

Review

Management and labour relations in a context of competitive work environment: Evaluating the process of interests mediation in an oil refinery, Nigeria

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This Paper evaluates the normative assumptions of participation and joint consultation in an Oil Refinery, Nigeria, in the context of work re-organisation. In response to heightened operating challenges in the Oil Industry, Management and Labour in the corporation have adopted a new approach to labour relations in the corporation; Joint Consultative Council (JCC) has emerged as institutional framework to cope with the emerging challenges. However, evidence from the study suggests that these are not without implications for both the workers and the unions. Drawing on extensive in situ observation and ethnographic study of the refinery, in Nigeria, the paper evaluates how the workers re-articulated their interests, as something different from the management's normative assumptions. This paper explores the impact and implications of new forms of "co-operative" working relations, not only on workers and their lived-work experiences in the corporation, but also on the unions. It provides an evaluation of evidence and empirical findings that offer an understanding of processes and outcomes of "social partnership" in the refinery. The study, which was essentially theory-led analysis and context-based evaluations, drew largely from Labour Process conceptual remit.

Key words: Interests mediation, management, social partnership, labour process, workers sense-making.

INTRODUCTION

In utilizing much of the theoretical strands within labour process analysis, this article accounts for social partnership model, (Lucio and Stuart 2004, 2005, 2007; Oxenbridge and Brown, 2004), in making explanations for 'actors motives' of interests, the processes and the assumed benefits of "co-operative relations" in the context of workplace regimes, and organisational restructuring. While eschewing an essentialist binary understanding of a "good" or "bad" intention behind partnership, the article adopts a framework that is

sensitive to the specific context and dynamics which define the social processes and manifestations of interests' mediation. In response to operating challenges of prevailing products markets, and technology of production in the oil industry, Management and unions in the refinery have become more innovative in their respective relations, in response to these challenges.

The article is organised along these lines; section 1 provides the conceptual and methodological approaches which underpinned the study; section 2 describes the

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background of the research setting; section 3 and 4, which are significant to the body of the study, provide a contextual evaluation of the processes of social partnership, which supposedly promoted common interest in the corporation, and upon which the conclusion for the Paper is drawn.

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL UNDERPINNING

Taking on Labour Process Theory (LPT), this paper therefore analyses the motives, dynamics and processes that underpins interests' articulation in the Oil Refinery. As noted by Lucio and Stuart (2005), concerns for uncertainty jointly shared both by the Management and labour, remained central to the evolution and utilization of partnership in the contemporary workplace regimes. According to them, understanding of the "risks should be at the heart of any discussion on partnership-based approach to employment relations" (Lucio and Stuart, 2005:8). In their analysis, two sets of organizational related factors that shaped the "environmentally" induced risks were identified; "distributive risks", determined by the material conditions of production activities of the organization, and the ensuing "political risks" as shaped by the prevailing managerial practices and its legitimacy.

However, sharing these risks is not without contestations between the Management and labour, and has remained source of problems between the partners, even within the micro socio-process and context of contemporary workplace. As a result, 'new' partnership arrangements in the emerging social democracy of the workplace are laden with "instability" and "unpredictability" requiring pragmatic approach from the social partners in the workplace.

In utilizing the "risks factors" model, Belanger and Edwards (2007) develop a framework for understanding what they refer to as "workplace co-operation". To Jacques and Edwards (2007), key structuring conditions influencing the new workplace regime and partnerships are; the technology of production, products markets and underpinning institutional arrangements. These were identified to possess the potentials to generate different patterns for interests' articulation and outcomes in the context of workplace operating environment. Conversely, the potentiality of these structuring conditions to generate positive-sum outcomes for both labour and capital has been found to be limited and problematic.

Indeed, the concern for the feasibility of new arrangement to 'usher in' 'mutual benefits' continue to resonate in the commentary of contemporary labour process analysts (Kelly, 2004; Stuart and Lucio, 2005, 2007). While much of these analysis are hinged on the processes of "corporate level political exchange" (Terry, 2003), embedded are dangers for trade unions (Kelly, 2004). Within the context of such corporate level political

exchanges, significant opportunities may have been given to trade unions to challenge managerial prerogatives. Even in spite of this, trade unions still operate at a 'gambling' or 'risky' level in which the "substantive outcomes" for them may even be less, as against what the rhetoric envisages.

