INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT AND PEACEBUILDING IN NIGERIA: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Industrial conflict remains a persistent challenge within Nigeria's labour relations system, with significant implications for governance, institutional stability, and peacebuilding. Although existing studies have extensively examined labour disputes, they have largely treated industrial conflict as an economic or administrative issue, with limited attention to its broader consequences for sustainable peace. This study addresses this gap by examining industrial conflict as a structural threat to

peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study employs a thematic review of literature, drawing data from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, and institutional reports. The study is anchored on Conflict Theory, Structural Violence Theory, and Human Needs Theory, which provide a multidimensional framework for understanding the structural and relational causes of industrial unrest. The findings reveal that industrial conflict in Nigeria follows a cyclical pattern of negotiation, partial agreement, weak implementation, and recurrent strikes, particularly across the education, healthcare, and public sectors. The study further finds that inadequate funding, poor remuneration, and the persistent failure of government to implement agreements remain the major drivers of labour unrest. These conflicts disrupt essential public services, weaken institutional trust, and undermine the legitimacy of governance structures, thereby posing serious challenges to both negative and positive peace. The study concludes that industrial conflict constitutes a major structural threat to peacebuilding in Nigeria, as it deepens social grievances, weakens institutional stability, and disrupts social cohesion. It contributes to existing scholarship by situating industrial conflict within the broader discourse of peacebuilding, governance, and institutional stability, thereby extending the understanding of labour disputes beyond workplace relations to their wider implications for sustainable peace. The study recommends strengthening labour governance systems, ensuring timely implementation of agreements, improving workers' welfare, and institutionalizing preventive dispute resolution mechanisms to promote industrial harmony and sustainable peace in Nigeria.

Introduction

Industrial conflict continues to pose a subtle yet enduring threat to the stability of modern societies, often undermining governance capacity, economic productivity, and institutional trust in ways that extend beyond the immediate workplace. While frequently treated as routine labour disputes, its cumulative effects have increasingly revealed deeper structural tensions within states, particularly in relation to justice, equity, and social cohesion.In contemporary peace and development discourse, sustainable peace is no longer conceived solely as the absence of violent conflict, but as the presence of fairness and inclusivity in socio-economic relations, especially within the labour environment. In this regard, labour relations have become a critical lens through which societal harmony and institutional legitimacy are assessed (Murphy &MacMahon, 2022). Across different regions, from public sector strikes in Europe and Asia to recurring labour unrest in Latin America and Africa, industrial conflict continues to expose the fragile balance between workers' welfare, state capacity, and economic productivity(Liu, 2025; Chamorro-Futinico, 2025).

Across the African continent, this challenge assumes even greater significance due to persistent structural vulnerabilities, weak institutional enforcement mechanisms, and widening socio-economic inequalities (Thelma et al., 2024). Many African states continue to grapple with unstable labour relations in the face of rising unemployment, inflationary pressures, and governance deficits. Industrial disputes

often transcend the boundaries of the workplace and evolve into broader questions of governance legitimacy, social cohesion, and national stability (Iwuoha et al., 2025). In several instances, prolonged strikes in essential sectors such as education, health, and energy have not only disrupted economic activities but have also eroded public trust in the state's ability to manage competing interests fairly, transparently, and effectively (Okonkwo, 2025).

In Nigeria, these dynamics are particularly pronounced and deeply entrenched. The country has experienced recurring waves of industrial conflicts across critical sectors, including education, healthcare, oil and gas, and public administration. Prominent labour unions such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), and various sectoral associations have frequently engaged in industrial actions over issues such as poor remuneration, deteriorating working conditions, and persistent failures in policy implementation. While these actions are often rooted in legitimate grievances, their prolonged and recurrent nature has resulted in disruptions to essential social services, significant economic losses, and growing public frustration. More importantly, these patterns raise critical concerns regarding their broader implications for peacebuilding processes in Nigeria, particularly in relation to institutional trust, governance legitimacy, and social stability (Onuigbo & Soba, 2025).

Against this background, this study takes a slightly different position from much of the existing literature, which tends to treat industrial conflict mainly as a labour relations or economic issue. Instead, it views industrial conflict as a deeper structural and systemic challenge to peacebuilding in Nigeria, with important implications for national stability. From this perspective, labour disputes are not just workplace disagreements; they can weaken trust between the state and workers, disrupt essential public services, and fuel wider social and political grievances that affect peace at the national level.Rather than focusing only on wage disputes, union activities, or administrative conflict management, this study uses a peacebuilding lens to understand how industrial conflict connects with broader issues of governance weakness, institutional fragility, and social cohesion in Nigeria. Using a qualitative thematic review of existing literature, it brings together and analyses scholarly discussions to identify the key structural and institutional gaps that continue to drive recurring labour unrest. By reframing industrial conflict within the wider conversation on peacebuilding and governance, the study contributes to existing knowledge by showing how labour relations are closely linked to national peace and stability. In doing so, it highlights that improving dispute resolution systems and labour governance is not only about workplace efficiency, but also about building a more stable and peaceful society in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine industrial conflict as a threat to peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the nature and patterns of industrial conflict in Nigeria.
2. Assess the implications of industrial conflict on governance, institutional stability, and peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria.
3. Analyse the structural factors sustaining industrial conflict in Nigeria.
4. Explore pathways for strengthening labour relations and sustainable peacebuilding.

