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COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES: AN EVALUATION OF ACADEMIC STAFF UNION OF UNIVERSITIES (ASUU) STRIKES FROM 2020-2022

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effectiveness of collective bargaining as a mechanism for conflict resolution between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Nigerian Federal Government, particularly during the prolonged strikes of 2020 and 2022. Despite collective bargaining's global recognition as a peaceful and structured approach to labor dispute resolution, its application in Nigeria's public university system has often failed to prevent or sustainably resolve conflicts. Findings reveal that ASUU's recurring industrial actions are rooted in the federal government's failure to honor previously signed agreements, inadequate funding, poor staff welfare, and disregard for university autonomy. The study further highlights the negative impact of failed negotiations on academic staff productivity, student outcomes, and the overall quality of education. Drawing on Mary Parker Follett's Constructive Conflict Theory, the research advocates for integrative conflict management strategies such as binding legislation, independent mediation councils, and stakeholder-inclusive dialogue. The study concludes that sustainable industrial harmony and educational development in Nigeria require a shift from adversarial bargaining toward transparent, enforceable, and collaborative conflict resolution frameworks.

Keywords: *Collective Bargaining, Conflict Resolution, ASUU Strike, Constructive Conflict Theory*

1.0 Introduction

Universities are central to global development and transformation, particularly in Nigeria where they serve as engines of progress through research and knowledge production. As observed by Ahmad and Basheer (2012), universities confront sociopolitical and economic challenges by generating solutions through academic inquiry. Education, therefore, is not merely a right but a societal necessity that contributes to national advancement. Despite this, Nigeria continues to neglect its educational sector, especially university education, which Akuh (2016) critiques as an irony, given its role in societal development.

Taiwo, Akinbode, Akinrinlola, and Olu-Ogunleye (2024) argue that at the core of labor relations within universities lies **collective bargaining**—a mechanism designed to improve employer-employee relations and ensure a conducive work environment devoid of conflict. Globally, collective bargaining has proven effective in resolving industrial disputes and is widely recognized as a critical strategy for labor engagement in developed nations.

In the Nigerian context, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) plays a pivotal role in championing academic staff welfare, which includes remuneration, job security, career advancement, healthcare, and other working conditions. According to Ibrahim (2015), the union's persistent resort to strikes, often as a last resort, underscores the failure of negotiations with the federal government regarding previously agreed issues such as salary structure, university autonomy, education funding (as recommended by UNESCO), and service conditions.

These persistent strikes reflect a broader failure in Nigeria's collective bargaining process. Similarly, Adegbite and Akinlade (2023) suggested that the inability to resolve conflicts amicably between unions and the government stems from either weak negotiation structures or deliberate neglect. Nevertheless, when ASUU calls for collective bargaining, it generally signals a preference for peaceful dispute resolution. However, the recurrence of strikes suggests that either the process is flawed or not genuinely pursued by both parties.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The persistent industrial disputes between ASUU and the Nigerian Federal Government have severely disrupted the academic calendar, undermined institutional credibility, and negatively impacted student progress and staff morale. Despite the existence of collective bargaining frameworks designed to mediate such disputes, the recurrence of prolonged strikes, particularly between 2020 and 2022, raises critical questions about the efficacy and sincerity of the negotiation process.

Specifically, as presented in Ume and Chukwuemeka (2023), the 2020 strike (lasting nine months) was due to the government's failure to implement prior agreements concerning funding, allowances, and the controversial Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS). Just two years later, in 2022, an eight-month strike ensued over similar unresolved issues, including the rejection of IPPIS, poor implementation of the 2020 Memorandum of Action, and demands for university revitalization

These recurrent strikes highlight a cyclical problem rooted in ineffective conflict resolution mechanisms, with collective bargaining either not producing long-lasting agreements or agreements being dishonored by the government. The detrimental outcomes include academic stagnation, brain drain, declining public trust, and diminished student motivation. Despite the theoretical potential of collective bargaining to foster industrial harmony, its implementation in Nigeria appears compromised.

Consequently, the unresolved tension between ASUU and the government calls for a critical examination of the actual impact of collective bargaining on conflict resolution. Does it achieve its intended outcomes, or does it merely postpone disputes? Moreover, is the negotiation process itself genuinely structured to yield results, or is it symbolic and reactionary?

