

CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES BETWEEN LABOUR UNIONS AND AUTHORITIES IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Conflict resolution is seen as a peaceful solution to individuals and groups that are in conflict. It is an important tool for reduction of violence and destruction in our institutions and human society. Nigeria tertiary institutions have over the years witness incessant conflicts between labour unions and authorities in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The existence of conflicts in Nigerian institutions is a mere reflection of the heterogeneous structure of the outer society where the struggle for a fair share of the common good by individuals and groups is the order of the day. This paper therefore, examined conflict resolution strategies between labour unions and authorities in Nigerian tertiary institutions on how best the positive elements of conflict can be maximally exploited to the mutual benefits of both parties. This paper recommends that the application of the conflicts' resolution method between labour unions and authorities in tertiary institutions should be adopted and employing the right personalities in conflict resolution in tertiary institutions will be a great advantage.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution Strategies, Labour Unions, Authorities, Tertiary Institutions

Introduction

Conflict is a struggle over claims, values and scarce resources. It is inevitable among individuals and in organizations because of the nature of human beings who differ in value orientation, attitudes and levels of understanding. Conflicts have become part of human organizations the world over. Conflicts are reported daily at the family, regional and global levels. Conflict resolution is also the process of ending a dispute and reaching an agreement that satisfies all parties involved (Brown, 2023). Since conflict is an essential part of human being, effective conflict resolution is not designed to avoid disagreements. Olamipekun (2021) stresses that organizational conflict, or workplace conflict, is a state of discord caused by the actual or perceived opposite of needs, values and interests between people working together. Conflicts takes many forms in organizations.

Moreover, there are two major types of conflicts, internal and external. Internal conflicts occur between employees and their employers while external conflicts occur between employees and other bodies outside the organization such as the government (Abolo & Oguntoye, 2024). Examples of internal conflicts abound between management and their employees in the universities while external conflicts occur between the university unions and the federal government. External conflicts seem to be the crux of the crises in the universities and they occur at alarming rates due to the diverse nature of the parties involves. The various unions in the Nigerian tertiary institutions are always in constant conflict with either the management or the federal government. These unions are the Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASU) and the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU). The staff Union Polytechnics (ASUP), Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU) and Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Polytechnics (SSANIP). The unions in Colleges of Education are the College of Education Academic Staff Union (COEASU), Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU) and Senior Staff Union in Colleges of Education Nigeria (SSUCOEN).

Conflicts in tertiary institutions in Nigeria are usually more interesting and, in some ways, more complicated to resolve since the parties involved operate at a higher level of intellectual or bit. Besides being more aware of their rights and established legal provisions on matters at hand, such parties rest being outwitted especially

when in conflict with persons or groups outside the higher education system such as government (Okebukola, 2010). Conflict and conflict resolution in tertiary institutions in Nigeria is inevitable. The more employee's perceived organizational injustice and unfairness as arising from the poor management of conflict in the tertiary institutions in Nigeria, the more they reciprocate by exhibiting negative attitude to work.

Government, Staff Unions and Management of Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

As stated above, the prominent unions recognized within the tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Main objectives are to protect the welfare of their members. These unions have always been at loggerheads with both government and the authorities of institutions where they are established.

At the level of government, the agitations have been based on three major issues. These are:

- i. Conditions of service
- ii. Funding of the system
- iii. University autonomy

Arikewuyo in Okebukola (2010) notes 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. It should be noted that till date, only ASUU is perhaps the only union that has signed comprehensive agreements with governments on the issues of funding, autonomy and condition of service. Much of the conflicts involving non-academic staff unions emanate from the collective agreements reached between the government and ASSU, which the non-academics regard as exclusionary. These have led to the popular parity conflict in the tertiary institutions.

Causes of Conflict in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

In the contemporary times our educational institutions had witnessed incessant conflicts causes of these conflicts are traceable to the economic hardship and corruption in the wider society affecting the tertiary institutions. Student's crisis is becoming more rampant in the tertiary institution and the consequence has been to the detriment of teaching and learning atmosphere which usually involve the unions in the institutions.