Literature Review

Scholarly literature on industrial conflict in Nigeria consistently underscores its deep-rooted connection to governance deficiencies, weak institutional frameworks, and persistent socio-economic inequalities. Rather than being isolated workplace disputes, industrial conflicts are widely understood as structural manifestations of strained labour relations and governance inefficiencies that cut across critical sectors of the Nigerian economy. Across studies, a dominant consensus is that industrial unrest is sustained by recurrent failures in policy implementation, weak collective bargaining systems, and a deficit of trust between the state as employer and organized labour.

A significant strand of literature situates industrial conflict within the broader problem of governance failure. Empirical and theoretical contributions from Nancy et al. (2025) converge on the view that strikes and labour disputes in Nigeria are largely triggered by the government's inability to honour negotiated agreements, particularly in the public sector. This recurring pattern has institutionalized a cycle of mistrust, where agreements are frequently reached but inconsistently implemented, thereby reproducing industrial tensions. Folorunsho & Samuel (2025) extends this argument by framing industrial conflict as a governance pathology rooted in policy inconsistency and weak accountability structures, rather than merely economic dissatisfaction.

According to Abdul Raza (2025), within sector-specific analyses, the education and health sectors receive substantial scholarly attention due to their vulnerability to industrial disruption. Studies on the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) highlight the systemic nature of academic strikes, emphasizing their impact on human capital development and institutional stability. The literature consistently demonstrates that prolonged university closures not only disrupt academic calendars but also weaken public confidence in Nigeria's higher education system, thereby contributing to broader social frustration and institutional decay. Similarly, research on the health sector by Manguele et al. (2024) reveals that strikes by medical personnel significantly compromise healthcare delivery, increase mortality risks, and expose structural neglect in public health governance. These findings collectively illustrate that industrial conflict in essential services has direct consequences for human security and social welfare.

Beyond sectoral impacts, a growing body of literature links industrial conflict to declining institutional trust and weakened state legitimacy. Rulashe & Jam (2025), alongside Elbahnasawy et al. (2025) argue that recurrent labour disputes erode citizens' confidence in government institutions, particularly when essential services are repeatedly disrupted. This erosion of trust is not merely perceptual but reflects a deeper crisis of state capacity and responsiveness. In this context, industrial conflict becomes both a symptom and a driver of governance fragility, reinforcing negative perceptions of state inefficiency and weak crisis management.

From a peacebuilding perspective, existing studies increasingly frame industrial conflict as a form of structural violence that undermines sustainable peace. Drawing on Galtung's conceptualization, scholars such as Mokofe (2025) argue that industrial unrest reflects embedded injustices within labour systems, particularly in relation to wages, working conditions, and institutional responsiveness. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from visible strikes to the underlying structural conditions that produce them. In this sense,

industrial conflict is not merely disruptive but constitutive of broader patterns of inequality that impede the realization of positive peace.

Recent scholarship also emphasizes the role and limitations of institutional mechanisms for conflict resolution. Nzom (2025) observe that while institutions such as the Ministry of Labour and the National Industrial Court are formally mandated to mediate disputes, their effectiveness is constrained by political interference, weak enforcement capacity, and delayed arbitration processes. Consequently, industrial disputes often escalate into full-scale strikes before resolution is achieved, reflecting a reactive rather than preventive approach to labour governance.

The literature reveals a convergence of evidence pointing to industrial conflict in Nigeria as a multidimensional phenomenon rooted in governance failure, structural inequality, and institutional weakness. However, a critical gap persists in the integration of peacebuilding frameworks into the analysis of industrial relations. While existing studies extensively document the economic and administrative consequences of strikes, fewer works explicitly theorize industrial conflict as a direct threat to both positive and negative peace. This study addresses this gap by situating industrial conflict within peacebuilding discourse, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of its implications for national stability and sustainable development in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts Conflict Theory, Structural Violence Theory, and Human Needs Theory not as static explanatory tools, but as complementary and critically interrogated lenses for rethinking industrial conflict as a peacebuilding challenge in Nigeria. However, rather than applying these theories in a mechanical or descriptive manner, the study engages them critically to expose their explanatory strengths and limitations in capturing the Nigerian labour context. In doing so, the framework moves beyond conventional labour relations analysis to demonstrate how industrial conflict operates at the intersection of power, structure, and unmet human expectations within a fragile governance environment.