1.2 Research Questions

1. What are the root causes behind ASUU's frequent demands and the recurring labor disputes in Nigerian public universities?

2. In what ways does the collective bargaining process influence the productivity and performance of academic staff in Nigerian universities?
3. What conflict management strategies can be adopted to enhance the quality of education and industrial harmony in Nigerian public universities?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Conceptual Clarification

2.1.1 Collective Bargaining

Collective bargaining is a foundational mechanism in industrial relations, serving as a formal negotiation process between employers and employees—often through their trade unions—aimed at establishing fair and acceptable conditions of employment. Kowo and Vareckova (2023) argue that its popularity grew in response to the rising strength of trade unionism and the need for dialogue as a means of resolving workplace disputes. Taiwo et al. (2024) define it as a structured forum for determining employment conditions such as wages, benefits, hours, and workplace safety.

As articulated by Thommen (2022), collective bargaining encompasses negotiations on a range of employment contract elements including salaries, overtime compensation, health and safety regulations, and bonuses. It provides a peaceful alternative to litigation, facilitating industrial harmony. Through this mechanism, both employers and employees seek mutually beneficial solutions to disputes.

Chukwuma (2021) further explains that collective bargaining is not only embedded in international labour statutes but also protected under national legal frameworks which grant workers the freedom to associate and engage in union activities. The Labour Act Cap 198, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (1990), and the Trade Disputes Act (1990), both recognize collective bargaining as a legitimate and formal process for achieving agreements on employment conditions.

An important aspect of collective bargaining is the right to strike, which Brand describes as a fundamental tool for redressing the inherent power imbalance between employers and employees.

Taiwo et al. (2024), note that without the ability to strike, collective bargaining loses its efficacy. However, the Trade Disputes (Amendment) Act of 1977 stipulates that striking workers are not entitled to wages during the strike period, highlighting the legal complexity surrounding this form of industrial action.

2.1.2 Conflict and Conflict Resolution

Conflict, while often seen as undesirable, is a common and sometimes necessary aspect of organizational life. Richardson views it as an inevitable occurrence resulting from misalignment between personal and organizational goals. Robbins and Judge (2019) define it as a process that begins when one party perceives that another has or will negatively affect something of value to them. Organizational conflict, therefore, manifests in various forms and levels, requiring effective management.

According to Kowo and Vareckova (2023), conflict resolution refers to the range of strategies employed to address and mitigate the negative effects of such disputes. These include negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and peace-building mechanisms. Tanifum, and Fabien (2025) describes conflict resolution as a process that enables parties to reach mutually agreeable solutions through effective communication and collaborative interaction in the workplace. This aid in maintaining workplace harmony and enhancing productivity.

Hence, conflict resolution is an essential mechanism used in settling disagreements and promoting a harmonious work environment between employers and their employees in order to foster peace, growth, and progress in the workplace. Thus, conflict resolution is not merely about ending disagreements, but about transforming them into constructive engagements that enhance institutional resilience.

2.2 Overview of ASUU Strikes in Nigeria

According to Nwachukwu and Okeke (2024), the history of strikes in Nigeria reveals a consistent pattern of labor unrest driven by unresolved grievances. However, following ASUU's establishment in 1978, it has encouraged its members to disrupt academic activities at public universities for at least 25 times over a period of 42 years from 1980 to 2022. These strikes were

typically triggered by issues such as inadequate funding, poor remuneration, lack of university autonomy, and disputes over payroll systems like IPPIS.

The 2020 strike (lasting nine months), as noted by Eme and Emeh (2021), was the longest in the union's history. It was primarily fueled by the non-implementation of the 2019 agreement between ASUU and the Federal Government, alongside disputes regarding the use of the Integrated Personnel Payroll Information System (IPPIS) and insufficient funding. Similarly, Ume and Chukwuemeka (2023) revealed that the 2022 strike (which spanned eight months) stemmed from the failure to implement prior agreements and further dissatisfaction with the government's proposed University Transparency and Accountability Solution (UTAS) and unmet financial commitments.

Consequently, these prolonged industrial actions have often had severe consequences on the education sector. These strikes severely disrupted academic calendars, delayed graduations, and eroded public confidence in Nigeria's higher education system. The disruption in the academic environment has had negative impacts on the overall standards and reputation of Nigerian higher education over the years.

