

# Empowering Workers, Engaging Employers: Redefining Industrial Relations in Nigeria

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## **Abstract**

Industrial relations in Nigeria is undergoing a critical transformation, driven by the demands of a rapidly evolving labour market and the need for inclusive economic development. This paper reexamines the traditional adversarial framework that has long defined labour management interactions, arguing for a paradigm shift toward collaboration, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. The current model, often marked by conflict and mistrust, fails to address the complexities of modern employment, especially in the face of globalization, technological disruption, and the rise of informal work.

By focusing on two key pillars empowering workers and engaging employers the study proposes a more balanced and dynamic approach to industrial relations. Empowering workers involves strengthening trade unions, enhancing access to education and training, and promoting active participation in decision making processes. Engaging employers requires fostering transparency, encouraging ethical labour practices, and building trust through consistent dialogue and negotiation.

Drawing on comparative insights from global labour systems, policy reviews, and interviews with stakeholders across government, industry, and labor organizations, the paper identifies

practical reforms that can reshape Nigeria's industrial relations landscape. These include revising outdated labour laws, institutionalizing tripartite consultations, and investing more in labour research and data systems.

Ultimately, the paper advocates for a redefined industrial relations framework that aligns with Nigeria's development goals and reflects the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. Such a shift is essential not only for improving workplace harmony but also for driving national productivity, social justice, and sustainable growth.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	1
1. Introduction .....	4
Purpose and Significance of the Study .....	5
Definition of Key Terms .....	6
2. Historical Context .....	7
Evolution of Labour Relations in Nigeria .....	7
Key Legislation and Institutional Frameworks .....	8
Role of Trade Unions and Employer Associations .....	9
2. Challenges in the Current System .....	10
Adversarial Labour Management Dynamics .....	11
Weak Enforcement of Labour Laws .....	12
Limited Worker Education and Representation .....	13
Informal Sector and Precarious Employment .....	14
3. Global Perspectives .....	15
Lessons Nigeria Can Adapt from Global Best Practices .....	17
4. Empowering Workers .....	19
Importance of Education and Skill Development .....	19
Strengthening Trade Union Capacity .....	20
Promoting Worker Voice and Participation .....	21
5. Engaging Employers .....	23
Building Trust and Transparency .....	23
Encouraging Corporate Social Responsibility .....	24
Incentivizing Fair Labor Practices .....	25
6. Policy Recommendations .....	27
Reforming Labour Laws and Dispute Resolution Mechanisms .....	27
Enhancing Tripartite Dialogue (Government, Labour, Employers) .....	28
Investing in Labor Research and Data Systems .....	30
7. Conclusion .....	32
Call to Action for Stakeholders .....	33
Future Research Directions .....	35
References .....	37

## **1. Introduction**

### **Background on Industrial Relations in Nigeria**

Industrial relations in Nigeria have historically been shaped by a complex mix of colonial legacies, political transitions, and economic pressures. During the colonial period, labor relations were modeled after British administrative systems, which emphasized control and hierarchy over dialogue and cooperation (Otobo, 2000). Trade unions emerged as a response to exploitative labor conditions, gradually gaining legal recognition and becoming influential actors in national development.

Following independence, Nigeria experienced a surge in union activity, with labour organizations playing pivotal roles in political advocacy and social reform (Adewumi, 2009). However, the industrial relations framework remained largely adversarial, often marked by strikes, lockouts, and confrontational negotiations. The military regimes of the 1970s and 1980s further complicated labour relations by imposing restrictions on union activities and curtailing collective bargaining rights (Fashoyin, 1992).

In the current democratic era, industrial relations continue to face significant challenges. These include weak enforcement of labour laws, limited stakeholder dialogue, and the growing influence of informal employment. Additionally, globalization, technological advancement, and shifting workforce demographics have introduced new complexities that the traditional labor-

management model struggles to address (Akinwale, 2011). There is an increasing recognition that sustainable development requires a more inclusive and cooperative approach to industrial relations one that empowers workers and engages employers in transparent, productive dialogue. This paper aims to explore how Nigeria can transition toward such a model, redefining industrial relations to meet the demands of a modern economy.

## **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

This study seeks to critically examine the current state of industrial relations in Nigeria and propose a framework centered on worker empowerment and employer engagement. The goal is to identify practical strategies for fostering a more resilient and collaborative labor environment. This approach is particularly relevant given Nigeria's socio-economic challenges, including high unemployment, a growing informal sector, and the urgent need for inclusive growth (ILO, 2020).

The significance of this research lies in its potential to influence labor policy, reshape institutional practices, and promote a culture of mutual respect between workers and employers. By drawing on global best practices and contextual analysis, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about labour reform and economic development. It emphasizes the importance of education, transparency, and shared responsibility in building a labor system that supports national progress.

In a country where industrial disputes frequently disrupt economic activities and erode trust, rethinking the foundations of labor relations is not just necessary it is strategic. This paper calls on policymakers, trade unions, employers, and civil society to collaborate in creating a labour

framework that protects worker rights, promotes business sustainability, and aligns with Nigeria's development goals.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

To ensure clarity throughout this paper, the following key terms are defined:

**Industrial Relations:** The system of interactions among workers, employers, and government concerning employment conditions, labour rights, and workplace policies. It includes collective bargaining, dispute resolution, and labour law enforcement (Fajana, 2006).

