TOWARDS A HARMONIOUS LABOUR-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

A harmonious labour management relation is a necessary precondition for academic excellence in the university system. Experiences in the Nigerian University system have however shown that all is not well with industrial harmony. Studies have been conducted on Labour management relations in the Nigerian public sector with little attention on contemporary issues that shapes the relationship in the Nigeria Public Universities. This paper examines contemporary issues in labour-management relations as it relates to the Nigerian Public Universities setting. It anchored on Neo-liberalism as its framework of analysis. The paper relied on secondary sources of data which were analysed using content analysis. Findings reveal that prevailing political, economic and other intervening variables such as globalization, economic recession, dominance of western model of democracy, emerging technology have always shaped government responses to the industrial crises in the Nigerian University system. The paper recommends that university unions must take cognize of them in their negotiations with the government for industrial harmony to prevail.

Introduction

The Nigerian Public Universities have been a hot sport for industrial disputes for the past three decades. Premium Times (2018) reported that universities workers in Nigeria stay away from work for about 40months from 1999-2018.In yet another revelation, the Federal Ministry of Education (2003) reported that 30 months was loss to closure of universities in Nigeria from 1993-2003 due to strikes. This precarious situation does not augur well for academic excellence. A harmonious labour management relation is a necessary precondition for academic excellence in the university system. It enhances labour productivity as one of the critical means of improving performance in the education sector, achieving economic growth, enhancing living standards and quality of life. It also creates a peaceful working environment that is attractive to tolerance, dialogue and other alternative means of resolving industrial/labour disputes (Ladan, 2012).

Generally, incessant strikes have adverse effect on the economy. Anyawu (2014), listed the effects to include: the suspension of academic activities, and disruptions of academic calendar, conflicts between the government and trade unions, government and academics, corruption, laziness of students, increase in crimes in the society, degrading the academic profile of Nigeria, loss of jobs, inactive economic activities and delay in registration of graduate students with NYSC, just to mention few. Although these issues are exhaustive, it fails to paint out the underlining reasons for industrial disputes.

The major areas of contention between the Nigerian government and the recognized unions of universities namely the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU), and National Association of Technologists (NAAT) border much on issues of adequate funding, autonomy and conditions of service. Arikewuyo (2004) noted that while ASUU has been vehement on these issues, other staff unions have often focused more on welfare and salary of members, rather than on the issues of funding and autonomy. This obvious lack of cohesion among the unions has not been helpful to industrial harmony which need to be examine.

Much of the conflicts involving non-academic staff unions emanate from the collective agreements reached between the government and ASUU, which the non-academics regard as exclusionary. These have led to the popular parity conflict in the institutions (Okebukola, 2010). As a result, any dispute involving ASUU members automatically affects other members of the unions in the university resulting to disruption of academic programmes which has not augur well for academic excellence. In a bid to minimize the incidence of strikes in the university, the Nigerian governments have responded with policies to address the contending issues. These policies have been determined significantly by the prevailing

political, economic and other intervening variables and the university unions must take cognize of them in their negotiation with the government. Previous studies have not paid much attention to emerging issues that strain labour-management relations in the Nigerian Public Universities.

Against this background, the paper seeks to interrogate (i) Trends in Labour-Management Relations overtime (ii) the emerging trends in labour-management relations and the political and economic settings that have influenced such trends in the world (iii)the extent of the Implications of the identified trend for industrial relations in Nigerian Public Universities. The paper is structured thus: Section one is this introduction; Section two deals with perspectives on Labour Management Relations with focus on trends in labour-management relationsovertime; section three gives analysis of socio-economic and political contexts that have shaped the current trend in labour-management relations of countries; section four analyses the Nigerian universities' scenario and section five is the conclusion and recommendations.

Perspectives on Labour-Management Relations

Labour–Management Relations is a sub-theme of Industrial-Relations. Industrial Relations is traced to the work of Dunlop (1958). Although, studies have shown that issues of Labour-Management relations have existed from time immemorial. Beal and Begin(1982), were of the opinion that every human society and culture creates some kind of an industrial relations system between the people who head the organizations and direct its activities and those who do the work. This relationship has however evolved with time in accordance with the prevailing socio-political and economic settings of the time. Thus, Ikeanyibe and Onyishi(2010), opines that

> The relationship has variously manifested in history as that between slave and master of the various periods of slavery, that between the serf and the baron of feudal societies, that between the master and the workman of the industrial revolution era, and that between the employee and employer of the present day.

These historical manifestation of labour- management relations have been shaped by various events with labour beginning to gain more ground in the 19th century following the industrial revolutions in Europe, which to a great extent awoke the workman from his slumber. The writing of Marx and many other social thinkers greatly enhance labour-favourable policies geared towards annihilating the exploitation of labour by the owners of capital, thus culminating in the great socialist revolution and the labour union movements that dominated the politics and economic thinking of the greater part of 20th century (Ikeanyiba and Onyishi, 2010).During this period, labour had a field day and upper hand in negotiation because of the political philosophy of socialism that places much

emphasis on welfare of the work force. This epoch also provoked studies on workers in work place.

