

Workers' Education: A Tool for Workers' Empowerment

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Abstract

Workforce remains indispensable machinery through which goods and services are produced. Therefore, no society could succeed without having working class whose efforts are geared towards attaining societal development. The employment patterns and trends as well as technological changes of our society have called for continuous learning opportunities of workers to be able to fit in to the scheme of work dynamic situations and conditions. The welfare of workers and their family members is very important, in fact exploitation of workers of any form must be fought to enable workers gain their personality as individuals and members of the society. The position of this paper is that workers' welfare, whether at work or home will be greater improved when they are better educated, an illiterate worker not only faces a risk of work-loss but a very limited opportunity for re-engagement as well. He or she also receives better remuneration and self-fulfilled as well as attaining professional happiness. It is against this background that this paper advocates for workers' education as a tool for workers' empowerment through its specially designed programs; Literacy education, Vocational skills, labor education, pre-retirement education, leisure education, development education and computer education.

Keywords: Workers, Education and Empowerment

Introduction

It is a known fact that all over the world the workforce is indispensable machinery through which progress of a nation is attained. No government could succeed without having workers whose efforts geared toward attaining its programs. The society will continue to progress when efforts (both physical and mental) of such able men and women are directed towards production of goods and services required by that society.

When we say "workers" our consideration does not limit itself to workers in government offices and private establishment alone but also every individual whose efforts contribute to the national income directly or indirectly. The artisans, self employed persons etc belong to this consideration.

No doubt, the world is dynamic. This means that it changes from time to time. What had been acceptable yesterday may not longer be today. The method that adopted in solving certain problems in the past may not be applicable in resolving contemporary problems and issues. Therefore the world today has grown from Stone Age to automated age. This has therefore, required everybody to catch up with a fast moving train.

Workers, moreover, should be equipped with the latest technology that will make them more efficient in discharging their duties. Besides, it is imperative to prevent workers from being exploited by their employers whose major aim is to maximize profits at all cost, even at the detriment of the workers' welfare.

From the foregoing illustrations, this paper would assess the role of workers education in the process of workers' empowerment. For this purpose, we will examine the status of workers in Nigeria, nature and objectives of workers' education and justification for workers' empowerment. Attempt equally been made to offer some workers' education programs in the process of workers' empowerment with some conceptual clarification of key terms used in the paper.

Conceptual Framework

We have to look back historically to answer the question "who is a worker?" From the beginning, there have always been workers. In the ancient past, every living citizen was a worker for himself and family. He/she was a general kind of worker because then the world was quite small and relatively simple. There was little or no division of labor. For instance, the father was healer, teacher, feeder, defender, etc. for his family. Today these would be commensurate with hospital, school, productive services, armed forces, etc respectively. Moreover today, each of the latter is also spatially and temporally varied to meet the relative complex nature of contemporary society.

However, in what has been known as the modern era, ie 15th century to the present time work has gradually become highly differentiated and specialized as well as consequently bureaucratized. There had emerged a class of professionalized workers (ie those that were trained to work for others for money). What is apparent is that, a worker is a person who uses his/her mental and physical efforts for productive purposes. This productivity could be in form of goods or services. A worker may be working for him/herself or for others irrespective of where a worker belongs whether in private or public section, the most paramount thing is that his/her efforts are directed to the production of goods and services which in turn improves the national income.

Empowerment remains one of the important and frequent issue being discussed at the private and public sector.

Empowerment denotes equipping an individual with relevant and useful knowledge; skills, information, attitude and understanding that can assist him/her to take control of his/her affairs. Certainly, when one is empowered one will be able to be in charge of his/her life. To Kam (1996, 230) "empowerment emphasizes peoples power and participation in the raising of peoples consciousness' and changing the environment to eliminate the social constraints acting on peoples' live". In fact, when workers are empowered they would be able to take their destiny into their hands. This process will improve their productivity and quality of life as workers and members of society.

