

Syndicats, tailleurs et société civile

Gunilla Andrae et Björn Beckman

Résumé

Le pouvoir des syndicats est menacé. Les inscriptions sont en baisse et les droits des travailleurs s'amenuisent. Les syndicats du Nigéria tentent de relancer leur pouvoir et d'accroître leurs nombres en s'alliant à la vaste majorité des travailleurs de l'économie informelle. L'industrie nigérienne du textile connaît un ralentissement profond. Le syndicat autrefois puissant des textiles peut-il retrouver sa vigueur en joignant ses forces à celles des tailleurs? Peuvent-ils défier ensemble l'ordre néolibéral? Cet article examine les possibilités de faire progresser les objectifs nationaux plus larges, dont la démocratisation, et d'obtenir que l'État réponde davantage aux besoins économiques et politiques des travailleurs. Pour conclure, les auteurs soulèvent la question d'alliances encore plus élargies. La syndicalisation au sein de l'économie parallèle et les alliances entre les secteurs formel et informel sont cruciales pour la réorientation de l'économie nationale.

Trade Unions, Tailors, and Civil Society

Gunilla Andrae and Björn Beckman¹

Abstract

The power of trade unions is under threat. Membership dwindles and labour rights are subverted. Trade unions in Nigeria attempt to boost their power and numbers by linking up with the vast majority in the informal economy. Nigeria's textile industry is in steep decline. Can the once powerful textile union recover its strength by linking up with the tailors? Can they jointly challenge the neoliberal order? This article discusses the scope for advancing broader national goals, including democratization and making the state more responsive to economic and political needs. In conclusion, it raises issues of wider alliances. It sees organising in the informal economy and alliances across the formal-informal divide as critical to the reorientation of the national economy.

Introduction

As we visited the headquarters of the textile workers' union in Kaduna in northern Nigeria in 2007, an organiser had been assigned the task to reach out to Kaduna's tailors. Most of the factories in this 'Manchester of West Africa' had been closed down and the collapse was exacerbated by the global financial crisis. Unionists named smuggling and the failure of the Government to provide essential economic infrastructure, especially electricity, as factors of particularly negative impact on their industry. How could Nigeria, they asked, possibly compete with the inundation of cheap products from China under current industrial policies? The failure of state institutions to establish the basic preconditions for production had also undermined achievements at the bargaining table. Their position as wage earners gives trade unions a special stake in modernization. On their own, wagedworkers are too few and too weak to influence the direction of development. This paper is about how unions reach out to other groups in society in an effort to confront those in power and their response to this offer.

The crisis of Nigeria's textile industry is seriously affecting the trade unions. The main substance of this article is an account of

the organising efforts of the tailors in Kaduna as based on fieldwork conducted in 2009. We discuss briefly the differences in organising experiences in Kano, also in the north of Nigeria, where the textile industry has been more successful, and in Ghana where unions are seen as spearheading organising in the informal economy. Relating to the international context, we look at the wider debate, especially within the International Labour organization (ILO), on the informal economy and formal-informal organising. We then return to Nigeria to discuss organising in civil society and the efforts to develop an alternative to prevailing forms of state power and development policies. Moving up, to the national and aggregate union level, we discuss the experience of the Labour-Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) and note that in 2010 a national federation of informal economy workers was established in Nigeria. In conclusion, we argue that civil society alliances need to be well rooted in informal organising in order to have a real impact.

Methodological note

This article expands on issues that were first raised at a conference in Uppsala in 2007 on new strategies in organising in informal economies in Africa (Andrae and Beckman, 2010a). A second contribution was made to a conference on “Theoretical approaches in labour geographies” organised at the University of Oslo in 2008, where union attempts to organise tailors were situated in the changing context of the ‘labour regime’ and union power in Nigeria’s textile industry (Andrae and Beckman, 2010b; Andrae and Beckman, 1998/99). After our field-work in September to October 2009 (Andrae and Beckman, 2008) a provisional report was circulated in early 2010 and presented to the Research Committee on Labour Movements (RC44) of the International Sociological Association in Göteborg in July that year.

Long-standing contacts with the National Union of Textile, Garments and Tailoring Workers of Nigeria (NUTGTWN) (Andrae and Beckman, 1998/9) provide the starting point for this study. Its General Secretary, Issa Aremu, and his deputy, were instrumental in mediating the links to the Kaduna tailors through the two union officials who have been directly in charge of organising the tailors on the union side in this city. We made our first contacts on these matters in February 2006 and October 2007. Fieldwork was conducted in September to October 2009. In Kano, the director and

organising secretary of the union headquarters facilitated contact with key informants. In both cities, the tailors that we contacted through the labour union referred us to other relevant respondents in their own tailors' union. In Abuja, the General Secretary of the Nigeria Labour Congress, John Odah, together with two of its present and one former organiser, all of whom had a background in organising in the informal economy, assisted us. In the case of Ghana, as in Nigeria, national-level union office bearers were interviewed. All assistance is gratefully acknowledged. Interviews referred to were conducted in 2009 unless otherwise stated.

