
An Exploratory Discourse on Labour Unrest and Industrial Peace

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory discourse is on labour unrest and industrial peace. It was necessitated by the damage done to the nation's economy by industrial unrest and the urgent need to address the phenomenon. The nation is confronted with a spill-over of bad governance and financial illiteracy in the public sector. The conflict between government and its workers often revolves around inability to pay salaries and fund institutions. A situation where those who teach the future generations are deprived of their living wages; and, political office holders and employers earn in millions officially and unofficially, and teachers earning pittance should be addressed. It is the collective responsibilities of employers and employees to seek to maintain a peaceful and harmonious relationship for improved productivity so as to sustain the nation's economic growth.

Keywords: Labour unrest; industrial peace; government; policies and discipline.

1. INTRODUCTION

Labor unrest is intimately connected to a loss of peace. Unrest (conflict) is said to be essential to life because life is incomplete without it [1]. As a result, labour unrest is not uncommon in any company (private or public). Workers in the public sector, for example, are always disenchanted with the Government over its handling of workers' welfare and the general penury facing the nation. Labour unrest is viewed as a situation where the economic depression in the country is exposing workers to a high level of economic hardship [2]. Further, it is contended that public sector workers who have been faced with economic realities may have seen unrest as a way of breaking loose from the shackles of economic deprivation. In Nigeria, some Government policies that are unfavourable to the workers tend to generate strike action and protest leading to labour unrest [3]. Therefore, it is important to understand that when Government formulates policies not favourable to labour unions, they are creating situations that will lead to labour unrest in the country, consequently, labour will take the following steps- (a) Labour Unions threaten the Government by issuing ultimatum which its demand will be met. Failure of the Government to oblige them may elicit strike or demonstration thereby leading to labour unrest. (b) Propaganda through the use of mass media and handbills is another dimension of labour unrest; here workers all over the Federation are notified of the latest development. (c) The use of protests, strikes and demonstrations is another dimension of labour unrest which could be peaceful or violent.

Labour unrest is one of the major impediments to development in Nigeria. This is due to the fact that no Nation can develop without human resources because they constitute and play very significant role in Nation building and development. The Nigerian case has been so pervasive that labour unrest extends to every situation when the Government takes major public policy decision that seems to affect the labour union and generally the masses without due consultation of labour congress; especially that which affects the social life of their members and welfare packages of the entire masses, specifically that which affect the socio-economic and political aspects.

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It is contended that most labour unions and workers are often very confrontational in their approach to issues which affect them as a group such as not fulfilling some of the employment contracts and as such, workers resort to anti-government posture which if care is not taken can lead to labour unrest or even tear the state apart [4,5].

However, industrial peace or harmony in a country is an important pre-requisite for its industrial development; it implies the existence of harmonious Industrial relations between the managements and workers. Stable industrial relations are the vital prerequisite for industrial progress. The interference of government in industrial relations through legal and administrative measures is quite common [6]. Discipline is very essential for a healthy industrial atmosphere and the achievement of organizational goals. Industrial discipline has its roots in individual dignity; need for recognition from others, a basic desire for security and a responsive horizontal and vertical relationship in the organisation. The existing gap here is that Government always perceives the workers as lazy, uncooperative individuals, who always hold secret labour meetings and plan drastic actions against Government and any other organization they consider a threat to their interest while on the other hand workers (labour unions) perceive the Government as exploiting them especially when they make policies concerning labour without labour consultations [7]. It is this perceptual basis arising from the Government and the workers that sometimes serve as the "brewing pot" of labour unrest. Hence the Nation tends to lose a great deal of financial and material resources [8].

1.1 Background of the Study

In Nigeria, labour unions have become very important agents of socio-economic transformation and class struggle which began from the colonial struggle and continued until the post-independence era [9]. In the later period, labour unions played significant role in the struggle against dictatorial military rule in the country. In the same vein under the current civilian dispensation, labour unions is at the forefront of the struggle against unpopular government policies such as deregulation of the oil sector, retrenchment of workers and refusal to honour agreement on wage increase. Nigeria is a third world country that has labour unions spread across the country. The unions are structured into industrial line and as at 1977, about 42 labour unions were recognized by the Government and allowed to contribute enormously to the development of economic, social, cultural and even political systems of the state. The role of these labour unions is usually regarded as people oriented because it tends to oppose Governmental policies and decisions not favourable to the masses through strike actions, protests etc., popularly described as labour unrest. However, in a multi ethnic democratic country like Nigeria, there exist different labour unions across the country. Some of these unions are National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Trade Union Congress (TUC), Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), Nigerian Union of Journalist (NUJ), Nigeria Primary School Teacher's Association (NPSTA), Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU), among others. These bodies give orders on strike-action, negotiate with the Government or its agency, and also announce the call-off of industrial actions when due.