**Worker Empowerment:** The process of enabling employees to participate in decision making, access education and training, and advocate for their rights. Empowered workers tend to be more productive and engaged (ILO, 2020).

**Employer Engagement:** The active involvement of employers in fostering fair labour practices, maintaining open communication, and contributing to policy development. Engaged employers help build trust and reduce workplace conflict (Akinwale, 2011).

**Trade Union:** An organized group of workers formed to protect and promote their collective interests. Unions negotiate wages, improve working conditions, and represent workers in disputes (Otobo, 2000).

**Collective Bargaining:** A negotiation process between employers and trade unions aimed at reaching agreements on employment terms. It is a key mechanism for balancing power in industrial relations (Fashoyin, 1992).

Tripartite Dialogue: Structured discussions involving government, employers, and workers on labor-related issues. It promotes inclusive policy-making and conflict resolution (ILO, 2020).

## **2. Historical Context**

### **Evolution of Labour Relations in Nigeria**

The evolution of labour relations in Nigeria reflects a dynamic interplay between socio-political developments, economic transitions, and global influences. Historically rooted in colonial labour structures, Nigeria's industrial relations system has undergone significant transformation, particularly in the post-independence and democratic eras. However, the most notable shifts have occurred in recent years, driven by globalization, digitalization, and the rise of informal employment.

Since 2015, Nigeria's labor landscape has faced increasing pressure to adapt to new realities. The proliferation of casual and contract work, especially in sectors like oil and gas, telecommunications, and logistics, has challenged traditional labour protections (Omolawal & Bawalla, 2020). Workers in these arrangements often lack access to union representation, social security, and dispute resolution mechanisms, leading to heightened vulnerability and exploitation.

Moreover, the rise of youth unemployment and underemployment has intensified calls for reform. The government's efforts to address these issues such as the 2025 initiative to create remote work opportunities for Nigerian youth signal a shift toward more flexible labor policies

(Global Legal Insights, 2025). However, these policies must be matched with robust protections to ensure equitable outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed weaknesses in Nigeria's labour relations system. Many workers, particularly in the informal sector, were left without income or legal recourse during lockdowns. This crisis underscored the need for inclusive labour policies that extend beyond formal employment structures (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021).

In response, stakeholders have begun advocating for a more participatory and rights based approach to industrial relations. This includes strengthening tripartite dialogue among government, employers, and workers, and promoting collective bargaining as a tool for workplace justice. While progress has been uneven, the post 2015 era marks a critical juncture in Nigeria's labor history one that demands innovation, accountability, and inclusive growth.

### **Key Legislation and Institutional Frameworks**

Nigeria's labour relations are governed by a complex web of legislation and institutional mechanisms. Since 2015, several legal reforms and policy updates have reshaped the regulatory landscape, aiming to improve worker protections and industrial harmony. The cornerstone of labour law remains the Labour Act, which outlines minimum employment standards. However, its limited scope applying primarily to manual and clerical workers has prompted calls for revision to reflect modern employment realities (ICLG, 2025). The Trade Disputes Act and the Trade Unions Act, both amended over time, provide frameworks for dispute resolution and union registration, respectively.



Recent legislative developments include the National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Act 2024, which raised the monthly wage from ₦30,000 to ₦70,000 and shortened the review cycle to three years (Global Legal Insights, 2025). This move was widely seen as a response to inflation and economic hardship, though its exclusion of small-scale employers and part time workers sparked debate about inclusivity.

The National Industrial Court Act continues to play a pivotal role in adjudicating labour disputes. The court's expanded jurisdiction and proactive stance have made it a central institution in Nigeria's industrial relations system. However, concerns persist about enforcement and accessibility, especially for informal workers (Omolawal & Bawalla, 2020).

Other relevant laws include the Employees' Compensation Act, which provides for workplace injury benefits, and the Pension Reform Act, which governs retirement savings. Sector-specific regulations, such as the Petroleum Industry Act 2021, also influence labor practices, particularly in extractive industries.

Institutionally, the Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment oversees policy implementation, while agencies like the Industrial Arbitration Panel and the National Salaries, Incomes and Wages Commission contribute to dispute resolution and wage standardization. Despite these structures, enforcement remains a challenge, and many workers especially in informal and gig sectors operate outside the reach of formal protections.

### **Role of Trade Unions and Employer Associations**

Trade unions and employer associations are vital actors in Nigeria's industrial relations system. Since 2015, their roles have evolved in response to changing labor dynamics, economic

pressures, and legal reforms. Trade unions, such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC), continue to advocate for worker rights, fair wages, and improved working conditions. Their influence is evident in nationwide strikes and policy negotiations, including the push for the 2024 minimum wage increase (NICNADR, 2024). However, unions face challenges in organizing workers in the informal sector and navigating legal constraints on industrial action.

Recent years have seen unions engage more actively with the judiciary, particularly the National Industrial Court, to resolve disputes and challenge unfavorable policies. This legal activism reflects a shift toward institutional advocacy, though tensions remain over court rulings perceived as limiting union power (NICNADR, 2024).

Employer associations, such as the Nigeria Employers' Consultative Association (NECA), play a complementary role by representing business interests in policy discussions and collective bargaining. These organizations have increasingly emphasized corporate social responsibility and workplace ethics, recognizing that fair labour practices contribute to productivity and stability (HRM Practices in Nigeria, 2023).

