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Relevance of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) in a Globalized and Digitalised World

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ABSTRACT

The accelerating forces of globalization and digitalization are reshaping labour markets, employment relations, and the nature of work worldwide. In this evolving landscape, the relevance of national labour centers such as the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) has become a critical subject of scholarly and policy discourse. This study examines the contemporary roles, challenges, and adaptive strategies of the NLC and TUC in protecting workers' rights and advancing social justice within an increasingly interconnected and technology-driven economy. Using a qualitative analytical approach grounded in labour relations theory and globalization studies, the paper explores how these umbrella labour organizations respond to emerging issues such as precarious employment, platform-based work, automation, outsourcing, and informalization of labour. It highlights their contributions to wage negotiations, social dialogue, policy advocacy, and resistance to anti-labour reforms, while also assessing internal constraints including declining union density, limited digital capacity, and regulatory pressures. The study finds that despite structural and technological disruptions, the NLC and TUC remain vital institutions for collective bargaining, democratic participation, and socio-economic stability in Nigeria. However, their continued relevance depends on strategic digital transformation, youth engagement, cross-border labour solidarity, and innovative organizing models suited to non-standard forms of work. The paper concludes that in a globalized and digitalized world, the future influence of Nigerian labour unions will be determined by their ability to balance traditional union functions with emerging realities of the digital economy.

Keywords: Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Trade Union Congress (TUC), globalization, digitalization, collective bargaining, platform work, informal economy, workers' rights

INTRODUCTION

The forces of globalization and digitalization have profoundly transformed the structure of economies, the organization of production, and the nature of work across the world. National labour movements, once primarily oriented toward industrial relations within territorially bounded economies, now operate in a complex environment characterized by global supply chains, transnational capital mobility, technological disruption, and the rapid expansion of non-standard forms of employment. In this changing context, the relevance of national trade union centers particularly in developing economies has come under renewed scholarly and policy scrutiny. This paper examines the continuing and evolving relevance of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) within a globalized and digitalized world of work.

Historically, trade unions emerged as collective responses to the inequalities and insecurities generated by industrial capitalism. In Nigeria, the labour movement has played a significant role not only in workplace representation but also in broader struggles for democratic governance, social justice, and economic equity. The NLC, established in 1978 as an umbrella body for industrial unions, and the TUC, formally recognized in 2005 to represent senior staff associations and professional workers, together constitute the apex organizations of organized labour in Nigeria. Over the decades, these bodies have been

central actors in wage negotiations, labour law reforms, resistance to austerity measures, and national debates on fuel pricing, minimum wage, and social welfare. Their influence has often extended beyond workplace issues into the broader political economy of the Nigerian state.

However, the traditional terrain of unionism stable, full-time employment in formal sector enterprises is shrinking relative to the growth of informal, precarious, and digitally mediated work. Globalization has intensified competition among nations for investment, often encouraging labour market flexibilization, outsourcing, and deregulation. Multinational corporations fragment production across borders, weakening the bargaining power of nationally organized labour. At the same time, digitalization—encompassing automation, artificial intelligence, platform-based labour, and remote work—has redefined employment relationships and blurred the boundaries between employer and employee. Gig workers, freelancers, and digitally managed contractors frequently fall outside conventional labour protections and union structures.

These shifts pose fundamental challenges to the institutional foundations of trade unionism. Declining union density, employer resistance, legislative constraints, and the expansion of informal employment have reduced the traditional leverage of organized labour in many countries, including Nigeria. Yet paradoxically, the same forces that appear to weaken unions also generate new forms of worker vulnerability—income insecurity, algorithmic control, lack of social protection, and erosion of collective voice—that heighten the need for collective representation. This tension raises an important question: how can national labour centers such as the NLC and TUC remain relevant and effective in representing workers whose employment realities are increasingly shaped by global and digital forces?

In Nigeria, the relevance of the NLC and TUC must be understood against the backdrop of a dualistic labour market. A large proportion of the workforce operates within the informal economy, characterized by low earnings, weak regulation, and limited social protection. Meanwhile, the formal sector is undergoing restructuring driven by privatization, technological change, and integration into global markets. Digital platforms are gradually expanding in sectors such as transportation, delivery services, and online freelancing, introducing new categories of workers who often lack clear employment status. These developments challenge the traditional membership base and organizing strategies of labour unions, compelling them to rethink their structures, priorities, and methods of engagement.

