

The Millstone of Industrial Disputes in Nigerian Universities: A Synoptic Account

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Abstract. This paper gave a synoptic account of the trends of industrial disputes in Nigerian public universities. It examined the history of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) which was formed in 1978. It was observed that since the infamous FG/ASUU Agreement in 1999 (which is a 20-year-period), only five years; 2000, 2004, 20014 2015 and 2016 were spared of the incessant strikes that had led to the downturn in academic activities and students' performances in Nigerian public universities. The paper recommended that the Federal Government and ASUU should map out an enduring strategy to allow the university system to run uninterrupted for a period of ten years so that some degree of sanity and stability in the management and administration of the university system can be achieved.

1. Introduction

The scourge of industrial disputes in Nigerian universities has become a millstone around the neck of Nigeria. It has become a perennial problem - a problem without any end in sight. An article of this nature cannot give a compendious account of the various instances on industrial disputes that have played out in Nigerian universities – hence, this paper is

aimed at giving a synoptic account. The paper will therefore examine the historical context of industrial disputes in Nigerian universities and the implications. The discussion, however, will be chiefly centered on the industrial disputes occasioned by the discord between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), which many perceive as the predominant trade union in Nigerian Universities, and the Federal Government of Nigeria.

2. A Brief History of ASUU

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in Nigeria came into existence in 1978. Before the birth of ASUU, the Nigerian Association of University Teachers (NAUT) which was formed in 1965 was the umbrella body for academic staff of state and federal universities in Nigeria. Membership was drawn from the University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria (Nsukka), Ahmadu Bello University (Zaria) and Obafemi Awolowo University (Ile-Ife) and University of Lagos. The University of Benin (Benin City, Edo State) later joined. The University of Benin (UNIBEN) which started as an Institute of Technology, was founded in 1970. It was later accorded the status of a full-fledged university by the National Universities

Commission (NUC) on 1 July, 1971. UNIBEN, at the request of the state government, was taken over by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1975 which further accorded it the status of a Federal and a first generation University in Nigeria (Udom, 2010).

3. Trends of ASUU Strikes

The history of ASUU is a history of never-ending industrial disputes. In fact, ASUU in the minds of many has become synonymous with strike actions (Oshun, 2008). Nigerian university lecturers embarked on their first ever industrial action in 1973. The strike was occasioned by the trade dispute between the Governing Councils of Nigerian universities and the local branches of the National Association of University Teachers. The dispute was engendered by the review of conditions of service.

There was also the 1986 ASUU strike. ASUU embarked on the strike by joining the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and National Association of University Students (NANS) in protest against the murder of Amadu Bello University (ABU) students by Mobile Police.

In 1987, there was an ASUU strike as a result of the dismissal of Iyayi, President of ASUU and Agbonifo, a branch executive member by the Minister of Education on an allegation from which they had been previously absolved. Part of the issues that generated controversy at this time was the alleged imposition of Ale Williams as the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Benin (UNIBEN) and the attempt by Babangida regime to deradicalize ASUU and trim down its weight.

ASUU observed a strike action in 1988. The union embarked on the strike to demand the implementation of the Elongated University Salary Scale (EUSS). The strike led to the proscription of ASUU on August 7, 1988. The Federal Government banned ASUU, seized all its properties and directed all universities to immediately pay the EUSS, backdated to January. The then President of ASUU, Jega and his predecessor, Iyayi, were detained and tortured. Passports of ASUU officials were

seized. The then Minister of Education threatened to sack all those who refused to resume work by Monday August 11, 1988. Unrelentingly, ASUU metamorphosed into a new association called University Lecturers' Association (ULA). However, ASUU was later de-proscribed.

In 1992, there was an ASUU strike which paralyzed academic programmes in all Nigerian universities. The strike culminated into negotiations on issues of dispute and the signing of an agreement between ASUU and the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). The agreement was to be reviewed every three years to reflect social and economic changes including inflationary trends and costs of living. The agreement unfortunately became the basis for deep-seated industrial conflicts between ASUU and the FGN. It was so bad that up to 2003, there was hardly any session that Nigerian universities did not witness strike actions some of which were unbearably protracted such as those of 1996 and 2002/2003 that stretched for about six months. ASUU was banned for a second time on the 23rd of August, 1992.

ASUU declared an indefinite strike on 3rd May, 1993. The strike was announced as a result of the breach of the 1992 agreement by the Federal Government. Part of ASUU's demand at this time was the University Academic Salary Scale (UASS). At this time, the situation of academic staff of Nigerian universities was miserable. For many, the drive to leave Nigerian universities for foreign countries and the private sector was the solution to the decadence that had permeated the university system. The situation was worsened by the political impasse and the untold hardship meted upon Nigerians as a result of the cancellation of the presidential election results of June 12, 1993.

