

Class Conflict and the Nigerian Labour Movement; Strike, Protests, and Policy Changes

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between class conflict and the Nigerian labour movement, focusing on the role of strikes, protests, and the subsequent policy changes. The primary objective is to explore how economic inequalities and class divisions fuel labour activism in Nigeria, particularly through the actions of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and various trade unions. The study is grounded in conflict theory, which posits that class struggles and economic disparities are key drivers of social and political change. A qualitative approach is employed, utilizing historical records, government reports, and scholarly literature to analyse the evolution of labour movements and their impact on policy development. The findings indicate that labour strikes and protests are pivotal in challenging class disparities and advocating for improved working conditions, fair wages, and social justice. These movements lead to significant policy changes, including reforms in labour laws and wage policies, though the responses from the government and employers are often reactive rather than proactive. The discussion emphasizes the enduring nature of class conflict in shaping labour relations and policy in Nigeria, concluding that continued advocacy is essential to address ongoing inequalities and ensure lasting socio-economic progress. The article underscores the importance of understanding of class conflict as a driving force behind labour activism and its influence on policy reforms in Nigeria.

Keywords: class, conflict, inequalities, labour, policy introduction

Introduction

The Nigerian labour movement has been a significant force in shaping the socio-economic and political landscape of the country. From the #EndSARS protests in 2020 to the controversies surrounding fuel subsidy removal in 2023, the interplay between class conflict

and labour activism reflects broader issues of economic inequality and social justice. This article explores the intricate relationship between class conflict and the Nigerian labour movement, focusing on how strikes, protests, and subsequent policy changes have influenced the landscape from 2020 to 2024. Using conflict theory as a framework, this study utilizes historical records, government reports, and scholarly literature to analyze the evolution of labour movements and their impact on policy development in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework: Conflict Theory and Labour Activism in Nigeria

Conflict theory, originating from the works of Karl Marx (1848), posits that societal dynamics are fundamentally shaped by the ongoing struggle between groups with conflicting interests, particularly over resources, power, and economic benefits. Marx argued that these conflicts arise due to class disparities, with the bourgeoisie (capitalist elite) exploiting the proletariat (working class). These power imbalances perpetuate inequality and foster resistance, often leading to social change.

In the Nigerian context, conflict theory provides a lens to analyze labour activism and its role in challenging systemic inequalities. Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) extended conflict theory to include the struggle for authority within institutions, which is particularly relevant to labour relations in Nigeria. Here, workers and labour unions often oppose state policies or employer practices that perpetuate economic and social injustices.

Labour activism in Nigeria is driven by economic disparities, poor wages, unsafe working conditions, and inadequate welfare policies. Historically, movements such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) have utilized strikes, protests, and negotiations to demand better working conditions and resist anti-labour laws. These struggles are deeply rooted in the Marxian conflict framework, as they reflect the friction between the ruling elite and the working majority. For example, the fuel subsidy removal protests of 2012 demonstrated how labour unions, in alliance with civil society groups, resisted neoliberal policies that disproportionately affected workers and the poor. Similarly, strikes by academic and health unions highlight persistent grievances tied to resource allocation and systemic neglect.

Conflict theory thus elucidates how the working class in Nigeria uses activism as a tool to address systemic inequities and advocate for justice, challenging power structures that uphold economic oppression. Authors such as Ake (1981) and Otobo (2016) have explored these dynamics, linking labour movements to broader socio-political struggles in Nigeria. This theoretical framework underscores the transformative potential of conflict, positioning labour activism as a critical in reshaping Nigeria's socioeconomic and political landscape.

Current Class Conflicts in Nigeria: Major Events from 2020 to 2024

i. The #EndSARS Movement (2020)

The #EndSARS protests of 2020 were a pivotal moment in Nigeria's recent history. Initially focused on police brutality, the movement quickly expanded to address broader issues of governance, economic inequality, and systemic oppression. The protests, driven largely by young Nigerians from working-class backgrounds, highlighted the deep-seated frustrations with a government perceived as disconnected from the needs of its citizens.

