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Socio-Economic Relevance of Strike Actions in Ancient Rome and Contemporary Nigeria

'GOKE A. AKINBOYE' AND GILL O. ADEKANNBI''

Abstract

Since the ancient Roman plebeians blazed the trail by embarking on the first general strike in human history to protest the monopolistic rule of patricians in 494B.C., numerous peoples globally have engaged in strike actions to express certain grievances and resist untoward policies of their governments or employers. This is so because it is generally assumed, especially by the masses, that 'the only language of resistance that governments understand is strike'. It is also known that when strikes are embarked upon, there is stoppage of work and services, which result in the paralysis of socio-economic and political activities and sometimes death of individuals. Beyond these various consequences and disorders, this paper examines the dominant causes of strike actions and argues that they (strike actions) are, oftentimes, relevant means of effecting positive socio-economic changes in a polity. Adopting a comparative method of research with an analysis of both ancient and modern authors to substantiate its argument, this paper provides evidence from two republics, far separated by time and space: the ancient Rome (494-287B.C) and contemporary Nigeria (A.D.1945-2016). It concludes that strike actions are not altogether destructive; rather, they serve as the last resort of masses in attaining equity, fairness, and constructive socio-economic change.

1. Introduction

A strike has been simply defined as 'a partial or complete withdrawal of labour by workers'. It is 'a situation where a labour force refuses to work in order to protest against an employer, working conditions, pay, etc. in the hope that, by doing this, their demands will be met'². And in the history of strike actions, many momentous events have indeed occurred. The first reported labour strike was said to have occurred in the mid-12th century B.C. at Deir el-Medina necropolis in ancient Egypt during the reign of Ramses III of the 20th dynasty³. Slaves and craftsmen

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³Rutherford L. & Bone S. (eds.)1993. *Osborn's Concise Law Dictionary*. Eighth ed. London: Sweet & Maxwell Ltd, p.314

⁴Robinson M. & Davidson G. (eds.)1997. *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*. Reprinted 2007. Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd, p.1396

working on the construction of the necropolis complained about insufficient and late pay and threw down their tools until the Pharaonic government increased their wages. The first valid general strike, however, was the famous *secessio plebis* (secession of the plebeians) which happened in ancient Rome in 494B.C. It was 'the general strike of the plebeians; the plebeians seemed to have invented the strike which now makes its first appearance in history'⁵. A general strike itself is a strike action by a large mass of the labour force in a city, region, or country, aimed at attaining some political, economic or social rights or goals⁶. In Roman times precisely during the Republican era (509-27B.C), *secessio plebis* manifested itself as an informal exercise of power by plebeian citizens, similar to a contemporary general strike. There were five of such general strikes between 494 BC and 287 BC⁷. During a *secessio plebis*, the plebs would simply abandon the city *en masse* and leave the ruling patrician order to themselves. Therefore, a '*secessio*' would mean the closure of all shops and workshops, temporal stoppage of all commercial transactions and withdrawal of all essential services, especially the military. It was indeed, an effective strategy in the *Conflict of the Orders* due to the numerical strength of the plebeian participants, who made up the vast majority of Rome's populace and produced most of its food and resources.

With the onset of Industrial Revolution of 18th and 19th centuries, strike became a regular feature of political landscapes and a means by which workers and the masses expressed their grievances. In Nigeria, the first instance of a strike was on 9th January 1920 when the Mechanic Union of the Nigerian Railway protested about insufficient wages, long hours of work, stoppage of war bonus, and non-payment of wages for public holidays. With the success of the 1920 strike, the Colonial Governors and Governor-Generals of Nigeria introduced trade union law in the country. Thus, it can be deduced that after the formal establishments of trade unions in Nigeria, strikes became popular and were often discouraged by the colonial masters'. And so, what was once thought to be a 'British disease'⁹ seems to

⁵Romer J. 1984. *Ancient Lives: The Story of the Pharaohs' Tomb-makers*. London: Phoenix Press, p.116-123.

⁶Wells H.G. 1920. *Outlines of History*. U.K: Waverly Book Company, p.225.

