

Poverty of Casualization of Labour in the Nigerian Public Service: Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana in Perspective

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Abstract

*The monetization policy initiated by the federal government of Nigeria in 2003 eliminated some job designations such as cleaners, labourers, security guards, caterers, stewards, messengers among others from government employment. Since then this category of employees is engaged on casual or contract basis, with the beneficiaries hoping to alleviate their poverty conditions. This study investigated whether or not income poverty has actually been reduced among these casual employees. Analysis in the paper was predicated on the **Theory of Surplus Value** originated by Karl Marx in 1860 to explain capitalist exploitation. The study utilized the descriptive research design underpinned by the case study method using Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana. Qualitative primary data provided the largest volume of data for the study and was derived through the structured interview method involving 13 respondents who were subgroup leaders within the three groups of casual employees studied namely: cleaners, labourers and security guards. The results of the analysis revealed that casualization of labour, though enhanced employment among this category of workers by about 50 percent, declining and irregular remuneration as well as inferior and dehumanizing working conditions combined to destabilize and diminish income leading to deterioration in the poverty conditions of the group. The study recommended that the National Assembly should exercise oversight and checks on MDAs to ensure compliance with the relevant labour laws that prevent exploitation, while civil society and human rights organizations should come to the rescue of casual workers by organizing sustained campaigns against exploitative and dehumanizing labour practices.*

Keywords: Labour Laws, Nigerian Public Service, Federal Polytechnic, Bureaucracy, Labour Unions, Poverty

Introduction

The neoliberal capitalist principles that were encapsulated in the Washington Consensus policy recommendations and their implication on poverty, unemployment and income, particularly in the Third World nations, provoked a global debate among scholars, practitioners and policy makers. The policy package canvasses a restrictive or minimalist state with a change in the configuration and role of government and its principal agent, the bureaucracy (Heywood, 2007; Basu, 2012; Sapru, 2013). It advocates a paradigm shift from government to markets where contracts and competition play a greater and leading role resulting to outsourcing of employees on casual or contract basis which, the promoters argue, translates to public expenditure cuts of government, and eventually access to more employment and income thereby mitigating poverty. Critics of the Washington Consensus package

counteract this position arguing that it exacerbates and deepens the poverty, unemployment and income inequality crises ravaging developing countries (Naim, 1999; Stiglitz, 2003; Sahn, Dorosh and Younger, 1997). Fasina (as cited in Iyayi, 2004) states that global capitalism or liberalism orchestrates attack on the working class or labour force in the forms of reduction in the number of public servants, government departments and institutions under the guise of minimal government, the reduction in or pegging of wages and allowances among others.

This paper sets out to contribute to that debate. It examines the employer-employee contract behaviour within the casual contract arrangement and the impact of the entire contract on poverty alleviation among the benefiting workers. The broad objective is to demonstrate the exploitation of labour and exacerbation of poverty through the instrumentality of casual labour. The paper lends credence to and upholds the opposition view that casualization does not mitigate the poverty situation among benefiting individuals, instead it inflicts numerous labour injuries such as wage decrease, exploitation, deplorable working conditions, job insecurity, a bleak future career and so forth, which tend to exacerbate poverty among the affected group of employees in the federal public service. The study uses Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana (referred to herein after as Polyunwana) as a reference case.

The 2003 public service reform initiative of the Obasanjo administration which ushered in financial and structural reforms such as monetization, workforce compression, downsizing, outsourcing and casualization was in response to the Washington Consensus agenda. Olaopa (2008) notes that job designations such as labourers, cleaners, security guards, drivers, caterers, stewards among others were disengaged from the federal public service. Since then, workers who provide these services are outsourced on contract basis by Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) thus changing the status of such workers' to casual employees. However, the outcomes of the application of the outsourcing or casualization policy seem to swing the pendulum of the debate in favour of the critics. Available data on the implementation of the reforms indicate a plethora of disastrous consequences on the affected employees in terms of wage decrease, irregular payment, delay in payment, irregular work hours, job insecurity among numerous other forms of labour exploitation and travails that tend to aggravate employee poverty.

Poverty among the working class in third world nations is an indisputable phenomenon and Nigeria is no exception. Media reports and statistics indicate that there is high incidence of income and material poverty among employees of both the public sector and private organizations. Most employees including those enjoying permanent tenure of office and job security can hardly afford the basic necessities of food, clothing, healthcare, decent family accommodation and quality education for children due to poor remuneration.

