

A LABOURER DESERVES HIS WAGES (Luke 10:7): TOWARDS A LASTING SOLUTION TO WAGE CRISIS AND INCESSANT STRIKES IN NIGERIA**Samuel C. Izuegbu**Department of Religion & Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka-Nigeria
Email: sc.izuegbu@unizik.edu.ng**Abstract**

The issue of wage in Nigeria has become so worrisome. There have been various problems that emanate from wage issue in Nigeria. The Nigerian labour force and the employers of labour especially the government both at the federal and state levels have experienced various degrees of crises as such, matters about wage continually lead to problems. These crises in most cases are culminated into strike or industrial actions that hamper the expected goals for which various institutions were established. It may be that employers of labour are ignorant of the religious backing of wage. From Christian perspective, wage payment is a religious duty that its negligence amounts to sin. Occupying a special position in maintaining peace between the workers and their employers, this work using virtue ethics approach, gathered data from secondary source of information, discusses the expected reasons for the continued wage crisis in Nigeria. These include lack of workable economic planning, problem of interpretation of wage laws, insincerity of politicians, imbalance in federal allocations and much focus on oil resources among other reasons for wage crisis in Nigeria. The work proffered solutions to the problem under study. To get rid of the wage crisis in Nigeria, cost of governance has to be addressed, objective dialogue is needed, viable economic planning both at the federal and state levels are important, justice should serve as a watchword among other solutions. The work concluded that if the solutions as proffered by this work are considered in policies that concern wage in Nigeria, there will be noticeable reduction in wage crises in Nigeria.

Keywords: Wage, Wage Crisis, Strike, Nigeria**Introduction**

Wage in human history has been an important issue in relation to employer-employee interaction. The industrial revolution in Europe and the consequent agitations by workers attest to this truism. There is no way one can expect peace where the worker is consciously denied of his wage or entitlement. In sending out His disciples, Jesus Christ clearly told the disciples that “a labourer deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7). This assertion from Christ shows that payment of workers’ wage (salary) is not just a civil duty but equally a religious duty. It then implies that payment of wages is part of Christian responsibilities and so should be firmly adhered to. Where this responsibility is met, there is high tendency that crisis between the labours and employers of labour would be at lowest ebb.

In Nigeria, the issue of wage between the labour and employers has in most cases elicited crises in the country. Many times, the Nigerian workers and the government are seen in serious log jam over wage and in most cases one witnesses series of strike actions. Okakpu (2013) using the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) as a case study observed that a critical look at the record of strikes from year 2001 to 2013, shows that apart from 2004 and 2012, no year has passed without ASUU going on strike. It is the same almost with other categories of workers in Nigeria. Till date, many Colleges of Education and Polytechnics are yet to recover from the blow of their over eight-month strike in 2014 and other strike actions afterwards. The Judiciary is not left out just as the crisis continues in every other institution. Sometimes ago, it was Teachers Salary Structure (TSS). Medical workers are not left out in this malady. In some cases, the crisis may be for non-implementation of agreed salary structure or inability of the government to pay promptly.

The issue of Minimum Wage from the time of General Abdusalami Abubakar as a Military Head of State till the recent Thirty Thousand (30,000) Naira minimum wage has continued to cause confusion among workers. Some States of the Federation agreed to pay the Minimum Wage while others agreed

to raise the salaries of some levels of workers who were not hitherto paid up to the stated amount. Some governors that agreed to pay eventually turned it down while others calculated their own brand of minimum wage. This becomes a serious disparity among workers. Nzomiwu (1989) holds that justice has to do with equal pay for equal work. However, in Nigerian situation, it has not been so and hence wage crisis continues. The issue of wage took a different dimension in 2015 as some states in Nigeria could not promptly pay workers. Some state Governors boldly went to the Federal Government for bailout. Some states especially Osun were on the pages of newspapers for being unable to pay workers. Today, it is still difficult to pay workers promptly in some states. Some are paid once in three months, a situation that hampers the basic needs of workers. Without doing anything to this situation, the end is not at sight.

Disturbed by the incessant wage crisis and its concomitant strike actions, one wonders the reasons for the continued crises. One asks why the issue of minimum wage in Nigeria would always lead to wage crisis among Government (employers) and their workers. What should be done to reduce or even eliminate this malady in Nigeria? It is the crux of this paper to attempt unveiling the factors responsible for the wage crisis in Nigeria as well as proffering solutions to the problem bearing in mind that wage payment is equally a religious responsibility.