The crisis of the textile industry

As in much of Africa, Nigeria's textile industry has gone through a sharp decline, having been central to early industrialization (Aremu, 2005; 2006; Jauch and Traub-Merz, 2006; Andrae and Beckman 1998/99). The consumption pattern in West Africa, with the continued reliance on 'African prints' as a source of both male and female dress and the habit of accumulating 'cloth' as a sign of wealth and status have combined to ensure the strength of local industry, despite liberalization and Structural Adjustment. It has also given Nigeria's textile plants a wider regional market, their cloth being well known, for instance, in Dakar and Abidjan. In recent years, the rise of China and India as leading manufacturers of textiles for the world market has accelerated the decline of African industry. Protection has been half-hearted and effectively subverted by smuggling with the connivance of well-placed politicians. In the Nigerian case, although the industry had suffered turbulence in the early 1980s, union membership had stabilised at around 60,000 in the first half of the 1990s. By 2008, it had nearly collapsed, having been reduced to one-third of its prior membership. Kaduna in particular suffered as it had housed some of the major factories as well as the headquarters of the union.

In the case of Kaduna, the death knell came with the closure in late 2007 of UNT Plc., the flagship of Nigeria's textile industry with some 4,000 workers, suggesting that things had changed irreversibly. It was not only global competition that had forced the hands of the Cha Group, the UNT Plc. owners; it was just as much the failure of the Nigerian state - federal, state and local - to provide the basic conditions for local production. As we met with management in 2007, the main problem was not global competition but the price

and availability of ‘black oil’, a major input in industrial production. The liberalization of trade in combination with the non-functioning of the local oil refineries, despite massive public investment, had caused prices to skyrocket. Electric power supply was equally affected by privatization and state failure. The high price of diesel for plant-based electric generators had undercut the viability of local industry. The manager of this industry, who also held positions in the national organisation of the textile industry, was convinced that ‘porous borders’ and complicity of the smugglers with politicians in high places made nonsense of repeated public attempts at tariff protection and bans on imports (author’s interview, 2007).

In Nigeria, industrialists and the textile workers’ union argued that local production would only be able to handle competition from China and India if allowed to compete on terms that are more equitable (interviews with officials of NUTGTWN: General Secretary, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010; Deputy General Secretary, 2007 and President, 2009). The failure of the local state to provide basic industrial infrastructure, not foreign competition, was seen as the primary source of the collapse. Both union and industry were anxious to get as much protection and support as could be exacted from the state. The necessity to go beyond collective bargaining and intervene in policy was realised. Nevertheless, the power of the union to intervene had declined with the collapse of the industry. Would including the operators in the informal economy enhance union power?

Trade unions and tailors in Kaduna

In September 2009, a special Tailors Unit was formed within the National Union of Textile Garments and Tailoring Workers of Nigeria (NUTGTWN). The concern with the ‘tailoring’ part of the name had come with the current crisis in the textile industry. The decreasing number of industrial workers was a threat both to the finances of the union and its political influence. Tailors produce garments to measure as self-employed, predominantly male, artisans working from market stalls or from small workshops in the commercial-cum-residential areas of towns and villages. Our discussions in Kaduna suggest that they typically work on their own with one or two apprentices. There are also female, household-based seamstresses, usually working by themselves, sometimes with an apprentice. Normally, customers bring their own cloth, i.e. most

tailors produce for final markets, rather than as part of a production and distribution chain.

The tailors have a long history of organising on their own, protecting themselves against tax collectors and municipal overseers as well as acting in solidarity with each other. Being a major group of artisans in a particular market, their representatives take an active part in distributing stalls, supervising security and regulating access to water and electricity. They also give support in conjunction with births, marriages, matrimonial disputes, bereavements, disease, and other life events. In 2007, parallel organising attempts among workshop-based tailors in town had resulted in one united Kaduna State Tailors Union, including also the market-based tailors but only few of the household-based female seamstresses. Out of a large number of entrepreneurs this union had reported about 3 000 members from ten Local Governments in Kaduna State with emphasis on three located in Kaduna city according to labour union records from 2006 (NUTGTWN, 2006). It had a hierarchical structure of zonal and local government area executives and an elaborate constitution. A permanent State executive was elected in 2009.

The industrial textile workers' union in Kaduna began recruiting tailors in 2006. Although organising had already begun in Lagos (*The Textile Worker*, 2010), events in Makurdi, Benue State, were particularly invoked. There, a conflict with the Local Government had broken out over plans to move tailors from a central market to the outskirts of the town. The local officers of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) had supported the tailors and helped prevent the move. Through NLC mediation, the Makurdi tailors were affiliated to the national textile workers' union. Inspired by this, an Organising Secretary of the textile labour union, NUTGTWN, was assigned the task of recruiting the tailors as members in Kaduna. When a meeting was called with the leaders of the Kaduna State Tailors Union in April 2006, a mutual interest in the process of cooperation was declared. The spokesman of the textile workers pointed out that the 1978 regulation of unions in Nigeria had made 'Tailoring' part of the official name of the labour union. This had also made it difficult for the tailors to organise beyond the State level on their own. While the responsibilities of the labour union in relation to the tailors had been ignored in the past, the time had come to invite them and ask what the textile union could do for them. For their part, the tailors, represented by the then interim Chairman

of Kaduna State, enumerated the areas for mutual support which included accessing electricity and fighting smuggling (author's interview 2007). While some tailors raised points of scepticism, it was agreed to set up a joint committee to work out the modalities of a merger. In the meantime, forms of registration for individual membership in the labour union were handed out to the tailors. In September 2009, a Tailors Unit was finally formed within the labour union and a regular executive sworn in.