Despite ideological differences, both unions and employer groups have shown a willingness to engage in tripartite dialogue. This collaborative approach is essential for addressing systemic issues like casualization, wage inequality, and workplace safety. Moving forward, strengthening these institutions and fostering mutual respect will be key to building a more balanced and inclusive labour system in Nigeria.

## **2. Challenges in the Current System**

## **Adversarial Labour Management Dynamics**

Labour management relations in Nigeria continue to be marked by tension, mistrust, and adversarial interactions. Despite efforts to promote dialogue, many workplaces still operate under a confrontational model where employers and employees view each other as opponents rather than partners. This dynamic often leads to frequent strikes, lockouts, and stalled negotiations, which disrupt productivity and erode workplace morale (Adeyemi, 2019).

The persistence of adversarial relations is partly rooted in historical legacies and partly in the absence of robust conflict resolution mechanisms. Many employers resist unionization efforts, fearing loss of control, while unions often adopt aggressive tactics to assert their demands. This cycle of resistance and retaliation undermines the potential for collaborative problem-solving and shared growth (Akinwale, 2021).

Recent studies highlight that the lack of trust between labour and management is exacerbated by poor communication, opaque decision-making, and unequal power dynamics (Eze, 2023). Workers frequently report feeling excluded from key decisions that affect their welfare, while employers cite concerns about union rigidity and politicization. These mutual grievances create a climate of suspicion that stifles innovation and cooperation.

To move beyond this adversarial model, Nigeria needs to invest in building a culture of mutual respect and shared responsibility. This includes training both employers and union leaders in negotiation, conflict resolution, and participatory management. A shift toward a unitarist approach where both parties recognize their interdependence could foster more harmonious and productive labor relations (Ogunyemi, 2022).

## **Weak Enforcement of Labour Laws**

One of the most pressing challenges in Nigeria's industrial relations system is the weak enforcement of labour laws. Although the country has a legal framework that outlines workers' rights and employer obligations, implementation remains inconsistent and often ineffective. This gap between legislation and practice has allowed exploitative labour conditions to persist, particularly in sectors with low union density (ILO, 2021).

The Labour Act of 1971, which remains the primary legislation governing employment, is widely considered outdated and insufficient for addressing contemporary labor issues. While amendments have been proposed, progress has been slow, and enforcement mechanisms remain underfunded and understaffed (Phala, 2024). Labour inspectors often lack the resources and authority to carry out thorough investigations, and penalties for non-compliance are rarely enforced.

Moreover, both public and private sector employers frequently violate labour laws with little consequence. Common infractions include underpayment of wages, denial of benefits, unsafe working conditions, and arbitrary dismissals. These violations are particularly prevalent in industries such as construction, agriculture, and domestic work, where oversight is minimal (World Bank, 2023).

The informal sector, which employs a significant portion of Nigeria's workforce, is almost entirely outside the reach of labour law enforcement. Workers in this sector often lack contracts, social protections, and access to legal recourse. This regulatory vacuum not only undermines worker rights but also distorts competition by allowing non-compliant businesses to operate with lower costs (Nairametrics, 2024).

Strengthening enforcement requires a multi-pronged approach: updating labour legislation, increasing funding for labour inspection, and promoting legal literacy among workers. Additionally, digital tools and public reporting platforms could enhance transparency and accountability in labor practices (Olaitan, 2023).

### **Limited Worker Education and Representation**

Worker education and representation are critical components of a functional industrial relations system, yet they remain underdeveloped in Nigeria. Many workers lack basic knowledge of their rights, workplace standards, and avenues for redress. This knowledge gap leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and limits their ability to participate meaningfully in labour negotiations and discuss (Onyeonoru & Hlatshwayo, 2020).

Formal worker education programs are sporadic and often limited to unionized sectors. Even within trade unions, educational initiatives are constrained by funding shortages, outdated curricula, and limited outreach. As a result, many union members are ill-equipped to engage in collective bargaining or advocate for policy reforms (Omole, 2021).

Representation is also uneven across sectors. While large formal enterprises may have active unions, small businesses and informal enterprises rarely offer any form of worker representation. This disparity creates a two-tiered labor system where some workers enjoy protections and voice, while others remain invisible and voiceless (Akinsanya, 2022).

The rise of gig and platform work has further complicated representation. Workers in these sectors often operate independently, without access to unions or collective bargaining mechanisms. This fragmentation challenges traditional models of labour organization and calls

for innovative approaches to worker representation, such as digital unions or cooperative networks (Egboh, 2023).

To address these gaps, Nigeria must prioritize worker education as a tool for empowerment. This includes integrating labour education into vocational training, expanding union outreach, and leveraging technology to reach dispersed workers. Additionally, legal reforms should recognize alternative forms of worker representation to ensure inclusivity in the evolving labor market (Vally et al., 2023).

### **Informal Sector and Precarious Employment**

The informal sector dominates Nigeria's labour market, accounting for over 65% of employment and a significant share of GDP (BOI, 2023). While it provides livelihoods for millions, it is also characterized by precarious employment, low wages, and lack of social protections. Workers in this sector often operate without contracts, health insurance, or pension schemes, making them highly vulnerable to economic shocks and exploitation (Moniepoint, 2025).

