

*A review of :*

R. COHEN: LABOUR AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA 1945-71

(Heinemann Educational Books, 1974)

*by Charles Simkins*

It is likely that the situation of South African workers, their relationship with the rest of their society, their organisations and possible lines of development will be elucidated by study of labour conditions elsewhere. Because of our historical British connection, South Africans are likely to find it relatively easy to gain some understanding of British labour history and industrial relations. Less is generally known about the position in North America and continental Europe, while next to no information is available concerning workers in Africa, Asia or Latin America. The latter gap, in particular, needs to be filled. The forces which shaped the labour market in many countries of tropical Africa were also at work in South Africa during the critical period from 1800 to 1950; traditional economies were permanently disrupted by the introduction of manufactured goods and by military/administrative measures specifically designed to create a cheap supply of wage labour for the mines, plantations and industry. Many Latin American states, on the other hand, occupy positions close to South Africa on the international GNP per capital league table, having reached roughly the same state of industrial development and urbanisation and, like us, have markedly inegalitarian social structures.

Cohen's book forms part of the second phase of the study of labour movements in tropical Africa. The continent-wide generalisations of a decade ago have recently been followed by individual studies on Zambia, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. To this list, he has added Nigeria, a country in which primary associations like trade unions, co-operatives, ethnic associations and professional bodies have proved more durable than political institutions in the post-independence era.

The industrial workforce started to grow rapidly after the end of the Second World War; the growth rate of large scale manufacturing over the period 1950-64 is estimated at 15% per annum and this has been maintained despite political instability and war. Nonetheless, the manufacturing sector of the economy remains small, accounting for at most 8% of GNP in the early sixties. Of a labour force of about 28 million people according to latest reliable estimates, about 1,8 million (6,4%) are wage earners.

At the end of the Second World War, giant expatriate firms controlled both the export of primary production and the import of manufactured goods. The dominance of foreign capital has persisted in the manufacturing sector, supported by post-independence policies, such as import duty relief, development of low rent industrial estates, pioneer industry tax exemptions and industrial loans. In such a situation, it is hardly surprising that an enduring feature of industrial relations is tension over the degree of Nigerian participation in the private sector; access by Nigerians to senior positions is severely limited. There is no evidence that, over the period, any effective resolution of this tension was found. A frequent response on the part of expatriate managements has been to appoint token Nigerians to company boards; criticism of this gambit has been voiced by trade unions and sections of the labour leadership advocate nationalisation of the major industries as the only effective way to promote local participation.

Cohen's investigations lead him to two less obvious and interesting conclusions about industrial workers in Nigeria:

- (1) He finds little evidence to support the thesis that workers in the early stages of industrialisation are more prone to absenteeism, wild cat stoppages, violence, industrial sabotage and general indiscipline than are workers in societies that have been industrialised for several generations.

Rather it appears that, where reasonable conditions prevail, productivity is high and absenteeism is low and that there is evidence of substantial acceptance of the industrial work ethic.

- (ii) In contrast to the situation among politicians, the bureaucrats and the military, there are generally good relationships between members of the various Nigerian groups in industrial employment. Although the civil war affected labour organisations, there was never complete fragmentation as occurred in other sections of the society.

Turning to union structure, three important features of the Nigerian scene may be discerned :

- (i) Repeated attempts to create a unified central labour organisation have failed. The reasons for this are numerous and range from leadership personality conflicts to tensions induced by competition between international labour organisations for local trade union support, to differences in the way in which various central bodies have desired to relate to party political activities and the Government. While warning against simplistic dichotomies, Cohen finds it possible to distinguish both a moderate and a radical wing of the labour movement. The moderate wing believes in meaningful dialogue with management, expects the Government to consider the interests of workers, is neutralist with respect to party politics and is class collaborationist. The radical wing sees strikes as essential in dealing with stubborn management, the Government as representing neo-colonial interests, believes that workers need their own parties, and is oriented towards class conflict.
- (ii) The number of registered trade unions has grown from 14 with a membership of less

than 5 000 in 1940, to 873 with over 650 000 members in 1971. There are a great number of small unions; unions organising less than 1 000 members account for 85% of registrations, while over 50% of all unions have less than 250 members. Again the reasons for this are numerous and include permissive legal provisions for union registration, diffusion of industries into widely separated and poorly connected areas, ethnic pressures leading to regional organisation, and the attitude of employers who generally favour the formation of company rather than industry-wide unions.