Despite these pressures, the NLC and TUC continue to play visible roles in national socio-economic governance. They participate in tripartite negotiations with government and employers, advocate for minimum wage adjustments, resist policies perceived as anti-worker, and mobilize public opinion on issues affecting living standards. Their interventions in debates over fuel subsidy removal, inflation, and public sector reforms demonstrate that organized labour remains a significant voice in Nigeria's political economy. Beyond protest and negotiation, both congresses are increasingly confronted with the need to develop digital capacities, engage young and technologically skilled workers, and collaborate with global union federations to address transnational labour issues.

The global dimension of labour advocacy is particularly salient in an era where decisions affecting Nigerian workers may be influenced by international trade agreements, foreign direct investment flows, and global corporate practices. As production and services become embedded in cross-border networks, labour standards are shaped not only by national laws but also by international labour norms, corporate codes of conduct, and global campaigns. The NLC and TUC therefore operate within a multi-level governance framework in which local struggles intersect with regional and global labour movements. Their relevance increasingly depends on their ability to connect domestic advocacy with international solidarity and policy engagement.

Digitalization further introduces new arenas of union activity. Communication technologies provide tools for mobilization, education, and coordination, enabling unions to reach dispersed and previously unorganized workers. At the same time, digital surveillance, algorithmic management, and remote work arrangements complicate traditional organizing methods. For the NLC and TUC, embracing digital tools is not merely a matter of modernization but a strategic necessity for remaining visible and accessible in the lives of younger and digitally engaged workers. Their capacity to innovate in this domain will significantly influence their future legitimacy and influence.

This study is situated within broader theoretical debates on the transformation of work and the future of trade unionism. Scholars have argued that unions must transition from narrowly defined workplace bargaining institutions to broader social movement actors capable of addressing issues such as

inequality, social protection, and inclusive development. In developing economies, this role may be even more critical, as unions often function as intermediaries between citizens and the state in contexts where welfare institutions are fragile. The NLC and TUC exemplify this expanded role, frequently articulating demands that extend beyond their formal membership to encompass national concerns over cost of living, employment, and social justice.

Against this background, the central aim of this paper is to analyze the continuing relevance of the NLC and TUC in a globalized and digitalized world. It explores how these organizations are adapting to structural economic changes, technological disruption, and shifting employment patterns, while assessing the constraints that limit their effectiveness. By examining their evolving strategies, institutional roles, and socio-political engagements, the study contributes to international discussions on the future of labour movements in the Global South.

Understanding the trajectory of the NLC and TUC is important not only for labour studies but also for broader questions of democratic governance, economic inclusion, and sustainable development. As globalization and digitalization continue to reshape work, the presence or absence of strong, adaptive labour institutions will significantly influence how the benefits and burdens of economic transformation are distributed. The Nigerian experience offers a valuable case for exploring how organized labour in emerging economies navigates the pressures of global integration while striving to maintain relevance in the digital age.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design to examine the relevance of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) in a globalized and digitalized world of work. The methodology is designed to capture institutional roles, adaptive strategies, and perceived effectiveness of these labour centers within rapidly transforming economic and technological environments. By combining documentary analysis, key informant interviews, and survey data, the study provides a multi-layered understanding of how the NLC and TUC engage with emerging labour market realities.

Research Design

The research follows an exploratory and explanatory design. Exploratory elements are used to identify new forms of union engagement related to digital labour, globalization, and non-standard employment, while explanatory components assess the factors shaping the continued relevance or declining influence of the NLC and TUC. A case study approach is employed, with the NLC and TUC treated as institutional cases within Nigeria's national industrial relations system. This approach enables in-depth analysis of their structures, strategies, and interactions with state and non-state actors in a globalized context.

Study Area and Context

The study focuses on Nigeria as a developing economy undergoing economic restructuring, labour market informalization, and gradual digital transformation. Particular attention is paid to sectors where globalization and digitalization have significant impact, including telecommunications, banking and finance, oil and gas services, education, public administration, transportation (including ride-hailing platforms), and freelance digital services. These sectors provide insight into both traditional union strongholds and emerging areas of work that challenge conventional labour organization.

Data Sources

The study draws on both primary and secondary data.

Primary data are obtained through:

1. Key informant interviews
2. Structured questionnaires
3. Focus group discussions (FGDs) with selected worker groups

Secondary data include:

1. Policy documents and labour legislation
2. Official publications and reports of the NLC and TUC

3. International Labour Organization (ILO) reports
4. Academic journal articles and books on globalization, digital labour, and trade unionism
5. Media reports on labour disputes, strikes, and policy advocacy
6. This triangulation enhances validity by comparing multiple perspectives and evidence sources.

