

Factors Militating on Conflict in Contemporary Nigeria Industrial Society

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ABSTRACT

Industrial relations in Nigeria is ridden with conflict hence this paper examined the nature, sources and manifestation of industrial conflict in 'Nigerian organizations. Dahrendorfs' conflict analysis which assumes that all organizations are a coordinated authority system with differential distribution of people in positions of power and authority is the theoretical anchor. Collective bargaining was suggested as an alternative approach to conflict resolution in Nigerian organizations.

Key words: Conflict, industrial conflict, industrial relations, collective bargaining

Introduction

Conflict is a universal phenomenon which can be described as a state of divergence in opinions, interest and the like. Conflict exists in the workplace as it does in many other parts of life. Conflict is inevitable in labour-management relations; but without cooperation based upon an ideology that makes it possible to develop constructive industrial relations, the marvels of modern technology and industrialization may lead to disaster (Ubeku 1983). Obiajulu 2001 saw it as what prevails when social actors are unable to share meaning in an issue of interest in such a way that even the process of interaction can be adversely affected.

Organizations are characterized by .conflict. This arises from the contentions between employers and employees. In labour management relations, conflict is more than an expression of irrationality or ill-will. In

spite of the strong desire among parties In an industrial relations system to coexist, there is nevertheless latent antagonism among them. Organizational conflict is the discord that occurs when the goals, interests or values of different individuals or groups are incompatible and those individuals or groups block or frustrate each other's attempt to achieve their objectives. Conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life since the goals of different stakeholders such as managers and staff are often incompatible (Jones, Gorge and Hill, 2000).

Nigeria, in recent years, has witnessed a plethora of trade disputes rather than peaceful industrial relations. The pattern of industrial relations between the employer and employee is characterized incessant conflict with disruptive consequences and significant work-house losses due to work stoppages. The new height of poverty among workers in Nigeria could be responsible for the waves of industrial disputes in recent times. Plethora of studies in Nigeria revealed that those who are privileged to be employed are finding it increasing difficult to survive on their monthly wages. Their take home pay cannot take them home. In the face of increasing inflation of about 14 percent, the Nigerian worker is one of the least paid in the world (ASSI-NEC, 2005, Agba, 2007; NLC 2009). Oghenekaro (2013) aptly noted that the recalcitrant attitude of the management to create the right arena for open discussion with aggrieved parties as early as notice of labour discontent have been served the management or government is another source of industrial conflict in Nigeria. The consequence is not only reflective in the man-hour lost but also the psychological effect it has on services as a result of industrial actions. In a conflict prone society like ours industrial action by employees often heightened the level of insecurity thus making issue horrifying for the general public (Akume and Abdullahi 2013). Radin (2007) noted that conflict is an integral part of social existence, however the issue, is not to attempt to avoid or suppress conflict but, rather to prevent unnecessary conflict by managing it in such a manner that it leads towards productive ends. Regrettably, the evident character of labour-management relations in Nigeria has been conflict that has persisted.

The concept of industrial conflict

Rahim (2001) viewed conflict as an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance within or between social entities (that is individual, group, organization. Loser (1968) saw it as the struggle over values or claim to status, power and scarce resources in which the aim of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values, but also to neutralize, ignore or eliminate their rivals. In a similar vein Jambrek and Penic, (2008) conceive it as a process of social interaction and a social situation, where interests and activities of participants (individuals or groups) actually, or apparently, confront, block and disable the realization of one party's objectives. Deutsch (1973) as cited in Adebile and Ojo (2012) opined that conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur. An action which is incompatible with another action prevents, obstructs, interferes with, injures, or in some way makes it less likely or less effective. Hence conflict is defined by interest, values and psychological disposition. More often than not conflict is a mixture of all three, although, in some instance they may vary (Chalant 2001: 473). Akume and Abdullahi (2013) posits that Industrial conflict or trade dispute is a part of the general pattern, of conflict in the polity.

