

Gov. Obaseki 's Public/Civil Service Reforms Excites Edo Workers

Section 14(2)(a) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, as amended, provides: “sovereignty belongs to the people of Nigeria from whom Government through the Constitution derives all its powers and authority”. In paragraph (b) of the same subsection, provision is made to the effect that “the Security and welfare of the People shall be the primary purpose of Government”. The above provisions were not made part of the same subsection for nothing. The Institution of Government all over the world is designed to provide greater happiness to the greater number of people in a defined geo-political area. This explains why governmental administrations are assessed on the basis of how much of this globally set standard they are able to meet in their relationship with citizens. Power proceeds from the people and those to whom the people give it must employ its instrumentality to achieve good and effective governance so that democratic dividends can be enjoyed by the people.

Therefore, where a governmental power donated by the people is employed by its holder in such a manner that contravenes, goes against, or does not fulfil its purpose, such power can be withdrawn by the people who own and gave it.

The Administration of the Governor of Edo State, Mr. Godwin Nogheghase Obaseki has, since it birthed in November 2016, shown character and zest to transform Edo State in all sectors and consummate the objective of the constitutional provisions in section 14(2)(b) of the Constitution. This is why in 2020, when the people of Edo State who are the original owners of the power donated to the Governor and his deputy assessed them and were satisfied about the use to which they had put it, enthusiastically, emphatically and unequivocally voted to return them to power in a most dramatic way which clearly demonstrated the extent to which the people can go to protect and defend a worthy donee of this governmental power.

Apart from engaging in massive infrastructure renewal across the State, the Governor has ensured the reinvigoration of the Civil/Public Service for the purpose of making it more effective and responsive to evolving societal and governmental challenges in line with his conviction that the Civil/Public Service constitutes the engine



of Government and that without a strong and effective Civil/Public Service, effective governance which delivers democratic dividends to the people would be impossible to achieve.

In the light of the above, the Governor has deliberately and vigorously undertaken result-oriented reforms in the Civil/Public Service of the State for effective service delivery. One key component of the reforms is the institution of the E-Governance Platform; an electronic system that aims to eliminate the use of paper in the administrative processes of government.

To ensure the success of the platform, no fewer than four thousand laptop computers have been purchased and distributed free of charge to officers requiring them, while efforts are in top gear to assist officers not yet covered under the scheme to acquire theirs on a buy-to-own arrangement with the Edo State Government having equity purchases in the total cost. Plans are also afoot to adopt the “kiosk model” in ensuring that workers, whom Government is unable to immediately provide laptops have access to the platform. The plan here is to have a dedicated space in each Ministry, Department and Agency of Government with three or more Desktops which workers can use to do their work. Also, with the use of the Virtual Private Network (VPN), workers are able to perform assigned responsibilities outside the confines of their offices and this has, to a large extent, helped to drive governance

processes in a most positive way.

As a major employer of labour, the State Government has severally demonstrated that providing for the welfare of its workers is a non-negotiable responsibility of Government and this explains why Governor Obaseki with absolutely no prompting from the Organized Labour announced an increase in the Minimum Wage for Edo workers from the agreed and approved National Minimum Wage of N30,000 to N40,000 during the Workers' Day celebration on May 1, 2022. It is worthy of note that Edo State Government is the only Government in Nigeria that has thought it wise to take this laudable step. Indeed, at the time when workers were yet to internalize the import of the announcement of a raise in their monthly pay package, Government did the 'unthinkable' when on May 26, 2022, less than a month after the announcement, credited the salary accounts of workers in the state with their new salaries in line with the improved salary structure.

The increase, no doubt, has boosted the purchasing power of the average Edo worker in the face of rising cost of goods and services in the country and they are most grateful for it. With this singular action, Governor Obaseki has endeared himself more than ever before to the hearts of workers of Edo State and, in addition, written his name in pure gold in the eternal sands of time. The foregoing is so because the Governor had, at all times, demonstrated his commitment to making workers in the State happy through regular and timely payment of salaries and pensions even in the face of increasingly harsh economic realities which have placed a huge financial burden on the State Government.

Before the recent increase in the salaries of its workers, the State Government had committed over N40 billion annually to meet up with its obligation in salaries and pensions without renegeing on its agreement to defray existing liabilities with regard to pensioners' benefits. In spite of the increase in the wage bill on account of the raise in the minimum wage, Government has continued to perform this obligation unflinchingly.

Regular payment of workers' salaries occupies a special place in the heart of the Governor. Mr. Governor believes that a well-motivated workforce is central to achieving productivity in any given Economy, and Edo is not an exception. The result is that workers

in Edo State and pensioners receive their salaries and pensions (respectively) not later than the 26th day of every month and this has been religiously adhered to since this Administration came on board.

As part of measures towards consummating the objective of giving workers the right opportunity to perform optimally, the Government of Edo State has embarked on massive infrastructure renewal in the Civil/Public Service. It is instructive to note that most Edo State owned public buildings in Benin City and outside the capital have been attended to and reconditioned. Such is the extent of the Civil/Public Service infrastructure renewal in Edo that the work environment for the Civil/Public Servants in Edo State is the very best that there can be. Seeing, they say, is believing. You only need to visit the State Public Service Secretariat to have a feel of the new work environment provided for Public Servants by the State Government. You would love to be a civil servant.

