

THE EFFECTS OF INDUSTRIAL CONFLICTS AND STRIKES IN NIGERIA: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The main thrust of this paper is to analyse and discuss the socio-economic implications of industrial conflicts, particularly strikes, in Nigeria. Industrial conflict was identified as the discord that occurs when the goals, interest or values of different individuals or groups in an industrial setting are incompatible. This conflict is however, inevitable. Such attributes like refusal of union recognition, public policies, failure of collective bargaining, etc, were identified as some of the reasons and causes of industrial conflicts. However, the paper identified that the strike incidence and propensity in Nigeria are alarming. This paper further averred that while industrial conflicts, strikes and work stoppages affect tremendously the economic development of Nigeria through low national productivity, it also has serious sociological consequences such as the dislocation and severance of the socialisation function of work. The paper therefore, recommended that all stakeholders involved in industrial relations should adopt systematic and sustainable mechanisms including collective bargaining in addition to political solutions toward arresting the embarrassing, incessant and recurring spate of strikes.

Keywords: Industrial conflicts, industrial relations, strike, collective bargaining and socio-economic.

Introduction

Industrial conflict has been a characteristic of industrial societies since the Industrial Revolution era. Conflict is an inevitable part of organisational life, since the goals of different stakeholders in an organisation often differ and are incompatible. While industrial conflict is bound to exist, its prevalence and re-occurrence, as in Nigeria, express the existence of unhealthy relationship between key actors in an industrial setting (Ogunbameru and Oribabor, 2000).

It is apparent that Nigeria is under industrial chaos and crisis. From independence to contemporary times, there have been series of industrial conflicts and strikes in the Nigerian industrial sector. Since the wake of the 21st century, the strike incidence and propensity have become unprecedented in view of the current democratic system of governance in the country. Between the periods, 1999 to 2002, though the incidence of strike was visibly infrequent, it witnessed about 153 work stoppages, and had a very high number (19,674,052) of man-days lost. From 2003 to 2006 the country witnessed about 502 trade disputes, 1422 work stoppages involving about 1,638,335 workers, resulting to 12,353,391 man-days lost (see table 1 below). For the year 2007, the National Bureau for Statistics estimated a total of 79 work stoppages

and 3415 man-days lost (www.nigerianstat.gov.ng). Virtually all sectors of the economy have witnessed one form of industrial conflict or the other. It is unworthy of note to mention that even the essential services workers, for example the Nigerian Police Force, have embarked on a strike action. There are regular and consistent strikes and threats of it. The prevalence of strikes in the country perhaps prompted Okene (2008) to remark that "what was once thought to be a British disease seems to have become a Nigerian disease."

Table 1: Industrial Relations and Conflict Statistics in Nigeria (1990-2006)

Year	Trade Dispute	Work Stoppages	Workers Involved	Man-days lost
1998	16	11	9,494	47,631
1996	29	24	19,826	94,664
1995	46	26	193,944	2,269,037
1999	52	27	173,858	3,158,087
1997	31	31	59,897	359,801
2001	51	37	259,290	4,722,910
2002	50	42	302,006	5,505,322
2000	49	47	344,722	6,287,733
1993	160	90	880,224	6,192,167
1990	174	102	254,540	1,339,105
1994	199	110	1,541,146	234,307,748
2006	46	112	86,342	2,446,055
1991	204	117	460,471	2,257,382
1992	221	124	238,324	966,611
2004	152	152	517,331	3,302,112
2005	155	489	872,463	2,086,903
2003	149	669	162,199	4,518,321

Source: Awe and Ayeni (2010)

Industrial conflicts, particularly strike, have become endemic. There is no sector that is not bedevilled with industrial disputes and conflicts organized by the various house and national unions. The roll call of these unions includes the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Non Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASUU), and Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT). Others are Medical and Health Workers Union, Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas (NUPENG) workers (www.nigeriadailynews.com). Included, of course, are the "almighty umbrella unions" - Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC), among others. That all the sectors of the economy are bedevilled with industrial crisis suggests that the wheel that is turning the nation is gradually grinding to a halt. This increasing incidence of strike implies that the very fabric of the Nigerian economy is being threatened, with looming severe socio-economic adversities. Instances of these abound. During the just ended 5 months (July to December, 2010) ASUU strike in the South-East wide state government owned universities, economic and social activities that usually boomed in these universities and their environs

were grounded and brought to a halt. Also, the NLC/TUC 3 days national shut down warning strike in November 2010 brought untold economic hardship, and severance of human social interactions and relationships. Perhaps, these were the reasons why the warning strike had to be called off barely 24 hours it commenced.