The disagreement of lecturers over unpaid salary and entitlements, this factor had at one time or another led to strike in our tertiary institutions. Coupled with it is non-fulfillment of government promises to tertiary institutions workers which usually cause conflict between labour unions and tertiary institutions authorities.

Academic restructuring and programming without the student's consultation leads to conflicts. It has been observed that the causes of students' crisis in tertiary institutions include wide communication gap between the students and the school authority.

Labour Management Polarization: This is when conflict occurs as a result of disagreement in terms of staff welfare, discipline and conditions of service.

Overlapping or Ambiguous Responsibilities: This arises when roles are not clearly defined for staff and also, when an organization fails to fulfill the employees' demands.

Personality Clash: These are differences in attitudes, ability, goals, values which can lead to conflict, such differences normally result in power tussle.

In his own opinion, Abubakar (2023) observes that the causes of labour conflict are many and some are peculiar to respective organizations internally, and some other located externally. Thus, the causes of labour conflict are internal and external, both often influences one another. Internal sources of conflict include; style of management nature of physical environment of the work place; orientation or social consciousness of workers; condition of service, promotion system, cumbersomeness of grievances, dispute procedure. On the other hand, the external causes of conflict include: Government industrial and economic policies, nature of labour legislation; unpatriotic and unethical behavior of political class and host of others.

Utilization of Funds: It is expected on the basis of the agreement that funds internally generated and those released to the institutions will be used with accountability and responsibility. This is why it was agreed that each Government Council shall set up a monitoring committee with representation from the congregation, senate, staff unions and the students union. Labour unions commits itself to this task of ensuring accountability and transparency in the system and the optimal utilization of the resources available to the tertiary institutions. Hence, the monitoring is a source of conflict between union leaders and tertiary institution authorities.

Group Solidarity: This refers to the belief that what affects one member of one branch affects all other members and branches of the union. For instance, the union's demonstration are held in solidarity by all branches for various positions which the union feels strongly about. The recent 3-day warning strike embarked upon by ASUU members in federal universities in solidarity with their state counterparts illustrate this.

Impact of Conflicts on Tertiary Institutions staff Effectiveness

Staff effectiveness is the total input of workers in their duties (Peters, 2021). It involves the overall dexterity of staff in his duties to achieve the organizational goals. This includes the conduct of staff, their skills, expertise, morale, interpersonal relationships with colleagues and their ability abide with management policies without stress. Akinfenwa (2002) stressed that the work environment generally is a collectivity of various individuals and groups from different cultural, social, political and economic backgrounds. Therefore, the interests and expectations of employees in organizations is bound to differ. These variations in staff are expressed in their various responses to duties during conflicts. Workers collective interest is represented through expressions by the workers' trade unions like ASUU, ASUP, COEASU, NASU, SSANIP, SSANU and SSUCOEN in tertiary institutions.

In their own opinion, Abolo & Oguntoye (2014) observed that educational sub-sector, specifically tertiary institutions in Nigeria have been recording series of industrial unrests in the recent past. The effect of repeated and abrupt closure of schools due to industrial bluffs on academic programmes and the goals for which they were established can now believed to be questionable. Many academic calendars in the institutions have been disorganized with some academic sessions out rightly lost. Students' academic performances have comparatively taken a nose dive while various forms of examination malpractices are on the increase. The situation has assumed such an alarming dimension that the public now accuses the 'ivory towers' of turning out graduates that are ill-equipped in character to contribute to the growth and development of the nation.

Tertiary institutions are adversely affected by conflicts in terms of performance and wastage of scarce resources. Similarly, organizational conflicts like those of the Nigerian tertiary institutions to have positive effects especially in increasing innovativeness and improving the quality of decisions in the institutions. Coupled with it, conflicts build the spirit of teamwork and cooperation among the employees. This occurs especially when the staff of the labour union and management come together to resolve the conflict.

Conflict Resolution between Labour Unions and Authorities in Nigeria Tertiary Institution

Since conflict is an attendant feature of human interaction and cannot be eliminated; therefore, its proper resolution and transformation is important for progress in human society. This is why conflict resolution is one of the most important challenges of governance (Fatile, 2011). In resolving school conflicts, developing a constructive communication process and influential conflict negotiator's personality are very important. No doubt, schools cannot avoid experiencing one conflict or the other but a great deal of such conflict be managed and be guided from disrupting school effort towards obtaining its manifest and latest goal, if the conflicting parties are systematic in the way the communicate their grievances, situation of the conflict and their readiness to negotiate for peace and if the negotiator mediating the resolution process is of good personality (Barnidele, 2012).

