



**INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS ENVIRONMENT IN NIGERIA:  
REVIEWING CONFLICT CAUSES AND TAXANOMIES  
AMONG PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES**

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**Abstract:**

The institutional and legal framework of bargaining that has been established in Nigeria can be seen as encapsulating the shape, rather than the substance, of meaningful industrial relations. As such, it closely corresponds to the broader disagreement existing in other areas of social life between the constitutional, legal, and normative mores inherited from the colonial government and real behavior patterns. The main issues that divide wage earners, on the one hand, from employers and government, on the other, have an existence far alienated from the recognized system of industrial relations, while the unions, the employers, and the government continue to give formal adherence to the system. As a response to the need to resolve issues between employers and their workers speedily, the Industrial Arbitration Panel [IAP] was established in 1976. The Act which was established vested the Panel with jurisdiction to hear and determine trade disputes between workers and employers, including inter and intra Union disputes in both private and public sectors of Nigeria. The paper seeks to review the industrial relations environment in Nigeria. It emphasizes on how conflict and its taxonomies shapes the behavior of public sector employees. The paper equally concludes that the causes of conflict among public sector

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employees is greatly influenced by the inter-play of institutional, political and legal factors within the industrial relations environment.

**Keywords:** industrial relations; conflict; taxanomies; public sector

## 1. Introduction

Generally, two regimes of industrial relations in Nigeria can be identified, the first being the Anglo-Saxon (colonial) model identified by Kilby (1969). This model, which was in operation from the colonial days through until the middle of the Civil War in 1968, was marked by the ideology of 'free collective bargaining' between the 'representatives of labour' and the 'representatives of management' (Collins, 1980:177). Sylvester (2012) opined that this policy is traced back to 18th century laissez-faire political economy and rests on concepts of free contract, free association, and the like. However, in the colonial context, it was heavily colored by 19th century British state paternalism. This ideology has it that social conditions in Nigeria tilt the scales so much in favor of the employer that there is need for control on the reputed freedom of the parties to agree on terms and conditions of employment. So far as the determination of wages was concerned, the Federal government during the late 1960s (like its colonial predecessors) laid great emphasis on their support for a system of free negotiation and collective bargaining between employer and employee (Cohen, 1974:181). The laissez-faire and the paternalist element in this ideology echoed dominant social ideologies in Nigeria during the transition from colonial to post-colonial rule.

The failure of the laissez-faire strategy to effectively subordinate labour ushered a second strategy known as the corporatist strategy in the midst of the civil war and was consummated in 1975. This model of industrial relations involved a more restrictive policy on trade unionism which started to be in force during the military regime of General Murtala Mohammed. Decree 1 of 1973 Wage Boards and Industrial Council provided for minimum wages to be set nationally and regionally as well as allowing for joint industrial councils. The structure of the unions was rationalized and the minimum number of persons required to form a trade union was increased from five to fifty (Collins, 1980:182). Not only were soldiers, policemen and certain key state financial and communications employees prohibited from joining unions, there was also a provision permitting extension of this ban to other establishments as required. Thus, it can be argued that this new model, which imposed greater control on the union, was greatly influenced by the civil war, and 1970 has been described as a period from which the Nigerian state started experiencing a steady process of militarization (see Peters, 1997 and Sabo & Muhammad, 2018). Since ASUU was formed in 1978, its existence and operations till date can arguably be said to have been shaped by the corporatist industrial policy of the state.

Militarization as used here refers to *“the process by which norms, institutions, and other aspects of society are penetrated, dominated and influenced by the military establishment.”* (Wallensteen, Galtung, and Carlos, 1985:111).

In general, the institutional and legal framework of bargaining that has been established in Nigeria can be seen as encapsulating the shape, rather than the substance, of meaningful industrial relations. As such, it closely corresponds to the broader disagreement existing in other areas of social life between the constitutional, legal, and normative *mores* inherited from the colonial government and real behavior patterns. The main issues that divide wage earners, on the one hand, from employers and government, on the other, have an existence far alienated from the recognized system of industrial relations, while the unions, the employers, and the government continue to give formal adherence to the system. As a response to the need to resolve issues between employers and their workers speedily, the Industrial Arbitration Panel [IAP] was established in 1976. The Act which established it vested the Panel with jurisdiction to hear and determine trade disputes between workers and employers, including inter and intra Union disputes in both private and public sectors of Nigeria. As a quasi-judicial agency, the IAP is expected to serve the need of stakeholders in both the private and public sector of the Nigerian economy, and maintain a peaceful business atmosphere in all sectors of the Nigerian economy. The IAP has a mission to maintain industrial relations and harmony between workers and employers from both public and private sectors to enhance the political and socio-economic development of workers and employers in various working environments in the Nation (IAP Nigeria, 2010)

## 2. Taxonomy of Conflict

According to Rapport (1994), human conflict can be classified on the basis of the nature of the participants; the issue involved (such as rights or privileges control over resources etc) or the means employed which may range from persuasive argument to physical annihilation.

