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Asuu's Strike in Nigeria: Interrogating the Motive Behind the Struggle

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Abstract

The consideration of ASUU industrial demonstration in Nigeria in recent times generated a lot of controversies and attempts to discuss it objectively incised the debate into two extreme positions and neither of it carries universal consent among lecturers, students, federal government and the general public. In one, the motive is socio-political and the other is educationally inclined. In between is a position of political factor which seemed more consistent with the federal government's views. Contrary, this paper with the aid of philosophical analytical method interrogated the motive and found out that right from when the entreaty turned into "a struggle" the common goal of ASUU remained essentially consistent; that there are various interpretations from different administrations about "the struggle" and the goals for the struggle are compatible with other universities globally. It was based on these that recommendations were made. That the motive for "the struggle" should be devoid of emotionally driven interpretations since it will be difficult to discourse it rationally. There is a great deal of confusion over the concept "struggle", but in the case of ASUU's struggle, the rationale and motive should override the confusion; nature of the struggle and the global university standard be regarded as a guardrail to check the struggle for fear of excess.

Keywords: ASUU strike, motives, struggle.

Introduction

The transformation of Association of University Teachers into Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Teachers in 1978 assumed the posture of a struggle rather than pleas. The fundamental question is; what is ASUU struggling for, with whom and in the strict sense for whom? The nature of the struggle and the reasons for the struggle rather than any other form are some of the concerns of this paper. The ASUU struggle lingered for over two decades and so many interpretations emerging as a result of its staggering nature fueled the need for a commonly acceptable interpretation devoid of emotional, irrational and illogical factors capable of undermining the efforts of the writers of this work to pull down the veil between the strugglers and the desired opportunities. In other to achieve this, efforts are geared towards identification of the parties involved in the struggle, what they are struggling for, the nature of the struggling, reason(s) for their struggle and to establish with logical sense of critique if the perceived motive actuary worth the struggle as well as project the socio- economic value of the impending opportunities in the fast social changing nation like Nigeria.

The quest to write on this controversial issue is more than mere academic exercise since the effects of the struggle are adversely affecting the university education system, programmes, political stability, national security and making the would-be focal point of the struggle, “universality education quality control in Nigeria” a mockery of reality. Therefore, there is a sense in this effort, because it is tailored towards justifying ASUU's struggle for a desired ideal state of quality education. However, the paper cautions against the fear that, the struggle may be drifting from struggle to “a fight” between the employer and the employees which will amount to total disregard to industrial laws. The historical evidences are worthy enough for one to express fear of the struggle either by spontaneously or by design assuming a shape of a fight or even a cold war; a paradigm that is psych washing and undermines national development process. There are some of the fundamental questions that form part of this work. Those questions are; When, how and why did the ASUU's pleas metamorphosed into agitations, then to struggle statuesque? These questions are not just worrisome but need urgent attention. This explains why it is encumbered upon the writers to carry out the investigation in this manner.

It is against this background that there are misinterpretations from different administrations, students, parents, ministry of education and even among academic staff of the universities about the motive behind the struggle. Issues that informed the misinterpretation and it attending consequences on the existing and the impending educational structure in Nigeria also constitute the concern of this work. In response to the misconceptions about the reason(s) behind the struggle, an analytical and critical approach is employed as a helpful tool for understanding the motive behind the struggle and as a matter of particularity focus attention beyond the nature of the struggle in a bid to capture the motive in its true sense and express the justification for it.

It is obvious that to some, the struggle goes violent by taking a problematic dimension. Though, it appears to take the form of problem to those that count it as personal, collective, sectional and national rather than a struggle for actualization of the desired ideal university educational standard in Nigeria. To such ones, the writers made recommendations and conclusion for them,

but feel reluctant to make same for those who look at the motive behind the struggle as a way of attaining self gratification or politically driven efforts.

Clarification of Terms

There are key concepts that need to be clarified in the context of this paper; attempt is made to explain the concept e-leaning in relation to university under-graduate students with the hope of eliminating any existing contradiction and ambiguity inherent in their usage.

