

**BEING THE TEXT OF THE 2014 MAY DAY SPEECH PRESENTED BY
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LABOUR CONGRESS (NLC) AT THE EAGLE SQUARE, ABUJA ON 1ST MAY
2014**

Salutations...

Great Nigerian workers, on behalf of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), I have the honour of welcoming you to this historic May Day. It is a significant day and symbolizes the heroic struggle and sacrifices made by the global working class in the historic fight for decent working hours which culminated in the execution of four unionists in Chicago Illinois on November 11 1887. This was the historic origin of May Day.

The theme of this year's May Day is : **"Building Enduring Peace and Unity: Panacea for Sustainable National Development"**. The choice of this theme underscores the reality of our nation today. The challenges of insecurity continue to threaten peace and unity in our country. Yet, without enduring peace and unity, our nation cannot truly develop on a sustainable basis.

On the topic of this year's May Day, I intend to start by saying enduring peace and unity are critical elements of nation building, and nations are built by exemplary men and women and sustained by institutions that promote good governance and thus socio-economic development.

Peace and unity are vital for the survival and development of any nation, and are an important part of modern society. If we go back into history, we see that the world used to be divided into empires and kingdoms that are in rivalry. In the modern period, however, nations or nation states have replaced empires as the basic unit of human political organization and have fostered peace and unity to ensure peaceful coexistence and social economic development. As an integral part of the modern world, therefore, Nigerians must be rightly concerned about building enduring peace and unity.

National Security

In the past few years, the nation has witnessed unprecedented security challenges that have tasked our imagination, resources and temperament. From the Niger Delta to the northern-most parts of the country , we have had one form of violent conflict or another that threatened the peace and security of the nation. Kidnappings, armed robberies, smuggling, communal and sectarian clashes, oil theft

and human trafficking are rife. Unarguably, the most threatening of these is the insurgency in the North East. This has witnessed several violent killings, including attack on schools. One of the most trying of these has been the kidnapping of over 200 teenage girls at Chibok, Borno state. As Nigerians await the release of some of them still being held by the terrorists, our hearts bleed and we pray for their safety and release.

In all, scores of lives have been lost, critical infrastructure and properties worth billions of naira destroyed, and investor-confidence, shaken. There have been major displacements leading to unquantifiable human suffering and severe food shortages.

Beside the human and material cost of this "war" is another cost, the psychological cost. Every time a bomb goes off or the sound of a gun rends the air, something in us dies. The humanity in us is giving way to something sinister; a degenerate society incapable of human feelings or development, the perpetrators and the victims alike. I am afraid, we may lose our humanity and our society except something drastic is done.

We do not need any one to tell us that we have a serious situation on our hands. The war on terror does not seem to be going on well at the moment. Our security forces despite gallant efforts have suffered reversals, taking direct hits in their critical asset areas, raising concerns about their capacity or willingness to win this war. We are not unaware of the complexities of a war of this nature, but we demand better initiative and more commitment.

In spite of government's effort, the situation, particularly in the North East, is deteriorating. The initial gains of emergency rule, clearly have been lost and the momentum squandered. The Boko Haram elements have matured into a full-blown terror group striking at high-profile targets with devastating effect.

Indeed, the choice of targets, regularity of strikes, weapons used, co-ordination and sophistication of their operations make them not only the leading terror group but the group to dread.

We feel seriously concerned about the state of the nation's security infrastructure. In spite of the relative huge security votes in the past few years, it is weak and inadequate. We also believe conflicting political interests, ambiguous operational order and primordial sentiments are some of the factors undermining the counter terror war.

It is immoral to play politics with the lives of people. Accordingly, we demand an end to this unholy past time, this dirty politics. We must all rise in unison, shoulder to shoulder and confront this common enemy once and for all. We are almost certain that if any one was left in doubt about the universality of this war, the the Nyanya bomb blast erased all of that.

While we do this, it is important government confronts the root causes of this violence. Government must of necessity and urgency deal with issues of functional education, unemployment and poverty.

National Conference

In spite of initial misgivings from some quarters, the National Conference has got on to a good start. Nigerians have been talking and interacting. It is the hope of Labour that unlike previous exercises of this nature, the outcome will not only be a reflection of the decisions of of the people, but will be implemented.

The role of the government will be critical in this direction. As the convener and funder of the conference, government has a great role to play in ensuring the proceedings are transparent and subjected to the will of the people via a referendum.

Happily, Mr President in his inaugural speech did say that although there is no provision for a referendum in our extant law, the executive would work closely with the National Assembly to ensure the proceedings are subjected to a referendum if necessary. I believe the President deserves our support.

