



Crises Management, Strike Actions and Government-ASUU Negotiations: Focus on the Perceptions of ASUU Members in Anambra State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

In Nigeria of recent time, many mismanaged Labour-Government conflicts have eventually culminated into crisis which later turned to become a clog in our wheel of economic prosperity as a nation. As it stands presently, ASUU Strike can be described as one of the most re-occurring labour unrests in Nigeria from mid 90s till today. This have distorted our academic calendar and created an image of uncertainty in the minds of students and parents alike. Hence, this study which was carried out to ascertain the position of ASUU members on the use of strike action as a negotiation tool between them and government. ASUU members in the two public Universities situated in Anambra state; Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Uli/Igbariam were studied using cross-sectional survey research design. Questionnaire was used as the instrument of data collection from a sample size of 352 respondents. The study found that ASUU members perceive strike action as the most effective negotiation tool, and the "language" that Nigerian political Leaders understand clearer. The study therefore recommends better staff welfare, implementation of MOUs/MOAs and increase in funding of University education in Nigeria as the panacea for incessant strike actions being experienced in Nigerian Universities.

KEY WORDS: Strike Action, Government, Labour, Negotiation, ASUU, Crises Management

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I. INTRODUCTION

The use of strike action as a tool in Government-Labour negotiation in Nigeria predates Nigerian independence. According to The Black Republic (2016), it is important to note that strikes in Nigeria are not a modern phenomenon, as there have been several key strikes that have taken place in the past. Two key strikes stand out due to them accelerating the collapse of British Colonialism in Nigeria. The first notable one was the General strike of 1945.

In the year 1942, an umbrella body saddled with the responsibility of controlling all Trade Unions known as Federation of Nigeria Trade Unions was born. It was the creation of this organization that integrated and strengthened about 30,000 Nigerian workers to down tools in protest of non-increment of their wages in the face of rising inflation induced by World War II and the disparity in the wages of indigenous workers and that of their European counterparts.

Since then, respective Labour Unions in Nigeria including Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) at different times have been employing strike actions as their tool for negotiating their demands with the government. In some other instances, it is used for other purposes which includes political goals. NUPENG and PENGASSAN strike of 1994 is a typical example of politically motivated strike action.

The National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), followed by PENGASSAN, Nigeria's union of gas industry senior staff, engineers and administrators, called the July 1994 strike to protest the arrest of Abiola and deteriorating conditions in the oil industry (Isaac, n.d.).

Today in Nigeria, a minimum of one academic session must be factored into the estimated duration of a students' stay in every of Nigeria's Public University. It is difficult for two years to elapse without the news of ASUU embarking on strike for one reason or the other. It is in the light of the foregoing that the researchers set out to embark on this study.

Statement of the Problem

It is common knowledge that Public Universities in Nigeria are facing inadequate funding, poor remuneration of staff, dilapidated or outright absence of requisite infrastructure and many other challenges which kept the government on an endless war path with Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). This in turn, gave birth to incessant interruption of University academic calendar through strike actions by ASUU. Sequel to the unpredictable graduation time table occasioned by this action, University admission seekers now flood Private Universities and our neighbouring countries in search of University education. Thus, it becomes pertinent to ascertain select Lecturers' perceptions of the place of strike action in government-ASUU negotiations as a method of crises management in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

- i. Ascertain ASUU Members' perception of the use of strike action as a negotiation tool.
- ii. Determine the extent of success achieved by ASUU in negotiations using strike action in the past.
- iii. Ascertain the level of support strike action enjoys amongst ASUU members in Anambra state.

Research Questions

1. What is ASUU Members' perception of the use of strike action as a negotiation tool?
2. What is the extent of success achieved by ASUU in negotiations using strike action in the past?
3. What is the level of support strike action enjoy amongst ASUU members in Anambra state?

Strike Action: Conceptual Clarifications

According to the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, a strike is "*a cessation of work by a body of persons employed in any industry acting in combination, or a concerted refusal, or a refusal under common understanding of any number of persons who are or have been so employed to continue to work or to accept employment*" (Archie, n.d.).

Similarly, Britannica (n.d.) defined strike as the collective refusal by employees to work under the conditions required by employers. Strikes arise for a number of reasons, though principally in response to economic conditions (defined as an economic strike and meant to improve wages and benefits) or labour practices (intended to improve work conditions).

To Scot (n.d.), a strike or industrial action is an action taken caused by a dispute between Trade Union members and employers. It is a refusal to work by employees until the dispute has been resolved.