2.3 Empirical Review of Related Studies

Multiple empirical studies provide valuable insights into the dynamics of collective bargaining and conflict resolution within Nigeria's educational and industrial sectors.

Owoseni and Ibikunle (2014) underscore the critical role of dialogue in mitigating organizational disputes. Their work suggests that proactive communication mechanisms can simplify and reduce the cost of dispute resolution.

In a focused study of ASUU-government relations, Odiagbe (2012) identifies historical grievances and poor implementation of agreements as key drivers of conflict. Ukokhe and Florah (2022) emphasizes the importance of collective bargaining agreements, joint consultation, and grievance handling mechanisms (such as collaboration and dialogue) contribute to industrial dispute management and harmonious organization outcomes.

Stankovska (2017), in their study of academic institutions in Macedonia, highlights a strong link between job satisfaction and academic staff performance. Alfagira, Zumrah, Noor, and Rahman (2017) echo similar sentiments in the Nigerian context, emphasizing motivation as a critical factor for performance enhancement. While Okafor et al. (2023), using survey data from Enugu State University, demonstrate that regular salary payments and access to research grants significantly influence staff attendance and research output.

Kowo and Vareckova (2023) using quantitative techniques, found that effective negotiation and reconciliation within collective bargaining positively impact organizational conflict management. Similarly, Taiwo et al. (2024) discovered a paradoxical outcome in South-West Nigerian universities where collective bargaining had a statistically negative effect on academic staff welfare (β=-0.494, $p>0.05$) suggesting that poorly structured bargaining processes may exacerbate existing challenges.

Ogbomah and Moses (2024) focusing on Federal University Dutsinma, linked prolonged ASUU strikes with diminished student performance and morale. Ekwoaba et al. (2020) studying the University of Lagos, found that collective bargaining significantly enhances productivity when appropriately applied.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

2.4.1 Constructive Conflict Theory by Mary Parker Follett

Mary Parker Follett's theory of constructive conflict serves as the theoretical underpinning for this study. First articulated in her 1925 presentation "Constructive Conflict" (as cited in Urwick, 1973), Follett advocates for integrative problem-solving over traditional adversarial approaches. She identifies three strategies for handling conflict: dominance, compromise, and integration.

Dominance involves the imposition of one party's will over another—an approach that often yields temporary solutions. Compromise, while frequently used in trade union negotiations, involves mutual concessions, but rarely satisfies either party fully. Integration, on the other hand, seeks creative solutions that satisfy all parties' core interests without sacrifice.

According to Follett, integration offers long-term stability, unlike compromise, which often leads to recurring conflicts. The ASUU-government dynamic exemplifies this: while negotiations often lead to compromises, the underlying issues remain unresolved, prompting repeated strike actions. Integration, though idealistic and resource-intensive, offers a path to sustainable industrial peace.

However, according to Clegg, Kornberger, and Pitsis (2016), critics argue that Follett's theory assumes rationality, openness, and goodwill among parties—conditions that may not exist in highly politicized or adversarial environments such as labor relations in Nigeria. Nonetheless, the emphasis on cooperative engagement and mutual respect remains relevant, especially in designing more effective collective bargaining strategies.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis and interpretive inquiry. Thus, the study was built on three research questions to enable the researcher evaluate ASUU strikes from 2020-2022. Interpretive inquiry as adopted focused on these three key issues of inquiry which form the three research questions: the underlying factors contributing to ASUU's consistent demands and the recurring labor conflicts in Nigerian public universities; collective bargaining procedure effect on productivity of university employees in Nigeria; and effective conflict management strategies effect on the quality of higher education in Nigerian public universities.

The study examined secondary data sources such as academic journals, policy documents, legal statutes, ASUU communiqués, and media reports to investigate the effectiveness of collective bargaining in resolving conflicts between ASUU and the Nigerian Federal Government. However, Google scholar was used to extract academic journals. Policy documents on ASUU and Federal Government collective bargaining agreements for 2020 and 2022 was accessed to ensure compliance. The Court ruling on ASUU strike 2022 was also accessed. ASUU communiqués were accessed online via ASUU official website and other media publications.

The documents were selected based on three key criteria: relevance to collective bargaining processes and dispute resolution mechanisms in the Nigerian university system; credibility and authority of the issuing institution—such as government agencies, courts, and recognized labor

unions; and publication within the period 2020–2022 to ensure alignment with the strike episodes under study.

