



CAUSES AND REMEDIES OF INDUSTRIAL CONFLICTS IN THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Industrial conflicts in Nigerian universities, particularly those involving the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), have had significant impacts on academic progress, national development, and peace. This study explored the primary causes and remedies of industrial conflicts in the Nigerian university system, focusing on the factors that drive strikes and disruptions in academic activities. The study identified key causes of industrial conflicts in Nigerian universities, which are inadequate funding, unfulfilled collective agreements, poor leadership, and policy impositions. It also examined the remedies for resolving these conflicts, which include improved funding for the education sector, timely payment of staff entitlements, effective leadership, and strong mechanisms for collective bargaining and dialogue. The study concluded that addressing these issues through collaborative efforts between the government, university management, and academic staff can prevent recurring industrial actions and enhance the stability of the academic system. Recommendations include increasing educational funding, establishing a participatory decision-making process, and creating a national policy framework for conflict management in universities to ensure sustained progress and development in the higher education sector.

Keywords: Industrial Conflicts, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Universities, Remedies

1. Introduction

Industrial conflicts in the Nigerian university system have become a prevalent thereby affecting the academic calendar, the quality of education, and the overall functioning of higher institutions. Over the years, tensions between Academic Staff Union (ASUU) and the government, as well as university administrations, have often led to frequent industrial actions, strikes, protests, and unrest. These conflicts often disrupt the academic journey of students, delay graduations, and create an atmosphere of uncertainty within the university system. According to NUC (2023), industrial disputes have been one of the primary factors contributing to the instability and declining quality of higher education in Nigeria.

One of the primary causes of industrial conflicts in the Nigerian university system is the issue of inadequate funding for universities. The Nigerian government has historically allocated insufficient funds to the education sector, resulting in poor infrastructure, outdated teaching materials, and inadequate research facilities. The lack of proper funding often results in poor working conditions for academic staff, which exacerbates tensions between the staff unions and the government. For instance, the 2020 ASUU strike was largely driven by the government's inability to meet the union's demands for improved funding and better welfare packages (Ugar, 2018). This lack of financial commitment has placed a significant burden on universities, forcing them to rely on limited internal resources, which makes it difficult for institutions to

provide adequate services to both staff and students.

Another critical factor contributing to industrial conflict is the issue of poor remuneration and salary disparities. Many university staff, particularly lecturers, have expressed frustration with their pay, which is often seen as inadequate compared to the demands of their job. Nigerian academics are among the lowest-paid university teachers in the world, which has led to dissatisfaction within the workforce. The disparity in salaries between academic staff and their counterparts in other sectors or private universities further aggravates the situation. Additionally, there are issues of non-payment of salaries, delayed salary increments, and unfulfilled promises by the government regarding better pay. These issues have led to repeated strikes, with unions demanding the implementation of agreed salary structures and a more equitable pay system for university staff (Monogbe & Monogbe, 2019).

Addressing this issue, therefore, becomes imperative to ensure that the Nigerian university system is functional, sustainable, and capable of producing quality graduates. According to Chukwudi and Idowu (2021), increasing government funding is crucial to creating a conducive learning and working environment, as it will enable universities to improve infrastructure, support research, and provide competitive salaries for academic staff. Furthermore, the timely implementation of agreements between unions and the government is essential to maintaining industrial peace and preventing disruptive strikes (Nwagbala et al., 2023). Additionally, establishing a more transparent and effective governance system within universities can enhance relations between management and staff, fostering collaboration and addressing emerging challenges (Ewa & Eze, 2023). Finally, a long-term and robust policy to address the remuneration and welfare concerns of academic staff is necessary to address the frequency of industrial actions and promote stability in the academic environment (Okeke et al., 2021).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework Industrial Conflicts

Industrial conflict refers to the disagreements, disputes, or tensions that arise between employers (university

management) and employees (university staff) over issues such as wages, working conditions, benefits, and policies. In the Nigerian university system, industrial conflict is commonly associated with strikes, protests, and work stoppages. These disputes often involve academic staff unions, such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), and university management. Okeke (2017) defined industrial conflict as the breakdown of relations between university staff and management, often due to unaddressed concerns, poor working conditions, and insufficient remuneration. These conflicts result in disruptions to the educational process, with long-term consequences for students, faculty, and the country's educational system.