Struggle

Struggle means to make forceful or violent efforts to get free of restraint or constriction. For instance, "before she could struggle, he lifted her up" engage in conflict or "politicians continued to struggle over familiar issues." In another sense, it means when someone, group, organisation vise a vise strive to achieve or attain something in the face of difficulty or resistance. This amounts to forceful or violent effort to get free of restraint or resist attack. Therefore, in any manner or context it is used, its predominant characters include achieving something forcefully, attaining with difficulty and resistance from one part.

Motive

In this context, motive means a reason for doing something. Therefore, one's motive for doing something is his reason for doing it.

Asuu's Strike in Nigeria: The Historical Perspective

The Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU) is a trade union and a union of intellectuals believed by some persons to be seeking not only the socio-political and economic/welfare interest of its members within the framework of promoting the cause of university education in Nigeria, but the entire good of Nigerians and Nigeria. However, to other persons, they are in total disagreement with the assertion. In the face of these different views about their motive, the nature of the struggle varies considerably. The writers are aware that, the Academic Staff Union of Universities transformed into its present state in 1978 with its roots and various transformations dated back to 1955 when the Association of University Teachers (AUT) was formed but the concern of this work is limited to ASUU strike, hitherto, struggle but ignore in totality to dig out the reasons for the transformation from (AUT) to (ASUU).

ASUU was known for the struggle during military regimes and demystified these regimes and therefore laid the foundations for popular resistance. The union was active in struggles against the military regime and claimed they were out to improve the quality of university education in Nigeria during the 1980s.² The is question, what really is their reason for the struggle remained a major concern of many persons that survived till date. In 1988 the union organised a National Strike to obtain fair wages and university autonomy. As a result, the ASUU was proscribed on 7 August 1988 and all its property seized. It was allowed to resume in 1990, but after another strike was again banned on 23rd August 1992. However, an agreement was reached on 3rd September 1992 that met several of the union's demands including the right of workers to collective bargaining. The ASUU organised further strikes in 1994 and 1996, protesting against the dismissal of staff by the Sani Abacha military regime.³

After the return to democracy in 1999 with the Nigerian Fourth Republic, the union continued to be forceful in demanding the rights of university workers against opposition by the government of President Olusegun Obasanjo.⁴ The question, why was their demands narrowed down to staff welfare points to the dynamism of the struggle. In 2007, the ASUU went on strike for three months and in May 2008, it held two one-week "warning strikes" to press a range of demands, including an improved salary scheme and reinstatement of 49 lecturers who were dismissed many years earlier. In June 2009, ASUU ordered its members in federal and state universities nationwide to proceed on an indefinite strike over disagreements with the Federal Government on an agreement it reached with the union about two and a half years earlier. After three months of strikes, in October 2009, the union and other staff unions signed a memorandum of understanding with the government and called off the industrial action.⁵

On 1st July 2013, ASUU embarked on another strike which lasted 5 months and 15 days was called off on 16th December 2013.⁷ However, the claims made by ASUU in regards to the strike were centered largely on funding and renaissance of Nigerian public universities as well as a certain earned allowance which it claims to be in an arrears of 92 billion naira. There was a mixed reaction from students; some Nigerian students said that the strike was a curse to them while others said it was a blessing before the ASUU strike was called off. While the association continues to claim that it is involved in a struggle for Nigerian tertiary education and Nigerian students by extension, many Nigerians perceive the struggle, characterised by incessant strike actions, to be mean and self serving. These interpretations brought the motive of the strugglers to doubts.

ASUU's Strike Actions: from Request to Struggle

ASUU was formed in 1978, the period of the beginning of the decline in the oil boom, when the country faced the consequences of the failure by its rulers to use the oil wealth to generate production and a social welfare system. Military dictatorship had eroded deeply the basic freedoms in the society. Academic freedom and university autonomy were the products of military dictatorship. The funding of education and universities became poorer. The factors informed the need for a change or diversification of the focus of the union of academics, from 1980.