In 1994, ASUU declared another strike demanding the following from Abacha: (1) Renegotiation of agreement (2) re-instatement of over eighty lecturers whose appointments were terminated at the University of Abuja by the Vice-Chancellor (3) the de-annulment of the June 12, 1993 elections. The strike lingered from 22nd of August, 1994 to January, 1995 (a period

of six months). At this time, the situation of the ailing Nigerian universities had worsened, leaving Nigerian universities in very pitiable conditions. The universities were far from the resemblance of institutions for teaching, learning and research.

The 1996 ASUU strike was declared in protest against the violation of some sections of the 1992 ASUU-FGN Agreement by the Federal Military Government and university authorities. For instance, the government failed to review the agreement when it was due in May, 1995. At a point, ASUU declared another strike that same year to press its demand for the re-negotiation of the agreement and the re-instatement of the lecturers sacked in the University of Abuja. The struggle lasted for over six months amidst threats and prosecutorial actions by the government. Not only were salaries stopped, but also the Sani Abacha led Military Government, through the National Universities Commission (NUC), directed Vice-Chancellors to relief ASUU leaders of their jobs. Without due process, ASUU officials were given the boot.

On May 25, 1999, under Abdusalami's regime, the Federal Government signed an agreement with ASUU. The intension of the government was to provide an interim palliative measure to enhance the income of academics, without prejudice to a comprehensive negotiation at a future date. The agreement only covered allowances – it did not cover basic salaries, funding and autonomy. When Obasanjo's civilian government took over in 1999, it constituted a committee to look into the agreement. The issues of funding and worsening conditions of service were not resolved hence; ASUU proceeded on strike which started on the 13th of September, 1999 and ended on the 6th of November, 1999.

In 2001, ASUU went on strike over an agreement the FGN failed to honour. Still the same year, Obasanjo's government and the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ilorin, Abdul-Raheem, sacked all the 49 ASUU members who refused to defy ASUU strike and return to work on Tuesday, 22nd May, 2001.

In 2002, there was a nationwide ASUU strike which spanned from December 29th, 2002 to June 18th, 2003. Topical issues that heralded the industrial action were the implementation of UASS, reinstatement of the 49 lecturers sacked in the University of Ilorin, funding of state universities and 26 percent funding of education (Vanguard, Thursday, March 20, 2003, p.35). The devastating impact of ASUU strike in 2003 was accentuated by the nationwide strike declared by the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) from Wednesday, January 29, 2003 – just a month after the commencement of ASUU strike.

In 2006, ASUU declared a warning strike from Monday, April 24 – Wednesday, April 26. Some of the issues of contention were the non-implementation of the 2001 ASUU-FGN Agreement, dismissal of lecturers at the University of Ilorin, third-term elongation agendum of political office holders.

From March 26th to July 2nd, 2007, ASUU declared a nationwide strike. The strike was suspended because of the intervention of late President Yar'Adua who appealed to ASUU to suspend the strike and give him time to look into their demands because he just assumed office as a President. The issues that provoked the strike included poor working conditions characterized by lack of facilities, the drain of Nigeria's best and brightest brains who were on a mass exodus to foreign countries for better conditions of service, government's refusal to reinstate the 49 lecturers sacked in 2001 at the University of Ilorin, and others.

On Monday, 15th February, 2008, ASUU declared a one-week warning strike. Some of the issues that led to the strike were: (i) Reinstatement of sacked forty-nine (49) lecturers at UNILORIN in 2001 (ii) Budgetary allocation of 26 per cent of national budget on education as recommended by UNESCO (iii) The challenge of obsolete tuition materials (iv) Inadequate research grants to aid scholars in universities to break new grounds of knowledge.

Year 2009 was not spared by ASUU strike. An indefinite strike by ASUU began on the 22nd of

June, 2009 after series of warning strikes. It was an offshoot of previous strikes. The problem as usual was Federal Government's failure to honour its agreement with ASUU. Between 1981 and 2001, the government and ASUU signed four agreements which were either partially or not implemented at all. The 1981 agreement, for instance, established a principle of collective bargaining in line with the provisions of the International Labour Organization (ILO). The agreement provided a platform for resolving issues like salaries and conditions of service of academic staff, funding and role of pro-chancellors and other functionaries within the university system. The 1992 agreement centered on university autonomy, academic freedom, academic allowances and conditions of service. The 2001 agreement addressed the issues of funding, university autonomy, academic freedom and conditions of service. The pact also made provision for a comprehensive review every three years.

In 2010, there were pockets of industrial disputes in some universities such as Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, Kaduna State. The authorities of the institution and the ASUU chapter of the university had a serious wrangling over alleged breach of the university statutes by the new management and the Governing Council of the institution (Isanyo, 2010). Similarly, indefinite ASUU strike erupted in state universities in the South East on Thursday, July 22, 2010. The institutions included Abia State University, Uturu; Anambra State University, Uli; Ebony State University, Abakaliki; Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Enugu and Evan Enweren University, Owerri (formerly Imo State University).

