengthening Institutional Enforcement of Agreements**

Government and relevant regulatory bodies should ensure strict compliance with agreements reached through collective bargaining and tripartite negotiations. Establishing legally binding enforcement mechanisms will reduce recurring industrial disputes and enhance trust between stakeholders.

#### **2. Enhancing Social Dialogue and Tripartite Collaboration**

There is a need to deepen institutionalized social dialogue between the NLC, TUC, government, and employers. Regular and transparent engagement through bodies such as the National Labour Advisory Council should be strengthened to promote consensus-based policy formulation and reduce confrontational labour relations.

#### **3. Reducing Political Interference in Labour Affairs**

Government should minimize political interference in union activities and leadership structures to preserve the autonomy and credibility of labour institutions. Independent labour governance will enhance professionalism and improve negotiation outcomes.

#### **4. Addressing Labour Casualization and Expanding Union Coverage**

The NLC and TUC should intensify efforts to organize workers in the informal sector and address the growing trend of casualization and outsourcing. Expanding union membership will strengthen bargaining power and improve representation of vulnerable workers.

#### **5. Strengthening Internal Union Capacity and Unity**

Both labour congresses should improve internal coordination, leadership cohesion, and strategic planning. Stronger unity between NLC and TUC will enhance their collective bargaining strength and policy influence.

#### **6. Enhancing Use of Digital and Media Advocacy**

Labour unions should adopt modern communication tools, including digital platforms and social media, to mobilize public support, increase transparency, and influence policy debates more effectively in real time.

#### **7. Promoting Macroeconomic Stability and Pro-Poor Policies**

Government should adopt labour-sensitive economic policies that reduce inflationary pressures and protect real wages. Stable macroeconomic conditions will enhance the effectiveness of negotiated labour agreements.

## **8. Strengthening Legal and Institutional Frameworks**

There is need for continuous reform of Nigeria's labour laws to align with international best practices as recommended by the International Labour Organization (ILO). Strong legal frameworks will reinforce fairness, accountability, and industrial peace.

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