

Original Article

Academic Staff Salaries and Academic Union Struggles: Historical Evidence from Nigeria

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Abstract - *The Academic Staff Union of Universities (then known as the National Association of University Teachers, NAUT) in the pre-1978 period were adjudged the most passive workers' union in Nigeria. Members of the union were relatively unconcerned about the union's activities and rarely demonstrated any sign of militancy since they were among the highest-paid members of the Nigerian middle class, and their salaries were never delayed. Rather, the union was more interested in the discharge of good quality education (Jega 1994:7). This position of the union was challenged, first of all in the 1970s, by excessive inflation, which eroded the purchasing power of all workers. Thus in 1973, the NAUT went on its first strike to negotiate wage increases. However, its profile at the time was that of a very compliant and elitist union, and it took a mere threat from the military administration of General Gowon to halt the strike. The leadership of the union met immediately and called off the strike; it was directly out of this context that ASUU was established in 1978. The paper makes a cogent review of the union struggles vis a vis the salary and other conditions of service of its members. It further found that academic staff salary review from successive governments in Nigeria was a success as a result of the union's struggles over a period of time. It also concludes that the rise to dominance of the Nigerian military in the postcolonial context and the connivance of the military with the processes of 'structural adjustment' which have forced limits on public sector spending, as well as the hypocrisy of the subsequent civilian regimes in Nigeria are factors which led to the economic decline in the status of the Nigerian academics over the years.*

I. INTRODUCTION

To understand this more clearly, it is helpful to recognize just how far Nigerian academics have seen a long-term decline in their salary levels. This process has been one of long historical development; hence, one can trace the problem of salaries and conditions of service back to the immediate post-independence era. Comparing the emoluments in the Nigerian public service with those obtainable in the university system at the time, Adekanye (1993) cited in Onyeonoru (2006) observed that:

At independence in October 1960, the salary of the Prime Minister of the Federation of Nigeria was only eight hundred pounds (£800) more than that of the Principal (that is the future Vice-Chancellor) of the University College, Ibadan, while the latter certainly earned more than the Nigerian Army Commander and General. The Prime Minister's personal emolument was put at £4,500, while the Principal of the University College, Ibadan, was paid £3,750, and the Army Major General and Commissioner £3,580 (08).

Historically, therefore, University employees occupied a relatively high position when compared to their counterparts in other offices in the state civil service. However, with the emergence of the military into Nigerian politics in 1966, there was a gradual shift in the relative systems of reward in various occupational groups around the country, which led to a growing disparity. By 1966, in spite of salary reviews which were skewed positively towards the military, the annual salary of the university professor remained £3,000. This figure was still higher than a Federal Minister's salary of £2,700 and a top civil servant of the rank of Permanent Secretary who was paid between £2,500 and £2,940. During this time, the salary of an assistant lecturer was £950, while his peers in the federal civil service (i.e., those with similar academic qualifications) were offered £720. (Onyeonoru, 2006:09). Yaqub (2007:9) confirms this point quoting the NUC (1994:3):

As of the 1960s, only the Chief Justice of the Federation on an annual salary of 3,600.00 British Pounds per annum earned more than a university professor. Not only were university lecturers better paid than their civil service counterparts, fringe benefits such as housing, allowances, social status, and working conditions were very attractive, making academics the envy of civil servants. Adequate funding of universities, attending overseas conferences every three years, and such other fringe benefits were the order of the day. The prevailing economic situation in Nigeria was such that the annual salary of a lecturer was sufficient to buy a car, and so the liquidation of a car loan five years later was not a strain.



The synchronization of the civil service under the “unified public service”, a recommendation of the Udoji & Co advisory committee of 1975, brought about a further devaluation of academic labor in Nigerian universities. Under this scheme, the university professor's salary was capped at £11,568, which placed him or her at par with a permanent secretary of the same grade at the state level, but lower than the latter's counterpart at the Federal level. A comparison of the remuneration of the then ruling military class with the university staffers before and after the Udoji recommendation makes the matter clearer.