Workers' education is one of the areas Adult education explores to improve the lots of adults in our society. In a very simple way workers' education is that form of education offered for workers with the intention to improve the efficient and productivity of workers and members of society. Anyanwu (1987) substantiated this point

"The education given to enable workers to develop their productive capacities, to understand the day-to-day problems that may confront them in their work situation, to appreciate and appraise the activities of any organization which seek to protect their interest in their work relationship, and to contribute fully and effectively towards the development of the society to which they belong".

Status of Workers in Nigeria

An economy of a country is being managed by the workers of different categories of the society. An economy is the productive section of society, viz production, distribution and consumption of goods and services in the society. The productivity of the economy can be enhanced when the workers who serve as drivers are up to the task in terms of skills, technology, welfare, motivation among others.

The Nigerian economy has three vibrant sectors viz, the public, private and informal sectors. The public sector is that productive area where government is dominant i.e major employer. The private sector is the profit oriented area composing individuals and collective ventures. The informal sector is the area dominated by micro-enterprises and medium size industries. The area is minor in terms of capital, staffing and output when compared to the preponderance of business in the public and private sector. The sector is also minor regarding the status, especially in terms of the take-home pay of workers. Since this sector earns much less than the other sector, little wonder they receive much less remuneration. Workers in the informal sector include artisans and vendors especially those who are self-employed.

The public and private sector enterprises are like competitors in many field of endeavor e. g. Oil, Agriculture and Manufacturing. The oil industry is for now, the monopoly of the public sector, although private international specialist ventures, such ELF and CHEVRON, are involved in excavation. Our concern here is that a great number of low income workers are involved with the kitty gritty. Even though their monitory benefits are significantly more lucrative to counterparts elsewhere, they still do not get a fair remuneration within the oil world and therefore the element of exploitation is universal.

The issue is that both on the major and minor areas of our economy low-income workers receive the brunt of the production process. By far is this so in the informal sector which is largely involving the poor trading with the poor in a vicious cycle ie small-scale production (if any) and sale and which further leads to still small capital for still small-scale production and sale.

The global economy which is characterized with capitalism which alone was largely responsible for commoditizing labour work as well as bring about the realization that the average worker was exploited against the background that without such a worker social wealth could not have been created. Since this realization, there has been humanitarian concern for the workers (especially the industrial workers) either for himself, through his union, or by his organization/employers in terms of improving his condition of work and living. This certainly calls for empowerment of workers to enable them with stand the challenges before them.

Justifications for the Need of workers' Empowerment

New knowledge and skills: As earlier, pointed out that the world is a dynamic world and as such, workers need to update their knowledge and skills, as much as possible. New knowledge, methods, strategies and procedures will enable the workers to remain relevant in their work No doubt about it that methods in solving certain problems in the past may no longer be applicable in solving contemporary problems and issues. Largely, acquisition of new knowledge and skills will help workers remain efficient and current in the performance of their duties.

Exploitation: Exploitation is an advanced stage of deprivation. Literarily, exploitation means to use or utilize something. In this context, employers in order to achieve their selfish ends are utilizing workers. The concept of exploitation is the practices of capitalist economy whereby the bourgeoisies utilize the masses like machine to enable the former acquire wealth at the expense of the later. In fact looking at the condition of workers in this

country one will disapprove the degree of exploitation the workers are suffering from. For example the minimum wage is very meager; in fact the take home pay of workers cannot take them home. The situation is very relevant to a popular proverb that “*monkey day work baboon dey chop*” meanwhile when some people are creating wealth through hard work other people like Nigerian legislators and politicians are ripping the fruit of the labour. The environment is not at all motivating and encouraging for high productivity. Mostly, the workers become demoralized consequently dehumanized.