Of much interest to this paper are to x-ray the content and context of industrial conflicts, especially strikes, causes of industrial conflicts, and the critical socio-economic implications of industrial conflicts and strikes. This paper will also proffer some solutions out of this recurring menace. The observations and unsavoury experiences of the writer, informal discussions on the topic, as well as review of relevant literatures formed the data sources for this paper.

Industrial Conflicts and Strikes

The human society is full of conflicts. Conflicts arise as a result of disagreement between two antagonising parties/classes. With reference to the industrial society, industrial conflict is the inability of parties to an employment relations (employers and employees represented by their unions or groups) to reach agreement on any issue connected with the object of employer-employee interactions (Fajana, 2000). Industrial conflicts could also be seen as a breakdown of cordial relationship between labour and management. Industrial conflict is thus, the result of an unpalatable, imbalanced and antagonistic relationship and interaction between and among parties involved in industrial relations. The import of this is that industrial conflict is an expression of not-so-good and hostile relationship between and among (inter and intra) industrial relations parties. That is, either between labour and management or between labour and labour. With regards to the latter, for instance, in 1986 a faction of the NUPENG workers, in a bid to demonstrate its claim to leadership of the union, organised a damaging strike of its tanker-driver members. This strike paralysed the delivery of petroleum products to major urban cities; yet it had little or nothing to do with labour-management relationship (Fashoyin, 2007).

Many discussions on industrial conflicts refer to strikes. Strikes are the most overt form of industrial conflicts. Thus, Fajana (2000) defines strike as a temporary cessation of work efforts by employees in the pursuance of a grievance or demand. Strikes have become a significant approach toward expressing workplace grievances. Adeogun (1980) remarked that strike is all about 'grievances, actual or imagined, arising from industrial life.' Okene (2008) however added that 'in an unashamedly capitalist society like Nigeria, where there is ostentatious display of wealth by the rich, where majority of the workers eke a living out of their wages while their employers live in absolute affluence with the widest ostentation, it is submitted that workers' grievances can hardly be described as 'imagined'. In a society such as ours, where the rich gets richer and the poor gets poorer; where the capitalists unimaginably exploit the proletariat, strike becomes an asset. 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 recognise and bargain with trade unions, to comply with the terms and conditions of an employment relationship (Okene, 2008)

Industrial Conflicts: A Theoretical Exploration

A theory is a body of reasoned supposition submitted to offer explanations to ideas, issues or hypothetical propositions. In view of this, it is pertinent to attempt a theoretical exploration as to the incidence of industrial conflict especially within the Nigerian environment. In doing so, this study borrows from the Unitary and Marxian theories of industrial relations.

Unitary theory

This theory identifies an organisation as comprising of groups of individuals who have and share same goals, and work as members of one team. The unitary view recognises an organisation as one big happy family. Unitarists view the enterprise as a unitary system with one source of authority ó management, and one focus of loyalty ó labour (Armstrong, 2009). Unitary framework extols the virtue of teamwork, where everyone strives jointly to a common objective, every one pulls their weight to the best of their ability, and everyone accepts their place and function gladly (Armstrong, 2009). The unitary view sees conflict as a bad thing which should not exist because it serves as a constraint towards the achievement of mutual objectives of both management and labour. However, unitarism has been criticised as being essentially autocratic and authoritarian. It also does not recognise the fact that an organisation is made up of individuals and groups with divergent and often conflicting interests.

Marxian (conflict) theory

In view of the inherent weakness of the unitary theory in recognising that an organisation consists of people who have often conflicting interests, the Marxists theorised that conflict is an inherent characteristic of the society. This view of industrial relations looks at the nature of the capitalist society, where there is a fundamental division of interest between labour and capital, and sees workplace relations against this background. The conflict theory is embedded in the works and ideas of Karl Marx. This theory explains that conflict is inevitable and stems from inequalities of power and economic wealth inherent in a capitalist economy or society. In Marxian analysis, conflict is attributable to an enduring power struggle between workers and their employers over the control of various aspects of work (Fashoyin, 2007). Identifying the causes of workplace conflict, Fashoyin (2007) further submits that ònequality in the distribution of the proceeds of industry, job-insecurity of the worker, and poor management control strategies breed grievances which lead to conflict.ö Here, conflict is seen as inevitable, and trade unions are a natural response of workers to their exploitation by capitalists, since it is rather difficult and dangerous for workers to individually express their grievances to management. Conflict theorists posit that there may be periods of acquiescence in this conflicting relationship. However, the institutions of joint regulations are believed to enhance rather than limit management's position as they presume the continuation of capitalism rather than challenge it (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/industrial_relations).

