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Strike Culture in University and Industrial Workplaces in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria: An Industrial Relations Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Strikes have become a recurring feature of industrial relations in Nigeria, especially in the university system, where the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has embarked on long national strikes in 2018, 2020 and 2022. This study examined how university lecturers and industrial workers in Owerri, Imo State, explain the persistence of strikes, drawing on the pluralist perspective on industrial relations, Dunlop's industrial relations systems approach and the idea of psychological contract breach. A mixed-methods design was used. A 35-item questionnaire was completed by 250 respondents (100 ASUU members at Imo State University, 100 workers in unions affiliated to the Nigeria Labour Congress, and 50 factory workers in Naze), and 40 in-depth interviews were held. Most respondents agreed that strikes persist because the government does not honour agreements (84%), because of poor salaries and welfare (78%) and poor personnel management (81%), and because there is no trust between workers and management (87%); 89% agreed that strikes are the only language government understands. Most also agreed that strikes make students spend extra years in school (94%). Interviewees described strikes as a defensive response to agreements that are not implemented. The findings suggest that workers see strikes as a response to failures in collective bargaining and to broken commitments rather than as a habit. The paper argues that what is often called a "strike culture" is better understood as a low-trust cycle in which unimplemented agreements teach workers that only strikes bring results. It recommends timely and enforceable implementation of collective agreements, wider use of mediation before strikes, and more participatory personnel management.

Keywords: Industrial Relations; Strikes; Collective Bargaining; Psychological Contract; Trust; ASUU; Nigeria

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Introduction

Background to the Study

Industrial relations concern the relationships between employers, employees, trade unions and government, including the negotiation of wages and conditions of service and the resolution of disputes (Fajana, 2006). In Nigeria, both the university system and industry depend on stable industrial relations, yet both have experienced frequent strikes.

In the universities, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), the Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU) and the National Association of Academic Technologists (NAAT) have embarked on repeated strikes. ASUU's national strikes of 2018, 2020 and 2022 lasted about three, nine and eight months respectively, and centred on the implementation of the 2009 agreement with the Federal Government, the funding of universities and the payment platform for staff. Earlier strikes, including the long strike of 2013, turned on similar issues (Ani & Ojakorotu, 2018). In industry, workers organised under the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) have also used strikes over wages, delayed salaries and welfare.

Strikes disrupt academic calendars, delay students' graduation and reduce output in industry. A national survey of stakeholders found that poor funding of education and the failure of government to honour

agreements were among the most commonly perceived causes of ASUU strikes, and that students losing interest in school and missing opportunities were among the main perceived consequences (Aun, 2024). Their persistence, despite commissions, negotiations and legal institutions for resolving disputes, suggests that their causes have not been adequately addressed. This study therefore examines how university lecturers and industrial workers in Owerri, Imo State, explain the persistence of strikes.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria has established institutions for settling trade disputes. The Trade Disputes Act sets out a sequence of internal settlement, mediation, conciliation, arbitration by the Industrial Arbitration Panel and adjudication by the National Industrial Court of Nigeria (Trade Disputes Act, 2004). The Constitution (Third Alteration) Act 2010 made the National Industrial Court a superior court of record with jurisdiction over labour and employment matters. Nigeria has also ratified the International Labour Organization's Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98), which commits member states to encourage voluntary negotiation between employers and workers' organisations.

Even so, strikes in universities and industry continue, and agreements reached through negotiation are often followed by further disputes over their implementation. Much of the public discussion of strikes treats them as indiscipline by workers or as a "culture" of militancy. Less is known about how workers themselves explain their recourse to strikes, and few studies have compared the views of university staff and industrial workers in the same locality. Without an understanding of workers' own reasoning, measures to reduce strikes may focus on punishing strikers rather than on the conditions that make strikes seem necessary. This study addresses that gap in Owerri, Imo State.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how university lecturers and industrial workers in Owerri perceive the causes of strikes.
2. To examine their perceptions of the effects of strikes.
3. To identify measures that respondents' views suggest for improving industrial relations.