In Deakin et al. (2004), normative assumption of 'gamble' or 'risks', embedded in workplace co-operative relations, are also identified with such institutional processes, on which political exchanges are carried out. These are also characterised by reciprocity in which parties are obliged to recognise the legitimacy of each other in the partnership. Acknowledgement of each others side of mutual exposure to risks, it is assumed, will limit a "low-trust attitude" that might otherwise be associated with lack of recognition of the legitimate position of either side, (Deakin et al., 2004). As analytical tool within the debate on partnership at workplace, Abbot and Kelly (2000) had argued that the concept can contribute to our understanding of the sociological analysis of employment relations; as shaped by both political and distributional exchanges at workplace.

The risk factors or gambles are conceptualized to be influenced by workplace distributional and political exchanges which are also seen as "endogenous responses" to the operating environment of the organization, Jenkins, (2007). And as noted by Lucio and Stuart (2005), the endogenous responses are themselves flux and unstable, with due considerations for agency and choices of partners, which are broadly influenced by complex dynamics of the macro socio-economic factors. Thus, workplace regimes of social partnership are embedded in the current epoch of "capital" restructuring, which characterised modern workplace relations.

The implicating influences of "exogenous factors" to which the endogenous responses of political and distributional risks are entwined are what Jacques and Edwards (2007) refer to as "structuring conditions". According to Jacques and Edwards, workplace structuring conditions i.e. technology of production, products market and institutional regulations generate the different dimensions of endogenous responses. And as noted by Lucio and Stuart (2005), the sociological insights into these relational dynamics provide an understanding of workplace regimes and different patterns and outcomes for social partnership.

This argument, though had featured as explanatory tool in many authors contributions, (Dunlop, 1958; Batstone, 1988, cited in Jacques and Edwards, 2007), it remained essentially "formal-orthodox" explanatory framework for understanding how shared interests were generated and mediated, in containing and diffusing conflicts in the workplace. A more rigorous innovative conceptual tool for analysing workplace contestations surrounding the concept of social partnership for interests' mediation; its processes and outcomes, has been located within the labour process analysis. Cressey and MacInnes (1980)

had earlier pointed out the contradictions inherent in employment relations. They argued that, since labour can only gain limited access to the means of production, its interests in the maintenance of the relationship rests on the “viability” of “interests mediation”. Further analytical insights are also derived from Kelly’s (2001, 2004, 2007) work. Kelly’s conceptualization and analysis go beyond the notion of “mutuality of interests”, to point out how the interests of labour and Management are ever divergent; opposing and conflictual.

Lukes (2005 cited in Jacques and Edwards 2007) explains how actors’ interests in the context of workplace restructuring have assumed the dimensions of ‘multiple’, ‘conflicting’, and ‘ambivalent’. In other words, it should not be taken *a priori* that “agents” behave according to a predetermined set of interests; “interests in context” are constructed and re-enacted in response to the exogenous factors. However, according to Jacques and Edwards, (2007) the notion of “concerns” in the context of such mediations should replace “interests”; indicating how capital and labour define their respective orientations and expectations through “agentic-action”. Actors assess what is beneficial and what is not, in context. The agentic assessment throws up the contradictory nature of employment relations. By this understanding, the competing rationales of both management and labour may sometimes run parallel and sometimes mutual, but never remained fixed over time or predetermined, hence the concept of “indeterminacy of interests” in social partnership” (Kelly, 2005).

Kelly (2004, 2005) provides us with more innovative and explanatory model for examining the utility of partnership to the unions and workers; indicating emblematic presence of union’s marginalization. Indeed, as noted by Lucio and Stuart (2004), “the politics of partnership have a complexity that may not always be beneficial to trade unions or their members” (Lucio and Stuart, 2004: 421). Kelly (1988) had earlier noted that the rhetoric of partnership may eventually be “hollow”, if taken into consideration, the hostility and marginalization experienced by unions.

