International Journal of Advanced Research in Public Policy, Administration and Development Strategies (IJARPPADS)
Volume 8, Number 1 July, 2026

e-ISSN: 2489-012X
p-ISSN: 2315-8395

Colonial Labour Policies and the Emergence of Trade Unionism in Nigeria: A Historical and Institutional Analysis

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Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/ijarppads.v8.i1.04

Abstract

The evolution of trade unionism in Nigeria is closely associated with the labour policies introduced during British colonial administration. Colonial labour policies were primarily designed to facilitate economic exploitation, maintain administrative control, and ensure a stable labour force for colonial enterprises rather than promote workers' welfare. However, these policies inadvertently created the institutional and socio-economic conditions that stimulated the emergence of organised labour movements. This paper qualitatively examines the relationship between colonial labour policies and the development of trade unionism in Nigeria through a historical and institutional analysis. Drawing on archival documents, colonial ordinances, government reports, historical records, and contemporary scholarly literature, the study analyses the evolution of colonial labour administration, labour legislation, and workers' responses to colonial economic policies. It further examines how discriminatory employment practices, poor working conditions, wage inequalities, and restrictive labour regulations encouraged collective action and the formation of trade unions. The study finds that although colonial labour policies sought to suppress organised labour, they unintentionally fostered workers' consciousness, collective bargaining, and institutionalised trade unionism. The paper concludes that contemporary industrial relations in Nigeria continue to reflect the institutional legacies established during the colonial period. It recommends continuous reforms aimed at strengthening labour institutions, promoting social dialogue, protecting workers' rights, and modernising labour governance in line with international labour standards.

Keywords: *Colonial labour policy, Trade unionism, Industrial relations, Labour administration, Colonial Nigeria, Labour legislation*

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Journal URL:
https://internationalpolicybrief.org/international-journal-of-advanced-research-in-public-policy-administration-and-development-strategies-volume-8-number-1/

Background to the Study

The history of industrial relations in Nigeria cannot be fully understood without examining the labour policies implemented during British colonial rule. Between the late nineteenth century and Nigeria's attainment of independence in 1960, the colonial administration established labour institutions, employment regulations, and administrative structures that profoundly shaped employer–employee relations and the evolution of organised labour. Although these policies were primarily intended to facilitate colonial economic exploitation and administrative efficiency, they also provided the institutional foundation upon which trade unionism later developed (Ananaba, 1969; Yesufu, 1984).

British colonial administration introduced modern wage employment into Nigeria through the expansion of railways, seaports, mining, public works, agriculture, and the civil service. The rapid growth of these sectors created a sizeable wage-earning workforce comprising railway employees, dockworkers, miners, artisans, clerical workers, teachers, and civil servants. Unlike traditional labour arrangements that were largely communal or family-based, colonial employment introduced contractual labour relationships characterised by wage determination, working hours, disciplinary regulations, and employer authority. These developments fundamentally transformed labour relations within Nigerian society (Aremu, 2021). Colonial labour policies were largely influenced by Britain's economic and political interests. The colonial state sought to secure a disciplined, reliable, and inexpensive labour force capable of supporting agricultural production, mineral extraction, transportation, and public administration. Consequently, labour regulations emphasised productivity, labour discipline, and administrative control rather than workers' welfare or industrial democracy (Fashoyin, 2005). Employment conditions were frequently characterised by low wages, racial discrimination, limited opportunities for promotion, poor housing, inadequate healthcare, and restrictive labour practices. The unequal treatment of African workers compared with their European counterparts became one of the most significant sources of industrial conflict during the colonial period. African employees performing similar responsibilities often received considerably lower remuneration, experienced limited career advancement, and worked under less favourable conditions than expatriate staff. Such disparities generated widespread dissatisfaction and gradually strengthened workers' consciousness regarding collective representation and industrial justice (Otobo, 2000).

As colonial economic activities expanded, labour disputes became increasingly common. Individual workers possessed limited bargaining power against colonial employers and government institutions. Consequently, employees began forming associations to protect their economic interests, improve working conditions, and negotiate collectively with employers. Early labour organisations such as the Nigerian Civil Service Union (1912), the Nigerian Union of Teachers (1931), the Railway Workers' Union, and the Nigerian Marine Workers' Union marked the beginning of organised trade unionism in Nigeria (Yesufu, 1984). The enactment of labour legislation further influenced the development of trade unionism. The Trade Union Ordinance of 1938 represented a significant milestone by providing legal recognition for trade unions while simultaneously introducing regulatory mechanisms that

enabled colonial authorities to monitor and control organised labour. Although the legislation granted legal status to registered unions, it also imposed administrative restrictions intended to limit militant union activities and protect colonial economic interests (Fashoyin, 2005).

The period following the Second World War witnessed rapid expansion of trade union activities across Nigeria. Economic hardship, inflation, unemployment, poor working conditions, and rising political consciousness encouraged workers to organise more effectively. The famous General Strike of 1945, led by Michael Imoudu and supported by numerous labour organisations, demonstrated the growing influence of organised labour within colonial Nigeria. The strike not only secured wage improvements but also established trade unions as important political actors within the broader nationalist movement (Ananaba, 1969). Beyond workplace issues, trade unions increasingly became active participants in Nigeria's struggle for political independence. Labour leaders collaborated with nationalist politicians to demand constitutional reforms, improved governance, social justice, and self-government. Consequently, trade unionism evolved from an economic institution concerned primarily with wages and employment conditions into a broader social movement advocating political emancipation and national development (Aremu, 2021).

Despite the extensive literature on Nigerian labour history, scholarly debates continue regarding the precise role played by colonial labour policies in shaping organised labour. Some scholars argue that colonial labour legislation institutionalised industrial relations and facilitated union development by creating legal frameworks for collective organisation. Others contend that colonial labour policies were essentially instruments of economic exploitation and political repression designed to weaken labour resistance and preserve colonial authority. These contrasting perspectives underscore the need for renewed scholarly analysis, particularly in light of contemporary discussions concerning labour rights, institutional reform, and decent work (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). Moreover, recent developments in labour markets—including globalisation, digital employment, platform work, migration, and changing employment relationships—have renewed interest in the historical origins of labour institutions. Understanding how colonial labour policies influenced the emergence of trade unionism provides valuable insights into the institutional evolution of industrial relations in Nigeria and offers lessons for contemporary labour governance. This paper therefore undertakes a historical and institutional analysis of colonial labour policies and the emergence of trade unionism in Nigeria. Specifically, it examines the conceptual foundations of colonial labour policy and trade unionism, analyses the legal and administrative framework established during colonial rule, evaluates the influence of colonial labour practices on organised labour, and assesses the enduring legacy of colonial institutions for contemporary industrial relations in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this paper is to examine the relationship between colonial labour policies and the emergence of trade unionism in Nigeria through a historical and institutional analysis.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the concept and evolution of colonial labour policies in Nigeria.
2. Analyse the legal and institutional framework governing labour administration during the colonial period.
3. Examine how colonial labour policies influenced the emergence and development of trade unionism in Nigeria.
4. Assess the contributions of early trade unions to workers' welfare and Nigeria's nationalist movement.
5. Examine the institutional legacy of colonial labour policies on contemporary industrial relations in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Colonial Labour Policy

Colonial labour policy refers to the body of laws, administrative regulations, employment practices, and institutional arrangements established by colonial governments to regulate labour recruitment, employment conditions, wages, labour mobility, industrial discipline, and employer–employee relations within colonised territories. These policies were primarily designed to secure an adequate supply of labour for colonial economic enterprises while maintaining political stability and administrative control (Ananaba, 1969; Freund, 1988). In most African colonies, labour policy was closely linked to the broader objectives of colonialism, namely the extraction of raw materials, expansion of commercial agriculture, construction of transportation infrastructure, and maintenance of colonial administration. Consequently, colonial governments developed labour regulations that prioritised productivity, labour discipline, and economic efficiency over workers' welfare or social justice (Cooper, 1996).

