



# Strikes and Lockdowns as Instruments of Industrial Action and their Effects on Employee Performance in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Industrial action remains a key instrument through which organized labour influences employer decisions and government policy in Nigeria. This study examines strikes and lockdowns as forms of industrial action and their effects on employee performance, industrial relations, and organisational productivity. While strikes traditionally function as bargaining tools for protecting workers' rights, lockdowns represent more extensive disruptions that affect economic activity and public service delivery. The study explores how these actions influence employee motivation, workplace relations, conflict resolution, and productivity outcomes. Using a qualitative approach based on secondary sources, including journals, labour reports, and policy documents, the study finds that although strikes and lockdowns can strengthen workers' bargaining power and improve working conditions, their frequent use negatively affects employee performance, organisational efficiency, and national economic stability. The study concludes that strengthened dispute resolution mechanisms, improved labour-management collaboration, and effective implementation of labour agreements are essential for sustaining industrial harmony and enhancing productivity in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** *Industrial action, Strikes, lockdowns, Employee performance, Industrial relations, Productivity.*

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### **Background to the Study**

Industrial action is a fundamental feature of industrial relations systems globally, serving as a mechanism through which employees collectively express grievances and negotiate improved working conditions. In Nigeria, strikes and lockdowns have become recurring instruments used by trade unions and professional associations to influence government policies and employer decisions. These actions often arise from disputes over wages, poor working conditions, delayed salary payments, inadequate welfare provisions, and non-implementation of collective agreements. Strikes typically involve the withdrawal of labour services by employees, while lockdowns represent broader disruptions that may extend beyond a single organization to affect entire sectors such as education, healthcare, or public administration. Although these actions are constitutionally recognized as part of collective bargaining processes, their frequent occurrence has raised concerns about their impact on employee performance, organisational productivity, and national economic stability. While industrial actions may enhance workers' bargaining power and draw attention to unresolved grievances, they also disrupt workflow, reduce service delivery efficiency, and negatively affect public confidence in institutions. This tension between labour rights and productivity outcomes forms the central concern of this study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the recognition of strikes and industrial actions as legitimate instruments of collective bargaining under both national labour laws and International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) conventions, Nigeria continues to experience persistent and often prolonged industrial disruptions across critical sectors of the economy. These disruptions have become a recurring feature of the industrial relations system, particularly in education, health, public administration, and essential services, with significant implications for employee performance and national productivity.

Empirical evidence indicates that Nigeria has experienced recurrent nationwide and sectoral strikes over the past two decades, particularly in the education sector. For instance, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) alone recorded multiple prolonged strikes, including 2009 (approximately 4 months), 2013 (about 5 months), and 2020–2022 (over 8–9 months cumulatively), resulting in severe academic calendar disruptions and loss of productive learning time. According to the World Bank (2022) and related education sector analyses, such prolonged closures contribute to human capital deficits and reduced long-term labour productivity outcomes in developing economies.

Similarly, the health sector has witnessed repeated strikes by unions such as the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) and Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU), with reports from policy briefs indicating that health worker strikes in Nigeria have contributed to delays in service delivery and increased patient vulnerability in public hospitals, particularly during periods of extended industrial action. The persistence of these disruptions reflects underlying structural weaknesses in Nigeria's industrial relations system. Scholars such as Aiyede (2021) and Otobo (2020) argue that the frequent recurrence of strikes is symptomatic of weak enforcement of collective agreements, limited trust between labour and government, and

ineffective dispute resolution mechanisms. In many cases, agreements reached between government and labour unions are either partially implemented or delayed, leading to renewed cycles of industrial action.

Furthermore, the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) emphasizes that effective industrial relations systems rely heavily on functional social dialogue and credible arbitration mechanisms. However, in Nigeria, institutional weaknesses in mediation and arbitration processes often result in prolonged negotiations that escalate into strikes rather than prevent them. Beyond institutional inefficiencies, the economic consequences of industrial actions are also significant. Studies on labour disruptions in developing economies indicate that prolonged strikes can lead to losses in productivity, delays in public service delivery, and reduced economic output running into billions of naira annually. In Nigeria, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and related fiscal analyses have consistently highlighted that labour-related disruptions contribute to inefficiencies in public expenditure and reduced service effectiveness, particularly in education and healthcare delivery systems.