Significance of the Study

The study contributes in three ways. First, it brings together the views of university lecturers and industrial workers, two groups that are usually studied separately, in a single city. Second, it applies the idea of psychological contract breach, developed mainly in organisational behaviour, to the explanation of collective industrial action in Nigeria. Third, its findings may help government, employers and unions to design measures that address the failure of agreements rather than only the strikes that follow.

Literature Review

Industrial Relations and Collective Bargaining

An industrial relations system consists of the actors (employers, workers and their organisations, and government agencies), the context in which they operate, a shared ideology, and the body of rules that governs the workplace (Dunlop, 1958). Collective bargaining is the main process through which these rules are agreed. Its value depends not only on reaching agreement but on carrying agreements out. Fajana (2006) describes Nigerian industrial relations as strongly shaped by the state, which is both the largest employer and the regulator of labour relations. Where agreements are reached but not implemented, the rule-making process breaks down, and strikes become more likely.

Kochan et al. (1986) argued that industrial relations outcomes are shaped by the strategic choices of employers, unions and government at three levels: long-term strategy and policy making, collective bargaining and personnel policy, and the workplace. This framework is helpful in the Nigerian setting. Decisions about funding universities or reviewing wages are taken at the top level by government; agreements are negotiated at the middle level; and their effects are felt at the workplace, where lecturers

and workers experience whether promised changes have occurred. A failure at the top level, such as a decision not to fund an agreement, cannot easily be repaired by good relations at the workplace.

The Legal and Institutional Framework in Nigeria

Nigerian labour law provides several routes for settling disputes before a strike. Under the Trade Disputes Act (2004), parties are expected first to use any agreed internal procedure, then to attempt mediation, after which the Minister of Labour may appoint a conciliator or refer the dispute to the Industrial Arbitration Panel, with further reference to the National Industrial Court. The Trade Unions (Amendment) Act 2005 placed conditions on lawful strikes, including the exhaustion of dispute procedures and approval by a majority of members in a ballot. The Constitution (Third Alteration) Act 2010 strengthened the National Industrial Court by giving it the status of a superior court of record. The National Industrial Court Act 2006 had earlier set out the court's constitution and powers.

On paper, this framework offers many points at which disputes may be settled. In practice, the repeated strikes in the university system suggest that the framework is less effective when the dispute is not about the meaning of an agreement but about whether the government will provide the money to implement it. Legal procedures are better suited to settling disagreements over rights than to compelling a government to make budget choices. This may help to explain why unions see the strike as more effective than the legal route.

Strikes and Strike Culture

A strike is a collective and temporary withdrawal of labour by workers to press their demands on an employer. In this paper, "strike culture" refers to a situation in which strikes come to be expected as a routine part of the bargaining process rather than a last resort. The term is often used in Nigerian public debate to suggest that unions strike out of habit or militancy. Whether strikes reflect a culture of this kind, or a rational response to the failure of bargaining, is the question this study explores.

Economic theories of bargaining offer one view. Hicks (1932) argued that, if both sides had full knowledge of each other's position and of the likely result of a strike, they would agree without one, and that most strikes therefore arise from faulty negotiation and misjudgement. On this view, the strike is a costly mistake that better information and communication should prevent. Hicks also observed, however, that the occasional strike keeps the threat of a strike credible, and that a union that never strikes may lose its bargaining power. Both points are relevant to Nigeria. If government repeatedly fails to implement agreements, unions may conclude that only an actual strike, and not merely the threat of one, will produce results.

Sociological work has paid attention to the setting of strikes. Kerr and Siegel (1954) observed that workers in some industries, especially those living and working in close and separate communities, tended to strike more often than others. Their argument suggests that strike behaviour is shaped by the social organisation of work and by the solidarity of workers, not only by economic calculation. University lecturers, who share professional identities and a single national union, may fit this pattern.