The question as to whether employees have a fundamental right to strike has been the object of considerable academic debate and is a point on which judicial opinions have continually been expressed. There is no doubt that workers throughout the world are alike in the sense that they desire recognition, satisfaction, fair wages and salaries, job security, redress of wrongs and good working conditions. But often, the employer and the union (representing workers) find themselves in sharp disagreement. Such friction or disagreement gives rise to trade disputes and strikes (Azubike, 2019).

Nwabueze (2006) in his own view, states that through industry relations, organisations use effective two-way communication to protect their interests and also be their brother's keeper. They jointly move with one voice when lobbying for favourable government policies or protection of one another's interest. The various Trade Unions and professional bodies play vital roles in industrial relations.

Wogu (1969) listed some pre-independence industrial strike actions in Nigeria as follows: Aba women riot of 1929, Railway workers' strike of 1938, Nigerian union of railway men strike of 1941, General strike of 1945, UAC employees strike of 1947, Coal miners' strike of 1949, Mercantile workers' strike of 1950, and Airways workers' union strike of 1959.

Up till today in Nigeria, strike actions by different Labour Unions is still prevalent. It can be best described as a pandemic that is ravaging Nigerian economy, image, as well as productivity. Painfully, avoidable strike actions have cost us unquantifiable human and material resources. If it is not embarked upon by health workers, it is oil workers, teachers, Non-academic staff of academic institutions or even bread producers.

Another social cost of strike is that it paints a bad image and casts a social stigma on both parties involved in the industrial conflict (Fashoyin, 2007). The news of helpless patients dying in Nigerian government owned hospitals because a health-related Trade Union is on strike is no more a 'Touching News'.

It will be an Important instance to consider the incident in Nigeria Airways when Pilots had a dispute with their management. At a time of serious economic depression, the strike weapon must be used very sparingly and only as a last resort (Eluwa,1998).

One striking reoccurrence in this quagmire is the fact that most of the pre and post- independence strike actions are usually caused by a disagreement or rift between the concerned Labour Union and the government of the day. During the colonial era, it was a tool against the colonial government's unacceptable policies, and later on in the late 1950s it was used for Nigeria's independence struggle.

In the present independent and democratic Nigeria, many policies and actions of the government is perceived to be insensitive to the economic plight of it's poverty -stricken citizenry. In Okene's (2008) postulation, obviously, strike becomes the only weapon to be employed by workers to compel a recalcitrant employer (especially the government as an employer, as in Nigeria) to recognize and bargain with trade unions, to comply with the terms and conditions of an employment relationship.

Crises Management at a Glance

Crisis Management, simply defined, is a deliberate act designed by an organization towards preventing and reducing the impact and damage a crisis can cause to an organization and its stakeholders, (Oduah,2020). Coombs (2007) also defined crisis management as a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damage inflicted. In his own view, Summers et al,(1996) cited in Nwodu (2007) defined crisis management as the skill or process of dealing with usually dangerous or difficult situations.

To Institute for Public Relations, (2007), Crisis management is a process designed to prevent or lessen the damage a crisis can inflict on an organization and its stakeholders. As a process, crisis management is not just one thing. Crisis management can be divided into three phases: (1) pre-crisis, (2) crisis response, and (3) post-crisis. The pre-crisis phase is concerned with prevention and preparation. The crisis response phase is when management must actually respond to a crisis. The post-crisis phase looks for ways to better prepare for the next crisis and fulfills commitments made during the crisis phase including follow-up information.

Crisis management does not only concern itself with responding to crises, it entails the ability to decipher rising issues and looming crises, taking precautionary and preventive measures, preparing for crises, alleviating their possible impacts and finally recovering from them, (Oduah,2020). According to Nwodu (2007), In discussing the procedures for crisis management, we shall delineate the procedures into three distinctive broad categories. These are:

- (i) Pre-crisis measure or procedure, which is planning for potential crisis.
- (ii) On-the crisis or reactive measure, which has to do with actual management of a crisis that has already occurred or is occurring.
- (iii) Post-crisis measure, which refers to actions needed to be taken after the storm to deepen and possibly perpetuate the gains of crisis management.

The import of all the definitions above is that crisis management is the effort by the management of an organization to ensure that crisis is prevented from occurring, in the circumstance that it eventually occurs, that its impact is adequately contained. To succeed in this task, the right personnel must be on the driver's seat. The case of incessant strike actions by ASUU and other Labour Unions in Nigeria is an avoidable crisis that can be mitigated using the three crisis management procedures as postulated by Nwodu (2007) ; Pre-crisis measure or procedure, On the-crisis or reactive measure and Post-crisis measure.