Research context

The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), where this research was carried out between April and August 2008, was established on April 1977 by the Federal Government of Nigeria with the mandate to manage the operational aspects of the oil industry in Nigeria. NNPC is a successor organization to the Nigerian Oil Company (NNOC) which was established in 1971. In addition to its exploration activities, NNPC developed operational interest in refinery, petrochemicals and product transportation as well as marketing. Between 1978 and 1989, NNPC constructed petroleum and petrochemical refineries in Warri, Kaduna and Port-Harcourt.

However, in the last two decades, NNPC, as one of the largest federally owned corporations in Nigeria, has emerged from one of the far-reaching organizational restructuring in its thirty year history. In 1978, the corporation was decentralised into twelve strategic business units (SBUs) and subsidiaries, covering the entire spectrum of the corporations operation. As an autonomous federally owned corporation, NNPC is regulated by the Department of Petroleum Resources- a Department within the Ministry of Petroleum Resources.

Over the years, the operations and activities of NNPC have centered on coping with challenges of both internal and external developments in the oil industry, in particular with regards to its products and technology of production. The concern has been how to make its products compete favourably in the world market, both in terms pricing and quality. As a result, the business units and subsidiaries of the State Owned Oil firm have been reorganized (unbundled) into companies with NNPC as a holding company.

Port-Harcourt Refinery Company (PHRC), Eleme, Port-Harcourt, Nigeria, is one of the twelve subsidiaries of NNPC. It provides petroleum refinery service to the nation. It is also charged with the responsibilities of development and production of specialized petroleum products. The operations and activities of the company are carried out by two Departments within the company: Production, Engineering, and Total Quality Control Dept and Administrative, Personnel and Manpower Development Dept.

In Pursuit of Common Interests? Social Partnership at NNPC

The historical trajectory and organizational context of the corporation provide the background for understanding the concept and dimensions of partnership in NNPC. Qualitative research in form of semi-structured interviews with workers and unions’ leaders were conducted. Observation of process of production and evaluation of documentary evidence such as procedural agreements relating to joint consultation with unions were carried out. The Chairmen and Secretaries of the two branch unions were interviewed. Also, informal interviews were held with two Senior/Management Cadres of the organisation, who were the convenors of the corporate level Joint Consultative Councils (NJCC) meetings. These interviews provided the contextual understanding of deliberations and normative values associated with social partnership; from the stakeholders’ perspectives.

Organizational context at NNPC that allowed for the introduction of social partnership became significant at a time when the organization had to respond pro-actively to the highly competitive products market and operating environment. Management’s initiatives behind JCC demonstrated a conviction that improved performance in terms of quality, and production processes, rest on the

basis of “joint work” arrangements between the unions and Management. Thus, justifications for “working together” were constantly hinged on the “prevailing precariousness” of the corporation in the face of operating challenges, and therefore used this as a “pedal” for a re-integration of attitudes of unions’ leaders and workers. Even though unions and Management at NNPC appeared to have been operating on strong bargaining positions, with wide bargaining scope covering substantive issues, the challenges of competitive operating environment of the oil industry, in particular, and as this relates to product markets, technology, and regulatory framework, made the elaborate processes and concerns for JCC more compelling.

In the last two decades, NNPC had witnessed significant changes in terms of its labour process and work activities, defined and driven by management initiated partnership relations with workplace unions. Analysis from interviews offered an evaluation of both unions and workers view of partnership; its promises and limitations. This could only be gauged from the perspective of the unions and workers; as something different from the perspectives of the management. Analysis and evaluations of workers and unions leaders’ responses, significantly showed how on-going labour process at NNPC has been synonymous and explained as work arrangements defined and driven by compelling imperatives of operating environments. From this standpoint, consultations agenda must be tailored along these imperatives. JCC at NNPC has become institutionalised and remain “non-negotiable” as a framework; only the content, procedures and subject matters remain issues of contestations between management and unions.