On 1 July 2013, ASUU embarked on another strike which lasted 5 months and 15 days was called off on 16 December 2013. Claims made by ASUU with regards to the strike were centered largely on funding and revitalization of Nigerian public universities as well as a certain earned allowance which it claimed to be in arrears of 92 billion naira.

On 13th of August, 2017 ASUU declared a nationwide strike which was later suspended on the 18th of September, 2017. While explaining the reasons for the strike, the Minister of Education, Mallam Adamu Adamu, said ASUU accused the Federal Government of failing to keep its side of their agreement. The union had asked the government to release N23 billion. But the government noted that the condition for releasing the N23 billion was for the union to account for the N30 billion they had received previously. The union did not account for the money so the Minister of Finance then undertook to do the audit from the ministry and promised to make the result known within six months. The Federal Government undertook to be paying ASUU N1.5 billion each month during the time they were waiting for the outcome of the audit. Later on, the Federal Government agreed to pay ASUU the N30 billion and do the forensic audit on the entire N53 billion. The Minister of Education further explained that the government did not agree with ASUU's request to be taken out of Treasury Single Account (TSA). He explained that it was a new policy and government was not going to change it for anyone. Concerning salary shortfall, the Minister attributed it to a lot of wrong practices in universities such as recruitment of staff without normal procedure.

While the nation was still convalescing after the ruinous impacts of the series of ASUU strike actions between 2013 and 2017, like Hiroshima, the news of an indefinite, total and comprehensive strike declared by the Academic Staff Union of Universities broke into the air on Sunday November 4, 2018. The National Executive Council of the union which met at the Federal University of Technology, Akure, Ondo State unanimously expressed collective disappointment at the Federal Government for failing to implement the 2009 FGN/ASUU agreements, 2012 and 2013 memorandum of understanding and the 2017 Memorandum of Action. In other words, the goal of the November 2018 ASUU strike was to compel government to address the funding of public universities based on the FGN-ASUU MoU of 2012, 2013 and the MoA of 2017. The strike which started on November 4, 2018 was

suspended on February 7, 2019. From the account so far, it can be observed that since the infamous FG/ASUU Agreement in 1999 (which is a 20-year-period), only five years; 2000, 2004, 20014 2015 and 2016 were spared of the incessant strikes that had led to the downturn in academic activities and students performances in Nigerian public universities. Below is a summary of strike actions embarked upon by ASUU in the last twenty years:

1999.....	5 months
2001.....	3 months
2002.....	2 weeks
2003.....	6 months (ended in 2004)
2005.....	3 days
2006.....	1 week
2007.....	3 months
2008.....	1 week
2009.....	4 months
2010.....	5 months & 1 week
2011.....	3 months (ended in 2012)
2013.....	6 months
2017.....	5 weeks
2018.....	4 months (ended in 2019)

4. Reasons for ASUU Strike: ASUU's Perspective

Many Nigerians have kept asking for the umpteenth time, "Why does ASUU like embarking on strike actions that disrupt research, teaching and learning in Nigerian public universities?" According to the incumbent ASUU President, Abiodun Ogunyemi as reported by Adedigba (2019), ASUU is strongly convinced that if academics fail to fight the cause of university education, the fate that befell public primary and secondary schools would soon become the lot of the public university system in Nigeria. ASUU's advocacy on the need to stem the continued slide into rot and decay in public universities since the 1980s has fallen on deaf ears. Experience, according to ASUU as a trade union, shows that successive governments in Nigeria always entered into negotiated agreements only to placate those pleading the cause – be it education, health, transportation, employment or any other issue of meaningful living. The proclivity and insensitivity of the Nigerian ruling class are the factors that provoke strike actions by ASUU. In

order words, the accumulated records of indifference and lackadaisical attitude of Government to negotiated agreements with the Union have the major causes of their strike actions.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The history of ASUU is a history of never-ending industrial disputes. In fact, ASUU in the minds of many has become synonymous with strike actions. The findings of the trend of industrial disputes in Nigerian universities so far indicates that Nigeria's rate of industrial disputes in the university system appears to be one of the worst in the world. Some Nigerians have observed that the attitudes of both ASUU and the Federal Government during strike do not portray conscience, dignity and interest in nation-building. They have reduced Nigerian students to the proverbial grass that suffers terribly for nothing when two elephants are fighting. They allow the strike to linger because the two parties seemingly have nothing to lose after the strike: ASUU will be paid for the periods it went on strike thus not losing anything and Federal Government, after much dilly dally, will pay ASUU with tax payers. It is the students who bear the brunt.

It is therefore recommended that the Federal Government and ASUU should map out an enduring strategy to allow the university system to run uninterrupted for a period of ten years so that some degree of sanity and stability in the management and administration of the university system can be achieved. This recommendation is in agreement with the suggestion of Udom (2010) that there should be a moratorium on industrial disputes in Nigerian universities for a continuous period of ten years to enable the universities recover from some of the negative effects of previous strikes. The strategies of resolving industrial disputes in countries that hardly experience strikes should be understudied and adopted.

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