Within Nigeria, colonial labour policy evolved gradually from informal administrative directives during the late nineteenth century into a structured legal framework regulating employment across the public and private sectors. The establishment of railways, ports, mining operations, public works departments, and commercial enterprises generated increasing demand for wage labour, compelling the colonial administration to formulate policies governing recruitment, remuneration, working conditions, and labour disputes (Fashoyin, 2005). Colonial labour policies were characterised by several distinctive features. First, they institutionalised racial segregation within employment by reserving senior administrative positions largely for European personnel while assigning Africans to lower-paid positions with limited opportunities for advancement. Second, labour regulations emphasised discipline and productivity through strict supervisory systems and administrative sanctions. Third, labour legislation restricted collective worker activities while simultaneously introducing limited legal recognition for labour organisations under government supervision. Finally, labour administration was highly centralised, with colonial authorities exercising extensive control over employment relations and dispute resolution mechanisms (Otobo, 2000). Although these policies were intended primarily to advance colonial interests, they inadvertently stimulated workers' awareness of common grievances.

Persistent wage discrimination, poor working conditions, limited employment rights, and unequal treatment encouraged employees to organise collectively, laying the foundation for trade union development in Nigeria. Thus, colonial labour policy represents not only an instrument of economic administration but also an important historical catalyst for the emergence of organised labour and modern industrial relations.

Concept of Trade Unionism

Trade unionism refers to the organisation and collective activities of workers established to protect and promote their economic, social, and professional interests through collective bargaining, consultation, negotiation, advocacy, and, where necessary, industrial action. It represents an institutional mechanism through which employees collectively negotiate with employers on issues relating to wages, working conditions, job security, welfare, occupational safety, promotion, training, and other conditions of employment (Fashoyin, 2005; Salamon, 2000). The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines trade unions as voluntary organisations of workers formed to defend their occupational interests and improve their socio-economic well-being through collective representation and social dialogue (ILO, 2024). Trade unionism is founded on the principle that individual workers often possess limited bargaining power in employment relationships, particularly where employers exercise significant economic and administrative authority. Collective organisation therefore provides employees with greater negotiating strength and enables them to pursue improved employment conditions through legally recognised institutional processes. The emergence of trade unions is closely associated with industrialisation, wage employment, urbanisation, and the expansion of capitalist production systems, all of which transformed traditional labour relations into formal employer–employee relationships (Hyman, 2001).

Modern trade unionism performs several important functions within industrial relations systems. First, trade unions represent employees during collective bargaining processes by negotiating wages, salaries, allowances, working hours, fringe benefits, pensions, and other conditions of service. Second, unions protect workers against unfair labour practices, discrimination, victimisation, arbitrary dismissal, and violations of employment rights. Third, they contribute to industrial peace by providing institutional channels for resolving workplace conflicts through negotiation, mediation, conciliation, and arbitration before disputes escalate into strikes or lockouts. Fourth, trade unions promote workplace democracy by encouraging employee participation in organisational decision-making and policy formulation (Fajana, 2006).

Trade unions also perform important socio-political functions beyond the workplace. Throughout history, labour movements have advocated social justice, equitable income distribution, democratic governance, improved social welfare, and respect for human rights. In many developing countries, including Nigeria, trade unions have participated actively in national development, constitutional reforms, anti-colonial struggles, and campaigns for democratic governance. Consequently, trade unionism extends beyond economic bargaining to encompass broader social and political responsibilities within society (Ananaba, 1969).

Within Nigeria, trade unionism evolved from small occupational associations into organised national labour movements representing workers across the public and private sectors. The legal recognition of trade unions under the Trade Union Ordinance of 1938 provided an institutional framework for collective organisation while simultaneously introducing government regulation of union activities. Since independence, trade unionism has continued to evolve through legislative reforms, institutional restructuring, and increasing engagement with international labour standards, particularly those promoted by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2024).

Contemporary trade unionism in Nigeria operates within an increasingly dynamic labour market characterised by globalisation, technological innovation, outsourcing, informal employment, digital platforms, and changing employment relationships. These developments have expanded the traditional responsibilities of trade unions beyond wage negotiations to include skills development, digital workplace governance, occupational health and safety, gender equality, social protection, environmental sustainability, and decent work promotion. Thus, trade unionism remains an indispensable institution for protecting workers' interests while promoting equitable and sustainable industrial relations.

Evolution of Trade Unionism in Nigeria

The development of trade unionism in Nigeria reflects the country's broader political, economic, and social transformation under colonial rule and after independence. Before the introduction of British colonial administration, labour relations were largely organised through communal systems, family structures, apprenticeship arrangements, and traditional occupational guilds. Production was primarily subsistence-oriented, and employment relationships were regulated by customary institutions rather than formal contractual agreements. Consequently, organised trade unionism, as understood within modern industrial relations, did not exist during the pre-colonial period (Yesufu, 1984).

The introduction of colonial administration fundamentally transformed Nigeria's labour market through the expansion of wage employment in railways, ports, mining, public works, commercial agriculture, and the civil service. As colonial economic activities expanded during the early twentieth century, increasing numbers of Nigerians became salaried employees working under formal contractual arrangements. These developments created new forms of employer–employee relationships characterised by wage determination, hierarchical supervision, working hours, disciplinary procedures, and employment contracts (Otobo, 2000). One of the earliest organised labour associations in Nigeria was the Civil Service British Workers Union established in 1912, later renamed the Nigerian Civil Service Union. Although initially dominated by African clerical workers, the union represented an important milestone in the institutional development of organised labour. During the 1920s and 1930s, additional unions emerged among railway workers, teachers, artisans, marine workers, and technical employees as dissatisfaction with employment conditions intensified (Ananaba, 1969).

The enactment of the Trade Union Ordinance of 1938 marked a turning point in the evolution of trade unionism by granting legal recognition to registered trade unions. While the legislation provided workers with formal legal status, it also enabled colonial authorities to regulate union registration, finances, leadership, and organisational activities. Consequently, the colonial government simultaneously institutionalised and controlled organised labour, reflecting its dual objective of maintaining industrial stability while protecting colonial economic interests (Fashoyin, 2005). The Second World War significantly accelerated trade union development in Nigeria. Wartime inflation, declining real wages, shortages of essential commodities, and worsening working conditions generated widespread worker dissatisfaction. Labour leaders increasingly mobilised employees to demand wage adjustments, improved welfare, and recognition of workers' rights. These developments culminated in the historic General Strike of 1945 led by Michael Imoudu, often regarded as the father of Nigerian trade unionism. The strike demonstrated the growing organisational capacity of labour unions and established organised labour as a major force within Nigeria's socio-political landscape (Yesufu, 1984).

