

Research Article

LABOUR UNIONISM AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA : A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Labour unions remain pivotal actors in shaping socio-economic outcomes across the globe, particularly in developing nations where they often serve as the principal vehicles for collective bargaining and social justice. In Nigeria, the historical and contemporary significance of labour unionism cannot be overstated, yet its contribution to national development remains contested and uneven. This paper interrogates the nexus between labour unionism and national development in Nigeria, with three key objectives: to examine the influence of labour unionism on economic and social development outcomes, to identify the challenges that hinder unions from contributing effectively to national development, and to analyse institutional and policy measures that strengthen or weaken the positive role of labour unions. Guided by the pluralist theory of industrial relations, which views employers, employees, and the state as distinct but legitimate interest groups whose conflicts can be managed through institutionalised mechanisms, the paper adopted a secondary method of data collection from peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports among internet documented materials. The paper showed that while labour unions in Nigeria have been instrumental in wage increases, improved working conditions, and policy advocacy, their efforts are frequently undermined by weak institutional capacity, inconsistent government compliance with agreements, internal governance challenges, and adversarial labour–state relations. These dynamics produce mixed effects, with unions sometimes acting as catalysts for development and at other times as sources of disruption. The paper concluded that the developmental potential of Nigerian labour unionism can be realised only through reforms

that institutionalise tripartite dialogue, strengthen union accountability, and ensure consistent enforcement of labour policies, transforming unions into reliable partners in achieving national development goals. It however recommended among others that government and union leaders should establish structured mechanisms that link wage negotiations and industrial agreements directly to measurable development indicators such as productivity growth, poverty reduction, and public service delivery outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Labour Unionism, National development, Nigeria, Pluralist theory, Industrial Relation, Wage Policy, Institutional Capacity, Policy Enforcement, Collective Bargaining, Workers Welfare

Introduction

Labour unionism has long been a global phenomenon through which workers aggregate power to negotiate for better wages, safer working conditions, social protection, and a more equitable share in economic gains (International Labour Organization (ILO, 2025). In developed economies, strong union presence historically contributed to the rise of the welfare state, collective bargaining frameworks, and more balanced labour–capital relations.

In Africa, trade union movements developed partly in response to the exploitative labour practices of colonial regimes and emerging capitalist enterprises. In many African countries, unions became key actors in promoting labour rights, influencing social policy, and often intervening in nationalist and postcolonial struggles. For example, studies trace how African labour unions have sometimes aligned with or resisted political regimes, shaping broader social and institutional development (Obono, 2004; see also the overview in Trade Union Movements in Nigeria). In Nigeria specifically, unionism has colonial roots but also deeper antecedents: Olusoji et al., (2012) argue that craft associations existed before formal colonial trade unions, and that colonial unionism was later formalised under British volunteerist models.

During the colonial period, labour unrest was already visible in Nigeria. A prominent early example is the 1897 Lagos strike of public works employees, a protest against proposed wage cuts and longer work hours, which ended in concessions by colonial authorities. More systematically, the 1945 nationwide general strike mobilised an estimated 200,000 workers across multiple sectors, demanding better wages in a context of wartime inflation and declining living standards. These episodes signalled that labour activism would remain a persistent force in Nigeria’s social and political life.

After independence, trade unions in Nigeria such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and sectoral unions (e.g. university staff unions, healthcare unions) have played active roles in wage negotiations, social welfare advocacy, industrial action, and influencing labour

legislation (Bamidele et al., 2019; Labourism and Good Governance in a Democratic Society). Over time, however, Nigeria's unions have confronted challenges: internal leadership crises, politicisation, weak legal enforcement, irregular strike patterns, declining membership in some sectors, and pressures from globalization and labour casualization (Solaja, 2015; Ibrahim, 2013). More recently, the 2024 general strike by NLC and TUC over minimum wage demands highlighted both the enduring strength and tensions in labour–state relations.

Against this backdrop, the question arises: can labour unionism in Nigeria be more than an arena of conflict over wages? Can it be a constructive force for national development? National development here refers not just to economic growth, but to human development outcomes, institutional capacity, service delivery, social equity, and stability. To answer this, it is necessary to examine how union activities have affected development outcomes, what impedes or moderates their influence, and which institutional mechanisms might enhance their positive role.

