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University Strikes

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ABSTRACT

University strikes are focused on Academic Staff Union Universities (ASUU) industrial actions in Nigeria. Strikes generally are organized cessation of work by a group of workers to enforce demands on an employer, used as a tool by labor unions such as ASUU to press for their demands. It is argued that both the government and ASUU most often squander precious negotiation time on fault-finding and blame-shifting rather than actively seeking solutions. University strikes are most often primarily driven by unresolved conflicts with the federal government with respect to agreements such as the 2009 renegotiation pact. In the 22 years since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, academics in its public universities have gone on strike a record 15 times. The government has institutionalized noncompliance, enabled primarily by systematic use of nonbinding Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs), which effectively exempt the state from legal liability. Failure of public sector collective bargaining frameworks usually forces ASUU to use its reliable tool - systemic disruption - to demand state accountability.

KEYWORDS: *University strikes, ASUU, funding, autonomy, academic calendar, democracy, MOU, systemic disruption, dialogue mechanisms, increase budget to 15-26% UNESCO, visitation panels, digital infrastructure, adoption of UTAS, revitalization funds, quarterly release tied performance, independent verification timeliness.*

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INTRODUCTION

A strike is an organized cessation of work by a group of workers to enforce demands on an employer, which has now become a tool used by labor unions like ASUU to press for their demands, as shown in Figure 1. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in Nigeria has played a pivotal role in advancing or advocating for enhanced funding, infrastructure, and welfare within public universities since its establishment in 1978. Persistent strikes have become a defining characteristic of Nigeria's higher education system, frequently disrupting academic calendars, delay examinations and graduation, increase students' financial burdens, and create uncertainty about their educational and career prospects.

University strikes have become a significant challenge to the development of higher education in many countries, particularly in development countries such as Nigeria. A university strike is a form of industrial action in which academic or non-academic staff, usually represented by labour unions, who suspend their official duties to protest against unresolved disputes with their employers or government, as shown in Figure 2. The disputes can be as a result of inadequate university funding, deteriorating infrastructure, poor working conditions, unpaid salaries and allowances, inadequate educational facilities, poor staff welfare, cum failure of governments or university authorities to implement previously negotiated agreements, as shown in Figure 3.

Furthermore, university strikes can also include insufficient government investment, disagreements over university autonomy, and ineffective collective bargaining. Strikes contribute to irregular learning, adverse effects on students' performance, quality of university education, discourage students in Nigerian public universities, affects human capital

development, and the migration of lecturers in search of greener pastures. Since 1999 to 2024, ASUU is known to have initiated more than 16 major strikes, totaling over 1,200 days of lost academic time, which included an eight-month strike in 2022 that ranked among the longest on record, as shown in Figure 4. It is being argued that prolonged strikes are necessary in order to compel the Federal Government to upgrade public universities to world standards, but noted that strikes have saved Nigerian public tertiary institutions from collapse, but they are not world standards [1-9].

HISTORY

University strikes in Nigeria is closely connected to the activities of ASUU, established in 1978 to protect the interests of academic staff and promote improvements in the Nigeria university system. However, as time went by, the union's activities expanded beyond staff welfare to include university funding, institutional autonomy, and the general development of higher education.

1. The Early Period: 1960s-1970s

After Nigeria's independence in 1960, great emphasis was placed on developing the country's educational institutions to support national development. The universities were expected to produce skilled professionals, teachers, researchers, administrators, and other personnel required for economic and social progress. The expansion of higher education also created some challenges such as funding, staffing, infrastructure and institutional governance. Questions bordering on academic freedom, and university autonomy gradually became important in relations between university authorities, academic staff, and the government.

At this period, disagreements over the management of universities helped to lay the foundation for later industrial disputes. The struggle for university autonomy became particularly significant as the government authorities exercised considerable influence over university administration cum academic appointments.

2. Establishment of ASUU in 1978

The establishment of the Academic Staff Union of Universities in 1978 marked an important turning point in the history of industrial relations in Nigerian universities. The Nigerian Association of University Teachers (NAUT founded in 1965) later evolved into ASUU providing a stronger platform for representing academic staff and negotiating with university authorities and the government. The union's major concerns included:

- Improved salaries and conditions of service.
- Adequate funding for public universities.
- Protection of academic freedom.
- University autonomy
- Improved teaching and research facilities.
- Protection of lecturer's employment rights.