1.2 Ways of Ending the Cycle of Incessant Strikes and Achieving Peace

Strikes, according to experts, impose costs not only on the affected sector, but on other sectors of the economy and society, including loss of productive output, technological growth and development. For a society that disdains statistics, putting a figure on the economic cost of strikes is difficult, but Babatunde Fashola, the Minister of Power, Works and Housing, provided a clue recently when he said that labour unrest by power and gas sectors workers cost government and employers about N7.73 billion between April 2014 and March 2016 [10].

Unfortunately, in Nigeria, we are confronted today with a spill-over of bad governance and financial illiteracy in the public sector. The conflict between government and its workers often revolves around inability to pay salaries and fund institutions as evidenced in many states; and failure by the government to fulfil compensation and funding obligations that it signed.

To achieve peace, government should consider the following:

First, Public finance and governance should be run with rationality. The Federal and State governments should stop creating universities and tertiary health institutions they cannot fund. A government that could not meet its obligations to 28 universities 10 years ago has since created about 12 new ones. Kano, Ondo, Ekiti with poor internally generated revenues have three universities each when they could not adequately fund one.

Secondly, the Federal Government should consider rationalising the mushroom universities which are politically motivated by past administrations through mergers, with some becoming campuses of older universities.

Thirdly, safety at the workplace is the responsibility of all, the employers of labour should ensure the provision of safety wears and safe work environment as accident in the workplace affects productivity.

2. DISCIPLINE

Industrial peace and harmony play crucial roles in organisational productivity, economic progress and nation building. Improving productivity and work ethics in the public and private sectors could sustain Industrial peace and harmony. It is the collective responsibilities of employers and employees to seek to maintain a peaceful and harmonious relationship for improved productivity so as to sustain business growth and profitability. Workplace conflicts have causative factors, which must be identified and constructively managed. We note that organization's aims are not achieved where productivity falls, and workers quests for better working conditions are unattainable where work organizations are unproductive. Employees are organization's most productive assets and must be regarded as partners and managed to understand the aligning nature of personal aspirations with the organizational aims. Employees should demonstrate their partnership with the employers in matters that relate to business sustenance; and the employers should show commitment to the welfare of the employees at all levels. However, where conflicts of interest arise in the course of employers/employees relationship, resolution of such conflicts should be pursued with understanding and effective communication/ feedback between employers and employees. This is imperative as poor communication could be disastrous in business, employment, labour and social relations.

Industrial peace or harmony in a country is an important pre-requisite for its industrial development. It implies the existence of harmonious Industrial relations between the managements and workers. Hence, stable industrial relations are the vital prerequisite for industrial progress. Discipline is very essential for a healthy industrial atmosphere and the achievement of organizational goals. An acceptable performance from subordinates in an organization depends on their willingness to carry out instructions and the orders of their superiors, to abide by the rules of conduct, and maintain satisfactory standards of work.

Until human nature attains greater perfection, the fullest measure of individual freedom of action can be realized only within the frame work of an expressed discipline. In social situations, this takes the form of laws; in industries, it is manifested as standards. Fairness in securing conformity in both instances is wholly consistent with our democratic approach. The term discipline can be interpreted variously, which connotes a state of order in an organization. It is sometimes understood as a sort of check or restraint on the liberty of an individual. It is a training which rectifies, modifies, and strengthens or improves individual behaviour. It is adherence to established norms and regulations. It also corrects improper conduct and this acts as a force leading to the observance of rules and regulations. Thus, it is essentially an attitude of the mind, a product of culture and environment and requires, along with legislative sanction, persuasion on a moral plane.

Formal and informal rules and regulations govern the relationship between a manager and workers. The formal rules and regulations, including work-related behaviour rules, are codified in the company's manual or standing orders. Informal rules on the other hand, are evolved from convention and culture in the organization [11].

Indiscipline results in chaos, confusion and diffusion of results. It give rise to strikes, 'go-slows', absenteeism, leading to loss of production, profits and wages. There is no hard and fast rule to deal

with indiscipline. Counselling and educating the employee are added means that can be effectively and positively used to check indiscipline [12]. If the management also adopts strategies like job enrichment to develop commitment to work, sets up effective grievance handling machinery, evolves proper induction and training programmes for new entrants and develops a system which provides sufficient scope and opportunity to develop employee potential, it would leave very little room for the growth of grievances which could lead to indiscipline.