For us at Labour, the conference is a great opportunity to re-design a new Nigeria that meets our expectations, allay the fears and concerns of all its constituent parts. A Nigeria that is at once strong and robust and prepared to exploit and deploy the relative advantages of its constituent parts for the benefit of the country. It is an opportunity too good to miss.

We are also aware that some vested interests among the governors are mobilizing some delegates to force through the balkanisation of labour and the negation of a national minimum wage as currently enshrined in the constitution. It is certainly the machination of a few privilege few in position of powers at the expense of the teeming Nigerians. This is an attempt to keep Nigerians in perpetual slavery and servitude.

I strong call on Nigerian workers and the teeming wellmeaning Nigerians to rise up against these retrogressive moves.

Electoral Reforms

Comrades, less than a year from now Nigerians will be going to the polls to elect leaders that will govern them for the next four years. This inevitably brings to the fore the issue of credible elections for which we have consistently canvassed.

It is of utmost importance that the elections and electioneering processes are transparent and credible. We insist that votes must count. We have no business running a democracy if the votes do not count. It will not be acceptable to Organised Labour, if huge national resources are expended without justifying the end.

We find it disgusting and embarrassing that despite our experiences and huge resources expended on the electoral system, we have chosen to get it wrong most of the time while smaller nations are getting it right. Nigeria, we need not reiterate, ought to be the leading example in Africa.

We make bold to say the problem does not lie with the electorate but with those who seek political powers. We note with pain that the motivation for seeking, and the zeal for office is not service but vainglory and self-aggrandizement. The biggest business in town is political business. The reward is awe-some and bears no relation to the work done.

In the light of the following, we call for the full implementation of the Justice Uwais Report on Electoral Reform. Similarly, we demand that votes count in 2015. We advise politicians to play by the rules or there will be costs. Days are gone when workers folded their hands while fraudulent politicians violated and desecrated elections and electoral processes. We will no longer be by-standers. Nigerian workers will no longer be indifferent while some people toy with the destiny of this country. A stitch in time, they say, saves nine.

Energy

We have followed with keen interest the reform process in the energy sector which culminated in the sale of the power stations and related assets. The reform was premised on a profound improvement in service delivery. Remarkably, however, service delivery has plummeted, throwing the nation into darkness and raising further the cost of living and of doing business.

Increase in electricity tariffs are unabated

While we will not be drawn into the blame game between the players in the sector, we will urge government to settle once and for all issues pertaining to Labour relations. We also call for the development of manpower from the stock of the old staff of the Power Holding Company.

We recognize the fact that the overriding interest of any business investor is profit. However, we wish to caution that this interest should not be allowed to jeopardize other interests which are critical to the over all health of the investment. Sequel to this, the new investors should resist the urge to impose on consumers arbitrary charges, as doing so will not only alienate their customers but could turn the operating environment into a nightmare.

We believe an improved power sector is key to the creation of jobs and enhanced productivity.

Poverty

The recent damning verdict of the World Bank which places Nigeria among the world's first five "extremely poor" countries is a sad commentary on wealth distribution system in the country. The reason is simple. Nigeria has no reason to be poor with all its material and human resources.

The poverty situation in the land is real and grim. Over the years, government churned out laws, policies and programmes that disempowered and pauperised its citizenry, leaving a tiny clique protected. Today, we have just two classes of citizens: the super rich and the super poor. Even payment of wages and salaries are skewed against workers. The time has come to link the remuneration of political office holders to the salaries of workers in the public sector.

Comrades, we are into a new genre of poverty, intellectual poverty. Developments in the education sector which make it difficult for the children of the poor to access quality education is creating an army of educated illiterates. The cost will be huge and the consequences, unfathomable. The protracted strike action in the education sector, first by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), and now by lecturers in the Polytechnics and Colleges of Education, would have been unnecessary if government musters the political will to address the deplorable state of education in the country.

We call on Mr. President to demonstrate once again, the same commitment in settling the ASUU strike to decisively intervene in saving education in the Colleges of Education and the Polytechnics.

Government should be prepared to fund our institutions of learning . We reiterate our call for the allocation of 26 per cent of the budget to the Education Sector as recommended by UNESCO

The Economy

Comrades, you will recall that of recent, the Gross Domestic Product of Nigeria was rebased, resulting in the economy becoming the largest economy in Africa. While we appreciate the technical basis of the rebasing, the size of the economy serves to highlight the skewness of the distribution of income in our country. Wealth and income are increasingly concentrated in a tiny proportion of the citizens. This situation, if unchecked, portends dangers for peace and stability. Government needs to evolve policies to promote inclusive growth and a more equitable society.