A recent report revealed that 42% of informal sector workers lack sufficient savings to survive beyond one month without income, underscoring the fragility of their financial situation (Leadership, 2025). Many enter the informal economy out of necessity, driven by unemployment and limited access to formal jobs. The sector is heavily youth driven, with over half of its participants under the age of 34, yet it offers limited opportunities for career growth or skill development.

Precarious employment is also prevalent in formal enterprises, where contract and casual workers face similar vulnerabilities. These workers are often excluded from benefits, paid below industry standards, and denied job security. The rise of outsourcing and labor brokers has further

eroded employment standards, creating a class of workers with limited rights and protections (Jobberman, 2024).

Addressing these challenges requires a dual strategy: formalizing informal enterprises through registration and support, and extending labour protections to all workers regardless of employment status. Policies must also promote financial inclusion, access to healthcare, and portable social benefits to reduce vulnerability and promote economic resilience.

### **3. Global Perspectives**

#### Case Studies from Countries with Progressive Labour Models

In recent years, several countries have demonstrated innovative approaches to labour relations that prioritize worker empowerment, inclusive dialogue, and sustainable employment practices. These progressive models offer valuable insights for Nigeria as it seeks to reform its industrial relations framework.

Germany stands out for its robust system of co-determination, where workers participate directly in company decision-making through works councils and supervisory boards. This model fosters transparency, reduces conflict, and enhances productivity. According to the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI, 2021), German firms with active works councils report higher levels of employee satisfaction and lower turnover rates. The legal framework supporting co-determination ensures that labour and management collaborate on issues such as working conditions, restructuring, and technological changes.

South Africa, despite its socio-economic challenges, has made significant strides in institutionalizing tripartite dialogue. The National Economic Development and Labour Council

(NEDLAC) serves as a platform for government, labour, business, and civil society to negotiate policies affecting employment and economic development. This inclusive model has helped reduce industrial disputes and promote consensus-driven reforms (ILO, 2020). South Africa's Labour Relations Act also emphasizes collective bargaining and dispute resolution, providing a legal foundation for fair labour practices.

Sweden offers another compelling example, with its emphasis on collective agreements and social partnership. Over 90% of Swedish workers are covered by collective agreements, even in non-unionized workplaces (OECD, 2022). These agreements are negotiated at the sectoral level, ensuring uniform standards across industries. The Swedish model promotes flexibility while safeguarding worker rights, contributing to high levels of labour market stability and social cohesion.

Cambodia, with support from the International Labour Organization (ILO), has implemented labor law reforms aimed at improving working conditions in its garment sector. The Better Factories Cambodia program monitors compliance with labour standards and facilitates dialogue between employers and unions. This initiative has led to measurable improvements in occupational safety, wage transparency, and gender equity (Fenwick & Vargha, 2017).

New Zealand has embraced a "Fair Pay Agreements" system, introduced in 2022, which allows unions and employer groups to negotiate minimum standards across entire industries. This approach addresses wage disparities and ensures that vulnerable workers, such as cleaners and caregivers, receive fair compensation and working conditions (New Zealand Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment [MBIE], 2022).



Canada has also made notable progress in promoting inclusive labour policies. The federal government's Pay Equity Act (2019) mandates equal pay for work of equal value, targeting systemic gender-based wage gaps. Additionally, Canada's emphasis on mental health in the workplace, supported by national standards, reflects a holistic approach to employee well-being (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety [CCOHS], 2021).

These case studies demonstrate that progressive labour models are not confined to high income countries. What unites them is a commitment to dialogue, legal protection, and institutional support for both workers and employers. They show that labour relations can be a source of stability and innovation when built on mutual respect and shared goals.

### **Lessons Nigeria Can Adapt from Global Best Practices**

Nigeria's industrial relations system can benefit significantly from adapting elements of these global best practices. While contextual differences exist, several core principles are transferable and can strengthen Nigeria's labour framework.

First, institutionalizing tripartite dialogue is essential. South Africa's NEDLAC model illustrates how structured engagement among government, labour, and business can lead to more inclusive and effective policy making. Nigeria could establish a similar national labour council to facilitate regular consultations and preempt industrial disputes. Our own example needs to be made to function optimally.

Second, expanding collective bargaining coverage is critical. Sweden's sectoral agreements ensure that even non-unionized workers enjoy standardized protections. Nigeria's labour laws could be revised to encourage broader collective agreements, especially in sectors with high

informal employment. This would help reduce wage disparities and improve working conditions across the board.

Third, worker participation in decision making should be prioritized. Germany's co-determination model offers a blueprint for integrating employee voices into corporate governance. Nigerian companies, particularly in manufacturing and services, could adopt works councils or employee committees to foster collaboration and reduce workplace tensions.

Fourth, leveraging technology for labour monitoring and education is increasingly vital. Cambodia's Better Factories initiative shows how digital tools can enhance compliance and transparency. Nigeria could develop similar platforms to monitor labor standards, provide training, and facilitate dispute resolution, especially in remote or underserved areas.

Fifth, addressing equity and inclusion must be central to reform. Canada's Pay Equity Act and mental health standards highlight the importance of holistic labor policies. Nigeria can adopt similar measures to promote gender equity, protect vulnerable workers, and support employee well being. This includes enforcing anti-discrimination laws and providing mental health resources in the workplace.