Successful conflict resolution strategy in tertiary institutions usually involves fostering communication among disputes, problems solving, and drafting agreements that meet their underlying needs.

Labour union causes a distributive bargaining approach, which is an approach that is often used during conflicts. In distributive bargaining, the union usually bargains over such things as wages because its often a zero-sum-one side's gain results in another side's loss. In other words, if the union gets a wage increase for members, it means management will have less money to do other things. The goal in distributive bargaining is to win as much as one can for the union. The union does not care about the other side. Another negotiation tactic is integrative bargaining. The union can use this approach when multiple issues are on the table such as, wages, benefits, working condition and host of others. In this bargaining the union leaders develop an agreement that is mutually beneficial for union members and institution.

Joint consultation is another powerful tool for resolving conflict. Joint consultation is a meeting between the workers and their employers where the relationship is seen not as terms of bargaining strength but in terms of their worth and ability to contribute to the subject being discussed. Hence, discussion focuses on mutual interest to both sides. Subjects like welfare, canteen, safety, productivity and so on are discussed. It is perhaps the joint benefit to be derived from such meeting that makes joint consultation suitable for discussing problems in tertiary institutions.

Mediation is another important means. The Trade Disputes Act of 1976 and amended by the Trade Disputes (Amendment) Act of 1977. Section 3 of the Act, provides for a comprehensive process of dispute settlement, aside the internal procedure. Under this Act, if the attempt to settle the dispute enterprises own machinery and procedures fail, the party shall within 7 days meet together either by themselves or through their representatives under the presidency of a mediator to settle disputes amicably. Sometimes help is needed to push through an impasse in conflict resolution. The union can tap the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service for assistance. It will provide mediator to help with negotiations. A mediator will try to help the parties reach an agreement but will not impose a solution upon the parties.

Arbitration: The arbitration procedure is generally time consuming, but it has the advantage of encouraging parties. In the interim, the head of state or the minister of labor can make the arbitration obligatory and binding if the possibility of a strike action is considered familiar to public order or against the general interest, as in cases involving essential service.

Ndum & Okey (2013) argued that efficient and effective management of conflicts is fundamental to the development of any society. They maintain that managing conflict towards proactive and constructive action is the best approach in resolving conflict in tertiary institutions. When conflict is managed properly, so that a negative one, which would threaten the individual or group if conflict arises and are not managed properly, it will lead to delay of work, disinterest and lack of action and in extreme cases, it might lead to complete breakdown of the system.

Negotiation is another structured process of dialogue between conflicting parties about issues in which their opinions differ. Thus, negotiation is a direct process of dialogue and discussion taking place between at least two parties who are faced with a conflict situation or a dispute. By talking to each other a solution is achieved. Also, conciliation is a third party activity which covers intermediate efforts aimed at persuading the parties to a conflict to work towards peaceful solution. It involves facilitation.

Conclusion

The persistent conflicts in the Nigerian tertiary institution system with seemingly unending solutions have necessitated the tendency to evaluate the labour union activities and thereby ascertain the relevance of the strategies employed in settling dispute between labour union and hence, all parties involved, especially the labour union authorities in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Hence, all parties involved, especially the labour union and school authorities should make genuine efforts at effectively exploring the tools of conflict resolution in order to address the challenges of the tertiary institutions generally. Since conflicts are inevitable, all parties should adopt the best situational management strategies to avoid minimize conflict and avoid constant violence large. The knowledge of effective conflicts resolution mechanism would go a long way in

achieving peaceful resolutions of conflicts among labour union and authorities in tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were considered:

- i. The application of the right or effective conflict resolution method suitable to the situation arising from the personalities in conflict.
- ii. Employing the right personalities in conflict resolution in tertiary institutions.
- iii. The application of the conflict resolution methods between labour union and authorities should be adopted.
- iv. Labour unions should be part of decision making.

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