The casual workers experience a worst case scenario in the workplace or organizations that hire their services. They earn lower wages than their regular counterpart yet are irregularly paid, enjoy few or no on-the-job benefits, work under poor conditions and environments, are without job security and so subjected to frequent lay-offs, and do not have access to labour unions. Amid all these travails, the questions that plague the mind and need to be addressed are: Does casualization mitigate poverty among the affected employees? To what extent has casualization alleviated poverty among the benefiting employees? Has casualization of manual labour increased employment of desiring citizens? These questions and many other related issues have engaged the attention of this paper.

Literature Review

Casualization of labour means hiring labour on a temporary or non-permanent basis. It connotes engaging the labour power of individuals on a short-term or for a short period. Hall (2004) defines casualization of labour as the act of engaging workers on a temporary or non-permanent basis. The ILO (2007) explains that a casual worker is one who has a precise employment contract which is expected to last for a short duration determined on the basis of understanding of the prevailing national employment circumstances. Casual work is an unprotected form of employment that does not enjoy the legal protection often available to permanent employees (Okafor, 2011). O' Donnell (2004) refers to a casual employee as one engaged for a period of not more than 6 months, during which the beneficiary receives daily pay. Casualization is variously denominated as casual job or labour, contract staff, temporary staff, seasonal labour or employment, undocumented labour, outsourced labour (i.e. labour supplied by sub-contractors), on-call workers (called in to work only when needed), zero hours contracts (workers not entitled to any minimum number of hours of work) (Young, 2019).

Trends in Casualization of Labour

The popularity of casualization of work can be traced to the 19th Century Industrial Revolution in Europe which elevated capital over labour thereby undermining the labour power and in some respects even dehumanizing labour. During this period, factory workers received daily pay according to the number of hours spent on the job and the output of labour invested. Longer hours with more labour investment attracted higher remuneration.

Globalization of capitalism catapulted the prevalence of casual labour. The spread of global capitalism underpinned by neoliberal policies of limited government, deregulation, privatization, outsourcing among others has promoted the rise of casual labour in both skilled and unskilled jobs. Entrepreneurs or owners of capital, as well as managers of organizations and labour constantly look for fresh ideas, skills and competencies while individuals or owners of labour frequently change jobs in search of either extrinsic job factors or conditions like higher monetary compensation or intrinsic motivation such as self-improvement, self-fulfillment and self-determination (Clegg, Kornberger and Pistis, 2008). Buchanan and Huczynski (2004) note that casualization is a new wave of labour management which offers workers limited choices, with shorter hours of work accompanied by lower pay while availing managers access to alternative ideas, skills and expertise. Theron (2005) agrees that the utilization of employees on a short duration contract in lieu of the standard, sustainable employment practice is certainly a new global phenomenon.

Casualization of Labour in Nigeria

Casualization of labour in Nigeria can be traced to the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of 1986 which instigated the collapse of the domestic industrial sector, leaving most factories to operate below minimum capacities (Fapohunda, 2012). Aladekomo (2004) and Alozie (2009) had expressed a similar view pointing out that casualization in the Nigerian labour market is an aftermath of the SAP in the late 1980s, with the adverse effects of downsizing and retrenchment of workers. Since then casualization has been deeply entrenched and is widely practiced in Nigeria. Labour exploitation through casualization is pervasive and on the increase in both private and public sector organizations in Nigeria (Esieboma, 2017; Eyongndi, 2016). Kazeem (2004) buttresses this position stressing that

casualization of labour is not only contemporary but also controversial in Nigeria due to its spontaneous spread across public and private sector organizations, with an estimated ratio, as the ILO (2007) notes, 3:1 casual to permanent workers. The implication of this is that the number of casual employees is fast increasing across organizations and sectors compared to permanent members of staff. About 80 percent of labour is engaged on casual basis in Nigeria (Anokwuru, 2006). The Blueprint (2014), estimates that 70 percent of Nigeria's workforce in the private sector is casualized. Casual labour is growing at a worrisome rate, with a preponderance in sectors like telecommunication, oil and gas, banking, insurance, and mining (Fapohunda, 2012; Blueprint, 2014). The Blueprint (Op Cit) further indicates that 50 percent of workers in the telecommunication industry and cement factories are on casual fringes. In the oil and gas industry, for instance, Danesi (2012) reveals that there were well over 14,000 casual or contract employees compared to a paltry figure of a little over 23,000 permanent workers in 1991.