More critically, while industrial actions are intended to improve workers' welfare and strengthen bargaining power, their recurring and prolonged nature raises concerns about their unintended consequences on employee performance. Reduced morale, loss of working time, weakened organisational commitment, and disruption of workflow processes are common outcomes identified in the literature (Ijewereme, 2023; Olowu, 2002). Therefore, the core problem is not the legitimacy of industrial action itself, but rather its frequency, duration, and ineffective management within Nigeria's industrial relations framework, which collectively undermine employee performance, organisational efficiency, and broader socio-economic development. This situation raises important analytical questions about whether strikes and lockdowns, as currently practiced in Nigeria, are achieving their intended objectives of improving labour welfare without producing disproportionate negative effects on productivity and institutional stability.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to examine strikes and lockdowns as instruments of industrial action and their effects on employee performance in Nigeria.

### **Literature Review**

Industrial action refers to collective measures adopted by employees, usually through trade unions, to compel employers or government to meet demands related to wages, working conditions, job security, and welfare. According to Fashoyin (2018), industrial action is a fundamental component of collective bargaining systems and functions as a pressure mechanism that balances power between employers and employees in industrial relations. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) recognizes the right to strike as a legitimate labour right, provided it is exercised within legal frameworks. However, the impact of industrial action is shaped by its frequency, duration, sectoral coverage, and the effectiveness of dispute resolution institutions. In Nigeria, industrial action has become a recurring feature of public sector labour relations, reflecting persistent tensions between labour unions and

government over issues such as wage arrears, fuel subsidy removal, and poor working conditions.

**Strikes as Instruments for Industrial Action**

Strikes are the most common form of industrial action and involve the temporary withdrawal of labour to enforce demands. In Nigeria, strikes are particularly prevalent in the education, health, oil and gas, and public administration sectors. Aremu (2022) notes that strikes have historically been effective in compelling government response, especially in wage negotiations and policy reforms. However, their recurrence reflects structural weaknesses in Nigeria's industrial relations system, particularly poor implementation of agreements and weak trust between government and labour unions.

**Examples of Major Strikes in Nigeria**  
**ASUU Strike (Academic Staff Union of Universities)**

The university system has experienced repeated strikes. For example:

- i. 2009 strike lasted about 4 months
- ii. 2013 strike lasted about 5 months
- iii. 2020–2021 strike lasted about 9 months (COVID-era overlap)
- iv. 2022 strike lasted about 8 months

These disruptions significantly affected academic calendars, student graduation timelines, and staff productivity.

- 1. **NLC Nationwide Strikes (Fuel subsidy & wage disputes)**  
 The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) has frequently organized nationwide strikes, including protests fuel subsidy removal and minimum wage delays.
- 2. **Health Sector Strikes (NMA, JOHESU)**  
 The health sector has also experienced repeated strikes affecting hospitals and public healthcare delivery.

**Table 1:** Estimated Frequency of Major Strikes in Nigeria (2010–2024)

Sector	Estimated Number of Major Strikes	Common Causes	Impact Level
Education (ASUU, SSANU, NASU)	8–12 major strikes	Salaries, autonomy, funding	Very High
Health (NMA, JOHESU)	6–9 strikes	Welfare, hazard allowance	High
Public Service (NLC/TUC actions)	5–8 nationwide actions	Minimum wage, subsidy	Very High
Oil & Gas	3–5 strikes	Labour conditions, safety	High

**Source:** Synthesized from labour reports, media records, and industrial relations studies (Aremu, 2022; ILO, 2023).

### Lockdowns and Broader Industrial Disruptions

Lockdowns represent a more severe and expansive form of industrial action that affects entire sectors or national systems. Unlike strikes, which may be localized, lockdowns often result in widespread shutdown of essential services, including education, transportation, and public administration. Webster, Lambert, and Bezuidenhout (2020) argue that large-scale industrial disruptions indicate systemic failure in labour governance and declining institutional trust between workers and the state.