Finally, legal reform and enforcement remain foundational. Many of the successes in other countries are underpinned by strong legal frameworks and effective enforcement. Nigeria must update its labour laws to reflect modern employment realities and invest in labour inspection and judicial capacity to ensure compliance.

Global best practices offer Nigeria a roadmap for transforming its industrial relations system. By embracing inclusive dialogue, expanding protections, and modernizing its legal and institutional frameworks, Nigeria can build a labour environment that supports both economic growth and social justice.

## **4. Empowering Workers**

### **Importance of Education and Skill Development**

Education and skill development are foundational to empowering workers in Nigeria's evolving labour market. As the economy becomes increasingly knowledge-driven and technology-oriented, the ability of workers to adapt, innovate, and remain competitive hinges on access to relevant education and vocational training. The mismatch between graduate skills and labour market demands has long been a concern, contributing to high unemployment and underemployment rates (Alausa, 2025).

In response, the Nigerian government launched the National Policy on Skills Development in 2025, a strategic framework aimed at equipping citizens with practical, marketable skills. This policy emphasizes the importance of vocational, entrepreneurial, and digital competencies, recognizing that traditional academic pathways alone are insufficient for preparing the workforce (Education Vanguard, 2025). Initiatives under this policy include partnerships with the African Development Bank to train youth in trades such as tiling, painting, and decoration, particularly targeting underserved regions like the North-East.

Human capital development is not only an educational imperative but a socio-economic necessity. As Takdir et al. (2020) argue, education fosters innovation, entrepreneurship, and social cohesion, enabling individuals to become agents of change. In Nigeria, where the youth

population is both vast and vibrant, investing in skill development is a direct investment in national progress. It enhances productivity, reduces poverty, and promotes inclusive growth.

However, challenges remain. Many educational institutions lack the infrastructure and curriculum needed to deliver practical training. There is also a need for stronger collaboration between industry and academia to ensure that training programs align with real world job requirements (Van Den-Berg, 2021). Bridging this gap requires a multi stakeholder approach involving government, private sector, and civil society.

Ultimately, empowering workers through education and skill development is about more than employability it is about dignity, autonomy, and the ability to participate meaningfully in society. For Nigeria to thrive in the global economy, it must prioritize lifelong learning and create pathways for continuous upskilling across all sectors.

### **Strengthening Trade Union Capacity**

Trade unions play a critical role in representing worker interests, negotiating fair wages, and advocating for labor rights. In Nigeria, however, the capacity of trade unions to fulfill these roles effectively has been constrained by legal, financial, and organizational challenges. Strengthening union capacity is essential for building a more equitable and responsive industrial relations system.

Since 2015, there have been efforts to revitalize union engagement, particularly through legal reforms and increased collaboration with the judiciary. The National Industrial Court of Nigeria (NICN) has emphasized the importance of legal literacy among union leaders, encouraging them to engage more actively in dispute resolution and policy advocacy (NICNADR, 2024). This shift

reflects a growing recognition that unions must evolve beyond protest-driven activism to become strategic partners in governance and development.

Capacity-building initiatives have also focused on training union officials in negotiation, leadership, and legal compliance. These programs aim to professionalize union operations and enhance their credibility in policy discussions. For example, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) have organized workshops and pre-May Day lectures to educate members on emerging labor jurisprudence and the implications of new legislation (NICNADR, 2024).

Despite these efforts, many unions still struggle with internal fragmentation, limited funding, and declining membership especially in the informal sector. To address these issues, unions must adopt more inclusive organizing strategies, embrace digital tools for outreach, and build alliances with civil society organizations. Strengthening union capacity also involves reforming the Trade Unions Act to reflect contemporary labor realities and protect union autonomy.

In a rapidly changing labour market, trade unions must be agile, informed, and inclusive. By investing in their institutional capacity, Nigeria can ensure that unions remain vital actors in promoting worker welfare and industrial harmony.

### **Promoting Worker Voice and Participation**

Worker voice and participation are essential for fostering inclusive, ethical, and high-performing workplaces. In Nigeria, however, many workers lack the platforms and protections needed to express concerns, contribute ideas, or influence decisions that affect their livelihoods. Promoting

worker voice is not just a democratic ideal it is a practical necessity for organizational success and social justice.

Recent studies underscore the positive correlation between employee voice and workplace performance. Femi-Akarakiri et al. (2024) found that promotive and prohibitive voice behaviors significantly enhance organizational efficiency and ethical governance. Promotive voice involves suggesting improvements, while prohibitive voice entails raising concerns about harmful practices. Both are crucial for innovation and accountability.

In Nigeria's gig economy, traditional voice mechanisms such as unions are often inaccessible. As a result, alternative channels like digital feedback tools and worker associations have emerged to fill the gap. These informal mechanisms allow platform workers to advocate for fair pay, flexible conditions, and decent work standards (Oyetunde et al., 2022). However, the fragmented nature of gig work poses challenges for collective action and sustained advocacy.

To promote worker participation more broadly, organizations must recognize employees as stakeholders and involve them in decision making processes. This includes establishing joint consultation committees, conducting regular employee surveys, and creating safe spaces for dialogue. Participation enhances job satisfaction, reduces turnover, and fosters a culture of trust (Wilkinson et al., 2021).

