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## **Trade Union Proliferation and Strike Actions in the Public Service in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the relationship between proliferation of trade unions and the frequent strike actions in the public service in Nigeria. The frequency of strike actions in Nigerian public service has become a very big source of worry, this is mainly because aside from the fact that strike action has become the only veritable weapon in the hands of public sector workers in Nigeria against the Government, it also has something to do with the number of trade unions existing in the public sector. In the public University system in Nigeria for instance, there are four trade unions and there is some kind of rivalry between these unions especially between the teaching staff union and the non-teaching staff unions. This explains why if any of the unions succeeds in gaining any form of concession from the Government the other unions will also demand such concessions for their members and that kind of situation has been a major source of strike actions in the public service in Nigeria. Aside from the unions in the public University system, there are other unions in the other tertiary institutions such as Polytechnics and Colleges of Education. The same situation applies in other sectors of the economy such as the health sector, oil sector and so forth. The strike that was recently embarked upon by the non-teaching staff unions in the public Universities in Nigeria which lasted three and half months over Earned Allowances and other demands is a typical case in point. This paper therefore concludes that the frequent strike actions witnessed in the public sector in Nigeria today is strongly associated with

proliferation of trade unions. There is need to merge some of the unions that could be merged especially those whose activities are related so as to reduce the number of trade unions to the barest minimum. This will obviously go a long way in reducing the frequency of strike actions in the public service in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Strike Action, Public Service, Trade Unions, Government, Public Sector.

### Introduction

There are possibilities of regular inter-union crises and inter federation of unions feuds in the industrial relations practice in Nigeria's public service as a result of proliferation of trade unions. Proliferation of unions could be very problematic in the Industrial Relations System (Omole, 1991; Abu, 2007). Nnonyelu (2000) in analyzing this phenomenon within the university system opines that inter-union struggle for supremacy and recognition is a strong weapon for strikes in Nigerian university system. The usual belligerent attitude, the "cat and mouse game" between ASUU, NASU, SSANU and NAATs is a recurring reason for strike and counter- strike (Nnonyelu, 2000). The issue of parity has gained prominence as to whether all categories of staff should have the same salary structure. While ASUU insists on a different salary scale for its members owing to what it considers its own special sphere, NASU, SSANU and NAATs insist that they should be entitled to the same allowances as academic staff (Nnonyelu, 2000). Any wage concession gained by one union makes others to make similar demands, a situation that results in industrial unrest. The on-going strike action by the Joint Health Workers Union in the health sector is partly because other health workers compare their remuneration with that of medical Doctors which instigates feelings of inequity. In as much as strike action has become the only weapon in the hands of trade unions in the public sector in getting the Government to the negotiating table, it is also clear that the frequency of strike actions has something to do with the large number of trade unions. Unions such as the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and other Professional Associations tend to use their professional expertise and skills to push for special wage concessions for their members using strike action as their biggest weapon (Nnonyelu, 2000). In the 1970s, the merger of trade unions that took place was mainly because of the problems associated with the existence of too many trade unions in the public service. Trade union proliferation does not encourage viable trade unionism rather what happens is that you have trade unions with very high nuisance value because every now and then there must be strike action. The link between trade union proliferation and incessant strike actions in the public service in Nigeria has not been given adequate attention by industrial relations scholars in Nigeria and that is the research gap this paper intends to fill. It is therefore necessary to examine the relationship between union proliferation and strike action in the Public Service in Nigeria. This study is significant in the sense that it draws attention to a major source of industrial conflict which manifests itself in the form of strike action in the public sector in Nigeria. Inadequate attention has been paid to trade union proliferation as a fundamental source of industrial conflict in Nigeria's public sector.

### Conceptual Clarifications

**Trade Union:** A trade union is an organization of workers who have come together to achieve common goals; such as protecting the integrity of its trade, improving safety standards, and attaining better wages, benefits ( such as vacation, healthcare and retirement), and working

conditions through the increased bargaining power wielded by the creation of a monopoly of the workers (Wikipedia, 2017). The trade union through its leadership bargains with the employer on behalf of union members (rank and file members), and negotiates labor contracts (collective bargaining) with employers. The most common purpose of these associations or unions is maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment. This may include negotiation of wages, work rules, complaint procedures, rules governing hiring, firing and promotion of workers, benefits, workplace safety and policies (Wikipedia, 2017).