Definition of Terms

Labourer: Labourer as used here implies a worker. It includes all that work in one way or another under another person or employer. However, the focus of this paper is on those that work under government in Nigeria (public/civil servants).

Wage: Wage as used here includes salaries, allowances and other entitlements which a worker deserves for work or service rendered.

Wage Crisis: Wage crisis is used here to mean the problems Nigeria which may lead to industrial actions.

Biblical References on Wages

In order to go on with the crux of this work, some Bible references are to be considered to show that payment of wages is not just a civil duty but a religious duty. This work selects few of the verses on wages as framework to understanding the necessity of payment of wages from Christian view. In Leviticus 19: 13 “Do not take advantage of anyone or rob him. Do not hold back the wages of someone you have hired, not even for one night”. The scripture here is explicit on the issue of this discourse. No matter what, a labourer even for a night has to be paid. If such is the case, to withhold a worker’s one month salary in the biblical perspective is grave injustice. This is in line with virtue ethics theory when one considers what ought to be. Again “Do not cheat poor and needy hired servants.... Each day before sunset pay them for that day’s work; they need the money and have counted on getting it. If you do not pay them, they will cry out against you to the Lord, and you will be guilty of sin. (Deuteronomy 24:14-15). It is therefore a sin not to pay for a day’s job how much more for months as one witnesses in Nigeria. In some cases, the government may even threaten to sack workers for any agitation. Bluntly, the Bible says “Doomed is the man who builds his house by injustice and enlarges it by dishonesty; who makes his countrymen work for nothing and does not pay their wages” (Jeremiah 22:13). It has been said that the civil service is the engine wire of any government. The formulation of policies as well as the implementation is carried out by the civil/public servants. In other words, they are the builders of any nation in various capacities. Attempts at denying them their entitlements for works done are grievous injustice and should not be thought of. It then follows that priority attention should be given to the welfare of men and women that build the nation through their services. The scripture equally warns that God would judge and testify against those who cheat employees out of their wages (Malachi 3:5). This may include unnecessary deductions from salaries which in some cases are witnessed. Paul in his teaching mentioned that wages are not gifts. “Those who work are paid wages, but they are not regarded as a gift; they are something that has been earned” (Romans 4:2). From Pauline

writing here, wage is a right not a gift. As such, the government cannot claim to be doing workers a favour for paying their salaries or raising their salary structure. Although in Nigeria, any government that pays workers promptly is celebrated because the system has made it a kind of magnanimity not a right. The Christian scripture does not in any way consider wages a privilege but a right. Paul in line with the above cited the scripture that says “Do not muzzle an ox when you are using it to thresh corn” and “Workers should be given their pay” (1 Timothy 5:18). For not paying the workers, James states that their cries reach the God Almighty (James 5:4). It is therefore evident in this exposition that the Bible is not mute about wages and its statements on wages are weighty. Payment of wage is a duty not a mere privilege. Any attempt at denying wages for works done or services rendered is a serious sin.

The scriptural backings of welfare of workers could have been a major force behind the Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical (1891) that articulates the basic rights of workers especially in advancing their welfare. Oguejiofor (cited in Chiegboka, 2014) holds that from the dawn of industrial revolution, the Church has intervened creditably in ensuring the right of workers in relation to the dignity of labour, right to form unions or associations to protect their interests and improve their working conditions as well as their right to just wages. In line with the scripture, the Church sees payment of wages a right.

Reasons for Wage Crisis in Nigeria

The crises have continued unabated in Nigeria. Using Academic Staff Union of Universities as a case study, there have been incessant industrial actions in the fourth republic from 1999 because of wage issues and related matters. A cursory glance becomes necessary here:

ASUU strikes and their durations 1999-2020

Source: Africa Explained (n. d)

YEAR	DURATION
1999	Five months
2001	Three months
2002	Two weeks
2003	Six months
2005	Two weeks
2006	One week
2007	Three months
2008	One week
2009	Four months
2010	Five months
2011	Two months
2013	Five and half months
2017	One month
2018	Three months
2020	Nine months

The above is one out of numerous industrial actions happening in Nigeria almost every year. It is on record that any time issue of minimum wage is raised in Nigeria, there must be crisis with different interpretations. There are certain reasons for the continued wage crisis in Nigeria which need to be addressed if the wage crisis would be eliminated or reduced. These reasons contribute in various degrees to the problem of wage crisis in Nigeria. The factors are here discussed.