Consequently, relating these classifications to the process of conflict resolution, a further classification can be made; for instance, distinction is made between exogenous and endogenous conflicts; symmetric and asymmetric conflicts and, issue-oriented and structure-oriented conflicts (Rapport, 1994).

In symmetric conflict, Rapport (1994) asserts that the participants are roughly similar systems and perceives themselves as such; for example, a conflict between a husband and wife, members of a particular departments or units within an organization. Hence, it is a conflict between two or more elements that are comparable in nature. On the other hand, asymmetric conflict occurs when the parties involved are dissimilar or have a negative perception on each other. For example, a revolt or a revolution is an example of asymmetric conflicts. Simply put, asymmetric conflict occurs when.

1. The system revolted against or perceives itself as defending an order or legitimacy; and
2. The insurgents perceive themselves as an instrument of social change or bringing a new system into being.

An issue-oriented conflict in Rapports (1994) view is resolved when the issue is settled without involving a change in the structure of either of the conflicting systems or in the super systems of which they are components. On the other hand, a structure-oriented conflict is not resolved unless the structure of either system or of the super system changes... Hence, a revolution is always a structure-oriented conflict. He also explains that endogenous conflict is one in which the conflicting systems are part of a larger system, which has its own mechanism in maintaining a steady state; while an exogenous conflict is one in which the conflicting systems are not within the control of a larger system. Rapport's (1994) taxonomy is of great value to this study especially with respect to our investigation into how industrial conflict within the Nigerian University system affects academic staffs' performance.

Deutch (1973:11-15) identifies six typologies of conflict namely vertical conflict, contingent conflict, displaced conflict, misattributed conflict, latent conflict and false conflict. Deutch (1973) further identifies some basic types of issues involved in a conflict such as control over resources, conflict over preference and nuisance, conflict over values and beliefs and conflict over the nature and relationship between two or more parties. These elements are important to our study especially in determining how the conflict over control of resources, values, beliefs and nature of relationship between the parties, constitute the major cause of industrial conflict between unions in the Nigerian Universities and the government. However, industrial conflicts according to Brandon (1998) exist whenever incompatible activities occur. His views corroborates with that of Adeyemi (2000) who view conflict as a total range of behaviours and attitudes that express oppositions and divergent orientation between industrial owners and managers on one hand, and working people and their organizations on the other hand. The conflict may be expressed by individuals alone or by groups, and it may be organized or unorganized (Bastone, 1979). According to Joseph (2007), industrial conflict may take the form of peaceful bargaining and grievance handling or it could be inform of boycott, political action, and restriction of output, sabotage, absenteeism and personnel turnover.

Hunts (1992) reports that there are five phases of industrial conflict, phase one is the initial tolerance stage when the bone of contention is noted by members of the group or union phase two involves when the members of the group or unions have noted the continued deviation from the expected behavior. Phase three occurs when there is verbal aggression especially when members of the unions or groups are becoming more annoyed and verbal messages become more hostile and more aggressive. Phase four is when there is physical aggression i.e. when the aggressive party attempts to deal with the issue on the opponent through physical combat. Phase five is the rejection stage when there is total silence and attempts are made to eliminate

the deviant behavior as such, he argued that the nature of industrial conflict is dependent upon the type of disagreement between two individuals or groups.

### **3. Causes of Conflict**

As conflict has different dimensions, the causes may range from a number of factors and issues. It can be political, Social or economic.

Political conflict emanates from power struggles within the political class, and often involves the manipulation of people who are inevitably less informed from the political struggle (IPCR 2002). In this situation, Rahul (2003) asserts that the elite and the politicians often influence Governmental policies for their selfish interest; this is usually done without consultation with the people of the society, hence it lead to creation of conflict between the masses and those who are perceived to be influential in the society.

According to Mark (2003) and Sabo, Muhammad & Abubakar (2018) economic causes of conflict may arise where the government economic policies have not sufficiently addressed poverty, under-development, and unemployment which are breeding ground for grievances and greed, hence, this manifest itself in the various strata of the Nigerian society, thus paving way for unhealthy economic rivalry and struggles as well as wealth accumulation at the expense of the nation. The interaction of the above factors is the background against which conflict emanate.