At Nigeria's independence in 1960, an Assistant Lecturer was paid more than both a Sub-Lieutenant and Lieutenant; a Lecturer II more than a Lieutenant Colonel, a Reader/Associate Professor more than a Colonel and Brigadier. The Major General's salary placed him a few incremental steps on top of the University Professor (Adekanye, 1993:18). Now, the overturn was evident in the 1975 post- Udoji period:

An Army Captain was now being paid more than the university Lecturer I, a Lieutenant-Colonel more than Senior Lecturer, a Colonel more than a Reader/Associate Professor; an army Brigadier, whose salary in 1966 had been lower than that of a Reader/Associate Professor now earned more than even a full Professor. The salaries of both the Lieutenant General and full General out-distanced that of a Vice-Chancellor (19)

It follows that according to Onyeonoru (2006:10), "the reversal in the conditions of service of the University staff was to be the starting point of the implementation of a class ascendancy project of the Nigerian military class in the wider society."

Hence, strike actions were undertaken by ASUU in 1988 and afterward started to take on the character of a form of struggle for class survival. One of the union's demands in 1988 was the restoration of the 20% differential in the University Salary Structure (USS), which was initially enjoyed by the University staffers relative to their counterparts in the wider economy, but which had been eroded by the effects of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of the Ibrahim Babangida administration. In a report filed to Babangida, ASUU argued that the wide disparity brought about by the unified salary structure instituted in the 1970s was causing the problem of a loss of academic staff and the erosion of status and income for academics. But the government implemented the Elongated University Salary Structure (EUSS) under the SAP, which led to a situation in which private-sector wages became more attractive than those of the public sector as a result of the privatization initiative thus defeating the entire purpose of the USS. The ASUU has thus sought to engage the FGN since 1992 in negotiations involving collective bargaining on salary and other welfare

packages for academic staff. It should be recalled that between 1993 and 2008, Nigerian universities were closed for nearly 36 months due to various strike actions embarked upon by the union. ASUU has always proposed an increase in their Academic Staff Minimum – Salary Pay Scale, such as that which is obtainable in other African countries. But the government has never acceded to such requests. As a result of this situation, as described above, many lecturers now engage in private practices (many of which are outside their scope and training) in a bid to supplement their income, thus distracting them from their core functions of teaching and research.

In other subsequent negotiations, ASUU has been reported to be insisting on a 109% pay rise to get salaries up to what the union called the ‘African average’. But this barely managed to yield 52% in the 2009 agreements with the FGN as the government pleaded fiscal difficulties. Union member from the University of Nigeria (UNN), Nsukka, comments on the government's position:

In a disgraceful 'might is right' posture and without any mutual negotiation, they flung a 40% salary increase on us. As if the university teachers are just hungry and only need a little appeasement, the government's insensitivity continued with 'the no work, no pay policy...

However, a communiqué issued by ASUU on its history and struggles (1981-2009) is revealing in that it specifically links economic and political aspects of the dispute. The statement reads:

The government thinks we are a bunch of mercenaries who are interested in mere salaries and who would jump at the sight of figures. No! Our main concern is the totality of the conditions in the Universities that affect staff and students – (ASUU communiqué, 2010:1)

A. Retirement Period for University Academic Staff

One consequence of the above argument is that the dispute has involved some demands which appear, from the point of view of 'classical' wage disputes (at least in the Western context), surprising. For example, according to the union members, an issue in the dispute, which remained unresolved until 2009, was the pegging of retirement age for university professors at 65 years. ASUU members have been fighting for an increase to 70 years. The demand by ASUU for the increment in retirement age appears unexpected when examined from the perspective of workers in some developed economies who agitate for earlier retirement ages. One can argue that the economic explanation for this difference lies partially in the fact that in most African economies like Nigeria, where policies such as unemployment or retirement benefits are limited, workers are compelled to seek to work longer in order to be able to maintain themselves in old age. Another argument often posed by the union members to justify the

increase in the retirement age to 70 is based on the premise that (as a result of the loss of academic staff to other contexts) there is often a huge gap between the younger lecturers in Nigerian universities and the older (more experienced) ones, especially professorial staff. The argument is thus that professors should be allowed to stay for additional 5 years in order to prepare the young lecturers for more senior positions before they leave the university system. This request was granted in 2009 when the Yar'Adua administration's negotiation team agreed to ASUU's demands.