Conflict Theory, traditionally associated with Karl Marx, conceptualizes society as an arena of unequal power relations and continuous struggle over scarce resources. While this theory is useful in explaining labour–management tensions, its classical formulation tends to overemphasize economic determinism and understate the institutional and political mediation of conflict. In the Nigerian context, this limitation becomes evident because industrial conflict is not only driven by class struggle, but also by governance inefficiencies, weak policy implementation, and the politicization of labour relations. Therefore, this study extends Conflict Theory by situating power imbalance not merely within employer–employee relations, but within a broader state-centric labour governance structure where the government simultaneously acts as regulator, employer, and negotiator. This triangular role complicates traditional Marxist assumptions and reveals that industrial conflict in Nigeria is also a governance and legitimacy issue, not just a class struggle.

Structural Violence Theory, advanced by Johan Galtung, shifts attention from direct confrontation to embedded institutional harm that prevents individuals from achieving their potential. While this theory is particularly relevant for understanding systemic deprivation, it has often been criticized for its broad conceptualization of "violence," which can obscure specific causal mechanisms. This study

engages that limitation by narrowing its application to concrete manifestations within Nigeria's industrial relations system, such as wage arrears, poor working conditions, and non-implementation of collective agreements. However, rather than treating these as isolated administrative failures, the study interprets them as interconnected governance deficits that reproduce cyclical labour unrest. In this sense, structural violence is not only descriptive of injustice but also explanatory of how institutional neglect gradually transforms workplace grievances into broader challenges of state legitimacy and public service disruption.

Human Needs Theory, developed by John Burton, provides a more micro-level explanation by arguing that conflict emerges when fundamental human needs such as security, identity, recognition, and welfare are not satisfied. Although this theory offers valuable insight into the psychological and relational dimensions of conflict, it has been criticized for underplaying macro-structural and political-economic forces. This study addresses this gap by integrating Human Needs Theory with institutional analysis, arguing that workers' unmet needs in Nigeria are not merely individual grievances but outcomes of systemic governance failure. For example, demands for fair wages or job security are not only expressions of economic interest but also indicators of deeper deficits in recognition, dignity, and institutional trust. Thus, the theory is extended to show how repeated neglect of these needs escalates industrial disputes into broader peacebuilding challenges.

Taken together, these theories are not simply adopted in parallel; they are critically synthesized to develop a more context-sensitive analytical framework for understanding industrial conflict in Nigeria. This study advances existing theoretical applications by demonstrating that Conflict Theory explains power asymmetry in labour relations, Structural Violence Theory exposes the institutionalization of inequality, and Human Needs Theory reveals the psychosocial dimensions of worker grievance. However, the originality of this study lies in integrating these perspectives into a peacebuilding framework that reconceptualizes industrial conflict as a structural threat to national stability. In doing so, the study contributes not only to labour relations literature but also to peace and conflict scholarship by demonstrating that sustainable peace in Nigeria is inseparable from the reform of labour governance, institutional accountability, and the protection of workers' fundamental human needs.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a thematic literature review approach to examine industrial conflict as a challenge to peacebuilding in Nigeria. The choice of this method is informed by the need to critically engage with existing scholarly works, policy documents, and institutional reports in order to develop a deeper understanding of how industrial conflict shapes peacebuilding processes. Rather than relying on primary data, the study draws on existing knowledge to identify recurring themes, gaps, and areas of disagreement within the literature. The thematic review approach is particularly suitable for this study because industrial conflict is a complex social and institutional issue that cannot be fully understood through numerical analysis alone. It allows for a detailed interpretation of the relationships between labour unrest, governance, and peacebuilding within the Nigerian context. Data for the study are sourced from secondary materials, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, and reports from key institutions such as the Nigerian

government, labour unions (NLC, TUC, and ASUU), and international organizations like the ILO. Additional materials from academic conference papers and credible scholarly databases are also consulted to ensure depth, reliability, and contextual relevance.

Conceptual Clarification

Concept of Industrial Conflict

According to Lah & David (2025), industrial conflict refers to disagreements between employers and employees arising from issues such as wages, working conditions, job security, and the enforcement of previously reached agreements. It signifies a breakdown in the employment relationship and constitutes an important dimension of industrial relations. Such conflicts are often manifested through strikes, protests, lockouts, or other forms of industrial action, which serve as avenues for workers to express dissatisfaction and press for change. Although these conflicts can disrupt productivity and workplace harmony, they are also widely understood as an inherent feature of the differing interests that exist between labour and management.