⁷Arnold Roller. 1905. *The Social Strike*. Germany: A Corvus Edition, pp.28-30

⁸Cary M. & Scullard H.H, 1980. *A History of Rome*, Reprinted ed. ISBN 0333278305v (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aventine_Secessio_%28#494BC%29) between 494B.C and 287B.C, the general strikes are traditionally dated. They were 494B.C, 449B.C, 445B.C, 342B.C, and 287B.C respectively.

⁹Akinwale, A. Akeem, 2011. Labour Reform and Industrial Conflict Management, *The Sixth IIRA African Region Congress of Industrial Relations: Emerging Trends in Employment Relations in Africa: National and International Perspectives*, January, 2011, Department of Sociology, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. p.9

¹⁰The widespread perception was that Britain, compared with other countries, had a particularly high level of strikes such that industrial actions came to be known as "British disease". See Honeyball S. & Bowers J. 2004. *Labour Law* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.389. See "Striking has become a disease and a very grave disease in the bosom of society" in Itainson L.H and Tilly C. (eds.), 1989. *Strikes, Wars and Revolutions in an International Perspective* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.71.

have become a disease in Nigeria. In fact, strikes have become so endemic in Nigeria today that even the courts are often prepared to take judicial notice of them¹⁰. From outset, the Nigerian workers had been at the forefront of general strikes in the country. Before the formation of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) in 1978, four labour centres existed namely: Nigeria Trade Union Congress (NTC), Labour Unity Front (LUF), United Labour Congress (ULC) and Nigeria Workers Council (NWC). The emergence of the NLC ended decades of rivalry and rancour involving the four centres and unions affiliated to them. The mission of the NLC¹¹ was, among others, 'to continually promote, defend and advance the economic, political and social well-being of Nigerian workers; to promote and defend their rights, well-being and interests; to enhance their quality of life and improve their income and other working conditions of workers'. In its almost 40 years of existence, the gravest strikes embarked on by the NLC, and which appear similar to that of the Roman plebeians during the *Conflict of the Orders*, have been the general strikes of 30th June- 8th July, 2003 and 9th- 16th January, 2012, both of which bordered on the issues of fuel price and/or removal of subsidy.

2. Ancient Republican Rome: Background to General Strikes

In Livy, Polybius, Cicero, Plutarch and other ancient sources, the internal politics of the early Roman Republic were dominated by constant disputes between two groups or social classes: the patricians and the plebeians. This is what modern scholars have termed the 'Struggle or Conflict of the Orders'¹². Conflict, what the Greeks called *stasis*, was also popular in the Greek city-states, as it was in early Rome, and it is important to be clear about what was at the heart of such conflict¹³. At the heart of the *Conflict of the Orders* were grave political and socio-economic grievances. The Roman economy, like other ancient economies, was based on agriculture. This is not to deny the fact that there were people who devoted most of their working hours to other commercial activities. In the traditional narrative, after the expulsion of kings in 509 B.C, Rome initiated the republican government. Towards the close of 494 B.C., however, some pressing socio-economic demands were gradually put forward by the plebeians to the superior class, the patricians, for redress in order to improve or change the standard of living of the working class. The plebeian's demands were not immediately met; therefore, they began a long period of struggle of almost two centuries for an equal and better society. The potent

¹⁰See Ehi Oshio, 2010. Bank Strikes and the Law in Nigeria, Department of Public Law, University of Benin, accessed on 3 Sept., 2012, p.171.

¹¹www.nlcng.org/history.php.

¹²Harriet I. Flower, 2004. *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic*. Cambridge: Princeton University and Cambridge University Press, p.16.

¹³*ibid.* p.17

weapon which the plebeians decided to use was strike which was complemented with some other revolutionary methods. The plebeian assembly met, from time to time, in an enclosed space called the *comitium* (assembly), and there they prosecuted their various plans.