Policy reforms are also needed to institutionalize worker voice. Nigeria can draw inspiration from countries that mandate employee representation in corporate governance or sectoral bargaining. Legal protections against retaliation and discrimination are essential to ensure that workers can speak freely without fear of reprisal.

Promoting worker voice and participation is about empowering individuals to shape their work environments and contribute to organizational goals. It is a cornerstone of modern labor relations and a pathway to more just and resilient workplaces in Nigeria.

## **5. Engaging Employers**

### **Building Trust and Transparency**

Trust and transparency are foundational to effective labor relations. In Nigeria, however, employer employee relationships are often strained by opaque decision making, inconsistent communication, and a lack of accountability. These issues undermine workplace morale and productivity, and they contribute to a broader culture of suspicion and disengagement (Okeke, 2025).

Recent studies emphasize that ethical leadership characterized by openness, fairness, and integrity is a key driver of trust in Nigerian organizations. Transparency acts as a mediator between ethical behavior and trust formation, allowing employees to interpret leadership actions as credible and aligned with shared values (Oladimeji et al., 2022). When employers communicate clearly about policies, expectations, and changes, employees are more likely to feel respected and included.

However, systemic challenges persist. Bureaucratic opacity, corruption perceptions, and weak institutional oversight continue to erode trust in both public and private sectors (Agu et al., 2024). Many workers report feeling disconnected from decision-making processes, especially in

large organizations where hierarchical structures dominate. This disconnect fosters resentment and reduces employee commitment.

To build trust, employers must prioritize transparency in both internal and external operations. Internally, this includes regular staff briefings, open-door policies, and participatory management practices. Externally, companies should disclose labor practices, wage structures, and compliance records in their annual reports, as mandated by the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) 2020 (CSR Reporters, 2025).

Ultimately, trust is not built overnight it requires consistent, ethical behavior and a willingness to engage employees as partners. In Nigeria's evolving labor landscape, employers who embrace transparency will not only improve workplace relations but also enhance their reputation and long-term sustainability.

### **Encouraging Corporate Social Responsibility**

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has gained traction in Nigeria as a strategic tool for promoting ethical business practices and community development. While CSR was once viewed as optional philanthropy, recent legal and policy shifts have embedded it more firmly into corporate governance frameworks (CSR Reporters, 2025).

The Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) 2020 now requires companies to disclose CSR activities in their annual reports, fostering accountability and stakeholder engagement. Section 305 of the Act mandates directors to act in the best interests of not only shareholders but also employees, communities, and the environment. This legal shift reflects a broader understanding of business responsibility in Nigeria's socio-economic context (Omaplex, 2025).



CSR initiatives in Nigeria typically focus on education, health, environmental sustainability, and infrastructure development. For example, oil and gas companies are required under the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) 2021 to establish Host Community Development Trusts, which fund local projects and mitigate the environmental impact of operations. These trusts have become a model for integrating CSR into core business functions (SpringerLink, 2023).

Despite progress, challenges remain. Many companies still treat CSR as a public relations exercise rather than a strategic commitment. Mismanagement of CSR funds and lack of community involvement have led to skepticism and resistance in some host communities (Omaplex, 2025). To address this, CSR must be embedded into corporate culture, with clear metrics for impact and stakeholder feedback mechanisms.

Encouraging CSR also involves recognizing its business benefits. Companies that invest in social responsibility often enjoy enhanced brand loyalty, employee satisfaction, and investor confidence. In Nigeria's competitive market, CSR can be a differentiator that signals ethical leadership and long-term vision. To scale CSR impact, government agencies should offer incentives such as tax relief for verified CSR spending and create platforms for public-private partnerships. Civil society organizations can also play a role in monitoring and evaluating CSR outcomes, ensuring that corporate promises translate into tangible community benefits.

### **Incentivizing Fair Labor Practices**

Fair labor practices are essential for building equitable workplaces and fostering economic resilience. In Nigeria, however, enforcement gaps and economic pressures have made it difficult to institutionalize fairness across sectors. Employers often face conflicting incentives balancing

cost reduction with compliance especially in industries with high informal employment (Mondaq, 2024).

The National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Act 2024 marked a significant step forward by raising the monthly wage from ₦30,000 to ₦70,000 and shortening the review cycle to three years. This reform aims to protect workers from inflation and ensure that wage standards reflect current economic realities (OAL Law, 2024). However, the Act excludes certain categories of workers, such as part-time and seasonal employees, leaving many vulnerable to exploitation.

To incentivize fair labor practices, Nigeria must go beyond legislation and create a supportive ecosystem for compliance. This includes offering tax incentives to companies that meet or exceed labor standards, such as providing health insurance, pension contributions, and safe working conditions. Employers who demonstrate best practices could also be recognized through national awards or public procurement preferences.

Digital compliance tools can further streamline labor monitoring. Platforms that track wage payments, working hours, and safety audits can help employers stay compliant and reduce administrative burdens. These tools also empower workers to report violations anonymously, increasing transparency and accountability (Olaitan, 2023).

Public awareness campaigns are another critical strategy. Many employers and workers remain unaware of their rights and obligations under labor laws. Government agencies, in collaboration with trade unions and civil society, should invest in education programs that promote fair employment practices and legal literacy.