The discoveries in the study of human behaviour in work organization by the human relations theorist led by Elton Mayo and associates significantly contributed to the growth of industrial relations and the nature of labour-management relations. The Hawthorne Experiment which he pioneered led to the discovery that workers could no longer be regarded as socially isolated individuals acting independently of their work mates to maximize income. This goes contrary to the individualistic and over-rational emphasis of scientific management school who felt that individual workers could be related to their work like machines (Goodman, 1984). The human relations encourage pluralist view of industrial relations with emphasis on the tradition of bargaining and other democratic processes of resolving labour-management conflicts. This view was largely influence by the ideological, political and economic environment of individual countries (Ikeanyiba and Onyishi, 2010). It has more profound effects in countries with socialist ideals leading to more emphasis on group dynamics in organisations. This period also marks a turning point in labour movements as labour unions had a field day adopting all kinds of militancy in securing advantages over management even in core capitalists' countries, where efforts were made towards enacting labour-friendly policies. Events however, began to nose-dive in the 1980s due to changes in the international political system that culminated in the dismantling of the Old Soviet Union and other intervening variables that informs the theme that follows.

Neo-liberalism and Labour

This study adopted Neoliberalism as its framework of analysis. Neoliberalism presupposes that human well-being can best be served by freeing individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills. It also emphasizes strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to facilitate and create an environment appropriate to such practices. For instance, the state has to guarantee the quality and integrity of money, establish the military, defense, police, legal structures, and functions required to secure private property rights, and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets (Ball, 2012; Harvey, 2005; Morrow and Torres, 2000; Ochwa-Echel,2013). In line with this spirit of free market, many private concerns responded and venture into businesses in Nigeria especially in the early nineties.

In Nigeria for instance, the advent of neo-liberalism led to proliferation of many private sector organisations such as: First Bank of Nigeria, PZ Cussons, Unilever, John Holt, Cadbury, Nestlé Foods, Shell, Total, Chevron, Mobil, Julius Berger, and numerous others. (Akinwale, 2014). These organizations are among the key supporters of implementation of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. This policy has also led to the establishment of several Private Universities. However, labour unions especially, the Academic Staff Union of

Universities have expressed dissatisfaction over the implementation of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria especially as it relates to areas of funding to education, poor pay packages for the academia and unfair labour practices among others. Expectedly, workers' resistance against government policies preceded the official recognition of labour unions, given the 19th-century experience of strikes among different groups, including artisans, labourers, canoe-men, warders, clerks, and railway workers (Akinwale, 2014). The relevance of neoliberalism to this study is that it offers explanations as to why the Nigerian Government is paying lip services to funding of education, poor welfare packages for university workers and unfair labour practices which has continued to trigger industrial crises in the Nigerian ivory towers.

Trends in contemporary labour-management-Relations

An understanding of the prevailing and intervening environmental factors especially in the areas of politics and economy provides insight on emerging trends in labour-management relations. Ikeanyiba and Onyishi (2010), highlight some of the factors that have shaped the contemporary world order since the 1980 to include:

- Globalisation
- Collapse of the Soviet Union and post-cold war capitalist triumphalism
- Dominance of western model of democracy
- Unprecedented technological advancement
- And the persistent global economic recession

The implication of globalization is the increase in the presence of foreign entrepreneurs and international capitalists in the productive sector of many third world countries. This entails that labour-management relations will continue to be in the direction of curbing labour unions, as labour practices in the capitalist world will continue to be imported and imposed on the developing economies. Such practices like casualization are common and unionism is completely prohibited.

Democratic principles align with capitalism which emphasizes fair competition and effective operation of a free market economy. Democratic principles promote individualism rather than collectivism which the union stands for. Individualism will presuppose that individuals have the right to either belong or not to belong. By implication, the right of check off will have to stop thereby weakening the financial base of labour unions. For instance, the 2005 labour act in Nigeria abolished the right of unions to check off dues and made membership of unions optional. In many trade unions today, some members are not financial members.

Armstrong (2004) observes that the introduction of new technology may result in considerable changes to system and processes. As a result, different skills are required, new methods of workings are developed. The increasing use of technology

will generate numerous challenges for industrial relations in the areas of redundancy and retrenchment problems. Many organizations are now causalising or outsourcing workers based on technological needs and flexibility, adopting flat organizational structures among others. These practices promote individualism rather than individualism thereby eroding the spirit of collectivism in workers.

In the wake of the global economic recession of the 1980s, the west and their international financial institutions like the World Bank have continued to propound structural adjustment measures as panacea to the economic downturn. These economic measures emphasizes: the role of competitive markets, government responsibility to management and the importance of private rights and individual initiative (Ikeanyiba and Onyishi, 2010). The subsisting world political and economic settings encourage the overriding role of capitalist and neo-liberal ethos in both the internal and external activities of states. The implications of this on labour –management relations was summarized by Caves (1994) in Armstrong (2004) thus:

- The conduct of industrial relation is now highly regulated by legislative requirements;
- Employers have become freer to decide the basis on which they are to conduct their employee relations;
- Trade unions have to operate within a tightly regulatory environment that is arguably tighter than any other group in society.

