

Paradox of Human Assets Management and Labour Relations in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria has severally witnessed production stoppage due to labour conflicts. This paper analyses how management and human assets co-exist in Nigeria, and ways their co-existence responds to the philosophies of labour relations. Labour relations refer to the arrangements to create a fair workplace between management and human assets. Marxist conflict theory, which suggested that management and human assets co-existed within a perennial conflict situation, guided the study. Based on secondary data, the paper focuses on management-human assets co-existence in Nigeria, and argues that treating human assets as factor to be used and dumped rather than as key stakeholders implicate the practice of human assets management in Nigeria in such a way that ensuring harmonious workplace and meeting of organisational targets become a mirage. Relatedly, government plays ambiguous role by enthroning imbalanced labour relations in Nigeria through authoritarian responses to curb the collective solidarity and strength of labour unions and treating them not as stakeholders who convey the needs and interests of human assets. This has become a business not as usual given that management and human assets should see one another as partners to combine their efforts to productively and profitably achieve organisational set goals and objectives in a rapidly changing world of work. Addressing the paradox will require an approach that encourages dialogue to repair the management-human assets conflicts in Nigeria. The paper therefore concludes that labour relations are necessary approach for the solution to the labour conflicts in Nigeria.

Keywords

Government, human assets, labour relations, labour unions, stakeholders, workplace

Introduction

Since Nigeria recorded the first strike in 1945, there have been many labour conflicts in the country (Bamidele, 2020; Giame et al., 2020), with deliberate disruption of production as target (Giame et al., 2020; Sule, 2013). In a bid to stop strike actions in Nigeria, government has made several efforts including ban, wage froze, stifling of labour union, militarisation and securitisation all but to no avail.

Human assets play critical role in an organisation, and hence the dedication of labour relations to the prevention of conflicts induced production stoppage. Paradoxically, human assets are the first victims when organisation is facing bad times (Obi, 2015; Sule, 2013). The objectives of this study include to examine the nature and dynamic of human assets management in Nigeria, and to analyse labour relations practices and its implications for deepening labour conflicts in Nigeria.

Theoretical Review

The study adopts Marxist class conflict theory as its theoretical framework. Karl Marx is credited with popularising the theory (Marx-Theory of Class-struggle, n.d.). Class is a social category with consciousness of common interest (Yates, 2021; Jakopovich, 2014; Güçlü, 2014). Class conflict theory believes that the existing societal structure is dialectically prone to class conflicts (Güçlü, 2014; Sule, 2013) because of unequal ability to manipulate the structure (Jakopovich, 2014; Blunden, 2006; Wright, 1980).

Marxist class conflict theory will therefore be used to examined the relationship between management and human assets in Nigeria.

Conceptualising Labour Relations

The idea of labour relations conveys the notion of an arrangement to create harmonious relationship between management and human assets. Sule (2013:8 & 14) aptly describes labour relations as the complex relationship between human assets, government, managements, and their representatives. Furthermore, Sule (2013:9) explains labour relations in the context of human assets management as arrangements for joint consultation between managements and labour unions. In other words, labour relations involve all patterns of interaction between labour unions and managements aimed at fostering harmonious workplace (Giame et al., 2020; Pradipbhai & Gupta, 2019; Ugar, 2018).

Two usages of labour relations exist, including relationship between management and human assets, also, the relations between labour unions and managements (Sule, 2013). Human assets use collective bargaining power and strike actions to resolve conflicts with management (Ayuba et al., 2020; Ugar, 2018; University of Minnesota, 2016; Nwoko, 2009; Okene, 2007; Human Resource Management and Labour Relations n.d.). Strike is an expression of grievances over breakdown in labour relations through deliberate stoppage of work by human assets (Ngbuelo, 2021; Ayuba et al., 2020; Bamidele, 2020; Giame et al., 2020).

In the context of this study, labour relations refer to employment relations, human relations, industrial relations, and limited sense, as organisational behaviour.