Statement of the Problem

From the global to the Nigerian context, labour unions have been influential actors in shaping worker rights and socio-economic policies. In Nigeria, they have been central in contesting wage injustice, advocating social welfare, and influencing labour laws since colonial times (Olusoji et al., 2012; Obono, 2004). Yet the record of their impact on national development remains ambiguous: while unions achieve occasional gains in worker welfare and pressure governments, their influence on broader development indicators, such as poverty reduction, institutional capacity, service delivery, and sustained productivity remains vague.

Several issues underscore this ambiguity. Firstly, many studies emphasise strikes, wage disputes, or internal union challenges, but seldom connect those to macro or sectoral development outcomes in a systemic way. Secondly, internal union problems (leadership, factionalism, weak democracy) and external constraints (weak legal enforcement, political interference, economic volatility) are often discussed in isolation, without exploring how they jointly weaken union contributions to development. Thirdly, institutional and policy reforms (collective bargaining, tripartite dialogue, legal enforcement) are often proposed but rarely critically assessed in terms of measurable development outcomes. Finally, Nigeria's changing labour environment such as rising informal employment, labour casualization, globalisation pressures among others raises the question on whether older frameworks of unionism remain effective.

Hence, the problem addressed in this paper is: What is the contribution of labour unionism in Nigeria to national development; what obstacles diminish that contribution; and what institutional or policy interventions can enhance its positive impact? The literature to date is rich in descriptive and sectoral case studies but lacks a cohesive, critical synthesis linking unionism and national development outcomes under varying institutional contexts. This gap motivates a structured literature review guided by clear objectives.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this paper was to critically review literature on labour unionism in Nigeria, investigating its contributions to national development. The specific objectives includes:

1. To assess how labour unionism has influenced economic and social development outcomes in Nigeria.
2. To examine the internal and external challenges faced by labour unions in Nigeria that hinder their capacity to contribute to national development.
3. To evaluate institutional and policy measures (or mechanisms of union-government/employer interaction) that strengthen or weaken the positive role of labour unionism in national development.

Methodology

This paper adopts a secondary method of data collection, relying exclusively on existing literature. It synthesises information from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic theses and dissertations, government publications, and other credible scholarly sources. The review focused on materials published between 2013 and 2024 to ensure the inclusion of recent and relevant evidence.

Literature Review

The review of relevant and related literature for this paper was done following the aim and objectives under the following subheadings:

Conceptual Review

Key concepts in the paper were reviewed as follows :

Labour Unionism

Labour unionism refers to organised associations of workers formed to protect their interests, especially in relation to employment conditions such as wages, working hours, occupational safety, benefits, welfare, and working conditions. Key features include collective bargaining, strike/industrial action, representation in negotiations, mobilisation of members, and political engagement. Union strength depends on membership density, leadership legitimacy, legal environment, internal democracy, financial sufficiency, and relationships with employers and government (Atiye & Itu, 2024).

National Development

National development in this context refers to growth and improvement in economic metrics (GDP growth, productivity, employment, income levels), social welfare (health, education, poverty reduction, social security), institutional development (governance, rule of law, regulatory frameworks), and overall human development. National development also includes

industrial harmony, stability, public service delivery, and sustainable development (Adeniyi et al., 2024).

Influence of Labour Unionism on Economic and Social Development Outcomes in Nigeria

The influence of labour unionism on Nigeria's economic and social development is neither uniformly positive nor wholly negative; rather, the literature shows a conditional relationship in which gains for workers and society depend on the institutional context, macroeconomic environment and the strategies unions adopt. Empirical studies by Edet et al. (2024) demonstrate that organised labour has secured concrete improvements in worker welfare including higher negotiated wages in some sectors, better pension arrangements, negotiated allowances and periodic welfare benefits, which translate into short-term improvements in household income and living conditions (Okolie & Afonughe, 2021).

At the same time, macro-level indicators complicate the picture: while Nigeria remains sub-Saharan Africa's largest economy, the labour market exhibits structural weaknesses. Official labour-force surveys show persistent underemployment and a combined underemployment/unemployment measure (LU2) of 15.3% in Q1 of 2024, with employment-to-population ratios and labour-force participation rates that reflect substantial informal and precarious employment (Edet et al. (2024). These structural realities mean that union victories in formal sectors do not automatically reduce poverty at scale unless coverage expands beyond a narrow formal wage sector (Edet et al. 2024).