Strikes in the Nigerian University System

Studies of ASUU strikes have documented both their causes and their effects. Ani and Ojakorotu (2018) traced the history of ASUU strikes with a focus on the 2013 strike and concluded that strikes had become the main tool for pressing the government to commit to the funding of universities, the payment of earned allowances and the provision of infrastructure. They also noted the costs: lectures, conferences and workshops are suspended and the quality of teaching and learning falls. Aun (2024), in a survey of 400 stakeholders across 12 public universities, found that poor budgetary allocation, the failure of government to honour long-term agreements and the revitalisation of universities were among the perceived causes of strikes, and that students losing interest in school, the rushing of academic programmes and missed opportunities were among the perceived consequences.

These studies agree that the central issue in university disputes is not simply pay but the implementation of agreements and the funding of the system. They also agree that students bear a large share of the costs. Few, however, have compared lecturers' views with those of workers in other sectors.

Trust, Personnel Management and Strikes

Personnel management covers recruitment, training, appraisal, reward and the welfare of workers. Fajana (2006) argues that the way employers manage these matters shapes trust between workers and management. Where workers are consulted, fairly rewarded and kept informed, disputes are more likely to be settled through negotiation; where they are not, strikes become more likely.

Fox (1974) gave a fuller account of the role of trust. He argued that relations at work can move in either a high-trust or a low-trust direction. When management treats workers as people who must be closely controlled and who cannot be relied upon, workers respond with distrust of their own, and each side's behaviour confirms the other's low opinion. Over time, this produces a low-trust spiral, in which formal rules, suspicion and conflict replace cooperation. This account suggests that strikes may become frequent not because workers prefer conflict but because each round of unkept promises lowers trust further.

Psychological Contracts and Broken Agreements

Research on psychological contracts offers a way of linking individual experience to collective action. Rousseau (1995) defined the psychological contract as an individual's beliefs about the terms of an exchange agreement between the individual and the organisation. Robinson and Rousseau (1994) found that the violation of such contracts was common rather than exceptional, and that it was associated with lower trust, lower satisfaction and a greater intention to leave. Morrison and Robinson (1997) distinguished between the perception that a promise has been broken (breach) and the emotional reaction of anger and betrayal that may follow (violation). They argued that the feeling of violation is stronger when the broken promise is seen as deliberate and unfair.

A collective agreement is a formal, written version of what workers believe they have been promised. When it is not implemented, workers may feel not only disappointed but betrayed. The longer the delay and the more often it is repeated, the stronger the sense of violation is likely to become. This view helps to explain why Nigerian workers so often describe strikes in moral terms, as self-defence against broken promises.

Empirical Gaps

The literature reviewed suggests that strikes in Nigeria are linked to the failure to implement agreements, poor funding and low trust. Three gaps remain. First, most studies of strikes focus either on the universities or on industry, not both. Second, few studies have asked workers themselves how they explain strikes. Third, the concepts of trust and psychological contract breach have seldom been applied to Nigerian strikes. The present study addresses these gaps, within the limits of a local, non-random sample.

Theoretical Framework

The Pluralist Perspective

The study is anchored on the pluralist perspective on industrial relations. The pluralist perspective holds that an organisation contains groups with different but legitimate interests, so that conflict between management and workers is normal; the task is to manage it through collective bargaining and agreed procedures rather than to suppress it (Fox, 1966). In this view, trade unions are a legitimate means of representing workers' interests, and strikes are one possible outcome of bargaining, not a sign of disorder in themselves. The pluralist view also implies that the stability of industrial relations depends on the willingness of both sides to keep agreements once they are reached.

Dunlop's Systems Approach

Dunlop's (1958) approach adds that industrial relations operate as a system of rules agreed among employers, workers and government, within a technical, market and power context and held together by a shared ideology. Rules include both substantive matters, such as wages and allowances, and procedures for making and changing them. When one actor, such as government, does not keep to the rules agreed, the system loses its shared basis, and the other actors may turn to pressure outside the agreed procedures.