Trade unions are workers' representatives. In other words, the unions function as organs and representatives of the workers in the industrial relations system. However, it is very important to mention that industrial relations can still come into play without a formal trade union so long as there are spokesmen and leaders chosen or emerging naturally from the ranks of the workers who represent the entire workers in negotiations with the employers (Anugwom, 2010). This is actually often the scenario in the enterprise level industrial relations. In the absence of the in-house union, the workers are usually represented by some leaders chosen or emerging naturally from their ranks. The trade union derives its importance essentially from the crucial role of labor in the productive process and the collective strength which the workers infuse into the unions. As a result, there is always the temptation to see the trade union or representatives of workers as the most important party in the industrial relations system (Anugwom, 2002; 2010).

The trade union whether seen as a permanent or temporary association of workers, is defined more strictly as having the function of regulating conditions of employment within the broader context of the industrial relations system. Besides this essential function, the trade union can include purposes other than the regulation of relations in its aims and objectives, such as the provision of benefits to members. This then implies that subject to some control on political activities, a trade union may use its funds for any lawful purpose authorized by its rules, at any time (Anugwom, 2002).

The strongest weapon of the trade unions or a critical source of their power derives from their ability to engage in work stoppages and other forms of industrial conflict which are negative to the smooth functioning of the industrial relations system and the economy in general. This ability often garners considerable bargaining latitude for the workers' representatives in the industrial relations system. The trade union also derives power from cohesion or its collective strength (Anugwom, 2002; 2010).

While the individual worker may not be able to challenge the might of the employer, the employers and government are usually wary of the collective strength of the trade union. More so, the more cohesive a trade union is, the stronger it is in terms of promoting the interests of its members. In this case, unions located in the more viable or critical sectors are often more powerful than the others (Anugwom, 2002; 2010). Moreover, economic base when defined as the totality of monetary resources available to a given trade union is equally important in gauging the strength of the union. A trade union with strong economic base might be able to engage in long drawn face-off with the employer by providing the wherewithal to pursue its cause and providing economic succor for the less privileged members of the union during the struggle (Anugwom, 2002; 2010).

Unions may organize a particular section of skilled workers (craft unionism), a cross-section of workers from various trades (general unionism), or attempt to organize all workers within a particular industry (industrial unionism). The agreements negotiated by a union are binding on

the rank and file members and the employer and in some cases on other non-member workers (Wikipedia, 2017). Trade unions traditionally have a constitution which details the governance of their bargaining unit and also have governance at various levels of government depending on the industry that binds them legally to their negotiations and functioning (Wikipedia, 2017).

Originating in Great Britain, trade unions became popular in many countries during the Industrial Revolution. Trade unions may be composed of individual workers, professionals, past workers, students, apprentices or the unemployed (Poole, 1986). Since the publication of the 'History of Trade Unionism' (1894) by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, the predominant historical view is that a trade union is a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment (Wikipedia, 2017).

The origins of trade unions can be traced back to 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain where the rapid expansion of industrial society then taking place, drew women, children and rural workers and immigrants into the workforce in large numbers and in new roles. This pool of unskilled and semi-skilled labor spontaneously organized in fits and starts throughout its beginnings, and would later be an important arena for the development of trade unions (Wikipedia, 2017; Kester, 2016; Poole, 1986). Trade unions have sometimes been seen as successors of the guilds of medieval Europe, though the relationship between the two is disputed, as the masters of the guilds employed workers (apprentice and journeymen) who were not allowed to organize (Wikipedia, 2017; Kester, 2016; Poole, 1986).