Before the struggle began, patricians had formed a closed order. Etymologically, the Latin word for 'patrician' - *patricius* (plural - *patricii*) - originated from *patres* (fathers). Patricians were the well-to-do members of the Roman state and senate. They were a sort of hereditary aristocracy, descended within the state of Rome. Thus, membership of the Senate and eligibility to important elective political offices and priestly ranks required the status of a patrician. To be a patrician, therefore, was to view the senate and, indeed, the consulship (broadly similar to the office of president) as one's birth-right. Consequently, all important political and military positions were held by patricians¹⁴. This governing patrician oligarchy ruled the Roman Republic. They conjoined in common enterprise with its ascendancy fixed by self-perpetuation. The drive for power and prestige produced frequent internal struggles. An unspoken principle cemented the ruling class: leadership and responsibilities must devolve upon the elites distinguished by generations of public service. The Roman senate, so it was firmly believed, was the repository of national wisdom and experience. And within the senate lay a smaller group, an inner circle of *nobiles* (nobles), who supplied ultimate leadership: the ex-consuls and members of their families. From that core radiated the unofficial lines of power with the consulship as the summit of ambition¹⁵.

The consulship was open to only two men in any one year. As principal executive officers of the state, they held the reins of government and symbolized its authority. They were the kingpins of a corporate body. Although during the 'struggle of the orders', access to the consulship was in principle open to both the patricians and plebeians, in practice, it was a closed affair. Men without forebears in the office stood little chance of election. But the impact of this chief magistracy went well beyond the twelve months' tenure. Ex-consuls comprised the leadership of the senate. They voiced their opinions first in debates, and their *auctoritas* (authority, influence, prestige) guided the state's policy. In tenure, magistracies were brief, but senatorial membership was lifetime. And democratic theory and practice had no place in the Roman system. Voting for the top magistracies, the consuls and praetors occurred in assemblies structured to the advantage of propertied Romans¹⁶.

¹⁴Ojo A. C. 2007. *Social Class and Conflict: Roman, French, and German Perspectives*, unpublished B.A project, Department of Classics, Faculty of Arts, University of Ibadan, p.16.

¹⁵Erich S. Gruen, 1974. *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, p.121.

¹⁶*ibid.* p.122.

Timocratic criteria determined the weight of men's votes. The organization of the electoral system guaranteed a heavy influence for landed-proprietary and affluent citizens, most of whom had their residences in the *municipia* (municipal towns) or the countryside. Ballots of the urban plebeians carried little weight in the popular assembly, *comitia centuriata*¹⁷. The system produced an exclusivist corporation and tradition; self-interest and experience perpetuated the structure. In fact, the patricians passed the consulship from hand to hand within their tight little clique. They paraded portrait busts of ancestors (ancient equivalent of modern photographs only affordable by the rich) as a substitute for personal merit, just as electoral results consistently returned a small member of prestigious families to the highest offices of the land¹⁸. Concerned with the preservation of its privileges, perpetuation of abuses and corruption, the ruling class ignored any hypothetical responsibilities to the community and neglected internal socio-economic and political reforms thereby bringing on revolution¹⁹.

On the other hand, the plebeians, also known as plebs, were the general populace of the early and middle Roman Republic. Although they constituted the majority of the city's free population, the plebeians had fewer civic rights compared with the patricians. They were permitted to serve in the military but forbidden by law to take charge in religious activities or serve as members of magistracies.

The ancient Roman legal framework proscribed trade and even intermarriage between plebeians and patricians²⁰. The patricians used the institution of marriage as a means of creating a closed order. The illegitimacy of marriages between patricians and plebeians was a mark of inferiority strongly resented by the plebs. There was also the unfair act of the distribution of the public lands -*ager publicus*- which had been acquired in the period of wars. Over the centuries and across many nations, this question of land distribution has remained a highly emotive and recurrent matter, sometimes resulting in conflicts among different classes of people in communities and states of the world. Like Robert Mugabe's land reforms in Zimbabwe, land distribution was a popular issue even in Britain during the early 1910s. In fact, one of the famous songs of the period, reflecting the theme of land distribution, was entitled *The Land*. As a protest song traditionally by the Georgist movement in pursuit and promotion of land value taxation, *The Land* became the anthem of the Liberal Party and chorused thus:

¹⁷On the *comitia centuriata*, the assembly of the Roman people which elected chief magistrates and decided capital issues, see Akinboye 'Goke, 2015. *A Short Story of The Roman Republic: From Emergence to the Crossing of the Rubicon*. Ibadan: Crown F. Publishers, pp. 9-10.

