



The Effects of Unionization on Wages and Working Conditions: A case Study of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigeria – A Review

by

E. Ejenma
Federal College of
Agriculture, Ishiagu
Ebonyi State, Nigeria

P. Ejenma
Department. of Economics,
University of Uyo, Uyo
Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

N. Ubani
Alvan Ikoku University of
Education, Owerri Imo
State, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper examined the effects of unionization on wages and working conditions on members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). The paper reviewed the series of agitations that have led to strikes between 1988 and 2022 spanning the periods of the military and the present democratic dispensation. Secondary data were sourced from existing literature while analyses were made up to year 2022. Records show that the agitations rest mainly on government's inability to honour agreements reached through dialogue, downward review of wages that affected the lecturers more as well as poor service conditions that have made the system less profitable to work in. It is equally noted that while smaller countries increase budgetary allocations to education, Nigeria still struggles with a poor budgetary allocations. In any case, these agitations have helped in instituting the TETFUND which made infrastructural development in the universities possible while wages have not remained stagnant though with heightened inflation. The paper concludes that the struggles must intensify to let ASUU out of the abyss of their incessant agitations.

Key words: ASUU, strike, wage, working conditions, agitations

1. Introduction

Over the years, unionism has remained one of the commonest and most viable features of public and private organisations. The union as an integral unit of every organisation's workforce has its interest mainly set in order to protect the rights and privileges of workers from unwarranted economic exploitation and the abuse of dignity of labour by the management. It is, therefore, believed that the workers welfare is sought through series of agitations that are championed by the specific unions in that area of speciality to the management or government as the case may be. In essence, it is a survival struggle between workers (employees) and the government/management

(employers). The history of labour unions in Nigeria is traced to the early nineteenth century and some of the early unions that came into existence at that time were The Civil Service Union which was formed in 1912; The Nigeria Railways Native Staff Union (1919); The Nigerian Mechanic Union, The Railway Loco-Drivers Union and the like. The aim and objectives of these unions did not differ from those from other parts of the world as they strive to institutionalize better conditions of service and employment for their members (Ubeku, 1983). Significant importance was not attached to labour unions during the early days of their establishment since much was not known about them but with the enactment of the Trade Union Organisation Act of 1938 which empowered workers with the legal right to see the union beyond an ordinary association but could now be a profitable panacea through which their rights and interests are duly protected. This further bolstered the right to collective bargaining for their employers with respect to issues that have to do with workers interests and the work in general (Tayo, 1980).

Before this time however, the Nigerian system was still under colonial rule and the right to collective bargaining in interests and conditions was restricted. This meant that the colonialists who were the employers and managers of various establishments dictated the conditions of service to the workers without much resistance. Even with the legal right conferred on unions to get established, stiff restrictions were still imposed on unions who at times struggled through dialogue to press home salient conditions to their employers. For example, the daily paid workers who protested poor wage structure; refusing to continue work under such unencouraging conditions were attacked and shot in the process. In any case, some success was recorded as these agitations have remained a sustainable picture of industrial activities in the Nigerian system.

With the proliferation of unions in the present day, it is discernible that the workers under an umbrella of a union which also stands as a pressure group fight for their rights against any economic exploitation and social injustice that could be meted on them by their employers with respect to the job. Outside the confines of their job in specific terms, unions also fight against abuse of office by Chief Executives, dictatorship, insecurity and high handedness. To operate and maintain some industrial harmony, the workers expect their employers to treat them fairly by giving them reasonable compensations and respecting the dignity of labour through the established terms and conditions. But whenever the employers lose sight of this, conflicts of interest come to play between the management and the employees which may negatively affect the attainment of objectives in the organisation and may be to the society at large. As dialogues between the workers and their employers end in a deadlock, industrial conflicts, loss of material, machine, customers and other services become widespread creating in many forms a state of insecurity to the government or society depending on the sector of government or organisation affected (Collins, 2013).