The social causes are normally closely linked to resource competition and contest for political power positions, ethnic differences are sometimes used for selfish interest, leading to heavy casualties among the masses that are not necessarily the beneficiaries of the economic gains of the coveted office.

Some of these conflicts according to Nakpodia (2004) emanated from governmental policies which do not seems to carry the populace along, but are tied to the interest of the elite, particularly the political class.

### **4. Perspectives on Industrial Conflict**

The liberal conflict school sees industrial conflict as a legitimate phenomenon. It recognizes the varying interest of capital and labour. Waterman (1990) remarks that this school sees industrial conflict as a phenomenon existing between two mutually competitive but mutuality dependent parties with the state, acting as a mediator and representative of the society as a whole. He argues that industrial conflict or strike should be treated as a social problem to be diagnosed and removed by the application of different combination of persuasion, concessions, reforms or legal force. The liberal conflict school accepts the capitalist order as given and does not question its legitimacy. It does not see conflict as fundamentally rooted in the capitalist system, but it rather explains it as normal product of industrial organization, devoid of class antagonism and struggle.

Kaufman (1990) in his bargaining model demonstrates the crucial role of limited information as the major cause of industrial conflict or strike. His views correspond with that of Thabo (1997) who attributes the causes of industrial conflict to imperfect information.

Knowles (1992) classical study on the other hand attempts to provide a comprehensive explanation of industrial conflict. Using time series data to examine the causes of industrial conflict in the spheres of union and management, He found out that strike may be generated by the worker's reaction not only to his conditions to work, but also, to the social order in general. Yet like other liberal conflict scholars, he did not see industrial conflict as a form of class struggle. He opines that strikes or industrial conflict in Britain were mostly spontaneous, lacking any attempt to fulfill some conscious economic or political grand strategy.

Based on the above assertion, he identified the causes of industrial conflict in terms of its immediate and remote (underlying) character. The immediate causes of industrial conflict are seen as multiple, various, and limitless in number. They reflect on such issues as basic questions of wages, working conditions, as well as frictional and solidarity causes. On the other hand, the underlying causes are ones that are not explicit and whose operation has to be inferred. Such causes can be grouped in to three general headings namely: bad social conditions, fatigue and frustrations in the industrial work and the inferiority of workers position (Knowles 1992). The relevance of Knowles work lies in its effort to distinguish the underlying causes of industrial conflict from their immediate and superficial causes. Another noteworthy work on industrial conflict and strike was carried out by Sabo, Adam & Muhammad (2018), Onyeoru (1994).

In his study, Onyeoru (1994) argues that industrial conflict has been going out of style or withering away. His assertion corroborates the works of Arthur and Hartman (1960) where they opine that the technological innovations have removed the complexities in our societies thereby making strikes to be in effective. Strikes have been withering away because; its causes have been diminishing over years. Three primary reasons why the strikes activity has been going out of style have been identified by Onyeoru (1994) first, employers have developed more sophisticated policies and more effective organizations. Secondly, the state or the government has become more prominent as an employer of labour, economic planner, provider of benefits and supervisor of industrial relations. Thirdly, the labour movement has been forsaking the use of strike in favor of broad political endeavors. Onyeoru (1994) argues that the increasing affluence and economic planning of industrial societies had, to a larger extent, given some level of satisfaction to worker's wants and has relieved them of the economic insecurities associated with pre-Keynesians era. He also believed that the embourgeoisement of the working class was helping to reduce industrial conflict activity, and a decline on economic in-quality was producing workers middle- class more and who resist any extended interruption of income. In the process, class antagonism and spontaneous inclinations towards industrial conflict have declined. Although, this analysis failed in its attempt to disprove the Marxian thesis that a class

struggle could bring a revolution, it nevertheless contributed to our understanding of how revolutionary zeal of exploited workers can be attenuated through the process of embourgeoisement. This argument therefore explained the importance of economic conditions of workers as a major factor in the occurrence of industrial conflict and strikes.

The issue of economic cycle, as a factor in the occurrence of industrial conflict was underscored by Ochoche (2002) who identified the state of labour market (especially, the amount of employment available) as the principal economic factor affecting a union behavior to strike. In his view, industrial conflict occurs during period of rising employment to enable unions secure wage increases and other benefits. But in periods of falling employment rate, especially with the current harsh realities facing most economies, there will be a sharp drop in industrial conflict since workers will be afraid to embark on strike, because the bargaining power of the employer is higher. However, it was observed that political events, government policies and the climate of public opinion have important influence on the timing of strikes and will therefore account on many deviations from the normal cyclical pattern.

