

# Labour Unions' Struggle with Neo-liberal Policies in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Antagonism has become a feature of labour unions' relations with the Nigerian government. The implementation of neo-liberal policies worsens the situation, thereby hindering industrial peace in Nigeria. As labour unions and government disagree over the implementation of neo-liberal policies, the relationship between the two parties has become hostile with adverse implications for socio-economic development in Nigeria. This article examines labour unions' struggle with neo-liberal policies in Nigeria via an exploratory research design, involving in-depth interviews and structured questionnaire used to collect data individually from 440 respondents, including members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG). The findings showed that the majority of the respondents (91.5%) blamed the Nigerian government for implementation of neo-liberal policies. Many respondents (96%) observed some negative impacts of privatization and commercialization, including inflation, job insecurity, unemployment, and poor living standards. Most respondents (99.2%) agreed that their living standard had fallen persistently. Many respondents (93%) believed that labour unions would continue to use strikes to express opposition to undesirable policies of the Nigerian government. The majority of the respondents (86.9%) denied the effectiveness of government ban on strikes. Besides the use of strikes, many respondents (73.5%) called for demonstration, mass protests, and collaboration with civil society organisations. The findings reflected labour unions' dissatisfaction with implementation of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. There is urgent need for a substantial improvement in government's relations with labour unions to promote industrial peace and development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** ASUU, NUPENG, labour unions, neo-liberalism, strikes, Nigeria

## Introduction

The public sector of the Nigerian economy has witnessed the persistence of strikes arising from grievances and labour unions' activism against the backdrop of perceived exploitation of the public. Also, the Nigerian government's inability to resolve many strikes amicably reveals the relatively low level of industrial peace in Nigeria. The above-mentioned situation started in the colonial era, following the activities of European merchants, whereas the situation escalated in the course of implementation of some neo-liberal policies, including privatisation, commercialization, deregulation, and the globalisation agenda.

As reported by Saleem (2002), neo-liberalism refers to a process whereby private interests control as much as possible of social life to maximize profits. Given its clarity, the above definition is adopted for the present article. There is no doubt that neo-liberalism is analogous to colonialism and capitalism. These are powerful processes that produced social change in developing societies across the world. Colonialism did not only lead to emergence of Nigeria as a state, it also resulted in development of capitalism in Nigeria. Therefore, analysis of neo-liberalism can be enriched with a reference to the interplay of colonialism and capitalism.

Alubo (2004) argued that the incorporation of Nigeria into international capitalism through colonialism resulted in transformations of the Nigerian society, starting from the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914. A capitalist organisation, the Royal Niger Company (RNC), significantly contributed toward the survival of the northern and southern protectorates before their amalgamation.

From one entity in 1914-1946, the colonial government operated Nigeria under three regions from 1946 to 1960. The first indigenes government operated Nigeria under three regions from 1960 to

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1963, and four regions from 1964 to 1967. The military intervention in the Nigerian politics started in 1966, and it was followed shortly by the civil war that lasted for three years (1967-1970). Government attempts to end the civil war prompted abolition of regions and creation of 12 states in 1967. Different dictators also seized power and created more states; the number of states and local government areas in Nigeria reached 36 and 774 in 1996, respectively, whereas the military elites returned power to a democratically elected Nigerian government in 1999.

The Nigerian government adopted and implemented neo-liberal policies, first under the British colonial administrators, second under military administrations, and later during democratic dispensations. The Nigerian experience of neo-liberalism began with activities of multinational companies (MNCs), such as the Royal Niger Company (RNC) and the Bank of British West Africa (BBWA).

The Royal Niger Company was a mercantile company chartered by the British Government in the nineteenth century. It was formed in 1879 as the United African Company (UAC) and renamed to National African Company (NAC) in 1881 and Royal Niger Company (RNC) in 1886. The Royal Niger Company began its business operations in the Oil Rivers Protectorate, which became the Niger Coast Protectorate in 1893.

The Niger Coast Protectorate was merged with its environs to form the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. The concept of Nigeria was officially adopted in 1897 but it became effective in 1914 when Sir Frederick Lugard amalgamated the Southern and Northern Protectorates.

