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Beyond strike suspension: A coverage-settlement-durability analysis of trade union and conciliation effectiveness in resolving organisational conflict in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article evaluates how far organisational conflict in Nigeria can genuinely be resolved by trade unions and statutory conciliation, rejecting the common but analytically weak practice of equating strike suspension with conflict resolution. Resolution is instead conceptualised as a chain of outcomes: representative voice, negotiated settlement, implementation, grievance closure, and non-recurrence. Adopting a critical-realist, mixed-method secondary design, the study triangulates doctrinal analysis of Nigerian labour law, quantitative reinterpretation of published Nigerian studies, labour-market statistics, and structured process tracing of six major disputes between 2019 and 2024. The evidence shows that trade unions are indispensable for aggregating worker interests and correcting power asymmetry, while conciliation is most valuable when direct bargaining is blocked by mistrust or positional rigidity. However, a persistent settlement-implementation gap emerges across cases: high perceived value of bargaining and conciliation coexists with low rates of strict agreement adherence, and several prominent disputes were resolved through judicial intervention rather than successful conciliation. Structural constraints further limit institutional reach, since informal employment comprised over 90 per cent of the Nigerian workforce in 2023 and nationally comparable data on union density, bargaining coverage, and conciliation outcomes remain sparse or outdated. The article concludes that unions and conciliation can resolve conflict substantially at the level of voice, de-escalation, and agreement formation, but only conditionally at the level of durable implementation, with effectiveness depending on coverage, representativeness, mediator independence, agreement precision, fiscal authority, and enforcement. A Coverage-Settlement-Durability framework and a set of institutional reforms are proposed to move Nigerian industrial relations from episodic strike settlement toward monitored and durable conflict resolution.

***Keywords*:** Trade Unions, Conciliation, Collective Bargaining, Organisational Conflict, Industrial Relations, Nigeria, Agreement Implementation, Informal Employment

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1. Introduction

Conflict is not an accidental interruption of organisational life. It is generated by the employment relationship itself because employers seek control, flexibility, productivity and cost discipline, whereas employees seek security, voice, distributive fairness and dignity. These objectives may overlap, but they are not identical. A unitarist interpretation presents the organisation as an integrated team and therefore treats sustained conflict as the product of poor communication, deviant leadership or external agitation. Pluralist and radical perspectives are less comforting but more realistic: they locate conflict in the unequal distribution of authority and economic returns, and recognise trade unions as legitimate countervailing institutions rather than pathological intruders (Fox, 1966; Hyman, 1975). In Nigeria, this conflict is intensified by inflation, irregular payment, wage erosion, insecure employment, weak occupational safety, political intervention in public organisations, limited trust and recurrent non-implementation of negotiated agreements.

Trade unions respond to these tensions by converting dispersed individual grievances into collective voice. Their resources include information, representation, bargaining expertise, solidarity, political lobbying, litigation and, ultimately, industrial action. Conciliation performs a different function. A conciliator does not normally impose an outcome; the institution seeks to restore communication, clarify the disputed issues, reduce misperception and help the parties produce their own settlement. Under the Trade Disputes Act, internal settlement machinery is intended to precede mediation, ministerial conciliation, the Industrial Arbitration Panel and adjudication by the National Industrial Court. The statutory architecture is therefore a ladder of escalating intervention rather than a choice between unions and the state. Trade unions supply the organised parties; conciliation supplies a structured process when direct negotiation fails.

The central research problem is that the Nigerian system is usually assessed through visible events, especially whether a threatened strike was suspended or an agreement was signed. This is a shallow outcome measure. A conflict may be removed from public view while wage arrears remain unpaid, funding commitments are deferred, victimisation continues, or the same dispute reappears under a new ultimatum. Conversely, the continuation of disagreement does not necessarily prove institutional failure: unions may prevent unilateral decisions, disclose hidden inequities or force a more legitimate compromise even when they do not secure all demands. The question is consequently not whether unions and conciliation 'work' in an absolute sense, but what kinds of conflict they resolve, at which stage, for whom, for how long and under what institutional conditions.