In what follows here, the articulation of workers interests, and indeed trade unions positions and activities within the context of institutional framework of interests’ mediation in dealing with these challenges in NNPC are analysed and evaluated. Institutional structures and processes for interests mediations and efforts bargaining at NNPC; comprising the two branch unions in the organisation, Joint Consultative Committees (JCC) and other framework for social partnership are empirically analysed in terms of functions and expectations in light of emerging conceptual approaches. Work re-organisations and changes in the process of production, in response to heightened competitive operating environment, both at the corporate and refinery levels have become characterised and shaped by institutional processes of production negotiations, with diverse implications both for labour and management. Much of these challenges have entailed a ‘working together’ that takes care of the processes and outcomes of work re-organization. Consequently, formal co-operation has become institutionalised and assumed prominence at NNPC, within the established framework of work relations, comprising the unions and management.

Indeed, evidence of different forms of partnership on; “lean production”, (Kochan et al., 1997), “high-performance work system”, (Appelbaum et al., 2000) and “social partnership agreement” (Guest and Peccei, 2001; Lucio and Mark Stuart, 2004) point to “modernization” of institutional processes of workplace relations in the context of contemporary challenges, (cited in Kelly, 2004:267). Impact and implications of emerging forms of co-operative working relations on the employees working lives have also been examined by Babson (1995); the implications for trade unions and activities by Kelly, (1996, 1998, 2004). These diverse strands of analysis provide the basis for the evaluations of evidence that illustrate our understanding of the processes, and outcomes of partnership relations and agreements at NNPC.

In the emerging workplace regimes at NNPC, workers, through their unions leaders, in their experiences and orientations appeared to have been “enlisted” into the normative values of social partnership as “pact” towards protecting the interest of workers, and therefore as a major way through which the unions can continuously revitalize their legitimacy to the members. However, Kelly’s works (1996, 1998 and 2004) have drawn out the main elements of strengths and weakness in the processes, and outcomes of social partnership between labour and management. This conceptualization is further drawn into our understanding and evaluations of labour-management co-operation for “mutual gains” at NNPC.

It assists in assessing the core components of themes that influence the expected outcomes of partnership at NNPC. In the empirical evaluation, the following themes were analysed and evaluated in the context of institutional framework of partnership at NNPC; dimensions of unions concession to management on emerging managerial practices on work process such as productivity, and Total Quality Programs, teamwork and task flexibility, degrees and levels of unions rights to information and consultations over strategic decisions, job and employment security. Evaluation of workers experience on outcomes of Joint Consultations in the corporation, both at the Headquarters and Refinery levels were based on the data and responses generated through interviews and observations. The implications of the partnership arrangement from the workers’ perception were examined. From the wisdom of institutional structure and process upon which JCC was based in the corporation, it would appear as if the arrangement brought in “equal” or perhaps “mutual benefits” to both partners. However, our evaluations of workers’ experiences and perceptions on those key themes showed “asymmetry” in mutuality of benefits, and as something variant to what the managements would want to portray. The key themes used for the assessment and evaluations are; workers involvement in the JCC process, their perceptions of how the process assured them job security, their perceptions of unions roles, and levels of trust and participations in decision-making process at

JCC.

Based on interview held with the refinery workers, evaluations of their experiences were done in the context of the managerial initiatives and practices. While this was being done, it was equally acknowledged that even though JCC process at NNPC operates on indirect participation of workers through their unions, Managements normative assumption was that the “voice” of the workforce was being adequately represented. However, majority of the workers interpreted JCC as mechanisms for passing on necessary information and communication regarding managerial decisions. In reality, and as far as they were concerned, there was separation between “being involved”, and just receiving information regarding the corporation’s activities. The evaluations also showed that though the institutional arrangement fulfilled the communications needs of the Management, the refinery workers maintained a low opinion of it, in satisfying their important expectations such as job security, and the ensuing work intensification in the context of the refinery operations demands.