The advent of neo-liberalism led to proliferation of many private sector organisations in Nigeria, including First Bank of Nigeria, PZ Cussons, Unilever, John Holt, Cadbury, Nestlé Foods, Shell, Total, Chevron, Mobil, Julius Berger, and numerous others. These organisations are among the key supporters of implementation of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. However, labour unions have expressed dissatisfaction over the implementation of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. Expectedly, workers' resistance against government policies preceded the official recognition of labour unions, given the 19th-century experience of strikes among different groups, including artisans, labourers, canoe-men, warders, clerks, and railway workers.

Hopkins' (1966) account of Nigerian labour history includes a record of strikes in the following years: 1886, 1897, 1899, 1902, 1904, 1945, and 1964, respectively. Besides, many strikes have erupted from various labour unions in Nigeria. The Nigerian experience in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods shows that the scope of labour-union functions is beyond maintenance or improvement of working conditions. It includes expression of interest in and agitation for development of the Nigerian society.

A brief description of some labour unions is necessary here for clarity. The Nigerian Civil Service Union (NCSU) emerged in 1914; it was the first national labour union in Nigeria. Other national labour unions established during the colonial era include the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), the Nigeria Railway Workers Union (NRWU), and the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ). These unions provided a springboard for the establishment of labour unions in other sectors, including the National Association of University Teachers (NAUT), which metamorphosed into the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), and the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), among others.

Labour unions constitute a significant group with power to monitor the activities and policies of the Nigerian government. Within the limits of their power, labour unions have opposed policies considered undesirable in the interest of the majority of Nigerians.

The present article deals with labour unions' struggle with neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. In addition to abstract and introduction, the present article is presented in six sections such as follows: an appraisal of neo-liberal policies, labour unions and their struggle with neo-liberal policies, theoretical framework of neoliberalism and Marxist theory of conflict, methods of data collection, findings and discussions, and conclusion, respectively.

### **An appraisal of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria**

Successive governments in Nigeria implemented different neo-liberal policies, such as the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP), the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP), and the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). Studies on the outcomes of the implementation of neo-liberal policies largely produced negative reports.

As reported by Naiman and Watkins (1990), most African governments that accepted SAP have recorded biting socio-economic crises such as high debt, poor macro-economic performance, the collapse of education and health care systems, and an inability to meet the basic social needs of the bulk of the population. Other African countries experienced similar setbacks following the imposition of SAP in the 1980s as they faced the worsening of structural crises, increasing debts, poor macro economic performance, collapse of education and health care systems, and the inability to meet the basic social needs of the bulk of the population (Naiman & Watkin, 1990).

Like situations in many African countries, the implementation of SAP resulted in the deterioration of living conditions of most people in Nigeria (Olukoshi, 1993). Perplexed by the growing resistance to poor track records of SAP, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) imposed another neo-liberal policy called Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS) on African government.

Though the PRS was a supposedly better tailored policy focusing on the needs of individual countries and incorporating local issues and concerns it has denigrated the role of the developmental state without significant improvement on SAP (Zack-Williams & Mohan, 2005). However, situations on grounds show that poverty alleviation strategies present little improvement over SAPs. Though the IMF and World Bank recognised the failure of SAP they have not stopped forcing their imperialistic policies on developing countries.

After the failure of SAP and with supports from Breton Woods institutions, the Nigerian governments adopted other neo-liberal policies, including privatisation, deregulation, and commercialization (Krueger, 2006). The major aim of the NEEDS established by the Nigerian government is to promote privatisation and commercialisation of government owned enterprises, such as Nigeria Airways, National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) and hotels (Erinsho, 2007).

As a result of implementation of neo-liberal policies, many workers have been laid off. Some workers were retired or retrenched, especially the drivers, cleaners, caterers, gardeners, clerical officers, and domestic servants for senior civil servants. Neo-liberal policies have worsened economic tensions in developing countries (Obiajulu, 2005; Saleem, 2002; Willett, 2005).

Specifically, the adverse effects of neo-liberal policies include low labour education, increasing unemployment, currency devaluation, and erosion of state welfare services. Currency devaluations resulted in declining living standards of workers. States seek to regulate the conditions under which labour power is sold and how it is used (Edwards, 2002). The state power to enforce labour laws effectively has declined in many African states. The continued ideological hegemony of neo-liberalism has greatly weakened the capacity of governments to enforce labour-union rights (Edwards, 2002; Volscho, 2012).

For Hoogevelt (2005), the adherents of neo-liberalism promised support for poverty eradication through debt relief, which is expected to encourage a renewal of commitment toward basic education and health care. Contrary to the above, the experience of debt relief has not translated into poverty eradication in Nigeria. Labour unions usually refer to the rising spate of poverty in their efforts to draw the attention of the Nigerian government toward the living conditions of the general public.

