

Reactions to Statements by the Honourable Minister of Education

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 11 August 2009 13:14 -

ASUU calls on the relevant arms of Government, the organized labour, religious and traditional institutions and all lovers of education to prevail on government to do the proper thing: sign the agreement and hence end this avoidable strike and its disruptive effects on our education system. We believe that this can be achieved now or within a week, if government considers it an emergency that needs to be addressed quickly and promptly.

PRESS BRIEFING BY THE PRESIDENT OF ASUU,
PROF. UKACHUKWU AWUZIE HELD AT CALABAR
JUNE 26, 2009.

Gentlemen of the Press,

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Preamble

As you are all aware, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) has been in negotiation with the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) since 2006. The negotiation was a review of the 2001 Agreement which was due for review in 2004. It took Government 2 years and an ASUU strike to begin the review. Nevertheless, in the letter setting up the Negotiating Committee, the then Minister of Education, Dr. Oby Ezekwesili, listed the terms of reference to include Funding, Conditions of Service, University Autonomy and Academic Freedom, and other matters.

In the course of discussion, the Committee agreed that the essence of the Re-negotiation was:

- (i) To reverse the decay in the university system, in order to reposition it for greater responsibilities in national development;
- (ii) To reverse the brain drain, not only by enhancing the remuneration of academic staff, but also by disengaging them from the encumbrances of a unified civil service structure;
- (iii) To restore Nigerian universities, through immediate, massive and sustained financial intervention; and
- (iv) To ensure genuine university autonomy and academic freedom.

With these, we thought and believed that the negotiation would give rise to better learning and teaching environment and ensure that our universities, once again, get rated amongst the best in the world.

The Federal Government Negotiating Team was made up of representatives of the Committees of Pro-Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors of Federal and State Universities and had, as its

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advisers, some Vice-Chancellors, representatives of the NUC, University administrators, the Federal Ministry of Labour; the Presidency, Federal Ministry of Education, National Salaries, Incomes and Wages Commission, Federal Ministry of Justice, the Office of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation and Minister of Finance. These people participated effectively in the deliberation which was conducted in the best practices of democracy under the able, meticulous and profound leadership of Deacon Gamaliel Onosode, as Chairman.

It was the belief and indeed the right expectations that each of these officers from the different ministries and parastatals had the responsibility of briefing their ministers on the deliberations of the Committee and getting necessary directives/guidelines. Otherwise, their presence would have been both meaningless and wasteful in terms of time and resources. By this method, therefore, the ministries were full participants in the negotiation leading to each and every aspect of the agreement.

Gentlemen, I have taken time to give you this background, in order to show the integrity and the process adopted in reaching agreements in all the four items for negotiation. It must also be stated, that on sensitive issues like the case of our unjustly sacked UniLorin 49 and the conditions of service, the Chairman considered them so critical to the negotiation and the final agreement that he had to on behalf of the Committee write Mr. President, through the Honourable Minister of Education in 2007, asking for approval. While it is true that although the Chairman did not show us a written document showing the reactions to the prayers in the said memorandum, the this of the Chairman, the NUC Executive Secretary and the then Minister of Education told the Committee that Mr. President was favourable disposed to the conditions of service proposed by the Committee but had directed that the case of Ilorin 49 be settled by the Supreme Court, since the case was already in Court at the time.

It should be further noted that by September 2008, the Executive Secretary of NUC in one of our meetings, urged the Committee to quickly wind up its deliberations to enable the universities access the money already provided for that agreement in the 2008 budget.

The Minister's Recent Statements:

The Honourable Minister of Education has made a number of really unfortunate statements recently and in the wake of our Union's strike, unnecessarily provoked by Government's insincerity and insensitivity. The issues raised in the said statements obviously fly in the face of the indisputable facts chronicled for you above. The Honourable Minister's remarks during his appearance at the NTA News of June 24, 2009 were particularly vexations and unfortunate.

The issues:

1. That there was no agreement.

Our response to this is simple as his denial raises a few simple questions:

- a) What did the Honourable Minister invite us to do on 12th May 2009?
- b) Could the Honourable Minister have invited us to sign an agreement where there was none?
- c) If so, who is deceiving who?
- d) If there was no agreement, from where did the Honourable Minister compute the N78 billion which he has been bandying about as the additional fund needed to service the agreement which he claimed that the Government does not have?

