

Towards a Viable Counter Movement in Nigeria

Beyond May Day Celebrations

Muttaqa Yushau Abdulra'uf, Sian Byrne, Warren McGregor and Lucien
van der Walt

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The origin of May Day, International Workers Day, lies in the historic fight for decent working hours that culminated in the execution of four trade unionists in Chicago, the United States, in November 1887. This was a decisive moment in the struggle for a just society through militant trade unionism. In Nigeria, May Day was first declared in 1980 by the People's Redemption Party (PRP)-led government of the late Abubakar Rimi in Kano State.

Therefore this article draws attention to the anarchist ethos of, first, building a people's counter culture to unravel the dominant class culture in the society and, second, building a counter-power that draws its energy from the trade unions, peasantry, the unemployed and the oppressed to change the world.

This article is concerned with reflecting on the May Day commemoration as a platform to harness the power of the working class into a counter movement for a better society. Across the world, ordinary people are faced by ecological problems, the financial crisis, massive unemployment, low wages and all sorts of oppressions and injustices. The solution does not seem to lie in more state regulation of the economy since politicians have often been part of the problem, not the solution. To understand this, we must look more closely at what the "Chicago," or "Haymarket Martyrs" stood for — as well as the role and potential of Nigerian trade unions as a means to change society.

Anarchism, Chicago and May Day

What did the "Chicago Martyrs" stand for? This is often forgotten. They were part of the "anarchist" movement. This term is often deliberately misunderstood, but the truth is that the anarchists simply stand for society being run from the bottom-up by the ordinary workers and farmers — and not by the capitalist and politicians. What they want is that in place of the masses being ruled and exploited from above, society and workplaces should be run through people's councils and assemblies, based on participatory democracy and self-management.

Anarchism was a global mass movement from the 1870s, including in the United States: its stress on struggle from below for radically democratic socialist society appealed to the oppressed in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and the Americas.

May Day was adopted as an international day of remembrance of the "Chicago Martyrs" and their struggle by the international working class.

Workers around the world were shocked by the brutal execution of the unionists and wanted to show their solidarity with the international fight for better conditions. In fact for the anarchist tradition, May Day was to be used as veritable tool of organising the working class. Rebuilding, anarchists and socialists formed the Labour and Socialist International in 1889. They proclaimed May Day as Workers Day, a global general strike to commemorate the "Haymarket Martyrs" fight for the 8-hour working day and build global workers unity.

Taking trade unionism forward

Noting the radical roots and aims of May Day, it is important to move beyond the as-usual May Day pattern in Nigeria and elsewhere of speeches, symposiums and dinners; much needs to be done to make the trade union movement relevant to the larger segment of the society; much needs to be done to push for real improvement in the conditions of the masses. What is needed

is to galvanise the masses around a positive programme of education and organisation, for social and economic justice and equality and for real grassroots democracy. The trade unions are central to this.

The trade unions have a responsibility that goes far beyond simple bread-and-butter issues. They have strategic importance in the production process in Nigeria and elsewhere and this makes them a very powerful force. They also provide a space to mobilise and educate people. Also, they can provide allies for other segments of the masses and powerful muscles for all progressive struggles. It is said with the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) motto that labour creates wealth; and this is true. Everything created by human hands and minds is labour and the labour is provided by the working class – the poor, the peasantry and the masses.

But the burning question remains: how can this strategic power be used to empower all the masses who toil to make the wealth? How can this wealth be used to empower all the masses who toil to make the wealth, rather than elite economic and political minorities enjoying the lion's share without doing the lion's share of the work? The only way is to build counter culture and counter power with the anarchist ethos; and this building can start from the strong foundations laid by many years of union struggles.

Brief history of militant trade unionism in Nigeria

It is clear that trade unionism in Nigeria has a proud history of fighting for justice and progress. The ideological standpoint of trade unionism has been leftist since inception, going back into the 1930s. Trade unionism was formally recognised by the British colonial authorities in 1938 with the union ordinance, but recognition arose from struggles.

The colonial economy based on the extraction of raw materials by a cheap labour force formed on the basis of ongoing agitation; notably the strike over the Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) that followed the global depression in 1930, and the callous and unforgivable massacre of miners at the Enugu colliery in 1949.