In all these, a union is an association of workers, which consists of representatives that mediate between the workers and their employers in order to avoid any unfair treatment that could be meted on them by the employers and to ensure commitment to work by its members in a way that it will result in high level of productivity and organisational efficiency in general (Tokunbo, 1985)

Also in Nigeria, the colonial government mainly produced the Nigerian working class who were Nigerians living on wages instead of being peasant farmers or self-employed artisans. By this development, Nigerian workers became products of the capitalist system and its exploitative mode of production. As Yesufu (1984) noted, wage employment in Nigeria was without foundation before the Europeans. Most people were engaged in agricultural enterprises from which they earned their living. Those who worked for feudal lords in communities, earned their income in kind. Although wage employment received approval among some Nigerians, such employments were undertaken to meet specific needs and the employment relationship was usually severed as soon as the objectives were achieved. These forces also created some problems for the colonial administration. Foremost was the shortage of persons available for employment in the colonial establishments while preference of Nigerians for rural agriculture resulted in the high cost of urban labour. Yet, in southern Nigeria, the official wage policy of the colonial office, as laid down in 1905, was according to Hopkins (1966) to keep the rates of wages as low as possible.

Accordingly, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in Nigeria has been a frontline agitator in the industrial struggle that will improve especially the wage and other working conditions of its members; taking a queue from the existing conditions in sister universities across the world where glaring wage differentials exist. This review paper examines the strengths of this struggle in the realisation of their wages and other working conditions in the Nigerian University system.

2. Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in History

In 1965, the Nigeria Association of University Teachers (NAUT) was established and it consisted of only five (5) federal universities which included; University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, University of Ife and the University of Lagos. In 1978 however, ASUU was founded as an offshoot of the NAUT. Ever since, the union has remained active in struggles against military dictatorship which characterised the 1980s. This was also consequent upon the failure of the government to use its oil wealth during the boom of late 1970s to generate sustainable production and social welfare system that should have guaranteed enduring welfare legacies in the system. As a result, academic freedom, university freedom and poor welfare packages became the casualties of this mismanagement. The funding of education and mainly of the university system, became somewhat problematic from this time and ASUU with a strong desire and a radical orientation, took a stand on broad national issues against the oppressive, undemocratic policies of the government. ASUU with vehemence resisted this encroachment to its rights and privileges as a negative down turn of events was sweeping through various national frontiers. Throughout the era of the military, ASUU directed its struggles on the survival of the university system with three components; the conditions of service (salary and non-salary), funding and university autonomy/academic freedom, the defence of the right to education, broad national issues as in anti-military struggles, return to democracy, struggle against privatisation, Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and the world bank's attempt to take over the universities (Ajayi, 2014).

These agitations did not go down well with the government who further stiffened their resolve to frustrate the union's objectives. This was exemplified as some leaders of the union were sacked, and later proscribed the union. These attempts at decapitating the union produced another union different in name but ASUU in style and characteristics – the University Lecturers Association. Without due recognition of the latter union by the government, its activities still went on though surreptitiously until its status as a functional union was reinstated. Throughout the regimes, ASUU has always had struggles with government over its demands for better conditions of service for its members, establish and maintain the conditions while protecting and advancing the socio-economic interest of the nation. It is not the goal of ASUU to please the government in power; it is historical in their mission to play the role of creating new values, producing knowledge for freeing the people of Nigeria from the systematic domination to which the people have been subjected since slavery through colonization to the present (ASUU, 2016).