This theory (Marxian conflict) is of much relevance in explaining industrial relations in Nigeria. Observably, industrial relations in Nigeria is largely imbalanced and antagonistic between the parties involved, often in favour of capital. The employer is wielding so much power at the expense and exploitation of the worker. Thus in response to such exploitative tendencies, conflicts result, conflicts over processes of work relations and control. With regards to wages, while the capitalist endeavours to purchase labour at the lowest price

possible, the wage worker on the other hand, tries to sell his only asset at the highest possible price in order to ensure his existence (Fajana, 2000).

Reasons and Causes of Industrial Conflicts and Strikes in Nigeria

Tensions created by incessant strikes in the country have become alarming. This would prompt a discerning mind to enquire for an understanding as to the reasons and causes of industrial conflicts. Though there may be ready answers to this, the following are some of the identified reasons why workers and their unions answer Marx's clarion call of 'revolting against capital'

Adopting a micro theory of conflict, Fashoyin (2007) identified the following causes of industrial conflicts: structural-organisational causes; inadequate decision-making power; management policies; intra-organisational policies; interpersonal and personal sources; and procedural sources. However, in addition to Okene's (2008) identified causes of strikes, the following issues are identified to bring about industrial conflicts and strikes.

Refusal of union recognition

Workers often resort to strike so that the employer would recognise them as a union and thus, make them parties in collective bargaining. Currently, a breakaway faction of the Association of Senior Staff of Banks, Insurance and Financial Institutions (ASSBIFI) in Union Bank, known as Union Bank Association of Senior Staff (UBASS) is involved in a trade dispute so as to force the management of Union Bank to accord them recognition as a collective bargaining party (the Guardian, February 21, 2011).

Bringing the plight of workers to bear

This is perhaps, the most singular reason why labour embarks on strike actions. Unconducive working environment, inadequate pay packages, poor welfare services, etc, are some plights of the workers that spur them to strike. For example, in 2010, medical doctors in Edo State embarked on strike to protest the level of insecurity in the state which had led to the kidnapping and killing of its members. Also in 2010, the NLC and TUC directed its members to down tools (as a warning) to press home their demand for an enhanced 'living' wage.

Failure of collective bargaining

This is another major reason for industrial conflicts and strikes. Okene (2008) avers that 'the main justification for industrial action is the failure of collective bargaining'. When workers and employers engage in collective bargaining, there is no guarantee that it will be successful. Even when successful, there is no guarantee that it will be honoured. Consequently, unsuccessful bargaining and failure to adhere to agreed terms naturally lead to industrial conflicts and dislocation of industrial harmony and peace. For example, the just ended industrial imbroglio between ASUU and South-East governments stem from the inability of the state governments in the South-East to honour and implement the FG-ASUU 2007 agreement.

Unpopular and harsh public policies

Unfriendly and harsh policies by governments and employers are veritable factors that have caused many severe industrial conflicts. Most public policies made by government have met stiff opposition by the labour. Workers and their unions usually resort to strikes to express their displeasures on such perceived anti-labour policies, decisions and/or legislations. In Nigeria, a number of public policies have stirred series of strike actions. Notably, among such policies, was the incessant fuel price hike that was the mainstay during President Olusegun Obasanjo's civilian administration (1999 to 2007). During this time, Nigeria witnessed frequent and regular series of strike actions called by the central labour organisation, NLC, led by the powerful comrade Adams Oshiomohle. These actions were as a result of labour's disapproval and total rejection of such fuel price hikes. Elsewhere, France, in 2010, witnessed a damaging strike action and protest against government's decision to review upward the retirement age of workers.

Socio-Economic Implications/Cost of Industrial Conflicts and Strikes

The incessant stoppage of work owing to industrial conflicts has a lot of socio-economic effects on the development of Nigeria. No matter the logics behind strike actions, it is obvious that there are attendant socio-economic misfortunes. While to an economist, strike causes economic fracture, which has serious negative economic consequences, to a sociologist, strike causes a dislocation in the sociological importance of work as well as the socialisation process.

Economically, strikes and other forms of industrial conflict and work stoppages obliterate the desired growth and development in the economy. This effect is two fold: while it hinders national productivity, it on the other hand, scares away the needed foreign investment. Human productivity is an important index in calculating national productivity. This is because it is the human element that transforms all other resources toward achieving an increased national productivity. However, trade disputes and conflicts instigate work stoppages, which result in man-days lost. Thus, when labour productivity depreciates, in form of man-days lost, it automatically results to a reduction and loss in productivity which affects the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as well as the Gross National Product (GNP). Incessant strikes are a reflection of the unhealthy nature and structure of our industrial society. Thus, foreign investors are scared away, and are not encouraged to invest in an environment of unstable industrial peace and harmony, where their return on investment will be distorted as a result of strikes and work stoppages.