Lack of Proper Economic Planning: Economic planning is a conscious mapping out of strategies for promoting, sustaining and improving economy of a nation or state. It has been clear that certain economic policies undertaken by the nation have not much improved the nation’s economy. Proper economic plan is a necessary factor for the growth of any nation and such goes a long way to affecting

the welfare of the workforce. Nigeria as a nation cannot boast of viable economic plan that could be felt in all areas of the country's institution including the labour force. Abdullahi (2012) points out that Nigeria has initiated policies to increase economic growth and reduce crisis in Nigeria. The crisis include wage crisis. However, these policies have not been much felt. Okeke (2010) in his submission opines that Nigeria has often been credited with developing some of the best policies in the world. He further regretted that most often, the policies do not go beyond intentions as they do not translate into concrete deliverables to improve the quality of lives of the citizenry. A nation in such quagmire cannot boast of adequate care for its work force. There is no doubt that persistent wage crisis in Nigeria has something to do with the kind of planning in Nigeria. Planning in any human enterprise is a sine qua non to the success of such enterprise. Suffice it to say that the bane of crisis in Nigeria including wage crisis in some cases is lack of clear economic planning.

Politics of Wage Increment: Here, by politics of wage increment, this paper affirms that many politicians in Nigeria make use of wage increment as a cheap way of getting the mandate of the people. Many of them make bogus promises just to win cheap popularity and in the end, they do the opposite. Situation like that hardly gives room for harmonious relations between the government and workers. The 2014 wage crisis in Nigeria that led to nationwide strike was an eye opener to what Nigerian politicians are capable of doing. The attitudes of the Federal Government and many State Governments clearly shows a continued deceit. Many politicians agreed to pay the minimum wage just to win election of 2011. The Federal Government that signed minimum wage law of eighteen thousand naira after election tried to escape it. In such a deceit situation, crisis is inevitable. The practice of the more you look, the less you see by politicians ignited the crisis all the more. Almost every politician promises to increase workers wage but in most cases, the promises were futile.

Lack of Dialogue: Anozie (2005) identifies dialogue as a formal interaction or discussion between two or more persons or groups. Dialogue where it is taken and the outcome implemented reduces to a large extent rate of crisis that would have occurred. No doubt, some wage crisis experienced in Nigeria is because the parties involved did not embrace dialogue or that the agreements reached were not adhered to by either of the parties involved. A situation where it is difficult for the government of the day to negotiate with its workforce through dialogue is crisis-ridden. It is part of the submissions of this work that one of the reasons for wage crisis in Nigeria is the inability of parties to reach workable agreement through dialogue. Chiegboka (2014) observes that one of the reasons for incessant strike actions by the Nigerian Universities lecturers is because agreements are not followed. Of course, dialogue remains invalid if the outcome eventually was not implemented.

Problem of Interpretation: The problem of interpretation comes when the issue of minimum wage is raised. Lack of clear interpretation of minimum wage Act is another source of the wage crisis in Nigeria. The eighteen thousand minimum wage Act in Nigeria witnessed this problem of interpretation as it was interpreted differently. This brought about disparity between the workers' interpretation and some state governments' interpretation. Some states in the federation agreed to pay certain amount from levels one to six to make sure they earn Eighteen Thousand naira. Those whose levels are higher were not considered in the minimum wage. Workers in those states agitated believing that the minimum wage should be for all levels and according to steps. The interpretation and practice by some state governments were countered by workers hence there was crisis in those states. The story has remained the same with the recent thirty-thousand naira minimum wage. From this, one understands that where the interpretation is not clear, one must expect crisis as in Nigeria.

Cost of Governance: It is no longer news that the cost of governance in Nigeria is very high. This directly or indirectly affects other aspects of the polity that requires finance including payment of wages. Nigeria is a country where civil servants earn peanut while political class earn jumbo pay to the detriment of the entire nation. Aggrieved workers always see it as injustice for the jumbo pay given to government officials whereas, a worker earns peanut. It is clear that money which would have been used to pay workers are in most cases paid to a particular person in the name of allowance or whatever

name it bears. The country's National Assembly often are on pages of newspapers for the amount each of them demands in millions. This happens in the midst of workers who serve for years and are not able to earn half of what a politician earns in a year if not a month. The injustice and greediness infuriate workers and such brings about wage crisis either as a remote cause or otherwise.