Conceptualising Human Assets Management

Human assets have been defined as the most important and dynamic factor that perform job, get work done, increase profitability, achieve set goals and objectives in an organisation

(University of Minnesota, 2016; Obi, 2015; Sule, 2013; Ofotokun, 2012). Human assets are hired either formally or informally. The former is with job security and right to bargain collectively. While the latter is under various types of part-time labour arrangements, but without job security and right to bargain collectively (Solidarity Center, 2010). Generally, human assets are treated as factor of production, using hard approach with strict rules to assess them purely on efficiency grounds or soft approach to nurture and develop them (Harney et al., 2018).

The concept of human assets management deals with the problems of human factor or people at work (Pradipbhai & Gupta, 2019; Harney et al., 2018). It is concerned with getting the right mix of people, giving them the right skills, and managing them to achieve the overall objectives of the organisation (Malik, 2018; O’Riordan, 2017; Nicole Richman, 2015; Obi, 2015; Sule, 2013; Human Resource Management and Labour Relations, n.d.). In other word, the concept of human assets management implies getting and maintaining the right number and skills of human assets needed to suit the objectives of organisation (Okon et al., 2022; Ofotokun, 2012). In the context of this study, human assets refer to labour, manpower, workers, workforces, human resources, personnel or generally speaking, people at work.

Labour Relations and Human Assets Management

Labour relations raise questions about the conflicts between managements and human assets, and the need to ensure the existence of harmonious workplace. At the core of the literature on labour relations is the view that organisations’ targets meeting requires arrangements to create a fair workplace in order to prevent disruption of production, and therefore, labour relations should promote harmonious relationship between the management and the human assets. In other words, it is about the co-existence of management and human assets (Harney et al. 2018). Both human assets management and labour relations aimed at balancing organisational structure for unhindered productivity (Ofotokun, 2012).

Studies have addressed the ideas of labour relations and human assets management on different issues. For instance, Okon et al. (2022) examined the impact of human assets management on organisational effectiveness. Ubabuike (2019) looked at human assets’ management in relation to organisational performance. Pradipbhai & Gupta (2019) examined the drawbacks in labour relations and human assets management. Harney et al. (2018:1) examine the emergence and relevance of key links between human assets management and labour relations. O’Riordan (2017:6) examines the evolution of human assets management. Literatures convey a sense of human assets management having a common responsibility to ensure the survival and positive performance of organisations. Drawbacks facing labour relations and human assets management were further indicated by the literatures to include ineffective management, exploitative and imbalanced labour relations, changes in legal environment, resistances from labour unions, poor working conditions, balancing the challenge of meeting organisational targets and managerial span of control, among others (Okon et al., 2022; Ngbuelo, 2021; Bamidele, 2020; Ibe, 2020; Jaillet et al., 2019; Pradipbhai & Gupta, 2019; Ubabuike, 2019; Ofotokun, 2012; Fashoyin, 2006). To overcome the drawbacks, studies have suggested welfare consideration for human assets, effective leadership and management, a progressive approach built on mutually satisfactory solution, and promotion of harmonious workplace with emphasis on the ideals of labour relations (Ayuba et al., 2020; AUTUniversity, 2019; O’Riordan, 2017; Ofotokun, 2012; Okene, 2007).

Interestingly, few studies have related labour relations and human assets management in terms of the implications of the nature and dynamics of human assets management in integrating the ideals of labour relations (Ofotokun, 2012:1). This is the gap which this study offers to fill by critically analysing how the nature and dynamic of human assets management in Nigeria respond to the goals of labour relations. It focuses on the labour conflicts, which has causal linkages to labour relations and responses of the management, and argues that taking labour unions for granted implicate labour relations in such a way that results in the deepening of labour conflicts in Nigeria.

Methodology

The study is exploratory and essentially qualitative in approach. It follows a systematic and consistent procedure of scientific research in order to collect data which emphasised secondary sources (Umar 2016:128). The data collected were logically examined and analysed in line with the focus of this study. Relevant scholarly publications were extensively sourced from text books, journal articles and on line publications.