Sociologically, industrial conflicts, strikes and work stoppages have serious consequences. Foremost, we need to understand that work is a fundamental connection among humans, creating the basis for social integration (Durkheim, 1960). Grounded on the demonstrable societal significance of work as an elementary human condition, and as a principal means to fashion and preserve mores (socialisation), we could concur therefore that:

beyond the mere provision of income to cover basic needs, it is through the social bonding of work which links individuals to society, gives them social standing and status, serves as a basis for the construction of their personal identity. Given our cultural heritage, work is for most an existential necessity, providing livelihood and meaning in life (Mohammad *et al*, 2009).

A cursory analysis of the above reveals that work is a necessary social activity which provides a sense of societal belonging, a sense of self worth and above all, a sense of living to a worker. This is in line with Armstrong (2009) position that to most people, to work is to earn a living or to make money. But they also work because of the other satisfactions it brings such as doing something worthwhile, a sense of achievement, prestige, recognition, the opportunity to use and develop abilities, the scope to exercise power, and companionship. Based on the foregoing, one can now understand why a professor in one of the Nigerian universities had to become a motor park tout 'agbero' during the protracted industrial face off between ASUU and government in 2009! Furthermore, unremitting work stoppage, owing to strikes, alienates man from other men in the industrial society. This results to a break down in the socialisation function that work serves. 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). Strikes especially frequent and prolonged ones, make the society to have a bad or negative judgment of the parties involved. For instance, ASUU has numerously been adjudged as a group of greedy, egoistic folks who are only after their selfish interest, owing to their frequent and often protracted strikes. On the other hand, their employers, the government, have been labelled a bunch of insensitive lots. It becomes obvious from the above background and analysis that strikes serve as a constraint towards the social development of Nigeria.

Conclusion

Owing to the nature of man and his society, conflict is inevitable. Industrial conflicts have been identified as an offshoot of an imbalanced, exploitative relationship between parties involved in an employment relation. Though causes of industrial conflicts or the resultant strikes are complex, it becomes oftentimes difficult to pinpoint the main causes of strikes. However, generally strike is an expression of grievance, mostly attributable to failure of collective bargaining. Strike is a weapon of last resort (*ultima ratio*) which is to be employed when other means of achieving an agreement or resolving disputes has failed (Okene, 2008).

The socio-economic effects and challenges of strikes cannot be over emphasised. While it hinders national productivity and economic development, it serves to alienate man from the social interactions obtainable in his workplace, as well as hindering the socialisation process.

Recommendations

The incessant industrial conflicts and strikes in Nigeria needs to be urgently addressed and checkmated. In view of the identified effects of industrial conflicts, the following measures, amongst other things, are recommended as ways of reducing industrial conflicts and effects.

There should be proactive and corrective mechanisms put in place. Proactive actions should be able to detect and prevent the possibility of an industrial conflict, and corrective actions should quickly resolve the conflict when it arises. One of such mechanisms is the institutionalisation of industrial democracy.

There is the need for a legislation which will give legal backing to collective agreement. Such legislation would give statutory recognition to collective agreement, and make it enforceable within a legal framework. This will go a long way in containing the propensity to default in honouring collective agreement.

There is the need for government, as an employer, to emulate the human resource management and employee relation strategies applicable in the private sector. This is because, strike propensity is very high and predominant in the public sector and infrequent in the private sector (Awe and Ayeni, 2010). Towards achieving this, public sector employers should accord premium to labour. Employee morale should be boosted by all means possible. Employers should recognise that human resources are the soul of the business and not the sole, to be trampled on. That the practice of extolling the primacy of the human resource yet of all assets, people are the first to be got rid of in times of trouble ó shrinking government, re-engineering (Aimiwu, 2004), privatisation, etc is not proper. In view of globalisation, employers should arm the workers with necessary morale boosters, respect and recognition to ensure industrial peace and harmony. This will go a long way in aiding both parties achieve both individual and collective interests and objectives within a world of intense interconnectivity and integration.

In line with Wokoma and Iheriohanmaø (2010) recommendation for a PEST (political, economic, social and technological) repositioning of the country, there should be, specifically, a serious and important political re-arrangement, restructuring and re-organisation of the country to reflect the meaning and spirit of true federalism. The issue of having a centralised trade union within a supposedly federal republic is uncalled for. Thus, if the country is properly arranged and governed along federal principles, it will translate to the division of trade unions along federating units. This will put an end to a situation where by trade unions respond to the dictates of the central labour union without recourse to the industrial situation of their locality.

Finally, the place of collective bargaining cannot be jettisoned. Collective bargaining has been identified as a means through which the protection of the economic and social interests of parties involved in an employment relation can be achieved. However, for effectiveness, collective bargaining has to be embedded within the concept of social dialogue ó which includes all types of negotiation, consultation or simply exchange of information between, or among, representatives of government, employers and workers, on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy.

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