ASUU's agitation and humble request became radical, more concerned with broad national issues, and stood firmly against oppressive, undemocratic policies of the country. This change in attitude was in response to the social changes occasioned by the leaders of that time. The Early Years of ASUU assault on academic freedom was the subject of "resistance" by ASUU throughout the 1980s thus assuming the posture of a struggle, a struggle between the government and ASUU. In 1978, the Uthman Mohammed Commission Report had an instrument for the Federal Governments usurpation of the disciplinary functions of Governing Councils. The Federal Government directed the council to dismiss certain members of staff from their posts without the right of hearing. This practice carried over into the military regimes through Babangida and Abacha's military administration. In 1980, ASUU declared a Trade Dispute and made the issue of autonomy an issue in dispute. In December 1980, President Shehu Shagari directed the Council of the University of Lagos to remove six senior members

of the academic staff from their jobs, following Justice Belonwus Visitation Panel Report. ASUU protested and continued to press for their reinstatement. In 1986, the Supreme Courts judgement upheld their struggle by given ruling in favour of the UNILAG academics, vindicating ASUUs position.¹⁰

It is obvious that their cause for struggle had at no time remained constant since in 1980-1981, ASUU had a struggle with the Shagari Government. Its concerns were funding, salaries, autonomy and academic freedom, the brain drain, and the survival of the university system indicating a broader focus. Again, ASUU in collaboration with other industrial unions and Nigeria Labour Congress engaged in debates on the direction and context of national economic, educational and other policies. Throughout the military period, ASUU waged its struggles around the survival of the university system with three components; the conditions of service (salary and non salary) funding, university autonomy and academic freedom; the defence of the right to education as well as broad national issues such as anti-military struggles, the struggles against military rule, the struggle against privatization, against the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), and the World Banks attempt to take over the universities, for example, the World Bank 120 million dollars (US) loan under Babangida's military rule and the Nigerian Universities Innovation Project (NUIP) during Obasanjo's regime.¹² For the fact that there is a diversifications of ASUU's interest, the degree of alignment indicates the variations of the nature of the struggle, a radical departure from request to "struggle".

ASUU's struggles during the Buhari-Idiagbon regime were based on the union's principled opposition to military leadership and ASUU's position on the union's path of development. In its publication, "How to Save Nigeria", which emerged out of its conference on the State of the Economy in 1984, ASUU spotted the shortcomings of the Nigerian Economy and tendered practical solutions to them. The document rejected privatization, and offered solutions on Economic Development and Planning, Industrialization, Agriculture, Debt Servicing, Taxation, Labour and so on. In 1985, the Buhari-Idiagbon regime began a programme of retrenchment of workers and wages freeze. It clamped down on the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) and the National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) when the doctors went on strike to protest the sharp deterioration of the health services in Nigeria; ASUU expresses her solidarity by supporting the doctors' union. The government sacked doctors, arrested and detained NMA and NARD leaders, as well as ASUU leaders. Babangida's government had waged its war against ASUU by terminating the appointment of the President of ASUU, Dr. Festus Iyayi, illegally. Abachas government had sacked Dr. Asobie, President of ASUU and many branch officials (especially at UNN), Obasanjo's government and the University of Ilorin Vice Chancellor, Professor Oba Shuaib Abdul-Raheem had, in 2001, sacked all the forty-nine ASUU members who had refused to break ASUUs strike and return to work.

Evidence on the ground shows that their appraisal of the problems is different from ASUU's struggle, the nature of the struggle is numerous. From all appraised in this work, none appeared to be immune to violent and resistance. Therefore in all ramifications, the style and manner of the struggle is inconsistent and heavily loaded with force or forces in the either parties. These

propelled some persons to arrive at the conclusions that suit their opinions leading to endless interpretations, some anchored by the nature of the struggle while others by their yet to be defined motive which is capable of breeding misinformation.

Insight on the Misinterpretations of the Motive ASUU Struggle in Nigeria

ASUU struggles have lived up to the Unions conventional requirement that the Union should defend the interest of its members, establish and maintain just and proper conditions of service for its members, the protection and advancement of the socio-economic interest of the nation, its special publications on issues that touch on the survival of the country. The Scholars resolutions have contributed to exposing the re-colonization forces directing our state policies and the decolonization implications of the Government of Nigeria given another sense or explanation for their behaviour. From this angle of reasoning helped some persons to settle on the whole that ASUU's only duties are to its members and the interest of Nigerians. To limit the reasons for ASUU struggle "only" only for her members, Nigerians and not the government nor the people living in Nigeria is conclusive but rather beg for further explanations.