- (iii) Trade union leadership is more compact than would appear from the fragmentation of membership: general secretaries constitute what amount to a profession and simultaneously offer their services to a number (often five or six) of unions. Accompanying this is a marked fluctuation of interest by union membership; except where a check-off system operates, dues are mainly paid when a major claim or grievance arises. From funds so generated, a professional secretary is hired to press demands with management. If necessary, he will call the workers out on strike. If the claim is not granted after a short time, his services will be terminated; if it is, the absence of discontent will itself result in a decline in interest. Trade union membership characteristically displays a sceptically instrumental attitude towards the leadership; unions are expected to cater only for fairly narrowly defined economic interests, since a multitude of other organisations cater for social, religious and cultural requirements.

Interesting also is Cohen's examination of the unions as political agents. Trade unionism is conventionally regarded as more 'political' in underdeveloped countries than in the industrialised

West; while this assertion is subject to substantial terminological and empirical criticism, one can identify factors which increase a predisposition to political activity. One of the most important is the weak industrial position of unions. Especially where there is a concentration of extractive, service and simple processing industry, demanding highly unskilled workers, combined with a huge pool of surplus labour, the strike threat is rendered largely ineffective by the ability of management to replace workers who withdraw their labour.

This factor has an important influence on the way in which the wage bargain is struck in Nigeria. Despite an inherited official preference for voluntarism in industrial relations, collective bargaining is, in fact, only a minor factor in the adjustment of rates of pay for the country as a whole. Much more important in the setting of wage levels has been the work of government wage commissions appointed successively in 1945, 1955, 1960, 1964 and 1971.

Each commission recommended an increase in wages and salaries for government employees; in each case, increases were awarded. After each award, there followed a round of demands in the private sector for corresponding increases. Characteristically there is a rise in the number of strikes (following a major public sector pay award) in support of private sector claims. Given this mechanism, it becomes important to discover what factors determine the appointment of wage commissions. Cohen makes a case for regarding factors associated with union pressure, political sensitivity to potential urban discontent and attempts to win political support from workers, as most important. This is in opposition to other analysts who stress the importance of shifting conditions in the labour market. Trade union pressure is applied through basically political campaigning: petitions, delegations and appeals to public opinion.

The greater part of Cohen's work applies to

conditions in Nigeria before the military coup in 1966. His penultimate chapter, however, analyses the position of trade unions under military rule. At the beginning of the period, workers in the Federal area accepted cuts in living standards as part of the civil war effort. Industrial action directed against the decline appeared from the beginning of 1968. The right to strike was restricted; this dampened but by no means stopped unrest, despite the appeals of union centres, and the period 1968-70 saw an increase in grass-roots militancy while the influence of the leadership decreased. As soon as the war ended, the pressures for a wage review mounted rapidly. As a response, and as a means for stimulating demand, the government agreed to appoint a commission whose ultimate effect was to raise wage and salary rates by about 30%. Initially, the government vacillated about the extent to which these increases should be applied to the private sector. This provoked unprecedented industrial unrest, which ceased only when demands for full application were conceded.

If the process of improving the lot of the workers is political, what are the political resources of the unions? Cohen identifies these as:

- (i) The creation of and adaptation to a way of wage bargaining which is fundamentally political, though not dependent on the presence of an electoral system. This is enhanced by the relatively precarious hold the politicians had, and even the military has, on political power.
- (ii) The ability to represent a group wider than their membership at critical times.
- (iii) Unlike the military and the bureaucracy, the unions have a multi-ethnic leadership and organisation, which would be a particularly useful political asset if there were a return to civilian rule.

- (iv) Economic development implies a tendency for groups to form on the basis of economic interest rather than ethnic affiliation; groups already representing a class interest will then be placed in an increasingly advantageous position.

While a direct application of particular aspects of Cohen's analysis to the South African situation would require cross checking with other accounts of labour conditions in the developing world it may be concluded at this stage that his work gives us grounds for believing that a number of channels may be found for advancing the cause of workers, even under generally tough third world political and economic conditions. The search for such channels, however, will certainly involve a move away from thinking within a narrow framework of standard industrial relations' models.