Thus, for the purpose of our understanding workers’ perception and work-life experiences in the context of work re-organisations and challenges in the corporation, there are two implications that could be inferred, one; while the refinery workers acknowledged the existence of the machinery of JCC as main means for canvassing for their interests, they demonstrated their agentic identity by showing reservations on the overall objectives and processes of joint consultation in the workplace. Secondly, our evaluations did show how perceived immanent job insecurity in the context of restructuring may have engendered low-trust, and indeed underlying doubts and pessimisms about the unions’ real involvement in mitigating untoward implications of managerial practices on their employability with the corporation. For instance, in the remarks of the refinery workers, they had expected their union leaders to fully utilize the machinery of JCC to pragmatically engage with the management on the diverse implications and “fall-outs” of managerial strategies and practices such as work intensification and job insecurity.

Critics of social partnership such as Kelly, (2004), Claydon (1998), Heery (2003) Tailby and Winchester (2000) have variously cautioned that beyond the managerial precepts and rhetoric surrounding the normative outcomes for both parties; it may have succeeded in reinforcing the ideology of the employer in the context of overall corporate objectives. It is in this characterization that Kelly’s typology is located. According to him, the balance of power within particular industrial relations institutions shapes the patterns of employment relations. In similar vein, dimensions and dynamics of labour management are contingent on such power relations. Partnership in the workplace is a power relations continuum, where at one end, exists, “employer- dominant agreement”. In Kelly’s evaluation, such social partnership

is marked by employer dominated agenda; primarily reflecting more of employer’s interests and “labour compliance” relations, rather than co-operations.

As contextual factors and variables influencing power relations, Kelly identifies such factors as; dimensions of the labour market, whether loose or tight, the degree of product market competition, the degree to which employer would have to depend on the employees for productive purposes, and the attributes of unions in terms of membership density, legitimacy and mobilization capability (Kelly, 2004: 272). From the point of view of this model i.e. power relations conceptualization, we would therefore expect to see different sets of outcomes, e.g. one that might reflect mutual gains for both parties- a labour-parity scheme, or the alternative; opposing type, that might reflect more dividends to the employer i.e. employer-dominant scheme. When operationalised, Kelly’s schema had guided this researcher in doing workplace investigation and empirical analysis of social partnership at NNPC. These are three key variables that shape the outcome of labour-management pacts, at NNPC, under the above theoretical considerations, (Kelly, 2004). First, at NNPC, where business imperatives have to compel Management to share information with workers on relevant issues, there is information sharing, and presumably a joint decision making process, (Freeman and Lazear, 1995). And when this prevails, workers’ representatives (the unions) often concede to redundancies and even job losses where need be, as might be proposed by the Management. Secondly, where parties realised that a route to “mutual interests” outcome must be shaped by changes in attitudes, a “trust variable” or integrative attitude guides union-management relations (Couper and Stevens, 1998, cited in Kelly, 2004:271). Here, the relations must be reciprocal for such attitudes of trust to be perceived as guiding the consultation processes. The third variable that shapes power relations in a context of ‘working together’, and one that deviates from the first two, occurs or come into play in “moments of economic” crisis facing the organization; when parties would have to deploy their respective power resource. And when there is imbalance in the power relations arising from economic circumstance of the organization, outcomes could be in favour of either of the parties. According to Cooke (1990 cited in Kelly, 2004:272), both parties might then have to seek out and construct new agreements around issues confronting the organisation. Quite often, in such circumstance, unions are more weakened in terms of power base and resource, which then make the employer secure more gains at the expense of the unions. Drawing on Kelly’s model therefore, changes in power resource could lead either party to a genuine co-operation (labour-parity), or employer coercion, and union compliance.

Kelly’s model was deployed as analytical tool in my evaluation of interests’ mediation at NNPC, it was evidenced that in moments of workplace restructuring,

and in response to emerging operating environments, NNPCs Management utilized these contextual circumstances to secure more compliance on various labour process regimes. In the context of the prevailing competitive labour and products markets to which NNPCs Management has had to respond, through production process prioritization, with attendant labour intensification, unions were increasingly compelled to moderate their stance and embrace social partnership.