The Nature and Dynamic of Human Assets Management in Nigeria

Abuse of hegemonic position of management in the nature and dynamic of human assets management in Nigeria. Nigerian government as employer of labour abuse their hegemonic position through breaching of collective agreement. For instance, the management of the University of Ilorin disobeyed the directive of court to reinstate sacked 49 lecturers (Ayuba et al., 2020; Bamidele, 2020). Similarly, since April 18, 2019 when the administration of President Buhari signed national minimum wage of ₦30,000 into law, there have been desperate attempts by some state and local governments to circumvent the law rather than to implement the national minimum wage law (Nigeria Labour Congress, 2021).

Enthronement of authoritarian approach is another nature and dynamic of human assets management in Nigeria. The Nigerian government is running a capitalist economy in an autocratic manner and by subjecting their citizens to second class fiddle. Human assets are not seen as stakeholders nor partner who convey the needs and aspirations of their members to the management but rather as trouble makers or mere factor to be used and dumped (Sule, 2013). For example, during labour strike on May Day of 1988, armed security was reinforced at government headquarters and around oil installations (Parker, 1988) to deal with the union leaders.

Also, the ruling class in Nigeria are noted for unfair policies, and the attendant excruciating pains this leaves on human assets are unimaginable (Nigeria Labour Congress, 2021). This can be linked to the historical dominance and outward orientation of oil multinationals in the oil exploration, exploitation and production that played pervasive role in shaping the nature and dynamic of human assets management in Nigeria. The Nigerian state own and controls the oil sphere but without making commensurate investments for the development of the sector nor the host communities (Ukiwo, 2018). In fact, the crisis in the Niger Delta is linked to this paradox in Nigeria (Obi & Rustad, 2011). For example, the oil exploration by international oil companies and their partners (Obi & Rustad 2011) displaced, jeopardised jobs and livelihood of many people in the region, yet reciprocation arrangement was next to nothing with few available amenities in the area exist to facilitate oil exploitation and exploration (Ebegbulem, et al. 2013; Davidheiser & Nyiayaana 2011).

Questionable informal strategy of hiring human assets is another dynamic in human assets management in Nigeria. The Nigeria Labour Congress has consistently frowned at and fought against such informal hiring strategy which includes agency, casualisation, contingent, or yellow dog contract that prevents collective bargaining or employment benefits besides wages (Bamidele, 2020; Solidarity Center, 2010). Furthermore, under the guise of essential services with backing of the 1976 Trade Disputes Act, right to strike is prohibited in Nigeria (Giame et al., 2020; Okene, 2007). The definition of essential services in Nigeria is questionable as it deviates from its baseline definition which emphasises service whose disruption would endanger human life, public health or safety or cause serious bodily injury or expose any valuable property to destruction or serious damage (Okene, 2007:50). On this, organisations like the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC), Turkish Air, Caverton Helicopters and some banks in Nigeria are exploring how to stifle labour unions (Nigeria Labour Congress, 2021:3).

Labour Relations Practices and Labour Conflicts in Nigeria

The Nigerian state has an ambiguous labour relations practices and these have implications in deepening of labour conflicts. For example, the militarisation of Niger Delta region, and securitisation of oil extraction by Nigerian State (Obi & Rustad 2011; Solidarity Center 2010:24), only moved an initial peaceful protest into violent resistance (Obi & Rustad 2011; Davidheiser & Nyiayaana 2011:48). State's military response did not resolve the resistance, but rather dialectically fed into the militarisation of the response(s) (Obi & Rustad 2011).