Concept of Peacebuilding

According to Dogonyaro et al.(2026), Peacebuilding refers to the set of processes and actions aimed at preventing the emergence, recurrence, or continuation of conflict by addressing its root causes and strengthening the social, political, and institutional foundations of sustainable peace. It extends beyond the absence of violence to include efforts that promote justice, fairness, reconciliation, and effective governance. Kim et al. (2024) emphasized that peacebuilding involves rebuilding trust within society, strengthening key institutions such as government and the justice system, encouraging inclusive development, and establishing effective mechanisms for resolving disputes. It is both preventive and corrective in nature, focusing on long-term stability by tackling structural challenges such as inequality, weak governance, and social exclusion that often give rise to conflict.

Industrial Conflict in Nigeria: Nature and Patterns

Industrial conflict in Nigeria can be understood not merely as a recurring feature of labour relations, but as a manifestation of deeper contradictions within the country's governance and socio-economic structure. While Okonkwo (2025) highlights its expression through strikes, protests, and other industrial actions, this perspective, although useful in mapping its surface forms, tends to understate the structural conditions that make such conflicts persistent rather than exceptional. Building on this, industrial conflict is better interpreted as an outcome of unresolved tensions between state authority and labour expectations, particularly in contexts where wage determination, welfare provision, and collective bargaining agreements are inconsistently implemented. From this analytical standpoint, what appears as routine labour unrest is more critically understood as an indicator of institutional fragility, governance inconsistency, and strained state–society relations, all of which extend the implications of industrial conflict beyond the workplace into broader questions of governance stability, service delivery, and peacebuilding.

The nature of industrial conflict in Nigeria is fundamentally structural, reflecting enduring weaknesses in governance capacity and institutional coordination. Rather than emerging as isolated workplace disagreements, these conflicts are often rooted in the recurrent failure of government to fully implement agreements

reached with labour unions, a pattern that continually reactivates mistrust and triggers renewed industrial action. While studies such as Ogunode (2026) document the prolonged dispute between the Federal Government and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), particularly around issues of university funding, earned academic allowances, and institutional autonomy, the deeper concern lies in what this persistence reveals about policy credibility in the Nigerian public sector. The 2022 ASUU strike, which lasted approximately eight months, is therefore not only significant for its disruption of academic activities nationwide but also for what it indicates about the fragility of agreement enforcement mechanisms and the limited capacity of the state to sustain long-term policy commitments.

Similarly, in the health sector, Udeobasi et al. (2025) note that industrial conflict has become a recurring phenomenon driven by persistent grievances within the healthcare system. The Nigeria Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) has frequently embarked on strikes over issues such as unpaid salaries, poor working conditions, and inadequate healthcare infrastructure. In 2021 and 2023, resident doctors across the country engaged in prolonged industrial actions that significantly disrupted healthcare delivery in public hospitals, forcing patients to seek expensive private alternatives or endure limited access to care. Rather than being viewed only as episodic labour unrest, these incidents reveal deeper structural weaknesses in health sector governance, where chronic underinvestment and weak institutional responsiveness continue to reproduce cycles of conflict. Consequently, industrial conflict in this sector directly translates into reduced human welfare and widening inequalities in access to healthcare services.

Another important pattern in Nigeria's industrial relations system is the cyclical and self-reinforcing nature of strikes, where conflict tends to re-emerge even after formal agreements have been reached. This suggests that the challenge is not simply negotiation, but the persistent failure of implementation and enforcement mechanisms that sustain trust between the state and labour unions. For instance, Okolo et al. (2024) observe that recurring agreements between the Federal Government and labour bodies such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) over minimum wage adjustments often become sources of renewed tension due to delayed or uneven implementation across states. Although the 2019 national minimum wage agreement was initially regarded as a significant policy achievement, its partial compliance exposed the gap between policy declaration and practical execution. The resulting threats of renewed industrial action demonstrate how implementation deficits continually reproduce cycles of mistrust, thereby institutionalizing instability within Nigeria's labour relations system.

In the oil and gas sector, industrial conflict has also been shaped by the strategic importance of the industry to Nigeria's economic stability and fiscal sustainability. Unions such as the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) and the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) play a critical role in labour negotiations, where industrial disputes often extend beyond workplace concerns to become national economic issues. Odey (2025) notes that strikes or even threats of industrial action in this sector tend to generate immediate and wide-ranging consequences due to Nigeria's heavy dependence on oil revenue. However, beyond the observable outcomes such as fuel scarcity, price hikes, and economic disruptions,

these conflicts also reveal the vulnerability of the national economy to labour instability within a single critical sector. In this sense, industrial conflict in the oil and gas industry highlights not only labour grievances but also the fragility of economic governance structures that rely heavily on uninterrupted sectoral productivity.

Another observable pattern in Nigeria's industrial relations system is the tendency for disputes to escalate into prolonged shutdowns of essential public services, particularly when mediation mechanisms are weak or delayed. Rather than being quickly contained through effective negotiation structures, industrial disagreements often persist due to slow institutional responses and recurring breakdowns in dialogue between government and labour unions. Ayatse et al. (2025) highlight that repeated university strikes, such as those recorded in 2013, 2020, and 2022, demonstrate how unresolved disagreements can paralyze the education sector for extended periods. However, beyond the immediate disruption of academic calendars, these prolonged shutdowns also reveal deeper systemic consequences, including declining student confidence in public education, increased frustration among stakeholders, and the growing trend of brain drain as students seek more stable academic opportunities abroad. In this sense, the recurring nature of these strikes reflects not only labour unrest but also structural weaknesses in institutional conflict management within Nigeria's education system.