During the late colonial period, trade unions became closely associated with nationalist movements advocating constitutional reforms and political independence. Labour organisations collaborated with nationalist leaders to challenge colonial authority, demand representative government, and promote social justice. Consequently, organised labour evolved beyond workplace concerns to become an influential participant in Nigeria's struggle for self-government. Following independence in 1960, trade unionism entered a new phase characterised by institutional expansion and legislative reforms. The establishment of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) in 1978 unified numerous industrial unions under a single national labour centre, strengthening collective bargaining and labour advocacy. Subsequent reforms, including the Trade Unions (Amendment) Act, labour law revisions, and recognition of additional labour centres such as the Trade Union Congress (TUC), further reshaped Nigeria's industrial relations landscape (Fajana, 2006).

In contemporary Nigeria, trade unions continue to play significant roles in collective bargaining, policy advocacy, labour rights protection, minimum wage negotiations, pension reforms, occupational safety, and democratic governance. However, organised labour also faces emerging challenges arising from labour market flexibility, informal employment, contract staffing, automation, digital work platforms, globalisation, and declining union density. These developments require trade unions to continually adapt their organisational strategies while remaining effective representatives of workers' interests in an increasingly complex employment environment (ILO, 2024; OECD, 2023).

Colonial Labour Administration in Nigeria

Colonial labour administration refers to the institutional arrangements, legal regulations, and administrative structures established by the British colonial government to regulate employment relationships, labour recruitment, working conditions, industrial discipline, and dispute resolution within colonial Nigeria. Labour administration formed an integral

component of the colonial governance system and was designed primarily to ensure an adequate supply of labour for colonial economic enterprises while maintaining political stability and administrative efficiency (Cooper, 1996).

The colonial administration established several institutions responsible for labour regulation, including Labour Departments, Public Works Departments, Railway Administration, Native Authorities, Labour Inspectorates, and later specialised labour officers responsible for monitoring employment practices and implementing labour legislation. These institutions supervised recruitment, wage administration, labour mobility, occupational safety, industrial discipline, and dispute resolution across both public and private sectors (Ananaba, 1969). Colonial labour administration was characterised by centralised decision-making and extensive government control over employment relations. Labour policies were formulated by the colonial government with minimal consultation with African workers or their representatives. Administrative decisions concerning wages, working conditions, recruitment procedures, and disciplinary measures were largely determined by colonial officials acting in accordance with imperial economic objectives rather than workers' welfare (Yesufu, 1984).

Labour legislation formed an important aspect of colonial labour administration. Key statutes such as the Master and Servants Ordinances, Workmen's Compensation Ordinance, Trade Union Ordinance of 1938, Wages Boards legislation, and various factory regulations established the legal framework governing employment relationships within colonial Nigeria. While these laws introduced formal labour regulation, they primarily sought to preserve industrial order and minimise disruptions to colonial production rather than establish equitable labour relations (Fashoyin, 2005).

Colonial labour administration also reflected significant racial inequalities. European employees generally enjoyed superior salaries, housing, medical services, leave allowances, pensions, and promotion opportunities compared with African workers performing similar responsibilities. Such discriminatory practices contributed significantly to worker dissatisfaction and strengthened demands for organised labour representation. Following the Second World War, colonial authorities gradually introduced limited reforms in response to increasing industrial unrest, growing nationalist agitation, and international pressure arising from evolving International Labour Organization standards. Labour departments became more involved in dispute resolution, collective bargaining, labour inspection, and conciliation. Nevertheless, the fundamental objective of labour administration remained the preservation of colonial economic interests until Nigeria attained independence in 1960. The institutional foundations established during colonial administration significantly influenced the post-colonial evolution of Nigeria's labour administration. Contemporary labour ministries, industrial relations institutions, labour inspectorates, dispute resolution mechanisms, and collective bargaining structures continue to reflect many administrative principles introduced during the colonial period, although they have undergone substantial reforms to align with democratic governance and international labour standards.

The Legal and Institutional Framework Governing Labour Administration During the Colonial Period

The legal and institutional framework governing labour administration during British colonial rule in Nigeria evolved in response to the increasing demand for organised labour required to sustain colonial economic and administrative activities. Colonial labour administration was primarily designed to facilitate the extraction of raw materials, expand commercial agriculture, develop transportation infrastructure, and maintain an efficient colonial bureaucracy rather than promote workers' welfare or industrial democracy. Consequently, labour legislation and administrative institutions reflected the economic priorities of the colonial government while simultaneously establishing the foundations of Nigeria's modern industrial relations system (Ananaba, 1969; Cooper, 1996).

Before the twentieth century, labour relations in Nigeria were largely regulated through customary institutions, communal obligations, apprenticeship systems, and family-based production arrangements. The introduction of British colonial administration fundamentally altered these traditional systems by expanding wage employment in railways, seaports, mining, public works, commercial enterprises, and the colonial civil service. The rapid growth of these sectors created the need for formal labour regulation to govern recruitment, wages, discipline, working conditions, and dispute resolution (Yesufu, 1984). One of the earliest legal instruments influencing labour administration was the Master and Servants Ordinance, enacted to regulate contractual relationships between employers and employees. Like similar legislation throughout the British Empire, the ordinance imposed contractual obligations on workers while granting employers considerable authority over recruitment, supervision, and disciplinary procedures. Workers who breached employment contracts could face criminal sanctions, fines, or imprisonment, whereas employers generally incurred only civil liabilities for comparable contractual breaches. This unequal legal framework reflected the colonial state's objective of maintaining labour discipline and protecting production rather than ensuring equity within employment relations (Cooper, 1996).

As colonial economic activities expanded, the government recognised the need for specialised administrative institutions to supervise labour matters. Consequently, labour administration gradually became the responsibility of designated labour officers operating under the Colonial Labour Department. These officials monitored employment practices, investigated labour disputes, inspected workplaces, supervised recruitment processes, and advised the colonial government on labour policy. Labour inspectors also enforced statutory regulations concerning wages, hours of work, occupational safety, and employment contracts, although enforcement often favoured employers and government agencies over African workers (Fashoyin, 2005).

The establishment of the Labour Department represented a significant institutional development in colonial Nigeria. Initially created to address labour shortages and regulate labour mobility, the department later assumed broader responsibilities, including labour inspection, industrial relations, dispute prevention, employment services, and policy

implementation. Following the establishment of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1919, British colonial authorities increasingly aligned aspects of labour administration with emerging international labour standards, particularly concerning forced labour, working conditions, labour inspection, and employment protection. Nevertheless, implementation remained selective and largely subordinate to colonial economic objectives (ILO, 2024).

Labour recruitment constituted another important component of colonial labour administration. The colonial government adopted various recruitment strategies to satisfy labour demands within plantations, mines, railway construction projects, ports, and public works. Native Authorities frequently participated in labour mobilisation, while indirect rule facilitated the recruitment of workers from rural communities. Although outright forced labour gradually declined following international criticism, indirect forms of labour coercion, taxation policies, and administrative pressures continued to influence labour supply throughout much of the colonial period (Cooper, 1996). Colonial labour legislation expanded progressively as industrial activities increased. The Workmen's Compensation Ordinance introduced limited legal protection for workers who sustained injuries during employment, representing one of the earliest attempts to recognise employer responsibility for occupational accidents. Although compensation provisions remained relatively modest and access was often restricted, the legislation reflected gradual acceptance of employer obligations regarding workplace safety and employee welfare (Ananaba, 1969).