Nigeria provides a demanding context for this question. The state is simultaneously legislator, regulator, conciliator, employer and fiscal gatekeeper in many high-profile disputes. A ministry

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may negotiate a settlement whose financial implementation depends on the finance ministry, the budget office, state governors or individual institutions. This fragmentation creates an authority deficit at the bargaining table: negotiators may possess political access but lack control over the resources needed to honour the agreement. The resulting implementation gap undermines trust and encourages unions to treat strikes as the only credible enforcement device. Public-sector conflicts in universities, health services, courts and transport therefore recur despite dense negotiation histories.

A second structural difficulty is coverage. The National Bureau of Statistics estimated that 92.2 per cent of employed persons were in informal employment in 2023 (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2024). Informality is not synonymous with absence of collective organisation, and some informal workers participate in associations or sectoral unions. Nevertheless, most statutory bargaining and conciliation mechanisms are designed around identifiable employers, registered unions, written conditions of service and formal payroll systems. The institutional model is therefore most developed where the Nigerian labour market is smallest. The most recent union-density figure displayed by ILOSTAT for Nigeria is 9.9 per cent and relates to 2008, while a current national collective-bargaining coverage series is unavailable (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2026). The age of the figure is not a minor technical issue; it exposes how confidently expressed claims about union reach often rest on obsolete evidence.

A third difficulty is the quality of administrative data. The Trade Union Services and Industrial Relations Department states that it compiles industrial-relations statistics and handles disputes through mediation and conciliation, yet recent public series on referrals, settlement rates, time to settlement, implementation and recurrence are sparse. Without these denominators, a ministry can publicise successful agreements without revealing how many cases failed, were delayed or returned. This creates survivorship bias. It also makes rigorous comparison among direct bargaining, conciliation, arbitration and litigation unusually difficult.

The study therefore addresses an empirical and conceptual gap. Empirically, it triangulates official labour-market statistics, reported dispute outcomes and Nigerian workplace studies rather than relying on a single strike chronology. Conceptually, it develops a Coverage-Settlement-Durability framework. The framework holds that full resolution requires: (a) meaningful coverage and representative voice; (b) a settlement process capable of producing a precise and accepted agreement; and (c) durable implementation that prevents recurrence. A mechanism may succeed at one dimension and fail at another. This disaggregation permits a more defensible answer to the phrase 'how far'.

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Table 1. The Nigerian Statutory Dispute-Resolution Ladder and its Analytical Limits

Stage	Principal mechanism	Intended function	Key limitation in practice
1	Internal machinery and direct collective bargaining	Define grievances and seek voluntary settlement within the organisation.	Power asymmetry, incomplete information, weak recognition, fragmented authority or positional bargaining.
2	Mediation by a mutually agreed person	Re-open communication after internal machinery fails.	Depends on consent, mediator credibility and the parties' willingness to disclose interests.
3	Ministerial conciliation under the Trade Disputes Act	Investigate causes, narrow issues and facilitate a signed memorandum of settlement.	Ministerial control may create delay or perceived lack of independence where government is also the employer.
4	Industrial Arbitration Panel	Issue an award when conciliation fails.	Objections and enforcement problems can prolong the dispute; adjudicative logic may reduce ownership.
5	National Industrial Court of Nigeria	Provide authoritative adjudication and enforcement within exclusive labour jurisdiction.	Can end a stoppage without repairing trust or settling the underlying distributive conflict.