Across education, health, oil and gas, and general labour relations, the recurring nature of strikes reflects a consistent breakdown in policy implementation, weak enforcement of collective agreements, and limited institutional capacity for preventive conflict management. More importantly, the analysis reveals that industrial conflict operates simultaneously as a governance problem, a welfare issue, and a peacebuilding challenge, since its consequences extend beyond the workplace to affect human security, public trust, and national stability. The persistence of these conflicts therefore suggests that addressing industrial unrest in Nigeria requires more than reactive negotiation; it demands structural reforms in labour governance, improved accountability mechanisms, and a more proactive institutional framework capable of sustaining dialogue and preventing escalation. In this sense, industrial conflict should be understood not merely as a disruption to economic activity, but as a critical indicator of the broader fragility of state–society relations in Nigeria.

Labour Strikes and Governance in Nigeria

Labour strikes in Nigeria have become one of the most visible and recurring expressions of industrial conflict, with far-reaching implications for governance, public administration, and state legitimacy. While they are commonly defined as collective withdrawals of labour aimed at compelling employers often the government to address grievances over wages, working conditions, and the implementation of agreements, such a definition only captures their surface meaning. In the Nigerian context, strikes increasingly transcend workplace negotiation mechanisms and function as broader indicators of strained state–labour relations and weaknesses in governance responsiveness. Their persistence disrupts policy continuity, weakens public service delivery, and gradually erodes citizens' trust in state institutions, thereby raising deeper questions about institutional accountability and state capacity (Ololube, 2025).

One important dimension of labour strikes in Nigeria lies in their connection to persistent

weaknesses in governance, particularly in policy implementation. Although agreements are frequently reached between the government and labour unions, their execution is often inconsistent, delayed, or selectively applied, raising concerns about the credibility of the state as a negotiating actor. This pattern suggests that the problem is not merely the existence of agreements, but the governance culture surrounding compliance and enforcement. A notable example is the 2019 national minimum wage agreement, which set the wage at ₦30,000 but encountered resistance and delayed implementation across several state governments. The resulting tensions and repeated threats of industrial action by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) illustrate how implementation gaps can transform policy commitments into sources of renewed industrial conflict. Rather than being isolated administrative challenges, such breakdowns reflect deeper structural issues in intergovernmental coordination and public sector accountability that continually fuel labour unrest in Nigeria (Kuforiji & Oikhala, 2025).

Similarly, the education sector in Nigeria provides a clear illustration of how governance challenges translate into prolonged industrial disputes, particularly in the recurring conflicts between the Federal Government and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). Rather than viewing these disputes as isolated disagreements over working conditions, they reveal deeper tensions surrounding policy continuity, institutional trust, and government commitment to previously negotiated agreements. The 2022 ASUU strike, which lasted several months, was driven by unresolved issues such as university funding, the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), and stalled revitalization agreements. However, beyond these immediate triggers, the prolonged nature of the strike points to a recurring governance deficit in honoring collective agreements and sustaining policy implementation over time. The disruption of academic activities nationwide in this period therefore reflects not only labour unrest but also a broader crisis of credibility in the governance of Nigeria's higher education system (Okorie, 2026).

Labour strikes in Nigeria also reflect a largely reactive approach to governance in managing industrial relations, where responses are often triggered by disruption rather than guided by preventive institutional mechanisms. Instead of sustained engagement aimed at addressing structural causes of conflict, government interventions frequently emerge as crisis-management strategies designed to restore services after breakdowns have already occurred. This pattern raises concerns about the effectiveness of existing conflict resolution frameworks and their capacity to prevent escalation. In sectors such as health and education, negotiations are often intensified only after strikes have begun, suggesting a weak culture of anticipatory governance. The repeated industrial actions by the Nigeria Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) in 2021 and 2023 further illustrate this tendency, where government responses were largely reactive and came only after significant disruption to healthcare delivery had already taken place, thereby exposing systemic gaps in labour conflict management and institutional preparedness (Nzom, 2025; Nancy et al., 2025).