The government's response to the #EndSARS movement was marked by violent crackdowns, including the infamous Lekki Toll Gate shooting. This incident, where security forces were alleged to have fired on peaceful protesters, brought international condemnation and further galvanized the movement. Although the government announced reforms, including the disbandment of SARS and the establishment of judicial panels, these measures have been criticized as insufficient. The ongoing struggle to fully implement the promised reforms underscores the challenges of addressing class conflict through superficial policy changes (Adeyemi 65).

ii. The COVID-19 Pandemic and Economic Inequality (2020–2021)

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing economic inequalities in Nigeria. The lockdowns and restrictions disproportionately impacted informal sector workers, who lacked the financial security and access to healthcare enjoyed by wealthier individuals. The pandemic highlighted the stark divide between those who could work remotely and those forced to risk their health for a daily wage.

Labour unions, including the NLC, played a crucial role in advocating for better protection for workers during the pandemic. They demanded hazard allowances for frontline workers and economic support for the vulnerable. However, the government's response was often inadequate, reflecting broader systemic issues in addressing worker welfare. Strikes and protests during this period underscored the urgent need for comprehensive social safety nets and better labour protections (Chukwu, 2021:58).

iii. The 2023 Fuel Subsidy Removal Protests

In 2023, the Nigerian government's decision to remove fuel subsidies sparked widespread protests. The removal, aimed at reducing government expenditure and addressing fiscal challenges, led to a dramatic increase in fuel prices and, subsequently, the cost of living. The policy change was seen by many as a direct attack on the working class, already struggling with inflation and stagnant wages.

The NLC and other civil society groups led nationwide protests against the subsidy removal, arguing that it would disproportionately affect the poor. The government's response included palliative measures, such as cash transfers and transport subsidies. However, these measures were criticized as insufficient and poorly targeted, failing to address the broader economic challenges faced by the working class. The protests highlighted the ongoing tensions between economic policies and social justice (Agbo 75).

iv. Minimum Wage Strikes and Industrial Actions (2020–2024)

Disputes over the implementation of the national minimum wage have been a persistent source of conflict in Nigeria. Although the national minimum wage was increased to 30,000 Naira in 2019, many state governments have been slow to implement it fully, citing financial constraints. This has led to numerous strikes and industrial actions by the NLC and other trade unions.

In 2022, the NLC organized a nationwide strike to demand the full implementation of the minimum wage. The strike underscored the disconnect between government policies and the realities faced by workers. Despite repeated promises, many workers continue to earn below the minimum wage, struggling to cope with rising inflation and a deteriorating standard of living. The government's failure to address these issues reflects a broader pattern of neglecting workers' rights and needs (Olusegun 92).

Comparative Analysis: Nigeria and Other Countries

To understand the dynamics of labour conflict in Nigeria, it is useful to compare it with labour movements in other countries facing similar economic and social challenges. This comparison provides insights into how different contexts shape labour activism and government responses across the world.

i. South Africa: Labour Strikes and Economic Inequality

South Africa, like Nigeria, has experienced significant labour unrest due to economic inequality and high unemployment rates. The country has seen numerous strikes in the mining and manufacturing sectors, driven by demands for better wages and working conditions. Similar to Nigeria, South African labour movements have faced challenges in achieving sustained policy changes, with government responses often reactive rather than proactive (Sibanda 113).

ii. Brazil: Labour Movements and Economic Reforms

In Brazil, labour movements have been influential in shaping economic reforms and addressing social inequalities. The country's history of labour activism includes major strikes and protests, particularly during periods of economic crisis. Brazilian labour unions have been more successful in negotiating long-term policy changes, partly due to a more engaged government and a stronger tradition of collective bargaining (Silva 89).

iii. India: Labour Activism and Policy Responses

India has also seen significant labour unrest, particularly in response to economic liberalization policies and changes in labour laws. Indian labour movements have often succeeded in pushing for reforms through sustained protests and strikes. The Indian government's approach to labour issues includes a mix of policy adjustments and social safety nets, reflecting a more proactive stance compared to the reactive measures seen in Nigeria (Rao 101).