¹⁸Gruen E.S op.cit. p.122.

¹⁹ibid. p.123.

²⁰'Plebeians' in *World History, Ancient and Medieval Eras*, [http:// ancienthistory.abc-clio.com](http://ancienthistory.abc-clio.com). Web 27 Sept., 2011.

The Land, the Land,
 'Twas God who made the land,
 The Land, the Land,
 The ground on which we stand,
 Why should we be beggars
 With ballot in our hand?
 God gave the land to the people.

As shown above, the *ager publicus* (public land) properly belonged to all the Roman people, and were to be used to relieve the distress of the poor, as was done later in the late Republic. But the government was in the hands of the oligarchs who converted the conquered lands into personal use. The senate allowed the lands to be "occupied" at a nominal rent, by members of their own order. As long as the lands remained public, they could not be sold by the occupants, but the longer the patricians retained their occupation, the more they considered the lands as their own property. And so, common people were deprived of their just share of the land which they had helped to conquer²¹. The plebeians were also at a great disadvantage with respect to the laws which were largely unwritten and interpreted solely by the ruling class. It was convenient for the patricians to act as they deemed fit and to manipulate the laws for their own selfish interests²².

Other causes of plebeian disadvantages were the cruelties of the patrician creditors to plebeian debtors. At the beginning of the Republic, Rome engaged in several wars with her neighbours. Many plebeians, who were called to arms during these hostile periods, returned to find their little farms in ruins or taken over by large ranches. They were obliged to borrow money from the rich patricians to survive. A debtor in the early days of Rome was especially wretched. If he could not pay his debt, he could be arrested, thrown into a dungeon, and made the slave of his creditor. Although a citizen, he was more or less a serf, who could be lynched or sold into slavery. His lot was chains, stripes, and slavery. The law of debt was not only harsh in itself, but its effect was to keep the poor in a continual state of poverty, from which he could not easily escape²³. This, in a way, may be compared with the modern practice of money-lending at high interest rates, the consequence of which often put debtors in perpetual indebtedness. The same treatment could be meted out on plebeians by the consuls who had the power of life and death over the citizens. And these were grievances that culminated in the first *secessio* (secession) of 494 B.C.²⁴.

²¹Robert F. Pennell, 1890. *History of Rome from the Earliest Times Down to 476 A.D.* USA:Riverside, California. p. 10

²²ibid. p.11

²³Cornell T.J, 1995. *The Beginnings of Rome Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars (c.1000-264B.C)*. New York, London: Routledge. p.267.

²⁴Akinboye Goke, 2015. op.cit, pp.11-15

The Roman army, particularly the large plebeian arm, after a campaign against the Volscians, withdrew their services by relocating to a sacred hill, two miles away from Rome, near the junction of the River Anio and the Tiber. Their conclusion was simply to leave Rome and its cruel patricians to their fates, and then form another government of their own. The plebeian decision alarmed the patricians, who then sent several of their men to persuade the aggrieved plebs to return into the city. Of course the plebeians returned, but not without some concessions from the ruling oligarchs. The office of tribunes of the plebeians was the first to be created to serve plebeian magistrates²⁵. And in the course of time, the plebeians gradually improved their situation, using the threat of *secessio* to secure more rights.

3. Labour Strikes in Nigeria: The Dominant Causal Factors

*The only man who desires a strike for fun is the man who wants to go to hell for a pastime*²⁶ - W. Payne.

Kahn-Freund once wrote that: '*But people do not go on strike without a grievance, real or imaginary... Sometimes they have ample justification... The important thing to do is to find out why strikes occur*'²⁷. It is pertinent therefore, in this section, to proceed with the questions: Why do workers in contemporary times go on strikes? Are the modern grievances in any way similar to those of ancient times, as in the case of ancient Rome above? What are the peculiarities of the Nigerian situations? In contemporary times, the general causes of strikes are for economic reasons, being a call for improvement of working conditions, expression of dissatisfaction with government or employers' policies, inevitably stemming from wages or salaries problems, wrongful discharge or dismissal of workmen, bonus or profit sharing grievances, retrenchment of workers, hours of work, and withdrawal of concession, *et al.* Issues such as monopoly of power, restrictions on intermarriage, enslavement for debt, etc. are no longer at the forefront of causes of modern strikes, having died with the passage of time.