Sectoral studies by Osuagwu and Chukwuemeka (2024), highlight how union action directly affects service delivery and human-development outcomes. In higher education, for instance, the recurring industrial disputes involving academic unions have produced repeated interruptions in teaching and research, with attendant declines in measurable academic outputs and delayed graduations that have long-term consequences for workforce readiness and productivity. Quantitative research by Osazuwa and Edeme, (2021), has also linked industrial unrest, measured by strike days, to measurable losses in sectoral output across education, health and construction, indicating that prolonged conflict can set back the very development objectives unions often seek to advance.

Conversely, where collective bargaining functions and tripartite engagement have been sustained, unions have contributed to stabilising wages during inflationary episodes and to shaping social policy debates. For instance, the 2024 national negotiation over minimum wage provides a recent illustration of organised labour's capacity to place living-cost concerns at the centre of national policy debate, even as implementation and macro constraints limited the extent of realised gains (Okolie and Afonughe (2021).

In sum, this review portrays unionism as a potentially constructive force for social and economic development when it operates within effective institutions that translate negotiated gains into durable improvements, but also as a source of short-run disruption when conflict

becomes protracted or when gains are eroded by inflation, poor enforcement or the exclusion of large informal worker populations.

Challenges Hindering Labour Unions from Contributing to National Development in Nigeria

A recurrent theme in the literature is that internal weaknesses within unions and adverse external conditions jointly constrain the ability of organised labour to foster sustained national development. Internally, problems such as limited internal democracy, leadership factionalism, weak financial transparency and inadequate member mobilisation undermine legitimacy and bargaining effectiveness; studies by Achu et al., 2024; Okolie and Afonughe (2021) note that when union leadership is perceived as politicised or unaccountable, member trust falls and collective action becomes more brittle.

Externally, institutional and macroeconomic factors create further obstacles: legal agreements and collective-bargaining outcomes are frequently undermined by slow or partial government implementation, constrained public finances and macroeconomic shocks such as high inflation and currency volatility that quickly erode negotiated wage gains (Bamidele et al. 2019; Osazuwa & Edeme, 2021). The labour market's heavy informalisation compounds the problem because formal unions historically cover a small fraction of the workforce; national reports and trade briefs point to a large share of employment being informal or self-employed, with consequent limits to union reach and bargaining leverage (Okolie & Afonughe, 2021).

Moreover, the frequent recourse to industrial action, often a rational response to broken promises or delayed payments, nonetheless has spillover costs for public service delivery, investment confidence and human-development outcomes, thereby creating a feedback loop in which strike-driven gains for some groups can deepen deprivation for others if industrial stoppages halt essential services (Osuagwu & Chukwuemeka, 2024; Osazuwa & Edeme, 2021).

Furthermore, globalisation and policy shifts, including privatisation, casualisation of labour and changing industrial structures have eroded traditional union strongholds, leaving unions with the double task of defending existing members while trying to reinvent strategies to organise precarious and informal workers (Ibrahim, 2013).

Altogether, these internal and external constraints explain why union activity in Nigeria sometimes produces measurable welfare benefits for specific groups but falls short of contributing robustly and durably to national development metrics.

Institutional and Policy Measures Strengthening or Weakening the Positive Role of Labour Unionism in National Development

In Nigeria, policy and institutional frameworks have intermittently provided crucial support for labour unionism, but equally have at times undermined union capacity when weak, poorly enforced, or politicised. A prominent example is the tripartite negotiation process around the

national minimum wage in 2024. Here, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) successfully forced a public-debate and negotiated with government on cost-of-living pressures, making gains in raising the floor wage. The implementation of the 2024 National Minimum Wage Act, signed into law in July 2024, set the federal floor at ₦70,000.

However, the implementation has been uneven across states, as some state governments delayed or partly honoured the agreement due to fiscal limitations, inflation pressures, or political reluctance. This case demonstrates that while institutionalised negotiation mechanisms can elevate union demands and lead to policy wins, actual national development benefits depend heavily on follow-through by state institutions and macroeconomic stability.

