

## UNIONS, GOVERNMENT AND THE UNIVERSITY ENTERPRISE IN NIGERIA

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**ABSTRACT:** *Permit me to broach this topic with an analogy. A roof is leaking. It needs repairs. Though it sits resplendently on top of a building, it leaks badly inside when the rain falls. In order to get to the top to fix the leakages, one would think naturally, that the mender would fetch a ladder and climb the structure. But this mender is different. He gets a sledge hammer instead and takes down the building to enable him fix the roof! This analogy exemplifies the toxic nature of the subject and the urgency of approach required to conjure a symphony between the unions in our universities today and the gentry (government and university management). The over-charged, over-unionized polity of Nigerian public universities has become a cause for concern, especially as it has begun to affect the quality of teaching, research and community services. Placed side-by-side with the lackadaisical approach of government to the educational sector, it has become evident that new byways needed to be tried out to preempt the imminent and total collapse of this sector. In this work, we shall examine the causes, effects and management of industrial disputes in our universities, and the historical, economic and political nuances involved in the incessant disputes. In other words, we shall carve our positions on the causes of strike, the effects of strikes and the possible alternatives to strikes in Nigerian public universities. The objective of the study is not to apportion blames but to expose the factors which had greatly contributed to the weakening of our HEIs and had forged a corrosive effect on our universities such that the culture of scholarship is being gradually sidetracked and mediocrity being glamourized. Our universities have no place in international rankings, and our graduates who are turned out in multitudes, could no longer said to be competitive in the global market. Stop-gap measures to address challenges could no longer serve the purpose of propping and rejuvenating the Nigerian educational sector especially, in public universities where every rupture has signified a culmination of gradual rust from the primary and secondary sectors of our education. Most of these universities are becoming factories where black-market options with little or no employable skills are mass-produced on a regular basis. Examination malpractices, incessant strikes, cult activities and poor work ethics are fast becoming 'the new normal,' which calls for urgent efforts to address quality concerns. This zeal to recover, rediscover and recalibrate the public universities in Nigeria is a project in irredentism that should be executed with all seriousness required so as to rescue the system from near-extinction and launch it back to global reckoning.*

**KEYWORDS:** unions, government, university enterprise, Nigeria

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## INTRODUCTION

Pushing the boundaries of knowledge in HEIs in Nigeria had been a major preoccupation from the pre-colonial era till present. It was confirmed that Africa is not bereft of 'the university idea' and

that the earliest universities in history started off in Africa between 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries; notable among them being the Al Azhar in Cairo and others in Timbuktu and in the now defunct Mali and Songhai Empires. Ibn Battuta, a renowned scholar of Moroccan descent who lived between 1304 and 1369 AD affirmed that the University in the Islamic West Africa state of Mali was given a pride of place under the reign of Mansa Musa (reigned between 1312 and 1337) who, according to history, remains the wealthiest individual the world had ever produced.<sup>1</sup> In colonial times, the most-prized single commodity of all the commodities that the Europeans had to offer was education. Africans were open and receptive to gaining new ways and new ideas and took steps to concretize and make education a veritable legacy for the African child. According to a UNESCO report:

*“African educational authorities should revise and reform the content of education in the areas of the curricular, textbooks, and methods, so as to take account of the African environment, child development, cultural heritage, and the demands of technological progress and economic development, especially industrialisation”*<sup>2</sup>

Education as a purveyor of reason, enquiry and philosophical openness, and as a consequential step towards entrenching cognitive gains and entrepreneurial mindset is therefore not alien to Africa where intricate traditional structures were introduced to institutionalize sociocultural values in norms, mores, rites of passage and the likes. The pride of place occupied by education in our national consciousness had not been in question, but rather the rate at which the stakeholders (i.e. labour, employers and government) foster friction and confusion, and emasculate our public universities through their inabilities to manage industrial conflicts. This study shall attempt to probe the challenges of industrial relations and how they are impacting negatively on our public university system in Nigeria.

