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TOWARDS CURBING INCESSANT INDUSTRIAL ACTIONS BY THE ACADEMIC STAFF UNION OF UNIVERSITIES TO ACHIEVE QUALITY EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Over the years, various unions in the industrial sector have deployed strikes or industrial actions as a tool to compel the ruling class to yield to their demands and implement agreements they willingly endorsed. Though, strikes impacts the public universities perniciously, and detrimental to the actualization of educational goals as enshrined in the sustainable development goals (SDGs); regrettably, Nigerian government appears rather adamant about resolving the issues that necessitate strikes as well as forestall their escalation. This is really the situation the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has faced over the years, in the hands of Nigerian government; who had vehemently and consistently reneged on its promises with utter bravado. Suffice that the agreements do not only bother on the welfare of workers and students alike but also towards the rapid development of Nigerian education system and stabilization of the economy. Unfortunately, government's blatant refusal to implement agreements had compelled the union to incessantly embark on strikes, spanning from weeks to months with their attendant effects, such as disruption of academic activities on campuses, suspension of statutory meetings, withholding of workers' salaries to mention but a few. Consequently, while some students get frustrated, others seemed demoralized by the unwarranted protraction of their year of study, payment of additional fees and levies as well as other avoidable expenditures thereof. The foregoing submissions demystifies strike and its effects on our public universities, and also calls for holistic and proactive approaches to mitigate the situation. Against this backdrop, the paper x-rayed the effects of strikes to advancement of education system vis-a-vis the sustainable socio-economic development of the nation, and as well recommends the way forward.

Keywords: *ASUU, Industrial Actions, Attainment of Quality Education, Sustainable Development*

Introduction

Education is regarded as the bedrock of development of any nation. This holds true because education does not only enable individuals realize their potentials and optimize them for their survival and wellbeing but also fit into the society and contribute towards building egalitarian and peaceful society to reckon with sustainable economy. Substantiating the foregoing, Eze (2020) affirmed that education is a process by which a society preserves its accumulated knowledge, skills and values by imparting these to its members and especially the younger generation. In corroborating the foregoing, Nwagwu (2020) maintained that education is process by which every society attempts to preserve and upgrade the accumulated knowledge and skills in its cultural milieu in order to foster continuously the welfare of mankind and ensure its survival in the face of changes triggered off by man and nature.

However, the acquisition of knowledge and skills to transform the society is achieved through the instrumentality of institutions of learning which begins from kindergarten to university. The university is regarded as the epitome of learning institutions, strategically configured for advancement of knowledge and competences for holistic development. Thus, the aim of the university education is to produce competent manpower who could render services that would contribute to the growth of the nation; and any university that provides the needs of its society is said to have achieved quality or functional education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Summarily, quality education is what justifies the essence of universities, be private or public.

According to Okoye (2019), public universities in Nigeria are bereft of essential amenities and facilities such as water supply, electricity, good roads, befitting classrooms and office blocks for the lecturers. Similarly,

Eze (2018) decried that the age long dearth of well-equipped laboratories, functional workshops and studios in engineering, science and technology-based institutions that are required to attain quality education. Quality education can only be envisaged in an enabling environment. Hence, no nation can develop beyond the level of its education. Quality education is a parameter which defines a reality that characterizes the impact of any learning outcome. Hence, quality education is the totality of the learning processes, experience, training etc., exposed to an individual or a learner in order to gain requisite knowledge and skills for survival and also be able to impact substantially to the nation's development (Uko, 2022). Unfortunately, public universities in Nigeria have not been given the required attention to evolve so as to meet the expectations or core educational objectives; which grapples with the production of human capital that would steer the wheel of the nation's developmental agenda. Thus, any education system that reckons with quality should be capable of producing competent professionals who solve societal problems through well-funded research and networking by governments and donor agencies. Such education system is problem-solving oriented instead of money or power-driven as obtains in most public universities in Nigeria; which has become a source of worry to the academia, especially the ASUU, who had been engaging the Federal and State Governments to raise public universities to global ranking and reckoning as advocated in the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Development is the growth of the economy of a country or region through increased business activities, or a process of producing or creating something new or more advanced, such as a new or advanced product or idea (Hornby, 2020). Acknowledging that development is the indices upon which nations socio-economic standing are

measured, the United Nations at its 55th Session on September 18, 2000 adopted an 8-point agenda for global development, popularly called the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The eight-point agenda represent a pledge of the international community, which includes to: (i). Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. (ii). Achieve universal primary education (iii). Promote gender equality and women empowerment (iv). Reduce infant and child mortality (v). Improved maternal health (vi). Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other communicable diseases (vii) Ensure environmental stability, and (viii). Develop a global partnership for development. The agenda was a mandate for redressing primarily, problems of development in the developing countries with the avowed aim of upgrading the value of human estate.

