

## COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AND POWER ASYMMETRY IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES: THEORIZING THE FG – ASUU’S AGREEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper discusses the negotiations of collective bargaining and power imbalance in the Nigerian universities in the form of a theoretical discussion of the life of a Federal Government (FG) -Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) agreement. Even after numerous talks and the official agreements, the most recent of which was the 2009 Accord industrial disputes, the issue of potential effectiveness and sustainability of the collective bargaining in the industry remains, as the number of strikes is increasing. Based on pluralist theory of industrial relations, power-resource theory and perspective of the fiscal political economy, the study has put together a composite conceptual framework to explain the recurring stability in FG and ASUU relation. The research integrates secondary data in the form of collective agreements, federal budget reports, and macroeconomic indicators using a qualitative and document based analytical method to explore the interaction of structural state power, the organizational ability of unions, fiscal volatility and institutional enforcement mechanisms to influence the bargaining outcome. As can be seen in the analysis, although the strike action by ASUU delivers short-term concessions, structural asymmetry caused by centralized fiscal control and poor enforcement structures limits the compliance in the long term. Agreeing with each other is further moderated by fluctuating oil-dependent revenues, which strengthens cyclical negotiation, strike and completion of partial agreements. The theoretical contribution of the study is the concept of implementation asymmetry, which helps to differentiate between the differences in the enforcement of the post-agreement and the power imbalances in the negotiation stage. It claims that sustainable industrial peace in the Nigerian state universities needs institutional re-alignment, when allocated over a period of years, enhancement of enforcement, and reestablished governance independence. The results can be used to test empirically and give policy-relevant information to reform the public sector collective bargaining in the developing political economies.*

**Keywords:** Collective Bargaining; FG – ASUU’s Agreement; Fiscal Volatility; Power Asymmetry; Public Sector Industrial Relations

## **INTRODUCTION**

Collective bargaining has been a primary tool for managing employment relations both in the private and the public sector around the world. Basing on the theory of pluralist industrial relations, collective bargaining is a formalized procedure wherein the organization of labour and employers enter into a negotiating agenda concerning wages, working environment, and general terms of employment (Pinar, 2025; Bondy, 2026; Alamgir, 2026). Power asymmetries however tend to influence the bargaining procedures in a significantly different way in the context of a public sector where the state is at once an employer, regulator and ultimate sovereign power (Greer, 2024; Paul, 2025; Akman, 2026). This dualism makes negotiations difficult especially where the fiscal limitations, politics and accountability to the public collide with the labour rights. The dynamics of this type are clear in the frequent negotiations and conflicts within the system of the state universities of Nigeria between the Federal Government (FG) and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) (Adeyemo, & Okeme, 2021; Adamu et al., 2024; Oyewopo, 2025).

There are more than 40 federal and above 60 state universities in Nigeria with a population of students exceeding by far the two million mark (National Universities Commission [NUC], 2023). This enrolment is dominated by the huge numbers of public universities, so that the federal government is a huge employer of academic labour. ASUU was formed in 1978 and it was a representation of academic staffs within public universities and has been voted as one of the influential trade unions in the public sector of the country.

The FG-ASUU relationship has been marked by constant strikes and collective bargaining of agreements since 1992 (2009 onwards) through the signing of Memoranda of Understanding and Action, which has unified the relationship (Fajana, 2006; Oladele, 2022; Ajayi, 2023; Oyewopo, 2025). In 2009, the FG-ASUU agreement in particular aimed at resolving the problem of funding revitalization, earned academic allowances, shall autonomy of the university and better conditions of service (Oladele, 2022; Tom, & Ndaeyo, 2024; Ogunode, 2026). However, recurring industrial strikes, the last being the long-standing 2022 one, highlight the consistent weak points of implementation and negotiated terms disputes.