In Nigeria, the dominant roots of strikes relate to government policies perceived as obnoxious, poor funding of establishments and agencies, wages and salaries stagnation, and in recent times, fuel pump increase and withdrawal of fuel subsidies. Within the confines of labour, the main reason for strike action is the failure of negotiations, otherwise called collective bargaining. When workers and employers engage in negotiations, sometimes the outcomes are unsuccessful. Even

²⁵Lewis N. & Reinhold M. 1951. *Roman Civilization*, (Vol.1, The Republic). New York, London: Columbia University Press, p.91.

²⁶Payne W. as quoted in Knowles K.G.J.C, 1952. *Strikes: A Study in Industrial Conflict*, New York: Philosophical Library, p. 30

²⁷Kahn-Freund Otto. 1972. *Labour and the Law*, London: Stevens and Sons, p. 227

where bargaining²⁷ is successful there is similarly no guarantee that the resulting agreement will be honoured. Consequently, unsuccessful bargaining or failure to implement agreed terms naturally leads to strike actions and the dislocation of industrial peace. The peculiarity of the Nigerian situation is that the frequency of strike actions in various sectors of the country is quite alarming.

Adebisi has stated that in a modern society, industrial activities take place within a setting where there are differences in terms of values, beliefs, interests, educational attainment and social relations²⁸. In this vein, he moves further by identifying 'perception of responsibility' as an important characteristic of labour conflict. The conception of the employee by the employers as mere production tool to be hired, disciplined or fired tends to alienate further the workers, thereby creating more tension as a prelude to industrial conflict²⁹. Failure by government to implement negotiated agreements is a particularly striking point among the root causes of Nigerian strikes. At various times, governments would enter into an agreement with labour unions with assurances to accede to their demands; but at the close of the case or bargaining, government would renege on agreements. This is often the result in respect of several past strikes of NLC and many other labour/trade unions in Nigeria.

On the whole, Akpala identifies economic, moral and political factors as the dominant causes of labour strikes. On economic causes, he relates it to the improper adjustment of wages to cost of living, the system of reward of labour in cash, kind or both and the working hours. On the moral and political sides, what is clear is the failure of government and employers to provide adequate measures for the welfare of workers. The political aspect relates to matters about union solidarity, trade-union jurisdiction, demarcation of functions, recruitment of labour, representation of workers in establishing working conditions, and the recognition of workers organizations and their leaders by the employer³⁰.

4. Socio-Economic Relevance of Labour Strikes: The Roman and Nigerian Experiences

As has been seen above, the first secession of the Roman plebeians in 494 B.C, when the plebeians threatened to leave Rome to set up their own independent state, brought about some profound socio-economic changes. The plebeian idea of creating a state within a state to acquire protection and independence against the

²⁷Adebisi, M.A. 2004. Industrial Conflict and Trade Unions in Nigeria, *Advances in Management, Journal of the Department of Business Administration*, Vol. 4, no 1, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria, p.6

²⁸ibid. p.7

³⁰Akpala A, 1993. *A Critical History of Nigerian Industrial Relations*, Enugu: Precision Publishers, p.64.

unjust and arbitrary acts of the senate and consuls seemed unthinkable³¹. The protest, as noted above, particularly frowned at the patrician harsh law of debt (*nexum*), which included floggings and enslavements³². In the long run, the patricians were compelled to shift ground by making solemn promises to the effect that debts of all persons, who were insolvent, were cancelled and those who had been imprisoned for debts were set free³³. Thus, the year 494 saw a restoration of consular government, the evolution of the plebeian tribunate and the guarantee of civil rights, which had been hitherto suspended³⁴.

