

## EDITORIAL COMMENT

### **Academic Staff Union of Universities and Federal Government Imbroglio**

Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) was founded in 1978 as a successor to the Nigeria Association of Universities Teachers for the establishment and maintenance of just and proper conditions of service for its members; advancement of the education and training of its members; establishment and maintenance of high standard of academic performance and professional practice, and protection; and advancement of the socio-economic and cultural interests of the nation, *et cetera*. ASUU comprises of all Federal and State Universities, except for Delta State University, Abraka.

For over a decade, ASUU has been having trade disputes with the federal government and embarking on strikes lasting several months each time, with the result that academic programme in the public universities is disrupted. A cumulative total of more than thirty-six months, more than three academic sessions have been lost to strikes. The main reason for the ongoing ASUU strike is to protest the Nigerian government's failure to implement the agreements it entered into with the union in 2009 and the 2001 agreement that gave birth to the 2009 agreement. The recurring issues in the ASUU's demands include the revitalization of public universities, earned academic allowances, funding, autonomy, and the recent, demand for the University Transparency Accountability Solution (UTAS) as a replacement for the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information system (IPPIS), as the platform for processing and payment of university staff salaries and allowances.

On February 14, 2022, ASUU embarked on a 4-week total and comprehensive strike to press home their unresolved issues with the federal government. The strike action was further extended by 12 weeks on May 9 to afford the government enough time to satisfactorily resolve all the outstanding issues. The Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari personally intervened on July 19 and directed the Minister of Education, to proffer a solution to the challenge and report progress to him in not later than two weeks. However, ASUU remained adamant in its resolve to press on with its demand as it once again on August 1 extended its ongoing strike by another four weeks to give the federal government more time to resolve outstanding issues in its dispute with it. It was reported that the federal government will be unable to meet the financial demands of the university lecturers as it was impossible for the government to borrow about N1.2 trillion to end the almost six months strike action. Furthermore, it has been argued that the government will have to make budgetary provision in the 2023 National Budget to be able to meet the demands of ASUU.

ASUU says it will does not intend to stop the ongoing strike action until the government meets their demands. Recently, the National President of ASUU, Professor Emmanuel Osodeke, publicly asked the students to be patient while suggesting to them that "Two years isn't too much to sacrifice" for the cause ASUU is pursuing. This means the academic lives of thousands of universities undergraduate and postgraduate students could be up in the air.

Strike actions by ASUU remains an issue of great concern and it has caused students to spend more time away from classes and this, unfortunately, is a contributing factor to the increasing crime rate in the country as many youths devote their idle time to anti-social and illegal activities. Students across the public universities, are losing hope in education. It is common knowledge that it took

some of them several years after secondary school education to gain admission into public universities because of the problem of oversubscription in the universities and other factors like the quota system.

Incessant strike actions are detrimental to any country's economy. The federal government should take stringent steps to ensure the commencement of academic activities in Nigerian public universities, and this should begin with meeting the legitimate and reasonable demands of the ASUU. Indeed, it is time a firm decision is taken whether we want to continue having public universities and by extension, other public tertiary institution in Nigeria. If the decision is to continue with public tertiary institutions, there is no option than funding them to make them functional and, in the position, to deliver on the fundamental objectives of tertiary education in any nation that strives to develop all facets of economic and social life. We must provide all the human resources and material to take care of the human element that give life to what we call a university or polytechnic in Nigeria. For the avoidance of doubt, we mean the academic, administrative, and technical staff that give life, meaning and effect to the sustenance of tertiary institutions as the engine rooms of teachings and research. On the other hand, if we do not want to have public universities anymore, we should come, sit together, and decide on an alternative (if there can be any).

The way things are going now, ASUU should not be blamed for the ongoing and protracted confusion in the university system. ASUU is not responsible for the circumstances that have given rise to the problems that have crippled all the activities in the public universities. We must look at the attitude of the federal government that has neglected and refused to take steps to resolve the crisis with the seriousness and urgency it deserves.

We call on the Federal Government even if not in the interest of the striking workers, but in the more important and fundamental interest of the students for whom the Constitution places the responsibility for their education on the government, to do what is necessary at this critical stage of the crisis. The intervention of the head of the government of the federation to settle all the issues in the dispute is a constitutional responsibility and failure to do so, is a breach of the Constitution.

Professor Momodu Kassim-Momodu  
Editor and Dean of Law  
16 August 2022