The conflict between ASUU and the Federal Government came about through a combination of economic, political, and institutional factors. The relationship most often became increasingly confrontational when negotiations failed to produce lasting solutions to disagreements over university administration, staff welfare, and funding.

3. The1980-1983 Strikes: University Autonomy and Academic Freedom

The early 1980s witnessed significant disagreements. For instance, in 1980 the Federal Government intervened in a dispute involving the University of Lagos following the report of a visitation panel. The government's directive to dismiss six senior academics without a hearing generated strong opposition among academics. This prompted ASUU to protest against what it considered government interference in university administration and the violation of established disciplinary procedures. The resulting disputes contributed to industrial actions between 1980 and 1983.

This highlighted the need to protect universities from arbitrary interference and to ensure that academic staff carry out their duties within an environment of institutional independence.

4. The 1986-1988 period: Structural Adjustment and Labour Disputes

During the 1980s, Nigeria experienced serious economic difficulties due to declining oil revenues, public expenditure constraints, and the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986. The economic reforms affected public institutions, including the universities. The academic staff expressed their concerns about declining purchasing power, inadequate facilities, and the deteriorating conditions of university education.

In 1988, ASUU embarked on a major strike to demand for the implementation of the Elongated University Salary Scale (EUSS), the establishment of a joint negotiating committee between the government and university staff unions, and respect for university autonomy.

The military government of General Ibrahim Babangida subsequently proscribed ASUU on 7 August 1988 – showcased influence by the political environment and the government's response to organized labour. However, despite the restrictions, disagreements over funding, staff welfare, and university autonomy continued to influence industrial relations in the university system.

5. The 1990s: Military Rule and Intensified Industrial Conflict

The 1990s was another important period in the history of university strikes in Nigeria. This was fueled by economic difficulties, military intervention in university administration, inadequate funding, disagreements over staff conditions intensified the conflict between ASUU and the government.

ASUU in 1992 embarked on a major national strike over poor working conditions, inadequate funding, university autonomy, and academic freedom which resulted in great confrontations between the dual. Further industrial actions occurred in 1994 and 1996, among other years – which reflected the union's dissatisfaction of how the government handled earlier agreements and its treatment of university lecturers.

6. The 1999 Agreement and the Return to Democratic Government

With the return of Nigeria to democratic government in 1999, disagreements over university funding, lecturers' salaries, staff welfare, and the implementation of negotiated agreements still persisted. The 1999 agreement between ASUU and Federal Government became an important reference point in subsequent disputes. The failure to resolve several longstanding issues actually contributed to further industrial actions in the early 2000s.

7. The 2000-2009 Strikes: Funding and Implementation of Agreements

From 2000-2009, ASUU embarked on several industrial actions over the conditions of Nigerian universities. Some of the major concerns included inadequate funding, poor remuneration, deteriorating infrastructure, the dismissal of lecturers – at the University of Ilorin, and the government's failure to implement previous agreements.

It was in 2009 that ASUU and the Federal Government reached an agreement addressing several longstanding issues about university funding, staff conditions, and the revitalization of public universities. Disagreements over the implementation of the agreement contributed to further strikes. The 2009 agreement subsequently became a central reference point in the recurring industrial disputes between the union and the government.

8. The 2010-2018 Strikes: Repeated Disagreements and Failed Negotiations

This period was characterized by repeated industrial actions due to unresolved disagreements over funding, staff welfare, and the implementation of previous agreements. Some of the major strike episodes occurred in 2010, 2011-2012, 2013, 2017, and 2018-2019. The recurring disputes showed that reaching agreements did not necessarily guarantee lasting industrial peace. The absence of effective mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing agreements contributed to the continuation of the conflict. The persistence of industrial disputes has negatively impacted academic activities and as well as the performance of students in Nigerian public universities, as shown in Figure 5.