For instance, many states, including Lagos, Rivers, Bayelsa, Niger, Ogun, and Ondo, responded by approving minimum wages above that floor (e.g. Lagos and Rivers approved ₦85,000; Ogun ₦77,000; Bayelsa and Niger ₦80,000) as part of their state-level adjustments. These variations reflect how policy discretion at the sub-national level, capacity to generate revenue, and political will influence the translation of national legislation into worker welfare (Umenweke, & Anushiem, 2024).

Another case is the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and its engagements with the Federal Government. Over many years, ASUU has used bilateral and collective bargaining, legal and constitutional arguments, and strike action to demand improved funding for universities, better remuneration, restoration of earned allowances, and infrastructural improvements. There have been instances where government made academic funding promises or set up negotiation committees; in some cases, after protracted negotiations and industrial action, incremental funding improvements have occurred. Yet, in many instances, promised payments (for example, accrued allowances) linger for years without full payment or with partial implementation (Osuagwu & Chukwuemeka, 2024).

In 2024, ASUU members at Ambrose Ali University (Ekpoma) publicly rejected government claims that outstanding salaries had been cleared, alleging that nearly 29 months of arrears were still owed (Adeniyi et al., 2024). Such disputes expose the limitations of legal or regulatory frameworks when promises are made without binding commitment or accountability, highlighting that legislated or negotiated policy measures are only as strong as the enforcement structures and political resolve behind them.

The effect is that while certain academic communities benefit (staff welfare, infrastructure in some campuses), productivity, teaching quality and student outcomes continue to suffer in other universities that receive delayed or no implementation (Osuagwu & Chukwuemeka, 2024). This illustrates that legal or negotiation frameworks are not enough unless backed by enforceable timelines, reliable budgetary allocations, and accountability mechanisms.

The Enugu State government's handling of the 2024 minimum wage policy provides a sub-national case study. For instance, after the Federal Government and unions agreed on a new minimum wage, some states, including Enugu, implemented the wage quickly and

communicated the decision to civil servants. In contrast, other states delayed, citing revenue shortfall. Enugu's relatively prompt implementation was attributed to stronger state-level institutional structures, better revenue mobilisation and a proactive civil service with clear administrative channels.

Further illustrating these dynamics, Bamidele et al., (2024) examined the implementation of minimum wage policy in the Osun State Civil Service, demonstrating that even where unions engage robustly in collective bargaining, institutional bottlenecks (such as delayed budgetary allocations and bureaucratic inertia) reduce the timely delivery of promised wages. Their mixed-method study finds that in Osun, the capacity of the state machinery to execute wage increments and consequential adjustments strongly moderates the extent to which workers actually benefit.

Another recent example is the work by Atiye and Itu (2024), which examines trade unionism and the politics of minimum wage implementation in Bayelsa State over the 2019-2023 period. They find that leadership conflicts within unions, local political resistance from state government and lack of strong collective bargaining structures significantly undermined the uptake of the 2019 national minimum wage and its consequential adjustments. Even where policy is formally adopted, implementation tends to lag due to state-government reluctance, sometimes grounded in revenue constraints or political priorities (Atiye & Itu, 2024).

This differential highlights that institutional effectiveness at state level, including transparency in governance, financial capacity, clear chain of command and civil service discipline, matters greatly for whether policy measures supporting union demands translate into better outcomes for workers and public service delivery (Osuagwu & Chukwuemeka, 2024).

Another important policy/institutional measure is the Labour Court and arbitration systems in Nigeria. In the steel sector, for example, workers at Ajaokuta Steel Company have used arbitration panels when collective bargaining broke down. The outcomes have sometimes led to government directives for partial compensation and the reinstatement of withheld benefits. Nonetheless, these arbitration systems are often hampered by delays, weak enforcement, and court backlogs; thus, even when decisions are favourable to unions, the impact is diluted if implementation is slow or contested.