3. The Problem

ASUU has always frowned at the long-term decline in their salary levels, conditions of service and the state of the nation at large. This situation has been one of long historical development from the pre to the post-independence era. In essence, at independence (1960) the following table explains the salary status of lecturers and their counterparts in other state and federal establishments;

Table 1: Salaries of some top officials and lecturers (1960)

| Portfolio | Salary/Annual | Difference |
|------------------------------|---------------|--|
| Prime minister of Federation | £4500 | PM earned higher with £750 |
| Vice Chancellor | £3,750 | VC earned higher than the Commissioner and MG with 170 |
| Major General | £3,580 | |
| Commissioner | £3,580 | |

*Source: Abubakar et al, 2019 - *There was no naira in 1960 hence pounds was used the basis.*

Clearly, university employees enjoyed higher wages than their counterparts in other establishments. Unfortunately, ASUU's struggle against the above scenario was made manifest as with the emergence of the military in the Nigerian political system in 1966. A gradual erosion of the existing standards sparked off these increasing agitations as marked wage differentials and disparities became evident against university employees, relegating them to lower positions. As salary reviews favoured the military more, the annual salary of the university professor remained £3,000. This amount was still higher than that of a Federal Minister (£2700) and a top civil servant of the rank of a Permanent Secretary who were paid between (£2500 and £2940). An assistant lecturer by this time earned £950 while his counterparts in the federal civil service-with similar qualifications earned £720. In 1960, only the Chief Justice of the Federation earned an annual salary of £3,600.00 about £600 greater than a University Professor. It was also known that it was not only in salaries that the university lecturers were better than their counterparts but in

fringe benefits as housing, allowances, social status and other working conditions. With these conditions, the lecturers discharged all their obligations without much strain making them the envy of other civil servants.

After this time, a Major General's salary placed him a few incremental steps on top of the University Professor (Adekanye, 1993). With the 1975 post Udoji period, an Army Captain began to earn more than a Lecturer 1; a Lieutenant – Colonel more than a Senior Lecturer, a Colonel more than a Reader/Associate Professor; an Army Brigadier whose salary was less than that of a Reader/Associate Professor now earned even more than a full Professor. Then the salary of a Lieutenant General and a full General outgrew that of the University Vice-Chancellor. With this downturn of events, ASUU's agitation and strike actions became the major tools to seek redress with the widening gap. Some of the strike actions and reasons behind them are presented in Table 2:

Table 2. ASUU's Strike Actions Overtime

| Year | Agitation/Reason | Effect |
|------|---|--|
| 1988 | - Structural Adjustment Programme - Implementation of the Elongated University Salary Scale - University autonomy | ASUU was banned |
| 1992 | - Govt. failure to negotiate with ASUU on the conditions of the universities. | Suspension of strike while returning to the negotiating table. |
| 1993 | - Govt. ignored the industrial Arbitration panel to negotiate the 1992 agreement | -Govt. realized another agreement with ASUU and the larger civil society |
| 1994 | - To re-negotiate the 1993 agreement and reinstate over 80 lecturers sacked at UniAbuja - annulment of June 12, 1993 elections | -Struggle was believed to have been hijacked by ethnic interests |
| 1996 | - Same as in 1993/1994 | - Strike suspended due to public outcry |
| 1999 | - Failure to honour an agreement signed by Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar to enhance lecturers salaries, funding and autonomy etc | -Neglect of the agreement by a new administration under Olusegun Obasanjo. |
| 2001 | - To reinstate lecturers sacked at Unillorin | -Signed agreement with only 22% basic salary increase. |
| 2002 | - Non-implementation of the agreements in 1999 | |
| 2003 | - Non-implementation of earlier agreements, disparity in salary and retirement age. | |
| 2005 | Revisiting the earlier agreements | Strike lasted for 2 weeks |
| 2006 | Same as above | - a 3day warning strike |
| 2007 | Same as above | A three month strike |
| 2008 | - Demand for the reinstatement of sacked Unillorin lecturers | 1 week strike |
| 2009 | -Renewed demands under late Umaru | -agreement (FG/ASUU 2009 |

| | | |
|------|--|---|
| 2010 | Musa Yaradua's administration - Failure to implement the 2009 agreements | memorandum of action) signed -6 months strike |
| 2011 | - Failure to implement the 70yrs retirement age for lecturers and adequate funding | -59 days strike |
| 2013 | - Failure to review retirement age of Professors from 65 to 70, increase budgetary allocations by 26% etc. | 5 months strike |
| 2017 | - Unresolved issues with government | 1 month strike |
| 2018 | - Government's inaction towards the union's demands | 3 months strike before the eight contentious issues were resolved |
| 2020 | - Government's failure to implement the 2019 agreements | 9 months strike |
| 2022 | -Renewed agitations from failure of government to implement agreements | 3 months strike |