Perhaps the most significant legal development occurred with the enactment of the Trade Union Ordinance of 1938, which formally recognised trade unions within Nigeria. Prior to this legislation, workers' organisations operated without formal legal recognition and possessed limited capacity to negotiate collectively. The ordinance established procedures for union registration, prescribed administrative requirements, and granted legal status to registered trade unions. At the same time, however, the legislation imposed substantial regulatory controls by empowering colonial authorities to supervise union finances, approve constitutions, monitor leadership, and intervene in union activities where considered necessary for public order or economic stability (Fashoyin, 2005).

The Trade Union Ordinance therefore reflected the contradictory nature of colonial labour policy. While it institutionalised collective organisation and provided workers with legal recognition, it simultaneously restricted union autonomy and preserved extensive government control over organised labour. Colonial authorities viewed trade unions as legitimate only insofar as they contributed to industrial stability and did not threaten colonial political authority. Consequently, labour legislation sought to balance limited worker representation with effective administrative control. Following the Second World War, increasing industrial unrest compelled the colonial government to strengthen labour administration further. Rising inflation, declining real wages, deteriorating living conditions, and growing political consciousness contributed to frequent labour disputes across the railway, ports, mining, education, and civil service sectors. In response, the colonial

administration expanded the responsibilities of labour officers to include conciliation, mediation, and dispute settlement. These developments marked the gradual institutionalisation of formal industrial relations practices within Nigeria (Yesufu, 1984). The influence of international labour standards also became increasingly evident during the post-war period. As a member of the International Labour Organization through Britain, Nigeria became subject to evolving international conventions promoting freedom of association, collective bargaining, labour inspection, and improved working conditions. Although implementation remained uneven, these standards encouraged gradual reforms in labour administration and strengthened demands for greater worker participation in industrial relations (ILO, 2024). Institutionally, colonial labour administration was characterised by centralisation, bureaucratic hierarchy, and executive control. Labour policy formulation remained concentrated within the colonial executive, while African workers possessed minimal opportunities to influence employment legislation or administrative decision-making. Labour departments functioned primarily as regulatory agencies responsible to colonial administrators rather than independent institutions promoting balanced employer–employee relations. Consequently, industrial relations during the colonial period reflected the broader asymmetrical power relations inherent in colonial governance (Aremu, 2021).

Despite these limitations, the institutional framework established during colonial rule laid the foundation for Nigeria's contemporary labour administration. Many post-independence institutions—including the Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment, labour inspectorates, collective bargaining structures, labour dispute resolution mechanisms, and employment regulatory frameworks—trace their origins to administrative arrangements introduced during the colonial era. Subsequent labour legislation, including the Labour Act, Trade Unions Act, Trade Disputes Act, National Industrial Court Act, and related employment regulations, has largely evolved from these colonial institutional foundations, albeit substantially reformed to reflect democratic governance, constitutional guarantees, and international labour standards.

Recent scholarship acknowledges that while colonial labour administration was fundamentally designed to advance imperial economic interests, it unintentionally established enduring legal and institutional structures that continue to influence industrial relations in Nigeria. Contemporary labour governance, dispute resolution procedures, labour inspection systems, and collective bargaining institutions retain important structural features inherited from the colonial period, demonstrating the long-term institutional legacy of colonial labour policies (International Labour Organization, 2024; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023). The legal and institutional framework governing labour administration during the colonial period represented both an instrument of imperial governance and the foundation of Nigeria's formal industrial relations system. Although primarily intended to regulate labour in support of colonial economic objectives, the institutions and legislation introduced during this period inadvertently created the administrative and legal environment within which organised trade unionism subsequently emerged and expanded.

Colonial Labour Policies and the Emergence and Development of Trade Unionism in Nigeria

The emergence and development of trade unionism in Nigeria cannot be separated from the labour policies introduced by the British colonial administration. Although colonial labour policies were primarily formulated to support imperial economic expansion, maintain labour discipline, and ensure political stability, they inadvertently created the conditions that stimulated collective worker consciousness and the formation of organised labour movements. The contradictions inherent in colonial labour administration—particularly the coexistence of modern wage employment with discriminatory labour practices—became the principal catalyst for the growth of trade unionism in Nigeria (Ananaba, 1969; Yesufu, 1984).

British colonial rule transformed Nigeria from a predominantly agrarian society characterised by subsistence production into a colonial economy integrated into global capitalist markets. The construction of railways, expansion of ports, establishment of mining industries, commercial agriculture, public works, and the colonial civil service generated unprecedented demand for wage labour. These developments produced a new class of salaried workers whose employment relationships differed fundamentally from traditional labour arrangements. Unlike communal labour systems that emphasised reciprocity and kinship obligations, colonial employment was based on contracts, wages, hierarchical supervision, and bureaucratic management (Cooper, 1996).

The expansion of wage employment brought workers from different ethnic, religious, and geographical backgrounds into shared workplaces where they experienced similar employment conditions. This interaction fostered occupational solidarity and gradually strengthened collective awareness of common economic interests. As industrial centres such as Lagos, Enugu, Kaduna, Port Harcourt, and Kano expanded, workers increasingly recognised the limitations of individual negotiations with employers and began organising collectively to protect their interests (Otobo, 2000). One of the most significant colonial labour policies influencing trade union development was the institutionalisation of racial discrimination within employment. European officials generally occupied senior administrative and technical positions, receiving substantially higher salaries, better housing, superior healthcare, generous leave allowances, pension benefits, and greater opportunities for promotion. In contrast, African workers performing comparable duties were frequently confined to subordinate positions with lower wages and limited prospects for career advancement. This systemic inequality generated widespread resentment and reinforced workers' demands for equitable treatment and institutional representation (Aremu, 2021).

Colonial wage policies further contributed to labour dissatisfaction. Wages were deliberately maintained at relatively low levels to minimise production costs and maximise returns from colonial enterprises. Periodic inflation, especially during and after the Second World War, significantly reduced workers' purchasing power, while salary adjustments often failed to correspond with rising living costs. Consequently, workers experienced declining real incomes despite increasing productivity and expanding colonial revenues. Economic

hardship became one of the principal motivations for collective organisation and industrial action (Fashoyin, 2005). The restrictive nature of colonial labour administration also encouraged workers to seek collective representation. Labour policies emphasised strict discipline, obedience, and managerial authority, leaving workers with limited opportunities to participate in decisions affecting their employment. Grievance procedures were often ineffective, and disciplinary measures frequently favoured employers over employees. The absence of effective institutional mechanisms for protecting workers' interests strengthened the appeal of trade unions as vehicles for collective bargaining and industrial advocacy (Hyman, 2001).