To be specific, the plebeian-patrician struggle periodically yielded certain socio-economic and, indeed, political benefits. First, the plebeian mass secured the right to form its own assembly (*concilium plebis*). The *concilium plebis* could then pass its resolutions (*plebiscita*), which were binding upon the plebeians. They were also given the right to elect their own officials (tribunes) to represent their interest within the state and at the popular assembly. These officials (*tribunes*), at the onset, were two but soon increased to ten³⁵. Not many years later, the plebeian assembly also secured the right to be elected to the position of *aediles* by the decree of *Lex Publilia*, 472 B.C³⁶. By the agrarian law of Spurius Cassius, they effected another socio-economic change which was the redistribution of the public land- *ager publicus*, earlier monopolized by the patricians.

The second wave of general plebeian secession which occurred in 449 B.C can be regarded as the 'second chapter of Roman liberty'. The secession witnessed the overthrow of the *decemvirate* and the installation of mass-friendly consulship through the newly elected consuls, Valerius and Horatius. Before then, two of the rights of the people had been hitherto trampled upon but they now had to be revisited. These rights were: the right that every Roman citizen could appeal to the *comitiacenturiata* (popular assembly) against the sentence of any magistrate, and the right that all the decisions (*plebiscita*) of the *concilium plebis* (plebeian assembly), if sanctioned by the senate and *comitia centuriata*, were binding upon plebeians³⁷. But now, the *plebiscita* were to be binding upon the whole people (patricians inclusive) but *with the approval* of the Senate. This was a step forward in bridging the gap between the two orders³⁸. Before the year 445 B.C, when the third general strike broke out, the plebeians had been deprived of the right of

³¹ Frank C. Bourne, 1966, *A History of the Romans*, D.C Heath and Company, p.55.

³² Harriet I. Flower, op.cit, p.17.

³³ William C. M. 1901. *Outlines of Roman History*. New York, Cincinnati: American Book Company, op.cit, chp 7.

³⁴ Bourne, op.cit, p.56

³⁵ *ibid*. p.55.

³⁶ See: William C. M. op.cit, chp.8.

³⁷ Robert F. Pennell *ibid*. p.12

³⁸ Naphtali Lewis & Meyer Reinhold, op.cit, p.101.

conubium i.e. the legal right of intermarriage. Only the patricians were granted intermarriage by alliance; they could accept marriage proposals from other states and probably their clients. However, with the plebeian revolt of 445 B.C. the ban on intermarriage was lifted by the Canuleian Law³⁹.

In the year 367 B.C, there was also a remarkable socio-economic change. In that year, after so much pressure from the generality of plebeians, their tribunes, Licinius and Sextius, proposed and pushed for the passage of some bills, called the Licinian rogations. These bills were enacted to:

- i) Elect annually, as formerly, two consuls, but with one of them chosen from among the plebeians.
- ii) To forbid any citizen from holding more than 500 *jugera* (300 acres) of the public lands (*ager publicus*), or feeding more than 100 oxen or 500 sheep thereon.
- iii) To compel all landlords to employ on their fields a certain number of free citizen-labourers, proportionate to the number of their slaves.
- iv) To allow all interests hitherto paid on borrowed money to be deducted from the principal, and the rest to be paid in three yearly instalments⁴⁰.

Clearly, these bills economically improved the masses' status and lessened the burden of poverty and distress, for they now had the opportunity for labour, which had previously been performed mostly by slaves. Indebtedness was lessened and many people now had some prospect of a livelihood. Moreover, since the position of consulship was opened to them, they felt that their interests were now more likely to be protected. Similar laws, enacted to improve the socio-economic and political status of the plebeians and alleviate their sufferings, were passed in 366, 357, 352, 347, and 342 B.C⁴¹.

The Hortensian Law of 287 B.C is known to have marked the total victory of the two centuries struggle between the patricians and the Roman masses. After the admission of plebeians to all the highest offices, the principal issue that remained outstanding for a more improved society was the validity of *plebiscita*, i.e. enactments of the plebeian assembly⁴². That year, the *concilium plebis* became a supreme legislative body like the senate of the Republic because its resolutions now became binding on all Romans *with or without the approval* of the Senate. Thus, for the ancient Romans, their general strikes, in form of secessions, paid off with evident socio-economic changes.