Furthermore, labour strikes in Nigeria have significant implications for public service delivery and administrative efficiency, both of which are central indicators of governance performance. Rather than functioning as isolated workplace disruptions, strikes in critical sectors such as health and education often expose the

fragility of state capacity to sustain essential services during periods of industrial tension. In the health sector, for instance, industrial actions by medical professionals can lead to partial or complete paralysis of public hospitals, thereby shifting the burden of care onto private facilities and limiting access for economically vulnerable citizens. This situation not only deepens inequality in healthcare access but also raises broader questions about the resilience of public health governance systems (Rulashe & Jam, 2025). Similarly, in the education sector, recurring strikes disrupt academic calendars, extend graduation timelines, and reduce institutional efficiency, thereby affecting both learning outcomes and long-term human capital development. Taken together, these disruptions weaken public confidence in state effectiveness and highlight how industrial conflict directly translates into governance deficits and reduced institutional legitimacy (Okonkwo, 2025).

Another important dimension of labour strikes in Nigeria is their implication for public trust and state legitimacy. While industrial actions are primarily negotiated between employers and employees, their consequences are largely borne by citizens who are not direct parties to the dispute. This creates a governance paradox in which public frustration is directed not only at the striking workers but also at the state, which is expected to ensure continuity of essential services. Over time, repeated disruptions contribute to a gradual erosion of trust in government institutions, as citizens begin to perceive the state as incapable of effectively managing labour relations and safeguarding public welfare. In more severe cases, prolonged strikes may extend beyond workplace grievances to generate wider social dissatisfaction, thereby heightening tensions between the state and civil society and reinforcing perceptions of institutional fragility (Cornell & Dukes, 2025).

Labour strikes in Nigeria also expose significant weaknesses in institutional mechanisms for conflict resolution. Although institutions such as the Ministry of Labour and Employment and the National Industrial Court are formally mandated to mediate and adjudicate industrial disputes, their effectiveness is often constrained by structural and operational limitations. These include weak enforcement capacity, political interference in labour negotiations, and slow arbitration processes that fail to respond to emerging tensions in a timely manner. In practice, this means that disputes are often allowed to escalate into full-scale strikes before meaningful intervention occurs, raising concerns about the preventive capacity of Nigeria's industrial relations framework and its broader implications for governance stability.

Industrial Conflict and Peacebuilding Challenges in Nigeria

Industrial conflict in Nigeria presents significant challenges to peacebuilding efforts, particularly because it repeatedly disrupts the social, institutional, and economic foundations required for sustainable peace. Peacebuilding, in its broadest sense, involves the creation of structures, relationships, and processes that prevent the recurrence of conflict while promoting justice, stability, and cooperation within society. However, recurring industrial disputes in Nigeria continue to weaken these foundations by generating instability in key public institutions and eroding trust between the state and its citizens (Olatayo, 2025).

One major peacebuilding challenge arising from industrial conflict is the disruption of essential social services, particularly in education and healthcare. For instance, prolonged strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), such as the 2022 nationwide strike, halted academic activities

across public universities for several months. This not only delayed academic progression but also created frustration among students and families, thereby generating social dissatisfaction (Nnagbo et al., 2025). Similarly, strikes by the Nigeria Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) in 2021 and 2023 led to significant disruptions in public healthcare delivery, limiting access to medical services and increasing public hardship. These disruptions weaken the state's capacity to provide basic services, which is a critical requirement for sustaining peace (Ekechukwu, 2025).

Another challenge is the erosion of institutional trust, which is central to peacebuilding. Frequent industrial conflicts signal to citizens that the government is either unwilling or unable to honour agreements with labour unions. This perception contributes to declining confidence in state institutions and weakens the legitimacy of governance structures. For example, repeated failures to fully implement agreements reached with labour unions, such as the 2019 minimum wage agreement, have led to continuous threats of strikes and renewed distrust between workers and government authorities. Over time, this weakens the social contract between the state and its citizens (Houeland, 2022).

Industrial conflict also contributes to the weakening of social cohesion and increased public frustration. While labour unions engage in strikes to demand better working conditions and rights, the general population often bears the consequences of disrupted services. Students experience prolonged academic delays, patients face limited access to healthcare, and economic activities are indirectly affected. This creates tension between different social groups and fosters resentment, which undermines collective trust and harmony key components of peacebuilding (Rulashe & Jam, 2025).

Industrial conflict exposes the limitations of conflict resolution and peacebuilding institutions in Nigeria. Institutions such as the Ministry of Labour and Employment, mediation committees, and the National Industrial Court are designed to manage labour disputes and prevent escalation. However, their interventions are often delayed or insufficient to prevent strikes. For example, many ASUU and NARD strikes proceed despite ongoing negotiations, indicating weaknesses in preventive diplomacy and institutional enforcement. This reflects a gap in Nigeria's peacebuilding architecture, where disputes are often managed reactively rather than through sustained preventive mechanisms (Jarikre, 2025).

In addition, industrial conflict contributes to the structural weakening of positive peace, as explained in peacebuilding theory. According to Johan Galtung's concept of positive peace, sustainable peace is achieved not merely through the absence of violence but through the presence of justice, equity, and strong institutions (Lasmana & Sripokangkul, 2024). In Nigeria, recurring industrial disputes reveal persistent inequalities in wages, working conditions, and resource allocation within the public sector. These structural injustices create a cycle of dissatisfaction that continuously undermines peacebuilding efforts (Esiere, 2026).