Source: *Authors analysis, 2024.*

Most of these agitations that led to strike actions after government failed to honour or implement most of the agreements were premised on wage differentials, funding the university system and other welfare packages. However, with routine strike actions from the above table, it is evident that most agreements are not implemented as the conditions in the university system continue to worsen.

4. Effects of Unionization on wages and working conditions of ASUU members

Unionism has over the years had tremendous effects on wages and living conditions of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) members. Whenever conditions of service of ASUU members improve, these incessant agitations both for wage review and others ebb. There is always calm in the system as the union sheaths its sword believing that the new development inherits some sustainability. But when the agreements are flung afieid contrary to the established timeline, the agitations and threats to strike return. In any case unionism effects on wage and better working conditions have some positive and negative implications. When wage differentials became evident during the early 1970s when other categories of workers began to receive higher pay than their university counterparts, the agitations were set to return to the initial agreements and make them retain their social status as was the case. Their situations were worsened as the military took over power, paying less attention to the original norm before their entry. It is noteworthy that the sacked university lecturers from Uni-Ilorin did not regain their appointments till date while funding was only left at the mercies of the military government. The radical approaches to wage increment under the military were met with severe consequences including the proscription of ASUU by late Gen. Sani Abacha. The situation did not change under Gen. Ibrahim Babangida who brought in the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) that adversely affected the universities and their working conditions. The universities have remained under-funded making the system rely on strikes to press home their points especially when comparisons are made with other

universities outside. These renewed agitations in 2023 and 2024 stemmed from government's failure to address issues that they had already signed into law before the lecturers returned to work.

Between 1960 and 2023, the average annual percentage budgetary allocation to the education sector by the Federal government was about 5.94% which is about 9.06%, 14.06% and 20.06% respectively less than the UNESCO's recommended minimum benchmarks of 15%, 20% and 26% of the total annual budget (see table 3 below).

Table 3: The percentage budgetary allocations to the educational sector by the FGN (1960-2023)

| Year | % Allocation | Year | % Allocation | Year | % Allocation | Year | % Allocation |
|------|--------------|------|--------------|------|--------------|------|--------------|
| 1960 | 6.02 | 1976 | 8.71 | 1992 | 3.86 | 2008 | 13.00 |
| 1961 | 6.15 | 1977 | 3.12 | 1993 | 5.62 | 2009 | 6.54 |
| 1962 | 5.19 | 1978 | 11.44 | 1994 | 7.13 | 2010 | 6.40 |
| 1963 | 3.45 | 1979 | 3.70 | 1995 | 7.20 | 2011 | 1.69 |
| 1964 | 3.65 | 1980 | 4.95 | 1996 | 12.32 | 2012 | 10.00 |
| 1965 | 3.57 | 1981 | 6.45 | 1997 | 17.59 | 2013 | 8.70 |
| 1966 | 4.23 | 1982 | 8.09 | 1998 | 10.27 | 2014 | 10.60 |
| 1967 | 4.88 | 1983 | 4.04 | 1999 | 11.12 | 2015 | 9.50 |
| 1968 | 2.84 | 1984 | 4.49 | 2000 | 8.36 | 2016 | 6.10 |
| 1969 | 2.20 | 1985 | 3.79 | 2001 | 7.00 | 2017 | 7.38 |
| 1970 | 0.69 | 1986 | 2.69 | 2002 | 5.90 | 2018 | 7.03 |
| 1971 | 0.53 | 1987 | 1.93 | 2003 | 1.83 | 2019 | 7.20 |
| 1972 | 0.62 | 1988 | 2.40 | 2004 | 10.50 | 2020 | 6.70 |
| 1973 | 0.88 | 1989 | 3.55 | 2005 | 9.30 | 2021 | 5.60 |
| 1974 | 2.96 | 1990 | 2.83 | 2006 | 11.00 | 2022 | 5.40 |
| 1975 | 4.57 | 1991 | 1.09 | 2007 | 8.09 | 2023 | 5.30 |