Psychological Contract Theory

Psychological contract theory (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 1995) supplements these structural views by explaining how failures of the system are felt by individuals. A broken collective agreement is experienced as a broken promise, which damages trust and produces anger. Morrison and Robinson's (1997) model suggests that the sense of violation will be strongest when the breach is seen as deliberate and unjust, which is how many Nigerian workers describe the non-implementation of agreements.

A Critical Note

A radical or Marxist perspective would question the pluralist assumption that the parties bargain on roughly equal terms. Hyman (1975) argued that conflict in industrial relations reflects deep inequalities of power between capital and labour, and that procedures for managing conflict tend to favour the stronger side. In the Nigerian public sector, where the state is both employer and regulator (Fajana, 2006), this critique has some force: the same government that signs an agreement also controls the budget, the laws on strikes and the agencies that settle disputes. The present study uses the pluralist framework but recognises that the balance of power between the parties is unequal.

Application to the Study

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that strikes will become frequent when the bargaining system fails, for example when agreements are not implemented or when trust between the parties breaks down, and that repeated failures will be felt by workers as broken promises that justify collective action. The study examines whether workers' explanations of strikes are consistent with this view.

Methodology

Research Design

The study used a mixed-methods design, combining a questionnaire survey with in-depth interviews. The survey provided a broad picture of how respondents viewed the causes and effects of strikes, while the interviews allowed respondents to explain their reasoning in their own words.

Study Area

The study was carried out in Owerri, Imo State, at Imo State University (IMSU) and in manufacturing firms in Naze. Owerri is the capital of Imo State and the home of several tertiary institutions and public agencies, while Naze, on the outskirts of the city, hosts an industrial area. The two settings allowed the views of university staff and industrial workers in the same locality to be gathered.

Population and Sample

The population comprised members of ASUU at IMSU and workers in industrial establishments in Owerri. A sample of 250 respondents was drawn: 100 ASUU members, 100 workers in unions affiliated to the NLC, and 50 factory workers.

Instruments

Data were collected with a 35-item questionnaire covering respondents' background and their views on the causes and effects of strikes, and through 40 in-depth interviews with union members and one factory manager.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were told the purpose of the study. Quotations are reported without names, using only the respondent's role and length of service.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire data are presented as frequencies and percentages. Interview data were analysed thematically, with attention to how respondents described agreements, trust, management and the decision to strike.

Results

Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents (N = 250)

Variable	Frequency	%
ASUU members	100	40.0
NLC-affiliated workers	100	40.0
Factory workers	50	20.0
Male	165	66.0
Female	85	34.0
Served more than 10 years	142	56.8

Two-fifths of respondents were ASUU members, two-fifths were NLC-affiliated workers, and one-fifth were factory workers. Two-thirds were male, and more than half had served for more than ten years, which suggests that many respondents had lived through several rounds of disputes.

Perceived Causes of Strikes

Table 2. Perceived Causes of Strikes

Cause	Agree (%)
Government does not honour agreements	84
Poor salary and welfare	78
Poor personnel management	81
Strike is the only language government understands	89
No trust between workers and management	87

Most respondents attributed strikes to the failure of government to honour agreements, poor salaries and welfare, poor personnel management and a lack of trust. The highest level of agreement was with the statement that strike is the only language government understands.

Perceived Effects of Strikes

Table 3. Perceived Effects of Strikes

Effect	Agree (%)
Students spend extra years in school	94
Workers lose salary during strike	76
Nigeria loses foreign students	86

Respondents widely recognised the costs of strikes, both to students and to workers themselves, and to the international standing of Nigerian universities.