### **Background of the Problem**

Strike actions have become a commonplace feature of the workspace culture in public universities in Nigeria. In recent times, lockdowns had lasted for months as the ivory towers were deactivated and campuses were made to remain perpetually in quiescence and amnesia. This development which is gaining ascendancy in our public universities calls for concern. We deem it apt and timely to interrogate the reasons, effects and escape routes from the *cul-de-sac* so as to secure the future of higher education in Nigeria. It is important to study this recurring problem as it has affected our educational sector and has corroded our hard-earned image which has now been brought to its lowest ebb. Universities ranking in the world and in Africa keep reflecting the fact that we have lost it.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Apart from scholars who had worked on the issue of strikes and industrial disputes in general, literature on a few number of particularistic views on the Nigeria's situation with respect to the incessant strike actions in our universities have been paltry. Scholars like Wogu A. (1969) and Clarke A.O. (2012) dwelt on the general concept of trade unionism in business organizations, and types of strikes ranging from jurisdictional strike, through sympathy strike, recognition strike to economic strike, which has been most prevalent in our universities. However, research publishers

like Williams Wodi (2006), Moses A. Adeniyi *et al*, (2010) and presenters like Oyedele Lukmon through their publications and presentations, have agreed on the urgency required to revamp and revalidate standards in our universities. This paper aims to address the gap.

### **Methodology**

The design used in this work probes historical antecedents. A descriptive survey is conducted to validate our statement of the study that incessant strikes have been pernicious to standards in our universities. Secondary sources of data collection remain the internet, newspapers, researched publications and relevant textbooks.

## **HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS**

### **Trade Unions**

Trade unions basically represent and advance the interest of workers. In employer-employee relationship, trade unions are necessary machineries that ensure the balance of power, prevent abuse and victimization of members and seek better living condition for their members as well. Other trade unions like Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in most cases, go beyond limiting their immediate concerns to members to address national issues, as stakeholders in the Nigerian polity. Faced with the challenge of nationhood and development, recommendations are expectedly proffered from the academic lighthouses, and '*ivory towers' solutions*' sought to concretize the town-gown relationships. The history of trade unions in Nigeria had been, to say the least, turbulent, as these unions were mostly birthed by necessity. Dating back to Aba women riot of 1929 when the colonial government introduced direct taxation in eastern Nigeria down to the present time, agitations for better living condition under some form of organization had been nothing but uncompromising. The catalogue is unending. In 1938, agitation by the rail workers for a better living condition dovetailed into the agitations of the rail workers and the Civil Service Union for a cost of living allowance popularly called '*war bonus*' after the Second World War. This happened in 1942. Just like the Aba riot, the protest for wage demand and improved working condition which happened first at Burutu in 1947 by United Africa Company's (UAC) employees and 1949 by coal miners at Iva Valley coal mine in Enugu happened with casualties. Industrial disputes were witnessed in 1959 (Airways workers), 1964 (United Labor Union workers), 1976, 1981, and 1988 when successive government of those times banned NLC (Nigeria Labor Congress)<sup>3</sup> By 1990 when the then military government led by General Sanni Abacha proscribed NUPENG (The Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers) and PENGASSAN (Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria), the agitations had assumed intensive dimensions where the revolutionary will of the working class had become inseparable from the revolutionary will of the common people whose preoccupation was to oust dictatorship and replace it with democracy.<sup>4</sup> Trade unions therefore transited from the exclusive tool of the working class to that of the oppressed class-a tool of politics. The counter-balance monopsony function of trade unions has been the most important for trade unions in Nigeria. Unions bargained for higher wages for their members as determined by the decline in purchasing power, not minding the penchant for unemployment which might be caused by pushing wages above equilibrium. The primary function conceptualized for the trade unions in Nigeria revolves around the request for higher wages and better living condition as there is a constant deficit of trust between the

government and its employers. Coupled with incessant corruption in government circles and unconcerned disposition of government to the issue of prompt salary payment and retirement pension, the workforce normally request for wage increase from government as the economy dips. Ideally, apart from this primary function, trade unions expectedly, should collaborate with government to fashion ways to increase labor productivity, to monitor the productivity of workers and to bring workers closer to management.<sup>5</sup> But the confrontational temperament of both parties in Nigeria's history and the code of distrust formed over time had made such positive alliances difficult to achieve.