The bargaining context is characterized by structural constraints in a statistical and macroeconomic sense. Over recent years, the government spending on education in Nigeria has been fluctuating between 5 and 8 percent of the total government spending, which is much lower than the standard requirements of 15 to 20 percent that are set by UNESCO (World Bank, 2022). The long - term underfunding has been translated into a lack of infrastructures, inadequate staff and loss of competitiveness of universities globally. Meanwhile, the population of young people in Nigeria (more than 60 per cent of it is below 25) puts an increasing strain on the capacity of tertiary education (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023). These organizational facts aggravate distributive struggles within the bargaining process because the scarcity of fiscal space increases the struggle of distributing the scarce resources between the demands of the government and the needs of the university.

On the theoretical side, the results of collective bargaining can be treated in terms of power-resource and structuralist approaches, which focus on distribution of economic, political and institutional power between participants (Lukes, 2005; Refslund & Arnholtz, 2022; Durán, 2023; Iliopoulos, 2026). Power asymmetry in the case of the Nigerian public university occurs in a variety of aspects. First, the FG oversees budgetary allocation, policy framework and regulatory approvals, which provide it with structural power over the negotiation periods and implementation. Second, the general ability of ASUU to collectively withdraw labour is its most important countervailing force as it interrupts the academic calendar and creates publicity. Nonetheless, this bargaining power is neutralized through legal mechanisms like the Trade Disputes Act and through more generalized political discourses that position

strikes as a national security risk. Therefore, although ASUU has associational power, the state has structural and institutional power.

In addition, the FG-ASUU agreement is located in a wider political economy of centralized fiscal federalism and revenue instability, which is associated with oil dependency. Oil revenues change considerably and affect how people spend their money; hence, this affects the bargaining position of the state. Empirical data of the industrial relations in the public sector indicates that when fiscal pressure is high, governments tend to postpone the introduction of agreements or to engage in small-scale concessions instead of radical ones (Bach & Bordogna, 2016). This pattern is consistent with the repeated renegotiations and partial adherence witnessed in the case of FG -ASUU to indicate that the power asymmetry is not only a factor of the institutions design, but also the macroeconomic weakness.

Even though the FG-ASUU agreement has received much media coverage and policy discussion, it is still not effectively integrated into theory on a larger scale in terms of collective bargaining and power imbalance. A lot of the available literature is based on descriptive narrations of strikes, deficits of funds, or policy failures, without theorizing how the interaction of structural power, institutional rules, and bargaining outcomes occurs. This gap creates a conceptual need to rethink the FG-ASUU deal as a locus of power struggle, distributive struggle, and institutional bargaining in a political economy that is in the process of development (Oladele, 2022).

This paper, therefore, proposes a theoretical framework according to which the FG–ASUU agreement is placed in the context of pluralist industrial relations theory and power asymmetry analysis. It questions the role played by structural dominance of the state, fiscal conditions and union mobilization strategies in determining bargaining processes and implementation of agreements. The article provides insights into underlying theoretical knowledge of the public sector collective bargaining in Nigeria and other similar emerging economies by combining statistical patterns in educational funding, enrolment strains, and frequency of strike through well-known theories of industrial relations. Finally, it also states that the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of the FG-ASUU agreement can be achieved not only by the terms negotiated but also the re-tuning of structural power relations and the reinforcement of institutional enforcement policies within the higher education governance system in Nigeria.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK***

#### ***i. Pluralist Industry Relations and Collective Bargaining***

The FG-ASUU bargaining relationship analytical framework is most appropriately placed in the theory of the pluralist industrial relations. Pluralism views the workplace as a place of competing yet acceptable interests among the management, labour, and the state with collective bargaining being the main institutional device of harmonizing the interests (Dunlop, 1958; Flanders, 1970). Instead of believing in underlying harmony, pluralism sees conflict as unavoidable but is capable of being dealt with by organizing negotiation and rule-making processes.

This pluralist logic can be seen in collective bargaining between the Federal Government (FG), and ASUU in the Nigerian system of higher education. The FG-ASUU Agreement of 2009 and the following Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) are attempts to institutionalize the rules that would regulate the aspect of wages, allowances, funding obligations, and the freedom that the university would enjoy. However, the employer and employee are more distinguished in a private sector bargaining, but in this case, the state plays various roles: as an employer, a regulator, a financier and a political power. This structural overlap not only makes the pluralist assumption of relative autonomy between parties involved

in the negotiations difficult but also brings asymmetrical leverage into the process of bargaining (Alamgir, 2026).