The officers of the labour union saw the Tailors Unit as a major breakthrough, as expressed in our interviews with leading officials such as the Deputy General Secretary and President in 2007 and 2009. However, the tailors continued to be divided. While most had both respect for and interest in somehow allying with labour, some were suspicious of its intentions. Others felt that the tailors should first build their own organization before considering an affiliation. Was it wise to join as individuals or should they wait until they were ready to merge as two distinct organizations? In the meantime, organisers of the labour union pursued the membership drive. By October 2009, at the time we conducted most of our interviews, few had formally signed up. Although the tailors hesitated to commit themselves, many had however indicated an interest in joining and were invited to participate in trade union activities such as gender training, May Day and other rallies. Some attended national congresses at the level of either the NLC or the industrial union.

The tailors we spoke to, (mainly zonal and state level office bearers of their union) although in principle positive to some form of link, were thus divided over the type of affiliation. At the one end there were those, like one female tailor, who participated enthusiastically in the recruitment drive and served as a main contact to us in getting to know other tailors from 2006 and onwards. She had been a member of the Doka zonal executive committee of the tailors and was given a seat on the committee of the Tailors Unit of the industrial union. At the other end were tailors, like the chairman of the executive committee of the Tailors Union in Kaduna South Local Government, who saw the need for building a separate organization. He agreed to chair the executive committee of the Tailors Unit of the labour union, however, thus hedging his options (see also interview in Textile Worker 2010:9). One interviewed tailor from Kakuri market in Kaduna South, who was eventually elected Chairman of Kaduna State Tailors Union, when formally created in

2009, had been a key contact of the labour union in the formation of its special Tailors Unit. More sceptical of integration were the diligent founders of the two early tailors' associations that had later merged into the Kaduna State Tailors Union. They seem to have favoured a strategy of organising the tailors separately. Still, they participated in the meetings at the labour union and one of them was even prevailed upon to lead the swearing in of the members of the executive committee of its special Tailors Unit.

In order to understand the different positions taken by the Kaduna tailors we need to remind ourselves that their interests only partially overlap with those of labour. In essence, tailors are entrepreneurs concerned with conditions of production, credit, and marketing. They strive to uphold professional standards through training and certification and to ward off unqualified entrants into the profession (including redundant textile workers!). To them as self-employed artisans, collective bargaining with employers over conditions of work and remuneration, so central to the organization of wageworkers, makes little sense. There is certainly scope for regulating the relationship between apprentices and masters, but this was not an issue in the negotiations between the tailors and the labour union.

Tailors could make good use of a link with the labour union by being protected against highhanded local authorities. Brandishing a membership card of the labour union, for instance, could ward off harassment by local tax collectors. For some this seems to have been a central motive for joining the labour union. Another attractive service that the labour union might render was to help finding solutions to the vexed questions of insuring the tailors against loss or damages from accidents in the work place and providing health and pension schemes. In Chikwun, a local government area whose executive committee we had the opportunity to meet, tailors were optimistically experimenting with a mutual health insurance scheme. Commercial insurance companies had contacted many tailors, individually and through their executive committees. Others, who had tried their offers, had been repeatedly cheated. One possible solution that had reportedly been discussed was that the labour union would offer guarantees and collateral based on its own material assets (as mentioned by leading tailors and confirmed by a labour organiser). Tailors wanted to be treated with due respect ('we are no illiterates') and consulted (like labour!) on relevant

issues of social and economic development. In October 2009, we were invited to a function hosted by the Nassarawa Zone, serving to boost the common commitments of the tailors in all Kaduna. Some envisaged a powerful independent national level Tailors Union. Political influence was a major concern of the influential tailor (interviewed in 2007 and 2009), who had organised traders and artisans in Kakuri market and later became the first elected chairman of the regularized Committee of the Kaduna Tailors Union. He was also the Kaduna State Secretary of one of the political opposition parties and of a local chapter of the Planned Parenthood Federation, being thus exposed to both party and NGO politics. There was the need, as he saw it, to participate in politics in order to make an impact at the state and national levels. He spoke of the potential of a strong interest organization in dealing with the state. From the start, he had also been anxious to liaise with the textile workers' union and, according to its records (NUTGTWN 2006), was one of the first to join in the negotiations for the setting up of its Tailors Unit. Like the newly elected first chairman of the labour Tailors Unit, he saw the potentials for drawing on the experience of the labour union while also benefiting from the institutional protection that this more established body would be able to offer. The tailors share concerns with the textile workers including the provision of infrastructure (in particular electricity), trade policies, and the rights of organization, which also makes some form of alliance an attractive option. Again, some felt this would be best served by an autonomous organization as a platform for pursuing members' interests and, in particular, to enhance the tailors' political influence in the state. Others saw the future in integrating as full members of the labour union. As we visited Kaduna in November 2010, the latter option was still the strategy that was energetically pursued by the organisers at that end, as was also reflected in the September issue of their publication *The Textile Worker* (2010).