### **Labour unions and their struggle with neo-liberal policies**

Labour unions constitute a vital part of industrial relations system in many countries. In Nigeria, the number of labour unions increased from a few in the colonial era to over 1000 in 1975, during the Military regime of General Murtala Mohammed. In 1976/1977, the Nigerian government restructured labour unions into 42 industrial unions, including the ASUU and the NUPENG.

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) grew out of the Nigerian Association of University Teachers (NAUT) formed in 1965 with membership drawn from academic staff of various universities, including the University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, University of Ife, and University of Lagos. The NAUT's orientation was mainly for improvement in the condition of service and socio-economic and political development of Nigeria.

ASUU was formed in 1978, following the failure of the Nigerian government to use the oil wealth to promote social and economic development. ASUU made several demands, including improvement in conditions of service, adequate funding of higher education, university autonomy, academic freedom, and broad national issues. In the 1980s, ASUU stood firmly against oppressive and undemocratic policies of the Nigerian government (Anugwom, 2002). The repressive practices of the Nigerian government contributed immensely to the frequency of ASUU strikes in Nigeria. In Anugwom's (2002, p. 143) remark:

The ASUU has the distinction of being the most strike-prone union, having embarked on national strikes in 1992, 1993, 1996, 1998, 1999, and 2001. [...] strikes initiated by other unions in the sector have been more or less a reaction to concessions or benefits emanating from ASUU's struggles. [...] The crisis in the sector may just as easily be traced to the advent of structural adjustment or effects of globalisation.

The above remark clearly shows ASUU's ability to organise strikes against the Nigerian government in attempts to resist the adverse consequences of neo-liberal policies on the university system. A more accurate account of the frequency of ASUU's strikes has been presented in Table 1, showing the strikes' record and duration for 20 years, i.e., from 1993 to 2013.

Like the ASUU, the NUPENG is one of the 29 industrial unions affiliated to the Nigerian Labour Congress. The NUPENG is an amalgam of several labour unions, such as Shell Workers' Union, BP Workers Union, Consolidated Petroleum Workers of Nigeria, Texaco African Workers Union, Esso

**Table 1: Strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (1993-2013)**

SN	Strike Record (Year)	Duration (Working Days)
1	1993	67
2	1994	134
3	1995	89
4	1996	156
5	1999	112
6	2000	45
7	2001	67
8	2002	11
9	2003	134
10	2005	11
11	2006	6
12	2007	67
13	2008	6
14	2009	89
15	2010	117
16	2011	67
17	2013	89+

Sources: Adapted from Akinwale (2009) and Akinboyo (2013)

Workers' Union, Union of Shell Operations, and Petroleum Tanker Drivers Union. It was formerly registered as a trade union on 15th August 1978. Its headquarters is at 9, Jibowu Street, Yaba, Lagos. NUPENG's membership spreads into four zones (Lagos, Warri, Port Harcourt, and Kaduna) for easy administration and operations.

The NUPENG struggled against the excessive use of casual/contract workers in the oil and gas industry, the struggle became popular in the 1980s and 1990s. In its struggle against casualisation, the NUPENG issued an ultimatum to the Nigerian government before embarking on strike in 1991. This led to a tripartite meeting involving the Nigerian government represented by officials from the ministry of employment, labour, and productivity, representatives of employers in the oil and gas industry, and labour-union officers from the NUPENG.

The tripartite actors agreed to solve the problem by recognising the need to unionise contract workers in the oil and gas industry. However, the NUPENG issued another ultimatum to the Nigerian government in April 2001, concerning its readiness to embark on strike to protest against the evil of casualisation. The intervention from the Nigerian government led to organisation of a casualisation seminar in November 2001 during which members agreed on several terms, including unionization of contract workers, conversion to regular employment, and equitable remuneration for all staff on similar jobs. Reality on grounds in Nigeria shows that employers have violated the above-mentioned terms of agreement. It is also noteworthy that the Nigerian government has devised several strategies to weaken the power of labour unions in Nigeria.