The 2020 and 2022 ASUU strikes were used as case studies to explore negotiation patterns and their impact on university operations. The research was guided by Mary Parker Follett's Constructive Conflict Theory, with thematic analysis used to identify key issues related to staff welfare, conflict causes, and resolution mechanisms. Empirical evidence from existing studies enriched the interpretation of findings. This approach enabled a detailed understanding of systemic labor challenges and the limitations of current bargaining practices in Nigeria's university system.

To ensure validity and reliability of the study, multiple sources were triangulated to confirm the consistency of facts and reduce bias. Only verified and publicly accessible documents were used, and all sources were duly acknowledged. As secondary data were used, the study did not involve human subjects. Ethical standards were maintained through accurate citation and responsible use of published materials. However, the study is limited by its reliance on existing documents, some of which may reflect institutional biases or incomplete accounts of bargaining episodes. Despite this limitation, the methodology provides a rigorous and credible basis for analyzing the effect of collective bargaining on conflict resolution in the Nigerian university system.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1:

What are the underlying factors contributing to ASUU's consistent demands and the recurring labor conflicts in Nigerian public universities?

The findings reveal that the recurrent ASUU strikes are not random or reactionary; rather, they are rooted in long-standing structural, political, and financial issues within Nigeria's higher education sector. The federal government's habitual failure to implement signed agreements, such as the Memorandum of Action (MoA) from 2020, is a core catalyst. Osodeke (as cited in (Pankyes, 2025), on behalf of ASUU, perceives these repeated breaches as a deliberate betrayal, eroding trust and reducing the union's confidence in future negotiations.

One specific grievance is the non-payment of Earned Academic Allowances (EAA), which forms a critical part of ASUU's welfare demands. The controversy surrounding the IPPIS payroll system further deepens the rift. ASUU views the IPPIS as a violation of university autonomy and has proposed an alternative—UTAS (University Transparency and Accountability Solution)—which the government has yet to accept. This standoff reflects a deeper clash over control and institutional independence.

Moreover, Ibrahim (2015) state that the rapid expansion of public universities without proportional investment in infrastructure or staffing has overstretched resources, leading to deteriorating conditions for both staff and students. This not only undermines academic quality but also intensifies staff workload and dissatisfaction, fueling more demands for reform.

The findings also show that ASUU strikes are cyclical because many of the issues raised in previous industrial actions remain unresolved. This suggests a systemic failure in Nigeria's industrial relations framework, characterized by poor implementation, lack of continuity, and insufficient political will. The 2020 and 2022 strikes—among the longest in Nigeria's university history—ended not because issues were resolved but because of pressure, including court intervention in 2022, which further illustrates the breakdown of dialogue mechanisms.

In essence, the conflict is sustained by a pattern of broken promises, administrative insincerity, and disregard for higher education's strategic importance. The Constructive Conflict Theory by Mary Parker Follett helps explain the recurrence of strikes between ASUU and the Nigerian government. This is further confirmed by Clegg et al. (2016), who state that by resorting to compromise rather than true integration, the parties only delay the inevitable recurrence of conflict, as core issues remain unaddressed

Research Question 2:

How does the collective bargaining procedure affect the productivity of university employees in Nigeria?

The study identifies a paradox in the practice of collective bargaining in Nigerian universities. Ideally, collective bargaining should enhance academic productivity by resolving grievances, improving conditions, and fostering morale. Indeed, the 2020 MoA, which ended a nine-month strike, initially provided a platform for optimism. However, empirical evidence, especially from

Taiwo et al. (2024), reveals that the process often fails to yield the desired impact. Their study showed a statistically negative relationship ($\beta = -0.494$, $p > 0.05$) between collective bargaining and staff welfare, reflecting the unfulfilled expectations and disillusionment of academic staff.

The failure of government to follow through on negotiated terms diminishes the credibility of the process, causing morale and productivity to plummet. Academics become disengaged, which is reflected in reduced research output, teaching quality, and student support. This disengagement is exacerbated during prolonged strikes when academic calendars are disrupted and teaching schedules collapse.

According to Ogbomah and Moses (2024), long strikes also damage mentoring relationships and collaborative research, leading to a decline in innovation and intellectual capital. These issues further erode the global competitiveness of Nigerian universities.