9. The 2020 Strike: COVID-19 and Disagreements over University Administration

The 2020 ASUU strike was due to continuing disagreements between the union and the Federal Government in the implementation of previous agreements, university funding, and the government's proposed Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS). This proposal was opposed by ASUU but advocated for an alternative arrangement that would accommodate the distinctive administrative and financial requirements of universities. The industrial dispute occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, when educational institutions were already experiencing serious interruptions. The prolonged strike further disrupted academic activities and highlighted the difficulty of resolving longstanding disagreements through negotiations alone.

10. The 2022 Strike: A Major Disruption of University Education

In February 2022, ASUU commenced another nationwide strike as a result of disagreements with the Federal Government over university funding, the implementation of previous agreements, staff welfare, and the IPPIS controversy. This strike lasted about eight months and was one of the prolonged national ASUU strikes in Nigeria's history.

"During Buhari's eight years as civilian president (2015-2023), public university students spent cumulative one year and nine months out of school due to ASUU strikes – arguably longest stretch under any single administration."

During this period, academic activities in many public universities were suspended, leaving students at home for extended periods – this affected students' academic progress, graduation schedules, research activities, and the planning of university programmes. The strike also attracted public debate about the responsibilities of government, the demands of academic staff, cum the need to protect students from the consequences of prolonged industrial actions.

The history of university strikes in Nigeria is a longstanding problem rooted in the relationship between academic staff, university management, and government authorities. Hence, sustainable industrial peace and harmony is hinged on adequate funding, transparent collective bargaining, respect for

university autonomy, improved working conditions, and effective implementation of agreements. These are very vital for protecting students' academic progress and strengthening the quality of university education in Nigeria [1, 5, 10-19].

ASUU STRIKES IN NIGERIA: ISSUES AND OUTCOMES

Since the formation of ASUU, various issues have been raised with the government to press for better working and learning conditions in Nigerian universities. Some of these issues include inadequate funding of universities, poor infrastructure, poor salaries, lack of job security, poor working conditions, lack of research grants and other support services, lack of autonomy for universities, inadequate remuneration for academic staff, and the failure of the government to implement the various agreements it has signed with ASUU.

The threat by ASUU to resume its suspended nationwide strike over unpaid salaries and poor implementation of the 2025 agreement was disclosed by its president, Piwuna to newsmen after the union's emergency National Executive Council (NEC) meeting in Abuja. The ASUU president, Professor Christopher Piwuna said the December 2025 FGN-ASUU Agreement was achieved after more than eight years of struggle but had been poorly implemented by the Federal Government and several state governments.

The President Tinubu administration has paid four months of the withheld salaries, leaving three-and-a-half months outstanding, according to ASUU. Some of aspects of the December 2025 agreement reached included the adjustments to lecturers' remuneration and academic allowances, while disputes over outstanding payments still continued [20].

CAUSES OF ASUU STRIKES

The causes of ASUU strikes according to rank ordering among public universities in Nigeria are as follows:

- Poor budgetary allocation to the education sector is the prime cause of the strike
- Failure of the Federal Government to honor their long-term agreement
- Staff bonuses
- Politicization of ASUU strike
- Revitalization of universities
- Misplacement of priorities by the government or disregard for the educational sector

The under-listed factors are however not regarded as leading causes:

- Unrealistic demands by ASUU
- Lack of funds from the federal government
- Greed from ASUU leaders/members

Public universities in Nigeria operate with ageing laboratories, obsolete equipment, insufficient research funding, overcrowded lecture theatres and under-maintained hostels. Without steady capital injections for renovation and equipment, teaching and research quality will continue to decline as per ASUU arguments. When promised revitalization funds do not materialize or arrive piecemeal, the union views strike as a tool to force concrete funding commitments.

ASUU also agitates often for improved funding to address infrastructural deficits so as to enhance the quality of teaching and research. The union cited the erosion of university autonomy and academic freedom as a major concern. The interference by the government in the administration of universities undermines institutional independence, decision-making processes, and the integrity of academic governance. Such interference, the union argues, restricts universities from effectively managing their own affairs in line with global standards.