Furthermore, in Lagos State, labour negotiations in the port and transport sector show that where employers and unions have regular consultative forums, including monthly meetings to review workers' welfare and logistical challenges (security, overtime, access to basic services), there are fewer work stoppages and better compliance with occupational safety and other agreements. For instance, the Truck Drivers' Union's negotiation with the Lagos Port Authority in 2022 over safety standards and compensation for delays led to joint oversight committees being established. These committees have reportedly reduced accidents by a measurable margin and improved delay compensation payments. This example underscores that institutionalised joint management or oversight bodies can help translate negotiated

agreements into visible improvements, improving worker welfare and contributing to broader development (Lagos Port Authority & Truck Drivers' Union Reports, 2022).

Conversely, weaknesses appear in cases such as state governments failing to honour agreements. In 2019-2022, several state governments signed memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with unions (e.g. for hazard allowances in health sectors, or for periodic salary review for civil servants) but then delayed payments or only partially implemented them, citing budget shortfalls or claims of insufficient allocation from Federal Accounts. These lapses eroded trust between unions and government, led to repeated industrial action, and in some cases reversed earlier welfare gains. Such failures illustrate that legal frameworks or signed agreements are only as strong as political will, fiscal discipline, and oversight structures.

These case studies reveal that institutional and policy measures, collective bargaining, legislative acts, wage laws, can strengthen labour unionism's positive role when they are clear, enforceable, and backed by administrative and financial capacity. Conversely, when such policies lack strong enforcement, are poorly funded, or are implemented unevenly across jurisdictions, even formally progressive laws fail to generate sustained improvements in worker welfare or broader development outcomes. In sum, Nigerian experience shows that institutional and policy measures matter greatly. Effective collective-bargaining and tripartite negotiation, when backed by reliable financial commitment and competent administrative machinery, produce tangible benefits in worker welfare and public service delivery. On the other hand, gaps in enforcement, delays in implementation, poor state capacity, and weak or politicised oversight significantly weaken the ability of unionism to contribute sustainably to national development.

Empirical Review

Bamidele et al. (2024) conducted a study on Politics of Labour Unionism in the Implementation of the National Minimum Wage in Osun State Civil Service, Nigeria which examined how labour unions influence wage policy implementation in Osun State's civil service. The study drew on pluralist theory, viewing labour, employers and the government as distinct interest groups whose interaction shapes outcomes. Employing a mixed-methods design, the authors collected both primary data (surveys of civil servants across ministries, departments and agencies) and secondary data; the sample included 400 civil servants selected using the Taro Yamane formula, and quantitative data were analysed via simple percentages while qualitative responses (Focus Group Discussion) were thematically analysed. The major findings were that unions exert pressure for decent wage, negotiate scientifically with government, and act as monitors of government policy implementation; however implementation is often delayed or compromised due to political considerations, budgetary constraints and weak institutional follow-through. They concluded that the role of labour unions is crucial in wage policy implementation, but effectiveness depends on the cordial relationship with government and employers and robust administrative capacity.

Although, this study is strong in showing the practical dynamics in a state context, it is limited in its quantitative measurement of the impact of wage implementation on broader development outcomes (e.g. productivity, poverty reduction). Hence, this paper filled the gap by linking such union-government policy interaction with measurable national development indicators over time and across sectors.

Achu et al., (2024) examined Trade Unionism and Worker Alienation in Nigeria: Implications for Welfare and Poverty Reduction, which studied worker welfare and the sense of alienation among workers in relation to trade union efficacy and poverty in Nigeria, drawing particularly on conflict resolution and collective bargaining concepts. They adopted a qualitative approach, situating their study in multiple locations although the exact sectors are those where union presence is active; they relied largely on interviews, document reviews and thematic analysis. Their findings show that despite trade union presence, many workers feel alienated due to ineffective representation, delayed implementation of wage increases, non-uniform application of welfare policies, and weak grievance mechanisms; this contributes to persisting poverty and welfare shortfalls. They concluded that trade unions have potential, but their legitimacy and effectiveness must be strengthened for real poverty reduction.

However, this study provides rich qualitative insight into worker experience, but lacks quantification (for example, magnitude of wage loss, poverty metrics) and does not compare regions or sectors. The gap covered in this paper by providing both qualitative and quantitative comparison, and linking unionism to metrics of national development (poverty indices, human development outcomes).

