



ASUU AND THE GOVERNMENT

The Nigerian Muslims Network (NMN) wishes to identify with the objectives of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) while, at the same time, believes in the need for ASUU to exercise restraint, caution and devise a more proactive action plan to achieve its noble and set objectives instead of incessant industrial actions. This is on the backdrop of the ongoing standoff between the government and the union over the issue of the 'Ilorin 49'. The lecturers concerned were sacked since 2001 when they refused to sign back-to-work registers during an ASUU strike action. After a protracted plea for over seven years involving the intervention of the International Labor Organization and other respectable bodies, the government has not budged.

Apart from the fact that strikes are legitimate in a democracy, such undue test of will from the government with the nation's intellectual elite is unhelpful. The lecturers involved include nine professors, twenty one P.hD holders and other senior academics, and all from a single university. In these days of intellectual dearth in our University system, losing 49 senior academics in a particular university is very worrisome. The latest action by the government on this vexed and protracted issue, a curt 'no work, no pay' response is highly unfortunate and only portrays a lack of will to yield to reconciliation for the overall good of the nation.



University Students, caught in the center of this whirlpool of crises, suffer an erratic and elongated years of studies and disruption of their learning processes. This elongation of years is becoming problematic even in the highly competitive labor market as employers are now placing a lot of premium on employing graduates of under 25 years with proven intellectual capability. Many students have decided to leave the country in search of education elsewhere to even less privileged, but educationally more stable African nations like Ghana where they could have quality education and finish their studies within stipulated official calendars.

The NMN feels that the government should adopt a very serious and effective attitude towards education. By UNESCO standards, the universities in Nigeria, which are 63 (Federal, states, and private), are supposed to have about 47,000 lecturers or thereabout but only about 16, 000 lecturers are currently working in the country. In fact, ASUU National President, Dr. Sule Kano, maintains that additional 60,000 lecturers are needed for the universities to attain a world-class standard. Dr. Kano recently cited a case of a university where water dropping from air conditioning system is used to supplant unaffordable distilled water for laboratory uses. Courses in Science and Technology are restricted to theoretical foregrounding since facilities are either obsolete or non-existent. ASUU president, Unilag chapter, Dr Ayo Olowe, for instance, states that the Chemical



Engineering department of the university alone needs a whopping ten billion naira to be equipped with up-to-date facilities.

Moreover, every country is expected to have at least twenty percent of the population of its youths in the universities but only three percent of Nigerian youths are in the universities. While UNESCO stipulates that at least 26 percent of annual budget of each country should go to the educational sector, Nigeria's highest budgetary allocation to the sector was 8.1%. The worst was in 2001 when the government allocated only 1% of its annual budget to education!

This statistics speaks volume of the utter misplacement of priorities by successive governments in Nigeria. This country has the resources and potentials to fund education adequately if it can cut down on profligate spending on white elephant projects and desist from unbridled acts of corruption. It is disheartening to see how our leaders demand and enjoy world-class perks for themselves and their families yet leaving very significant sectors like education in a highly sub-standard and sub-human status.

The NMN, at this juncture, wishes to state that two wrongs never make a right and in the interest of the whole country, Labor Unions like ASUU should have a measure of restraint taking into consideration the real victims of their actions which are ordinary and poor Nigerians; while the government, on its part, should



stop being nonchalant to the demands for constructive change of our University System. It should stop viewing any strike action as simply part of the 'Nigerian Factor' but as an aberration that deserves to be treated with all seriousness. The NMN humbly feels that the government should ponder on the following points with a view to maintaining a harmonious relationship with bodies like ASUU and resuscitating crucial sectors like education:

Firstly, the government should do all it can to make education live up to its billing by UNESCO - i.e. increased funding, increased intellectual work-force, increased university in-take, etcetera. Right from the base, the government should concretize education to the university level. The case of the 49 sacked teachers should be reversed and the arrears of their unpaid salaries be paid. There is no society that can develop with a lackadaisical attitude to education and when it treats its intellectual cream like lepers. Martin Luther King is right to say that 'the prosperity of a country depends, not on the abundance of its revenues, but in the number of its cultivated citizens: in its men of education, enlightenment and character.'

Secondly, the government should generally try to be more humane in its economic policies to pacify an economically overburdened working class by improving on its wages and maintaining a single digit inflationary trend. Let the



take home pay of university lecturers not only take them home but take them abroad for individual research and even vacation!

Thirdly, the Government should be more responsive to the demands of trade unions and always implement, with dispatch, its own parts of the bargain. It should adhere strictly to the principles and demands of collective bargaining. It would be recalled that ASUU embarked on the last strike action following the refusal of Obasanjo's administration to abide by the agreements reached with the government to honor agreements between the union and the Federal Government in 1981, 1992, 1999 and 2001. So, in most cases, as in this one, trade unions embark on strike actions when government has reneged on general agreements and shunned adequate ultimatums. The government should, as a matter of policy, view union demands and threats with sincerity and seriousness to avoid a situation where it has to be 'forced' to implement what it could have otherwise implemented peacefully, respectfully and without any damage.

Fourthly, the government should put in place a patriotic machinery which would facilitate the deployment of services under its control and funding for its own usage. It would appear to be a bit incongruous and obviously questionable for government officials to utilize services abroad rather than the ones they manage. In Nigeria, it is not surprising to find a Minister of Education sending his children to foreign universities or a Permanent Secretary in the health sector going for



medical care abroad. If government utilizes its sectors not only would it have a first-hand view of what is happening there thus effecting a possible change, but would instill confidence in the citizenry to also toe the same patriotic path.

Fifthly, aggrieved workers should always try to temper their demands with compassion especially on the plight of the masses in crucial sectors like education and health. If the wealthy citizens have options abroad or where their money can carry them, what then would happen to the penniless masses that have to, as it were, accept everything like that with no options?

In conclusion, we fervently hope that the government would do something concerted and effective to stem this spate of strike actions in the country. This should be done for the interest of average Nigerians who are always at the receiving end in this tug of war between the government and the labor unions.

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