Source; 2018 edition of the Statistical Bulletin of the Central Bank of Nigeria and the Official website of the Budget Office of the Federal Government of Nigeria (budgetoffice.gov.ng)

However, these incessant agitations have yielded some reasonable results. Much as government reneged on some its signed agreements by not releasing 1.3trillion over a period of six years, it least released ₦200 billion. Though it took some time before the fund was accessed, it stands to show that the agitation set some impressions in motion. Most of the universities got their shares which they plunged into infrastructural development. Though budgetary allocations to education have not increased, the Abacha administration had established the Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF) which not only touched the educational sector but covered all parts of our national economy while the Tertiary Education Fund (TETFUND) has also made personal and collaborative research possible. Most of the lecturers who gained employment in the Nigeria university system enjoyed the TETFUND for their post graduate studies outside and within the country.

Increased infrastructural expansion in most of the universities owes their success to the agitations that brought TETFUND in place. Further, the earned allowances became part of the benefits considering the load of work, supervision of students, research and

other related assignments. Most researches that go through the TETFUND for sponsorship to conferences and seminars both within and outside are all the success stories of these agitations. Those who will later join the academia and become professors will also benefit from the 70 years retirement age while with the increased agitations the lecturers stand to benefit from other allowances set aside as special allowances. Though these agitations have not recorded 100% success but as the struggles continue, positive changes are bound to come. Although from inception, inflation and poor management have affected the financial bargaining power of the lecturers, it is believed that their wages and allowances have also not remained stagnant overtime.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

These agitations have been sustained as most of the agreements reached with government through dialogue have not been honoured or implemented to the latter. Poor budgetary allocations have held the universities down such that the students now bear the brunt of these neglects. This is regrettable even as war-torn and seemingly less advanced countries as Sudan and Rwanda are still allocating well above 20% to education. This situation is causing serious brain drain as our lecturers enter these countries for better working conditions while our students who have the finances decide to school outside since our system is characterised by incessant strikes.

References

- Abubakar, S., Mohammed, S.U and Abdulsalam, N.K. (2019). Academic staff salaries and Academic union struggles: Historical evidence from Nigeria. *International Journal of Economics and Management Studies* vol 6(6) pp.97-101.
- Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) (2016). History and struggles of ASUU. Abuja, National Secretariat Publication
- Adekanye, J. (1993). Military occupation and social stratification. Inaugural lecture, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
- Ajayi, J.O. (2014). ASUU strike and academic performance of students in Ekiti state, *International Journal of Business Management* 4 (1)
- Collins, E.N.O. (2013). Labour Unionism and its effects on organisational Productivity: A case study of Jos International Breweries (JIB) PLC, Nigeria. *African Research Review*; pp. 36-48
- Hopkins, A.G. (1966). The Lagos strike of 1879: An exploration of Nigerian labour History; past and present, Los Angeles, Berkely
- Tayo, F. (1980). Industrial relations in Nigerian development and Practice. Lagos, Longman group.
- Tokunbo, M.A. (1985). Labour movement in Nigeria. Past and present Lagos, lantern books
- Ubeku, A.K (1983). Industrial relations in developing countries: the cases of Nigeria: London; Macmillan
- Yesufu, T.M. (1984). The dynamics of Industrial relations: the Nigerian experience. London; Oxford University Press pp.87