The Nigerian government established a labour centre in 1978, i.e., the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), through Trade Union (Amendment) Decree 22 of 1978. In 1989, the labour unions were again restructured into 29 industrial unions under the Nigeria Labour Congress. The function of the labour centre is to coordinate the activities of labour unions in Nigeria. The Nigerian government preferred to deal with one labour union instead of dealing with many unions at different periods. The Nigerian

government created another labour centre – the Trade Union Congress (TUC) – through the Trade Union (Amendment) Act of 2005. The amendment of the labour law can be attributed to government determination to reduce the labour-union power and resistance against neo-liberal policies.

It can be recalled that the NLC expressed its opposition to the controversial loan sought from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1983 by the Nigerian government (Fashoyin, 1986). However, the implementation of the IMF loan and other aspects of neo-liberal policies turned out to be contradictions built into the post colonial production process with adverse implications for labour unions and the Nigerian society. Labour unions constitute a formidable opponent to the Nigerian government because neo-liberal policies resulted in increasing number of people with lack of access to basic education and rising unemployment in Nigeria.

The Nigeria Labour Congress, a conglomerate of 29 labour unions lodged complaints about adverse effects of neo-liberal policies but the Nigerian government remains adamant and carries on with implementation of the policies. As labour unions and government disagree over the implementation of neo-liberal policies, the relationship between the two parties has become hostile with adverse implications for socio-economic development in Nigeria. To weaken labour unions' opposition to neo-liberal policies, the Nigerian government amended the labour law in 2005.

Like the Nigerian situations, implementation of neo-liberal policies has produced adverse consequences on the labour markets in many countries. Based on their study on neoliberalism and the Australian labour market, Gellecum, Baxter, and Western (2008) reported that the Australian government progressively decentralized wage setting from the national and state level to the industry, workplace, and individual level whereby employees negotiate directly with their employer for their pay and work conditions.

Labour unions played a central role in protest movements that impelled democratic reforms in Africa (Southall, 2003). However, in most cases, labour unions proved incapable of challenging the imposition of neo-liberal reforms. Even in South Africa, the Congress of South African Labour Unions (COSATU) has proved incapable of checking the imposition of market-driven policies, although it has proved somewhat more successful in checking an ambitious privatisation agenda.

Neo-liberal policies have created an environment that is not conducive to successful labour unionism. Leggett's (2012) review of labour unions' responses to neo-liberalism are summarised as follows: (1) the American unions are ill prepared for the challenges of the neo-liberal agenda, (2) the Argentinean unions have resisted neo-liberal policies with little success, (3), the British unions have become receptive to neo-liberal policies, (4) the Australian unions have not shown sign of radical opposition to neo-liberalism, (5) the German unions have moved toward democratization in their resistance against neo-liberalism, and (6) the French unions have maintained a strong opposition to neo-liberalism through the values of activist involvement, political demands, and subversive activities.

In addition to the above-mentioned instances of labour unions' responses to neo-liberalism, Leggett (2012) observed some instances of ambivalence in labour unions' responses to neo-liberalism in some countries. He mentioned that the China Federation of Trade Unions (CFTU) believed that marketisation and globalisation are good for the Chinese economy but urge for more protective labour legislation. The Indian Trade Union Congress has produced ambivalent responses to neo-liberalism, whereas the Russian unions' policy on neo-liberalism has been labeled a failed social democratic opposition. The Federation of Korean Trade Unions has challenged neo-liberalism but its militancy

largely excludes the bulk of the workforce, including irregular employees, women and migrant workers. Labour unions' resistance to neo-liberalism can be more meaningful if they mobilize for mass protest.

### **Theoretical framework of neo-liberalism and Marxist theory of conflict**

The central ideas in neo-liberalism and Marxist theory of conflict are applicable to the analysis of the issue of labour unions' struggle with neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. Neo-liberalism is an ideology that promotes dwindling state control of the economy. It reflects government claims that privatization and deregulation would not only revive the moribund public enterprises but also increase efficiency of the enterprises. In his summary of the central ideas in neo-liberalism, Aborisade (2010, p. 39) noted as follows:

The basic idea of neo-liberalism is that free market economies will operate smoothly and steadily produce more wealth. [...] The role of the state, therefore, should be restricted to defending private property, upholding contracts, national defence, and overseeing the money supply. In essence, therefore, neoliberals see the existence of public enterprises (PEs) and/or government involvement in the economy as the obstacle to economic development. They, therefore, advocate commercialization and privatization of existing PEs and the promotion of the private sector as the engine of economic growth.