Inequality in Federal Allocation and Oil Rent Politics: The country Nigeria has not been practising through federalism. In Nigeria the states largely depend on the federal allocation for survival. Owing to the fact that Nigeria has unfortunately caged herself in what Soludo (2012) described as oil resource curse and the triumph of distributive oil politics, the whole nation is every month waiting for oil money. Soludo regretted that in the pre and post-independence Nigeria politics was developmental before oil boom. He emphasized that Regions in Nigeria were self-reliant and consequently upon that catered for their problems. Each Region has one agricultural produce or the other that served as the major source of income. From 1970, Nigeria abandoned other sources of income and faced oil money which is today affecting the nation adversely. Some states in Nigeria due to principle of derivation in allocation get more allocation every month than some other states. It is possible in Nigeria that where a state's allocation is three billion another state gets the same amount and about another nine billion. The implication is not farfetched. It would be easier for a state with high allocation to pay workers than those that have nothing to be derived from. Since, it is in the same country, a worker in a state where payment is lower has to agitate for that. Thus the inequality in allocation and mono-economy in Nigeria becomes a source of problem.

Non-Payment of Tax: Tax should be paid for development of the state. As it is, many do not pay taxes for development of states. Obiefuna and Uzoigwe (2012) equally observed this lacuna and asserted that "a simple observation in Nigeria society would unveil that many people... do not show active commitment to their social responsibility. There is lack of conscientious commitment towards that which benefits the public" (p. 254). Civic duties no doubt include payment of tax. Where the government battles with only monthly allocation to develop the state and at the same time pay workers, it may not be easy for such government. In most states, the only people that pay tax are workers under government. Where government lacks money to cater for its functions in the state, the salary of workers may be hampered and consequently, wage crisis erupts.

So far, this work has made effort at showing the likely causes of wage crisis in Nigeria. The problems showed above are observed in daily Nigeria. Whether as immediate or remote cause, each of the above discussed has a way of contributing to wage crisis in Nigeria.

Solutions towards Wage Crisis in Nigeria

To bring to an end wage crisis or to reduce it in Nigeria, certain measures are to be taken. In line with the above identified reasons, solutions are here proffered. It is necessary to address the issue of cost of governance in Nigeria. It is necessary that the issue of jumbo pay for the legislators and other government officials whether elected or appointed officials have to be addressed. It is a matter of injustice to pay political office holders in millions whereas civil servants who work all days are paid peanut. Where the allowances are reduced there would be reduction in the crisis as it concerns wages in Nigeria. It is not debatable that one of the things that infuriate workers is this imbalance. So, if a reduction is made there, the wage crisis in Nigeria would reduce.

It may be important to consider state minimum wage as a solution to wage crisis in Nigeria. Looking at it from the inequality that exists as it concerns monthly allocation, one thinks it right to base minimum wage in the hands of each state government. Where it is still national minimum wage, a state with more allocation can comfortably pay while other states with meagre allocation may find it difficult to pay. On that note, it is imperative to advocate that each state should have its own minimum wage according to the resources available to it. This may equally stimulate the interest in diverging economy by those states with meagre resources. It can make states think of how to generate their own revenue which would reduce over dependence on oil money and as well federal allocation. If this option is considered in Nigeria, many states would be able to pay and there would be reduction in crisis as it affects wage.

One cannot proffer solution on issue of wage crisis without mentioning the issue of justice. Nzomiwu (1999) was emphatic to state this when he stated that “justice is *conditio sine qua non* for peace and so far as the desire and struggle for peace cut across all faiths and ideologies, so does that justice” (p. 22). He maintained that justice played and still plays and will continue to play veritable roles in the history of mankind. To him, justice is a fitting for a world dialogue. So where the position of justice is as crucial as Nzomiwu identified, it is right to say that justice can solve the wage crisis in Nigeria. In fact, whatever one may proffer as solution to this issue must hover round justice. It is justice that can make employers of labour pay reasonable amount to their employees and at appropriate time. If the virtue of justice is imbibed in political terrain in Nigeria, no doubt, wage crisis will be reduced. Justice promotes the principle of equal pay for equal work. Where there is fairness, it is difficult for people to disenchant. Justice entails being ready to fulfil agreements at appropriate time. Strongly, this paper holds that if there should be justice in dealing with wage issues in Nigeria, there will be elimination of this crisis that is witnessed in Nigeria till today.

Objective dialogue is another veritable tool for solving the wage palaver in Nigeria. Dialogue has been identified as a powerful means of settling any dispute. Most of the crises so far because of wage were caused because either the government or workers failed to dialogue objectively. Objective dialogue here implies dialogue that has a balance goal which each party to it is ready to fulfil its part after. Where employers and employees can dialogue effectively and objectively, each party understands the plight of another and this will bring about an outcome that is welcoming to the parties. The employers and employees therefore should discuss issues on wage and each party remains committed to the agreement. In doing so, wage crisis is reduced.