From a theoretical perspective, industrial conflicts in Nigerian universities can be understood through the lens of Marxist theory (Marx, 1867), which suggests that conflicts arise from inherent inequalities between employers and employees. According to this view, university management, which holds economic and administrative power, may exploit staff by offering inadequate remuneration and working conditions. Conflict theory, as proposed by Coser (1956), highlights that such conflicts emerge from competition for resources, power imbalances, and differing interests between the management and employees, often resulting in strikes or protests.

In the context of the Nigerian university system, industrial conflicts are rooted in both economic and sociopolitical factors. The unequal distribution of resources, compounded by poor government funding and the political instability of the educational sector, often results in grievances from staff unions. Okeke (2021) pointed out that the relationship between university staff and government is often marked by tension, as the former demands better compensation and working conditions, while the latter struggles with budgetary constraints.

Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU)

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) is a trade union in Nigeria that represents the academic staff of public universities across the country. Established to

protect the rights and interests of its members, ASUU advocates for better working conditions, fair wages, improved academic autonomy, and adequate funding for the university system (Uzoh, 2017). Over the years, ASUU has been at the forefront of several strikes and industrial actions, often in response to unfulfilled agreements with the government or university authorities (Asiyai, 2013). These actions have been crucial in drawing attention to the poor state of higher education in Nigeria, where underfunding, delayed salaries, and lack of infrastructure have led to widespread dissatisfaction among university staff (Arikewuyo, 2009).

Nigerian Universities

Nigerian universities refer to the institutions of higher learning in Nigeria that offer a range of undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral programs. These universities play a significant role in the nation's development by educating future leaders, conducting research, and driving innovation (Uzoh, 2017). However, the university system in Nigeria faces a multitude of challenges that contribute to industrial conflicts, such as chronic underfunding, poor management, and a lack of effective governance (Asiyai, 2013). Public universities, in particular, struggle with insufficient government funding, which hampers their ability to provide quality education, maintain infrastructure, attract and retain qualified academic staff (Asiyai, 2013).

Remedies

In the context of the study, Remedies refer to the strategies and solutions proposed to address the underlying causes of industrial conflicts in the Nigerian university system. Remedies aim to resolve disputes and prevent future industrial actions, ensuring the smooth operation of academic activities (Arikewuyo, 2009; Uzoh, 2017). These solutions focus on tackling the systemic issues that contribute to frequent strikes and disruptions in the university system. Addressing funding deficiencies, improving staff welfare, enhancing communication, and establishing effective conflict resolution mechanisms are some of the proposed remedies (Asiyai, 2013).

Causes of Industrial Conflicts in Nigerian Universities

Inadequate Funding of Universities

A major contributor to industrial conflict in Nigerian universities is the chronic underfunding of the education sector. Many Nigerian universities operate with limited financial resources, which impacts infrastructure, staff salaries, and overall academic quality. According to Monogbe and Monogbe, (2019), poor funding leads to deteriorating facilities, outdated learning materials, and insufficient resources to conduct research. This lack of investment in higher education results in university staff feeling undervalued and dissatisfied with their working conditions. ASUU has consistently highlighted this issue, with protests and strikes often centered on demands for better funding of universities. Chukwudi and Idowu (2021) observed that the lack of adequate funding affects the ability of universities to maintain basic infrastructure, let alone offer competitive salaries and career development opportunities for their staff.