While we note that the 2014 Budget has been christened a Budget for Job Creation and Inclusive Growth, we find no details in the budget to promote these objectives. The proposed budget for 2014 amounts to a total expenditure of ₦4,642,960,000,000. Of this sum, ₦399,687,801,891 represents Statutory Transfer; ₦712,000,000,000 is allocation for debt service (both domestic and foreign debt). Non-debt Recurrent Expenditure has an allocation of ₦2,430,665,361,597. The residual of ₦1,100,602,836,512 constitutes the Capital component of the budget. This represents a mere 23.7 percent of the total budget.

The problem is further compounded by the fact that a high proportion of the capital allocation in several MDAs goes to service Administrative Capital as opposed to Development Capital. MDAs routinely load their capital budget with such items as office furniture, office equipment, generators and vehicles. These, invariably represent administrative capital for the comfort and convenience of the bureaucracy and do not impact on development. This very low proportion of the Capital budget and the high proportion of administrative capital in the capital allocation raise fundamental questions regarding the capacity of the budget to promote growth and development which can impact positively on poverty reduction, job creation and general improvement in citizens' welfare.

Unemployment continues to be a major challenge of the economy. All levels of government must rethink their policy measures in tackling the problem of unemployment. What the economy requires is not short-term or temporary job

creation. Sustainable and/or enduring jobs cannot be created by re-charge card selling, job creation by gambling in the name of “You Win”, graduate street cleaners, graduate road traffic officers, vocational training of a few hands, and so on. What the disturbing degree of unemployment requires today is direct investment by the State and preparedness to fight corruption, head-on.

Job creation is a function of providing for the basic goods and services which the masses need. For example, a program of bridging housing deficit of about 17million units would lead to massive job creation. A program to ensure that 23 million young persons who are out of school (including about 11million who are out of primary schools) are brought to school would involve building classrooms, employing teachers, nurses and other classes of employees and professionals. A policy that all members of the armed forces source their shoes and uniforms from Nigerian companies would translate into millions of jobs in the textile and rubber industries, just to mention a few. Direct government investments in the welfare of the people is the panacea for solving the unemployment problem.

We need to enact policies to protect domestic industries, which in the long run are the engines for creating sustainable jobs. In this regard, we are worried by some recent policy changes. For example, the abandonment of the import prohibition policy for carpets and some other related items in favour of adopting the Common External Tariff (CET) of 35 percent. This could lead to factory closures and further loss of jobs. While we recognize that we have regional obligations, we wish to appeal to Mr. President to take a second look at this with a view to protecting jobs.

It is no longer news that we cannot attain the targets set out within the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). We believe and will continue to argue that the effective implementation of social protection floors as agreed by State parties of the International Labour Organizations is one of the effective ways to tackle hunger, want and hardship

Thus government must aggressively pursue progressive tax practices and work to defeat Illicit Financial Flows (IFF) and other harmful tax practices that diminish and delete national resource mobilization prospects. By so doing, we can be sure of steady flow of revenues to be channeled to deliver social services.

INTERNATIONAL

Comrades, at the international scene, the people of Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) have continued to be subjugated to the most dehumanizing conditions by Morocco, Cuba is still under decades of economic blockade by the United States, and in the Democratic Republic of Congo DRC, violation of women through rape in the war of attrition by both government and militias have continued unabated.

We condemn these acts of aggression in the SADR, Cuba and DRC, and urge the Nigerian government to intensify its support for the liberation struggle of the Saharawi People (the last colony in Africa), and join forces with AU and the international community to stop the continued atrocities against women in the DRC. We also call on the United States government to lift the embargo on Cuba and free the Cuban 5, as their continued detention violates their fundamental human rights, a cause which United States claims to play a leading role in the world.

Conclusion

Comrades, as the theme of this May Day portends, there is a symbolic correlation between current insecurity and poverty. As long as our policy makers are more interested in making policies in the interest of capital and the ruling class to the detriment of the working people and Nigerian poor they cannot guarantee enduring peace, the search for sustainable national development will not only remain elusive, but a mirage.

Great Nigerian Workers, this is my last May Day address to you as president of the Nigeria Labour Congress. As you are all aware, I will complete my tenure in early 2015 and in the tradition of our great movement, I look forward to a smooth transition to a new leadership. Comrades, let me therefore thank you all for your cooperation and support these past seven years. If we have achieved anything for our workers and our movement, this was possible only through your support and commitment. I value your continued support for the remaining part of my tenure and implore you to continue to rally round whoever leads our movement after me.

Thank You!