In understanding the goals of ASUU's struggles, the tendency to see our struggles merely from the stand point of economic gains is a product both of the struggles for UASS and allowances, a worsening economic situation. But ASUU cannot win and defend the economic gains unless the struggles for political-economic conditions that will make economic gain possible and worthwhile. ASUU's long-cherished tradition requiring its members and leaders to think and act in the interest of Nigerians, irrespective of ethnic, religious and regional affiliation is under question. The use of leadership positions by ASUU to negotiate for their personal advantage is responsible for many of their problems which they wrestle with it in the name of internal predicament. This explains why most of the members do not have knowledge about what being members of a trade union is about and they lack the historical knowledge required. This accounts for why, in times of ASUU's struggles for the university system, some tend to be isolated.

An insight in the ASUU's links with students and students' organization which out to have been the *prima facto* has weakened tremendously. Could it be because (NANS) National Association of Nigerian Students appeared to be ran from the Presidency is another side of the story. The need to invigorate an inward-looking therapeutic mechanism arising out of the Unions desire to maintain its principle and integrity is in itself worrisome as socio-economic and political factors interfered with the mechanism. In recognition of these challenges, the writers are of the view that the business of ASUU is to save education and Nigeria.

ASUU's struggles arise out of the necessity to build a country in which every citizen shall be free, educated, well-fed and healthy. For ASUU to abandon those struggles and yet be worthy of being called intellectuals is a mockery of reality. The determination to pursue vigorously what has been built with the blood and sweat of our people to agents of domination and oppression of African and other peoples will be disservice to humanity. This appeared from our appraisal to be the submission of ASUU.

Towards Understanding the Motive Behind the Struggle

For anyone to ascertain the motive of ASUU's struggle, aims and objectives of ASUU ought to be the secure to the quest. One of the aim and objective is to ensure adequate funding, improved salary package, university autonomy and academic freedom in order to curb brain drain and ensure the survival of the university system in Nigeria. **It** also includes establishment and maintenance of a high standard of academic performance and professional practice, establishment and maintenance of just and proper conditions for Universities education. The question whether these aim and objectives are achievable became more rational and timely reflecting on the nature and manner of the struggle and he achievements so far. The aftermaths of these conflicts seemed to point at the complexities emanating from the struggle intended to be conscious efforts geared towards achievement of her aim and objectives. One of the aftermaths is staff of Nigerian federal universities always battling with being engaged in their assigned duties and staying idle due to incessant conflicts in the name of pursuing the outlined aim and objectives of ASUU.

As rampant as the conflicts in the South-West federal universities, so also are the various effects on the effectiveness of their jobs. This is evident on the quality of work put in by the university staff especially lecturers in trying to catch up with the loss time during conflicts. Conflicts in the universities result in low or no form of work. This tends to weaken staff satisfaction and morale as their needs are left unmet. Assessing the engagement level of staff during and after conflicts in the South-West federal universities is of paramount importance considering the huge number of students whose performance could be affected. There have been a replay of one conflict or the other with attempts at resolving them, using strategies that seem to suggest inadequacy due to their reoccurrence since the 1990s till date. These conflicts are so rampant that students and lecturers have advocated for a third session named strike session in the universities calendars. The university staffs are demanding better university infrastructures, funding systems and working conditions of staff in reflection of their aim and objectives but ignored the plight of those they claimed to protect, defend and ensure quality control compelling critical minds to question whose interest is ultimate and whose interest ought to be ultimate. An attempt to answer these questions effectively cast doubts on the motive of the struggle.