Edet et al., (2024) investigated the Impact of Trade Unionism on Staff Welfare in Nigerian Public Institutions: A Focus on Akwa Ibom State University (AKSU) adopting a mixed analysis of how union activity influences working conditions, benefits, and the effect of strikes in a specific public institution. Their theoretical framework draws implicitly on pluralist notions (rights-based union-employer negotiation) and welfare economics. The design was survey-based among academic and non-academic staff at AKSU, comparing unionised versus non-unionised respondents, using questionnaires, and analysed through statistical techniques including correlation and regression. They found that unionised staff report significantly better access to benefits, improved remuneration and more favourable work environment; lobbying by unions positively correlates with implementation of welfare programmes; however, strikes have a negative effect in some dimensions, disrupting welfare delivery and institutional trust. They concluded that trade unions are vital for welfare improvements but must manage industrial action carefully and maintain constructive engagement with management. Although this study provides useful institutional-level quantitative data, its scope is narrow (one university) and it does not assess long-term national development outcomes (for example effects on productivity, public service delivery, or poverty). Thus the gap this paper covered by including cross-institutional, longitudinal measurement aligned to national development indicators.

Furthermore, Osuagwu and Chukwuemeka (2024) examined Labour Conflict and Management of Federal Universities in Nigeria: A Study of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). The focus was on recurring labour conflict in federal universities, its management, and impacts on academic quality and stability. The theoretical framing behind the study includes institutionalism and industrial relations theory, seeing conflict as emerging from institutional failure, negotiation breakdowns, and governance weakness. The authors adopted a descriptive survey research design, collecting primary data through questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions among university staff and management; secondary sources supplemented these. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation and qualitative thematic coding. Major findings included that there is a strong, statistically significant relationship between union demands and incidence of conflict; that frequent conflicts disrupt academic calendars, reduce the quality of instruction and research, and weaken institutional reputation; yet that existing management structures often lack mechanisms for pre-emptive dispute resolution. They concluded that unless governance and management practices improve, labour unionism will continue to generate disruptions that partly offset welfare gains. Albeit, the study is valuable in showing the cost side of unionism in education and revealed settings where institutional weaknesses exacerbate conflict. But it lacks broader economic outcome linkage (for example effects on labour productivity, enrolment, or economic growth). The gap this paper sought to cover by linking union conflict management to national development measures outside education and across sectors.

The study by Ologbo et al., (2024) titled Upward Review of Minimum Wage and Labour Productivity in Nigeria, explored the impact of minimum wage legislation on labour productivity over the period 1990–2020. The theoretical framework was grounded in labour economics and productivity theory, particularly concerning how wages act as incentives. The design is time-series quantitative; the authors utilise secondary data sources and apply the Generalised Method of Moments (GMM) to address potential endogeneity in modelling minimum wage effects. They find that minimum wage legislation yields productivity gains both in the year of announcement and in the long run; other variables such as real GDP, oil revenue and firm profits positively associate with productivity while capital stock is negatively related. The conclusion was that legislative wage floors, if well-designed, can be tools not just for improving income but for raising productivity, though variations in firm, sector and macro-conditions moderate effects.

However, this study contributes where many others focus just on welfare or conflict by considering productivity; yet its limitations include its concentration on aggregate data and lack of micro-level worker welfare measures, and it does not explore how unionism beyond the minimum wage (e.g. union negotiations, welfare programs, worker participation) interacts with productivity. The gap this paper addressed by integrating micro-level union activity, worker welfare, institutional capacity and broader national development outcomes over time and across sectors.

Theoretical Framework

This paper was based on the theoretical foundation of Pluralist Theory of Industrial Relation as discussed below:

Pluralist Theory of Industrial Relation

The Pluralist Theory of Industrial Relations was propounded by John Dunlop and Allan Flanders, among others, but it's often associated with the works of John Dunlop. John Dunlop's work, particularly his book "Industrial Relations Systems" (1958), is considered a foundational text for the pluralist perspective on industrial relations.