Uninterruptedly, the MDGs ran their course and effectively ended in 2015, with a remarkable progress in several important areas, such as income poverty, access to improved source of water, primary school enrolment and child mortality (National Center for Education Statistics- NCES as sited in Okoye & Okoye, 2018). Following the expiration of the MDGs in 2015, the UN on September 25-27, 2015 adopted a new agenda for global development, the sustainable development goals (SDGs), also called Agenda 2030, and Global Goals (Okoye & Okoye, 2018; Osisioma, 2017). The Global Goals encapsulated 17 goals and 169 targets as follow:

> *Goals 1-6: Poverty, Hunger and Food Security, Health, Education, Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, Water and Sanitation; Goals 7-12: Energy, Economic Growth, Infrastructure and Industrialization, Inequalities, Cities, Sustainable Consumption and Production; Goals 13-17: Climate Change, Oceans, Bio-diversity, Forest and Desertification, Peace and Justices, and Partnerships (*Okoye & Okoye, 2018*).*

Interestingly, the SDGs were aimed at addressing core human development issues

with emphasis on sustainability, equity and empowerment. As such, this approach to development encompasses the needs of future generations in ensuring that human development truly endures, attempts to correct extant structural disparities and inequities within the polity, enables people to exercise individual choice to participate in, shape and benefit from processes at private and public spheres of national life (Osisioma, 2017).

To ensure that public universities across the length and breadth of Nigeria up their game in order to stimulate the development agenda, ASUU has been engaging the Nigerian government through dialogue, negotiations and renegotiations as well as the industrial action or strike as the last resort. Then, what is industrial action or strike? Simply put,

> *Industrial action is usually organized by a trade union; and also occurs when employees take action against their employer because of a work dispute. Industrial action is usually a last resort when other ways of negotiating have not worked. Therefore, employees, employers and trade unions must follow industrial action law, as enshrined in the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 and Employment Rights Act 1996 which guarantee the security of the employees when they embark on strike. (www.ilo.org, 2003).*

Why does ASUU embark on strikes?

The answer is apparently not farfetched. ASUU usually embarks on strike as a last resort following government's blatant refusal to implement agreements it willingly reached with the union which hinges on revitalization of public universities and improvement of working conditions of staff members, especially the lecturers as well as the learning environment. Consequent upon this submission, Wilson (2014) maintained that,

> *the state of our universities is so poor and heart-rendering that it is incredible how a Nigerian academic manages to produce even one academic paper! From the McLuhan futuristic projection of class-room without walls we have arrived at its fictional equivalent of classroom under trees. Lecturers operate from their cars because they have no offices, and when they are through with lectures under the trees they go home. Our laboratories are so deprived that many of the research papers churned out by our colleagues' sound like fiery tales. Even among us we doubt ourselves. There are no recreational facilities because our Vice Chancellor who is looking for funds to replace bulbs in the few classrooms cannot imagine spending a kobo on people whom they sometimes drunkards, by providing a conducive place for them to unwind. Our many campuses are strewn with abandoned projects funded from Abuja.*

The foregoing narrative lucidly underscores the state of most public universities in Nigeria. Nevertheless, it could be recalled that few years back an IMF-inspired team had recommended that the Federal Government of Nigeria should abandon the funding of the universities and rather put its resources into primary and secondary education Wilson added. This assertion is a clear indication that people of such mindset do not mean well for Nigerian people but regrettably Nigerian government sheepishly condescend to their dictates, as the best way to maintain their 'masters-slave relationship' to the detriment of the generality of Nigerians and the education system.