³⁹Akinboye 'Goke. op.cit p.23.

⁴⁰ibid, pp.20-24

⁴¹Harriet I. Flower, op.cit, p.18

⁴²Naphtali Lewis & Meyer Reinhold, op.cit, p.125.

As with Rome above, there is no doubt that incessant strikes in Nigeria, from the pre-colonial period to the present times, have brought much socio-economic grief and woe to individuals, employers and the nation at large. Nevertheless, strikes have also generally brought some benefits to both labour and the masses. These benefits have manifested themselves in the form of periodic increase in wages, salaries, and allowances, reversal of certain obnoxious government policies, provision of certain goods and social services, improvement of employees' working conditions and environment, reinstatement of discharged staff, etc. It is known for instance, between 1945-2012, the Nigeria Labour Congress embarked on countless strikes which sometimes ended in the improvement of the working conditions of workers and the general masses that could not fight the government directly.

Dominant among the strikes that positively changed the socio-economic landscape of the country was the June 21st, 1945 strike, attributed to a radical leader, Late Michael Imoudu. It was a landmark and dramatic opening in the annals of labour strike action since it was the first against the ruling colonial masters. The strike compelled British colonial government to meet Nigerian workers' demands for increase in salary and Cost of Living Allowances- COLA. In 1980, the Nigeria Labour Congress, after a 2-day national strike for an increase in national minimum wage, compelled the government to come to negotiation table which ultimately led to the enactment of the National Minimum Wage Act of 1981⁴³. It was an increase from N120 to N125 per month which not only improved workers' condition but also exposed many untoward practices in government establishments and institutions. In 1992, the Babangida regime announced a national minimum wage for the civil service. Civil servants under Nigeria Labour Congress had to embark on strike before the various state governments implemented it. In 1998, the same scenario repeated itself during Abdulsalami Abubakar regime. He approved a national minimum wage for socio-economic improvement of workers. Again, civil servants under the leadership of the NLC had to embark upon strike before various state governors implemented the minimum wage⁴⁴.

Since the beginning of the year 1999 when the fourth republic began, the dominant demand of the Nigeria Labour Congress has been directed at federal government's policies on petroleum products. This was due to the fact that increase in the price of the fuel became incessant, a situation that usually brought economic hardships to the masses. According to Emmanuel and Edio, between 1978, when the NLC was formed and year 2002 alone, the government of Nigeria had increased prices of petroleum products eighteen times; the organized labour had protested

⁴³Sulu B. Isiaka, 2001, The Continued Relevance of Strike as a Form of Industrial Action in Nigeria, *Humanity, Jos Journal of General Studies*, ISSN 1595-4072, Vol. 3, No 2, Nov., 2001, p.41

⁴⁴ibid. p.42

nine times and promoted civil protest nationwide three times⁴⁵. In the year 2000, the NLC announced the general strike of workers in order to force the new civilian government to shelve its idea of increasing the pump price of oil from N20 to N30. At the end of the struggle, government conceded to N22. The concession further enabled the NLC to establish a negotiating committee with the federal government, which included representatives of various stakeholders in the petroleum sector (The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, independent petroleum marketers, students, market women, labour, manufacturers etc.). The committee reviewed all aspects of petroleum product supply, distribution and marketing and made recommendations to the federal government⁴⁶.