Findings from the 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS) sponsored by the department of trade and industry and other agencies in the UK, further reinforced these trends as reveal by the following results:

- There has been a significant decline since 1990 in the number of union recognition agreements by employers;
- The level of overt industrial conflict was as low as 2% of the workplace surveyed and only 1% of strikes;
- There was increase in the use of independent contractors (casual workers);
- There was observed increase in the satisfaction of workers despite a relative dissatisfaction with the pay;
- Unionism in the workplace continues to decline, relationships in workplaces are reasonably good and job satisfaction is quite high except with regard to pay (Armstrong, 2004:702).

Despite the revelations of this survey, Industrial disharmony in the Nigerian Public Universities has been on the increase with daring implications which shall form the thrust of our next discussion.

Implications of Trends for Industrial Relations in the Nigerian Public Universities

Labour management relations in Nigeria have been influenced by the British colonial policies, the prevailing economic situation and military dictatorship. The first labour law of 1938 as well as the bulk of the

extant labour laws in Nigeria,were enacted before independence in 1960. Most of these pre-independence laws were derived from International Labour Conventions ratified on behalf of Nigeria by the colonial government and, enforced by means of Acts and military decrees (Yesufu, 2000:77). Although, the Nigerian government is said to have paid mare lip service to the principle of industry democracy, leading to confrontational state-Labour relations (Yesufu, 2000:511).

Following the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), in 1986 with its attendant market driven policies, the confrontation between labour and management have increased tremendously. The Federal Ministry of Education (2003) reported that 30 months was loss to closure of universities in Nigeria from 1993-2003 due to strikes. Also, the National Bureau of Statistics(NBS, 2008:270) reported that number of disputes resulting in strike increased from 28 in 2003 to 79 in 2007(Yesufu,2000).The recent report by the Premium Times also shows that universities workers stay away from work for about 40 months from 1999 to 2019.The recent strike action over the implementation of Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System(IPPIS) and other underlying issues was reported to be the longest ever strike embarked upon by ASUU(Businessday,2020).

In reaction to series of labour unrest that characterized the Obasanjo administration as a result of the privatization and related policies, a bill was introduced to reform the labour laws in Nigeria in 2004. This eventually culminated in the trade union act of 2005.The bill among others introduced the following reforms:

- The abolition of any trade union such as NLC as a singular federation of trade unions in the country;
- Abolition of automatic check-off dues of workers to their trade unions;
- Provision that a worker shall or shall not join a trade union or shall or shall not relinquish membership of a trade union
- Prohibition of any trade union from compelling any person who is not a member of its union to join strike…

In response to the provision of the 2005 trade union amendment act, many workers do not pay union membership dues as the right of compulsory check-off dues have been stopped by employers. This was the case at the University of Ilorin until its recent admission back to ASUU. The situation remains so at the Kogi state university where the government has proscribed union activities and in Federal university Lokoja where some members have defaulted in check-off due payment in recent times. As the situation persists, trade unions in the affected universities may not have enough funds to finance their activities.

In line with neo-liberal agenda, there have been sustained efforts since the 1998 to deregulate industrial relations in Nigeria. For instance, Decree No.43 of 1998 stipulated that the relevant trade unions should henceforth negotiate with each state

and local government over its terms and conditions of employment bearing in mind its ability to pay. Yar'adua's government sustained the decentralization agenda further when it insisted that members of ASUU and other trade unions from State Universities should go and negotiate with various state governments while those from various Federal Universities should go and negotiate with their various councils. This policy pronouncement was met with over three month strikes by the state universities in the south-East in 2010(Ikeanyiba and Onyishi, 2010). Recently, Governor Nasir El-Rufai (2017) declared as unlawful the strike embarked on by the Kaduna State University (KASU) branch of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). The state government stated that:

> The Kaduna State Government is neither affected nor bound by any dispute, disagreement or agreement ASUU may have with the Federal Government. As a sub-national entity, the Kaduna state government is separate from the federal government of Nigeria.

In continuation of its onslaught on trade unionism in public universities, the Kogi state government terminated the appointments of about 135 lecturers and went further to proscribed union activities in the state own institutions (Daily Post, 2017).The foregoing scenarios demonstrate efforts made by government to deregulate the activities and weaken the base of trade unions in public universities.

Conclusion

Contemporary industrial relations call for the need to take into cognizance political and economic settings which determine nature of industrial relations. Globalization with its attendant's neo-liberal agenda, western democracy and advancement in technological knowhow and its increased application to organizational processes are major world developments that have shaped industrial relations in recent times. And this has to some great extent affect industrial relations in public universities.

For a harmonious labour-management relations,giving the emerging scenarios,the paper recommends as follows:

- Industrial relations in the university should strive towards more diplomacy and lobbying through more democratic means.
- Leadership of labour unions in the university should exhibit transparency and productive leadership so as to attract more followership that is committed to payment of dues.
- Trade unions in the university must take into cognizance the economic setting of the environment in which they operate.
- Labour leadership in the university should not only be interested in their welfare alone but should also be concern with how productivity could be improved.

- Efforts should be geared towards political education of union members through Centre for Popular Education (CEPED).

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