### **Unions in Nigerian Universities**

Unions in Nigerian universities are offshoots of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC). They are registered with this parent body (NLC) and participate in joint actions. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) was formed in 1978, and had ever since, been involved in checkered history of strikes and government proscriptions. The Babangida regime banned ASUU in 1988 for its agitations on wage increase. It was unbanned in 1990 and banned again in 1992. In 1994, ASUU embarked on strike for more than a year to press home the demand for a good working condition and for the reinstatement of appointments of certain dismissed staff. Ditto 1999, 2002, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2017, 2019 and 2020; the strikes ranging from two (2) months to one (1) year. The union in all cases, agitated for better living wage for members and the revitalization of the universities with reasonable funds.<sup>6</sup>

Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) came into being in 1993 as a breakaway subset from SSATHURAI (Senior Staff Association of Universities, Teaching Hospitals, Research Institutes and Associated Institutions) when it could no longer run with the amorphous vision of the large body. It was consequently registered in 2005, though its relevance was acknowledged almost immediately as government negotiated the 2001 SSANU/FGN agreement with the union even when it was yet to be officially registered. To date, the union has been able to record milestone achievements through negotiations, a case in reference being the signing of the 2009 SSANU/FGN Agreement which advocated for 65 years retirement age for members and consolidation of salaries of Registrars and Bursars of universities.<sup>7</sup>

The Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities Allied and Educational Institution (NASU) represents the 'junior-cadre' staff in Nigerian universities. The union was formed in 1977 and gained government recognition in 1978. The main objective of the union is to regulate relations between it and the Governing Councils of universities, with a view to eliminating exploitation inherent in power relations, and to assist members in other ancillary areas. The union had won many battles in the process of advocating for welfare of its members e.g. disparity in the salary table (1992), harmonized tertiary institutions salary structure (HATISS) (1999), FGN/NASU Agreement (2001/2009) etc. The union had also catered for and prioritized the well-being of its members through welfare schemes, cooperatives and thrift societies that cushion pressures after retirement. Over the years, it had catered for job security and psychological needs of members. It should be noted that though it is usually assumed that the union is the umbrella body for members of non-teaching staff in junior cadre, many senior members of staff who were hitherto junior by ranks and had bootstrapped to senior ranks had consistently refused to migrate to SSANU because

of the bond they had formed with NASU, and because of NASU's sterling achievements in the area of staff welfare when compared to other staff unions. The singleness of purpose, unitary and unified thought-process and dedication to the issue of welfare of members had served the union in good stead, and had consequently widened the membership base beyond its restricted domain.<sup>8</sup> National Association of Academic Technologists (NAAT) is the union in the universities that brings together technologists and scientists in the universities to provide leadership and synergy among workers in university laboratories, workshops, studios, farms, etc. for research purposes, as well as to protect and promote interests of members.

Currently, owing to differences of opinions on trade matters, dissenters have broken away from some of these parent unions to form parallel unions in certain universities. Such unions include CONUA (Congress of University Academics) from ASUU and NANTS (National Association of Non-Teaching Staff of Nigerian Universities) from NASU. These new subsets have gained broad-based membership across universities in Nigeria.

The list of unions in Nigerian universities would not be complete without our mentioning the union for students code-named the Students Union Government (SUG). This is the union upon which other unions in the universities gained relevance as universities are first and foremost about students. Though the study emphasizes activities of staff unions *vis-à-vis* their relationships with government and management, history would always remember the apoplectic gale which swept across Nigeria in 1978 when Segun Okeowo was President of the National Union of Nigeria Students (NUNS). Tagged the '*Ali Must Go*' protest named after the then Federal Commissioner of Education in the military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo, the protest was launched to counter the announcement of a hike in tuition and feeding fees for all universities in the country; and what started as a peaceful protest ended up becoming a full-scale riot nationwide, and terminated with military carnage of defenceless youths killed by agents of the Nigerian state.<sup>9</sup> Even today, one is yet to experience such a broad-based anger where every student from primary and tertiary institutions were mobilized to '*fight for the survival of the educational sector.*' To most kids who were in primary schools then, Okeowo was a folk hero and a firebrand gladiator unjustifiably stalked by power profiteers, typified by the military junta. Like everything else, this union today is also going through rust and rots, and has ruptured across many cleavages. The vibrancy, the verve, the wavelength had paled into insignificance as the union nationally, lacks ideological depth and gives in to frivolous demands and outlandish realities.