2.1 Causes of Indiscipline

When individual goals eclipse organizational goals or when equilibrium between the capacity, the interests and opportunity for an individual is destroyed, the disharmony results in conflict and frustrations. These may be realized by aggressive attitudes towards management. Non-committed workmen invariably develop apathy to work.

Theoretical causes of indiscipline that appear in the scene of industrial life are:

- a) non-placement of right man for the right job in the right time according to individuals qualifications, experience and training.
- b) undesirable in-human dealings and behaviour of senior officers towards their subordinates.
- c) biased evaluation of persons by executives and favouritism
- d) lack of upward communication system, which prevents expression of thoughts, feeling and reactions of employees to the competent authority or top management.
- e) lack of commitment to work, to the organization, to the industrial way of life.
- f) Improper supervision and absence of good supervisors for appraisal of subordinates performance critically.
- g) lack of properly drawn rules and regulations which are practicable with code of behaviour.
- h) adoption of divide and rule policy of the management causing destruction of team spirit among the employees.
- i) illiteracy and low intellectual level of workers as well as social back ground.
- j) workers reactions to rigidity and multiplicity of rules and their proper interpretations.
- k) workers personal problems like fears, apprehensions, hopes, aspirations, lack of confidence and their adoptability with supervisors and colleagues.
- l) intolerable bad working conditions and inborn tendencies to flout rules.
- m) absence of enlightened sympathetic and modern scientific management system,
- n) discrimination based on caste, colour, creed, sex, language, reasons and provincialism in matters of selection, transfer, promotion, placement and imposing penalties by the management.
- o) undesirable management practices , policies and activities to control workers that are employed as spies, undue harassment of workers to create fear, complex and autocratic leadership of the management towards their subordinates.
- p) psychological and social reasons like misunderstanding, rivalry, distrust among workers and supervisors, apathy on the part of the management.

There are other salient reasons for the recurring industrial unrests in the education sector like overcrowded classrooms, among others. Thus, ignoble as industrial unrest in the education sector are, they are often driven by noble ideals.

2.2 Impact of Labour unrest on Nigerian Education Sector

Labour unrest affects the students' education plan, the students' performance in their studies and examinations. It also leads to frustration among students, some of whom end up giving up formal education completely. Labour unrest thus fuels school drop-outs in a country where the number of out of school kids are already very high [13].

Furthermore, labour unrest propels brain drain and its consequences: Nigerian school children or wards travelling to neighbouring countries to obtain certificates from universities and colleges that are sometimes of less quality than what obtains here in Nigeria [14]. Equally affected are teachers, including university teachers, some of who either leave for abroad in quest for greener pastures, or leave the education sector entirely (even after years of training to work in the education sector).

Again, the parents or guardians are not left out of the negative impact of the industrial actions, it affects their emotional stability, disorganises their set-plans, and pushes many to shopping schools and shovelling their wards from one school to another, in quest for education [15]. Consequently, it affects the country in a very great way, as it hinders the country's education sector and the nation's overall development [10]. The collateral effect is so immense that nothing but outright stoppage of such is needed.

2.3 Approaches to Maintaining Discipline

Indiscipline could be dealt with using formal and informal systems. In the case of using informal system, either a transfer, an informal warning, or a non-hierarchical status demotion is the remedy to correct indiscipline. The informal approach is undesirable and creates bitterness and has adverse effects on employee's morale and motivation.

i. **The human relations approach:** It calls for treating an employee as a human being and considers the totality of his personality and behaviour while correcting fault that contribute to indiscipline. His total personality is considered, as is his interaction with his colleagues, his family background, etc. and then appropriate punishment for misconduct is awarded.

ii. **The leadership approach:** In this case, every supervisor or manager has to guide, control, train, develop, lead a group and administer the rules for discipline.

2.4 Features of Code of Discipline

(i). It prohibits strikes and lock outs without proper notice and also prohibits intimidation, victimization, go-slow tactics, violence, coercion or instigation by both parties.

(ii). There shall be no one-sided action in any matter by either party.

(iii). The existing machinery for the settlement of disputes should be followed and the awards and agreements should be implemented without any delay.

(iv). A common grievance procedure should be provided for after a careful consideration and negotiations for the settlement of disputes.