Rosenberg (2010) noted that capital has dominated labour unions during the neoliberal period. In accordance with the above, Volscho (2012) observed that part of the neo-liberal turn involves waging war against labour unions. Like in other neo-liberal state, the Nigerian government has embarked on internal reorganization and new institutional arrangement to improve its competitive position in relation to other states in the global market. The ongoing economic reforms and restructuring in Nigeria follows from the ideology of neo-liberalism, which has become globally dominant in developing countries since 1970s.

Neo-liberalism also lends credence to trade liberalization through removal of all barriers to free movement of trade in the interest of the state. This notion approximates David Harvey's doctrine of market exchange as an ethic in itself and Louis Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatus. While neoliberalism is relevant to the explanation of government adoption and implementation of neo-liberal policies, Marxist theory of conflict is more suitable for analysis of labour unions' struggle with neo-liberal policies.

The basic assumptions in conflict theory are as follows: (1) interdependence of units in a social system always reveals conflict of interest, (2) the conflicts of interest results from unequal distribution of scarce resources, (3) latent conflict of interest eventually will lead to overt and violent conflicts among social groups in a system, (4) such conflicts will become bi-polar because a small minority hold power and exploits the majority, (5) the eruption of conflict will lead to social reorganization of power relations within a system.

Marx focuses on violent conflicts processes that could prompt desired social change, as social classes directly confront one another in a system. In his description of Marxist theory of conflict, Turner (1975, p. 621) posited that:

The more unequal the distribution of scarce resources in a system, the greater will be the conflict of interest between dominant and subordinate segments in a system. [...] This proposition follows directly from Marx' assumption, that in all social structures, the unequal distribution of power inevitably creates a conflict of interests between super-ordinate holding power and subordinate lacking power. [...] The more subordinate segments become aware of their collective interests, the more likely they are to question the legitimacy of the unequal distribution of scarce resources. [...] The more members of subordinate segments can communicate their grievances to each other, the more likely they are to become aware of their true collective interests.

Awareness of conflicting interests and questioning of legitimacy of the system would lead to organisation of conflict. A key concept in Marxist Theory is relative deprivation, a necessary condition for initiation of conflict. Marx assumes that conflict is inevitable, particularly in a modern capitalist society. The Marxist assumption clearly reveals the existence of conflict at different stages of development of society, given showing that:

The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of the feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of old ones. [...] The modern bourgeoisie itself is the product of long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the mode of production and of exchange. (Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 35 as cited in Shang & Hui, 2007)

Marxist theory of conflict gives impetus to labour unions' concerns about the need to ensure justice and equity by opposing various practices that violate labour rights. Labour unions in Nigeria expressed their concerns about the adverse consequences of privatization and deregulation on average Nigerians, who live in abject poverty. Labour unions have expressed openly their opposition to the neo-liberal policies implemented by the Nigerian government.

In contrast to Freeman and Medoff (1984) argument that unions enhance social efficiency, neo-liberals charge that they distort the operation of labour markets in the direction of monopoly. The gap in the above debate is offset by the provision of voice mechanisms, which raise social concerns of labour importance beyond the workplace (Kaufman, 2004). As agents of civil society, labour unions in many African countries have challenged authoritarian regimes and served as campaigners to promote democracy within the wider society (Wood, 2004b).

#### **Methods of data collection**

An exploratory research design was adopted to generate primary and secondary data for the study. The primary data were derived from in-depth interviews and structured questionnaire, whereas relevant documents obtained from literature constitute the secondary data. Forty in-depth interviews were conducted among executives of ASUU and NUPENG at the national headquarters of the unions. The in-depth interviews were complemented by the structured questionnaire used to generate data from the rank and file of the two labour unions. The respondents were randomly selected through the application of stratified random sampling technique in which 500 respondents constitute the sample size, which is a suitable figure for a large population.

Five hundred copies of the structured questionnaire were administered among members of ASUU and NUPENG at the national headquarters of the unions. The questionnaire contained questions relating to socio-demographic characteristics, labour-union perception of neo-liberal policies, and how the unions tackled the challenges arising from the policies. From 500 copies of the structured questionnaire distributed, after several follow-ups, the respondents filled and returned 400 copies of the questionnaires, showing 80% response rates. The analysis of data was subjected to descriptive statistics, including percentage distribution and chi-square analysis.

### Findings and discussions

The analysis captures the respondents' socio-demographic background, perception of neo-liberal policies, challenges facing labour unions as a result of the implementation of neo-liberal policies, and strategies for overcoming the challenges arising from the implementation of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. The findings were derived from 400 copies of the structured questionnaire filled by the respondents, representing the views of some members of the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU), and the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG).