The increase in and sustained use of casual labour is also attributable to global economic slumps or meltdowns like that of 2007 which put many firms in financial distress culminating in layoffs and loss of jobs especially in third world nations. Casualization is thriving as a result of high unemployment occasioned by the global economic and employment crises rocking developing economies (Blueprint, 2014). The economic downturn or recession that hit Nigeria between 2016 and 2018 also rendered many people who were previously either on permanent employment or in business jobless thereby intensifying the spate of casual labour in sectors like banking and telecommunication. In the tertiary education subsector in Nigeria, the number of casual workers particularly in the sphere of manual jobs has become prevalent since the monetization era, underscored subsequently by periods of intermittent economic fluctuation.

The Move against Casualization

Globally, Convention 153 of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which also applies to Nigeria as a member, abhors any form of discrimination in the workplace. This portion of the law views casualization as out of tune with labour best practices in the 21st Century and should be eliminated. Article 15 of the African Charter provides for equitable and satisfactory conditions of work, as well as equal pay for equal work for all persons across countries in the continent (as cited in Bamidele, 2011). Domestically, Section 7(1) of the Labour Act, Cap 198, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 1990 and Section 17(3) (b and e) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) both frown at and prohibit unfair and unjust treatment in any workplace arrangement, and guarantee commensurate pay for labour investment. However, discrimination still persists between permanent and temporary employees in the Nigerian labour market (Okafor, 2007). This menace attracted the attention of the Nigerian House of Representatives which passed a bill in 2020 seeking to amend the Labour Act to prohibit and criminalize casualization of employment or workers beyond 6 months. The bill also prohibits outsourcing to third parties and prescribes appropriate penalty or punishment for defaulters or offenders (Aytogo, 2020; Baiyewu, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The **theory of surplus value** was adopted to advance explanation and understanding in this paper. The theory was coined and expounded by Karl Marx in 1860. Marx expressed the firm opinion that value is generated by the labour power expended in the production of goods and services. Surplus value is the excess of labour over wages in a capitalist system. In other words, it is the balance

between the labour power (what labour has produced) and the wage paid by the employer, which Marx referred to as profit. Since capitalism is driven by profit maximization through exploitation of labour, capitalist bourgeoisie constantly and continuously seek to extract surplus value from employees by paying less wages in comparison with the amount and value of labour expended (Heywood, 2007). Ake (1981) explains the notion of surplus value exploitation more lucidly stating that the proletariat (labourers) is hired on the premise that they accept lower wages than their actual labour investment, that is, they are contracted to work only if they submit to exploitation by the bourgeoisie. Marx noted that “employees must receive less value in wages than they created in profits, otherwise no profits would accrue” (as cited in Clegg, Kornberger & Pistis, 2008).

Capitalist drive for exploitation during the Industrial Revolution prompted the introduction of the casual labour practice which has intensified under globalization. The reasoning is that since labour is a commodity at market price, it will become surplus and therefore cheaper if it is devalued through casualization. Harvey (2005) observes that firms operating on the neoliberal principles prefer to engage employees on short-term contracts thereby creating high personnel turnover which permits easy layoffs that reduce production costs and boost profits. Thus, casual workers are paid very low wages, are not entitled to any form of work benefits, suffer inferior working conditions, lack job security and can be laid off without notice or explanation since they do not belong to trade unions and are not protected by labour laws and regulations. Klein (2001) criticizes private sector organizations especially the transnational corporations (TNCs) that prevalently engage in this practice in the developing nations for behaving irresponsibly by employing subcontractors who pay low wages, provide poor working conditions, and potentially unhealthy and abusive environments.

This scenario has infiltrated the bureaucracies of many developing countries where capitalism holds sway. (Young, 2019) acknowledges the existence of the practice in the public sector. Sapru (2013), states that under capitalist bureaucracy the human element becomes an object of manipulation in order to perpetuate exploitation. In the Nigerian public service, for instance, the advent of the monetization policy has exposed many workers to the unpalatable act of casualization. Casual workers especially of manual job orientation are employed by third-party contractors (an arrangement referred to as outsourcing) who, sometimes in connivance with the management of MDAs, usually subject this category of workers to unfair and undignified labour practices. Esieboma (2017), remarks that casualization of labour is a traumatic and dehumanizing practice which deprives the affected workers of several basic rights. It hurts workers interest which is why the practice is described as modern-day slavery or enslavement and impoverishment of the worker (Anokwuru, 2006; Blueprint, 2014; Young, 2019). Fapohunda (2012) notes with dismay that casual workers occupy a precarious position in the workforce which comfortably and effectively affords them the status of new set of ‘slaves’ and ‘underclass’ in modern-day capitalism.