Urbanisation further accelerated the emergence of organised labour. Colonial economic development stimulated migration from rural communities to urban industrial centres where employment opportunities were concentrated. Increasing urban populations facilitated communication among workers, encouraged the exchange of ideas, and promoted collective mobilisation around shared workplace grievances. Labour organisations benefited from this concentration of workers by recruiting members across different occupations and industries (Cooper, 1996). The legal recognition of trade unions through the Trade Union Ordinance of 1938 represented a landmark in the institutional development of organised labour in Nigeria. Before the enactment of the ordinance, workers' associations operated informally without legal status or clearly defined organisational rights. The ordinance established procedures for trade union registration, recognised the legitimacy of collective worker organisations, and provided a statutory framework for union administration. Although colonial authorities intended to regulate and monitor labour organisations, the legislation inadvertently strengthened organised labour by granting legal recognition to workers' associations (Ananaba, 1969).

The 1938 Ordinance also reflected the contradictory objectives of colonial labour policy. On one hand, it acknowledged workers' rights to organise collectively; on the other, it imposed significant restrictions on union activities. Trade unions were required to register with government authorities, submit financial records, comply with administrative regulations, and operate within limits prescribed by colonial legislation. Government retained extensive powers to supervise, investigate, and, where considered necessary, intervene in union affairs. Consequently, legal recognition was accompanied by mechanisms intended to minimise labour militancy and preserve industrial stability (Yesufu, 1984). The outbreak of the Second World War significantly intensified workers' grievances. Wartime inflation, shortages of consumer goods, increased taxation, and deteriorating living standards imposed considerable hardship on wage earners throughout Nigeria. Despite increased demand for labour arising from wartime production, many workers received inadequate compensation and experienced worsening employment conditions. These developments stimulated unprecedented levels of labour mobilisation and strengthened trade union organisation across several sectors of the economy (Fajana, 2006).

Perhaps the most defining event in the evolution of Nigerian trade unionism was the General Strike of 1945, led by Michael Imoudu. The strike involved railway workers, civil servants, dockworkers, artisans, and employees from numerous public and private establishments who demanded improved wages to offset rising living costs. Lasting over six weeks, the strike demonstrated the growing organisational capacity of Nigerian workers and highlighted the effectiveness of collective action in challenging colonial labour policies. Although the colonial government initially resisted workers' demands, the strike compelled authorities to review wage policies and recognise organised labour as an increasingly influential actor within colonial society (Yesufu, 1984). The success of the 1945 General Strike encouraged the formation of additional trade unions and strengthened existing labour organisations. Railway workers, teachers, miners, marine workers, postal employees, public servants, and other occupational groups increasingly organised around common economic and professional interests. Labour unions gradually expanded beyond workplace issues to address broader concerns relating to social justice, political representation, educational opportunities, and constitutional reforms (Ananaba, 1969).

The emergence of charismatic labour leaders also contributed significantly to trade union development. Michael Imoudu, Pa Imoudu, Wahab Goodluck, Samuel Akinsanya, and several other labour activists provided organisational leadership that transformed scattered occupational associations into coordinated labour movements. These leaders mobilised workers, negotiated with colonial authorities, organised industrial actions, and established relationships with nationalist political organisations advocating self-government. Their leadership enhanced the credibility and organisational capacity of the Nigerian labour movement (Otobo, 2000).

International developments equally influenced the growth of trade unionism in colonial Nigeria. The establishment of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1919 and subsequent international labour standards promoting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and improved working conditions encouraged workers to demand greater recognition of labour rights. Although colonial implementation of ILO standards remained selective, international attention to labour issues strengthened domestic campaigns for labour reform and trade union recognition (ILO, 2024).

Scholars remain divided regarding the extent to which colonial labour policies facilitated or constrained trade union development. One perspective argues that colonial labour legislation inadvertently institutionalised organised labour by providing legal recognition, administrative structures, and formal dispute resolution mechanisms that enabled unions to operate more effectively (Fashoyin, 2005). From this viewpoint, colonial institutions supplied the organisational infrastructure upon which post-independence industrial relations were subsequently built. An alternative perspective contends that colonial labour policies were fundamentally instruments of political control designed to suppress labour militancy and protect imperial economic interests. According to this view, legal recognition of trade unions was intended less to empower workers than to regulate, monitor, and contain

organised labour within acceptable administrative limits. Trade unions therefore developed not because colonial authorities supported workers' rights but because workers persistently resisted exploitative employment practices and demanded greater economic justice (Cooper, 1996).

Contemporary scholarship increasingly reconciles these perspectives by recognising the paradoxical nature of colonial labour policy. While colonial legislation sought to regulate and restrict organised labour, it simultaneously created legal institutions, administrative procedures, and employment structures that facilitated collective worker organisation. Wage employment, urbanisation, labour legislation, industrial conflict, and administrative regulation collectively provided the institutional environment necessary for the emergence of modern trade unionism in Nigeria (ILO, 2024; OECD, 2023). In retrospect, colonial labour policies unintentionally achieved outcomes that contradicted their original objectives. Policies designed to maintain labour discipline and safeguard colonial production instead fostered worker solidarity, strengthened collective consciousness, and stimulated the development of powerful labour organisations that eventually became influential actors in Nigeria's industrial relations system and nationalist movement. The evolution of trade unionism during the colonial period therefore illustrates how institutional arrangements created for administrative control can generate unintended social and political transformations that extend far beyond their original purposes.

Contributions of Early Trade Unions to Workers' Welfare and Nigeria's Nationalist Movement

The emergence of trade unionism in colonial Nigeria represented a significant turning point in the country's industrial relations history. Although the earliest trade unions were established primarily to improve workers' conditions of employment, their influence gradually extended beyond workplace issues to encompass broader socio-economic and political struggles. Through collective bargaining, industrial action, political advocacy, and collaboration with nationalist organisations, early trade unions contributed significantly to workers' welfare while simultaneously supporting Nigeria's campaign for independence. Consequently, organised labour became both an economic institution and an important political actor within the colonial state (Ananaba, 1969; Yesufu, 1984).

One of the earliest and most enduring contributions of trade unions was the improvement of workers' welfare through collective representation. Before the emergence of organised labour, individual employees possessed limited bargaining power and were largely unable to challenge unfair employment practices imposed by colonial employers. The establishment of labour unions enabled workers to negotiate collectively for improved wages, better working conditions, reasonable working hours, annual leave, housing allowances, medical services, pension schemes, and other employment benefits. Through organised negotiation, workers gained greater influence over employment conditions than would have been possible through individual bargaining (Fashoyin, 2005).

Trade unions also played a critical role in protecting workers against arbitrary administrative decisions. Colonial employment was characterised by dismissals without adequate procedural safeguards, discriminatory disciplinary practices, and unequal treatment of African workers relative to their European counterparts. Labour organisations increasingly represented employees during disciplinary proceedings, challenged unfair dismissals, and advocated for transparent employment procedures. These interventions contributed to the gradual institutionalisation of fairness, procedural justice, and due process within colonial labour administration (Otobo, 2000).

An equally important contribution of early trade unions was the promotion of occupational health and workplace safety. Working conditions in colonial railways, mines, ports, construction projects, and public works were frequently hazardous, with limited safety equipment, inadequate medical facilities, and poor compensation for occupational injuries. Labour unions consistently demanded safer working environments, employer responsibility for workplace accidents, and improved welfare provisions for injured employees and their families. Their advocacy contributed to the gradual strengthening of labour inspection systems and improvements in occupational safety regulations (Ananaba, 1969).