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It is pertinent to present here the true position.

- i) On May 12, 2009 and on government's invitation, we assembled at the NUC to sign the agreement reached between the FGN and ASUU, since December 2008. At least, two previous dates given by Government for the same exercise were cancelled by the same Government. A documented programme for the signing ceremony was duly circulated by the same Government. In other words, there is an agreement. We are on strike to persuade Government to be serious for once and take the interest of its citizens seriously by signing the agreement already reached.
- ii) Secondly, the much touted sum of N78 billion, is actually the shortfall in the amount needed to fund personnel emoluments arising from the various agreements, which government has reached with all Federal tertiary institutions in the country (Polytechnics, Colleges of Education and Universities' academic and non academic staff).

Hence it is not true that N78 billion is needed to fund the FGN/ASUU agreement. Again it was an assertion meant to politicise the issues, deceive hoodwink the Nigerian people. By the way, is it not a crying shame that our government finds the some of N78 billion too much to spend over a period of time, to revamp the Nations educational system? Yet, the same government wastes billions of naira on frivolities.

2. That government needed to review the agreement because of the global economic melt down.

This should not in any way affect the agreement for the following reasons:

- (i) The agreement on conditions of service was reached and communicated to government in 2007 when the price of oil was about \$50 per barrel. Today oil sells for about \$70 per barrel.
- (ii) Again, melt down or no melt down, none of the African countries sampled and used in evolving the African average used in the computation of academic staff conditions of service has in anyway reduced its staff emoluments because of the economic meltdown, and they are far less economically endowed than our dear country, Nigeria.
- (iii) Even with the melt-down, government recently approved N40 billion for the construction of grain silos, when the country has not, as of now, met the carrying capacity of the existing ones.
- (iv) The issue of melt down has been brought to the center stage by government because it has misplaced its priorities and relegated the education of the citizenry of this nation to the background.
- (v) It is also sad to note that even though the present government touts education as one of the issues in its 7-point agenda, the allocation to education in this year's budget betrays government's lack of commitment to the education of Nigerian people.
- (vi) ASUU believes that with an average of N120 billion earned from oil each day, government should be able to fund education effectively, including free and compulsory education, under a fair and conducive environment. If it considers this impossible, then the money should be enough to increase access to education by a greater majority of our people. We cannot aspire to being one of the developed economies by 2020, if the bulk of our citizenry remain uneducated as is the case today.

3. Government holds that it was not properly briefed during the negotiation.

ASUU cannot and should not be held responsible for this, as its agents/representatives from the NUC, the ministries and parastatals involved in the negotiation process had this responsibility to their principal. This excuse is also not tenable when we consider that the

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Chairman of the Negotiating Committee wrote when considered necessary and expedient, to Mr. President through the office of the Honourable Minister of Education. While we appreciate that the Minister was not on seat during the greater part of the negotiation, this should not be an excuse, as his predecessor and subordinates had the primary duty to brief him well on all issues that relate to the Ministry's activities.

4. Why is it that ASUU must adopt the strike option considering its impact on that quality of education which the Union wants to raise?

The answer to this is simple. ASUU's resolve to forge a hitch free academic calendar has been demonstrated by the utmost restraint which it showed in the two and half years of negotiation and waiting for the signing of the agreement. In these past two and half years, ASUU has dialogued, negotiated and lobbied government and those who matter in the education sector for intervention and quick resolution of issues. ASUU had reached out to religious and traditional institutions and the National and State Assemblies. ASUU had prayed for intervention from organized private sector and the media. ASUU felt that it had come to the end of its tether and could go no more. Dialogue had become a discussion between the deaf and the dumb. It has been two and half years of fruitless lobbying, dialogue and negotiation. ASUU had to adopt strike only as a last option and taking that decision was painful to the Union because of our students, their parents and, indeed, the Nigerian community.

ASUU calls on the relevant arms of Government, the organized labour, religious and traditional institutions and all lovers of education to prevail on government to do the proper thing: sign the agreement and hence end this avoidable strike and its disruptive effects on our education system.

We believe that this can be achieved now or within a week, if government considers it an emergency that needs to be addressed quickly and promptly.

Should Government prolong it, Government should also bear the responsibility.

Thank you.

Professor Ukachukwu Awuzie, fnia
President