Central to Nigeria's university crisis is chronic underfunding. With regards to repeated advocacy from education stakeholders, Nigeria's budgetary allocation to education has rarely exceeded 8% which is a far cry from the UNESCO-recommended 26%. Worthy of note is the claim that UNESCO recommends allocating 26% of the national budget to education is not consistent with UNESCO's established global education-financing benchmarks. UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action recommends allocating at least 15-20% of total public expenditure and/or 4-6% of gross domestic product (GDP) to education. The persistent shortfall affects every facet of university life: laboratory equipment remains obsolete, libraries lack current materials, and facilities deteriorate faster than they are repaired [1, 3, 5, 10, 21-29].

VICIOUS CYCLE AND STRUCTURAL REASONS

The common loop looks like this: Agreements are negotiated and signed 'n partial compliance or slow implementation 'n warnings and public statements 'n strike when items remain unresolved.

It then follows that since this cycle has repeated for decades, skepticism and brittle trust now shape every negotiation, making lasting solutions harder to achieve or reach.

The structural reasons why strikes feel inevitable are due to:

- Weak enforcement: As agreements sometimes lack definite timeliness or independent verification, allowing delays without clear penalties.

- Limited autonomy: Centralized control over budgets and appointments reduces universities' ability to address problems locally.
- Political timing: Funding and policy choices are often influenced by election cycles and shifting priorities.
- Poor communication: Public posturing and antagonistic media exchanges escalate tensions instead of facilitating compromise.

The cyclical conflict underscores a deeper systemic failure which is an absence of long-term commitment and will on the part of all stakeholders to commit to the structural reform of higher education in Nigeria. The ASUU strike of 2025, just like those before it, is less about the strike itself and more about what it represents: a collapsing model of higher education management. The inability to stabilize university operations has resulted in prolonged academic sessions, eroded global competitiveness, and contributed to an ever-growing wave of brain drain ("Japa" syndrome). Nigeria's public universities were once the pride of Africa in the 1970s and early 1980s, but are now struggling with dilapidated infrastructure, underpaid staff, and a generation of students losing faith in the public education system.

ASUU strikes at the national level have caused significant delays in graduation timelines for millions of students, with the 2022 strike alone impacting over 2 million students and precipitating a 15-20% decline in national academic performance metrics [6].

CONSEQUENCES OF ASUU STRIKES

The resultant effects or consequences of ASUU strikes are quite great leading to increased youth idleness, social vices, which threatens societal stability and development as public university students increasingly turn to unproductive ventures or activities. Some of these consequences include:

- Loss of interest in school to join illegal businesses like cybercrime, gambling, and fraudulent acts.
- Increased social vices such as armed robbery, kidnapping etc.
- Cancellation of academic sessions.
- Decline/Poor student's academic performance achievements leading to half-baked graduates.
- Psychological stress and emotional distress
- Missing out on NYSC service year.
- Loss of sponsorship
- Poor employment pattern where age is an important consideration for entry-level jobs.
- Drop out school due to increased cost
- Increased financial burden on parents and guardians
- Additional extra underserved extension study years
- Rush of academic activities calendar
- Missing out on jobs and other opportunities
- Delayed marriage and/or early marriage
- Reduced research productivity
- Decline in the quality of university education
- Disruption of professional and practical training
- Strained relations between government and university unions

ASUU strikes also hurt the economy, since the prolonged closure of universities has led to a decrease in the number of graduates entering the workforce, resulting in a decrease in the number of skilled workers available for employment in the country. Furthermore, and most critically the pervasive instability and poor remuneration of lecturers are accelerating the "Japa" syndrome (brain drain), causing a massive haemorrhage of high-skilled human capital. Indirectly too, ASUU strikes also causes 'crisis' for small business operators who depend on it for their livelihood like tricycle taxi drivers, food vendors, vulcanizers, etc. crippling their businesses [2, 8, 22, 30-36], as shown in Figure 6.