Government and Employer Responses

The responses of the Nigerian government and employers to labour activism have been a critical factor in shaping the outcomes of labour disputes. These responses are often characterized by a pattern of short-term fixes and reactive measures.

Government Responses: Reactive Measures and Short-Term Fixes

The Nigerian government's responses to labour activism are often marked by a lack of proactive engagement. For example, during the #EndSARS protests, the government initially responded with violent crackdowns before promising reforms that were slow to materialize. Similarly, the response to the fuel subsidy removal protests included temporary relief measures that failed to address the broader economic issues. This reactive approach reflects a broader reluctance to engage with the root causes of class conflict, such as economic inequality and poor governance. The government's focus on short-term fixes, rather than comprehensive policy changes, limits the effectiveness of its responses and perpetuates ongoing class tensions (Eze 77).

Employer Responses: Compliance and Resistance

Employers in Nigeria often resist labour demands, particularly regarding wage increases and improved working conditions. Many employers, especially in the informal sector, have been slow to comply with labour laws and regulations, citing financial constraints and operational challenges. This resistance exacerbates class conflict and contributes to ongoing labour unrest.

The role of employers in shaping labour relations is complex, as they navigate the pressures of economic competitiveness while responding to labour demands. In some cases, employers have engaged in negotiations and made concessions to avoid prolonged conflicts. However, these efforts are often limited and fail to address the underlying issues driving labour activism (Osagie 130).

Future Outlook and Recommendations

Looking ahead, the future of labour activism in Nigeria will likely be shaped by several factors, including economic conditions, political developments, and the evolving nature of class conflict.

Potential Future Trends

1. **Increased Labour Activism:** As economic pressures and class inequalities continue to grow, labour activism may become more prominent. Workers may increasingly demand better wages, improved working conditions, and more comprehensive social protections.
2. **Digital Activism:** The use of digital platforms for organizing and mobilizing protests is likely to increase. Social media and online communication tools can enhance the reach and impact of labour movements, providing new opportunities for advocacy and engagement.
3. **Policy Reforms:** There may be pressure on the government to implement more substantive policy reforms to address economic inequalities and improve labour conditions. However, the effectiveness of these reforms will depend on the government's willingness to engage with the root causes of class conflict (Chukwu 58).

Recommendations for Policy Improvements

1. **Comprehensive Labour Reforms:** The government should prioritize comprehensive labour reforms that address wage disparities, improve working conditions, and strengthen social safety nets. This includes enforcing existing labour laws and implementing new policies to protect workers' rights.
2. **Proactive Engagement:** The government should adopt a more proactive approach to managing class conflict, engaging with labour unions and civil society groups to address grievances and negotiate solutions.
3. **Enhanced Social Protections:** Expanding social protections, including healthcare, pensions, and unemployment benefits, can help mitigate the impact of economic inequalities and provide a safety net for vulnerable workers.
4. **Strengthening Collective Bargaining:** Promoting and supporting collective bargaining processes can enhance the effectiveness of labour movements and contribute to more equitable outcomes for workers.

Conclusion

The relationship between class conflict and the Nigerian labour movement is characterized by ongoing struggles for economic justice and social equity. Strikes, protests, and other forms of labour activism have played a crucial role in challenging class disparities and advocating for workers' rights. However, the government's responses to these movements have often been reactive and insufficient, reflecting a broader reluctance to address the structural causes of class conflict.

To achieve lasting socio-economic progress, there is a need for continued advocacy and engagement from labour unions, civil society, and other stakeholders. Addressing the deepseated economic inequalities that fuel class conflict requires more than temporary fixes; it demands a comprehensive rethinking of economic policies and a commitment to social justice. Understanding class conflict as a driving force behind labour activism is essential for developing policies that promote equitable and inclusive growth in Nigeria.

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