Trade unions also facilitated the institutional development of collective bargaining within Nigeria's industrial relations system. Through structured negotiations with colonial employers and government officials, unions established the principle that employment conditions should be determined through dialogue rather than unilateral managerial decisions. This development marked a significant departure from earlier employment arrangements in which colonial authorities exercised almost unrestricted control over labour relations. Collective bargaining subsequently became one of the defining characteristics of Nigerian industrial relations and remains central to employment regulation today (Fajana, 2006).

Industrial action constituted another important strategy through which early trade unions advanced workers' welfare. The most notable example was the General Strike of 1945, led by Michael Imoudu. Triggered by widespread dissatisfaction over stagnant wages amid wartime inflation and rising living costs, the strike involved thousands of workers across the railway, marine, civil service, and other sectors. Although the strike temporarily disrupted colonial economic activities, it compelled the colonial government to reconsider wage policies and acknowledge the growing influence of organised labour. Historians widely regard the 1945 General Strike as a watershed in Nigeria's labour history because it demonstrated the effectiveness of collective action in securing economic concessions from colonial authorities (Yesufu, 1984).

Beyond workplace issues, early trade unions made significant contributions to workers' education and political awareness. Labour organisations organised meetings, seminars, newsletters, and educational programmes that informed workers about their employment rights, legal protections, collective bargaining processes, and broader socio-economic issues.

This educational function strengthened workers' political consciousness and encouraged active participation in public affairs. Increased awareness enabled workers to understand the relationship between colonial economic policies, labour exploitation, and political domination, thereby reinforcing demands for institutional reforms (Fashoyin, 2005). The contribution of trade unions to Nigeria's nationalist movement became increasingly evident during the 1940s and 1950s. Labour leaders recognised that many workplace grievances were rooted in the broader structures of colonial governance. Consequently, organised labour extended its activities beyond industrial relations to support constitutional reforms, representative government, and political self-determination. Trade unions increasingly collaborated with nationalist political leaders who viewed organised labour as an important ally in the struggle against colonial rule (Coleman, 1958).

Several prominent labour leaders emerged as influential figures within Nigeria's nationalist movement. Michael Imoudu, often described as the father of Nigerian trade unionism, combined labour activism with broader campaigns for social justice, political inclusion, and national independence. His leadership during the 1945 General Strike inspired widespread public support and strengthened the relationship between organised labour and nationalist organisations. Other labour activists similarly contributed to public debates concerning constitutional reforms, workers' rights, and democratic governance (Ananaba, 1969). Trade unions also provided organisational structures that facilitated political mobilisation. Their nationwide membership networks, regular meetings, communication systems, and leadership structures enabled them to disseminate political information, mobilise public opinion, and coordinate collective action across different regions of the country. These organisational capacities proved valuable during constitutional conferences, political campaigns, and mass protests advocating greater African participation in governance (Yesufu, 1984).

The alliance between organised labour and nationalist movements reflected shared objectives concerning social justice and political emancipation. Nationalist leaders sought independence from colonial rule, while labour organisations demanded improved employment conditions, equitable treatment, and recognition of workers' rights. These overlapping interests encouraged cooperation between labour unions and emerging political parties, thereby strengthening the broader anti-colonial movement. Labour activism therefore contributed significantly to the political environment that ultimately culminated in Nigeria's independence in 1960 (Coleman, 1958). Furthermore, trade unions promoted democratic values within Nigerian society. Internal union elections, leadership accountability, member participation, and collective decision-making exposed workers to democratic organisational practices long before independence. These experiences strengthened civic engagement and prepared many workers to participate more actively in Nigeria's post-colonial political institutions. In this respect, trade unions served not only as economic organisations but also as schools of democratic participation and leadership development (Hyman, 2001).

Despite these achievements, early trade unions encountered numerous challenges. Colonial authorities frequently viewed organised labour with suspicion, particularly where union activities intersected with nationalist politics. Labour leaders were occasionally subjected to surveillance, intimidation, arrests, and restrictions on public assemblies. Financial constraints, limited organisational capacity, ethnic divisions, and inadequate legal protection also affected the effectiveness of several early unions. Nevertheless, these obstacles did not prevent organised labour from expanding its influence within colonial Nigeria (Otobo, 2000). Contemporary scholars generally agree that the contributions of early trade unions extended beyond immediate improvements in wages and working conditions. Labour organisations helped institutionalise collective bargaining, strengthened workers' rights, promoted industrial democracy, encouraged political participation, and contributed substantially to the development of civil society in Nigeria. Their activities also established enduring principles of social dialogue, consultation, and employee representation that continue to underpin contemporary industrial relations (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024).

The historical contributions of early trade unions remain evident in Nigeria's modern labour institutions. Current labour centres, including the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC), continue to pursue many of the objectives championed by their colonial predecessors, including decent work, equitable remuneration, social justice, occupational safety, democratic governance, and protection of workers' rights. Although the labour market has evolved considerably since independence, the foundational contributions of early trade unions continue to shape industrial relations practice and labour policy in Nigeria (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023).

Institutional Legacy of Colonial Labour Policies on Contemporary Industrial Relations in Nigeria

The institutional legacy of colonial labour policies continues to shape the structure, administration, and practice of industrial relations in contemporary Nigeria. Although Nigeria attained political independence in 1960, many of the labour institutions, legal frameworks, administrative procedures, and employment practices introduced during British colonial rule remain embedded within the country's labour governance architecture. These institutional continuities demonstrate how colonial administrative systems established enduring structures that have been modified rather than completely replaced in the post-colonial era (Yesufu, 1984; Fashoyin, 2005).

Institutional Theory posits that organisations and governance systems evolve through historical processes in which existing structures influence future institutional development (Scott, 2014). Applying this perspective to Nigerian industrial relations reveals that many contemporary labour institutions originated from administrative arrangements established during the colonial period. Labour ministries, labour inspectorates, collective bargaining procedures, dispute resolution mechanisms, and employment regulations have evolved from colonial administrative systems while adapting to changing political, economic, and legal realities (Peters, 2019). One of the most enduring colonial legacies is the legal framework

governing employment relations. Colonial labour ordinances introduced formal regulation of employment contracts, working conditions, labour inspection, trade union registration, and dispute settlement. Although these ordinances have since been replaced or substantially amended, they provided the legal foundation for subsequent legislation, including the Labour Act, the Trade Unions Act, the Trade Disputes Act, the Factories Act, and the National Industrial Court Act. Contemporary labour legislation continues to reflect principles first institutionalised during the colonial era, particularly regarding labour administration, collective bargaining, and statutory dispute resolution (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2007).

Similarly, the institutional framework for labour administration has maintained significant continuity. The colonial Labour Department evolved into the present-day Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment, which remains responsible for labour policy formulation, employment regulation, labour inspection, industrial harmony, and dispute settlement. The Ministry continues to coordinate labour relations through mediation, conciliation, collective bargaining facilitation, and labour inspection, functions originally performed by colonial labour administrators. Although these responsibilities have expanded considerably in response to democratic governance and international labour standards, their institutional origins remain firmly rooted in colonial administrative structures (Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2024).

The system of labour inspection also reflects colonial institutional continuity. During the colonial period, labour inspectors monitored compliance with employment regulations, workplace safety standards, and labour legislation. Today, labour inspectorates continue to perform similar functions by enforcing labour laws, ensuring occupational safety and health, monitoring compliance with employment standards, and promoting decent work in accordance with International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions. Contemporary reforms have strengthened inspection capacity, yet many operational procedures remain derived from institutional models established during the colonial administration (ILO, 2024).