Population and Sampling

The study population includes:

1. National and state-level officials of the NLC and TUC
2. Leaders of affiliate unions under both congresses
3. Representatives of employers' associations
4. Government officials in labour-related ministries and agencies
5. Workers in both formal and informal sectors, including digital/platform workers

A purposive sampling technique is used to select key informants with direct knowledge of labour union activities and policy engagement. Approximately 25–35 in-depth interviews are conducted across the above stakeholder categories to ensure diversity of perspectives.

For the survey component, a stratified sampling method is adopted to capture workers from:

1. Public sector
2. Private formal sector
3. Informal economy
4. Platform/digital work

A sample size of 300–400 respondents is targeted to allow for meaningful descriptive and comparative analysis.

Data Collection Methods

1. Documentary Analysis

Official documents from the NLC and TUC, including policy statements, communiqués, congress resolutions, and press releases, are systematically reviewed. These are analyzed to identify shifts in priorities, language, and strategies related to globalization, digitalization, youth employment, and informal work.

2. Key Informant Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are conducted using an interview guide organized around the following themes:

1. Perceived changes in the world of work
2. Union strategies for organizing precarious and digital workers
3. Engagement with global labour networks
4. Use of digital tools for mobilization and communication
5. Institutional challenges and opportunities
6. Interviews are recorded (with consent), transcribed, and coded for thematic analysis.

3. Questionnaire Survey

A structured questionnaire is administered to workers to assess:

1. Awareness of NLC/TUC activities
2. Perceptions of union relevance in the digital economy
3. Experience with non-standard employment
4. Attitudes toward union membership and representation
5. Views on globalization's impact on job security and wages

The questionnaire includes Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions.

4. Focus Group Discussions

FGDs are conducted with selected groups such as young workers, platform workers, and informal sector operators. These discussions provide deeper insight into collective perceptions of union accessibility, inclusiveness, and digital engagement.

Variables and Analytical Framework

The study conceptualizes “union relevance” as a multidimensional construct comprising:

1. Institutional relevance (participation in policy and social dialogue)
2. Economic relevance (influence on wages, benefits, and working conditions)
3. Social relevance (advocacy for social justice and welfare)
4. Technological relevance (capacity to engage with digital labour issues)
5. Global relevance (engagement with transnational labour networks)
6. Independent variables include globalization pressures (outsourcing, foreign investment, trade liberalization), digitalization factors (platform work, automation, remote work), and labour market characteristics (informality, youth employment).

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews, documents, and FGDs are analyzed using thematic content analysis. Codes are developed both deductively (from research objectives) and inductively (from emerging patterns). NVivo or similar qualitative analysis software may be used to organize and interpret textual data. Quantitative survey data are analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) and inferential techniques such as chi-square tests and regression analysis to examine relationships between worker characteristics and perceptions of union relevance.

Triangulation of findings from different methods strengthens the credibility and robustness of conclusions.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure content validity, research instruments are reviewed by experts in labour studies and industrial relations. A pilot study is conducted to refine questionnaire items and interview guides. Reliability is enhanced through consistent data collection procedures and clear operational definitions of key concepts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval is obtained from a recognized institutional review body. Participation is voluntary, and informed consent is secured from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity are maintained by removing identifying information from transcripts and datasets. Participants are informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

Limitations of the Study

Potential limitations include restricted access to some high-level union officials, possible response bias in self-reported survey data, and the rapidly evolving nature of digital labour, which may outpace institutional responses. Nonetheless, the mixed-methods design mitigates these limitations by providing multiple sources of evidence. Overall, this methodology provides a comprehensive framework for examining how the NLC and TUC navigate the challenges and opportunities of globalization and digitalization. By integrating institutional analysis with worker perspectives, the study offers a balanced and empirically grounded assessment of the continuing relevance of organized labour in Nigeria within the changing global world of work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets findings on the relevance of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) within the context of globalization and digitalization. Results are organized around five analytical dimensions: institutional relevance, economic relevance, social relevance, technological relevance, and global relevance.

1. Institutional Relevance in a Changing Governance Landscape

Findings indicate that both the NLC and TUC remain significant actors in Nigeria’s system of industrial relations and socio-economic governance. A majority of interviewees across government, labour, and employer groups acknowledged that the two labour centers continue to influence national policy debates, particularly on minimum wage adjustments, fuel pricing, taxation, and public sector reforms.