Industrial conflict therefore is defined as a struggle over values or claim to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralize, injure or even eliminate rivals (Pondy (1986). Nonyelu (1997) saw it as all forms of dissension or misunderstanding that arise between labour and management or employer. Iguniwei (1997) defines industrial conflict as any misunderstanding between management and workers in an organization resulting in stoppage of work, lock outs or work to rule, strikes, dismissal and resignation. Coser (1968) posits that industrial conflict is any perceived divergence of interest between groups that are involved in the direction, coordinating and execution of job processes in work organizations. However, Edwards (2001) observed that the term 'industrial conflict' is used in three main senses: the use of overt sanctions, as when it is said that conflict erupts when workers go on strike; a continuing sense of discord ('conflict over new work rotas'; an

underlying conflict of interest between workers and manager that need receive no overt expression

Theoretical framework

This paper anchors on Dahrendorf conflict analysis which views human behaviour from the point of view of groups. It assumes that all organizations are a coordinated authority system hence organization's basic feature is the differential distribution of people in positions of power and authority. Some are able to take decisions legitimately and issue command and others are not and this creates a conflict of interest. Hence the existence of dominant and subordinate positions produces a situation in which individuals have different interest. Those in dominant positions have an interest in maintaining a social structure that gives them more authority than others while those in subordinate positions have an interest in changing it. Suffice it to say that the voice of the working class is growing louder through its formal associations and sees a trend toward a more balance of power between employers and employees and the development of industrial democracy which begins with the formation of workers interest groups. The issue of power and control are common in many of the day to day struggles in industrial organizations hence workers can only marshal sufficient power to effect a significant change in their work situation by acting collectively (Haralarnbos and Holbom, 2008).

Sources of industrial conflict

Industrial conflict appears in a variety of forms and has varying causes. These can generally be separated into several categories. Kilmann (2008) identifies three sources of conflict. These are structural conflict (conflict arising out of the need to manage the interdependence between different organizational sub-units); role conflict (conflict arising from sets of prescribed behaviour) and resources conflict (conflict stemming from interest groups competing for organizational resources). Also, Tjosvold and Sun (2002) identify three sources of organizational conflict and indicates that an understanding of the source of a conflict improves the

probability of effective conflict management. The main factors which serve as sources of conflict are identified as communicational (conflicts arising from misunderstandings etc.), structural (conflicts related to organizational roles), and personal (conflicts stemming from individual differences) .

In Nigeria, Okonkwo (1984) noted that the advent of colonial rule with its attendant f01111 of work system changed the relationship between employer and employee with the introduction of monetary reward hence the struggle for living wage and better work conditions. Fashoyin, Adeleke and Yesuf (1980) noted, wages as well as other related fringe benefits constitute the basic element in industrial relations. Nonyelu (1997) opined that wage problem is central to industrial conflict in Nigeria. He observed that The Nigerian employee like everyone else is also faced with "bread and butter" issues and more so because of the high cost of living and sometimes unfavourable economic conditions. It is therefore not surprising that most labour issues border on wages and salaries. Often challenging economic conditions and expectations by society (family members) from workers have made money a big issue. One cannot be wrong in suggesting that the Nigerian worker becomes dissatisfied when commensurate pay is not received for work done. The centrality of wage for most employees cannot be ignored. More so evidences abound of income inequality in Nigeria where the political office holders continue to swell their (pockets and line their bank accounts with tax payer's money. The implication is acute wage differential between the political office holder and the ordinary working class. Hence industrial agitations centered on wage related issues have cumulated into serious industrial crisis and further dissatisfaction among Nigeria workers. Also Ngu (2005) posits that delay in implementation of wage tribunal award causes conflict between management and labour. Fashoyin (1980) pointed out that one of the indictments of the various tribunals has been that they have generated bigger disputes than ones that preceded them. Thus a general feature of wage tribunals is that the highest incidence of disputes and strike cluster around them.

However, other scholars have argued that industrial conflict has multiple causes. Thus Otobo (1994) posits that conflict can arise internally through autocratic management style, nature of physical

environment of the work place, promotion, delay in payment of salaries and lack of efficiency of grievance and dispute force drivers while externally caused by government, industrial and economic policies, the nature of labour and social legislations, state economy and general distribution of wealth and power in the society. Njoku, and Nwosu (2007) observed that the causes of industrial conflict include observed unfair or prevailing organizational inequity in wages, managerial style of applying organizational rules. Ette (1981) observed that not dealing with complaints or grievances on time, individual and group discontent that characterizes workers attitude in a particular industrial organization, breakdown in communication are other sources of conflict. Hence for Ette, the major source of the present predicament of industrial warfare seriously eating deep into our ailing economy is due to the rising cost of living without a matching salary structure, thus apathy, alienation and lack of economic literacy becomes the other of the day.

More so, inadequate communication between the management and workers is another source industrial conflict. This is because according to Chidi (2010) "lack of communication leads to suspicion which leads to mistrust which in turn leads to disagreement and finally conflict.. According to Enemu (2001), for any meaningful relationship to exist between any two or more elements; individuals, organizations or institution, there must be some form of communication. Breakdown in communication causes industrial conflict. Thus the nature of industrial work which denies one the chance to self-expression, loss of ones freedom to creativity, individuality and imagination, social values which accord industrial workers a lower status in society should be avoided.