### ***ii. Power Asymmetry and State as Employer***

The second perspective that helps to understand the FG-ASUU relationship is the power asymmetry theory. The concept of power as the ability of one participant to influence the results in its favour despite opposition can be structured position, institutional power or control of resources (Lukes, 2005). The state normally has structural power in the public sector bargaining since it manipulates fiscal allocations, legal systems and enforcement systems.

In Nigeria, the FG sets budgetary allocations per year to the federal universities and reserves its powers to regulate the salary structures by having centralized wage-setting bodies. Considering the fact that the public university funding relies heavily upon the federal subventions, the bargaining power of ASUU is systematically limited. As the union exerts associational power by using collective mobilization and strike power, the government has structural power in terms of controlling the budget, exercising regulatory power and calling upon labour laws, including the Trade Disputes Act. This imbalance resembles unequal distribution of economic and institutional resources in determining the result of the bargaining process by power-resource theorists (Bondy, 2026)

In Nigeria, the statistical data show that the government spending on education has not exceeded 10 percent of its total expenditure over the last few years (World Bank, 2022). These fiscal constraints enhance distributive conflict since bargaining is a zero - sum game to access limited resources. Here, the asymmetry of power is not only institutional but also macroeconomic: the absence of fiscal capacity makes the justification of the government of slow implementation stronger and the redistributive arguments of the union weaker.

### ***iii. Structural Constraints and Fiscal Federalism***

The FG-ASUU accord should also be viewed in the light of centralized fiscal federalism of Nigeria and oil-based political economy. Liquidity and volatility of revenues have direct impact to public expenditure and bargaining power. In times of low oil prices, fiscal pressure heightens and responses that are austerity focused and postponed financial obligations are realized. Comparative institutional evidence on the fiscal stress states that governments are more likely to renegotiate, stagger or partially enforce collective agreements (Bach & Bordogna, 2016).

In this macroeconomic set up, the results of collective bargaining is predetermined by exogenous revenue shocks, as opposed to just being determined by negotiation prowess or union power. In its turn, reoccurring implementation lapses in the FG-ASUU contract can be indicative of structural fiscal unsteadiness to almost the same extent as intentional state hegemony. This convergence between fiscal federalism and labour relations, then, creates a cyclical effect of agreement, delayed implementation, strike, renegotiation, and temporary solution.

### ***iv. Deficit on Institutional Trust, Compliance and Enforcement***

In addition to structural influence and financial limits, institutional confidence is very important in keeping mutual agreements. Good collective bargaining assumes that there is good faith negotiation, and a good commitment to follow-through (Bang et al., 2016). In the area of poor enforcement, agreements will be like a fig leaf more than instruments.

The frequent strikes in the Nigerian state universities indicate lacks compliance credibility. Although agreements are signed formally, their implementation is in a phase or parts of it undermines mutual trust. In terms of institutionalists, this dynamic signifies poor enforcement structure in the Nigeria public sector

industrial relations system. In the absence of autonomous enforcement of arbitration, open systems of monitoring and assurances based on budget is putting agreements under the influence of political recalibration.

#### ***v. A Move Towards an Integrated Theoretical Model***

Based on pluralist theory, power asymmetry analysis and fiscal political economy the present paper presents an amalgamated conceptual framework of the FG-ASUU bargaining process. The model has three determinants, which are interlocked:

- i. Structural State Power- The ability to control the budget, authority of the law and the authority of regulations.
- ii. Union Associational Power- The ability to mobilize, strike power, and the ability to be legitimate to the masses.
- iii. Macroeconomic Constraint- Fiscal volatility, revenue dependence and demographic pressure.

These variables play off to influence the results of bargaining and the sustainability of agreements. Where power of the structures of the state is of great importance and power of the unions is low, the agreements can be ended but poorly carried out. In cases where union mobilization creates high pressure on society, concession can go up, yet it will be stabilized depending on the fiscal capacity.