Furthermore, the age long neglect of public universities in Nigeria has precipitated into the absence of basic necessities which invariably not only has turned the universities a shadow of itself but also made quality education impracticable. However, ASUU has been standing in the gap to compel government to take necessary actions to restore the glory of our universities, using varied approaches including meetings, which led to the signing of Agreements cum Memoranda of Understanding and Action which the federal government had not only

consistently reneged but also brandished a threat that depicts that its relationship with the worker's Union is a master-slave instead of employer-employee relationship (Raliyat, et al., 2022). This disposition poses a serious threat to the supposedly umbilical cord that bonds leaders and followers to synergize in order to achieve a livable, productive and sustainable economy where opportunities abound. Worse still, Nigerian rulers or elites, who are often intoxicated by the opium of power and vainglory but are ever-quick to yield to the dictates, whims and caprices of their slave masters, the jingoistic and parasitic western landlords, who regard Africa as a Christmas chicken to be ruthlessly devoured and masticated. This is indeed, the bane of African development and the root cause of the incessant industrial actions or strikes embarked upon by the union.

In recognition of the despicable condition of public universities in Nigeria, the then Federal Commissioner of Education during his opening address at the 1969 National Curriculum Conference emphasized government's views about Nigerian education as thus:

> *No doubt that the educational system we inherited was a good one. Good, this is, for the country and society for which it was planned; good for England and English society. But it was not good for us, because it neglected to take into consideration our cultural and social background; because it has tended to produce an educated class of pen-pushers and because it failed to lay the foundations of economic freedom by providing the manual skills and expertise necessary for successful industrial and agricultural development* (Abdalla, 2014).

The above assertion affirms that Nigerian government or elites have not shown serious commitment in revolutionizing the education system in order to optimize its resources for onward transformation of the nation as well as to compete technologically among the comity of nations. Buttressing the foregoing, Wilson (2014) posited that it has become a

feature peculiar to the Nigerian political system that a new Nigerian rulership must first test its political sagacity by engaging ASUU in a game of wits even though its outcome must necessarily be injurious to the Nigerian people. Little wonder, since 1973 when General Gowon ordered academics out of their official quarters because of the latter's declaration of a strike action, Nigerian rulers have not learnt anything from the past. It is, as Wole Soyinka explicitly noted, 'a situation in which we continue to revolve in a circle of human stupidity,' Wilson further contended. Undoubtedly, since 1966, Nigeria has not had a taste of true democratic governance; we have had military juntas and civilian administrations which were never democratic in spite of the blatant and farcical pretentions to be democratic governance. That is why, the caliber of people who pilot the affairs of this country are mainly the political jobbers who prioritize their personal interest over that of the generality of Nigerians, and as so would do anything to have their ways, even reneging on promises to implement agreement with the union.

ASUU strike has become a term for frequent acts of refusal to work, in protest against poor conditions of service and poor remuneration which causes government to shut down universities. Among the following are reasons for incessant strike by ASUU:

Untrustworthy of government to implement agreements with unions: The government has continually elicited untrustworthiness and insincerity towards implementing agreements with ASUU. This phenomenon expressly depicts that the elites do not have any regards for the academia, who are the formators of the supposedly leaders of tomorrow. And if the situation continues the fate of the system would be utterly jeopardized. It becomes imperative to inquire, 'why Nigerian government does not have any iota of respect for the academics

who are the prime mover of the education system. Substantiating the foregoing, Wilson (2014) regretted that,

> *the relationship between the Union and the Federal Government had been slippery, hence from 1992, 1993, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2003 through 2009 the Union has been dealing with a feckless customer who at no time has shown the desire to abide by agreements. One would assume that it would have been probably better if government did not sign any agreement at all.*

Poor funding: Despite the ILO's declaration that 23% of the nation's annual budget should be allotted to education sector, none of the past governments in Nigeria, including the present one has budgeted above 7% to education sector. This situation has been really worrisome as it has limited public universities access to funds needed to tackle their needs and infrastructure challenges, in order to be able to compete globally. Similarly, the imposition of IPPIS, Single Treasury Account (TSA) and other obnoxious fiscal policies of the government equally worsened the situation, thus compelling school authorities at various levels to scamper for funds to run their affairs. Unless something is done urgently, to avert this ugly trend, departments and faculties would in no distant time begin to operate with bank loans, otherwise they would go into extinction.