Enthronement of imbalanced labour relations is another practice in Nigeria. Key illustration of this is the authoritarian responses to labour demands in general and attempts to curb the collective solidarity and strength of the labour union particularly in the oil and gas industry by successive government in Nigeria. For instance, the attempt to stifle the labour unions in the Nigeria oil and gas sector, with disdain for their tremendous bargaining power, and by splitting them between two national labour bodies; the Nigerian Trade Union Congress and the Nigeria Labour Congress, did not stop them from cooperating and communicating openly in taking actions on issues of common interests. Similarly, when the Military government in 1969 introduced Decree 53 to ban strikes as well as froze wage in Nigeria, the use of institutional force and brutal violence against lawful and peaceful protests only spurred the labour unions on to form alliance against the infamous 1969 decree 53 (Giame et al., 2020; Solidarity Center, 2010; Nwoko, 2009). Again, when the then military government in 1988 negotiated to borrow money from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with conditions stipulating, among others, that the Nigerian government should raise the price of petrol, the labour rallied against the package due to increase in prices of goods and its implications on the living standard of their members. The violent response of government to the non-violent protests later provoked strike actions (Parker, 1988).

Not given right priority to collective agreement is another labour relations practice that deepens labour conflicts in Nigeria. For example, education helps the society in producing highly skilled personnel, however, education in Nigeria has not be given the right priority financial wise with the situation triggering labour conflicts in the public universities (Ayuba et al. 2020; Ugar, 2018; Amaghionyeodiwe & Osinubi, 2006; Ejiogu & Sule, n.d.), particularly, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) whose demands include better condition of service for its members and conducive learning environment for students through the implementation of past collective agreement reached in 2009 on how to save public universities in the nation from

collapse, but the government is rather proposing a piecemeal selective approach (Ngbuelo, 2021; Ayuba et al. 2020; Bamidele, 2020). This is a case of not giving right priority to collective agreement thereby deepening labour conflicts.

Failure to reach collective agreement is another practice that deepens labour conflicts in Nigeria. For example, the first strike in Nigeria on June 21, 1945, took place after failure to reach collective agreement between government and labour union over salary increase to meet increase in cost of living (Giame et al., 2020). Also, reactivity rather than proactivity of the government is another factor deepening labour conflicts in Nigeria. For example, when the government is given ultimatum notice for strike action, proactive steps to avert such strike actions are often neglected (Ngbuelo, 2021). Similarly, the Nigeria Labour Congress members and its affiliates engaged in nationwide protest and withdrawal of services over the contentious issue of fuel subsidy withdrawal, increase in the pump price of petrol, and without proactive steps to meet the demands of labour union for a comprehensive probe into the entire fuel subsidy regime to unravel the fraudulent activities that took place over the years (Ezigbo, 2023).

Tight control over union matter is another practice that deepens labour conflicts in Nigeria. For example, the then Nigerian military government in 1978 banned all trade union federations and established the Nigeria Labour Congress to prevent strike actions. Nevertheless, when the labour union protested against the ban, the response of the then military government was to victimise the leaders of the union through armed security that barricaded the union headquarters (Parker, 1988).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The thrust of the study is to examine the nature and dynamics of human assets management in Nigeria, and the implications of labour relations practices for deepening labour conflicts in Nigeria. The nature and dynamics of human assets management in Nigeria were implicated for being ambiguous and imbalanced as reflected in the hegemonic position of the government. The paper indicated that labour relations practices in Nigeria negates the ideals of labour relations. Rather than human assets management in Nigeria fostering harmony and fair workplace, they enthrone imbalanced labour relations that deepens labour conflicts. Authoritarian responses to the demands of labour unions in Nigeria like the use of brutal violent and institutional force are key illustrations.

With people from different background, culture, orientation and belief coming together to work; there is need for transparent and mutual arrangement on how they can co-exist together (Sule, 2013:15). In this regard, the management and human assets are stakeholders whose inputs are needed and rights should be respected to achieve uninterrupted productivity and profitability for the benefit of all (Oregon State University, 2009:5; Fashoyin, 2006:1). This has become a business not as usual for management and human assets in a rapidly changing world of work.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The study is limited to qualitative approach and with focus on Nigeria as a whole. It is suggested that a quantitative approach with case study should be adopted to further investigate this subject matter.

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