The situation that workers face after their service years is very pathetic. In most cases the workers entitlements do not come forth. Many retired civil servants do meet their death during the process of claiming their pension and gratuity. Even in recent time the new pension scheme was introduced where both employee and employer contribute for the pension of the employee and managed by a third party; pension management firms, people are not having rest of mind as no one knows what can happen at a later time to the scheme as happened to the previous ones. So many retired officers have become beggars because currently the pension they get is very small and in some cases the pension does not even being on time. This situation is very unfortunate. **Illiteracy rate:** Illiteracy is one of the greatest obstacles to individual and societal progress. So many workers are illiterates especially among those found in the informal sector of the economy and low-income workers. This problem affects them negatively as they are at high risk to exploitation either by the employers or their counterparts. Another problem associated with this is that the illiterate workers are likely to remain a level for a very long period as promotion is largely due to certain qualifications which illiterate worker may not possess. Mobility of labour will not be possible for an illiterate workers since moving from one occupation to another or from one place to another demands for some papers and skills which are virtually absent from illiterate workers.

Ignorance about unionism: Another reason why workers should be empowered is that of ignorance of some workers about significant role of union in the life of workers. Many workers show apathy to unionism. Some of them consider the role of union is unnecessary and unimportant and as such, their participation in unionism is very low. This situation has really harmed workers directly or indirectly as some workers serve as barrier to the activities of union. This situation is largely due to the workers wrong understanding of labour union.

In this context, we have several reasons to list and discuss. However, the point to make here is that, given the above example, what are significant efforts to empower the workers? Education has therefore been identified as the essential vehicle for the worker to improve his life and work situation hence workers’ education becomes a tool for workers’ empowerment.

Importance of Workers Education

Workers’ education is one of the ambits of adult education programs geared towards empowerment. There are many importance of workers’ education. For example Mre (1956) quoted by Barton (1982) argues that, workers’ education

“Major objectives are improvement of workers individual and group competencies and advancement of their social, economic and cultural interests, so that they can become current, wise and responsible citizens able to play a part in the union as well as a free society and to also ensure for themselves a status of dignity and respect equal to those of their groups or individuals.”

Workers’ education aimed at helping workers in understanding their problems and taking actions in solving them. It also helps workers to become positive thinkers and contented citizens. Through workers’ education the orderly development of workers in their union is ensured. It can prevent or stem any crisis in industrial relation, with it, general standard of living of workers can be raised. It enhances workers skills, knowledge, techniques, etc hence high productivity is ascertained.

In his contribution on workers’ education Imhabekhai (1998) submits that “workers’ education provides workers the opportunities to acquire new skills relevant to their day-to-day operations and also to renew outdated and irrelevant skills”. With those skills workers will become more proficient, efficient and effective in carrying out their official duties. In addition, workers’ education aims at producing an educated, informed, professional and self reliant group of workers whose eyes are opened and always at alert to resist any form of oppression.

If workers’ education can achieve all above said then there would be no doubt it can serve as a tool for empowering workers.

Some Proposed Workers’ Education Programs aimed towards Empowering Workers

The position of this paper is that workers’ welfare, whether at work or home will be greater improved when they are better educated. An illiterate worker not only faces a risk of work-loss but a very limited opportunity for re-engagement as well. She/he also receives better remuneration if better educated.

Then following programs are therefore designed to help workers attain a better welfare bargain for self and family whether he/she decides to stay in his/her current job or wishes to join another place of work.

Literacy education: this program is aimed at helping workers who cannot read, write and calculate in any language. The literacy skills will help illiterate workers engage in a meaningful bargain both in seeking job itself in the first place and in regaining any reviews of workers of working condition. In fact with literacy education workers would be safe guided from exploitation.

Continuing education: since the world is dynamic and things change everyday in both offices and industries for workers to remain relevant and capable of handling situation effectively the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, procedures, methods, information etc becomes imperative. This process demands for continuing education inform of training and retaining. Continuing education among other things provides opportunities for workers to be kept abreast of development in their work situation and adjust accordingly. This opportunity is available thorough on-the-job training and off-the-job training. In fact, when workers improve their professional status in this direction their life will change for positive

Vocational education: this aims at earning a living and empowerment for self-reliance (Umar,2002). This program will equip workers with different and relevant skills related to their job. It is therefore practical oriented. As such it will avail workers opportunities of acquiring the enabling skills that will assist them in handling machines appropriately. This program among other things gives room for training of workers in different vocational skills such as carpentry, vehicles repair, weaving, painting work, etc so as to profit workers even after their service years as self-employed persons.