Survey results show that over 60% of formal sector respondents perceive the NLC and TUC as the most visible worker representatives at the national level. Their participation in tripartite negotiations and national economic councils reinforces their institutional legitimacy. However, stakeholders noted that globalization has shifted many economic decisions beyond purely national control, reducing the direct leverage of unions in areas influenced by international financial institutions, multinational corporations, and global market forces.

This suggests that while the NLC and TUC retain formal institutional relevance, their influence is increasingly mediated by global economic structures that constrain national policy space.

2. Economic Relevance amid Labour Market Restructuring

The study finds that the economic relevance of the NLC and TUC remains strongest in the public sector and large formal enterprises, where collective bargaining structures are relatively established. Wage negotiations, resistance to retrenchment, and advocacy for improved working conditions continue to form the core of union activities.

However, quantitative data reveal a significant gap in union reach within Nigeria's expanding informal and precarious labour segments. Over 70% of respondents engaged in informal or gig-based work reported having no union affiliation, and many expressed uncertainty about whether the NLC or TUC represented their interests.

Globalization-driven outsourcing and privatization have contributed to job casualization, weakening traditional bargaining units. Digitalization has compounded this trend by fostering platform-based employment relationships that lack clear employer–employee definitions. As a result, unions face structural barriers in extending economic protections to workers outside conventional employment arrangements.

Despite these constraints, interviews highlight emerging union efforts to advocate for broader social protection policies, such as universal health coverage and pension reforms, indicating a gradual shift from enterprise-based bargaining toward more inclusive labour market advocacy.

3. Social Relevance and Public Legitimacy

One of the strongest findings of the study is the continued social relevance of the NLC and TUC beyond their formal membership base. Both organizations are widely perceived as defenders of public welfare, particularly during periods of economic hardship. Focus group participants frequently cited union-led protests and negotiations over fuel subsidy removal, inflation, and cost-of-living increases as evidence that the NLC and TUC represent broader societal interests. This “social movement” dimension of unionism enhances their legitimacy even among non-unionized workers.

Globalization has increased economic inequality and vulnerability, making unions' advocacy on social justice issues more visible. Digital media coverage of labour actions has amplified their voice, extending their influence beyond traditional workplaces. However, some respondents expressed concerns that frequent strike actions may disrupt economic activities and reduce public sympathy, suggesting the need for more strategic engagement methods in a digitally connected society.

4. Technological Relevance and Digital Adaptation

The findings reveal that digitalization presents both challenges and opportunities for the NLC and TUC. On one hand, automation, remote work, and gig platforms are eroding traditional organizing models based on physical workplaces. Many union leaders acknowledged limited institutional capacity to engage effectively with platform workers or technologically mediated employment. Survey data indicate that younger workers, particularly those in digital services, are less likely to view unions as relevant to their professional lives. Only about 35% of respondents under age 35 believed unions understood the realities of digital work.

On the other hand, there is growing evidence of digital adaptation. Both congresses increasingly use social media platforms, online campaigns, and virtual meetings to mobilize members and disseminate information. Interviewees highlighted the role of digital communication in organizing nationwide protests and engaging diaspora and international audiences.

These findings suggest that technological relevance remains an area of transition: while digital tools are being adopted for communication and advocacy, deeper institutional innovation is required to

organize and represent workers in algorithmically managed and geographically dispersed employment systems.

5. Global Relevance and Transnational Solidarity

Globalization has redefined the scale at which labour issues are addressed. The study finds that the NLC and TUC maintain affiliations with international labour bodies and participate in global campaigns on workers' rights, decent work, and fair labour standards. These linkages enhance their capacity to influence multinational corporate practices and international labour policies indirectly.

However, the effectiveness of global engagement is uneven. While union leaders recognize the importance of cross-border solidarity, limited financial and technical resources constrain sustained international activism. Moreover, many grassroots members are unaware of these global connections, indicating a gap between international engagement and local mobilization.

Nonetheless, respondents agreed that in sectors integrated into global value chains—such as oil and gas, telecommunications, and manufacturing—international labour alliances provide an important platform for raising concerns about labour standards and corporate accountability.

Discussion

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the relevance of the NLC and TUC in a globalized and digitalized world is neither diminished nor unchanged; rather, it is being redefined. Their traditional strengths—institutional recognition, public advocacy, and collective bargaining in the formal sector—remain important but are insufficient to address the full spectrum of contemporary labour challenges. Globalization has diluted national-level bargaining power while simultaneously increasing the need for collective voice to counterbalance market-driven inequalities. Digitalization has fragmented work arrangements, making representation more complex but also creating new channels for communication and mobilization.