The attributes of worker manipulation, domination, deprivation and exploitation inherent in the surplus labour accumulation theory illuminate, buttress and underpin analysis in this paper. The fact remains indisputable that increased and sustained casualization of labour subject it to all forms of unconventional labour practices ranging from miserable emoluments, job insecurity, inferior working conditions to denial of freedom of unionization, which erode the bargaining potency of labour, exposing it to extensive exploitation and debilitating pauperization. This tends to aggravate the vulnerability of the employees, raising the unemployment and underemployment levels (Anugwon, 2007). This in turn exacerbates and perpetuates poverty especially among unskilled job holders or informal sector employees in Nigeria. It is upon this fulcrum that this paper revolves.

Methodology

The paper adopted the qualitative research approach using the single case study design and utilized the structured interview method which served as the main source of primary data. The population of the study was not well educated and could not fully appreciate the issue under study hence the structured interview schedule was preferred because it restricted the respondents' answers and prevented confusion. The interview involved three groups of casual employees (security guards, cleaners and labourers) of the polytechnic. Within each of these groups, there were subgroups created by the employer. The labourers numbering 17 were predominantly men employed to clear grasses on the campus. They were divided into three groups, each headed by a leader. The cleaning group comprised mainly women who were engaged to sweep offices, lecture halls, workshops, laboratories and major roads. They were 67 in number and divided into nine groups, each also headed by a leader. The third group represents the security guards who were made up of both men and women numbering 120. They provided campus security and were headed by a Chief Security Officer (CSO). The 13 leaders of the groups, therefore, constituted the sample size of the study and were labeled A-M for purposes of identification, consistency and anonymity. Participants from the labourers group were labeled A-C, the cleaning leaders, D-L and the security participant, M. This afforded the opportunity for the interview to be conducted on a person-person basis. Before the interview commenced, its purpose was explained to the participant and consent for participation sought. Anonymity and non-disclosure of responses was also assured hence their views were neither voice-recorded nor video-recorded or personal names needed. The interview schedule consisted of 16 questions and was conducted for two days, each lasting for 10 minutes, with full note-taking. Secondary data were also derived largely from unpublished documentary materials like contract documents, payment schedules, staff nominal roll and posting schedules.

Data Presentation

This subsection presents a summary of the data gathered for the study using the interview schedule. The abridged interview transcript is as presented:

Question: Who employed you, Polyunwana or contractor?

Responses: All the interviewees responded that they were employed by the contractor.

Question: How long have you worked in Polyunwana?

Responses: Respondents A, G, I answered "7years" while respondents C, D, E, F, J, K, L answered "since 2014" and respondent H answered "since 2015", meanwhile respondents B and M said they were permanent employees of the polytechnic but sacked and converted to casual employees in 2007.

Question: Who pays you?

Responses: All the respondents answered "the contractor".

Question: How much are you paid?

Responses: Apart from interviewee C and M, the rest of the interviewees answered that they that they were paid #10,000.00 presently but #18,000.00 previously. Interviewee C answered that he was

paid #12,000 presently but #20,000 previously. Meanwhile, respondent M said that he was on a salary of #8,000.00 in 2007, which was increased to #15,000.00 and later reduced to #10,000.00 in 2015.

Question: Are you paid monthly?

Responses: All the respondents answered “yes”.

Question: Are you paid regularly?

Responses: All the interviewees responded “no”.

Question: Is the pay prompt, that is, as at when due?

Responses: All the respondents answered “No”.

Question: Were you told the amount of money you would be paid at the time of employment?

Responses: Respondents A, C, D, E, H, I, J, K, L answered “no” while respondents B, F, G, M answered “yes”.

Question: Have you received increased pay since you started the job?

Responses: All the respondents answered “no”.

Question: Has there been decrease in your pay since you started the job?

Responses: The rest of the respondents answered “yes, from #18,000.00 to #10,000.00” while respondent C answered “yes, from #20,000.00 to #12,000.00.”

Question: If “yes” in question 10, were you told why your pay was reduced?