Pre-retirement education: The policy as far as ‘work’ is concerned is that at certain years workers have to retire, at times some workers do tender their voluntary retirement letters to their employers. Retirement as we all know is accompanied with decrease in income, lost of contact with the colleague at work, boredom, sometimes illness as a result of idleness among others. The consequences from retirement in most cases do not go well with retirees especially decrees in income and adjustment to the life after retirement. Adult education as a humanitarian profession has provided for this group of people to ensure that do not face the challenges of retirement such unfavorable situation described earlier pre-retirement education as a component of workers’ education caters for the prospective retirees so that after their service year they will not be demoralized with untold situation. The program focuses on equipping the prospective retirees with necessary information and knowledge to meet the retirement with adequate preparation and enthusiasm. Adjustment strategies to life after retirement constitute an important component of pre-retirement education. Self-employment and entrepreneurial skills and vocation training as well as income management are the priorities of pre-retirement education. Considerable emphasis should be given to the above skills to enable retired workers becomes self-fulfilled and happy retirees.

Labour Education: labour education is the attempt to meet workers education need and interest as they arise from participation in union. It is education directed towards actions. It intends to enable workers be more effective as unionists to help them understand society and fulfill the obligations as citizens and to promote individual development. In fact,

“Labour education is essential for the achievement of industrial peace and harmony in the workplace. It engenders industries democracy and participation in making of decisions effecting the welfare of workers as well as other conditions of employment” (Imhabekhai 1998).

Leisure education: low-income or low-skill workers (including the non-skilled) whose work is usually very physical are very prone to fatigue and exhaustion. The irony is that although they require the most rest, they often have little opportunity for rest and leisure. Rest and leisure are essentially to recharge a worker for greater creative effort. Leisure is another word for recreation and this includes time for games, hobbies and other higher order pastimes. The argument is given the opportunity to indulge in leisure, such workers may not be able to partake as expected since they are already habituated (even addicted) to exceptionally hard and tiring work. This may do irreparable damage to their physical body, hence the issue of leisure and its education. They therefore need a forum to induct into a systematic way of experiencing leisure such that a higher productivity level is obtained from them, with little or no cost physically. Leisure has therefore become one of the privileges of hand-pressed workers, especially the low-income and lowly – skilled ones. It is in this regard that the liberal education model becomes imperative in workers’ education.

Development education: This program aims at equipping the workers with skills that will ensure that individual workers are flexible enough to retain and regain employment opportunities in the face of economic recession and liberalisation policies as well as the right for personal enrichment and development (kester, Omoregie & Adeyeye 2006:245). It was also emphasised that the idea of including ‘development education’ into any educational program for the working class citizen is informed by the need to provide a type of education which does more than informing and encourages active individual involvement in the developmental process (Kester, Omoragie & Adeyeye, 2006:245). Development education will empower workers to be able to struggle for addressing socio-political and economic problems of their society, which include the reduction of illiteracy,

poverty, misery, job insecurity and uncertainty to the barest minimum

Computer education: In the present time computer education has become a ‘must’ for anyone to survive in this ‘automated age’ where survival depends partly on computer literacy. Workers certainly require the skills of computer to be able to cope with ever dynamic situations and conditions of home and work.

Conclusion

Workers’ empowerment is an important weapon for increasing workers productivity and enhancing their living standard. In fact empowerment of workers in Nigeria can improve workers’ awareness towards their right. Incontestably optimum utilization of benefits and programs composed in workers’ education enterprise would lead to workers’ empowerment. Similarly, realisation of the above benefits by workers demands bodies like Industrial Training Fund (ITF), Administrative College of Nigeria (ACON), Nigerian Labour Organisations, employers of labour and non-governmental organisations to come to forefront in providing of workers’ education for up-liftment of workers.

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