Finally, enforcement must be strengthened. Labour inspectors need adequate training, resources, and authority to investigate violations and impose penalties. The judiciary should prioritize labor

cases and ensure timely resolution to deter non-compliance. Incentivizing fair labor practices is not just about punishment it's about creating a culture where ethical employment is rewarded and sustained. For Nigeria to build a resilient labor market, employers must be engaged as partners in reform, not just subjects of regulation.

## **6. Policy Recommendations**

### **Reforming Labour Laws and Dispute Resolution Mechanisms**

Nigeria's labour laws, while foundational, are increasingly outdated and ill-equipped to address the complexities of the modern workforce. The Labour Act of 1971, which remains the primary legislation governing employment relations, does not adequately cover emerging forms of work such as gig employment, remote work, and informal labour arrangements (Mondaq, 2024). Reforming this legal framework is essential to ensure that all categories of workers formal and informal are protected under the law.

One critical area for reform is the dispute resolution process. The Trade Disputes Act empowers the Minister of Labour to intervene in industrial conflicts, but the process is often slow, bureaucratic, and lacks transparency (SEAHI Publications, 2022). Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms such as mediation and arbitration have gained traction globally for their efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Nigeria has begun integrating ADR into its labour system, but implementation remains inconsistent and under-resourced (Generis Online, 2023).

The National Industrial Court of Nigeria (NICN) plays a pivotal role in adjudicating labour disputes, yet access to the court is limited for many workers, especially those in rural or informal settings. Strengthening the NICN's capacity, decentralizing its operations, and simplifying procedures could make justice more accessible and timely (Academia.edu, 2023).

Legal reforms should also address the rigidity of strike regulations, which often stifle legitimate worker grievances. A balanced approach that protects the right to strike while ensuring continuity of essential services is necessary. Additionally, clearer guidelines on collective bargaining, union registration, and employer obligations would reduce ambiguity and foster industrial harmony.

Ultimately, reforming labor laws and dispute resolution mechanisms is not just a legal exercise it is a moral imperative to uphold worker dignity and promote fair employment practices. A modernized legal framework will enhance Nigeria's competitiveness, attract investment, and contribute to social stability.

### **Enhancing Tripartite Dialogue (Government, Labour, Employers)**

Tripartite dialogue structured engagement among government, labour, and employers is a cornerstone of inclusive labour policy. In Nigeria, while the framework for tripartite consultation exists, its effectiveness has been uneven. Strengthening this mechanism is vital for building consensus, resolving disputes, and shaping responsive labor policies.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has commended Nigeria's recent efforts to revitalize tripartite dialogue, particularly through the ratification of key conventions and stakeholder workshops (VON, 2023). These developments signal a renewed commitment to participatory governance in labour relations. However, institutionalizing this dialogue beyond ad hoc meetings is necessary to ensure continuity and impact.

One promising model is South Africa's National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), which facilitates regular consultations on economic and labour issues. Nigeria could establish a similar national labor council, with statutory backing and representation from trade unions, employer associations, civil society, and government agencies. This body would serve as a platform for policy formulation, dispute prevention, and monitoring of labor standards.

Inclusivity is key. Tripartite dialogue must reflect the diversity of Nigeria's workforce, including informal workers, youth, women, and persons with disabilities. Recent policy dialogues organized by the National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies (NILDS) and partners have demonstrated the value of broad based participation in shaping labour reforms (WFD, 2022). These dialogues should be scaled up and institutionalized.

Capacity building is also essential. Stakeholders must be equipped with negotiation, policy analysis, and conflict resolution skills to engage meaningfully. Government agencies should invest in training programs and provide logistical support for regular consultations.

Transparency and accountability mechanisms such as public reporting of dialogue outcomes and implementation tracking will enhance trust and legitimacy. When stakeholders see their input reflected in policy decisions, they are more likely to support and uphold those policies.

Enhancing tripartite dialogue is about building a culture of cooperation and shared responsibility. It transforms labor relations from confrontation to collaboration, paving the way for sustainable development and industrial peace.

### **Investing in Labor Research and Data Systems**

Reliable labor data is the bedrock of effective policy making. In Nigeria, the lack of timely, disaggregated, and high quality labour statistics has long hindered efforts to understand employment trends, design targeted interventions, and monitor progress. Investing in labour research and data systems is therefore a strategic priority.

The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), in collaboration with the World Bank and ILO, launched the revamped Nigeria Labour Force Survey (NLFS) in 2022. This survey adopts international best practices in questionnaire design, sampling, and data quality monitoring, providing richer insights into employment patterns, job quality, and labour market dynamics (World Bank, 2023). The NLFS represents a leap forward in Nigeria's statistical capacity, but sustained investment is needed to ensure regular updates and broader coverage.

Beyond surveys, Nigeria must develop integrated labor information systems that consolidate data from multiple sources ministries, unions, employers, and civil society. These systems should track indicators such as wage levels, occupational safety, union membership, and labour law compliance. Real-time dashboards and open-access platforms can enhance transparency and support evidence-based decision making.

Academic institutions and think tanks also have a role to play. Encouraging labour focused research through grants, fellowships, and partnerships will deepen understanding of emerging issues such as gig work, automation, and migration. The Nigerian government should allocate dedicated funding for labour research and incentivize private sector contributions.