### Background of the respondents

As shown in Table 2, the overwhelming majority of the respondents (80.5%) were male. This is not surprising given the underrepresentation of women in labour unions in Nigeria, especially in the ASUU and the NUPENG. Most of the respondents (70%) were married; this can be attributed to their status as middle-aged adults. Over 62% were aged at least 40 years.

**Table 2: Socio-demographic background of the respondents**

SN	Background	Frequency	Percent
1	Sex:		
	Female	78	19.5
	Male	322	80.5
	Total	400	100.0
2	Marital Status:		
	Never Married	76	19.0
	Living Together	24	6.0
	Married	280	70.0
	Divorce/Separated	12	3.0
	Widowed	8	2.0
Total	400	100.0	
3	Age (Years):		
	Less than 30	47	11.8
	30–39	95	23.8
	40–49	188	47.0
	50–59	40	10.0
	60 +	30	7.5
Total	400	100.0	
4	Educational Qualification:		
	Primary/Secondary	20	5.0
	OND/NCE/Technical	26	6.5
	HND/Bachelor	100	25.0
	Masters/PhD	254	63.5
Total	400	100.0	
5	Income (₦):		
	<50,000	0	0
	50,000–100,000	11	2.8
	100,001–150,000	14	3.5
	150,001–200,000	288	72.0
	200,000+	87	21.8
Total	400	100.0	

6	Labour-Union Identification :		
	ASUU	232	58.0
	NUPENG	168	42.0
	Total	400	100.0
7	Labour-Union Participation:		
	Regular/Always	366	91.5
	Not Regular/Sometimes	34	8.5
	Total	400	100.0

All the respondents were literate with at least secondary educational level while those with university postgraduate degrees constitute the majority (63.5%). This finding is expected because postgraduate education is mandatory for members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), which is often called a union of intellectuals. Also, the NUPENG could boast of members with higher education, given that many graduates have been employed in the oil and gas industry in Nigeria.

The monthly income of most of the respondents (72%) was ₦150,000 – ₦200,000 (\$938 – \$1250). The income distribution shows that the income of each of the respondent was far above the national minimum wage of ₦18,500 (\$115) per month. More than half of the respondents (58%) identified with the ASUU and 42% identified with the NUPENG. This finding reflects higher response rate from members of the ASUU.

Expectedly, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (92%) noted that they participated regularly in labour-union activities. This implies that the respondents would be knowledgeable about labour unions' struggle with neo-liberal policies in Nigeria, especially if the issue of neo-liberal policies had featured in their deliberations. Data from the in-depth interviews indicated different expressions of knowledge of neo-liberal policies among members of labour unions.

#### **Labour unions' perception of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria**

Table 3 shows the respondents' perception of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. At 91.5%, awareness was high about close connections between globalisation and the adoption and implementation of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. This finding implies that globalisation has induced the Nigerian government to adopt and implement privatisation, deregulation, and commercialisation. However, 96% mentioned their observation of negative impact of globalisation.

Similarly, 91.5% disclosed that privatisation had led to job losses while deregulation had fuelled increase in prices of essential commodities. Almost all the participants in the in-depth interviews condemned the Nigerian government for the implementation of neo-liberal policies without considering the adverse consequences of the policies on the majority of Nigerians.

This finding confirms Obiajulu's (2005) earlier observation that the implementation of neo-liberal policies has affected workers negatively, as the policies resulted in gradual reduction of the workforce in Nigeria. She further noted that massive retrenchment of workers occurred in the course of commercialisation, concessioning, and privatisation of state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

She mentioned several organisations that have retrenched many workers, including banks with a record of retrenchment of over 30,000 workers, the Nigeria Railway with a record of retrenchment of

over 7,000 workers, Nigerian ports with a record of retrenchment of over 10,000 workers, and textile industries where many workers have lost their jobs. A large number of workers have also lost their jobs in the power sector and oil and gas industry in Nigeria. The use of contract and casual workers has been rampant in many organisations in Nigeria.

A large majority of the respondents (96.3%) revealed that labour-union voices had been heard on neo-liberal policies, though labour-union benefits from the implementation of neo-liberal policies have been low and insignificant while their losses have been much and significant as mentioned by 82.8% and most of the participants in the in-depth interviews. This finding is consistent with Anugwom's (2002) report that the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU) identified globalisation as the root cause of crisis in the Nigerian university system. The ASUU has not only confronted structural deficiencies in the Nigerian environment but also challenged the government-imposed neo-liberal policies.