Four of the five blocks of the State Secretariat buildings where most Civil/Public Servants perform their duties have been renovated, furnished and equipped with state-of-the-art facilities for the comfort and work convenience of Edo workers. In addition, most government offices in the Benin Metropolis have been linked to the twenty-four-hour power supply from the Osiomo Power Plant which has made installed equipment function optimally. The Osiomo power source is the State Government's direct answer to the challenge of epileptic power supply which had, over the years, hampered the smooth running of Government business.

In further demonstration of the State Government's resolve to provide for the welfare of the workforce, the Governor had, last year, approved across the Service promotions for year 2021. The processes are on and will soon be completed. The promotion exercise for the first half of 2022 is to commence shortly. The implication of this is that there will be no arrears of promotions owed Public Servants in Edo State.

Interestingly, every worker in the Edo Civil/Public Service has been enrolled in the Edo Health Insurance Scheme and this has tremendously reduced the out-of-pocket spend by Edo workers on drugs and hospitals bills. The scheme is designed in such a manner that enrollees pay a meagre 10 percent of the total cost of treatment. The success of the scheme with the Public Servants in State has encouraged Government to extend same to artisans and other irregular income earners in the State, some of whom have, like their Public Servants counterparts, started to benefit from the scheme. The Administration is also rebuilding and remodeling the State College of Agriculture, Iguoriakhi and has completely turned around the College of Nursing Sciences, Benin. The two

educational institutions have been designed to produce the manpower needed in both the Agriculture and Health Sectors and this is in recognition of the fact that investments in these sectors are central to our survival as a State and indeed as a Nation. Added to the foregoing is the simultaneous construction of three Colleges of Education in Abudu, Igueben and Afuze to produce quality teachers for absorption into the State's Basic Education System and for export.

Another area where the State Government has positively impacted the lives of Edo Civil/Public Servants is the enhancement of Duty Tour Allowances (DTA) for all levels of Public Servants, in some cases, by as much as three hundred percent; the retroactive promotion of civil/public servants who had to exit the Service by retirement before their due promotions came to fruition as well as the reduction in the wait period of civil/public servants on GL 16 before qualifying for promotion to GL 17 from 5 (five) to 4 (four) years. This wait period had been increased previously from the conventional and regular four years to five years through a circular.

But this Administration reversed the circular and reverted to the four-year period to encourage growth and progression of officers in the Service.

As mentioned earlier, the e-governance platform designed to eliminate all encumbrances hampering effective service delivery in the Civil/Public Service in the past has become fully operational in the State while efforts are on-going to link as many personnel to the platform as possible for its smooth operation vide the three-prong access (distribution of laptop computers, the buy-to-own option and the kiosk model) to the platform mentioned earlier.

At the moment, the State Government has on-boarded all its ninety-four (94) Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) to the Edo Gov Platform and over seven thousand (7,000) workers are now enabled to use the platform. In doing so, Edo State Government has achieved one hundred (100) percent on-boarding of its Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) electronically and has thus become the first State in Nigeria to achieve this. Government is determined to continue to invest massively in creating a viable and sustainable electronic platform for ease of work and operations. Mr Governor has repeatedly assured public servants in the state that he would be the last Governor in the state to treat files manually.

The Government of Edo State recognizes the fact that all these achievements would not have been possible without the support and co-operation of the Organized Labour. The cordial relationship existing between the Organized Labour and Government has, in no small measures, contributed to the prevailing industrial peace in the State. As a way of deepening the gains of this cordiality, a platform for a quarterly parley between the

Organized Labour and the State Government has been created to provide opportunity for labour to interface with Government on issues of concern which otherwise could snowball into industrial unrest.

It is the expectation of the State Government that the Organized Labour will continue to enlighten Edo workers and other stakeholders on Government Development Initiatives (GDI) to drive support for the ongoing reforms in the Civil/Public Service aimed at ensuring efficient and quality service delivery to Edo People.

As part of efforts to deepen and sustain the on-going reforms in the Public Service, Government built a state-of-the-art Academy the John Odigie Oyegun Public Service Academy (JOOPSA) (named after the first civilian Governor of Edo State, Chief John Odigie-Oyegun for his multifarious contributions to the development of the Public Service in Nigeria) positioned to champion the unprecedented development of the Public Sector in a manner similar to what the National Resource Centre does. This Academy will train, not just public servants in Edo and across the country, but also interested business personnel from the Private Sector. The expectation is that this initiative will stimulate intellectual property resource development and help to make the State a preferred destination for Academic Tourism in Nigeria.

Having regards to changing work ethics in the wake of globalization, the present administration has worked extensively on reviewing the Civil Service Rules to adequately deal with emerging disciplines and challenges, and has also conducted research into the prevailing culture of the Civil/Public Service with a view to effecting needed paradigm changes to drive growth and development as well as ensure optimal service delivery. Government has included in the emerging rules several incentives and packages in furtherance of its policy of making workers its first priority. The New rules which have been designed to move the Service away from the era of transactional service to one that is strategy-inclined, with the overall objective of guaranteeing optimal performance in service delivery, contain performance-based initiatives aimed at ensuring that workers are properly remunerated for effective job performances.

Having regards to the fact that Government's interest in the welfare of workers in the State is top notch by ensuring a work-friendly environment for optimal service delivery, it is hoped that all these worker-centric initiatives will spur Civil/Public Servants in the State into unprecedented levels of productivity, commensurate with the massive investment of the State Government.