Proper Economic Planning is another way of dealing with the problem of wage in Nigeria. Where a nation like Nigeria lacks steady growing economy, it may be difficult to cater for the workers and at the same time work on other sectors of the society. Many states in Nigeria have failed to plan and because of that it is difficult for the states to pay workers appropriate salaries. If states in Nigeria can plan in long and short terms, knowing the population of the state, number of actual workers in the state among other things, it is possible that payment of wage may not be so difficult for such states. Therefore, adequate economic planning in Nigeria can help reduce wage crisis in Nigeria. States should as a matter of importance embark on proper economic planning for the states to avoid future occurrence of wage crisis in Nigeria and their states in particular.

It is also imperative that prompt payment of taxes by the citizens be taken seriously. Though, tax is meant for development of the state but the problem in most states is that people do not pay tax. So, instead of using monthly allocation for salaries and few other projects, it is used for both salaries and developmental projects. This can adversely affect salary of workers. Where Nigerians pay tax promptly, it can help reduce wage crisis. This work holds that if taxes are paid promptly, there will be increase in the revenue of government which would help in payment of salaries.

Moreover, any Act on wage should be clearly stated to avoid crisis. The recent minimum wage crisis in Nigeria experienced this so much. So, any law to be enacted has to be clearly stated so as to avoid ambiguity in interpretation. When any law is clear, people cannot easily revolt once it is done the way it is stated. On the other hand, when any law is not clear, even when it is well interpreted, some people may still revolt. Therefore, as a measure towards bringing solution to wage crisis in Nigeria, wage act must be clearly stated to avoid misinterpretation which may lead to crisis.

Sincerity on the part of politicians is paramount to the solutions in discourse. Nigerian politicians need to show sincerity. It was clear after election, that the Federal Government signed the minimum wage Act may be to win 2011 election. Many state Governors who sought to be re-elected pledged to pay the minimum wage to the later. Unfortunately, most of the Governors after their re-election read another side of the Act. This caused a lot of problem in Nigeria. Leaders are called to be sincere, to say what

they can do and not make sentimental speeches to attract cheap political support. Looking at such deceit in politics, Izuegbu (2013) made a case for politicians especially those that are Christians to distinguish themselves by imbibing Christian values which include sincerity. Where leaders are not sincere, surely, wage crisis may continue but where leaders are sincere, wage crisis can reduce.

Another important solution to wage crisis in Nigeria is that the government should create enabling environment for private sectors to thrive. It is glaring that the government may be having more workers to pay. This is so because there are little or no employment opportunities to enable the private sectors to stand. It is a truism that in developed countries, private sectors have more employees than the government. In Nigeria, many seek government jobs because the private sectors are not that viable to contain many workers. If the government creates enabling environment, many workers may likely prefer working in private sectors to government establishments. By so doing, the government can easily manage the number of workers it has as its employees and possibly pay them to reduce wage crisis.

Conclusion

It is important to emphasize that issue of wage is not what may be overlooked in employer-employee relations. If there is just wage, there won't be recurrent crises. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2005) is emphatic on this. According to the document

Remuneration is the most important means for achieving justice in work relationships. The "just wage is the legitimate fruit of work". They commit grave injustice who refuse to pay a just wage or who do not give it in due time and in appropriate to the work done.... A salary is the instrument that permits the labourer to gain access to the goods of the earth. "Remuneration for labour is to be such that man may be furnished the means to cultivate worthily his own material, social, cultural, and spiritual life and that of his dependents, in view of the function and productiveness of each one". (pp. 166-167)

Wage crisis in Nigeria cannot be seen as a recent development. Workers have in different times embarked on strikes because of wage problems. Wage from Biblical perspective is a right of workers and where it is not paid, the scripture sees it as sin. Bible attaches more importance to wage of labourers. It therefore means that wage is equally a religious issue that should be done religiously. It therefore behoves that all those in leadership stool and employers of labour should see payment of workers as their religious obligation. The labourer deserves his wages as long as he does his work judiciously. Owing to the fact that Nigeria lacks adequate economic planning, clear interpretation of the wage act or law the issue of wage continues. Other factors are responsible for the continued crisis. However, wage crisis in Nigeria would be reduced by embracing adequate economic planning, and other suggestions made by this work. Categorically, it is pertinent to affirm here that any society with elements of capitalism cannot fully boast of wage crisis free. Nigeria is not a socialist or communist state and so, wage crisis may not be totally eradicated but may be reduced if the above measures as proffered by this work are observed especially in policy making in Nigeria.

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