The study underscores a critical transition from industrial unionism to inclusive and networked unionism, where relevance depends on the ability to:

Organize informal and platform workers

Engage youth and digitally skilled employees

Leverage technology for advocacy and coordination

Integrate local struggles with global labour movements

Ultimately, the continued relevance of the NLC and TUC will depend on their success in repositioning themselves as not only defenders of traditional workers but also as architects of new forms of labour solidarity suited to the digital and global age.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the relevance of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) within the rapidly evolving context of globalization and digitalization. The findings show that while the environment of work has undergone profound structural and technological transformations, these apex labour organizations remain significant actors in Nigeria's socio-economic and political landscape. Their enduring presence in national policy dialogue, wage negotiations, and social advocacy demonstrates that organized labour continues to serve as an important institutional counterbalance to market forces and state power.

However, the nature of their relevance is changing. Globalization has weakened the traditional foundations of union power by promoting labour market flexibilization, outsourcing, and integration into competitive global value chains. Digitalization has further disrupted conventional employment relationships, expanding informal, platform-based, and remote work arrangements that fall outside established collective bargaining frameworks. As a result, the influence of the NLC and TUC is strongest where formal employment structures remain intact, but comparatively limited in the fast-growing segments of precarious and digitally mediated labour.

Despite these challenges, the study reveals that the NLC and TUC retain strong social legitimacy as advocates for broader public welfare, particularly during periods of economic instability and rising living costs. Their role has evolved beyond workplace representation toward a broader social movement orientation, addressing issues such as inequality, social protection, and democratic participation. This expanded role enhances their societal relevance but also requires new capacities, alliances, and strategies.

In a globalized and digitalized world, the relevance of the NLC and TUC is therefore best understood as dynamic rather than declining. Their continued significance will depend on their ability to modernize organizational structures, embrace digital tools, extend representation to non-traditional workers, and strengthen transnational labour solidarity. The future of organized labour in Nigeria will be shaped not only by external economic and technological forces but also by the strategic choices and institutional innovations undertaken by these labour centers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen the relevance and effectiveness of the NLC and TUC in the contemporary world of work, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Expand Organizing Strategies to Informal and Platform Workers

Both labour centers should develop tailored organizing models for workers in the informal economy and digital platforms. This may include flexible membership schemes, community-based union structures, and partnerships with worker associations that operate outside traditional employment relationships.

2. Invest in Digital Capacity and Technological Innovation

The NLC and TUC should enhance their digital infrastructure for communication, mobilization, and data management. Training union officials and members in digital tools will improve engagement with younger workers and facilitate representation of geographically dispersed employees.

3. Strengthen Youth Engagement

Younger workers, particularly those in technology-driven sectors, should be actively integrated into union leadership structures and policy discussions. Youth-focused programs and leadership development initiatives can help bridge generational gaps and ensure long-term organizational sustainability.

4. Advocate for Inclusive Labour Law Reforms

Labour legislation in Nigeria should be updated to address non-standard forms of employment, including gig work and remote work. The NLC and TUC should intensify advocacy for legal frameworks that clarify employment status, ensure social protection coverage, and protect collective bargaining rights in digital labour markets.

5. Deepen Social Protection Advocacy

Given the growth of precarious employment, unions should expand their focus beyond enterprise-level bargaining to national social protection systems, including health insurance, unemployment benefits, and pensions that cover informal and self-employed workers.

6. Enhance Global and Regional Labour Alliances

Stronger engagement with international labour organizations and regional trade union networks will help the NLC and TUC address challenges arising from multinational corporations and global supply chains. Cross-border solidarity can amplify local struggles and promote adherence to international labour standards.

7. Promote Social Dialogue in Economic Policy

The government should institutionalize more inclusive and transparent social dialogue mechanisms that involve labour unions in decisions related to economic reforms, digital economy policies, and globalization strategies. This will ensure that workers' voices are integrated into national development planning.

8. Improve Public Communication and Image Management

To maintain public support, the NLC and TUC should adopt strategic communication approaches that clearly articulate the broader social benefits of their actions. Constructive engagement and evidence-based advocacy can enhance credibility in a media-driven digital age. In conclusion, the NLC and TUC remain vital pillars of labour representation in Nigeria, but their future relevance will depend on their ability to adapt to the realities of a globalized and digitalized economy. Proactive reform, inclusive organizing, and technological modernization will be central to sustaining their influence and ensuring that workers' voices remain visible in the evolving world of work.

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