Manifestation of conflict

Industrial conflict manifestation can vary from one of massive and protracted confrontation to a half hour protest by a handful of men and women. According to Nonyelu (1997), the different expressions of industrial conflict range from subtle action to non-cooperation by individuals. to protracted nationwide work stoppages. Chidi (2010) noted that industrial sabotage as a manifestation of conflict is very dangerous and is embarked upon often when some workers do not possess the

courage to embark upon some more overt action that clearly identifies them. Taylor and Walton (1975) see it as that rule breaking which takes the form of conscious action or inaction directed towards the mutilation or destruction of the work environment. As Ezeaku (2000) noted it can be a deviant behavior that produces fruit and merriment to reduce frustration in a situation where the workers is relatively powerless. Weapon of labour include:- go-slow, work to rule, set in, strike, sabotage and overtime ban while the weapon of management include lock out, salary stoppages, threat of dismissal and denial of benefits.

Conflict resolution and management

Trade unions as expression of conflict in industries play a prominent role in conflict management in organizations. According to McCabe & Rabil, (2001) Conflict management systems provides workplace justice. It provides the opportunity to systematically redress an injustice without litigation, strikes or other forms of industrial actions (Mesch & Dalton, 1992). Hence a conflict management procedure perceived to be fair will be used and regarded as effective and result in greater perception of fair treatment and enhance job satisfaction (Peterson & Lewin, 2000; McCabe, 1997).

Onwe (2014) posits that the Nigerian model of conflict resolution involves the use of mediators, conciliators, and the industrial arbitration panel that are often resisted by the trade unions. However Akinwale (2011) observed that the Situations surrounding industrial conflicts management in Nigeria especially the relative weakness of state machineries and prolongation of industrial disputes have affected peacemaking efforts. Mismanagement of industrial conflicts is a key outcome of the weakness of the state machineries. It is therefore necessary to search for alternative approaches to conflict resolutions in Nigeria through collective bargaining principle. Labour decree No 21 of 1978 defines collective bargaining as "the process of arriving or attempting to arrive at a collective agreement. Hence it is interpreted as agreement in' writing regarding work conditions and terms of employment concluded between trade union and organization". Bratton and Jeffrey (1999) defined collective bargaining as: An institutional

system of negotiation in which the making, interpretation and administration of rules, and the application of statutory controls affecting the employment relationship, are decided within union- Management negotiation committees. The degree to which these collective bargaining rules are adhered to in Nigeria appears questionable.

Oghenekaro (2013) noted that conflict is persistent even with collective bargaining machinery because in actual fact there is no real bargaining in most industrial setups since government determines wages and fringe benefits. Much of what is done is consultation by workers representatives with management and not actually to negotiate. Thus according to him this is seen as invasion of management prerogative. The government both as the employer and arbitrator hardly respects collective bargaining rules. However Ubeku (1983) noted that collective bargaining technique is superior to wage commissions and other form of regulating employee \welfare because collective bargaining is directed at accommodating the competing interest of the parties in industrial conflict. Ubeku (1983) noted that the essence of collective bargaining therefore is that its results should reflect the respective strength, economic positions, organizational ability and bargaining skills of the parties and their capabilities to make effective agreements not just agreements to be observed in breach. Thus such areas as status and dignity of man, fairness and equitable income distribution as well as changes to wage and fringe benefits are all considered. Therefore, unionized and non-unionized organizations have a grievance procedure which is systematic and provides assurance that terms and conditions agreed in negotiation are properly implemented. An organization without grievance procedures, attempts at conflict at conflict resolution leads to open confrontation which is hardly in the interest of good labour relations.

Conclusion

Finally, conflict is an integral part of human nature. It is not only a negative pathological condition characterized by lack of cooperation, hostility and struggle but also a process which signals a need for social change. However the possible failure of the industrial arbitration panel and national industrial court to enforce decisions on any matter does not

minimize their importance in settling disputes. Their overriding effects may reduce tension on the parties to the dispute. The Nigerian government participation and involvement in conflict resolution is enormous. Her distinctive role as the largest single employer of labour, the guardian of social conscience and as the provider of social conscience and social amenities leaves her without any choice but to mediate in industrial conflict in order to attain and maintain peace and harmony in industrial establishments for the desired economic and social development of the nation.

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