TNV THE NIGERIAN VOICE

AJIMOBI WON'T BORROW TO PAY SALARIES -ADELABU, FINANCE COMMISSIONER

With the town hall meeting he held with the workers on Monday, it was thought all the parties would put the dispute and attendant crisis on the minimum wage in Oyo State behind them, the governor, Senator Abiola Ajimobi, having opened the books and explained why government can only do so much by offering N19,195 as the benchmark and proportionate percentage increases across board for other categories of staff.

But, the workers shocked the government and indeed the public by rejecting the explanation and plea for understanding that the resultant wage bill would gulp 92 per cent of its income when later that day they declared an indefinite strike, protracting an industrial action that has crippled government business in the past two weeks. The state commissioner for Finance, Mr. Zacheus Adelabu, in a chat with journalists on the impasse regrets the posturing of the workers, saying they failed to appreciate the magnanimity of the administration.

According to him, the government had bent over backwards, making so much concession just to avert their going on strike, which unfortunately they did. He shed further light on the issues involved and perceived misinformation going on.

Why is there so much noise over the minimum wage in the state?

This is how to put the record straight. As far as law is concerned, we comply with the minimum wage requirement. Well, before we came on board in April 2011, the minimum wage was N9,400 and as at today, according to the minimum wage table we presented to the labour which they rejected, the take home pay of the least worker-grade level 01 step

1 in the state is N19,130. That is, if you join the civil service today, that is the amount you will collect. Then, if you now calculate the financial implication of this table, it represents 92 percent of the total income which also represents 400 percent of the total Internally Generated Revenue(IGR). If put in another way, it means that the IGR can only cover 35 percent of the wage bill that we have in the state today. That was why we came openly to them that, and said look, because we are all integral part of the state, this is the situation we have.

That was why his Excellency, Governor Abiola Ajimobi presented it to them to remove any ambiguity. After the payment of the workers' salary, we will have only 8 percent remaining for other things then the overhead cost, if I put it on paper, is 11 percent. If you add 92 to 11, you will have 103 percent which means after running the government and you pay the salary, you will have deficit of roughly N135million left that you have to borrow every month and that means not doing anything as far as development is concerned and remember, we are not here to represent a section of the populace. We are here because we were voted for by the entire people of the state.

The argument of these workers, at least, the senior officers, is that this wage table has reduced their total emolument that you give with the right hand and collect with the left.

That can never be true because we presented it for all of them to see. Remember I said when we came in, the minimum wage was N9,400 when the total wage bill was N2.9billion. As at today, the total wage bill is N4.1billion, and if you calculate the workers salary increase individually, it means workers salary was increased from 38 percent to 108 percent. For better understanding, a level 16 grade 01 worker had his salary increased by 108 percent as at today.

That is less than one year we came on board. If you juxtapose that with the income which just been increased by .2 percent less than N8 million and if they now say the table we have is less than the amount they were earning before, they are not being truthful and it is so sad that they are taking that position.

What is the point of departure then. What is still their grouse? What exactly do they want the government to do?

That is exactly what we want the public to ask them. This is why we are coming out to let the people know the fact and then we have been open to them.

I have said it times without number that all these figures are in hard copy. They are public information that anybody can verify. And that is why I'm surprised as a person that instead of these people to see reason, they still remain adamant. As at today, we use 92 percent of our total income to pay their salary. If I add all other related overhead to it, it will give us 103 percent as we have it today. This is not sustainable. It is not desirable and I don't know how we are going to fulfill our promises to other sections in the state. If less than 38 percent of the population is taking 92 percent of total income, we have only 8 percent left for other things and zero percent for capital development and how do we now carry out our transformation agenda? This the question. We appreciate them and we know how important they are when we talk of development.

That is why we have to start from them. It is not because we are fools that we are committing much to them. It is disappointing knowing they are still churning out wrong figures without any proof to back it up. They just say this is how much they think we are generating and this is how much they would take. And they start comparing the neighbouring states. Then, I say, if you want to compare, what is the total population and the population of workers in the states you are comparing us with, what is the total wage bill of Oyo State? Remember, we were not voted for by a section but by all the people and we have to take care of others. That is why we are appealing and telling them that they need to be reasonable with us and come back to work so that we can continue the developmental work that Governor Ajimobi promised the state.

Looking at the no-going back posture of workers, could it be said that some political enemies are at work instigating them against the government?

Honestly, I don't want to think like that. There is nothing political in what is as clear as this. I don't want to believe that there is a party that wants to destabilize the state. I don't want to dwell too much on that. This is democracy and in the next three years, another election will come up. Why would anybody want people to be suffering from now till then. I don't want to believe that there is any political undertone. What I see is that these labour leaders or workers refuse to open their minds as the government has done. We have shown you the figure that we have 92 percent of the total income going for the salary and the remaining amount left and someone is till saying they are satisfied, so what else do they want us to do.

So, I don't want to think that some politicians are the ones behind them because it may be an embarrassment to them. I want to believe that all political parties should be for the welfare of the people. If any political party is now behind people staying at home preventing them from what they should do when especially the facts are clear, it may sound embarrassing.