Collective bargaining constitutes another important institutional legacy. Before colonial rule, employment relations within indigenous societies were largely governed by customary norms rather than formal negotiation between employers and employees. Colonial labour legislation gradually introduced structured collective bargaining processes by recognising trade unions and providing legal procedures for negotiations between organised labour and employers. Following independence, collective bargaining became firmly institutionalised as the preferred mechanism for determining wages, conditions of service, and employment benefits across both the public and private sectors. This tradition remains central to contemporary industrial relations in Nigeria, particularly within the civil service, education, healthcare, banking, and manufacturing sectors (Fajana, 2006).

Closely related to collective bargaining is the institutional development of labour dispute resolution mechanisms. Colonial authorities gradually introduced administrative procedures for conciliation and mediation to minimise industrial unrest and ensure uninterrupted production. These procedures have evolved into Nigeria's current dispute settlement system, which incorporates negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration through the Industrial Arbitration Panel (IAP), and adjudication by the National Industrial Court of Nigeria (NICN). While contemporary procedures have become more sophisticated and constitutionally grounded, their sequential structure reflects the administrative philosophy of colonial labour governance (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2007).

Trade union administration also demonstrates significant institutional continuity. The legal recognition of trade unions under the Trade Union Ordinance of 1938 established formal procedures for registration, organisational governance, financial accountability, and legal recognition. These principles continue to underpin contemporary trade union regulation under the Trade Unions Act and related legislation. Although post-independence reforms have expanded workers' rights and strengthened freedom of association, trade unions remain subject to statutory registration requirements, financial reporting obligations, and regulatory oversight inherited from colonial administrative traditions (Fashoyin, 2005). The centralised character of Nigeria's labour administration also reflects colonial institutional influences. British colonial governance emphasised hierarchical decision-making, bureaucratic control, and central government supervision of labour relations. Similar characteristics remain evident within contemporary public sector employment, where labour policies, wage negotiations, and employment regulations are often coordinated at the federal level. National wage commissions, centralised salary structures, and nationwide collective bargaining arrangements illustrate the continued influence of administrative centralisation inherited from the colonial state (Aremu, 2021).

Another significant colonial legacy is the enduring role of the state as a principal actor in industrial relations. During colonial administration, government simultaneously functioned as regulator, employer, and dispute settlement authority. This multiple role has continued in post-colonial Nigeria, where government remains the country's largest employer while also regulating employment standards and mediating industrial disputes. Although this arrangement facilitates policy coordination, scholars argue that it occasionally creates conflicts of interest, particularly when government is directly involved in disputes with public sector unions (Otobo, 2000). Despite these institutional continuities, significant reforms have transformed Nigerian industrial relations since independence. The 1999 Constitution guarantees freedom of association and the right of workers to organise and participate in trade unions. Labour legislation has progressively incorporated international labour standards relating to collective bargaining, occupational safety, gender equality, child labour, forced labour, and non-discrimination. The establishment of the National Industrial Court as a superior court of record has further strengthened judicial protection of employment rights and improved the legal enforcement of labour standards (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2007).

Recent public sector reforms have also modernised labour administration through digital governance initiatives. Systems such as the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), the Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS), and electronic human resource management platforms have enhanced payroll transparency, personnel management, accountability, and administrative efficiency. These reforms represent significant departures from colonial administrative practices by integrating technology into labour governance while strengthening institutional accountability (Bureau of Public Service Reforms, 2023).

Globalisation has further reshaped industrial relations beyond the colonial institutional framework. Contemporary labour markets are characterised by digital employment, remote work, platform-based employment, outsourcing, contract staffing, labour migration, and multinational enterprises. These developments have created new employment relationships that differ substantially from the traditional wage employment models established during colonial rule. Consequently, labour institutions increasingly face pressure to modernise existing legal frameworks to regulate emerging forms of work while protecting workers' rights in an evolving global economy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024).

Nevertheless, several challenges inherited from the colonial era continue to affect industrial relations in Nigeria. Bureaucratic procedures, delays in dispute resolution, weak enforcement of collective agreements, limited labour inspection capacity, inadequate institutional funding, political interference, and adversarial labour-management relations remain persistent concerns. Some scholars argue that these challenges partly reflect institutional cultures established during colonial administration, where labour governance prioritised administrative control over participatory social dialogue (Igbokwe-Ibeto et al., 2020). Contemporary scholars increasingly advocate institutional reforms that preserve the positive aspects of colonial administrative structures while addressing their historical limitations. Such reforms include strengthening collective bargaining institutions, enhancing labour inspection systems, promoting alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, expanding social dialogue, improving institutional independence, and aligning labour governance more closely with international labour standards and decent work principles. These reforms are considered essential for responding effectively to twenty-first-century labour market challenges while overcoming structural weaknesses inherited from colonial administration (World Bank, 2025; ILO, 2024).

The institutional legacy of colonial labour policies remains evident throughout Nigeria's industrial relations system. Contemporary labour legislation, administrative institutions, dispute settlement mechanisms, trade union regulation, and collective bargaining structures all bear the imprint of colonial governance. However, these institutions have undergone substantial transformation through constitutional reforms, democratic governance, international labour standards, and public sector modernisation initiatives. Understanding these historical continuities is essential for appreciating both the strengths and limitations of

Nigeria's present industrial relations system and for designing future reforms capable of promoting equitable, efficient, and sustainable labour governance.

Theoretical Framework

Marxist Theory of Industrial Relations

The Marxist Theory, advanced principally by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, views industrial relations as a reflection of the inherent conflict between capital and labour within capitalist production systems (Marx, 1867/1976). According to the theory, employers seek to maximise profits by controlling labour and minimising labour costs, whereas workers seek improved wages, better working conditions, and greater economic security. This structural conflict makes industrial disputes inevitable.

Within colonial Nigeria, the British administration functioned as the dominant economic and political authority controlling labour recruitment, wages, and employment conditions. Colonial labour policies largely served imperial economic interests by ensuring a stable and inexpensive labour force for agriculture, mining, railways, and public administration. Wage discrimination, racial inequalities, and exploitative working conditions reflected the unequal power relations emphasised by Marxist theory. The emergence of trade unions represented workers' collective response to these exploitative employment relations. Through collective organisation, workers sought to challenge unequal labour practices, negotiate improved conditions, and resist economic domination. Consequently, Marxist Theory provides a valuable explanation for understanding why organised labour emerged as a response to colonial labour policies and capitalist exploitation.

Labour Process Theory

Labour Process Theory was developed by Braverman (1974) to explain managerial control over work within capitalist organisations. The theory argues that employers continually seek to increase productivity by exercising greater control over labour processes through work standardisation, supervision, technological innovations, and administrative regulations. Workers, however, often resist excessive managerial control where it threatens their welfare, autonomy, or job security. Colonial labour administration in Nigeria closely reflected these principles. British employers introduced rigid supervisory systems, strict work schedules, disciplinary procedures, and administrative controls intended to maximise productivity while maintaining labour discipline. Such management practices often generated dissatisfaction among workers, particularly where accompanied by poor remuneration and discriminatory treatment. Labour Process Theory therefore explains how managerial control under colonial administration encouraged workers to organise collectively as a means of protecting their interests, negotiating improved working conditions, and limiting arbitrary employer authority.