**Table 3: The respondents' perception of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria**

SN	Perception of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria	Frequency	Percent
1	Description of neo-liberal economic policies:		
	Privatisation/Deregulation/Free Trade	366	91.5
	Structural Adjustment Programmes	34	8.5
	Total	400	100.0
2	Comments on the neo-liberal policies in Nigeria:		
	The policies are driven by globalisation	366	91.5
	The policies are not driven by globalisation	34	8.5
	Total	400	100.0
3	Impact of neo-liberal policies:		
	Positive/Good	16	4.0
	Negative/Bad	384	96.0
	Total	400	100.0
4	Job value of privatisation:		
	Lead to job losses	366	91.5
	Lead to more jobs	34	8.5
	Total	400	100.0
5	Price value of deregulation:		
	Lead to price stability	34	8.5
	Lead to rising prices	366	91.5
	Total	400	100.0
6	Labour-union voice on neo-liberal policies:		
	Labour-union voice of labour has been heard	385	96.3
	Labour-union voice has not been heard	15	3.8
	Total	400	100.0
7	Labour-union benefits from neo-liberal policies:		
	Much/Significant	69	17.3
	Less/Insignificant	331	82.8
	Total	400	100.0

#### **Labour unions' challenges from neo-liberal policies**

Table 4 depicts the challenges and barriers facing labour unions because of the adoption and implementation of neo-liberal policies. Large proportions of the respondents (98.8%, 89% and 88.8%)

agreed that labour-union membership, funding opportunity, and mobilization capacities had been decreasing because of the adoption and implementation of neo-liberal policies.

**Table 4: Challenges facing labour unions in the neo-liberal policies**

SN	Challenges facing labour unions	Frequency	Percent
1	Union membership:		
	Increasing	5	1.3
	Decreasing	395	98.8
	Total	400	100.0
2	Labour-union funding opportunities:		
	More	44	11.0
	Less	356	89.0
	Total	400	100.0
3	Labour-union mobilisation capacity:		
	Strong	45	11.3
	Weak	355	88.8
	Total	400	100.0
4	Labour-union certainty about tenure of office:		
	Certain	35	8.8
	Uncertain	365	91.3
	Total	400	100.0
5	Labour-union education:		
	High	81	20.3
	Low	319	79.8
	Total	400	100.0
6	Government consultation with labour unions:		
	Yes	336	84.0
	No	64	16.0
	Total	400	100.0
7	Labour-union members' standard of living:		
	Falling	395	98.8
	Rising	5	1.3
	Total	400	100.0
8	Labour-union feeling with neo-liberal policies:		
	Happy	18	4.5
	Sad	318	79.5
	Indifferent	64	16.0
	Total	400	100.0

Participants in the in-depth interviews provided a rationale for the above finding, disclosing that labour unions have lost potential members through the increase in the rate of non-standard work arrangements in different sectors of the Nigerian economy during the implementation of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. Members of the NUPENG articulated their observation of excessive use of casual and contract workers in the oil and gas industry more clearly compared to members of the ASUU.

Regarding the issue of job security, 91.3% mentioned that they were not sure of the stability of tenure of their offices while 79.8% disclosed that labour-union education had not improved because of government adoption and implementation of neo-liberal policies. Surprisingly, the majority of the

respondents noted that the Nigerian government did not consult labour unions before adopting the neo-liberal policies.

However, available evidence in literature shows involvement of the erstwhile President of the NLC in the deliberations of the National Council on Privatisation (NCP). In his comment on this issue, Okafor (2009) reported that Adams Oshiomole, the President of the Nigeria Labour Congress accepted a seat on the government-established National Council on Privatisation (NCP). Clearly, this tendency to compromise with the government limited the movement's ability to secure its demand to the fullest extent.

Generally, respondents expressed their concerns against neo-liberal policies. In this regard, 98.8% noted that their living standards had fallen while 91.5% stated that they had observed negative impact of neo-liberal policies. Besides, 79.5% believed that they were not happy about the adoption and implementation of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. This finding is consistent with Saleem's (2002, p. 103) observation of a close connection between implementation of neo-liberal policies and increase in the rate of poverty:

Due to the neo-liberalism, there is an increase in both types of poverty, relative and absolute. The ratio of people living below poverty line is increasing along with the increase in the inequalities between the rich and the poor. There is a direct linkage between neo-liberalism and poverty as neo-liberalism only believes in the private interest not in the interest of society.