Using this combined perspective to theorize the FG–ASUU agreement, the paper offers a systemic explanation of the repetitive instability in the industrial sector. The following section consequently formulates certain research propositions based on this framework, which relates power distribution, fiscal context, and institutional enforcement with the tendencies of agreement implementation and industrial action within the context of Nigerian public universities.

#### ***RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS AND ANALYTICAL MODEL***

Based on the integrated theoretical framework, this section proceeds with explaining analytically based propositions that describe the continued existence of bargaining instability between the Federal Government (FG) and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). The studies are based on the pluralist industrial relations theory, analysis of power asymmetry, and the perspectives of political economy that are mentioned above (Lukes, 2005).

##### ***i. Strategic Power and Concurrence Enactment***

Collective agreements in the pluralist systems are supposed to stabilize the employment relations by having rule-based employment relations (Dunlop, 1958). But, in cases where one of the sides has excessive structural power, especially fiscal and regulatory power, it is possible that agreements may be executed more by political than contractual commitment (Lukes, 2005).

The FG has the structural leverage of dominance in Nigeria because it has control on budget releases and policy guidelines in the public university system. Although, the 2009 FG-ASUU Accord agreement binds the two parties the disbursement of revitalization funds and earned allowances is subjected to the yearly budgetary processes and the executive approval.

1. Proposition 1: The larger the fiscal structural control of the state the higher the chances of implementation of collective bargaining agreements being delayed or partial.

This suggestion is consistent with the literature on employment relations in the public sector that argues that when budget is centralized, executive discretion in compliance decisions increases (Bach & Bordogna, 2016).

## ***ii. Mobilization of Unions and Disruptive Leverage***

The first countervailing resource that is held by ASUU is its ability to jointly withdraw labour. The power-resource theory hypothesizes that the unions gain bargaining power based on their capacity to organize the members as well as to create economic or political punishment to the employers (Lukes, 2005). The scenario in the Nigerian case is that long strikes interrupt academic schedules, postponed graduation and created concern among the populace, thus increasing the political price of non-compliance.

Nevertheless, the legal frameworks and the opinion of the people mediate the strike leverage in the field of public education. The governments can use labour laws or request court intervention to curtail industrial strike, thus restraining unionisation (Lukes, 2005).

Proposition 2: The mobilization capacity of unions enhances the likelihood of the short-term concessions but fails to ensure the long-term compliance in the face of no institutional mechanisms to enforce the rules.

This suggestion is the reason as to why deals are usually struck after lengthy strikes but then suffer setbacks when it comes to implementation.

## ***iii. Bargaining and Fiscal Volatility Cycles***

The oil-based revenue base that exists in Nigeria brings about macroeconomic instability in the bargaining of the public sector (Pohler, 2018; Doellgast, & Benassi, 2020). The instability in revenues has a direct impact on the flexibility of budget and the capacity of the government to service financial obligations. Comparative analysis indicates that fiscal stressed governments tend to trip over payments, renegotiate conditions, or default (Bach & Bordogna, 2016).

In Nigeria, the times of revenue deficit have been associated with the periods of increased conflicts over the funding promise in higher education.

Proposition 3: Macroeconomic volatility has a moderating effect on the relationship between collective agreements and the implementation outcomes, strengthening cyclical patterns of agreement, dispute and renegotiation.

Therefore, bargaining instability cannot be comprehended fully as it is not within the broader fiscal structures.

## ***iv. Credibility and Lack of Trust in institutions.***

Collective bargaining systems work effectively whereby agreements are viewed as being credible and binding (Pohler, 2018; Doellgast, & Benassi, 2020). High turnover rates in implementation erode institutional trust which further increases the chances of parties applying adversarial approaches instead of solving problems together. The frequent strikes in the FG8ASUU case are an indication of lack of trust in negotiated resolutions. Agreements lack transparency in terms of monitoring processes, escrow-backed funding arrangements, or enforcement of arbitration, otherwise they can turn into mere pieces of paper.

Proposition 4: Low institutional trust and weak enforcement architecture enhance the rate of reoccurrence of industrial action even after the deals are settled on a formal basis.

This is the suggestion of an association between deficits of governance and enduring industrial warfare.