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory emphasises that organisational behaviour and social relationships are shaped by formal rules, legal frameworks, administrative structures, and established

institutional practices (Scott, 2014). Institutions provide stability, legitimacy, and predictability by establishing accepted norms governing social interactions. Within the context of colonial Nigeria, labour legislation, labour departments, trade union registration procedures, and dispute resolution mechanisms constituted important institutional arrangements that shaped industrial relations. Although these institutions were originally established to support colonial administration, they inadvertently provided the legal and organisational framework for the emergence and growth of trade unions. The Trade Union Ordinance of 1938, labour inspection systems, collective bargaining procedures, and labour dispute resolution mechanisms gradually institutionalised industrial relations within Nigeria. Many of these institutions have continued to influence labour administration after independence, demonstrating the enduring legacy of colonial governance structures. Institutional Theory therefore provides an appropriate framework for understanding how colonial administrative institutions continue to shape contemporary labour relations in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The review demonstrates that colonial labour policies played a dual and paradoxical role in the evolution of industrial relations in Nigeria. On one hand, British colonial labour administration was established primarily to facilitate imperial economic interests by ensuring a stable, disciplined, and inexpensive labour force for commercial agriculture, mining, railway transportation, ports, and the colonial civil service. Labour legislation, administrative regulations, and institutional structures were therefore designed to maximise productivity, preserve industrial order, and maintain political control rather than promote workers' welfare or industrial democracy (Cooper, 1996; Fashoyin, 2005). On the other hand, these same policies unintentionally stimulated the emergence and institutionalisation of organised labour. The expansion of wage employment, urbanisation, racial discrimination in employment, poor working conditions, wage inequalities, and restrictive labour practices created shared grievances among African workers, fostering class consciousness and encouraging collective action. Consequently, trade unionism emerged as a rational response to structural inequalities embedded within the colonial labour system (Ananaba, 1969; Hyman, 2001).

The review further reveals that the legal framework introduced during colonial rule, particularly the Trade Union Ordinance of 1938, simultaneously recognised and regulated trade unions. Although colonial authorities intended to control organised labour through legal and administrative supervision, the legislation provided workers with legal recognition and facilitated the institutional development of collective bargaining. This confirms the institutional perspective that legal frameworks often produce outcomes extending beyond their original policy objectives (Scott, 2014). Another significant finding is that early trade unions contributed substantially not only to workers' welfare but also to Nigeria's nationalist movement. Through collective bargaining, industrial action, political mobilisation, and collaboration with nationalist leaders, organised labour became an influential participant in the struggle for constitutional reforms and political independence. Labour unions therefore

evolved beyond workplace institutions into broader social movements advocating justice, equality, and democratic governance (Yesufu, 1984).

Finally, the review establishes that contemporary industrial relations in Nigeria continue to reflect the institutional legacy of colonial labour administration. Labour ministries, labour inspectorates, collective bargaining systems, dispute resolution mechanisms, and trade union regulation all demonstrate significant continuity with colonial administrative structures. Nevertheless, constitutional reforms, international labour standards, democratic governance, and public sector modernisation have progressively transformed these institutions to better respond to contemporary labour market realities.

Conclusion

The emergence of trade unionism in Nigeria represents one of the most significant institutional consequences of British colonial labour administration. Although colonial labour policies were fundamentally designed to advance imperial economic interests through labour regulation and administrative control, they inadvertently created the socio-economic and institutional conditions that encouraged workers to organise collectively. The expansion of wage employment, discriminatory employment practices, poor working conditions, and restrictive labour regulations generated widespread worker dissatisfaction, ultimately giving rise to organised labour movements capable of challenging colonial authority through collective bargaining and industrial action.

The historical evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates that the relationship between colonial labour policy and trade union development was inherently paradoxical. While colonial authorities sought to regulate and restrict organised labour, they simultaneously established legal and administrative institutions that facilitated the growth of trade unionism. The legal recognition of trade unions under the Trade Union Ordinance of 1938, the development of labour administration, and the gradual institutionalisation of collective bargaining laid the foundation for Nigeria's contemporary industrial relations system.

The study further reveals that early trade unions contributed significantly to improving workers' welfare through collective bargaining, advocacy for fair wages, occupational safety, social protection, and procedural justice. Beyond industrial relations, organised labour became an important participant in Nigeria's nationalist movement, supporting constitutional reforms, political mobilisation, and the struggle for independence. These contributions underscore the historical significance of trade unions as both economic and socio-political institutions. Although Nigeria's industrial relations system has undergone substantial reforms since independence, many contemporary labour institutions retain structural features inherited from the colonial period. Labour legislation, dispute settlement procedures, labour inspection systems, and collective bargaining mechanisms continue to reflect institutional arrangements introduced during British colonial administration. However, rapid technological change, globalisation, digital employment, informal labour markets, and evolving international labour standards require continuous reforms to ensure

that these institutions remain responsive to contemporary employment challenges. This study concludes that understanding the historical origins of Nigeria's labour institutions is essential for strengthening labour governance, promoting industrial harmony, protecting workers' rights, and improving employment relations within an increasingly dynamic labour market.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Modernise Labour Legislation:** The Federal Government should undertake periodic reviews of labour laws to ensure that they adequately address emerging labour market issues such as digital employment, platform work, artificial intelligence, remote work, contract staffing, and other non-standard forms of employment.
2. **Strengthen Labour Administration:** The Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment should strengthen labour inspectorates through increased funding, digital monitoring systems, continuous staff training, and improved institutional capacity to enforce labour standards effectively.
3. **Promote Effective Social Dialogue:** Government, employers, and organised labour should institutionalise regular tripartite consultations to encourage consensus-building, minimise industrial disputes, and improve policy implementation through inclusive decision-making.
4. **Enhance Collective Bargaining:** Employers in both the public and private sectors should respect collective bargaining agreements and implement negotiated settlements promptly to strengthen industrial harmony and improve workers' confidence in institutional dispute resolution.
5. **Strengthen Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR):** Mediation, conciliation, arbitration, and workplace negotiation mechanisms should be further strengthened to provide timely, cost-effective, and mutually acceptable solutions to labour disputes before they escalate into industrial actions.
6. **Improve Workers' Welfare:** Governments and employers should prioritise fair remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security, continuous professional development, and decent working conditions consistent with International Labour Organization conventions.
7. **Promote Labour Education:** Trade unions, universities, and labour institutions should expand labour education programmes to improve workers' understanding of labour laws, collective bargaining, occupational rights, and peaceful dispute resolution.
8. **Strengthen Institutional Independence:** Labour institutions, including labour inspectorates, dispute resolution bodies, and the National Industrial Court, should operate with greater administrative autonomy and adequate financial support to enhance efficiency, credibility, and public confidence.
9. **Preserve Historical Labour Archives:** Government and academic institutions should preserve colonial labour records, trade union archives, and historical industrial relations documents to support future scholarship and evidence-based labour policy development.

10. **Align Labour Governance with International Standards:** Nigeria should continue harmonising domestic labour legislation with International Labour Organization conventions and other international best practices to promote decent work, inclusive employment, and sustainable industrial relations.

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