Trade unions and tailors in Kano

The organization experience of tailors in Kano, the commercial and cultural hub of northern Nigeria, is different. Until recently, and still on our visit in 2009, the textile workers have been much less active in recruiting tailors into the labour union and the tailors themselves have had no functioning state-wide organization of their own, although probably having associations in all major

markets. In July 2010, however, NUTGTWN inaugurated another Tailors Unit of the union with a caretaker committee, as part of a national drive. A ‘Special Adviser on Labour Matters to the Kano State Government’ spoke enthusiastically about the need for unity, the achievements of the labour union, and what it could do for the tailors (Textile Worker 2010:10).

Kano, an ancient city with now at least some four million inhabitants, is a major centre of Nigeria’s textile industry, reinforced by its standing as a commercial hub in the West African region. Unlike Kaduna, a much younger city of slightly smaller size and with more focus on administrative functions, where large state and multinational capital has dominated, Kano’s industrial origin is in small family firms, often owned by individuals or families of Lebanese (Syrian) decent. A number of these firms have developed into large factories in the past two decades and have succeeded in maintaining their level of production and employment, despite the collapse of the industry elsewhere in Nigeria. Only recently has Kano’s textile industry showed signs of the same malaise that has been affecting the other major industrial centres. Remarkably, most plants have come to accept a union-based labour regime, despite union organisers being chased out of town at gunpoint at an earlier stage (For the union story, see Andrae & Beckman 1998/99). In fact, organising by the textile workers’ union in Kano has been a success with its head, having a respected social standing.

The success in expanding membership by organising previously unorganised textile plants is most likely what explains why the textile union in Kano had earlier shown limited interest in recruiting the tailors. The need to uphold membership numbers by other means has been less pressing. A former trade unionist, who had resigned from factory work and set up a small tailoring co-operative, had been asked by the labour union to contact tailors in different parts of Kano and to find out about their interest in joining as members. In October 2009, this tailor, thanks to a union Organising Secretary, took us to the tailors in the Sabon Gari and Enkaba markets and in Fagge for discussions. According to him there was currently no functioning overarching organization of tailors in Kano. Associations of a more traditional nature exist in most markets, often including tailors also from the surrounding commercial areas. The one in the main Sabon Gari market, whose chairman we interviewed with members of his committee) and with close to 400 members, represented the

tailors on the market management board. It filled traditional social functions at the time of funerals and family events, occasionally assisting victims of fire and other calamities with collections. As in the case of the Kaduna tailors, a commercial insurance company had approached them. There was a firm belief that the organization had a potential for becoming a vehicle of social change of some importance. In particular, they felt responsibility for the training of the youth. On occasion, they had come together in collective campaigns with other neighbouring tailors associations. At this time, they had not considered the idea of joining the labour union.

The Tailors Association of the much smaller Enkaba market filled similar social and trade related functions inside the market. In our discussions the young officials of the executive committee, represented by its chairman, expressed keen interest in expanding its activities, especially when hearing of the success of the Fagge tailors in approaching the State Government over electricity supply (on which see below). The lack of routine contacts between the different market-based associations was apparent. In the absence of a joint organization, the large Tailors Association in Fagge, with its 1700 members, all based in workshops in the central residential-cum-commercial area, seems to have played a certain limited coordinating role, at least in central Kano. The Sabon Gari tailors knew them mainly from their annual social get-togethers. Apart from filling the more traditional functions, the executive committee members we met, headed by its secretary, told us that the Fagge association had approached the Kano State Government, acting in conjunction with other local associations, over the recurrent electric power failures. It had managed to negotiate a guaranteed allocation of power for five hours per working day, which was considered a major success. For the Fagge tailors harassment by government officials was not the major problem. They were more worried about criminal gangs (a strong motive behind forming the association) and the need to approach the Kano State Government for protection. They were anxious to negotiate gifts from the state, including sewing machines for 'deserving' members, and hoped for major state orders for school uniforms etc. In particular, the wider alliance over power supply touched the raw nerve of the political system. It suggested that organising might indeed be critical to achieving the basic preconditions of production, not just for the select few but also for the many. There was an obvious common interest with

the labour union in challenging the distorted provision of economic infrastructure.

Trade unions and the informal economy: The Ghana experience

Our study of trade unions and organising in the informal economy focuses on the relations between the textile union and the tailors in Nigeria. There is also a case for taking a brief look at developments in neighbouring Ghana. The relative 'success' of Ghana's development was often mentioned at the Nigerian end, including the textile industry, which, after a major earlier decline, was now said to be picking up. The Cha Group, the Chinese owners of the big UNT Plc. factory in Kaduna, which was closed down in 2007, was said (by the Kaduna manager that we interviewed in 2007) to have expanded production in its Akosombo plant. It seemed as if foreign capital was migrating to countries within Africa that were considered more 'hospitable' to securing basic conditions of production in terms of industrial infrastructure and political order. A major reason to include a visit to Ghana was the frequent reference in the literature to current developments in formal-informal organising (War on Want, 2006). How relevant is the Ghanaian experience? Did it suggest a way forward also in the Nigerian case?