Constant conflict results in strained relationship between members, students and the government largely undermining the purpose for the establishment of ASUU. In resolving the conflicts, the federal universities and government are yet to arrive at a compromise. Relationships have been strained and affected as conflicts are not effectively resolved. This also has affected staff morale, mostly evident in low productivities. Also, the immediate effect of conflict is the distortion of academic calendar in most universities. Thus, the overall impact of conflict on staff effectiveness relates to value distortion and system dissonance. When the system and values are distorted, then the effect is enormous and frightening to staff morale and productivity which is obviously against the reason for its establishment that can be seen from the aim and objectives.

The more employees' perceived organisational injustice and unfairness as arising from the poor management of conflict in the work place like the university, the more they reciprocate

by exhibiting negative attitude to work. These negative attitudes are not without consequences on staff morale and productivity (effectiveness). Thus there is the need to examine the effects of the different conflicts on the effectiveness of Nigerian universities staffs because a workers who has experienced work frustration or suffered organisational injustice arising from poor management of conflicts, may become counterproductive. These can be expressed in form of character assassination, spreading negative rumors, sabotaging and low productivity. Conflict is inevitable given the wide range of goals existing in organizations. In consideration of the aim and objectives and vise a vise moved one to ask whether the struggle worth these efforts that is undermining the purpose of the union as captured from the aim and objectives. Unresolved conflicts in the universities seemed to have resulted in serious consequences on staff effectiveness such as employee low turnover, low morale, reduced productivity, quality problems, reduced collaboration, aggressive behaviours, inefficient management credibility, negative upward attention and distrust is a total disregards to the acclaimed purpose it was transformed.

Looking Beyond the Nature of the Struggle as a Justification for the Struggle

There is no particular nature the struggle took but at all times, the struggle was structured and conditioned in response to the demands of the times. When President Obasanjo was elected in 1999, ASUU further demanded for the adoption of the 1992 agreement. Pressure from the university staff led to FGN and ASUU agreement of 2001. After series of appeal by ASUU to FGN for the implementation of the 2001 Agreement, ASUU called its members on 29th December 2002 to embark on a total and indefinite nationwide strike. FGN failure at fulfilling its own part of the agreement by using avoidance strategy led to another three day warning strike on April 24, 2006. The election of President Yar'Adua into power in 2007 brought some hope to the academia, but this was proved to be a false hope as nothing was done to implement the agreement. After several failed negotiations, the staff went on an indefinite strike in 2009. The 2009 strike can be termed the highest over time as it further involved all the facets of the university including NASU. The suspended 2009 strike could be termed only as a repetition of the usual past, for the technical committee/inter-ministerial committee undermined the agreement already reached. Failure of state to honor the agreement reached in 2009. This struggle took various forms but the motive seemed to be more constant particularly the essential elements. For one to settle at the manner in which the struggle assumed as the basis for drawing their conclusion will be irrational.

Recommendations

The recommendations are drawn from the findings of this paper and intended to be more useful for readers who shared their convictions with the writers' position. The prime reason for the struggle is beyond self gratification but collective bargains for Nigeria and Nigerians.

ASUU members should know that freeing a people and a country is a heinous task that requires exerted efforts. The need for self-directed cleansing within their ranks is justified simply by the truth that they are pursuing, struggling for the university system and the common man.

For ASUU to succumb to the discourse of image-making, it will amount to targeting demobilization in times when the union needs to sustain her struggles

The change of psychology of leadership; some allege with a good deal of truth, that there is emerging in the union a labour aristocracy a set of leaders who see their offices as privileged position from which they enjoy some relative comfort, are not well attuned to the rank and file and stand over as above them, use their leadership to enhance their own social/political positions either in university administration or in government. This needs to be examined.

The problem of accountability is also vital and need to be vigorously addressed. Often, addressing the accountability issue requires very hard decisions at very high costs for the highest offices. But the union has no choice on this matter if it is to fulfill its mission.

Conclusion

The fundamental questions; what is ASUU struggling for, with whom and in the strict sense for whom as well as the nature of the struggle and the reasons for the struggle have clarified. The struggle is for the common interest of Nigerian and the struggle is always with the various governments though, the nature of the struggle is also faceless and dynamics. The dialectical nature of the struggle was occasioned and conditioned by a given administration. This is because, the pattern of the struggle during the military dictatorship was different from that of the civilians.

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