SOLUTIONS TO ASUU STRIKES/WAY FORWARD

The Nigerian higher education sector has for too long been deviled by incessant ASUU strikes for more than three decades, and therefore urgently requires drastic solutions. To end these persistent, hydra-headed crises, several practical and pragmatic steps must be taken, of which some are:

- The Federal Government must immediately implement the renegotiated 2009 ASUU-FGN agreement and set clear timeliness for the release of revitalization funds. This will restore confidence and stability within the system.
- The government should fully adopt the University Transparency and Accountability Solution (UTAS) as the preferred payment platform for university lecturers.
- Need for constitutional provision for regular visitation panels to all federal and state universities. These panels are to assess infrastructure, financial management, and academic standards to ensure accountability.
- Government to provide a fixed percentage of the national budget to the education sector in line

with UNESCO's established global education-financing benchmarks. UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action recommends allocating at least 15-20% of total public expenditure and/or 4-6% of gross domestic product (GDP) to education. Funding should be released quarterly and tied to specific performance indicators to prevent mismanagement.

- Need to establish dialogue mechanisms for ASUU-government negotiations.
- Enhance digital learning infrastructure during strike periods.
- Implement student support initiatives to address learning losses, so as to facilitate performance recovery by 30-40% [6, 28, 29, 32].

In resolving this persistent menace, policy must pivot away from ad-hoc negotiations toward establishing the three key structural pillars – utilizing multi-dimensional research approaches [37].

CONCLUSIONS

University strikes in Nigeria, particularly ASUU strikes since 1978 formation from NAUT in 1965, are not isolated labor disputes but symptoms of deep institutionalized pathology rooted in failures of governance and financing. Agreement covering funding, salaries and autonomy remains largely unimplemented sixteen years later, fuelling mistrust. Empirical evidence shows that strikes cause programme disruption, psychological damage including depression, anxiety, frustration and low self-esteem among staff and students. In order to restore stability, the government must legalize collective agreements, increase allocation beyond current 7-8% towards UNESCO global benchmark, need to grant university autonomy and respect MOUs. More information on university strikes can be obtained in books in [38-54] and the following related journals:

Research Invention Journal

European Journal of Science, Innovation and Technology (EJSIT)

Journal of Guidance and Counselling Studies

African Journal of Educational Management

African Journal of Social and Behavioural Sciences (AJSBS)

Internal Journal of Research (IJR)

International Scholar Journal of Arts and Social Science Research

Education Review Letters

*Pan-African Journal of Education and Social Sciences (*PAJES)

Southeast Journal Research Sustainable Development (SEJRSD)

Journal of Education and Change Education Review

International Journal of Innovative Research in Education (IJIRE)

Annals of Social Sciences and Management Studies (ASM)

International Journal of Education and Science Development (IJESD)

Research Invention Journal

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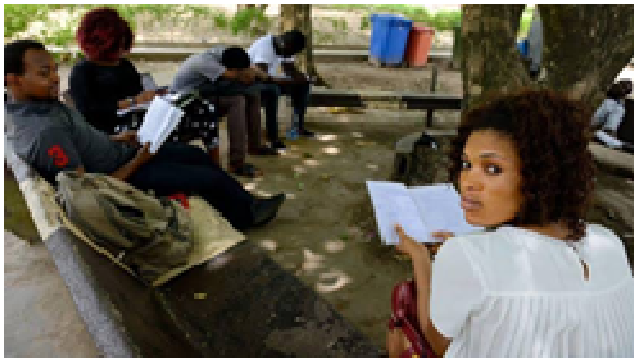


Figure 1. Nigeria's ASUU university strike



Figure 2. Thousands of university staff went on strike for 18 days between February and March



Figure 3. FG-ASUU reached agreement to prevent strike

ASUU Strike

s/n	Year	Duration
1	1999	5 months
2	2001	3 months
3	2002	2 weeks
4	2003	6 months
5	2005	2 weeks
6	2006	3 days
7	2007	3 months
8	2008	1 weeks
9	2009	4 months
10	2010	5 months
11	2011	59 days
12	2013	5 months
13	2017	1 months
14	2018	3 months[13]
15	2020	9 months
16	2022	February 14, 2022 - present

Figure 4. ASUU has spent 19 months on strike under Buhari, the longest since 1999



Figure 5. All teaching cancelled on October 14th because of strike



Figure 6. Nigeria academic strike crisis affects small businesses.