With obvious "shift in power relations" (Kelly, 1996, cited in Ackers et al., 1996:83), unions continued to face the risk of being marginalised with limited roles within the system of workplace labour relations. Thus, the study assessed the outcome of social partnership in terms of implications on traditional patterns of collective bargaining, the scope of unions' involvement, and degree of unions' legitimacy, from 'shop floor' refinery workers perspective. Also, as noted by Jenkins (2007:635) the dynamics of workplace union-management relations remain an arena of contestations in terms of outcomes and expectations between labour and management. And the context, in which the arrangement is embedded, shapes the patterns of these contestations, the interests and motivations of the actors. The nature of distributive risks that were shared by parties influenced mutuality of substantive outcomes. While the potentials for more gains and benefits remain the concern of Management, much of the deficits remain the concern of unions and members (Lucio and Stuart, 2005).

Indeed, the relative "robustness" or "weakness" of interests' mediations is defined by the ideology and power-base of parties that are involved. However, as cautioned by Kelly (2005:636), an apparent robust partnership may serve to disguise current marginalization and relative weakness of the unions. Thus, as noted by Lucio and Stuart (2005:13), the "politics of partnership are both complex and "context determined", shaped by the dynamics of interests articulation of both labour and Management. This is more so given the peripheral capitalist mode of production in which workplace re-organization and labour process at NNPC are located.

Evaluations of social partnership arrangement at NNPC, in particular in the context of on-going restructuring and labour process realignment, benefit from the analytical conceptual models deployed by these authors. For instance as noted in Lucio and Stuart (2004), if attempts to identify mutuality of interests have become problematic in the context of competitive operating environment, "researchers analysis and evaluation must place the concept of "risk in the center of analysis". "Risks in context", may therefore be interpreted as the micro-social process of workplace regimes upon which distributive or substantive risks are negotiated and shared. Distributive risks are associated with the material conditions of employment relations, and social relations of production that are politically determined. Thus, locating and evaluating attitudes and responses of

partners to the workplace social process and risks, provides a more nuanced sociological account of motivations of actors, in particular, within the context of internalised competitive challenges.

Increasingly, at NNPC, organisation of work and labour process continue to face external pressures thereby requiring shifts in expectations and aspirations of social partners. For instance, employment security remains the prime concern for workers, and as such, concession bargaining would have to characterise relations through which expectations are narrowed down. Management leveraged on this to justify changes in work process. Also, while unions desire to legitimize and maintain their representational capability, the challenges of the bargaining environment remain a great political risk for them, (Danford, 2004). In the current dispensation, workplace regimes at NNPC have assumed a dimension in which innovative work practices and arrangement based on teamwork, total quality programs and flexible deployment of skills were implanted. And these have also been characterised with managerial assumptions about workers empowerment and autonomy.

It was in these normative assumptions that partnership relations were expected to engender a more positive climate. Indeed, Piore and Sabel (1984), Kuchan and Osterman (1994), Rogers and Streeck (1995) (cited in Ruchel et al., 2000) have all earlier written on these normative themes as hallmark of managerial initiatives at workplace, where Management would have to operate on the basis of competitive and diversified, flexible and quality-focused production process. However, as qualified by Jenkins (2007:638), "labour-management pacts in any context is never apolitical"; even integrative bargaining that seem to move relations beyond distributive concerns simply end up in co-opting the workers more into political manipulation of the management. As noted by Jenkins (2007:638), better communications does not make the workplace partnerships less vulnerable to managements dictates; "it does not insulate the workers against the vagaries of the product markets imperatives". To Boyer (2006 cited in Brewster et al., 2009), the connection between JCC and collective bargaining in the workplace is neither one of mutual exclusion nor complementary; they tend to co-exist. However, as clarified by Brewster, the effectiveness of each; either for the unions or management is not necessarily enhanced by the presence of the other.

The instructive point from this, for researchers, is contained in Lucio and Stuarts (2004), that in developing a research agenda that evaluate workplace partnership, we would have to be attentive to the internal micro-social of politics involved in decision-making that eventually shape the "strategic choice" of actors. In other words, the distinctive meanings and interpretations actors give to the arrangement are located in context. Context therefore matters in terms of multifaceted dimensions of all the intrigues involved.