During the independence struggle trade unions in Nigeria also played a key role. They were, though, divided into conservatives exemplified by the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUCN), the United Labour Congress (ULC) and the Nigeria Workers Council (NWC) affiliated to the ICFTU and the radicals exemplified by the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and Nigeria Trade Union Congress (NTUC), which were socialist in orientation and affiliated to WFTU.

It was only in 1978 that the NLC was formed as the sole central labour organisation with a check-off system. In fact, the NLC was the creation of a military government which wanted to create a form of corporatism to promote labour quiescence. But like the British authorities, the military miscalculated: workers did not become quiet due to government action.

This plan was a failure for the NLC never shied from challenging the Nigerian state and the Nigerian elite. It was especially notable when in the wake of neo-liberalism exemplified by the 1986 Structural Adjustment Programme, the NLC mobilised and, in alliance with the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), issued documents such as “Nigeria Not for Sale” and the “Student Charter of Demand.”

The NLC was proscribed from 1990–1998 by the Military junta. With the return of the civilian administration via the 1999 Fourth Republic, the NLC revival was rapid, culminating in a delegate-based conference that elected a dynamic new leadership. This leadership developed a programme

of rebuilding the union movement and of making it relevant to a wider segment of society beyond simply the employed unionised workers.

The formation of Labour and Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) in 2004 was one outcome; a means to rebuild the labour movement both on the shop-floor and in alliance with the masses across society. LASCO focused on fighting against neo-liberal state policies such as deregulation and privatisation; it also fought against corruption, such as elite-driven scams in the pension industry and waged a robust campaign for electoral reform.

Neo-liberalism at the crossroads — what next?

But what alternative is being proposed to neo-liberalism? With the collapse of the Keynesian welfare states in Western Europe, the eclipse of the Central Planning Model in Eastern Europe and Russia and the decline of Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) in post-colonial countries, neo-liberalism is often presented as the only feasible model of economic organisation: the mantra of the late Margaret Thatcher being “There is no alternative” or Francis Fukuyama’s claim that this is “The end of history.”

But neo-liberalism is not a solution for the masses. For the workers it has redefined labour-capital relations on terms that force labour into retreat through flexible labour markets characterised by outsourcing, labour-subcontracting and labour brokerage and downsizing. This has weakened the organisational power of the working class and promotes the proliferation of vulnerable employment in the informal sector. Meanwhile the commodification of welfare, the removal of subsidies and sky-rocketing prices has hit hard against the unemployed, the peasants, the students and others.

These challenges confront the NLC and the Nigeria labour movement with the need to revise its organising strategy — so as to build a counter movement that could replace the existing rentier and predatory state system with a participatory democracy that is from the bottom-up and based on principles of equality and social justice as envisioned by the anarchists.

Conclusion: building working-class struggle for a better world

The organisational power and strategic location of the Nigerian trade union movement, representing over five million workers organised both in the private and state sectors, should be the point of departure for building a counter movement among the broader Nigerian working class allied to the peasantry and other poor sections of society.

The strength of the Nigerian working class both in white collar and blue collar jobs should be translated into a viable political and social movement with a clear agenda for change — a movement that can provide an alternative to the current state system that is ruinous to society. To struggle to fix the current state system would continue to be an exercise in futility. Even the best politicians are powerless to change the state. We dare not tinker with reform that fails! Rather, we need systemic change that can guarantee equality, fraternity, self-management and socialisation of the common wealth guided by a bottom-up approach to decision making. We need a labour movement guided by the following dictum:

“...a multicultural and international movement with a profound feminist impulse, a movement with an important place in union, worker and rural struggles, prizing rea-

son over superstition, justice over hierarchy, self-management over state power, international solidarity over nationalism, a universal human community over parochialism and separatism — anarchism and syndicalism is this and much more” (van der Walt & Schmidt, 2008: 10).

This is our appeal, and that is our message as we commemorate this May Day, in a country in which the storm clouds gather over humanity — but in which the hope of a better future can break through, if we organise. May Day began as an example of globalisation-from-below and it continues to be a rallying point for workers everywhere facing social and economic injustices some 120 years later.

Let us rally to it!

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