Poor remuneration: It quite heartrending that the salaries of the lecturers including that of the supporting staffers of public universities have not been reviewed for over two decades now irrespective of the agonizing inflation and hardship ravaging the country. Funny enough, the rulers who pay themselves jumbo salaries and allowances, regularly review their entitlements astronomically, while cajoling the impoverished workers to tighten their belts and make sacrifices as professor at bar earn less than four hundred thousand naira (#400,000) monthly.

Poor attention to brain drains: It is quite pitiful that a lot of brains and intelligent youths of this country have jetted out of the country in droves in search of greener pasture overseas. This condition has abysmally reduced the country's human capital development and as well deflated the patriotic dispositions of those who had resolved to stay put and seek ways to better the nation.

Lack of academic freedom, human right and university autonomy: The unwarranted interferences and meddlesomeness of government and its agents into the affairs of the public universities have become utterly worrisome to the academics as it speedily erodes the autonomy and dignity of the ivory tower. This makes it imperative to arrest this cankerworm without further delay, as mutinous politicians are gradually infiltrating into public universities, usurping power and lording it over the university community. The onus is now on the university based-unions to stand up and collectively fight this ugly development to stand still, else the public university would be reduced to a mere local council work.

Public ignorance/indifference: Over the years, the general public and students alike have elicited untainted indifference over the industrial disharmony existing between the government and the union. That is why, they tend to take side with the government to criticize and condemn every prudent move made by ASUU to secure the future of public universities, by making education affordable to learners irrespective of their background, ethnicity, religion and social status. Left for this sabotage, one could rightly deduce that ASUU struggles would have yielded more positive results if the masses, parents and students had thrown their weight behind the Union.

Poor labour relations: The relationship between the union and successive governments in Nigeria has not been cordial

at all. That could be largely the reason none of government has religiously implemented the agreements to the letters, thereby resulting in series of protracted strikes which have grossly distorted the academic calendar of the universities. Government should show human face and accord due respect to the union, bearing in mind that the academics are the livewire of the institutions of learning.

Overdependence on foreign policies and ideologies: Government at various levels do not seem to repose enough confidence in Nigerian intellectuals, and that appears to be why they often resort to foreign expatriates, especially when they fall sick. This skewed ideology apparently made Nigerian leaders lack trust in home-made commodities, hence, they import anything foreign and impose it on hopeless citizens who would grudgingly swallow it hook, line and sinker to without questioning. Take the IPPIS saga as an instance.

Way forward

Acknowledging the overbearing effects of strikes on public universities in Nigeria, there have been claims and counterclaims as to why strikes should be invoked or not. Whilst some schools of thoughts have vehemently discountenanced the use of strike to make the Federal Government succumb to union's demand, other insisted that it is the most effective approach and unequivocally challenged anybody with contrary views to bring it to bear. But, from all estimations, it seems apparently hard to jettison strike in the union's struggle, as such the paper suggests that the following approaches could mitigate the frequency of strike in public universities:

Adoption of impactful curriculum: It is incontrovertible that the current curricula used in public universities are due for holistic review by competent scholars. However, this does not give credence to the imposition of the controversial curriculum (such as core

curriculum minimum academic standard, CCMAS) that threatens university autonomy on public universities by Tinubu administration.

If government is really serious, such review should be carried out by competent professionals from the academia and industrial sector in relation to currency of job demands and economic reality.

Sincere negotiation, bargaining and willingness to implement agreements: It quite disgustful that government takes pleasure in reneging on promises to implement agreements with workers. Unarguably, government's consistent failure to honour agreements could be attributed the root cause of incessant industrial actions in public universities. Suffice it to say that no academic union delights in embarking on strike, bearing in mind its adverse effects to education system and the society in general. It is therefore expedient that government should show leadership and respect agreements with the union in order to discourage industrial disharmony of any sort.

Adoption of a secure, false proof and acceptable payment platform: Since a worker deserves a wage, payment of workers' wages should be done seamlessly and without comprise. In the same vein, the platform used in paying salaries should be devoid of fraudulent and unethical practices, as grossly witnessed in IPPIS. The authors therefore suggest that a home-breed but sophisticated payment platform with appropriate taxing regime and real-time payment schedule such as University Transparency and Accountability System (UTAS) be promulgated to save workers any unwarranted and inconsequential upheavals in course of receiving their wages that cannot even take them home.