Based on the above, it was evident that ASUU members were pushing for an increase in the retirement age for university professors because it afforded an opportunity for more experienced intellectuals to train the less experienced lecturers in the context where large numbers of professors were retiring or migrating to other countries. In that respect, retirement ages became an issue in the crisis of higher education in the country not because the union aimed at protecting lower retirement ages (as might be conventionally expected), but because the dispute occurs in the context of the profoundly politicized crisis of Higher Education in the country.

B. Salary Differentials between Federal, State, and Private University Staffers:

For the same reason, according to the union members, another controversial issue which the members have been concerned about is the uniformity of the pay scale across the national university system so that agreements reached at the Federal level become binding on the state and private universities. The issue arises, in part, because some state governors have threatened not to execute any salary packages approved by the federal government for state-owned universities, except if funding was forthcoming from the federal government to support such measures. ASUU members were of the view that an equalized pay structure would allow for the free movement of academic labor within the national university system (Awuzie, 2009).

ASUU argues that there should be a national agreement that would require the Federal Government, the State Governments, and Private universities to adhere to the same salary structure and conditions of service for all academic staff, irrespective of where they teach based on the fact that they are all regulated by the same federal government agencies: the National University Commission (NUC) and Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB). Similarly, the former President of ASUU, Professor Ukachukwu Anwuzie, in his October 2009 press conference, said:

ASUU has, since 1992, insisted that we should never have a multiplicity of academic standards in Nigeria. We cannot divide Nigerian Universities into low and higher-standard institutions in the same structure. There should

be just one system with a minimum standard that will keep the system internationally competitive. This is ASUU's position. This is why we have insisted that what our Union has negotiated is a minimum benchmark for the system. State Governments that cannot fund their Universities to meet the benchmark set up in the Agreement will find that they cannot survive in the system. The minimum conditions are not only about emoluments. They are standards that must be met in the funding of facilities for teaching and research, funding of post-graduate studies, the upgrading of programs, remedy of deficiencies in them, and for collaborating with industries in the areas of research and development of technology and staff development.

What is clear from this comment is that the union is not only concerned about pecuniary benefits but are also with seeking to defend the integrity of the state-funded education sector against the threat posed by a growing private sector in the country which can be seen as one consequence of the effort towards deregulation and limited state expenditure in the structural adjustment era.

In summary, this section examined the problem of poor wages and conditions of service among Nigerian academics as well as the resulting problems: lack of worker motivation, reduced productivity, and the brain drain syndrome. What emerges clearly from the review is that ASUU members believe that the decline in their wages means that they can hardly carry out their primary assignments of teaching and research without having to engage in non-academic related practices to supplement their income and meet their basic needs. In comparison with their fellow counterparts in the civil service, banking, steel, oil industries, and higher education around the world, Nigerian lecturers are relatively underpaid. The problem of poor wages for academics seems to have arisen over the years from the class struggle between the ruling military class and the intellectuals; what remains unanswered is the extent to which these and other related factors affect their (academic staff) productivity. Prior to the dominance of the Military on the political scene, Nigerian academics were well paid and enjoyed a reasonable level of affluence and social status. But with the emergence of the military and the subsequent era of structural adjustment, the position of the academics began to shift over time from what was effectively that of the white-collar, middle class to a position more or less equivalent to working-class status (Sylvester 2012). This provides, in part, an explanation as to why these disputes seemed to have become increasingly politicized, involving not just questions of economics but also questions about the general management of the economy and the distribution of the nation's resources

II. CONCLUSION

Thus, the paper concludes that the salary demands are implicitly tied to the fact that the decline in the economic status of Nigerian academics over the years has been shaped in profoundly political ways, as the foregoing historical survey reveals. In summary, the rise to dominance of the Nigerian military in the postcolonial context and the connivance of the military with processes of 'structural adjustment' which have forced limits on public sector spending, as well as the hypocrisy of the subsequent civilian regimes in Nigeria, are factors which led to the economic decline in the status of Nigerian academics over the years. In this respect, the economic questions in the dispute and its political aspects are hard to separate, yet the dispute has become increasingly politicized over time.

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