## CAUSES OF INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES

Section 55 of the Trade Union Act of 1973 states thus:

*"Industrial conflicts are any dispute/conflict between employer and workers which are connected with the employment or condition of employment or works of any person."*<sup>10</sup>

By the above, it is expressly stated that labour conflicts are expectedly concerned with conditions and service of works; that is, salaries, wages, welfare packages and other relevant matters. Conformity to these cardinal *desiderata* therefore ensures industrial peace while non-conformity

engenders industrial disputes. Another potential area of conflict is the penchant for violation of rights by the employer. This is a sore area that mirrors the downside aspect of the culture of impunity rampant with the 'ruling gentry' in our workspace environment. It is a known fact that most of the industrial disputes we witnessed in the universities were avoidable if well managed. There are various forms of industrial disputes of which total strike is one. These include work to rule, lockout, overtime ban, picketing, intimidation, boycott, sit down strike, etc.<sup>11</sup> In our universities, the most prevalent is total strike. In most cases, the unions would supposedly have exhausted every means and explored every channel as stipulated in the industrial dispute regulations by going on warning strike of three days, followed by seven days and twenty-one days' notices to commence a total strike. It is jaw dropping and farcical that in almost all these cases, government would not take steps to pre-empt the strike until it actually commences and it becomes breaking news. One could not but think that some of these actions of government were deliberate to appeal to the emotion of the citizenry and to make the striking unions look bad in the eyes of the public.

Some other causes of strike in Nigerian universities include:

#### **Unhonored Agreements**

Many times, government would sign agreements with the unions to get them to call off strikes. The agreements jointly approved by all parties would in some cases, come with timelines. Government would either honour the initial timelines and dump others or jettison all parts of the agreement altogether. The agreements willingly entered into by all parties and duly gazetted as elucidated under Section 37(I) of the Trade Dispute Act of 1978 becomes a problem for government to carry out at each turn:

*"It is either government out-rightly rejects the collective agreement or asked the agreement to be renegotiated. In most cases, it is when workers embark on a protracted strike action that the government starts implementing the collective agreement."<sup>12</sup>*

This kind of action from government promotes distrust between government and the unions, and has made the unions always insist on the actualization of all agreements before strikes are called off. In most instances, the strikes were always suspended and revisited when these agreements were not honored to the letter. A case in study is the 2009 FGN/ASUU (and other unions) Agreements which was willingly signed since 2009, but had not been fully implemented in 2021. The unions were forced to resume strikes on the same matter at different times;

#### **Class Conflicts**

These negotiations to resolve crises and liberate universities from industrial entanglements often turned out as war of complexes. Both the unions and agents of governments usually come to the table with preconceived positions and insist on their positions even to the detriment of education. At times, warped strategies are adopted to the effect that they would have worked out perfectly the number of times they would disagree before 'agreeing to agree' in order not to be seen as giving in easily. Such meetings are usually short and meaningless when they appear only to affirm that their positions remain the same since the last meeting, and that there was no need to proceed with

the present meeting, thus elongating the strike and playing pawn with the lives of the students who are the ones at the receiving ends;

### **High-handedness by Comprador Management**

In some universities, the management led by the Vice-Chancellors have become cult-figures who perpetrate all sorts of impropriety with impunity and visit untold hardships on the workforce. In most cases, such figures could boast of powerful connexions in government circles, such that whatever wrongdoings by ways of corruption and misrule that they had perpetuated remained unquestioned. In these cases, internal strikes are almost always mounted by unions when they could see no other headway and are pushed to the wall;