Moreover, the adversarial nature of negotiations and the lack of enforcement mechanisms between ASUU and the Federal Government of Nigeria undermine the utility of bargaining. In contrast, as shown in the writings of Dickens (2012) and Hassel (2014), developed countries like the United Kingdom (UK) and Germany leverage strong institutional frameworks that ensure agreements are respected, and grievances are addressed constructively.

In Nigeria, as argued by Okafor et al. (2023), the politicization of the process, weak union-government trust, and poor follow-through make collective bargaining seem like a ritual with little tangible benefit. As such, while the procedure is recognized in law, it has become procedurally flawed and substantively ineffective, ultimately contributing to the degradation of academic standards and workforce morale.

Research Question 3:

What effective conflict management strategies can enhance the quality of higher education in Nigerian public universities?

The findings underscore the urgent need for a shift from adversarial to integrative conflict resolution approaches in the Nigerian university system. Hence, Adegbite and Akinlade (2023) further highlight that the repeated breakdown of negotiations, reliance on litigation (as in 2022),

and recurrence of strikes show that the current model—centered on compromise and pressure tactics—is unsustainable.

The study draws on Follett's Constructive Conflict Theory, which advocates for integration rather than compromise. Integration entails identifying shared interests and working collaboratively toward solutions that satisfy both parties. In the ASUU-government context, this means recognizing the legitimacy of ASUU's demands while aligning them with national education policy and fiscal realities.

Another strategic recommendation is the institutionalization of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms (such as mediation and arbitration) that have been successfully implemented in other sectors. The study recommends establishing an independent education dispute resolution body, modeled after the UK's ACAS, to mediate ASUU-government disputes impartially (Dickens, 2012).

Furthermore, the findings call for legal reforms that make collective agreements enforceable, along with budgetary frameworks that guarantee funding for agreed commitments. The absence of such mechanisms is a major reason for the recurrence of unresolved disputes.

Importantly, the study advocates for inclusive and multi-stakeholder dialogue, involving not just ASUU and the government but also student bodies, civil society, and independent observers. According to Chibugo and Emeka (2020), this inclusion will enhance accountability and help rebuild trust in the negotiation process.

Finally, digitizing MoAs/MoUs and making them publicly accessible would promote transparency and allow stakeholders to track compliance. The integration of annual review platforms, joint monitoring teams, and proactive communication systems will further enhance implementation and reduce conflict triggers.

In conclusion, the study recommends a paradigm shift from reactionary, top-down negotiations to structured, proactive, and participatory conflict management. If implemented, such strategies could transform strikes from being destructive interruptions into constructive opportunities for systemic reform and innovation in Nigeria's public university system.

5.0 Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the effect of collective bargaining on conflict resolution between ASUU and the Federal Government is conditional and context-dependent. While it holds potential for positive outcomes, such as the temporary resolution seen in 2020, the repeated breakdowns — exemplified by the 2022 strike ending through judicial intervention — point to structural and procedural weaknesses. The process is undermined by failed implementations, lack of transparency, political interference, and absence of institutional accountability.

Improving conflict resolution in Nigerian public universities requires a move toward integrative strategies grounded in trust, enforcement of agreements, and institutional strengthening. Ultimately, for Nigeria to achieve industrial peace and revitalize its higher education sector, it must embrace more collaborative, transparent, and enforceable conflict management strategies rooted in equity, sincerity, and mutual respect. Only then can collective bargaining fulfill its intended purpose of promoting educational stability and enhancing academic productivity.

6.0 Recommendations

To address the persistent ASUU-government labor conflicts, the government should **enact legislation for the binding enforcement** of all agreements (MoAs and MoUs), ensuring continuity and accountability regardless of administrative changes. A permanent Education Collective Bargaining Council (ECBC) should be established to institutionalize dialogue and prevent crisis-driven negotiations. Independent audits of university funding and salaries are necessary to restore trust and ensure transparency in financial management. **Additionally, to** improve productivity, collective bargaining agreements should include performance-linked incentives and be monitored by a centralized implementation unit for compliance. Conflict resolution should shift from adversarial strikes to proactive strategies like mediation, annual stakeholder reviews, and an independent Education Dispute Resolution Agency (EDRA). Finally, digitizing agreements, enforcing them legally, and involving students and civil society in monitoring can enhance trust, reduce strikes, and improve the quality of higher education.

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