As we arrived in Accra in October 2009, the country was still awestricken by its own feat of having changed government peacefully. In the 2008 elections, the old ruling party with its origins in the military regime of Jerry Rawlings, was surprisingly returned to power. The new government was more radical and nationalist, at least in its rhetoric, and one of the issues in its election campaign affected both tailors and textile workers. The party had promised that, if elected, it would place a major order for school uniforms, to be sewn locally from locally produced cloth.

The main textile workers' union had broken away from the Trade Union Congress (TUC), Ghana's dominant central labour organization, as far back as in the early 1990s. According to its Secretary-General, who is also the head of an alternative labour centre, the Ghana Federation of Labour, the reason for the split was that the TUC and its Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) had paid too little attention to the problems of the declining textile industry. We met twice with him and with a Project Coordinator of the Federation, in Tema, Accra's industrial harbour city.

The school uniforms were supposed to be paid for by the Government as they were to be provided free of charge to certain vulnerable groups. The declared intention was to employ one of the textile companies, Printex, to produce the cloth and organise local tailors to do the sewing. The implementation was delegated to the Ministry of Education, which, according to the union leader, had its own agenda and dodged the issue. He was infuriated by the failure of the new government to deliver on its election promises. Even more infuriating was that he, his Project Coordinator and the tailors, whom we met in Tema, suspected that leaders of the National Tailors Association were colluding with the politicians to deprive Ghana's ailing textile industry and its tailors of the job. He showed us ready-made school uniforms – with little badges in Ghanaian colours (flags) neatly attached! - that had been imported from China.

Ghana's tailors have their own national organization, the Ghana National Tailors and Dressmakers Association. We visited its headquarters in Kokomlemle in Accra and had discussions with its National President and other members of his executive. A Senior Administrator also took part in the meeting. According to the leadership, the Association has existed for a long time and in these premises since 1979. Its primary functions included the training and licensing of apprentices and tailors and, in particular, negotiating taxes with the authorities, taxes that the Association itself collects on behalf of the Government. It lobbies the textile-producing firms for the supply of cloth to its members and occasionally voices the interests of the profession on policy issues. It has no links to the labour unions. According to the Secretary General of the textile union, the Tailors Association has failed to take a stand on the school uniforms, although its leadership claims that the issue had been left to the district assemblies to decide. They mentioned to us that they hesitated to be drawn into 'politics'. Additionally, the Tema members that we met were disappointed with the leadership, especially as the National President was originally one of them.

The very existence of a national body of tailors compared radically with the Nigerian situation where local associations were not effectively integrated even at the regional (State) level. The Ghana Association seems to have been able to insert itself effectively as a 'middleman' between tailors and the Government. This is likely to open it up to clientelism and patronage, which may explain its 'low-key' position on the school uniforms. It is, of course, power of

a sort even if Ghana's National Tailors Association may have a long way to go before qualifying as a major source of members' influence on national policy.

The failure of the association to act in the interest of its members on the school uniforms suggested to the labour unionists that local tailors would be much better off as members of the labour union, which had repeatedly taken a vocal position, exposing the dishonesty of the politicians. We attended a meeting with officials from a zonal executive committee of the Tailors Union, where a highly emotional Secretary General urged the tailors to join. The case of a textile labour union merging with an association of self-employed tailors is, however, as new in Ghana as it is in Nigeria. How would the two parties be able to cooperate? Do they have a common platform to confront the state?

At the headquarters of the Ghana Trade Union Congress (GTUC), we met with Dr Anthony Yao Baah, the Deputy General Secretary, and with the Head of the Education Department and Principal of Ghana's Workers College. Both of them were well informed about relations between labour unions and the informal economy, an area where, as we have seen, Ghana has a special reputation for being particularly advanced. Dr Baah had recently sponsored two donor-funded studies, where Ghana's experience in this field is compared with developments in other African countries (Baah, 2007 and GTUC, 2009). His colleague has followed developments since the late 1990s and written for the ILO on the matter.

In Ghana, major industrial unions, like the farm workers' union (GAWU), have a long tradition of incorporating 'workers' in the informal economy, including small independent producers. Unlike in Nigeria, where the state imposed a new form of unitary organization on the labour movement in 1978, there are no bureaucratic obstacles to including associations of independent producers as members of an 'industrial union'. Like in Nigeria, we saw that the distinction between employers and employees was occasionally blurred, as in the case of road transport workers. GTUC has played an active role in supporting the organizations of market traders that have been affiliated to the Congress centrally and in their own capacity, rather than becoming members of industrial unions. Special pride is taken in the successful affiliation of the Makola market women and the tomato traders.