Responses: All the interviewees answered “no”.

Question: Do you have some days off your job?

Responses: All the participants answered “no days off”.

Question: Do you buy the working tools yourself?

Responses: All the participants answered “the contractor supplies the tools”.

Question: Are you happy with the job? If “yes” or “no”, why?

Responses: Respondents A, B, D, E, I, K, L answered “yes” and added that they were happy with the only because they were employed while respondents C, F, G, H, J, M answered “not happy” due to poor or reduced pay.

Question: Do you want to continue with the job or stop?

Responses: All the participants answered “yes” they would continue with the job due to absence of other job alternatives.

Question: Is there anything you would like your employer to do to improve the job?

Responses: All the respondents answered “increase in salary”.

Findings and Discussion

Casual workers in Polyunwana are engaged by third party contractors under the authority of the institution’s management. The number of employees to be recruited at any point in time is determined by management because management funds the payment of salaries. In addition, the recruitment process is based more on patronage than merit. Comparatively, more people have been employed under the casual arrangement than when those job designations enjoyed a permanent status. The statistics indicate an upward of 50 percent employment thereby justifying the neoliberal claim of job increase. Nevertheless, the employment seems less gainful due to several imbued worker-exploitation and deprivation tendencies that have deepened income poverty and inequality among the beneficiaries thus holding sway the argument of the neoliberal critics.

Casual employees in Polyunwana work under unconventional labour practices and inferior working conditions. This finding agrees with that of Okafor (2007) that casual workers are deprived of or denied several labour rights such as freedom to unionize, freedom to legitimate and organized strikes, liberty to peaceful protests and so forth in gross contravention or violation of conventional labour laws. They work from Mondays to Fridays with neither off days nor any form of leave. Even expecting mothers (pregnant women) and nursing mothers do not enjoy maternity leave. Employees who intend to be off duty are compelled to privately negotiate replacement for those days or risk pay. Working implements like brooms, cutlasses, parkers and so forth are provided by the contractor but in some cases, workers who ran out of supply of such tools are required to make out-of-pocket purchase without guarantee of re-imburement by the employer. Young (2019) describes these conditions of work as dehumanizing and humiliating.

The casual employees receive ridiculously low monthly salaries due to stagnation in pay and persistent pay cut. They are not entitled to any other pecuniary work benefits yet the salaries are irregular and paid at the contractor’s whims and caprice, without any fixed payment period. Sometimes, salaries are not paid for many months. For instance, during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, the casual workers were not paid salaries for up to seven months (April to October) (Field data, 2020). There is also no standard wage grading system or payment temperate among this category of employees as all the workers receive the same pay irrespective of the number of years put in by the individual worker. The contractor is at liberty to peg wages and reduce them but is not under any obligation or compulsion to increase. This is probably why there was a whopping pay cut from N18,000.00 to N10,000.00 in 2015 (Field data, 2020) without restoration of same or any other increment as at the time of this study. This further explains why income poverty is very high among these employees compelling most of them to resort to begging for lift to and from work or transport fares from the permanent employees of the polytechnic.

The study equally discovered that in spite of the dehumanized and undignified treatment the casual workers were undergoing on the job, none of them wanted to leave the job. They all wanted to continue with the job since, according to them, there was no better alternative. This simply confirms the principles of the surplus value theory that willful and deliberate exploitation of labour using casualization completely erodes its bargaining power and leaves it in perpetual and devastating penury.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The practice of outsourcing employees on some job designations in the Nigerian public service though has increased employment, it has exerted monumental consequences in the forms of debilitating income poverty, widening income inequality and dehumanizing working conditions, among the benefiting class of workers as evidence from Polyunwana presented in this paper suggests. This clearly lends credence and convincing support to the anti-neoliberal perspective that the Washington Consensus policies will adversely affect (or disastrously impinge on) the labour force, threatening job security and distabilizing wages thereby worsening the income and inequality crises bedeviling Third World nations. It is, therefore, expedient that the President assents to the bill passed in 2020 by the House of Representatives prohibiting and criminalizing both outsourcing and casualization. It is believed that this will free the affected workers from the shackles of exploitation and deprivation which will go a long way in mitigating their poverty conditions. Meanwhile, the National Assembly should exercise result-oriented oversight on MDAs to stop the violation or breach of labour laws. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Human Rights groups should collectively intervene by organizing sustained campaigns against labour exploitation and dehumanization.

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