ASUU: The Union and Its Struggles

Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) is a union comprising all academic staff of government owned Universities in Nigeria. It was founded in 1978 to succeed Nigerian Association of University Teachers which was formed in 1965. Since its formation, ASUU have been engaged in many 'Fights' against the government both civilian and military regimes.

From 1998 till date, ASUU have been embarking on different strike actions citing varying demands which includes; unfair wages, unending military rule, University autonomy, University funding, good working environment, unfair treatment of members, non- payment of EAA, and most recently IPPIS payment system.

At different times during the military regime, ASUU had been proscribed, and it's properties seized for daring to embark on strike. ASUU face off culminating into strike didn't end with military regime in Nigeria. It was thought to have gone with the military, but surprisingly, it resurfaced and became more incessant.

As posited by Wahab (2018), after the end of the military era in 1999, Nigerians ushered in democracy and a government that promised to be people oriented. But it didn't take long for Nigerian students to experience a disruption in their academic pursuit. Few months after the Obasanjo-Atiku administration was sworn-in, ASUU embarked on a nationwide strike and it lasted for five months.

As a Labour Union, ASUU’s preoccupation at all times is welfare of its members and development of Nigerian University education at large. While government on the other hand, irrespective of the fact that paucity of fund hinders them in some cases, their individual enrichment and funding the next election seems to take precedence on their agenda. If not so, why would any responsible government allow academic calendar to be disrupted before engaging ASUU on a sincere dialogue to avert any form of strike action?

Theoretical Framework

This study was premised on conflict theory. Conflict theory, first purported by Karl Marx, is a theory that society is in a state of perpetual conflict because of competition for limited resources. Conflict theory holds that social order is maintained by domination and power, rather than by consensus and conformity (Hayes,2020).

It further states that those with wealth and power try to hold on to it by any means possible, chiefly by suppressing the poor and powerless. Viewed from the perspective of this study, the government and ASUU are in what can be described as war of interest.

Conflict theory views social and economic institutions as tools of the struggle between groups or classes, used to maintain inequality and the dominance of the ruling class. It sees society as divided along lines of economic class between the proletarian working class and the bourgeois ruling class.

II. Methodology

This study adopted cross-sectional survey design. This research design was used to determine the place of strike action in government–labour negotiation. Questionnaire was used to generate primary data. The population was made up of all registered members of ASUU in the two government Universities situated in Anambra state, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, (UNIZIK) and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University (C.O.O.U).

According to records obtained from ASUU office of both Universities, UNIZIK has 2,463 members, and C.O.O.U. has 500 members, totaling 2963 members. The sample size of the study was 352. This was calculated using Taro Yamane for sample size determination. Thus;

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

‘n’ - sample size

‘N’ - population of the study

‘K’ - constant (1)

‘e’ –margin of error (in this case, 0.05)

Then, the proportionate sampling technique was used to allot units to each University according to the population of ASUU members in each of the schools. Finally, the members in each University were randomly selected without further recourse to gender, position or rank.

Table 1: Proportionate Sample Distribution

University	Population	Percentage	Sample Proportion
UNIZIK	2,463	83	293
C.O.O.U.	500	17	59
Total	2,963	100	352

Data Presentation and Analysis

Out of the total of 352 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 346 were retrieved, which implies 97% response rate. However, only 342 copies were considered usable for this study. The following sets of data, as analysed, were generated to answer the research questions, as well as discuss the findings.

Table 2: ASUU Members’ perception of the use of strike action as a negotiation tool

Options	scores(x)	Frequency(F)	FX	Percentage%
V Positive	4	168	672	49
Positive	3	124	372	36
Negative	2	33	66	10
V Negative	1	17	17	5
Total		342	1,127	100

From table 2 above, the analysis shows ASUU members’ perception of the use of strike action as a negotiation tool. The result shows a mean score of 3.2 on a 4-point scale. It goes further to show that ASUU members’

perception of the use of strike action as a negotiation tool is 80% positive. The responses indicated that most members perceived strike action as the language Nigerian government understands faster.

Table 3: The extent of success achieved by ASUU in negotiations using strike action

Options	scores(x)		Frequency(F)	FX	Percentage%
Very High	4	176	704	51	
High	3	128	384	37	
Low	2	27	54	8	
Very Low	1	11	11	4	
Total		342	1,153	100	

Table 3 above shows the level of success that ASUU have achieved using strike action as negotiation tool. The result shows a mean score of 3.3 on a 4-point scale. It also shows that strike action has achieved 82% success in its use as a negotiation tool with government whenever dispute arises between them. That their demands are usually given serious attention whenever they embark on strike action.