### **Insatiable Demands by Unions**

Over the years, our government has paid lip service to the issue of updating and upgrading education. It is no gainsaying that successive governments in Nigeria had refused to see the importance of education as impacting on the quality of life of its citizenry. This is obvious in the fact that for decades, Nigeria had apportioned between 4% and 7% of its budgetary allocation to education. This is highly defective, the lowest in sub-Saharan Africa, and one of the lowest in the world. In spite of our natural endowments, Nigeria had been straw-grabbing for decades on issues of education. Successive governments had asserted that allocating 26% of budget to servicing of education as persistently demanded by ASUU is unrealistic in the midst of austerity and frugal resources, though they see nothing wrong in profligacy spending on political activities. However, in World Education Forum final report, a UNESCO document titled *Education for All, EFA, 2000-2015* 15% to 20% was expressly recommended as international benchmark for all nations to achieve the honorable goal of ensuring education for all for the period 2000-2015.<sup>13</sup> Though, this remains the subsisting document for now, we note that it is disheartening and discommodious to argue for allocation below 10% which had been the situation for decades, while huge sums were allocated to less important sectors. It is therefore erroneous and unacceptable to dismiss such demands as insatiable;

### **Skewed Perceptions of Unions by Government**

The Ivory Tower is the hotbed of revolutionary ideas. Such ideas are expected to be used to advance the society and to make the town-gown interface beneficial. However, some policy implementers in government circles see the academia as a community of *'hot-heads'* try out some of their newfangled ideas in their communities. Sometimes ago, the political ideology of socialism held sway on Nigerian campuses, and a number of these union actors were self-proclaimed socialists and ideologues who readily shoehorned the contests playing out on campuses in terms of dialectics that happened in a bourgeois-proletariat framework. Such people were readily perceived as *'socialist miscreants'* and toxic revolutionary militants who craved for a socialist takeover, especially during the military era. The confrontational ambience already created by this perception between the policy implementers in government and the ASUU activists who were viewed as largely successful in selling their ideas to other unions always played out whenever they were at the negotiation table, and became attempts to unite two incompatible bedmates;

### **Unequal Treatments of Unions**

Discriminatory and inequitable treatment of unions by government had fostered grave misunderstanding in the system in recent times. Non-teaching unions see government as taking side with the academic union basically because the academic union have more people representing it in government. Also, the war of complexes between the academic and non-teaching staff where ‘*boss-servant, superiority and inferiority*’ complexes are evoked based on who is more relevant in the system play a dichotomizing role to fan the embers of discord in the universities, and government is seen to almost always encourage this ‘*divide-and-rule*’ gambit rather than promoting and reinforcing the importance of balance and symbiosis in a system. A case in reference is the issue of disparity;

### **Sensationalism**

Some union officials have an uncomfortable relationship with the truth. For acceptability, and to twist public opinions in their favour and gain popularity with congress members, they preferably paint inaccurate pictures of what transpired at the meetings with the hierarchy. At times, such pictures are superfluous, even outlandish. Such officials had used their various unions as mouthpieces to mislead other members into taking uninformed decisions at their congresses.

### **IMPLICATIONS OF STUDY**

Apart from inadequate funding by government which was mentioned earlier in the work, countless other factors vitiated the quality of university education in Nigeria as a result of incessant strike. Writing under the caption “*The Scourges in our universities*” Professor Nimi Briggs, the erstwhile Vice-Chancellor of the University of Port-Harcourt observed that:

*“There is no doubt that but for the unions, ...the plight of Nigerian universities would have been worse than what it is today. But it is the practice of the use of the instrument of strike action ever so often by the unions in pressing for their demands that one finds objectionable. Not infrequently, dialogue is abandoned in preference for strike actions especially when the issue has to do with the payment of allowances at individual universities. This hurts the system very badly as many times, the unions themselves are aware that money had not been made available for the payment of the allowances for which they are embarking on strike actions.”*<sup>14</sup> (p.195)