The main objective is to evaluate the extent to which trade unions and conciliation resolve organisational conflict in Nigeria when resolution is measured not only by agreement or strike suspension, but also by implementation and non-recurrence. The specific objectives are to examine the theoretical mechanisms through which trade unions influence the initiation, escalation, management and resolution of organisational conflict; to analyse the legal and institutional architecture governing collective bargaining, mediation, conciliation, arbitration and adjudication

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in Nigeria; to assess the empirical relationship between union-based bargaining, conciliation and reported dispute outcomes in selected Nigerian studies; to compare short-run de-escalation with substantive agreement, implementation and recurrence in selected Nigerian disputes; to identify labour-market, organisational, political and evidential constraints that limit the reach of trade unions and conciliation; and to develop recommendations for moving Nigerian industrial relations from episodic strike settlement to monitored and durable conflict resolution.

The study is guided by six research questions. First, to what extent do trade unions convert individual workplace grievances into effective and legitimate collective voice in Nigeria? Second, how does conciliation add value when direct collective bargaining has reached an impasse? Third, do union bargaining and conciliation produce durable resolution, or mainly short-term suspension of industrial action? Fourth, how do implementation, enforcement and recurrence affect the observed effectiveness of collective agreements? Fifth, how do informality, union coverage, state duality and fragmented fiscal authority moderate the reach of the Nigerian dispute-resolution system? Sixth, which legal, administrative and organisational reforms would improve the speed, legitimacy and durability of conflict resolution?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Meaning and Levels of Organisational Conflict

Conflict occurs when interdependent actors perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, status threats or procedural injustice. It may be intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup or organisation-wide. Industrial conflict is a narrower category arising from the employment relationship and may concern wages, hours, recognition, discipline, restructuring, safety, redundancy, promotion, discrimination or managerial prerogative. Coser (1956) cautions against assuming that all conflict is destructive. Properly institutionalised conflict can expose information, clarify norms and rebalance relationships. The relevant distinction is therefore between productive disagreement and unmanaged or coercive conflict. At organisational level, conflict has both substantive and relational dimensions. Substantive conflict concerns the distributive question of who gets what. Relational conflict concerns recognition, trust, respect and the legitimacy of procedures. A settlement that increases wages but humiliates union representatives may reproduce relational conflict; a cordial meeting that postpones arrears may preserve relationships while failing substantively. Conciliation is strongest in the relational and procedural dimensions, whereas unions are essential to the distributive and representational dimensions. Durable resolution usually requires both.

The dependent variable in much Nigerian literature is inadequately specified. 'Industrial harmony', 'cordial relations', 'dispute settlement' and 'strike avoidance' are often used interchangeably. This conflation produces optimistic conclusions because the easiest outcome to observe is whether workers returned to work. The present study distinguishes five levels: voice formation, de-escalation, written settlement, implementation and non-recurrence. Only the final three constitute substantive and durable resolution.

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2.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Unions and Conflict

The unitarist frame assumes a common organisational purpose and locates conflict in poor communication, personality or external manipulation. Its strength is its attention to culture, leadership and shared identity. Its weakness is analytical denial: it can interpret legitimate disagreement over wages or job security as disloyalty. In Nigerian public organisations, unitarist rhetoric often appears when governments describe industrial action as unpatriotic while failing to disclose whether negotiated commitments were funded or implemented. Pluralism treats the organisation as a coalition of groups with legitimate but competing interests. Trade unions are therefore institutions of job regulation and countervailing power. Collective bargaining converts unilateral managerial rule into jointly negotiated rules (Dunlop, 1958; Flanders, 1970). The pluralist account best explains why conflict can be managed without being abolished. It also explains the value of conciliation: an impartial process can help autonomous parties make their own rules while preserving the employment relationship.

Radical and labour-process perspectives locate conflict in the structural subordination of labour to capital and managerial control (Hyman, 1975). From this position, conciliation can either civilise conflict or depoliticise it. A neutral language of compromise may conceal large differences in economic power, especially where workers face dismissal, casualisation or salary arrears. A conciliator who treats unequal parties as if they were equally able to withstand delay may reproduce rather than correct inequality. This critique is particularly relevant to outsourced and contract workers in the Nigerian oil and service sectors. Industrial-relations systems theory adds institutional context. Dunlop (1958) identifies actors, environmental contexts, a shared ideology and a web of rules. Nigerian dispute outcomes cannot be explained by union tactics alone because rules are shaped by labour statutes, fiscal federalism, political cycles, essential-service restrictions, court jurisdiction and macroeconomic shocks. The same union strategy may succeed in a profitable private firm but fail in a public university where the negotiator lacks budgetary authority.