In January 2012, the federal government gave the Nigerian masses a New Year gift of petrol increase from N65 to N145. There was a loud outcry from the organized labour and all masses who took to the streets from 9th – 16th, January, 2012 to protest against the price increase. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) estimated that the economic loss of Nigeria during that nationwide strike was over N200 Million⁴⁷. The outcome of the general strike was that the price was negotiated to N97. In June 2007, the federal government considered the sale of two national petroleum refineries at Port Harcourt and Kaduna, an increase of 15% in the price of petroleum products, and an increase of 100% in the rates of Value Added Tax (VAT) and an increase of Income Tax from 5% each to 10%⁴⁸. Labour embarked on a strike to compel the government to rescind its decision. Only recently in May 2016, the federal government, with the assent of the current President Muhammadu Buhari, also announced an increase in the price of fuel from N87 to N145. A wing of the NLC summoned a strike action. But it did not receive much support because government succeeded in factionalizing the NLC. The price was thus sustained. The bottom line of all the foregoing, however, is that strike actions are potent tools of labour and, indeed, of the masses in seeking fairness and equity from the government. They have helped, no matter how small, to check the incessant upward review of fuel price and to ensure the increase in workers' wages and salaries. Either initiated by labour or otherwise, strikes have contributed significantly to the development of the economy of the masses and the unburdening of their social stress.

⁴⁵Emmanuel O.O and Edio E.2010. The Contribution of Organised Labour to the National Development- The Nigerian Experience, *AAUJMS* Vol. 1 No 1, December, 2010, pp.89-90

⁴⁶ibid.

⁴⁷See NBS report on Economic Cost of the Nationwide Strike Action of 9th January – 16th January, 2012: Initial Assessment, p.3 via, www.nbs.ng

⁴⁸Emmanuel O.O and Edio E, The Contribution of Trade Unions to the National Development- The Nigerian Experience op.cit, p.89.

5. Conclusion

From the preceding, it is apparent that the most dominant causes of strikes in all ages seemed to be the grievances of the masses against certain policies of their employers and governments. In ancient times, as shown in the case of ancient Rome whose economy was basically agrarian, the masses were not only deprived of numerous civil and economic rights, but were also deprived of other conveniences of decent living. As a result, the plebeians were very bitter against the ruling patricians. The issue of debt bondage, coupled with no personal land for farming, for instance, enabled creditors to reduce their debtors to slaves or condemn them to death economically by frequent borrowings. Fortunately, the issue of state approved enslavement for debt is not dominant in contemporary Nigeria where crude oil, to the neglect of agriculture, has been the main source of revenue. Rather, the debt bondage among Nigerian waged workers can be termed 'Urban Debt Bondage'. By this term, we mean the debt that workers frequently incurred after paying for high cost of transportation, food, shelter and maintenance of their general well-being.

There is no doubt that strikes, in both republics considered above, had their attendant effects on the generality of the people. Stoppage of work and withdrawal of essential services naturally took their tolls on the masses through a general breakdown of trade and commerce, health, insecurity and so on. Nevertheless, the evidence from both states, though separated in time and space, shows that strike actions are not entirely worthless and destructive, especially when viewed from the vantage-point of the victims. For instance, at the end of the first strike in 494B.C, the plebeians had their own council. Over the period of the two centuries of their struggle for a better and improved society, the plebeians generally gained a lot of concessions which resulted in great socio-economic changes such as the lifting of the ban on intermarriage, reduction of the harsh law of debt and the overbearing powers of patricians, and redistribution of the public land.

In Nigeria, the dominant socio-economic changes also became visible. From time to time workers' wages and fuel prices were reviewed. For instance, at the beginning of June 2007, the NLC and the TUC (Trade Union Congress) with their other allied unions protested against a whole set of measures taken by the government with regard to increase in prices of the petroleum products, a rise of 100% of VAT and the sale of two public refineries. The nationwide strike was so effective in all parts of the country that the government was forced to re-open the negotiations so that many aspects of the economy, especially the oil sector, might not totally collapse⁴⁹. At the negotiation table, the trade unions obtained satisfaction for most of their grievances: cancellation of the 100% increase of the VAT; cancellation of the envisaged increase in the prices of the petroleum products

⁴⁹Obono Daniele, 2007. *Workers and Popular Masses in Nigeria*, University of Paris: Pantheon- Sorbonne, Dept. of Political Studies, July 2007, accessed on the 31st October, 2012.

and their demand for 15% increase in wages of civil servants. Thus, the potency of the strikes, as a relevant tool of resistance and socio-economic development of the masses, remains relevant and indispensable. This is true in the light of future untoward policies of government which might likely continue, as seen in the current Buhari regime which increased the pump price of petrol to N145 in May 2016,

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