Staff Welfare and Remuneration

Flowing from the above the issue of staff welfare and remuneration is also pivotal to the causes of industrial conflict in Nigeria universities. University staff, especially academic staff, often feel underpaid compared to their counterparts in other sectors. The disparity between the wages of university staff and the rising cost of living in Nigeria has led to widespread dissatisfaction and unrest. Agbi (2015) noted that many university lecturers find their salaries inadequate to meet their needs, particularly in an economy marked by inflation and economic instability. This frustration often leads to the formation of strikes or work stoppages as staff unions demand better pay, improved benefits, and enhanced job security. Furthermore, there is often dissatisfaction with the lack of pension plans, healthcare benefits, and other social services that would support the staff in their personal and professional lives (Chukwudi & Idowu, 2021).

Government Policies and Implementation Issues

The concerns of government policies and its

implementation is also an issue that brings about industrial disharmony in the Nigerian Universities system. Government policies related to education, particularly those concerning salaries and conditions of service, also play a critical role in triggering industrial conflicts. For instance, the introduction of the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS) by the Nigerian government in 2019 led to significant resistance from ASUU. The union argued that the policy undermined the autonomy of universities and failed to address the core issues affecting staff welfare (Njoku, 2022). This policy was seen as a direct attack on the rights of academic staff to negotiate their terms and conditions independently. Moreover, policy inconsistency and the lack of commitment to previous agreements exacerbate tensions. According to Njoku (2022), the frequent changes in government policies and the lack of continuity in education reforms create a volatile environment for academic staff, making it difficult for them to trust the government's ability to address their concerns.

Political Interference and Institutional Autonomy

The often time political interference in the operations of universities further exacerbates industrial conflict in Nigeria. University staff often complain that political actors, including government officials, influence decisions that should be made independently by university management. According to Toryuha (2024), this political interference often leads to suboptimal decisions that do not address the real needs of the academic community. Furthermore, universities' institutional autonomy is frequently compromised when political interests take precedence over academic and administrative concerns. This undermines staff morale, leading to strikes and protests. ASUU, in particular, has long demanded that universities be granted full autonomy in managing their affairs without external political interference. Such demands often result in prolonged negotiations with government bodies, further fueling industrial conflict (Njoku, 2022).

Remedies for Industrial Conflicts in Nigerian Universities

Increased Government Funding and Investment

One of the most important remedies to industrial conflict in Nigerian universities is increased government funding. Nwachukwu (2019) highlighted that adequate financial support is crucial for maintaining university infrastructure, improving staff remuneration, and ensuring that the education system meets the needs of students. Increased investment would not only improve physical facilities but also enable universities to offer competitive salaries and research grants, reducing the pressure on staff unions to engage in industrial actions. According to Toryuha (2024), targeted funding for staff development programs, infrastructure improvement and research initiatives would help address some of the key grievances that contribute to industrial conflicts.

Strengthening Dialogue and Collective Bargaining

Effective communication and negotiations between university management and staff unions are essential to resolving industrial conflicts. Ajayi (2017) argued that regular meetings between academic staff unions and university management can help identify and address issues before they escalate into larger conflicts. A transparent, open dialogue that recognizes the legitimate concerns of staff would help build trust and reduce tensions. Establishing independent conflict resolution mechanisms or engaging third-party mediators can also facilitate smoother negotiations and minimize disruptions. Ogbette et al. (2017) suggested that ensuring that both parties understand each other's constraints and work together to find solutions would foster a more cooperative environment and reduce the frequency of strikes.

Policy Consistency and Institutional Autonomy

Ensuring policy consistency in the education sector is crucial for preventing industrial conflicts. Governments need to honor agreements made with academic staff unions and demonstrate a commitment to educational reforms that address the needs of both staff and students. As Oyewole (2018) pointed out, the government must ensure that policies are stable and sustainable to avoid recurrent disputes. Additionally, granting universities greater autonomy to manage their affairs, including hiring, budgeting, and academic planning, would reduce political interference and foster

a more conducive environment for academic excellence and staff satisfaction (Ogbette et al., 2017).