In Nigeria, lockdown-type industrial disruptions have been observed during:

- i. Nationwide fuel subsidy protests
- ii. Extended university closures (ASUU strikes)
- iii. Public service shutdown threats by NLC
- iv. Electricity sector disputes involving labour unions

These disruptions often create **multiplier effects on the economy**, including reduced productivity, inflationary pressure, and loss of human capital development time.

**Table 2:** Economic Cost of Industrial Actions (Nigeria Estimates)

Type of Loss	Estimated Impact
Education disruption	Loss of 6–12 months academic time in prolonged strikes
Health service disruption	Increased patient mortality risk during hospital strikes
Economic productivity loss	Billions of naira in lost output annually (World Bank estimates on labour disruptions in developing economies)
Public service delay	Reduced government efficiency and service delivery backlog

### Effects of Industrial Action on Employee Performance

Employee performance is strongly influenced by workplace stability, organizational continuity, motivation, and trust in management systems. According to Ijewereme (2023), frequent industrial disruptions reduce morale, weaken commitment, and lower productivity across public institutions. Olowu (2002) further notes that unstable industrial environments in developing economies contribute significantly to inefficiency in public service delivery and declining citizen satisfaction.

### Key Effects Identified in Literature

1. **Reduced Employee Motivation:** Worker's experience uncertainty and frustration due to unresolved disputes.
2. **Decline in Productivity:** Frequent interruptions reduce output levels and institutional efficiency.
3. **Loss of Working Time:** Extended strikes (especially in education and health) result in irreversible loss of productive time.
4. **Weak Organizational Commitment:** Employees often disengage due to distrust in management or government responsiveness.
5. **Service Delivery Breakdown:** Public institutions become unable to deliver essential services effectively.

**Table 3:** Effects of Industrial Action on Employee Performance in Nigeria

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Positive Effect</b>	<b>Negative Effect</b>
Wage Negotiation	Improved bargaining power	Delayed agreements
Employee Welfare	Better conditions in some cases	Economic strain during strikes
Productivity	Short-term mobilization effect	Long-term productivity loss
Institutional Trust	Awareness of workers' rights	Reduced trust in government/employers
Service Delivery	Policy attention	Service disruption

The literature shows that industrial action remains a legitimate and necessary instrument for labour advocacy and collective bargaining in Nigeria. However, its increasing frequency and prolonged duration reflect deeper structural weaknesses in industrial relations governance. While strikes and lockdowns strengthen labour bargaining power, they simultaneously create significant disruptions in employee performance, institutional efficiency, and national productivity. The persistence of these actions suggests that Nigeria's industrial relations system still suffers from weak enforcement of agreements, inadequate dispute resolution mechanisms, and limited trust between stakeholders. Thus, literature supports a dual conclusion: industrial action is both a protective labour instrument and a potential constraint on employee performance and economic stability, depending on how it is managed.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined strikes and lockdowns as instruments of industrial action and their effects on employee performance in Nigeria. The study concludes that while industrial actions remain important tools for protecting workers' rights and improving labour conditions, their frequent use has negative consequences for employee performance, organisational efficiency, and national productivity. The effectiveness of industrial action depends largely on the strength of labour institutions, the responsiveness of government, and the efficiency of dispute resolution mechanisms. Without these supporting structures, industrial actions tend to create more disruption than resolution.

The findings of this study imply that industrial action must be carefully managed within a structured and enforceable labour relations framework. First, strengthening dispute resolution mechanisms is essential to reduce the frequency and duration of strikes and lockdowns. Second, improving the implementation of collective agreements will reduce mistrust between labour and government. Third, the establishment of more effective early-warning and negotiation systems can help prevent conflicts from escalating into full industrial actions. Finally, adopting the best international practices in labour relations, as recommended by the ILO, will promote stability, productivity, and sustainable industrial harmony.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. The government should strengthen industrial dispute resolution mechanisms to reduce reliance on strikes and lockdowns.

2. Labour agreements should be fully implemented to build trust between workers and employers.
3. Early negotiation and mediation systems should be institutionalized to prevent escalation of disputes.
4. Labour-management collaboration should be strengthened through regular dialogue and engagement.
5. Public institutions should improve communication channels between management and employees.
6. The use of arbitration and conciliation should be prioritized over prolonged industrial actions.

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