

Political Change and The Funding of Education in Nigeria

By [Prof. Adewale Stephen](#)

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It has been said that no nation can develop beyond the level of its education. In other words, education is the livewire of any serious nation which aspires to attain the highest level of development. In Nigeria, One might not be too wrong in saying that the policy of the successive government in the country is that the goose that lays the developmental golden egg must be killed so that it does not turn around to criticize the misappropriation and looting of its resources. Or how else does one explain the continuous neglect of the education sector whereby students, who are the nation's assets and bridge to the future, are made to bear the brunt of our government's insensitivity while the lecturers and other workers, who train the future wealth of the country, are made to wallow in abject poverty.

This situation which began in 1978 under Obasanjo's military regime has taken a very critical turn with detrimental implications on the lives of workers, youths and peasants as well as the quality of education. Right since 1978 when the tuition and feeding fees were introduced and government got ensnared in crippling IMF/World Bank loans, the lots of education have gone from bad to worse. As a result of non-funding, all the Nigerian schools lack adequate and well-equipped facilities like modern libraries, laboratories, classrooms, hostels, portable water, constant power supply, etc. Schools are understaffed while morale is low among the existing staff due to poor welfare package and lack of necessary working tools.

In their bid to reverse this, the ASUU, SSANU, NASU and NAAT succeeded in forcing the federal government to sign an agreement with them in October 2009. The agreement basically centres on funding, the allocation of a minimum of 26% of the annual budget to education. But unfortunately since that time, the federal government has not deemed it fit to implement the agreement. It was this government's blatant refusal to implement the agreement that led ASUU into declaring a one-week lecture boycott last week. As I write, other staff unions are also on strike. And if care is not taken, the crisis may soon degenerate into a full blown industrial strike.

I call on the governments at all level to accede to the demands of the striking universities workers and honour the agreement it willingly reached with the Unions in 2009. The government's refusal to adequately fund education has created basis for the authorities of institutions to impose various obnoxious charges and fees of the students. This has been making education the exclusive preserve of children of the few rich, the privileged and treasury looters. Moreover, the decaying state of our institutions, from the primary to tertiary, is not a concern to the governments since members of the capitalist ruling class can afford to send their wards to private schools or abroad to acquire sound education.

This is further buttressed by the fact that while government claims there is no money and the universities are left to decay, public officials (elected/unelected) live fabulous ostentatious lifestyles with fat salaries and allowances with a coterie of aides, special advisers, special assistants, and hangers-on, while billions of naira are daily looted, squandered and wasted on frivolous activities that do not fundamentally affect on the living conditions of the working people for the better. Apparently, it is not a case of non-affordability but lack of sincerity, political will, charismatic drives and sensitivity to the welfare of the people.

However, as ASUU and other staff unions along with the students are fighting for the proper funding of education, the sight must not be lost on the fact that corruption and mismanagement is another phenomenon that compounded the crisis of the education sector. Therefore, we must equally demand for democratic management of our institutions with the elected representatives of the students and academic and non-academic staff.

And while it is instructive to state that the struggle of ASUU is necessary and commendable, the task of revamping of education must be shouldered by the every staff union in the sector (i.e. ASUU, ASUP, COEASU, SSANU, NASU, SSATHURAI, NUT, NAAT, etc.) along with the Nigerian students. There should be joint action among the staff unions and the students. This will lead to the formation of a formidable force that can give the required strength to the struggle. In the meantime, ASUU and other unions should take the struggle beyond the four walls of campuses by organizing public rallies and symposiums in order to enlist physical participation of the working people and to mount pressure on the government.

The need to form a united front is highlighted in the fact that university workers and students have become victims of state repression as a result of their genuine campaigning and demands for better wages and enabling academic environment. In fact, most institutions have not only found it difficult to increase their school fees astronomically but have also elected to suspend and victimize those students activist who make any meaningful attempt to criticize them. This prevalence among others is not accidental but a historically premeditated and calculated attempt at breaking the defenses of any vibrant structure that can possibly protect the interest of the working class. This experience is not limited to the schools alone. The governments at all level of the public service have refused to implement the #18,000 minimum wage which only amount to a meager #600 per day while the disconcerted workers are being threatened with massive retrenchment!

The only lesson inherent in these present quagmires is the need for all working class to unite under a common ground and with the knowledge that nothing can be given freely by the state. It has to be fought for. That is how the capitalist state has always been and that is the way it will remain. History has made it so and there appears to be nothing any mortal can arguably do about that. The state will remain the state just as a leopard cannot change its spot.

As the University workers continue their campaign for adequate funding of education, I maintain that students and workers must not just realize in theory the need to fight for political change as a basis of improving the condition of education and better living condition, they must realize this necessity in practice by taking the bold steps of creating, joining, and building a pro-masses' political party alongside with the labour and civil society with the sole aim of chasing away these anti-education capitalist government and putting in their place a political party and government that recognizes the principle of provision of functional education not just as a fashionable phrase but a cardinal principle of governance

which can be realized on the basis of radical re-arrangement of the economy to suit the majority and not the minority.

It is only when these programmes are executed and accomplished that we can boldly peep back into this dark moment in history of our nation and say that after all “the struggles and campaign for the better funding of education were never in vain”.

Adewale Stephen, Department of History, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State

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