Social and Economic Stability

Addressing the broader social and economic stability in Nigeria is essential for reducing industrial conflicts in universities. As Ogundele (2014) suggested, improving the general economic situation would reduce the financial pressures on both universities and their staff. When the economy is stable, government funding can be more predictable, and universities are more likely to meet the needs of their academic staff. Socially, improving the quality of life for university staff by addressing issues such as housing, healthcare, and job security can help mitigate grievances that often lead to industrial conflict.

2.2 Empirical Review

Toryuha (2024) investigated the causes and consequences of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strike among public universities in Nigeria from 1999 to 2022. The study employed a descriptive survey method, with a sample of 400 stakeholders, including lecturers, students, parents, transporters, and marketers, selected from 12 universities using a multistage sampling procedure. The findings showed that poor budgetary allocation to the education sector, failure of the federal government to honor long-term agreements, politicization of the strike, and staff bonuses were key causes, while the consequences included loss of academic interest, increased social vices, and missed job opportunities. The study concluded that resolving industrial conflicts requires both the government and ASUU to reach a lasting agreement to prevent future occurrences.

Njoku (2022) studied the causes and effects of the ASUU strike on the academic activities of public university students in Nigeria from 2015 to 2021. The study employed a qualitative methodology, utilizing secondary data sources such as articles, textbooks, newspapers, and online materials. The findings showed that inadequate funding, non-payment of financial entitlements to academic staff, and the imposition of the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIIS) were major causes of the strikes. Additionally,

the study revealed that the strike led to disruptions in academic activities, irregular learning, and student demotivation. Njoku (2022) concluded that resolving the strike requires collaborative efforts from the government, university management, and ASUU, alongside improved university funding and the development of better study habits among students.

Ogbette et al. (2017) investigated the causes, effects, and management of ASUU strikes in Nigerian universities from 2003 to 2013. The study employed a qualitative methodology using secondary data sources. The findings revealed that both domestic factors (e.g., low wages, poor funding, and rising student population) and external factors (e.g., the effects of Nigeria's macroeconomic policies) contributed to the intensity of the industrial disputes. The study also highlighted that these disputes were driven by historical, economic, and political factors, making them difficult to resolve. The study concluded that the remedy to resolving strikes in Nigeria's university system includes creating a strong forum for dialogue between the government, university management, and ASUU, along with a progressive increase in the annual education budget by 26% or more.

2.3 Theoretical Framework Human Relations Theory

The Human Relations was introduced by Elton Mayo in 1933. This theory focuses on the importance of interpersonal relationships, employee morale, and communication in organizational settings. It opines that conflicts in an institution arise when there is a breakdown in communication or when workers feel that their needs, such as respect, recognition, and fair compensation, are not being met. In Nigerian universities, the frequent industrial actions can be seen as the result of inadequate attention to university funding, staff welfare and poor communication by the university administrators and the government. Mayo (1933) emphasized that improving working conditions, fostering open dialogue, and addressing employee concerns are crucial in preventing conflicts.

When staff feel not recognized, neglected and

undervalued, or when there is a lack of transparency and communication regarding funding and policy changes, frustrations build up, leading to disharmony. For instance, the delay in implementing agreements, such as the 2009 FG-ASUU agreement, is a clear manifestation of undervalued, neglect, poor communication and a failure to address the concerns of academic staff (Obasi, 2020). This theory suggests that by improving communication and focusing on the human aspects of university management, such conflicts can be minimized, fostering a more collaborative and harmonious environment.

3. Methodology

The study employed secondary data to explore the causes and remedies of industrial conflicts in Nigerian universities. Information was collected through an extensive review of existing literature, which highlighted key factors contributing to these conflicts, including inadequate funding, poor communication, and unfulfilled agreements between staff and government. The literature review also examined various strategies for conflict resolution and institutional reforms aimed at reducing strikes and enhancing university management. The thematic analysis of information facilitated the identification of recurring issues such as resource dependency, strained stakeholder relations, and governance inefficiencies. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics surrounding industrial conflicts in the Nigerian university system.