(v). Both the parties should attempt to avoid any action which may disturb industrial peace in the industry.

(vi). The employers will not increase workloads without prior agreement with the workers.

(vii). The employers will provide full facilities for unfettered growth of trade unions. However, unfair labour practices should be discouraged.

(viii). Prompt action should be taken against those officers who instigate the workers for the breach of its discipline.

(ix). The workers will not indulge in any trade union activity during working hours.

(x). The workers will implement their part of awards and settlements promptly and will take action against those office bearers of the union who are responsible for the breach of code.

2.5 Core Measures of Discipline

For the maintenance of effective discipline, the contributory causes of indiscipline should be removed and favourable conditions be created. The following measures should be adopted in maintaining discipline.

Condonation of past offenses: The real purpose of disciplinary action is to prevent the recurrence of future offenses of similar nature. As far as the past offenses are concerned, they should be allowed to be condoned after a prescribed time limit. An opportunity should be given to employees to rectify their faults. The employer should always try to seek cooperation from the employees.

Agreement as to Disciplinary Rules: A code of discipline should be prepared and adopted with the approval of employees. Unilateral action should not be taken by the management in framing the rules and regulations for maintaining discipline. A code of discipline, duly approved by the representative of the trade unions and by the management, can avoid certain unhappy consequences and impose self-discipline.

2.6 Careful Discipline of Employee Relations

The discipline of employee relations encompasses a broad range of concepts, transactions, practices, behaviours and objectives arising out of the relationship between an employer organization and its employees, and among the employees themselves. Its foundations, if carefully laid and maintained, will support and guide myriad decisions that human resources management will make in the course of recruiting, screening, hiring, training, compensating, assessing, coaching, counselling, disciplining and terminating employees. For a resource that broadly discusses the practice of employee relations, Employee relations involve the behaviour of two or more individuals, and the effects of the organization's rules and culture, bureaucratic structures, and external influences and pressures. While it is impossible to anticipate each unique combination of factors, human resources professionals who understand the basic concepts will know how to identify needs, spot issues and formulate solutions. Basic employee relations concepts include equal employment opportunity, fairness and consistency in the treatment of employees, effective communication between management and employees, documentation of employment actions, recordkeeping as required by law and practice, complaint resolution processes, managerial and employee training, and "best employment practices." Employee relations also encompasses the organization's overall approach to maintaining a positive, productive and cohesive work environment within the organization's particular business model and corporate culture. Additionally, employee relations is concerned with anticipating, addressing and diffusing workplace issues that may interfere with the organization's business objectives, and with resolving disputes between and among management and employees. The organization's employee relations model supports the policies and practices governing workplace rules and conduct, and guides its compliance with the scheme of Federal, State and Local laws and regulations governing and impacting the employment relationship.

2.7 Suggestions for Implementation

There is urgent need to address the issue of teachers' (primary, secondary and tertiary) emoluments. A situation where those who teach the future generations are deprived of living wages is simply condemnable. Hence, raising the salaries of teachers should be utmost, as it would make the teaching profession interesting and less stressful.

Next, the government, especially the State and Federal levels, should declare an emergency in the education sector, especially in public schools. Such emergency would see the government refurbish and re-equip the public schools to meet acceptable standard.

Finally, a serious step should be taken in stopping recurring incidence of industrial unrest by the government by being serious in fighting corruption generally, and in schools in particular.

The present situation where political office holders and employers earn in hundreds of thousands and millions officially and unofficially; and teachers earn pittance is not acceptable.

In summary, the damage done to the nation's economy by industrial unrest, and the urgency of addressing the phenomenon cannot be overemphasised, especially since it affects the teeming population of Nigeria who cannot afford the luxury of private schools, or travelling abroad to acquire education.

3. CONCLUSION

The ultimate success and survival of an organization will invariably be determined by the quality and competence of its human resources. In fact the differences in the lives of economic development of the countries are largely a reflection of differences in the quality for their Human Resources and their involvement in national building. Discipline is essential for the smooth running of any organization and for the maintenance of industrial peace which is the very foundation of industrial democracy. Without discipline no enterprise would prosper. There is no doubt that when work culture is good, employees are excellent, and quality is outstanding, it attracts more clients, new business, challenging projects and more profits to the organization. As the ultimate success and survival of an organization is invariably determined by the quality and competence of its human resources, the Code of Discipline definitely improves moral level of employees and makes them more responsible as well as increases quality and productivity of work by encouraging more creativity, more innovative techniques and ideas from employees.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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