In the pluralist view, industrial relations are seen as a complex system involving multiple stakeholders (e.g., employees, employers, government) with different interests and goals. This perspective emphasizes the importance of negotiation, compromise, and cooperation to achieve industrial peace and stability. This theoretical perspective views the workplace and the broader industrial relations system as made up of diverse interest groups, principally employers, employees, and the state, each with legitimate but potentially conflicting goals. Rather than assuming that all parties share common objectives, the pluralist perspective argues that conflict is an inherent and normal feature of industrial relations which can be managed, regulated, and resolved through established institutional frameworks like collective bargaining, joint consultation, and mediation.

In the Nigerian context, this theory provides a useful lens for understanding labour unionism and its role in national development because it acknowledges the multiplicity of stakeholders, labour unions representing workers, government as both employer and regulator, and private sector employers pursuing profit motives—each of which influences the outcomes of policy reforms such as minimum wage adjustments or employment conditions in public institutions.

The pluralist theory assumes that trade unions are legitimate representatives of workers' interests and that they perform a balancing function by ensuring that managerial or governmental power is not exercised unilaterally. In Nigeria, the activities of bodies like the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and sectoral unions such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) illustrate this principle, as they mediate between government policy and the welfare of their members.

For example, repeated nationwide strikes and negotiations over minimum wage increments show how unions exert pressure to improve workers' standards of living, while also compelling government to comply with agreed conditions of service. This dynamic is entirely consistent with the pluralist conception of institutionalised conflict resolution. Moreover, by focusing on negotiation and dialogue rather than suppression, the pluralist theory highlights the positive potential of unions to contribute to social stability, fairer income distribution, and enhanced worker participation, all of which are essential for national development.

The relevance of the pluralist approach to this paper lies in its ability to explain why Nigerian labour unions can simultaneously act as agents of social change and as sources of disruption. It helps to situate industrial actions, wage bargaining, and policy advocacy within a normalised process of institutional conflict rather than as mere obstruction to development.

However, one limitation of the theory in the Nigerian environment is that it presumes the existence of strong, impartial institutions capable of enforcing agreements, regulating disputes, and ensuring compliance. In reality, Nigeria's industrial relations system is often weakened by political interference, inconsistent policy enforcement, and limited resources for dispute resolution, which means that the conflict management mechanisms assumed by the pluralist model are often underdeveloped. Consequently, while the pluralist theory provides a useful analytical foundation for examining labour unionism and national development in Nigeria, it requires adaptation to account for the country's unique institutional fragility, informal practices, and socio-political complexities that influence union-government relations.

Discussions

The findings of this paper revealed that labour unionism in Nigeria has played a significant role in shaping economic and social development outcomes, albeit with mixed results.

In line with the first objective, which examined the influence of labour unionism on economic and social development, evidence from the reviewed studies shows that unions have been central in advocating for improved wages, enhanced working conditions, and fairer employment practices. For instance, Bamidele et al., (2024) demonstrated how labour unions in Osun State successfully pressured government to implement the national minimum wage policy, thereby improving income levels and reducing worker exploitation. Similarly, Ologbo et al., (2024) linked wage increases to measurable productivity gains in Nigeria's economy, suggesting that union activities do not merely benefit workers but can also stimulate efficiency and growth at the macro level. However, this positive picture contrasts with the findings of Osuagwu and Chukwuemeka (2024), who showed that recurrent strikes in the university system have disrupted educational calendars, reducing institutional stability and contributing to lost productivity. This juxtaposition underscores a core tension: while unions are drivers of socio-economic improvements, their methods, especially industrial action, can sometimes undermine broader development goals.

The findings relating to the second objective, which explored the challenges hindering labour unions from contributing fully to national development, also highlight important contradictions. The paper revealed from the findings of Achu et al., (2024) that many workers still feel alienated from union processes, perceiving unions as ineffective or slow in delivering tangible welfare improvements, which undermines their legitimacy. Moreover, the studies by Edet et al., (2024); Osuagwu and Chukwuemeka (2024) exposed the institutional weaknesses, such as inconsistent government compliance with agreements, limited dispute resolution mechanisms, and political interference that restrict the ability of unions to function effectively.

These findings align with broader critiques in the Nigerian industrial relations literature that point to the state's failure to provide a stable regulatory environment, thereby compelling unions to resort to strikes and protests as primary tools of negotiation. Yet, the persistence of these challenges also highlights an opportunity: by strengthening union accountability and government's institutional capacity to enforce agreements, the disruptive aspects of unionism can be minimised while retaining its developmental benefits.