In a nutshell, there had been some level of uncompromising demeanors of which both the government and the unions were culpable. What is of importance in the context is sacrifice and moderation so as to be able to salvage what remains of standards in the sector. Some of the readily noticeable effects are as follows:

### **Compromised Standards**

Universities in Nigeria were established to uphold gold standards of practice. In the immediate past, this was evident through its products who compete favorably in the global market, as well as through global recognition of the qualities of teachers, administrators and other professionals. These universities had produced novel inventors, artists, technologists, pharmacists, medical doctors and even a Nobel Laureate. Lately, what we have in our universities is a large number of professors who remain nondescript in international circles. Level of productivity drops as soon as



one becomes a Professor or Deputy Registrar, and both the teachers and the administrators sitting behind the resolute desks miraculously transit to behemoths, overburdening the junior officers with their schedules;

### **Cancelled Sessions/Revised Calendars**

In most universities, revising calendars necessitated by the need to adjust and re-adjust dates due to incessant strikes have become ritualized paediatrics. Sessions were cancelled to accommodate new arrangements and to make sessions conform to years of graduation. During these adjustments, standard requirements were flouted, stipulated numbers of weeks for lecture were reduced drastically, while due process was abbreviated to force quantity into a constricted format. It is difficult to adequately cover the syllabus in these '*rush-rush*' situations. The committee practice of consideration of results which normally pass through Committee of Deans *en route* Senate was short-circuited to meet mobilization for the National Youth Service (NYSC). At the end of the process, mistakes were made, failed and sometimes, dismissed students were mobilized and a lot of the results of non-graduating students that ought to have been released by the commencement of a new session to facilitate the pre-requisite/co-requisite requirements were left outstanding for years because of the rush to mobilize students for graduation in a short time. Students who had fallen short of the required CGPA and ought to have been withdrawn from the universities still populate them because they were unaware of their current status;

### **Time Extension/Deferred Leave**

In these emergency situations, it becomes difficult for students to complete their studies within the stipulated years, hence, a four-year course ends up taking about six or seven years to complete. This is appalling, difficult and demotivating to students and parents who had not factored this into their plans, especially in this time of inflation and unemployment when their wards would still queue up at the unemployment market. The staff in the universities are also indubitably forced to defer their leave while they mark and grade in lesser weeks. Mangled time had also persistently done a disservice to students who had their vacations constantly abridged or taken away completely. In most instances, graduates of our universities who travelled outside the country to further their studies always encounter humongous problems when their transcripts were being interpreted by foreign scholars who would not understand how students could end up spending more years outside the required years of study;

### **Visiting Scholars/Foreign Students**

In the not-too-distant past, our universities were mostly besieged by foreigners from USSR, United States and from far and wide Europe to teach or study in our universities in the areas of Science and Humanities. These forays had suddenly stopped and the exchange programmes which were vibrant in those days and had given our universities a universal identity had become nonexistent. This speaks volume about our standards *vis-à-vis* global acceptability and the descent is obviously connected with low standards and shambolic academic calendars;

### **The Law School**

The Law School in Nigeria was established in 1962 to provide practical training to aspiring lawyers in Nigeria where they are 'called to bar.' It has a strictly regulated time-table of its programme and

it is a compulsory part of the education of legal practitioners in Nigeria. In recent times, the school had had to make concessions with a view to accommodating graduates of some schools who could not meet up as a result of skewed calendars. By this development, the stance and ethics of the law profession in Nigeria is beginning to experience abysmal threat. More importantly, students from some universities had missed-out and had been made to wait endlessly for Law School because their results were not ready and did not make the time for Law School admission. Bearing in mind that the legal profession is one which values and recognizes hierarchy and seniority, these misses had left gaps in the practice of some lawyers that could not be redeemed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt that the strike-stricken system of Nigerian universities needs a placebo. It is obvious that the protests that had happened in the past were not just for self-aggrandizement of members but also for the improvement of the educational sector in the country. From the symptom to the lesion; the treatment for the system which had witnessed downturns due to strikes should go beyond treatment of the symptoms and focus towards recalibration and recovery of the glory of the past. To start on this note, there is need to find other means of protest that would not entail bringing down the structure to mend the leakages, but one that would restore our virile reputation and reverse the present dystopian state of our public universities. Let us consider the following options:

### Collective Bargaining

It is mostly the consensus that weaponizing strike actions in our universities had spelt doom for the system and had accounted for the sorry state of delivery in recent times. The threat of strike at every given chance had hardened both sides and had rendered the strategy effete, image-soiling and inconsequential. Moreso, it had pulverized a system where we all remain stakeholders. This has made some pundits to start having a re-think and start emphasizing the primacy of collective bargaining over lockdowns and strikes:

*“...trade unions and professional associations should rescind their constant decision to resort to strike action. For one, it makes them appear weak and vulnerable and leaves a trail of bad news behind. Collective bargaining presupposes that both parties in a conflict are seen as mature, responsible and selfless in trying to resolve any clashes of interest.”* <sup>15</sup>

Collective bargaining is a process of reconciliation through negotiations between the employer or representatives and the employee or representatives. However, a new twist to this process of negotiation is found in certain areas in Nigeria, where collective bargaining is understood to be a weapon of government against the working class. It is believed that though in theory, the process is to nurture harmonious relationship between the employer and the labour force, in reality, the intent of government/employer is always to subvert the demands of the working class. While for the working people, industrial harmony exists only when there is social and economic justice, for the employer, it is the subversion of justice that remains the ultimate goal.<sup>16</sup> Collective bargaining remains the preferred process to resolving industrial disputes with less devastation on the structures. However, so as not to undermine the capabilities of collective bargaining, let us emphasize the need to eschew inaccurate reportage. The leadership of the trade unions should at

all times ensure the transmission of accurate information to their members to enable them make informed decisions;

### **Office of the Ombudsman**

To reduce incidence of maladministration in universities and forestall internal crises and industrial disharmony occasioned by high-handedness of Chief Executives and principal officers, government may consider establishing offices of the ombudsman in them. Ombudsmen are independent, impartial person or people who are empowered to aggregate, investigate and prosecute where necessary, any act of commission or omission of any public officer that are illegal, or that may pass as impropriety or abuse of office. The Anti-Corruption and Transparency Units (ACTU) of the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) established by the government in MDAs (Ministries, Departments and Agencies) in Nigeria do not seem to possess the level of autonomy to operate freely without hindrance in the universities as there are areas where they are still subjected to the goodwill of the Chief Executives who in some cases, might turn out to be the chief culprit;

### **University Autonomy and Sundry Matters**

Financial autonomy forms the fulcrum of every autonomy. Without full autonomy and virile internal augmentation mechanism, the claim to academic freedom would remain a pipedream. Economic empowerment precipitates academic freedom. The culture of scholarship would continue to be bedridden where our universities continue to depend on cap-in-hand largesse of politicians and politicasters who care less about education:

*“The University of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should go beyond providing skills for manpower and take cognizance of the need to drive job creation to boost the economy. In order to elevate our HEIs from the dystopian debacle they have found themselves, it is necessary to think out of the box and be financially independent to a large extent to usher in a real regime of university autonomy.”*<sup>17</sup> (p.44)

Basically, the problem of our universities lies in the substratum. The conceptual idea of a university as an evolving system catering for constant change according to contemporary needs of host communities and the nation is lost from our comprehension. For us, the university is an insulated, high-brow complex that breeds elites who are nurtured for imaginary highly-placed job markets; markets that are daily becoming nonexistent. The need to ‘fix our universities’ which have become defective over time and have become dumping grounds for grumpy workforce with unchanging ideas is more conspicuous in recent times. There is a monumental disconnect between the town and the gown as the system is becoming increasingly dysfunctional by the day. Intellectual *manques* and professional layabouts clog our system and make real revolutionary advancement unachievable. Until our universities get full autonomy, eschew over-reliance on government, go all out to attract funds and grants to run the universities and leave government to perform the supervisory role of policy development and monitoring; until such a time when the leaderships of our universities devote themselves entirely to ‘academic governance, business governance and corporate governance’ (the (a) (b) (c) policy of the new academia)<sup>18</sup>; until they jettison the slipshod management of our universities and do away with the idea of ‘receiving mentality’ and