Table:4 The level of support strike action enjoy amongst ASUU members in Anambra state.

Options	Scores(x)	Frequency(F)	FX	Percentage%	
Very High	4	157	628	45	
High	3	145	435	41	
Low	2	31	62	9	
Very Low	1	19	19	5	
Total		342	1,144	100	

The data in table 4 above shows that strike action enjoys a very high level of support among ASUU members in Anambra state. It shows a mean score of 3.3 on a 4-point scale. Furthermore, it shows that it enjoys 82% support of ASUU members. From their responses, it is strike action that attracts to ASUU the level of sympathy and public attention that forces government to hearken to their demands.

III. Discussion of Findings

Table 2: Responses from the data above found that 80% of ASUU members in Anambra state perceive strike action as a positive negotiation tool between them and the government. Hence, their firm support for its use. Just as Bellace, (2016) submitted, as cited in Abuza,(2016), that without the right to strike, without the ability to threaten economic loss to the employer, unions lack bargaining power. Without the ability to press demands and to back up those demands with the threat of using economic weapons, workers effectively cease to be able to bargain.

Affirming the postulation above, Business Jargons described Strike as one of the powerful tools of collective bargaining, used by trade unions and labor associations to compel the employer to grant several concessions.

In relation to conflict theory, this finding presupposes that ASUU members perceive strike action positively as long as it is the only means by which their demands are attended to. That the due reward for their sweat left in the hands of government officials (the rich and powerful) is intentionally withheld from reaching them, out of selfishness.

Table 3: The data in this table answered the question put forward to ascertain the extent of success that ASUU has achieved using strike action as a negotiating tool. The 82% success achieved is quite enormous considering the level of attention accorded University education by federal and state governments in Nigeria.

Expressing hope that ASUU would call off the strike, the Labour and Employment Minister said: “ASUU will go back to consult its organ with a view to calling off the strike. We hope to hear good news from them in the next 24 hours so that our children can go back to class. They got nearly everything they wanted”, (NUC,2017).

From the above statement credited to Sen. Chris Ngige, Nigerian Minister of Labour and Productivity, it affirms the respondent’s claim that the level of success achieved by ASUU using strike action as a negotiating tool is enormous.

In relation to conflict theory, this finding implies that embarking on strike action is a continuation of the conflict in the social order (those with wealth and power and the poor and powerless).

Table 4: The responses extracted from the question, what is the level of support that strike actions enjoy from ASUU members in Anambra state is overwhelmingly positive. The support level standing at 82% signifies overwhelming support of ASUU members in the use of strike actions as a negotiating tool.

Referring to Hornby (2001) cited in Adavbiele (2015), strike is a period of time when an organized group of employees of a company stops working because of a disagreement over pay or conditions. It can be seen as an action/attitude exhibited by a group of people (that is, employees or students) to express their level of disagreement with a view to attracting favourable responses from those concerned.

Knowing that without embarking on strike, Nigerian Government will not fulfil their obligation to ASUU\Education sector, ASUU members now hope on strike action as their most powerful weapon that forces the government to comply with their demand. Hence, their support for its use as a negotiating tool.

Relating the above finding to the researcher's guiding theory, strike action as a tool for negotiation is overwhelmingly supported by ASUU members because it benefits those on their side of the existing economic divide (proletarian working class).

IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings that emanated from this study, it is obvious that there is lack of commitment and zeal on the part of government to bequeath Nigeria a 21st century University education. Nigeria is no doubt blessed with high quality academics that can compete with their counterparts anywhere in the world. But due to lack of motivation and requisite teaching infrastructure, their best is not given.

Job dissatisfaction occasioned by poor remuneration and poor working environment have become commonplace among majority of ASUU members. That Nigerian government seems not to appreciate the importance of a standardized uninterrupted University education system, and the role it plays in the growth and development of a nation.

Having observed these anomalies, the researcher recommends as follows; Firstly, that the government should as a matter of urgency increase it's budgetary allocation to public Universities in Nigeria. This is to reduce the level of decay on it's available infrastructure and for provision of new ones.

Secondly, to engage the services of experienced human managers at the decision taking level of our government, where MOUs and MOAs entered into with ASUU will be seen to be honored. This will usher in a smoother and uninterrupted University education where Government- Labour disputes are resolved on a round table instead of strike actions.

Finally, it is an incontrovertible fact that an unmotivated workforce is an unproductive workforce. Therefore, the issue of Lecturers' welfare should be given priority attention so that they will be as productive as their counterparts in other developing countries. This will in turn serve as a precursor to the production of highly qualified graduates from our public universities.

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