We had discussions with the Deputy General Secretary of the Industrial & Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), also a breakaway from the GTUC, who spoke of ICU's involvement, especially with hairdressers and waste pickers, where the main issue has been to regulate the use of chemicals and risky practices. Just as in the Kaduna case, a major reason why organizations in the informal economy are prone to link up with labour unions seems to be to improve protection in relation to public authorities. Traders, for instance, have to struggle over access to spaces in streets and markets where the support of labour unions may be helpful.

The agenda of the GTUC has been clearly articulated. From its position as an umbrella for informal economy organizations, it has since the mid-90s applied a conscious policy to pressurize the Government for provision of training and business services, credit facilities and social protection policies as outlined by Baah (2007). An insurance scheme for 'workers' in the informal economy has also been designed (Baah, 2009). Above all, it has had the strategy to help informal economy workers to build their own structures for negotiation and have linked up with major international forces in these efforts, where they have played a very central role. Their hosting of the second international conference on 'Organizing in the Informal Economy' in 2006 manifests this role. The Indian Self-employed Women's Association, the emblematic SEWA, in conjunction with the dominating international informal traders' association, Street-net International, joined forces with three national union confederations and formed the International Co-ordinating Committee to organise a first conference in Ahmedabad in 2003. The informal economy – trade union alliance in this project is expressed in the slogan of 'Combining our Efforts'. Ghana TUC was one of the three unions involved, presumably based on its past engagements with these issues. The others were Home-net Thailand and the Nigeria Labour Congress.

Using the ILO-machinery, this formal–informal organizing committee has since worked hard to mobilise for the formation of an international informal economy organization where Ghana has been one of the most active forces. It seems to have made the Ghanaians an interesting target for other international aid at the national level. The dominant role of women traders will also have appealed to donors with a commitment to gender emancipation, like Sweden and particularly Denmark. Their support has concerned

research and information dissemination. In addition, in the case of the Hairdressers and Beauticians Association, donor support (from the Netherlands) was said by its interviewed leader to have been prominent. It may be suggested that donors seem to be attracted, not least for administrative reasons, to use the established labour unions as a means of channelling their support, in view of their assumed superior administrative, accounting, and auditing routines. The market and street traders' associations have been particularly successful in getting donors' attention. Co-operation with worldwide networks, like Street-net and WIEGO, Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing, has reinforced this orientation. The Ghana case thus points to the role of international co-operation in motivating the labour unions to support and affiliate organizations in the informal economy.

In comparison with Nigeria, links between the labour movement and the organising efforts in the informal economy in Ghana have been more successful. It is far from clear to what extent such cooperation adds to the capacity of the organizations to confront the state over policy. In the specific case of the tailors, no such organised links seem to exist. The national coverage and ambitious programme of the Tailors Association is impressive. The leadership, however, may be too anxious to be in the good books of the Government to assert itself as an effective pressure group.

Organising across the divide: The wider debate

The engagements of Nigeria and Ghana's trade unions with organising in the informal economy reflect a new international focus to which we will now briefly refer for context. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the Global Union Federations (including the International Textiles, Garments and Leather Workers Federation, ITGLWF), as well as other actors in the international labour movement are all concerned with the rights and welfare of informal workers, especially as neo-liberal globalization policies support 'flexibilization' and outsourcing. Unprotected, 'precarious' work is increasingly central, obscuring the distinction between the formal and informal economies and threatening the achievements of organised labour. By insisting on basic rights for workers also in the informal economy, trade unions are defending themselves against the rolling back of union rights that is a part of the neo-liberal agenda. This is reinforced through the 'Decent Work' programme of the

International Labour Organization (ILO), comprehensively outlined in 2002. Workplace rights and social protection apply equally to all, including those who work in the informal economy (ILO, 2002). The self-employed and the small entrepreneurs are often scattered and face difficulties in forming coherent organizations. In 'Making the Law Work for Everyone', the UN demands legal reforms to help 'formalise the informal', seeing the formal economy with its state-backed modes of regulation as a norm that should be extended (UN, 2008). Support for the informal economy is not just a question of poverty alleviation, this report argues, but can be expected to generate economic growth by raising productivity and mobilising new markets. In programmes of 'Corporate Social Responsibility' (CSR), companies reluctantly respond to international pressures to respect the rights of workers, being obliged to extend their responsibility to include subcontractors in the informal economy. 'Global Framework Agreements' (GFAs), initiated and monitored by the global unions, similarly expect companies to abide by agreed work-place standards (Croucher and Cotton, 2009). The consumer movements in the advanced industrial countries provide additional pressures on TNCs to take conditions in the informal subcontracting economy more seriously. In some cases, consumer organizations are allies of the labour movement, as in the 'Clean Clothes Campaign', and receive direct support from trade unions (e.g., in Sweden). The potential role of the workers in monitoring the effects of consumers' intervention is the main argument advanced on their part (Sluiter, 2009).

A final issue that has drawn international attention is the right to social protection as an important aspect of the basic rights of workers. It has been addressed in recent research undertaken by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (Mkandawire, 2005; Bangura, 2007; UNRISD, 2009). Conditions in the informal economy have also been studied by the Brooks World Poverty Institute (Barrientos and Hulme, 2008). Those who are outside contributory, employment-related support schemes create a major problem. Wage-work related modes of social protection are inherently irrelevant to those who have no income from which contributions can be drawn. . Their lack of stable incomes and their dispersed positions in small scale units of production, all contribute to the problems of building viable financing systems to protect these categories of producers. .