Walton and McKersie's (1965) behavioural theory differentiates distributive bargaining, integrative bargaining, attitudinal structuring and intra-organisational bargaining. Nigerian wage disputes often begin distributively, with highly divergent public positions. Conciliation creates value when it shifts discussion towards affordability, phasing, review clauses, non-wage benefits and implementation timetables. Yet union leaders and government negotiators must also bargain internally with members, ministries, governors and political principals. Agreements may collapse because the people in the room cannot secure approval from those outside it. The collective-voice model proposes that unions reduce costly individual exit by providing a channel through which workers communicate dissatisfaction (Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Hirschman, 1970). Voice may improve retention, safety and organisational learning, but only when management listens and when union leadership is accountable. Where grievance channels are ceremonial, employees learn that only

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disruptive action attracts attention. Repeated government invitations immediately before threatened strikes can unintentionally reward escalation and weaken routine consultation.

2.3 Functions and Limits of Trade Unions

Trade unions contribute to conflict resolution through interest aggregation, representation, information, expertise and credible commitment. Aggregation prevents management from negotiating hundreds of inconsistent individual claims. Representation reduces fear of victimisation and gives disadvantaged employees access to trained negotiators. Union research can challenge employer claims about affordability or staffing. Collective agreements also create precedents that stabilise expectations across time. Union power, however, is not equivalent to union effectiveness. A union may mobilise successfully but adopt an opening demand that is economically or politically unsustainable. It may privilege insiders, permanent staff or dominant occupations while neglecting women, casual workers, junior employees or non-members. Leaders may escalate conflict to preserve legitimacy or internal office, even where a phased settlement would improve member welfare. Conversely, accusations of union militancy may be used to divert attention from employer non-compliance. A rigorous assessment must therefore examine both union democracy and employer conduct. Recognition and representativeness are foundational. Employers are more likely to implement agreements negotiated with a union that clearly represents the relevant bargaining unit. Inter-union rivalry can create incompatible claims and make settlement vulnerable to challenge. The Trade Unions Act provides the legal framework for registration and regulation, but legal status alone does not prove internal democracy, density or bargaining capacity. Evidence on actual membership and coverage is weak, and the frequently repeated assertion that national labour centres represent millions of workers is rarely accompanied by audited, current membership data.

The strongest union contribution may be agenda-setting rather than final settlement. By imposing reputational, political or operational costs, unions force an employer to recognise a conflict that would otherwise remain individualised or invisible. This can be socially valuable, but it can also generate external costs. The June 2024 minimum-wage strike disrupted electricity and aviation. Such leverage accelerated negotiations, yet the burden fell partly on citizens who were not parties to the dispute. The legitimacy of industrial action therefore depends on proportionality, democratic mandate, essential-service safeguards and whether less disruptive mechanisms were genuinely exhausted.

2.4 Nature, Value and Limitations of Conciliation

Conciliation is an assisted negotiation in which a third party helps disputants communicate, diagnose issues and search for acceptable terms. It is less coercive than arbitration and adjudication because the parties retain control of the outcome. This ownership can enhance compliance, preserve relationships and permit creative remedies that a court could not easily order. Ige (2017) argues that collective conciliation occupies an important position within Nigerian alternative dispute resolution, particularly where the continuing employment relationship makes purely adversarial