Findings

Year	Sector	Union/Actors	Key Grievances	Duration	Nature of Industrial Action	Negotiated Outcome	Policy/Implementation Response
2013	Education	Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU)	University funding, implementation of 2009 FG–ASUU Agreement	~5 months (July–Dec)	Nationwide university strike	FGN–ASUU agreement reached leading to suspension of strike	Partial implementation; establishment of monitoring committee with weak compliance
2020	Education	ASUU	IPPIS enrolment dispute, funding, university autonomy, revitalization funds	~9 months (Mar–Dec)	Nationwide strike	Conditional suspension after negotiations	Agreement on UTAS development and funding commitments; implementation remained partial
2021	Health	Nigerian Association of Resident Doctors (NARD)	Hazard allowance, salary arrears, COVID-19 welfare packages	Multiple intermittent strikes	Series of warning and total strikes	Series of MoUs signed with government	Partial payment of allowances; recurring non-implementation led to renewed disputes
2022	Education	ASUU	Revitalization funding, earned academic allowances, autonomy	~8 months (Feb–Oct)	Prolonged nationwide strike	Strike suspended following government intervention and court rulings	Partial concessions; enforcement of "no work, no pay" policy; limited implementation of agreements
2023	Health	NARD	Salary structure review, brain drain mitigation, working conditions	Multiple short strikes	Intermittent industrial actions	Temporary suspension after negotiations	Incremental wage adjustments and promises of structural reform; limited long-term compliance
2019	Labour (General)	Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Trade Union Congress (TUC)	National minimum wage increase	Industrial pressure and negotiations	Nationwide labour agitation and threats of strike	Adoption of ₦30,000 national minimum wage	Legislative approval through National Minimum Wage Act (2019); partial state-level compliance challenges

Fig. 3: Selected Major Industrial Strikes in Nigeria and their Negotiated Outcomes (2013-2023)

(Source: *Author's Conceptualization based on Reviewed Literature 2026*)

An examination of selected industrial strikes in Nigeria from 2013 to 2023 reveals a recurring and cyclical pattern of labour unrest across key sectors, particularly education, health, and the broader labour system. The findings suggest that such industrial actions are largely rooted in deep-seated structural challenges, notably insufficient sectoral funding, poor remuneration, inadequate welfare provisions, and the persistent failure of government authorities to fully honour and implement prior collective bargaining agreements with labour unions.

A salient pattern evident in Fig. 3 is the dominant role of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in sustaining prolonged industrial disputes within Nigeria's higher education sector. The strikes recorded in 2013, 2020, and 2022 reflect a recurrent cycle of contention largely anchored on issues of university funding, institutional autonomy, and the non-implementation of previously reached agreements. While these disputes frequently end in negotiated resolutions, such settlements are often marked by partial adherence and weak enforcement frameworks. This situation underscores a deeper systemic governance deficit within the tertiary education system, where policy commitments are inconsistently implemented, thereby reinforcing cycles of industrial instability.

Similarly, the health sector represented by the Nigerian Association of Resident Doctors

(NARD) has experienced intermittent yet recurring episodes of industrial action. The strikes recorded in 2021 and 2023 were largely triggered by issues such as delayed salary payments, poor working conditions, and inadequate welfare provisions. Although government interventions often resulted in the temporary suspension of these strikes, the persistence of the underlying grievances indicates that the responses have remained largely short-term and reactive, rather than addressing the structural deficiencies required for long-term transformation.

In the broader labour sector, the 2019 national minimum wage negotiation, spearheaded by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC), culminated in the formal adoption of a ₦30,000 minimum wage. Nevertheless, implementation across various sub-national governments has remained inconsistent, highlighting a continuing disconnect between policy formulation and effective execution. This implementation gap further exacerbates tensions within Nigeria's labour relations framework and underscores the fragility of compliance mechanisms in the system.

Discussion

This study has examined industrial conflict as a structural impediment to peacebuilding in Nigeria, employing a qualitative thematic review of existing literature. Drawing on the empirical patterns presented in Fig. 3, the findings reveal that industrial conflict is sustained by a recurring disconnect between negotiated agreements and their effective implementation. The repeated strike actions across the education, health, and broader labour sectors most notably involving ASUU, NARD, and the NLC underscore that industrial unrest in Nigeria is not isolated or episodic, but deeply systemic in nature. This further strengthens the argument that the persistence of industrial conflict is driven not only by workers' immediate demands, but more fundamentally by governance deficits that weaken the credibility and reliability of state commitments.