Qualitative Findings

Interviewees described strikes as a response to agreements that were not implemented. An ASUU member at IMSU with 25 years of service said: "We signed agreement in 2009. It is now 2026, 17 years after, nothing implemented. We have no choice but to strike."

Another ASUU member, with 12 years of service, contrasted the speed of government decisions on prices with the slowness of wage negotiations: "Government increases fuel price overnight, but salary takes 2 years to negotiate. Strike is self-defence."

A factory manager in Naze suggested that strikes in universities influence workers elsewhere: "We don't want strike. When our workers see ASUU striking and succeeding, they copy it."

Three themes run through these accounts. The first is the broken agreement: respondents measured the government's good faith by whether it had carried out what it signed. The second is unequal speed: government was seen as acting quickly when it suited it and slowly when workers' interests were at stake. The third is demonstration: the manager believed that visible strikes in one sector shaped expectations in another.

Discussion

Strikes as a Response to Failed Agreements

The findings show that respondents mainly attributed strikes to the failure of government to honour agreements, poor welfare, poor personnel management and a lack of trust between workers and management. These explanations are consistent with the pluralist view that conflict between management and workers is normal and must be managed through effective bargaining (Fox, 1966), and with Dunlop's (1958) view of industrial relations as a system of agreed rules. When agreements are signed but not implemented, the rule-making process loses credibility, and strikes come to be seen as the only effective means of pressure, a view held by 89% of respondents.

These findings agree with earlier Nigerian studies. Aun (2024) found that the failure of government to honour agreements was among the most widely perceived causes of ASUU strikes, and Ani and Ojakorotu (2018) concluded that strikes had become the main means of pressing government to keep its commitments to the universities. The present study adds that workers outside the university system, in NLC-affiliated unions and in factories, appear to share a similar view, although the data do not allow the groups to be compared formally.

Bargaining Failure and the Credibility of Threats

Hicks's (1932) bargaining theory helps to explain why respondents believed that only strikes work. If government regularly signs agreements and then fails to implement them, a union's threat to strike loses force unless it is carried out. Each strike that is followed by some concession teaches the union that strikes produce results, while each agreement left unimplemented teaches it that negotiation alone does not. The view that "strike is the only language government understands" is, in this sense, a lesson learned from experience rather than a cultural habit. It may still become self-reinforcing: if both sides come to

expect that nothing will happen without a strike, government may delay action until a strike begins, and unions may strike earlier.

Trust and the Low-Trust Spiral

The finding that 87% of respondents saw no trust between workers and management is consistent with Fox's (1974) account of low-trust relations. Where workers believe that management will not keep its word, they are less willing to accept assurances and more likely to insist on immediate action. Where management, in turn, sees unions as militant, it may be less willing to share information or make concessions. The interviewee who described strike as "self-defence" expressed this outlook clearly. Seen this way, what is often called a "strike culture" may be better understood as a low-trust cycle, in which each broken promise and each strike lowers trust further.

Broken Promises and Psychological Contract Violation

The interview accounts support an interpretation based on psychological contract theory. Lecturers presented strikes not as a preference but as a defensive response to agreements left unimplemented for many years. The ASUU member who counted the years since the 2009 agreement was describing what Robinson and Rousseau (1994) called contract violation: a promise that the employer was believed to have made and not kept. Morrison and Robinson (1997) argued that the sense of betrayal is strongest when the breach is seen as deliberate. The second interviewee's contrast between the speed of fuel price increases and the slowness of wage negotiations suggests exactly this belief, that government acts when it chooses to and that delay on agreements is therefore a choice. When many workers share this feeling, individual anger can become collective action through the union.

The State as Employer and Regulator

Fajana's (2006) observation that the Nigerian state is both employer and regulator helps to explain why disputes in the public universities so often centre on government's implementation of agreements. Hyman's (1975) critique adds that procedures for settling disputes are not neutral when one party controls both the money and the rules. Workers may see little point in following the Trade Disputes Act procedures to the end if the body that must ultimately pay is also the body that appoints conciliators and arbitrators. This may explain the limited faith that respondents placed in negotiation, even though the legal framework provides several routes to settlement.