The argument of some workers is that Governor Ajimobi promised them at least N22,000 minimum wage during his campaign knowing that they were earning the lowest salary in the South West. He said then that the government of the day was unable to increase the IGR and as a management expert, when he gets there, he was going to deploy his ingenuity to ensure that he increased the IGR. That is why workers are saying they don't believe he doesn't know how to work it around.

No, no, no. that is not the promise. Actually, the N22,000 might have been promised at one forum or the other. I don't have any problem with that. Remember, he was given a four-year mandate. Less than one year, he has increased the salary from N9,400 to N19,000 and we have four years at least as our plan to spend. Then, because of the IGR we promised we would increase that is why we have to start like this. There is an adage that says an angry dog cannot take care of its owner.

Why we have gone that far in using 92 percent to pay their salary is because we know if we want to increase the IGR, we have to take care of the workers first. Remember, this is the first administration that paid the 13th month salary, it had never happened in the state before. We don't delay in salary payment since we came on board. These are the promises we made and have done. Are we closer to N22,000 or far from N9,400? We have a lot of plans to increase the economic activities of the state. So, the labour should reason with us so that the greater percentage of the people can benefit from the dividends of democracy.

What is your message to the workers and the people of the state?

Definitely, as you can see everything is under control and there is no breakdown of law and order. My only plea to them is that they should see reason. We cannot go beyond what we have today and if you listened to the governor on Monday when he met them, he said we are here so that we can reason together and that only option for us is to increase the IGR. This was the plea of the governor to them. Unfortunately, the following day, they said they were on strike. If they have alternative figure apart from the one we have, let them come up with it and we negotiate. They should be able to tell us the source of our own figure.

From the part of government, we have done what is clear even though we know it is challenging to have given them 92 percent of the total income. God forbid, if nothing comes from the federation account, we can only pay one month salary out of four.

Like my colleague has said. Should we look forward to upward review if the IGR improves considerably?

That is the point. There cannot be a closed door on negotiation between the employee and his employer. The only thing is that let this premise on available fact remain. If during their cooperation with us, the IGR increases considerably to a certain extent, why not?

What will government do now?
We are waiting for them to present their proposal on what they think the government can do. Remember, we are all stakeholders. We are not superior to them and they are not superior to us.

Would government trim down the population of workers to meet up their demands?

No, it is not in our contemplation to fire them. Remember, we have a social contract with the people. If we sack them, are their lives going to be better off? No. we are not contemplating sacking them. If this is what our intentions are, we would not go openly to them asking them on how to move the state forward. If you find out that your wage bill is too high, if we want to go the simple way, we cut down the number and we have decided not to do that. That is why we call them for interaction. They provided the figure and all the civil servants relate together. Let them ask themselves.

Some hours ago, a section of the Nigeria Civil Service Union has pulled out of the strike. Is it that the government has broken their rank?

No, there is no way we can do that. I thank God that some people are beginning to see the reason because they know it doesn't take time for truth to catch up with lies. The civil servants are close to us, they have seen the reason. You know part of our hallmark is accountability and transparency. They have seen our sincerity. Those are the people who are close to us. The only option is to increase the IGR and move the state forward. That is the only option we have.

This government has committed 92 per cent to the payment of the workers' salary, how do you intend to use the remaining eight per cent to fulfill your electoral promise?

What the government is that it has set the machinery in motion to raise the IGR. Just because the government wants to have a cordial relationship with the labour, that's it committed that much to workers believing that when we work harder on IGR, we are going to get enough to spend on capital project and the capital projects embarked upon are all over the place.

The government is rehabilitating a total of 66 roads through contract and another 50 roads through direct labour at the value of N11billion. The government is constructing the flyover at Mokola at N2.9billion. We are constructing 8 bridges across the state; we are renovating 65 secondary schools and in another two weeks, government is giving out contract for the rehabilitation of over 240 blocks of classroom; we are providing equipment for Home Economics and science laboratories; we are paying the WAEC fees of secondary school students.

And we are setting up the Oyo State University and all these cost money. The government had done its project and we are sure that the IGR would be able to cope with these demands. But, government believes the labour is the machinery through which it can deliver its promises and that is it had committed so much to ensure that it maintains cordial relationship with the labour.

There is mistrust over the minimum wage table presented by the government.

Yes, the question we are raising is that if it is true that the government is generating N4.6billion every month and we are committing N4.1billion to paying salary leaving only N500million. There is no reasonable person that would say the government should go beyond that. Committing 92 percent to salary itself has been condemned by many well-meaning indigenes of the state.

The only basis on which anyone can question the table is to question authenticity of that figure and the governor addressed that when he met labour. He said set up a committee of four that will be meeting the Accountant General of the state every month each time he comes back with the federal allocated fund you know what is there and then you can ascertain whether the government is saying the truth or not. And the fact that the figure is an open thing.

You can go to the website of the state and download the figure there. Nobody can falsify it. If labour can actually try to ascertain the authenticity of these figures, I think they are not going to run into the crisis they are in. All you need is to verify what is coming to the state every month and if the government is saying it is N4.6b, there is no necessity for this crisis.

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