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Policy Alternatives  
Manitoba Office

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## Youth Voices

### Strengthen the Ranks: Labour Movements in Canada and Nigeria

**A**s an international student in Canada, the stark difference in labour laws and provisions between Canada and my home country Nigeria embitters my heart. On a brighter side, my knowledge of these two contrasting realities has shaped my perspective. Studying the history of unions and their evolution in the Canadian workplace tells a story; a story of struggle, of determination spurred by an unflinching willpower to see change for better. One can boldly hope that with more activism and grass root participation, the laws and more importantly their implementation, even in Nigeria, can improve if modelled after the Canadian story. One reason could be the interlocking nature of social movements and how infectious a wind of change in one nation can spur a trend in others. By this logic, unions even in Nigeria can strategize on how to win more rights for their members and prospectively appeal to more non-unionized workers.

The workplace can be viewed as a microcosm of society having dynamics similar to the larger society. In the Nigerian and Canadian electoral climate this year, significant changes were recorded that could apply to the workplace if appropriate steps are taken by unions in driving the needed social change. Electoral democracy emphasizes the collective involvement of all citizenry and enshrines the dominance of the rule of law: this also ought to apply in the workplace. Just as electoral democracy ensures that no one citizen wields prerogative powers in society, so should industrial - or workplace - democracy, as supported by unions, strive for

parity in the balance of power within the workplace. In emphasizing the interconnection between these two forms of democracy, political analysts argue that electoral voter turnout is influenced by union density. Therefore, change in one could suggest a possible change in the other.

The recently conducted federal election is one for the history books on several grounds. Most profoundly, the change of personnel at 80 Wellington Street came as a huge sigh of relief to the many Canadians who not only voted but engaged other citizens to participate in the electoral process. I have been involved in student politics at the University of Manitoba since 2013, and I perceived a sudden spur of political activism on campus around this election. This was evidenced by the positive turn out at several discussion panels hosted on campus. In classrooms and across campus, the vibe and eagerness to participate in the electioneering process was unprecedented (in terms of other student government elections). Indeed the electoral process this year produced glimmers of hope for unions as a growing population of youth advocated for social change.

A similar electoral trend was recorded in Nigeria this year. The power of incumbency syndrome (as I like to call it) since the inception of democracy in 1999, has tipped the odds in favour of the incumbent party for every election - even before the polls opened. In April this year, this jinx was broken. A pro-

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# page 2

gressive party tapped into increasing frustration and social unrest towards the ruling party and championed a mantra called Change thereby appealing to the majority of the populace. Opinion polls a few weeks prior to the election predicted victory for the incumbent however a frustrated but determined electorate trounced the oppressive force of state machinery. A convincing victory for the people was recorded similar to the Canadian federal election.

Elections such as those recently held in Canada and Nigeria provide hope for further social change. Increased participation yields improved discussions about social issues, which is necessary so citizens can question government policies, including those that affect workplace democracy.

A quick analysis of the labour law in Nigeria shows a pitiable and epileptic state of labour activism. The ever-growing army of local and international corporate power backed by state machinery is bent on repressing every form of unionism or collectivity amongst workers. The reliance on international monetary organizations like the IMF places an extra burden on the government to enact structural adjustment policies that open the market for international and local corporations to exploit the workers. In retaliation, unions in Nigeria frequently embark on strikes albeit with little result. Commenting on the pitiable state of the fight against the international capitalist barrage of attacks on labour, John Odah, a former National Secretary of the Nigerian Labour Congress posits “national labour standards have often been identified by the World Bank as rigidities impeding the effectiveness of market-oriented reform”. As a result, national governments who are desperately looking for foreign direct investment would appear to have readily succumbed to pressures from international investors who usually insist on relaxing (lowering) labour standards and workers’ rights. One interesting, if not intriguing, fact is that most of the investors/companies

who seek lowering of standards have come to Nigeria from countries where standards are much higher - with stiff penalties for non-compliance. In actuality, labour laws in Nigeria are merely notional, existing only in paper but barely implemented. Although there is no guarantee that increased political participation in both countries can lead to definite results for unions, it is expedient that unions from both countries seize the moment and push hard for much needed changes in labour legislation.

My final words are directed to critics of unions in Canada. Under the immediate past federal Conservative government, bills like Bill C-525, Bill C-377, and increasing back-to-work legislation as well as other similar provincial legislation passed over the past three decades were all fashioned to debilitate unions. Whose interest is the government serving in vigorously pursuing the anti-union agenda even though it is proven that the union advantage accrues benefit to the whole of society? Improved industrial democracy reflects the health of democracy in society. Stronger work place laws positively impact the society as a whole as families earning more income pay more taxes and boost the economy as a whole. Just as electoral participation birthed the desired change in both countries, societal support is needed to strengthen industrial democracy not just in Nigeria but Canada also.

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