Most industrial disputes are caused by social, psychological and economic forces which are non-cyclical in nature. It was maintained that grievance can be stored up for long periods and then, most likely boil over into strikes when business conditions promises that strikes may be successful. This justifies the specific contribution of Ochoche (2002) to the study of industrial conflict because he identified the conditions under which strikes or industrial conflict can successfully takes place.

The issue on whether economic factor alone or political factor playing decisive role in determining the occurrence of industrial conflict has become a lively debate on industrial conflict studies. Studies by Madubuike (2000:46), Garba (2001:64); Gilin (2004:17) using multiple regression approach gave primacy to economic factors as determinants of industrial conflict. These correspond to the works of Oyebade (2004:70) who observes that industrial conflict vary positively with economic prosperity.

Other studies such as Frank and Tilly (1994:66) have assigned more primacy to political and other factors from their findings. To them, workers engage in industrial conflict or go on strike only when there is organizational capacity for such action. This depends on the mobilization of the unions. Based on their view, strikes are in the short run, effort to bring pressure on the employers and governments, but in the long run, they serve as a mechanism through which unions struggle for membership in a nation's polity. Based on this, they believed that political and organizational factors are decisive predictors of strike actions. Dalton (2000) has presented an alternative conceptual framework to the debate on the economic versus political organizational model of strike. Based on the results of his study, the determinants of strikes or industrial conflict in Nigeria show that both the economic factor: such as unemployment and inflation, as well as the various non-economic factors, are significant in explaining variation in strikes activity.

The absence of collective bargaining and the rising expectations has been identified by Blum (1972:68-72) as other factors that cause industrial conflict and strike. Commenting on the crisis of rising expectations, he contends that:

*“Conflict is not always a by-product of the Marxian expectations that as things get worse and worse, the depressed and disadvantaged become more embittered until eventually, they revolt. If the history of western civilization has any lesson, it is somewhat the reverse of the Marxian nightmare or correlation between depression, despair and eventual revolution. On the contrary, when people who feel they are at the bottom or near the bottom of social hierarchy begin to improve their lot, and move up the ladder of the society, they then become more discontented and make more demands upon the society. This is the reason why strike is occurring in most countries.”*

The class conflict perspective on the other hand sees capital and labour as mutually antagonistic phenomenon. Hence, strike is seen as evidence of rising class consciousness and conflict (Waterman, 1998). This school of thought is a product of the Marxist theory of the state and it contends that the relations of production in a capitalist society are necessarily antagonistic or conflictual. This, it is argued derives from the exploitative and oppressive character of such relations. It further contends that the two principal classes in a capitalist society namely, the bourgeoisies (the oppressive class) and the proletariat (the exploited class) have diametrically opposed and irreconcilable fundamental interest. As a result, class conflict (struggle) becomes inevitable. This inevitability arises from the inherent contradiction between the economic situation and political status of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Volkow, 1999). This basic extradition of capitalism as observed by Ryndina and Chogez (2000:46) stems from the antithesis of social character of labour to private form of appropriation.

In other words, the private capitalist appropriation retards the progress of productive forces, and the drive to minimize profit derives from the basic law of capitalism, a law that induces capitalists to produce the greatest possible amount of surplus value through intensifying the exploitation of labour. The class conflict school therefore locates industrial conflict within the fundamental structure of the capitalist relations of productions (Hibbs, 2000), accordingly, it was argued that strike is a vital weapon of working class in pursuing its industrial objectives, and as such, it is an inescapable demonstration of antagonism to capitalist. In his attempt to criticize the liberal theory, Hibbs (2000) contends that it is erroneous to attribute the cause of industrial conflict to faulty communication or bad human relations, lack of integration of workers or technological factors among others. His finding shows that work relations within capitalism are an inevitable source of dispute and it is within this frame work that the roots of industrial conflict should be explained.



#### 4. Conclusions

The paper concludes that industrial conflict is conditioned on the total environment in which industrial relations takes place. Such significant environmental variables are the institution structure of bargaining, the organizational security, power resources and ideological positions held by each of the bargaining parties as well as the economic climate in which the bargaining takes place. Therefore, government and private sector employers should put in their best to tackle and minimize the conflict predictors prevalent in their industrial relations environment.

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