4. Results and Discussion

Causes of Industrial Conflicts in Nigerian Universities

A recurrent cause of industrial conflict is the chronic underfunding of public universities in Nigeria. Toryuha (2024) and Ogbette *et al.* (2017) underline that poor budgetary allocations to the education sector have led to the deterioration of infrastructure, inadequate facilities for both students and academic staff, and low wages. Toryuha (2024) also noted that the failure of the government to honor long-term agreements with ASUU, particularly those related to salary increases and

university funding, exacerbates the strain within the system. This budgetary shortfall hinders the effective operation of universities and leads to strikes as academic staff push for better working conditions.

According to Toryuha (2024) and Adeyemo and Okeme (2021), promises made in memorandums of understanding (MOUs) between the government and ASUU are often left unfulfilled, leading to frustration among academic staff. These unfulfilled promises typically include issues related to salary increments, the provision of better teaching materials, and infrastructural development. The lack of political will to adhere to these agreements creates a sense of distrust between the stakeholders involved, further deepening the conflict. Adeyemo and Okeme (2021) noted that the persistent failure to pay lecturers their rightful salaries and bonuses is a source of grievance. In some cases, lecturers are denied their entitlements for months, creating an environment of dissatisfaction and unrest. The situation is compounded by the politicization of the strike, as political factors sometimes prevent the timely resolution of these financial issues, exacerbating tensions between ASUU and the government.

Ogbette *et al.* (2017) emphasized that Nigeria's macroeconomic policies, such as inflation, currency devaluation, and the lack of economic diversification, have had a direct impact on the education sector. For instance, the rising cost of living, coupled with the diminishing purchasing power of academic staff, amplifies their dissatisfaction and fuels industrial actions. The politicization of the university system also affects how resources are allocated and how strikes are addressed, leading to further unrest. The introduction of the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) was another key cause identified by Njoku (2022). This system, which was intended to streamline salary payments, became a point of contention when it was imposed on university staff without adequate consultation with ASUU. The system disrupted the autonomy of university administrations, leading to dissatisfaction among lecturers (Njoku, 2022). Additionally, administrative inefficiencies, such as bureaucratic delays and poor communication, contribute to the prolongation of strikes.

Remedies for Industrial Conflicts in Nigerian

Universities

A fundamental remedy proposed by several studies, including those by Ogbette *et al.* (2017) and Toryuha (2024), is the urgent need for increased funding to the education sector. Nigeria's universities face significant underfunding, which affects infrastructure, research, and the welfare of academic staff. A progressive increase in the education budget, as recommended by Ogbette *et al.* (2017), is essential to improving the quality of education and addressing issues such as inadequate facilities and poor salaries for university staff. It is suggested that the government should allocate at least 26% or more of the national budget to education annually to ensure that universities are adequately funded and equipped to operate effectively.

The persistent failure of the government to honor agreements made with ASUU has been a major cause of conflict. Resolving this issue requires the government to demonstrate political will by adhering to agreements on salary increments, infrastructure development, and staff welfare. Establishing a formalized mechanism to track the implementation of these agreements can help build trust and prevent future disputes (Toryuha, 2024; Adeyemo and Okeme, 2021). Ensuring the timely payment of salaries and allowances for academic staff is another key remedy. Delays in salary payments contribute to the dissatisfaction of lecturers and other university staff. The introduction of a more efficient payroll system and better management of funds within university administrations could prevent these delays (Adeyemo and Okeme, 2021). This measure would help address grievances related to financial entitlements and reduce the likelihood of industrial actions triggered by payment issues.