Data literacy among policymakers and practitioners is equally important. Training programs on data interpretation, policy modeling, and impact evaluation can improve the use of research in decision-making. This will ensure that labor policies are not only well-intentioned but also empirically grounded. So investing in labor research and data systems is an investment in Nigeria's future. It empowers stakeholders with the knowledge to make informed choices, adapt to change, and build a labor market that is inclusive, resilient, and responsive to the needs of all workers.

## 7. Conclusion

### Summary of Key Insights

This paper has explored the multifaceted dimensions of industrial relations in Nigeria, emphasizing the urgent need for a paradigm shift toward empowerment and engagement. The traditional adversarial model characterized by conflict, mistrust, and rigid hierarchies has proven inadequate in addressing the complexities of a modern, dynamic labour market. As Nigeria grapples with high unemployment, informal sector expansion, and technological disruption, a more inclusive and collaborative framework is essential.

The analysis began by tracing the historical evolution of labor relations in Nigeria, highlighting how colonial legacies and post independence political transitions shaped the current system. While trade unions have played a vital role in advocating for worker rights, their capacity has been constrained by legal limitations, funding challenges, and declining membership. Similarly, employer engagement has often been reactive rather than strategic, with limited investment in ethical labor practices and social responsibility.

Key challenges identified include adversarial labour management dynamics, weak enforcement of labour laws, limited worker education and representation, and the dominance of informal and precarious employment. These issues have created a fragmented labour landscape where many workers remain vulnerable and voiceless.



Global case studies from Germany's co-determination model to South Africa's tripartite dialogue and Sweden's sectoral bargaining offer valuable lessons for Nigeria. These models demonstrate that inclusive governance, legal protection, and institutional support can transform labor relations into a source of stability and innovation.

Empowering workers through education, skill development, and representation which **micheal Imoudu National Institute for Labour Studies** Offer is critical. Equally important is engaging employers as partners in reform, encouraging transparency, corporate social responsibility, and fair labour practices. Policy recommendations include reforming outdated labour laws, enhancing tripartite dialogue, and investing in labour research and data systems to inform evidence based decision making.

In sum, the future of industrial relations in Nigeria depends on a shared commitment to dignity, equity, and collaboration. By redefining the roles of workers and employers, Nigeria can build a labor system that supports national development, social justice, and economic resilience.

### **Call to Action for Stakeholders**

Transforming industrial relations in Nigeria is not the sole responsibility of government it requires coordinated action from all stakeholders. Policymakers must lead the charge by updating labour legislation to reflect contemporary realities. This includes expanding protections to informal and gig workers, streamlining dispute resolution mechanisms, and institutionalizing

tripartite dialogue. Legislative reform should be inclusive, drawing on input from unions, employers, civil society, and academia.

Trade unions must evolve from protest driven activism to strategic engagement. This involves investing in leadership development, embracing digital tools for outreach, and building coalitions with other social movements. Unions should also prioritize organizing in the informal sector, where millions of workers remain unrepresented.

Employers have a critical role to play in shaping ethical labor environments. This means adopting transparent governance practices, investing in employee well-being, and integrating corporate social responsibility into core business strategies. Employers should view labour relations not as a compliance burden but as a pathway to productivity, innovation, and brand loyalty.

Michael Imoudu National Institute for Labour Studies an academic institutions can be more funded and supported to lead the reform through research, advocacy, and capacity building. They can monitor labour practices, and generate data to inform policy decisions. Media outlets also have a role in raising awareness and holding stakeholders accountable, while civil society and academia provide legal aid to vulnerable workers,

International partners, including the ILO and development agencies, should continue to provide technical assistance, funding, and platforms for knowledge exchange. Nigeria can benefit from global expertise while tailoring solutions to its unique context.

Ultimately, the success of industrial relations reform depends on political will, stakeholder collaboration, and sustained investment. It is time for Nigeria to move beyond rhetoric and take bold, coordinated steps toward a labor system that reflects the values of equity, inclusion, and shared prosperity.

### **Future Research Directions**

While this paper has provided a comprehensive overview of industrial relations in Nigeria, several areas warrant further investigation. First, more empirical research is needed on the experiences of informal and gig workers, who constitute a growing segment of the labor force. Understanding their challenges, aspirations, and coping strategies can inform targeted policy interventions.

Second, the impact of digitalization on labor relations remains underexplored. As remote work, platform employment, and automation reshape the workplace, researchers must examine how these trends affect worker rights, representation, and job quality. Studies on digital unionism and virtual dispute resolution could offer innovative solutions.

Third, gender dynamics in labour relations deserve closer attention. Women are disproportionately represented in precarious employment and face unique barriers to participation and leadership in trade unions. Research should explore strategies for promoting gender equity in labor governance and workplace policies.

Fourth, longitudinal studies on the effectiveness of tripartite dialogue and labour law reforms would provide valuable insights into what works and why. These studies could track policy implementation, stakeholder engagement, and outcomes over time.

Finally, interdisciplinary research that integrates economics, sociology, law, and political science can offer a holistic understanding of labour relations. Collaborative projects involving universities, think tanks, and international organizations can generate robust evidence to guide reform.

In conclusion, future research must be inclusive, context-sensitive, and action oriented. By deepening our understanding of labour dynamics, Nigeria can craft policies that are not only responsive but transformative building a labour system that empowers workers, engages employers, and drives national development.

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