## ***Theoretical FG -ASUU Bargaining Dynamics Model***

Summarizing the propositions, the research proceeds to the next conceptual model where the bargaining results are determined by a combination of four basic variables:

- i. Power of structure (budgetary and legal power)
- ii. Union Organizational Power (mobilization and strike potential)
- iii. Macroeconomic Environment (fiscal stability and revenue system)
- iv. Institutional Strength of Enforcement (credibility and monitoring measures)

These are not linearly interacting variables. Structural power of the state influences the limits of negotiation; mobilization in unions affects temporary concessions; macroeconomic factors influence financial viability; and enforcement strength influences sustainability.

In situations where structural dominance does not stabilize, but rather coincides with weak enforcement, and fiscal volatility, bargaining is not stabilized, but it is cyclical. On the other hand, power relations should be recalibrated with the help of transparent funding systems and credible compliance systems that may contribute to industrial harmony at the public universities in Nigeria.

## **METHODOLOGY**

According to the combined theoretical framework, this section goes further to expound analytically founded propositions which explain further existence of analytical based bargaining instability between the Federal Government (FG) and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). The above referenced above-mentioned theses are based on the pluralist industrial relations theory, analysis of power asymmetry, and viewpoints of political economy (Lukes, 2005).

### ***i. Strategy Power and Concurrence Enactment***

The pluralist systems are expected to stabilize the employment relations through collective agreements based on the rule-bound employment relation (Adamu et al., 2024). However, whereby one of the parties is too endowed with structural power, particularly fiscal and regulatory power, chances are that agreements can be implemented more through political than by contractual obligation (Adeyemo, & Okeme, 2021)

Structural leverage of dominance that the FG has in Nigeria is that it has the control over budget releases as well as policy guidelines within the public university system. In spite of the fact that, the 2009 FG-ASUU Accord agreement commits the two parties to the disbursement of revitalization funds and earned allowances are subjected to the annual budgetary procedures and the executive authorization.

Proposition 1: The more the fiscal structural control of the state the greater the likelihood of the delayed or partial implementation of collective bargaining agreements.

This recommends is in line with the employment relations literature in the government sector that has suggested that executive discretion in compliance decisions should be higher when budget is centralized (Bach & Bordogna, 2016).

### ***ii. Unions and Disruptive Leverage Mobilization***

The first countervailing resource in the hands of ASUU is the fact that it can collectively withdraw labour (Ibe, & Maduka, 2024; Okonkwo, 2025). The power resource theory is based on the hypothesis that the unions become powerful, depending on the ability to organize the members and create economic or political punishment to the employers (Okonkwo, 2025). The Nigerian case scenario is that the long strikes were disrupting academic schedules, delaying graduation, causing worry amongst the people so that the cost of non-compliance is higher politically. However, the opinion of the people and the legal frameworks intermediate the strike leverage in the area of the public education. Labour laws or court

intervention can also be used by the governments in curtailing industrial strike and thereby retaining unionisation (Lukes, 2005).

Proposition 2: Mobilization ability of unions increases the chances of the short - term concessions but does not guarantee the long - term compliance when there are no institutional mechanisms to enforce the rules.

It is because of this recommendation that it is normally through a long strike before deals are struck but subsequently fail when it comes to implementation.

### *iii. Bargaining and Fiscal Volatility Cycles*

The oil revenue foundation that prevails in Nigeria introduces macroeconomic instability in bargaining of the public sector. The unpredictability of revenues directly affects the flexibility of budget and the ability of the government to meet the financial commitments (Alabi, 2010; Okonjo-Iweala, 2014; Olusegun, 2023). The comparative analysis shows that fiscal stressed governments are prone to stumble over payments, renegotiate terms, or default (Bach & Bordogna, 2016). The periods of revenue deficit in Nigeria have been linked with the times of escalated conflict on the promise of funding in higher education.

Proposition 3: There is a moderating role of macroeconomic volatility on the reaction between collective agreements and the results of implementation, which enhances the cyclical tendencies of agreement, dispute and renegotiation.

As such, bargaining instability cannot be understood in full as it does not exist in the context of the broader fiscal schemes.