**Strike action:** Strike action, also called labor strike, or simply strike, is a work stoppage caused by the mass refusal of employees to work. A strike usually takes place in response to employee grievances. Strikes became common during the Industrial Revolution, when mass labor became important in factories and mines (Wikipedia, 2018). In most countries, strike actions were quickly made illegal as factory owners had far more power than workers. Most western countries partially legalized striking in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Wikipedia, 2018).

Strikes are sometimes used to pressure governments to change policies. Strike action only became a feature of the political landscape with the onset of the Industrial Revolution. For the first time in history, large numbers of people were members of the industrial working class; they lived in cities and exchanged their labor for payment. In 1842 the demands for fairer wages and conditions across many different industries finally exploded into the first modern general strike (Wikipedia, 2018).

The unpalatable side of industrial relations, and one with which the public associate unions is the strike. The strike indicates a breakdown of cordial relationship between labor and management and is usually the one aspect of industrial relations that invites the most negative commentary (Fashoyin, 2005). Yet the strike as distasteful as it is performs various useful functions for the two sides of industry. When a union calls out its members on strike, it is in the belief that the strike will exert pressure on the employer (and sometimes indirectly on government) to take a desired action, such as conceding a demand for improvement in terms of employment, or ameliorating an unsatisfactory working condition. All strikes, whether orthodox or political, fit into this description (Fashoyin, 2005).

Most strikes are undertaken by labor unions during collective bargaining as a last resort. The object of collective bargaining is for the employer and the union to come to an agreement over wages, benefits, and working condition. A collective bargaining agreement may include a clause which prohibits the union from striking during the term of the agreement, known as a "no-strike

clause” (Singh, 2013; Wikipedia, 2018). This explains why Fashoyin (2005) posited that most strikes involve attempts by either the union or management to change the bargaining position of the other party. When properly used, a strike can force management to concede the demand of the union. It can impose exorbitant costs and thereby induce them to reach agreement. Apart from the use of the strike by the workers to win substantive demands, a strike may be used to effect a change in the structure of bargaining, such as changing from enterprise to multi-employer bargaining, or vice versa (Fashoyin, 2005).

A strike may consist of workers refusing to attend work or picketing outside the workplace to prevent or dissuade people from working in their place or conducting business with their employer. Less frequently workers may occupy the workplace, but refuse either to do their jobs or to leave. This is known as sit-down strike (Wikipedia, 2018). Occasionally, workers decide to strike without sanction of a labor union, either because the union refuses to endorse such a tactic, or because the workers concerned are not unionized. Such strikes are often described as unofficial. Strikes without formal union authorization are also known as wildcat strikes. Strikes may be specific to a particular workplace, employer, or may encompass an entire industry, or every worker within a city or industry (Singh, 2013; Wikipedia, 2018).

Strikes that involve all workers or a number of large and important groups of workers, in a particular community or region are known as general strikes. Under some circumstances, strikes may take place in order to put pressure on the state or other authorities or may be a response to unsafe conditions in the workplace (Singh, 2013; Wikipedia, 2018).

### **Proliferation of Trade Unions and the Incessant Strike Actions in the Public Service in Nigeria: A Theoretical Review**

“Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains”, was the clarion call of Karl Marx and his comrade and collaborator, Friedrich Engels in ending the Communist Manifesto of 1848. That call was based on the enormity of the task before workers in the struggle between labor and capital, not just within the workplace but also in the general class struggle to overthrow the yoke of capital (Adewumi, 2007). Since capital is concentrated social power, in a context in which the worker has only his individual labor power, it is considered imperative for workers to be united in confronting the enormous power of capital (Adewumi, 2007). According to Lozovsky (1972), the only social force possessed by the workers is their numerical strength. This force, however, is impaired by the absence of unity. It is in the same vein that Flanders (1972) argues that the unity of workers makes the trade union a complete organization and constitutes the foundation of the union’s strength. The call for united labor front remains valid today as it was then, as a result of a number of factors both internal and external to the trade union movement. According to Adewumi (2007), the enormity of the task confronting Nigerian workers today is perhaps greater than those confronted by the workers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

If trade union unity is desirable, it is appropriate to ask, at this juncture, why it is difficult to achieve?. Although, the restructuring exercise that took place in the late 1970s was partly meant to address this issue, fractionalization within the different unions is a recurring issue (Abiodun, 1978; Adewumi, 2007). A union, such as the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), for example, has a long history of fractionalization. Divisions within the trade union movement as has been mentioned before are borne out of factors that are internal and external to the trade unions (Adewumi, 1997; Summonu, 1998). The internal factors arise out of the patterns of union

organization, which are reflected in the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of members. On the other hand, the external factors revolve around political and ideological differences and state manipulation (Summonu, 1998).