Joint Consultative Councils (JCC) at NNPC, and the involvement of unions; a contextual analysis

In our evaluations of the outcomes of JCC and partnership arrangement at NNPC, in terms of implications on unions leadership roles and members' orientation, the research analysed the scope of unions involvement, recognition rights and legitimacy accorded unions from members, degree and extent of unions involvement in terms of consultation, communication and strength of decisions making abilities. These evaluations were done in the context of employer's strategies of work re-organisation and labour process control. At NNPC, the two branch unions; PENGASSAN and NUPENG, representing the Snr and Jnr Staff respectively, were involved in the consultation process. Stated clearly in the Procedural Agreements of both unions with the Management on Joint Consultations are the formal framework and process of the mechanisms. In Part 111, Clause 1 of the document, it was stated that "there shall be a body established by the corporation and the unions, to consult with each other". The terms and coverage of the Councils decisions "shall apply to employees of the corporation in permanent employment, and who are members of the unions".

At the corporate level of the organization, membership of JCC was made up of representatives of the Headquarters; comprising the Managers of the Administrative and Personnel of all the subsidiaries, Zonal Managers, and members of the Union Executive Council, and National Officers; who are unelected. The General Manager; Personnel or his representative of Managerial Cadre shall be the Chairman of JCC, Deputy Manager; Employee Relations is the Secretary, while the unions Chairman or his representative shall be the spokesperson for the union. A Meeting of the JCC shall be convened quarterly at any location of the corporation's plants or subsidiaries that is agreed upon by the two parties. Notice convening the Meeting of JCC shall also include the proposed agenda for the Meeting. Any item slated in the agenda submitted by either party shall be discussed with the Secretary (who is a representative from the management side), at least fourteen (14) days prior the Meeting. Impliedly, issues not contained in the agenda shall not be discussed during the Meeting. This clause, as demonstrated earlier in my evaluations illustrates the power relations and dynamic in the whole arrangement. Also, no more than four (4) issues shall be allowed under the (AOB). At every Meeting, the Council shall agree on the agenda for the Meeting. Quorum shall only be formed by not less than half of the accredited representatives of both management and the unions. Decisions taken at the National JCC shall be binding on all the branches of the corporations and the unions.

Similar structure and process are replicated at the corporations Subsidiaries and Refineries, to deal with local issues within the competence of the Managements at branch levels. The main aims of NJCC at NNPC are

stated as follows: to ensure consultation on matters affecting the well being of members of the unions' i.e safety, education, and medical and training on the one hand, and efficiency and productivity of the corporation on the other hand. To achieve the above, "management expects greatest measures of corporation from the unions and members on how best to attain higher productivity, by 'keeping the refinery running" (NJCC Convenor).

For much of the normative precepts described above, as contained in the institutional framework of interests' mediation in the corporation, it is instructive to note how this is equally embedded with power relations. Also, for all the 'mutual benefits' and promises presumably contained therein, there are, from the perspective of labour process analysis, conceptual and analytical implications which also explain the experiences and location of workers and the unions in the capitalist labour process.

Conclusion

In what follows here as conclusion, attempt is made to reconceptualise the normative discourse of social partnership, by focusing on how NNPC, through the agenda setting of the institutional framework of NJCC have succeeded in implementing the "strategic choices" it wants the unions and members to accept. From both the workers' and unions' perspectives and responses, the agenda-setting are limited and driven by those issues that ultimately favour the distinct "unitary perspectives" of the Management.

As tempting it is to assume that the presence of "micro-level" institutional process of interest mediation give workers the opportunity to insert their voices and concerns, the practical manifestation of the mechanisms tell little of the robustness of 'mutual gains', even from the workers perspectives. Much of the managerial discourse and processes of JCC had only succeeded in subsuming the unions into the "integrative discourse". It is therefore instructive for researchers doing workplace study to note that; while the objectives of partnership are essentially on its mechanisms and platform to provide workers with minimal say and contributions on matters affecting their workplace interests, this is equally circumscribed by the prevailing imperatives of existing workplace regimes that define the scope, agenda and issues to be discussed (Dundon et al., 2004). Indeed, in the context of challenges facing work organisations, the process and mechanisms of the framework of interest mediation might be "deep" or "shallow"; defined not only by the challenges itself, but also by the embedded power-relations. This remains a research implication for researchers doing workplace study.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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