The provision of social protection to the self-employed and small-scale entrepreneurs of the informal economy requires, in our view, that the state takes an active part in supporting collective forms of savings and in the provision of social services to all. Will joining the labour unions provide an opening in this direction? Only, we think, if such ventures across the formal-informal divide serve to enhance their joint power to put political pressure on the state to ensure social services for all. While donor funding may help in strengthening organizational involvement on both sides, it is only likely to bring sustainable results if the joint organizational advantage is being used to alter the nature of state power in society.

With the current threat to the labour movement, both sides stand to gain from joining hands in making the state more responsive. There is scope for alliances across the formal-informal divide. It is not clear, however, to what extent Ghana's achievement in this respect points to a way forward. We are impressed with the way in which trade unions have engaged themselves with market women and other self-employed groups, providing them with an umbrella for autonomous organising that may well have boosted the bargaining power of all involved. Yet, was it primarily a marriage of convenience? To what extent did it reflect substantive alliances aiming at a joint confrontation of state policies? The Nigerian case suggests that effective alliances depend on the ability not only to identify common interests across the formal-informal divide but also to do so as part of a wider strategy of mobilising in civil society (Beckman, Hansson and Sjögren, 2001).

LASCO and alliances in civil society

As elsewhere in Africa, trade unions played a central role in the anti-colonial struggle, being the best-organised groups in civil society (Andrae and Beckman, 1998/99; Beckman, Buhlungu and Sachikonye, 2010). Industrialization, mostly import-substitution, facilitated the growth of unions in the early post-Independence period. In recent decades, the oil economy in Nigeria has allowed for a massive increase of public sector members while unions engaged in manufacturing have declined. In the late 1970s a strongly interventionist military government created a uniform union structure, an organizational monopoly, compelling all major employers to deduct union fees at source. However, subsequent attempts by the state to control the unions have been largely futile,

despite successive banning of the union leadership. The textile workers' union was crucial in resisting federal control in the 1990s. While labour legislation has been liberalised to allow for more labour federations in 2005, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) has retained its position as the dominant union body. In 2007, the leadership position was taken over by the large teachers' unions.

In order to intervene politically, unions need to boost their popular support. In October 2009, a meeting was held in Labour House in Abuja, the headquarters of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) by LASCO, the Labour-Civil Society Coalition, to plan a rally. It was the last in a series of seven rallies organised in different geographical zones, beginning in Lagos, the former capital city, in late May. The demands on the Government were three: an upward revision of the minimum wage, electoral reform, and a stop to government plans to privatise 'downstream' petroleum marketing. Civil society organizations, that is, primarily NGOs with or without a membership base of their own, emerged as major players at the time of military rule, largely as an alternative channel of public opinion in the absence of parliamentary representation (Ya'u, 2010). With the collapse of military rule, their function was less obvious, not the least to foreign donors who provided much of the funding.

Nigeria returned to 'civil rule' through general elections in 1999, generating expectations of 'dividends of democracy'. These expectations were soon disappointed and the 2003 elections were generally judged to be grossly rigged in order to consolidate the rule of former General Olusegun Obasanjo. The 2007 elections were as later evidenced also rigged, this time in favour of his sickly, handpicked successor, Umaru Yar'adua. The elections were accordingly met with a mixture of outrage and despair. The failure of the new government to take credible action on the report of a high-powered, non-partisan committee on electoral reform added to the uproar (Uwais, 2008). In particular, the NLC and its allies saw an independent Electoral Commission as a prerequisite of free and fair elections. Although governments, at both state and federal level, retained much of the scope to manipulate election results, the appointment of Attahiru Jega with a record of great integrity, formerly the president of the Academic Staff Union (ASUU), to head the Electoral Commission in 2010 was seen as great victory by the unions. While the 2011 elections were far from unproblematic, they were widely considered the best Nigeria ever had.

The price of petroleum products had long been a major rallying point for the Labour-Civil Society Coalition. Adams Oshiomhole, President of the NLC from 1999 to 2007, resisted Federal attempts to raise the local price in line with world market prices as required by the World Bank (Beckman, 2002; NLC, 2010). Ahead of the 2007 elections, the Government had agreed to freeze the prices. By ‘liberalising’, the ‘downstream’ trade in petroleum products it sought, however, to divest itself of all responsibility, leaving the issue of prices to the operators in the market. The situation was aggravated by the failure to revive the country’s three refineries, despite major public investment. The massive imports of refined petroleum from elsewhere were too lucrative to members of the Government to allow for a revival of local production. The NLC and its allies took a firm stand against both privatization and the deregulation of petrol prices and the increase that was expected to follow (NLC, 2010).