#### **Labour unions' strategies against neo-liberal policies**

Table 5 shows the labour-union strategies against neo-liberal policies. Most respondents (93%) believed that the use of strike was a major weapon against neo-liberal policies. This finding points to labour unions' use of strike as a major strategy against the Nigerian government.

**Table 5: Labour-union strategies against neo-liberal policies**

SN	Strategies against neo-liberal policies:	Frequency	Percent
1	Labour-union actions against neo-liberal policies:		
	Strike actions	372	93.0
	Non-strike actions	28	7.0
	Total	400	100.0
2	Non-strike actions against neo-liberal policies:		
	Mobilisation/mass participation	164	41.0
	Demonstration/Rally	50	12.5
	Networking with civil society organisations	151	37.8
	Political party	35	8.8
	Total	400	100.0
3	The need for reversal of neo-liberal policies:		
	Yes	321	80.3
	No	79	19.7
	Total	400	100.0
4	Political platform against neo-liberal policies:		
	Necessary	366	91.5
	Unnecessary	34	8.5
	Total	400	100.0

5	Labour-union power for agitation:		
	Effective	366	91.5
	Ineffective	34	8.5
	Total	400	100.0
6	Labour-union strikes during neo-liberal policies:		
	Much/Significant	303	75.8
	Less/Insignificant	97	24.3
	Total	400	100.0
7	Government ban on strike:		
	Successful	49	12.3
	Not successful	351	87.8
	Total	400	100.0

In his comments on the consequences of strikes, Fashoyin (1986, p. 68) noted as follows:

Strikes are a nuisance and a destabilizing force in industrial development. Many of them can be too costly to the national economy. [---] Many of the strikes that take place in African countries are too short-lived and insignificant to damage the economy. [---] Despite their short duration, strikes in Africa are a source of concern.

Besides strikes, members of labour unions believed in the necessity of other strategies that could stimulate antagonism against the government on any undesirable actions. Some respondents (41% and 37.8%) considered mass protest and networking with civil society organisations as other potent strategies that could be used against neo-liberal policies. Many respondents (80.3%) considered the need for a reversal of the implementation of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. This finding resonates with the previous position expressed in the ASUU's strike bulletin as follows:

The insistence of government on abdicating the education of Nigerian people can be explained only within the context of the World Bank agenda. Government must be persuaded by Nigerians to reverse its position on this matter. This means that all our members must educate themselves on the conspiracy of these institutions of domination (ASUU, 2001, p. 1 as cited in Anugwom, 2002, p. 148)

Also, 91.5% each strongly believed in the potency of labour-union power for agitation, and the use of political platform against neo-liberal policies. A key finding also showed that 91.5% believed that decentralization had weakened the labour-union centres in Nigeria but the majority (82.7%) believed that government attempt to stamp out labour-union right to strike has not been successful.

## Conclusion

The issues addressed in this article bordered on labour-union relations with the Nigerian government concerning the implementation of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. A significant proportions of labour-union members exhibited high level of participation in labour-union activities and awareness of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria. Labour unions have used strikes successfully to call the attention of the Nigerian government toward the challenges arising from the implementation of neo-liberal policies.

However, the labour unions have not succeeded in stopping the implementation of neo-liberal polices. Despite the labour-union struggle, the Nigerian government has succeeded in the implementation of some neo-liberal policies, including privatisation, deregulation, and commercialization. Unfortunately, privatisation and deregulation have contributed to rising rates of unemployment and non-standard work arrangements in Nigeria. This partly explains the rationale behind labour-union advocacy for a reversal of the implementation of neo-liberal policies in Nigeria.

Available evidence shows that neo-liberal policies serve the interest of international institutions, such as, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organisation (WTO); these institutions regard the implementation of neo-liberal policies as a means to reconfiguring capitalism (Leggett, 2012).

It is therefore obvious that as the implementation of neo-liberal policies results in deplorable socio-economic situations the incidence of antagonism against the Nigerian government would be on the increase. Labour unions and the Nigerian government should freely negotiate and reach an agreement toward mitigating the adverse consequences of neo-liberal policies. The Nigerian government should reconsider its confrontational ideology to strengthen its capacity for the management of the lingering conflicts arising from implementation of neo-liberal policies.

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