### *iv. Weaknesses: Credibility and Lack of Trust in Institutions*

Collective bargaining systems are workable in that agreements are considered as credible and binding (Olusegun, 2023). High implementation turnover destroys institutional trust which further enhances the possibilities of the parties to use adversarial ways instead of trying to solve problems together.

The common aversion of negotiation resolutions in the case of FG & ASUU is manifested by the frequent strikes. Agreements are not transparent with regard to monitoring processes, escrow-backed funding structures, or even respecting arbitration, otherwise, they may become a mere piece of paper.

Proposition 4: Low institutional trust and a weak architecture of enforcement improve the rate of reoccurrence of industrial action despite the deals being agreed on a formal basis.

This is the implication of a correlation between the lack of governance and prolonged industrial war.

### ***FG -ASUU Bargaining Dynamics Model Hypothetical.***

In a nutshell of the propositions, the research moves to the second conceptual model in which the outcome of the bargaining process is as a result of a combination of four fundamental variables:

- i. Power of structure (budgetary power and legal power)
- ii. Mobilization and strike potential (Union Organizational Power).
- iii. Macroeconomic Environment (fiscal stability and revenue system)
- iv. Enforcement Strength Institutional (credibility and monitoring measures)

These are not linearly interacting variables. The state structural power has an impact on the scope of negotiation; temporary concessions can be influenced by mobilization in unions, financial viability can be affected by macroeconomic factors, and sustainability by enforcement strength.

Where structural dominance fails to stabilize, as well as coincides with weak enforcement, and fiscal volatility, bargaining is not stabilized, but it is cyclical. Conversely, the balance on power needs to be adjusted with the assistance of open-minded funding and valid compliance systems that can help to foster industrial peace in the Nigerian public universities.

## **CONCLUSION**

The paper has captured the collective bargaining problem and power asymmetry problem in the Nigerian state universities with the FG-ASUU agreement as the basis. The discussion has integrated the pluralist theory of industrial relations, power-resource approach and fiscal political economy in the explanation of common patterns of negotiation and implementation.

The outcomes indicate that the strength of the state of structure in its budgetary and regulatory control remains the most effective in the determination of the bargaining outcome. Despite the ability of ASUU to have associational power because strike action and mobilization have the power, the creation of adhering in the long-term is limited by the structural power of the government and the entire fiscal environment. The government is also not so effective in fulfilling and timely implementing agreements on the full scale due to regular fiscal instability owing to oil related revenues.

Also, poor institutional enforcement systems and the absence of trust to compliance contribute towards recidivations industrial action a vicious cycle of give and take negotiation, strike and partial application is established. These outcomes can witness to the topicality of elaborated conceptual model, according to which the structural power, mobilization of union, fiscal capacity, and credibility of enforcement are formerly jointly determined in order to characterize the bargaining result of the processing in the system of Nigerian public universities.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

As per the findings, the research gives some practical and policy recommendations that comprise:

- i. As part of mutual trust and low rate of strike, a set-up of independent monitoring and arbitration mechanisms can ensure that collective agreement is fully and timely implemented as transparent enforcing mechanisms.
- ii. The FG should adopt multi-year budgetary structures in the instance of the public universities in order to stabilize the level of funding and minimize the impact of the change in revenue streams.
- ii. Legally recognized procedures of conflict resolution that escalate to strikes should be elaborated. This can include the joint committees, early warning systems and mediation systems to hold on to industrial peace.
- iv. The balanced power relations are also to be encouraged since the policymakers will be motivated to consider institutional reforms that can grant universities greater financial and operational freedom. This will weaken the institutions as it will depend on the FG and bring about a more even-minded bargaining.

- v. The union-government communication avenue or opportunity of strengthen should be established. The levels of distrust can be mitigated by frequent communication and open communication in decision-making and joint problem-solving that will result into cooperative outcomes of the bargaining.

In a nutshell, the sustainable harmonious coexistence of the industrial world in the Nigerian institutions of higher learning under the form of the public universities implies entailing structural, fiscal, and institutional changes. It should be mentioned that the power of the state, the strength of unions, the credibility of the macroeconomic and enforcement can be interdependent and may be utilized to create good collective bargaining systems.

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