Reaching out to organizations in civil society has a long history within the Nigerian labour movement. One of the key grievances of the NLC in the late 1980s and early 1990s was the disengagement from its earlier cooperation with the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), and the Academic Staff Union of the Universities (ASUU) (Beckman, 1995). As the NLC was revived in 1999, having been banned in 1994, labour-civil society cooperation was supported financially by the European Union through the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. As external funding dried up only organizations that were themselves anxious to ally closely with labour kept sending delegates to the occasional meetings. The formation of a Labour Party was turned primarily into a trade union matter but failed to have any significant impact on the parliamentary process, except providing an occasional platform for gubernatorial candidates that had been discarded by one of the dominant political parties (Beckman and Lukman, 2010).

The Labour-Civil Society Coalition was used for wider popular mobilization over the petrol price. As in the case of the Labour Party, LASCO was most firmly established in Lagos, the former capital of the Federation where it also drew on market women and militant youth groups. In the case of the LASCO rally in Lagos in May 2009, for instance, market women used their networks to have major markets closed. The core of Labour’s civil society allies in Lagos were the human rights and pro-democracy NGOs, some

membership-based such as the Campaign for Democracy (CD), and the United Action for Democracy (UAD). Many key human rights groups, like the Civil Liberties Organization (the CLO), were based in Lagos (Ibrahim and Ya'u, 2010). They had their own interest in cooperating with labour that was seen as having superior national reach and organizational influence. Due to this and in accordance with their socialist aspirations, they attributed a special role to the mobilising capacity of the working class. Some civil society groups had links to organizations in the informal economy. The Automobile Technicians' Association (NATA), for instance, with its members of roadside mechanics, vulcanisers, and auto-body painters participated in LASCO in its own right.

The NLC sought to widen its own base. It was badly affected by de-industrialization, privatization, and the spread of more 'flexible' forms of labour contracts and a "One million more members" campaign was launched in January 2008 in order to "arrest the drastic decline in unionization" (NLC, 2008). A working document spoke of the "complacency and lackadaisical attitude" of union leaders because of favourable labour laws that made workers automatic members and compelled employers to deduct union dues. Unions were depleted without new members being brought in. Much needed to be done. Recruiting from the informal economy was seen as one opening. The National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas (NUPENG) had organised service attendants at petrol pumps and the textile union (NUTGTWN) was reaching out to the tailors. Overall, however, organising in the informal economy was seen as an area "where we have registered near absence" (NLC, 2009). In 2010, organizations in the informal economy came together to form a Federation of Informal Workers of Nigeria, FIWON, with Gbenga Komolafe, as its National Secretary. Although symptomatic of both union concerns and new forms of international involvement, the relations of the new Federation to both LASCO and the NLC remain to be seen.

Nigerian trade unions look for allies when confronting governments over wider policy issues. Yet, the substance of its outreach is only in an infant stage, often more symbolic than substantive. Groups in the informal economy, especially market women, have been ritually invoked as part of such efforts in union appeals for wider political support. Recent developments in society, intermittent crises of union rights, the decline in union membership

as well as the self-assertion of artisans, traders and other groups in the informal economy, including the tailors, underscored the importance of rooting union action more firmly in society. Beyond the problem of declining union membership, it involves both the need to defend union rights and to extend the impact of popular democratic forces on the direction of government policies. To these issues we turn in the concluding section.

Conclusions: Alliances across the divide

An organised informal economy is essential for the advance of a popular democratic agenda. On their own, at least in most African countries, wage earners constitute only a small minority of the active population, although trade unions in particular may claim a wider popular mandate. In their efforts to influence governments and the direction of development, both trade unions and their civil society allies need the support of those in the dominant informal economy. Primarily it is a matter of engaging with already existing forms of organization.

We see nothing wrong with trade unions seeking to recruit producers in the informal economy as members, especially if full respect is shown to their own organizational efforts. The experience of Ghana's market women and other groups in the informal economy in affiliating to the central bodies of the labour movement may provide useful examples. To what extent can trade unions and their civil society friends enhance the popular democratic standing? Numbers (membership) may be less important than the popular democratic content of the alternative alliances that they can sustain in confronting the shallow control of the political elites. All parties to such alliances have their own internal democratic frontiers. This is as true for the Kaduna tailors as it is for the textile union. Trade unions may be unable to recruit more members unless they can protect those they already have, for instance, by fighting casualization and labour brokerage. No amount of infusion of new members from the informal economy is likely to compensate for a failure in this respect.

However, alliances across the formal-informal divide are essential for the democratization of politics. Formal and informal workers have common interest not only in ensuring the basic preconditions for production, e.g. access to water and electric power. They also protect and advance the rights to organise independently.

Trade unions serve as role models. Collective bargaining in large workplaces has made them more powerful. They also have a special role because of the way wage earners are inserted in the national economy. On their own waged workers are few and trade unions reach out to other groups, mostly NGOs, in confronting the state. In addition, such groups are weak and alliances across the formal-informal divide may therefore be critical in enhancing their joint power. This, as we see it, is the wider significance of the attempt to pull the tailors into the labour union. The tailors themselves, however, need to advance their political agenda, developing both the productive environment of society and protecting the welfare of the members, including the right to contest state power.

Endnotes

1. Gunilla Andrae, Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University (e-mail gunilla.andrae@humangeo.su.se) and Björn Beckman, Department of Political Science, Stockholm University (e-mail bb@statsvet.su.se)

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