4.1 Discussion

The findings from the empirical studies showed that the role of the government in funding and respecting agreements is critical in tackling the issue of the incessant industrial actions in the Nigeria universities. As highlighted by Toryuha (2024) and Adeyemo and Okeme (2021), there is an urgent need for the Nigerian government to prioritize the education sector by increasing funding and honoring collective agreements

reached with academic staff. Additionally, the involvement of university management in negotiating with ASUU and ensuring timely payment of staff allowances is essential for preventing future industrial actions (Toryuha, 2024; Adeyemo and Okeme (2021). These findings align with broader theories of labor relations, which emphasize the importance of cooperation, negotiation, and compromise in resolving industrial conflicts (Harbison, 1946).

Furthermore, the findings support the view that a participatory decision-making approach, as argued by Adeyemo and Okeme (2021), could provide a sustainable solution. Engaging all stakeholders including ASUU, university management, and government in open dialogue can help create a sense of shared responsibility and ensure that the needs of academic staff, students, and the larger society are met. This approach, alongside democratic leadership practices, could facilitate the resolution of disputes and prevent the politicization of strikes. In terms of remedies, creating a robust platform for dialogue and negotiations, alongside increasing the education budget, as suggested by Ogbette *et al.* (2017), would go a long way in addressing the root causes of industrial conflicts. Furthermore, the imposition of systems like IPPIS needs to be done with consultation and collaboration with relevant stakeholders to avoid unnecessary disruptions.

In overall, industrial conflicts in Nigeria's university system are primarily driven by issues related to funding, non-payment of salaries, and unfulfilled agreements. Addressing these concerns requires a multifaceted approach, including better funding, participatory leadership, and more effective communication between all stakeholders. By addressing these root causes, Nigeria can reduce the frequency and impact of industrial conflicts in its university system, ensuring a more stable and productive academic environment for future generations and overall development/growth of the country.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the significance of addressing the primary causes and remedies of

industrial conflicts in Nigeria's university system. The study highlights that the root causes of these conflicts are multifaceted, ranging from inadequate funding and unfulfilled agreements to poor leadership and the imposition of disruptive policies. The primary drivers of industrial disputes, such as the failure to honor agreements and the delayed payment of staff entitlements, continue to undermine the stability of the academic environment. The study further reveals that the consequences of these conflicts are far-reaching, affecting not only the academic progress of students but also national development as a whole. Strikes have led to disruptions in learning, decreased academic interest, and even increased social vices, while the political and economic climate exacerbates these challenges.

However, despite the complex nature of these disputes, the findings suggest that there are viable remedies to these issues. Key solutions identified include improving the funding allocated to universities, ensuring that agreements between the government and academic unions like ASUU are honored, and implementing democratic leadership approaches within universities. Additionally, it was emphasized that strengthening collective bargaining, creating platforms for dialogue, and improving university management could significantly reduce the frequency of industrial actions. These remedies align closely with the need for a more structured and collaborative approach involving all stakeholders in the university system—government, university management, academic staff, and students.

The Nigerian government should allocate a larger portion of the national budget to the education sector to ensure universities are adequately funded. A

progressive increase in funding will address the infrastructural challenges and improve staff welfare, which will significantly reduce the chances of conflicts.

The government should ensure a more efficient system for the payment of salaries and financial allowances for academic staff. Delays in payment contribute significantly to industrial actions. By ensuring that lecturers and university staff receive their entitlements promptly, the government can significantly reduce the likelihood of future strikes. This measure will also contribute to improved morale among staff, ensuring a more focused and productive academic environment.

A critical step in resolving industrial conflicts is for the government to honor past and future agreements made with ASUU. Government commitments should be formalized, tracked, and monitored to ensure that they are implemented on time. This will help rebuild trust between the government and ASUU, preventing further strikes caused by unfulfilled promises. Additionally, creating a more robust framework for monitoring the implementation of these agreements will enhance accountability.

The implementation of policies like the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) and or future software portals should be done in consultation with stakeholders like ASUU and university management. Changes in policies that affect university staff should be introduced with thorough discussions and agreements to avoid conflicts. This will foster a sense of ownership and understanding, reducing resistance to new policies and promoting smoother transitions in the university system.

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