

Can union organising help save Nigeria's textile industry?

Trade Unions in Transformation: A Case Study of the National Union of Textile, Garment and Tailoring Workers of Nigeria

Ismail Bello

Funke Omoniye Johnson is the founder of Mama Tee Fashion and Saidat Taiwo Oshodi is the proud owner of Sai Tai Enterprises Nigeria Limited. They are both self-employed tailors based in Lagos, Nigeria's bustling commercial capital. Between them, they have amassed a total of 55 years in business. One would expect this is enough to propel the growth of their business, ensure their financial safety and secure their future. Instead they are struggling to keep their heads above water due to the continuous decline of Nigeria's textile sector.

It is for self-employed tailors like Johnson and Oshodi that the National Union of Textile Garment and Tailoring Workers of Nigeria (NUTGTWN) continues to fight, in the hope that one day the industry will regain its glory days. However, the NUTGTWN is also engaged in its own battle to stay relevant in a very unpredictable sector. Own-account tailors need the NUTGTWN to defend them on the policy frontlines, while the NUTGTWN needs informal workers in its ranks to ensure its power base and relevance in the larger trade union movement.

At its peak in the 1980s, the Nigerian textile industry was a vibrant and thriving sector, boasting more than 150 textile factories and employing over 350,000 people. It was the third largest in Africa after South Africa and Egypt, and Nigeria's "second largest employer after the government," according to *Trade Union in Transformation: A Case Study of The National Union of Textile, Garment and Tailoring Workers of Nigeria*, a report by Ismail Bello, deputy general secretary of the NUTGTWN, published by the German foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES).

With an annual growth rate of 67 per cent between 1985 and 1991, and an employment rate of approximately 25 per cent of Nigeria's manufacturing workforce, this period is often described as the textile sector's 'golden era'. At the time the NUTGTWN was regarded as one of the most powerful and influential unions in Nigeria. At its peak, its membership included over 75,000 workers, enabling the union to "mobilise on critical issues like wage negotiations, defending workers' rights, improve working conditions and seeking industrial justice for its members," says Bello.

But “the ascendancy of neoliberalism in the 1990s as the framework in which economic policy is set,” led to “market liberalisation and economic deregulation, with attendant consequences for local industries, particularly the textile and garment sector.” Speaking to *Equal Times*, Bello further elaborates: “The current state of things started on a massive scale in the mid-1990s. In 1997, Nigeria became a signatory to the World Trade Organisation, which meant that Nigeria fully liberalised the textile market. Before then, the Nigerian textile market was largely safeguarded and protected. But the membership of the WTO opened the space for textile imports at a time when the machinery in the industry was ageing and it was not prepared for the massive competition it witnessed.” According to Bello, “the impact was almost immediate and dramatic,” leading to years of factory closures, job losses and general decline. In addition, “the internal issue around electricity supply, availability of funds and protecting the local market,” all played a part in the sector’s slump and stagnation.

New strategy for survival

Over time, the decline has had a reverberating effect: a workforce of over 350,000 in 1980 stood at just 27,000 in 2016, while the NUTGTWN’s membership has dwindled by more than half to approximately 35,000. With a shrinking membership of industrial workers – which meant loss of power and clout – the NUTGTWN needed a strategy to ensure its survival, one that would also help transform and strengthen its position within Nigeria’s labour movement and its ability to influence government policies and affect change at a critical time.

As a result, the NUTGTWN decided that reorganising internally and “expanding the scope of its membership base beyond factory workers to include self-employed tailors” was one way to achieve this goal. “For a union to look at a new terrain beyond the factory walls to organise people who work on their own was new. It was something that drew attention, and was a very striking development,” Bello says.

He explains further: “If the union had sat back and just watched [the decline of the textile industry], its structural power would have diminished. So to organise the self-employed tailor was a way of compensating for the decline in structural power and build on associational power to ensure the union maintains its relevance in collective bargaining and representation of workers.”

So how does the NUTGTWN help self-employed tailors? According to Oshodi, it gives him a voice. “Alone, the government won’t listen to you but when you have the support of a mother union you are affiliated to, the government will definitely hear you. They also speak for us on issues like double taxation [state and federal taxes] and power supply.” For Johnson, who has been a NUTGTWN member for over a decade, the union has been central to her professional development: “Apart from getting us organised, they conduct seminars and conferences on leadership training, new trends in fashion, business and financial literacy on how to survive when we no longer have the capacity to keep working, and how we can benefit from each other.”

As well as training, Bello says the NUTGTWN helps self-employed tailors by engaging with the government on the issues most important to them. “[For example] the way illegal textile imports affect the textile manufacturing, it also affects the self-employed tailor. If garments are illegally imported into the country, where will tailors have the opportunity to showcase their skill?” Securing suitable work spaces and dealing with the impact of foreign imports is also a key issue for Nigeria’s informal textile workers. Johnson and Oshodi tell *Equal Times* that their trade has become more difficult with the import of fabrics and garments from other countries, particularly China, which is notorious for producing sub-standard counterfeits of local designs. Asked if a ban of Chinese imports would help rejuvenate the industry, Oshodi is emphatic. “I’m 100 per cent sure of that. They in China have access to power supply. We have to buy diesel to power our generators in order to be able to ensure production. This leads to higher prices. If the government can come to our aid, I think the garment and textile industry will be resurrected and things will be fine for the ordinary man.”

Unfortunately, Bello knows that the challenge facing the NUTGTWN is protecting its workers in the absence of protectionism. “In the age of globalisation, the country’s hands are already tied to all kinds of agreements – multilateral and bilateral. On regular basis, we engage with the government at all levels. Recently, the Nigerian government came up with a new industrial revolution plan.” Bello says the plan, which aims to turn Nigeria from a net importer of goods to a self-sufficient manufacturing nation, is “likely a product of our advocacy and the advocacy of other people who are concerned about industrial revival in Nigeria.”

Bello says there are a number of issues which the government should tackle as a matter of urgency. “We think it’s important the electricity issue is fixed, for the imports that come into the country to do so legitimately and with the right quality. They cannot violate copyright issues because there are designs that are local, which people steal and smuggle into the country. All of those things kill businesses and affect the industry.”

Implementation is also key. “What’s left is to be able to act on some of the ideas that have been put forward,” says Bello. However, he remains positive that Nigeria’s textile industry can once again be competitive if the right environment is provided. “As a union, we are not giving up.”

by Belinda Otas