Demonstration Effects across Sectors

The factory manager's remark suggests that strikes in one sector may shape expectations in others, although the present data cannot test this. If workers in Naze see that ASUU strikes produce concessions, they may conclude that strikes work for them too. This idea fits Kerr and Siegel's (1954) argument that strike behaviour is shaped by the social setting of work and by workers' perceptions of what is possible. It also suggests that the way government handles university disputes may have effects beyond the universities.

The Costs of Strikes

Respondents also recognised the costs of strikes: 94% agreed that strikes make students spend extra years in school, 86% that Nigeria loses foreign students, and 76% that workers lose salary during strikes. These findings agree with earlier studies that documented the disruption of academic calendars and the fall in the quality of teaching and learning (Ani & Ojakorotu, 2018; Aun, 2024). They suggest that workers see strikes as costly to themselves and others, which is consistent with the view that they are a response to failed bargaining rather than a habit. People do not usually choose a costly course of action out of mere habit when they believe a cheaper one would work.

Implications

Theoretical implications. The findings support a pluralist account of industrial conflict, extended by the concepts of trust and psychological contract violation. Together, these explain how a structural failure,

the non-implementation of agreements, becomes a personal and then a collective grievance. The findings also suggest that the label "strike culture" may hide more than it explains, because it locates the problem in workers' attitudes rather than in the failure of agreements.

Policy implications. If strikes arise mainly from unimplemented agreements, the most effective way to reduce them is to make agreements credible. Government should not sign agreements it cannot fund, and agreements that are signed should include timelines, budget provisions and a joint body to monitor implementation. The principle of voluntary collective bargaining set out in ILO Convention No. 98 depends on both sides keeping their commitments.

Practical implications. Employers and university managers can improve trust at the workplace through regular consultation, timely payment of salaries and clear communication about the progress of agreements. Unions, for their part, can make greater use of mediation and conciliation before declaring strikes, especially where the issue is the meaning of an agreement rather than its funding.

Limitations

The sample was drawn from one city and was not selected randomly, so the findings cannot be generalised to all Nigerian universities or industries. The data are perceptions, and the results are not broken down by respondent group, so differences between lecturers and industrial workers could not be examined. The study did not examine records of agreements, negotiations or strikes, and so could not compare workers' accounts with the documentary record. Future studies should compare groups formally and examine records of agreements and strikes alongside workers' views. It would also be useful to gather the views of government officials and employers, whose explanations of strikes may differ from those of workers.

Conclusion

University lecturers and industrial workers in Owerri largely explained strikes as a response to the non-implementation of agreements, poor welfare, poor personnel management and a lack of trust, rather than as indiscipline. They also recognised that strikes are costly to students, to the country and to themselves. These views are consistent with a pluralist account of industrial conflict, in which strikes become frequent when collective bargaining fails, and with the idea that broken agreements are experienced as broken promises. What is often called a strike culture may therefore be better understood as a low-trust cycle created by agreements that are signed but not kept. Breaking that cycle is likely to depend less on punishing strikes than on making agreements credible.

Recommendations

1. Government and employers should implement collective agreements promptly, set clear timelines for doing so and make budget provision for agreements before they are signed.
2. Each major agreement should be followed by a joint implementation committee of government or employer and union representatives, which should report publicly on progress at agreed intervals.
3. Existing institutions, including the Industrial Arbitration Panel and the National Industrial Court of Nigeria, should be used more fully, and mediation should be attempted before strikes are declared.
4. Employers should adopt more participatory personnel management, involving workers in decisions that affect them and paying salaries on time.
5. Personnel and human resource managers should be trained in negotiation and dispute resolution.
6. Future research should compare the views of different groups of workers using larger samples and statistical tests, and should include the views of government officials and employers.

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