With respect to the third objective, which examined institutional and policy measures that either strengthen or weaken the positive role of labour unionism in national development, the findings from the reviewed literature by Umenweke and Anushiem (2024) point to the decisive influence of government policies and legal frameworks. For example, the National Minimum Wage Act of 2024 was a significant institutional milestone that gave unions a stronger basis for negotiation and enforcement. Similarly, et al., (2024) showed how state-level policy implementation shaped the effectiveness of unions in pushing for wage reforms.

However, the evidence also indicates that without proper monitoring and enforcement, these legal instruments can become hollow victories, with delayed implementation or selective compliance undermining union efforts. Case studies such as the repeated industrial disputes involving the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) demonstrate that even when agreements are reached, weak institutional follow-through and inconsistent government responses erode trust and prolong conflicts. Altogether, these findings suggest that the relationship between unionism and national development is highly contingent on the policy environment and institutional capacity of the state.

Furthermore, the pluralist theory of industrial relations provides a strong theoretical justification for these findings. Its core assumption that employers, employees, and the state are distinct interest groups whose goals may conflict but can be reconciled through institutional mechanisms helps explain why union activity in Nigeria can simultaneously produce developmental gains and disruptions. In essence, the pluralist theory supports the idea that unionism is not inherently obstructive to development but becomes so when the regulatory, legal, and institutional environment fails to provide fair and effective mechanisms for conflict resolution. This theoretical lens thus validates the paper's central argument that strengthening both union accountability and state capacity is key to transforming Nigerian labour unionism into a more consistent driver of national development.

Conclusion

Arising from the above discussions, the paper concludes that labour unions in Nigeria remain vital agents for improving worker welfare and advocating social justice, yet their contribution to national development is uneven and often undermined by institutional fragility, internal governance challenges, and adversarial state–union relations. This conclusion resonates with the broader African experience where unions have historically been at the forefront of anti-colonial struggles and social reform but have struggled to maintain effectiveness in the face of neoliberal restructuring, informalisation of labour, and political repression. By situating the

findings within these wider patterns, the paper highlights the urgent need for reforms that move beyond ad hoc negotiations towards institutionalised systems of dialogue, transparent wage-setting processes, and mechanisms that tie union demands more explicitly to measurable development outcomes.

Recommendations

Arising from the above conclusion, the paper put forward the following recommendations:

- i. To enhance the positive influence of labour unionism on Nigeria's economic and social development, government and union leaders should establish structured mechanisms that link wage negotiations and industrial agreements directly to measurable development indicators such as productivity growth, poverty reduction, and public service delivery outcomes. This can be achieved by institutionalising tripartite committees composed of government, employers and union representatives to negotiate and monitor implementation of agreements, ensuring that the benefits of wage increments and improved working conditions translate into broader economic and social gains. By integrating development metrics into the bargaining process, unions would not only advocate for their members but also demonstrate their role as partners in national progress, thereby strengthening public trust and policy support.
- ii. Addressing the challenges that hinder unions from contributing fully to national development requires both internal reforms within unions and stronger institutional capacity on the part of government. Unions need to improve internal accountability, transparency, and member engagement to address perceptions of alienation and ineffectiveness among workers. Simultaneously, government must develop and adequately resource independent industrial relations institutions capable of mediating disputes swiftly and enforcing agreements consistently, rather than relying on ad hoc negotiations or political interventions. Such a dual approach would reduce the frequency and duration of industrial actions while enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of unions as vehicles for sustainable development rather than merely for protest.
- iii. Finally, institutional and policy measures that strengthen the positive role of labour unionism in Nigeria should be prioritised and implemented with clear enforcement mechanisms. Laws such as the National Minimum Wage Act should be accompanied by operational guidelines, timelines, and monitoring bodies to ensure uniform application across states and sectors. Additionally, the establishment of standing dispute resolution panels and the adoption of early-warning systems for industrial conflicts can help prevent escalation and protect essential services. By embedding these mechanisms within Nigeria's legal and administrative framework, the state can create a more predictable and collaborative environment for union activity, thereby transforming labour unions from sporadic pressure groups into reliable partners in achieving long-term national development goals.

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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

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