Truly independent and uncompromising judicial system: The activities of Nigerian judiciary in recent time makes one to wonder if judiciary remains the last hope of the

common man. It was also, quite disgustful the level of apathy and partiality extended to ASUU by the Industrial Court when the rift with the government was decided. Such act was capable of throwing the entire nation into chaos. Since the role of the court is to promote harmonious co-existence, Nigerian judiciary must be fair, firm and impartial in dispensation of justice. The axiom, who pays the piper determines the tone should be forbidden among them and anyone found wanting be made to face the full wrath of the law.

Unbiased and equitable budgeting and prompt release of funds: To match words with justifiable actions, the allocation of 23% of the national budget to education sector as promulgated by ILO Convention should be sacrosanct. Government should ensure that the fund allocated to education sector, particularly public universities, is not only adequate but also released as and when due as well as expended on what it was budgeted for.

Strict monitoring and supervision of projects in tandem with contractual terms/specifications: There should be close monitoring and systematic supervision of project execution to ensure accurate utilization of funds and quality service delivery. This suffices that fund must be judiciously expended and appropriate sanctions meted out to culprits.

Provision of infrastructures and basic amenities for effective learning: There is no gainsaying that the basic amenities and infrastructures are lacking in public universities. Government should provide the necessary infrastructures and basic amenities in order to promote to teaching and learning through the adoption of emerging technologies and global best practices.

Adequate funding: No university can operate efficiently and produce competent and employable graduates with paucity of

funds. This is because, fund is required in the implementation and execution of all the programmes and activities in the school. Little wonder lots of private universities are ranked higher than public universities in the country. That is why it is imperative to make adequate funds available to public universities in Nigeria to ensure seamless and effective running of academic activities thereof. This would expedite the actualization of thoughtful educational objectives that are tailored towards the nation's wellbeing as enshrined in the National Policy on Education. A proper check should be put in place to ensure that such funds are equitably and judiciously expended.

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET): The activities in the universities should focus on exploration and exploitation of requisite skills and knowledge for sustainable development and advancement of the economy; this is what TVET aims to achieve as it gears towards preparing individuals for work. Embracing TVET would mitigate the brain-drain syndrome and high rate of unemployment in that, it will encourage learners to discover gainful opportunities in various professions and exploit them advantageously. This assertion eminently supports the notion that every academic programme should be problem solving oriented and not just for mere formality which is quite rampant in our clime.

Apply international academic remuneration: The salary structure should be tenable or attractive enough so as to attract foreign brains for impactful knowledge processing and innovative practices. Thus, adoption of international academic remuneration could attract foreign scholars who would work with indigenous scholars in Nigerian universities to ensure effective cross pollination of cutting-edge knowledge and competences akin to reputable universities.

Unless, the international academic remuneration is embraced, the public universities would continue to be localized with little or no innovations while the younger academics jet out to foreign universities for greener pasture.

Partnerships: Over the years, some high-ranking universities world over have thrived and promoted the economy of their countries as well as earned international recognitions through affiliation with relevant industries. This underscores the potency of industries in promoting education by providing the needed funds, requisite training and employment opportunities for young school leavers. Such could go along way in combatting unemployment and deficiency in skill needs of learners and as well enhance their employment opportunities in requisite specialties.

Conclusion

Any attempt to curb or mitigate industrial disharmony is not only a step in the right direction, but also the actual beginning of academic freedom in public universities. Cognizant of the fact that strike is an ill wind that blows nobody good, as its consequence seems to negate overall educational objectives or goals in the long run. It is therefore concluded that Nigerian public universities could regain their lost glories and bounce back stronger if the relevant authorities sincerely embrace the approaches highlighted above with deep sense of maturity, integrity, responsibility, and show respect to all the concerned parties.

Recommendations

Based on the above submissions, the following recommendations were proffered:

1. Government should elicit probity, respect and leadership when negotiating with the Union, and also ensure that agreements or memorandum of understanding or action signed with the union are implemented to the letter.
2. Student bodies, parents and relevant stakeholders should strategically device ways and means of showing fraternal support and unwavering solidarity to ASUU, in order to make government and its agents succumb to

union's demands. This would go along way in promoting industrial harmony and thereby mitigating the tendency of embarking on strike.

3. Government and university administrators should judiciously expend resources at their disposal in improving the conditions of public universities by providing basic amenities and also ensure that staffers' entitlements are not only paid as and when due, but also reviewed in consonance with the prevailing economic reality.

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