The findings further demonstrate that industrial conflict carries significant implications for public service delivery and human security, with direct consequences for peacebuilding outcomes. For example, the prolonged ASUU strikes and recurrent industrial actions by NARD, as highlighted in the study, illustrate how disruptions in education and healthcare systems generate widespread public frustration while simultaneously weakening societal resilience. These patterns suggest that industrial conflict transcends the boundaries of workplace disputes, evolving into a broader issue of social and systemic instability. In this context, the study advances the argument that labour unrest should be understood as a manifestation of structural instability with direct implications for peacebuilding, rather than being viewed merely as isolated sector-specific challenges.

In addition, the findings indicate a sustained erosion of institutional trust arising from recurrent industrial disputes and weak enforcement of policy commitments. The government's persistent inability to fully implement agreements, particularly those relating to minimum wage and broader sectoral reforms has contributed to a recurring cycle of mistrust between the state and organised labour. This observation aligns with the propositions of Structural Violence Theory, which underscores how systemic neglect and institutional inefficiencies produce conditions conducive to conflict. Connecting these theoretical insights with the empirical patterns identified in the study, it becomes evident that industrial conflict

in Nigeria is deeply rooted in institutional fragilities that weaken governance legitimacy and undermine social cohesion.

Another key insight emerging from the findings is the predominantly reactive nature of Nigeria's approach to industrial conflict management. The evidence suggests that government responses to labour disputes are largely crisis-induced, typically occurring only after strikes have already caused significant disruptions to public services. This pattern constrains the effectiveness of existing dispute resolution mechanisms and points to a deficiency in institutionalised preventive frameworks. From a peacebuilding perspective, this indicates that Nigeria's labour governance architecture is insufficiently equipped to anticipate and manage emerging grievances proactively, thereby enabling their escalation into recurrent industrial actions.

Importantly, this study makes a significant contribution to existing scholarship by explicitly situating industrial conflict within the broader discourse of peacebuilding in the Nigerian context. Whereas prior studies have largely approached labour disputes from economic, legal, or administrative perspectives, this research extends the analysis by embedding industrial conflict within the theoretical and practical concerns of peace and conflict studies. It argues that recurrent labour unrest undermines both negative peace, understood as the temporary absence of violence or disruption and positive peace, which encompasses justice, equity, and effective institutional performance. In doing so, the study positions industrial conflict as a substantial impediment to sustainable peacebuilding processes in Nigeria.

The discussion underscores that industrial conflict in Nigeria extends beyond a narrow labour relations concern, reflecting more profound structural and institutional deficiencies within the state system. The findings provide compelling evidence that, in the absence of meaningful reforms to address governance failures, strengthen implementation mechanisms, and institutionalise preventive conflict management frameworks, industrial disputes will persist and continue to undermine peacebuilding efforts. This therefore reinforces the imperative for a more holistic and integrated approach that aligns labour relations management with broader governance reforms and long-term peacebuilding objectives in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study has examined industrial conflict as a structural threat to peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria through a qualitative thematic review of existing literature. The analysis demonstrates that industrial conflict extends beyond a conventional labour relations issue, reflecting deeper governance inefficiencies, institutional weaknesses, and enduring socio-economic inequalities. Across key sectors such as education, health, and public administration, recurrent strike actions reveal a persistent pattern of unresolved grievances, weak policy implementation, and fragile state–labour relations. The study further establishes that industrial conflict significantly undermines peacebuilding processes by disrupting essential public services, eroding institutional trust, and weakening social cohesion. These disruptions have direct implications for human security and national stability, as citizens are continually exposed to the consequences of prolonged service interruptions in critical sectors such as healthcare and education. The persistence of these conflicts also highlights the limited effectiveness of existing institutional mechanisms in managing labour disputes in a preventive and sustainable manner. The study

concludes that industrial conflict in Nigeria poses a direct challenge to both negative and positive peace. While temporary settlements may restore short-term stability, the recurrence of underlying structural grievances sustains cycles of industrial unrest. Accordingly, the attainment of sustainable peace in Nigeria requires the strengthening of labour governance systems, full and consistent implementation of negotiated agreements, and the institutionalisation of robust, preventive conflict resolution mechanisms capable of addressing the root causes of industrial disputes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of labour relations management and strengthen peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria.

1. Government at all levels should ensure that agreements reached with labour unions are fully implemented and not delayed or ignored. This will help reduce repeated strikes, build trust, and improve relationships between workers and the state.
2. There should be a shift from reacting to strikes after they begin to preventing them before they happen. This can be done by creating regular dialogue between government and labour unions, as well as early warning systems to address issues before they escalate.
3. Government should increase and properly manage funding for key sectors like education and healthcare. Many of the conflicts in these areas come from long-standing problems such as poor infrastructure, low pay, and weak working conditions.
4. Institutions responsible for handling labour disputes, such as the Ministry of Labour and the National Industrial Court, should be strengthened so they can respond more effectively. Labour negotiations should also be more inclusive, fair, and focused on long-term stability rather than short-term solutions.

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