migrate to a '*giving mentality*'; until every university identifies its '*unique selling points (USP)*' and concentrate on entrepreneurial, civic, digital or other specific interest-areas (not jack of all trades); until '*meritocracy*', not patronage, becomes a yardstick for appointments of officers into the services of our universities; and until '*key performance indicators (KPI)*' are reckoned with to promote, remunerate and complement service-delivery in a performance-based environment, our universities shall continue to go on a wild goose chase with grandiose missions and visions, but with nothing to show for it. Our format no longer works. We should adopt the format that reflects new realities and put us at par with global realities. Government, people, intellectuals and all stakeholders in the education enterprise should come together to swallow these bitter pills in good faith, with a view to revamping, revitalizing and recalibrating university education in Nigeria for posterity.

### Agreements

While a plea is made to unions to look at other ways of alleviating disruptive actions which had consistently emasculated our structures, a stronger plea should be made to government proprietors to toe the path of honour and show deference to freely-signed agreements. They should be proactive and avoid making a show out of legitimate discontent. It is only when more interest is shown in investing aggressively in the education sector and agreements are duly honored without duress that we can begin to have the issue of distrust resolved.

### CONCLUSION

So far, we have been able to argue that a tumultuous interface between the major stakeholders in our universities had affected the gold standards the universities were known for in halcyon times. This current paresthesia, this entropy in our university system was brought about by the '*collective irresponsibility*' of all the stakeholders over the years. We have identified areas of concern and make suggestions which if devoutly pursued, might lead to the recovery of lost territories. We have also submitted that the university system needs a holistic revamping to forestall the effete and destructive method of strike. Though we set out not apportioning blames as conflicts in a large enterprise like the university is dialectical, we have made it clear that the subliminal attention that our universities get in terms of management and productivity had affected global ratings, and that steps needed to be taken urgently to reverse the downturn. In all lockdowns, students who happen to be the nexus of the university communities suffer the most, and a disregard of this fact would portend that:

*'(We) are not as careful of students as much as (we) are concerned of the workers.'*<sup>19</sup>

The use of strikes and lockdowns as weapons had formed the bases of our industrial history riddled with crises. Also, a culture of distrust between the government/employer and worker/employee where the former is perceived by the latter as the agent of exploitative capitalism has a long-standing history in our national life. It is true that the series of strikes had forced the achievements of certain individual and institutional positives, especially in a discourse when government people in recent times understand no other diction apart from strikes to galvanize them to action. But it is also true that the devastating effects of incessant strikes had gradually started to wear down the

weakened bones of our public university system. The devastation being caused presently, knowingly or unknowingly, may take years to rebuild. We align our concerns with Professor Nimi Briggs when he said:

*“There is no doubt that ...these strike actions have a salutary effect especially on government. But the ruin, destruction and lack of confidence they inflict on the system cannot be compared to the money they put into individual pockets. (p.196)”<sup>20</sup>*

Granted that the unions oftentimes express legitimate discontent, a time has come to fashion-out new strategies, new ways that would ensure that we do not continue to shoot ourselves in the legs by behaving like that mythical bird who spent several days building her nest and spent the next seconds scattering it. We should adopt a strategy that would not portray us as selfish refuseniks destroying the very structures we seek to protect. It is hoped that our public universities which today are being incinerated by our actions or inactions, would come back to life renewed and regenerated.

This paper has attempted to explore the causes and the resultant effects of repeated strikes in our universities in Nigeria. The strikes which are not limited to economic concerns but oftentimes, also underline the call for infrastructural development of the sector have posed legitimate questions over time. It is however, unfortunate that the strikes are hitting the structures hard and destroying standards that had taken decades to build. This paper examined ways by which our actions as staff and government had contributed to the gradual disintegration of standards in our universities. It concludes by making recommendations.

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