According to Flanders (1972), the internal factors relate to the nature of trade unions themselves. Workers from diverse backgrounds formed unions. As such, from the very beginning, unions exist to promote sectional interests; the interests of the section of the population which they happen to organize (Flanders, 1972). Various structural arrangements have been devised to give organizational effect to trade union membership. In terms of union structure, two contradictory forces have always been in contention. The first is the move towards breadth, unity and solidarity. The second tendency is towards parochialism. While the first tendency favors unionism, which is open and expansive, the latter encourages closed and restrictive unionism. It is the first type that the so-called general unions tend to promote as reflected in their slogan "trade unions for all" (Offiong, 1983; Otobo, 1986; Summonu, 1998). Adewumi (2007) argues that the paradox of this situation is that these tendencies are not unconnected with the realities of capitalist industry in which we are confronted with a variety of work contexts and work relations. Arising from this is the tendency for those involved to be conscious primarily of their immediate work environment, what they experience on a daily basis, their direct and personal relationships. In this context, workers easily identify themselves first and foremost as members of a given occupational category, an employing organization or of a particular industry (Adewumi, 2007).

Counterpoised against the above reality is the fact that most workers, manual or white collar, experience many common grievances such as job insecurity, lack of autonomy in work and unsatisfactory compensation and conditions of employment all of which should, ordinarily provoke a common feeling of opposition and antagonism to capital, the owners of capital and their agents (Adewumi, 1997; Summonu, 1998). By and large, the divisive tendencies that are internal to the trade union organization are expressed in their organizational boundaries and this shapes the lines of demarcation or jurisdictional scope among different unions (Adewumi, 2007). The above analysis adequately captures the situation in Nigeria where proliferation of unions is a fundamental issue. Each union tries to make wage demands based on the peculiarities of the occupation of its members. Any wage concession achieved by a particular union for its members makes other unions to equally make similar demands for its members. This kind of situation encourages labor unrest, because at every point in time, it is usually difficult not to find unions that are not on strike over wage related issues (Otobo, 1986). According to Adewumi (2007), the name trade union itself implies sectionalism which is about the inward looking unity of people who practice a common skill. As such, it would take a major motive force beyond the mere fact of a common membership of the working class to broaden organization beyond the limits of a specific occupational group. This is one of the greatest challenges to trade union unity (Adewumi, 2007).

The 'proliferation' of trade unions in the era before the restructuring exercise that took place in the late 1970s, can be explained in the light of the two tendencies earlier mentioned. The low level of development of the Nigerian economy and the fact that most union organizers survived on the number of unions organized by them and were interested in carving out exclusive territories or sphere of influence accounted for the smallness and proliferation (Otobo, 1986; Adwumi, 2007). Although the restructuring exercise resulted in significantly fewer unions, from

over 1,000 to 42, the divisive tendencies remain within the trade union movement (Adewumi, 2007).

The theoretical thrust of this paper is the relative deprivation theory. The first proponent of relative deprivation theory was Ted Robert Gurr (1970), subsequently; Wilson (1973), Morrison (1978) and Townsend (1979) also made their own valuable contributions to the development of relative deprivation theory. The theory argues that collective actions have their foundations among people who feel deprived of some goods and services. According to this approach individuals and groups who lack some goods, services and comfort are more likely to organize collectively to improve or defend their conditions. Gurr's hypothesis is that the potential for collective violence varies strongly with the intensity and scope of relative deprivation among members of a collectivity. According to Gurr (1970), just as frustration produces aggressive behavior on the part of an individual, so does relative deprivation predict collective violence by social groups. Those members of society who feel most frustrated and disgruntled by social and economic conditions are not necessarily the worst off in an objective sense (Morrison, 1978). Social scientists have long recognized that what is most significant is the way in which people perceive their situation (Schaefer, 2010).

Relative deprivation is the lack of resources to sustain the diet, life style, activities amenities that an individual or group are accustomed to or that are widely encouraged or approved in the society to which they belong. Measuring relative deprivation allows an objective comparison between the situation of the individual or group compared to the rest of society (Wikipedia, 2018).

It is a term used in the social sciences to describe feelings or measures of economic, political, or social deprivation that are relative rather than absolute. The concept of relative deprivation has important consequences for behavior and attitudes, including feelings of stress, political attitudes, and participation in collective action (Schaefer, 2010; Wikipedia, 2018). Social scientists, particularly political scientists and sociologists have cited 'relative deprivation' as a potential cause of social movements and deviance, leading in extreme situations to political violence such as rioting, terrorism, civil wars and other instances of social deviance such as crime (Schaefer, 2010; Wikipedia, 2018).

Deprivation theory means that people who are deprived of things deemed valuable in society, whether it is money, justice, status or privilege, join social movements with the hope of redressing their grievances. This is a starting point for looking at why people join social movements; however, it is even more important to look at relative deprivation theory from the perspective of the belief that people join social movements based on their evaluations of what they think they should have compared with what others have (Morrison, 1987; Schaefer, 2010; Wikipedia, 2018).

Feelings of deprivation are relative, as they come from a comparison to social norms that are not absolute and usually differ from time and place. This differentiates relative deprivation from objective deprivation which is a condition that applies to all underprivileged people. Some Sociologists, for instance, Karl Polanyi have argued that relative differences in economic wealth are more important than absolute deprivation, and that it is more significant in determining human quality of life (Wikipedia, 2018).

Relative deprivation theory is very useful in understanding the incessant strike actions by trade unions in the public service in Nigeria which are partly attributable to the proliferation of trade



unions. It is an undisputable fact that there are numerous trade unions operating in the public sector in Nigeria. In the University system for instance, there are four trade unions completely different from other unions found in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, there are also many other sectors where there are more than one trade union, for example, the oil sector, the health sector to mention but a few. These unions have different interests which they pursue since the primary mandate of every trade union is to fight for the interests of its members. As a result of the divergent nature of these interests, they are extremely difficult to harness making each union to pursue its own interests. This explains why each time a union gains concession from the Government based on its demands, other unions will immediately follow suit demanding for concession from government based on their own demands. The fact that strike action has become the only weapon in the hands of unions in the public sector in Nigeria against the Government has not helped matters. In the Nigerian public sector, the collective bargaining machinery is hardly used in determining work conditions of employees. On few occasions there have been negotiations between Government and trade unions and there were collective agreements, Government unfortunately did not keep to those agreements. Trade unions therefore take their fate in their own hands and easily resort to strike action as the only way to draw the attention of Government to their demands. Proliferation of trade unions therefore partly explains the high frequency of strike action in the public service in Nigeria.

### Conclusion

The frequency of strike action by trade unions in the public service in Nigeria has no doubt become a very big source of concern. This study found that while this problem is partly attributed to the character of successive Nigerian Governments that do not take workers seriously until they embark on industrial action; it is also noteworthy to realize that the problem is partly because of the large number of trade unions in the public sector. There is also some level of rivalry between trade unions especially those operating within the same industry or sector. This situation provides a fertile ground for inter-union crises. The consequences of the frequent strike actions embarked upon by trade unions in the public sector in Nigeria cannot be underestimated because of the negative impact on every aspect of our national life. For instance, the Joint Health Sector Unions are currently on strike and the negative impact of the strike on the health sector in Nigeria can only be imagined. There is therefore the need to begin to harmonize the activities of trade unions especially those found in the same sector or industry as a way of reducing the high frequency of strikes in the public sector in Nigeria.

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