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victory costly. The mechanisms through which conciliation works are information and process effects. A conciliator can separate public positions from underlying interests, identify areas of agreement, reality-test claims, manage sequencing, use private caucuses and protect negotiators from the appearance of unilateral concession. Conciliation also provides procedural justice. Even parties that obtain less than they demanded may accept an outcome when they consider the process respectful, neutral and informed. These advantages are conditional. First, conciliation cannot manufacture resources. Where the dispute concerns unfunded wage arrears or a statutory allocation controlled elsewhere, improved communication does not solve the material constraint. Secondly, the process depends on good-faith disclosure. Parties may use meetings to delay industrial action, gather intelligence or transfer blame. Thirdly, ministerial conciliation may suffer a neutrality deficit when the federal government is also the employer or political principal. Fourthly, short statutory timetables are valuable in theory but unrealistic where the issues require multi-agency costing or verification. Finally, a memorandum is only as useful as its specificity and enforcement.

The distinction between mediation and conciliation is not consistently maintained in Nigerian practice or scholarship. Some accounts reserve a more active proposal-making role for the conciliator, while others use the terms interchangeably. The legal sequence in the Trade Disputes Act refers to a mutually agreed mediator before ministerial appointment of a conciliator. For this study, mediation and conciliation are both facilitative processes, but statutory conciliation is treated as the more formal ministerial stage.

2.5 Nigerian Legal and Institutional Framework

The Trade Disputes Act requires parties to use agreed internal machinery and, where that fails, to meet under a mutually agreed mediator. If settlement is not achieved, the dispute may proceed to a conciliator appointed by the Minister of Labour and Employment. A successful settlement is recorded in a memorandum signed by the parties and becomes binding. Failed conciliation may be referred to the Industrial Arbitration Panel, while objections to an award can ultimately reach the National Industrial Court. The National Industrial Court Act 2006 and section 254C of the Constitution, following the Third Alteration, give the Court extensive and exclusive jurisdiction over labour and employment matters. The architecture appears rational because it favours voluntary settlement before coercive determination. However, several design problems remain. Ministerial discretion can centralise case progression. Procedural deadlines may be missed without meaningful consequence. Monetary penalties in older provisions have lost deterrent value. More fundamentally, the sequence assumes that a dispute moves linearly from internal negotiation to conciliation, arbitration and court. In reality, political meetings, public ultimatums, litigation and bargaining often occur simultaneously. High-profile disputes may bypass routine machinery and become presidential or governors' matters.

Nigeria has ratified ILO Convention No. 87 on freedom of association and Convention No. 98 on the right to organise and collective bargaining. These conventions establish normative support for

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voluntary organisation and protection against anti-union discrimination. Yet ratification does not itself ensure bargaining coverage or effective remedy. The practical question is whether workers can organise without retaliation, whether employers recognise representative unions, and whether public authorities create institutions that make bargaining preferable to recurrent strikes. The Trade Union Services and Industrial Relations Department is responsible for dispute intervention, surveillance and the compilation of industrial-relations statistics. This administrative role is potentially valuable because effective conciliation requires case triage, specialist expertise and institutional memory. Public transparency is nevertheless inadequate. Annual data should distinguish disputes reported, disputes accepted, sectors, causes, time to first intervention, agreements, implementation status, arbitration referrals, court referrals and recurrence. Without such information, effectiveness cannot be independently audited.

2.6 Empirical Evidence from Nigeria

Obadara (2016) surveyed 1,040 respondents from four academic unions across 16 chapters in South-West Nigeria. The study reported positive correlations between collective bargaining and arbitration ($r = .244$), collaborative law ($r = .236$), mediation ($r = .213$) and conciliation ($r = .441$). Conciliation was therefore the strongest association among the mechanisms tested. However, the square of the correlation is .194, indicating approximately 19.4 per cent shared variance, not proof that conciliation caused resolution. The cross-sectional self-report design, regional and sectoral concentration, ambiguous measurement scale and table-labelling errors substantially limit generalisation. Otohinoyi, Oboromeni and Christopher (2017) examined dispute-settlement mechanisms at Ahmadu Bello University. Ninety per cent of respondents believed collective bargaining promoted industrial harmony; 72 per cent reported that most disputes were resolved through collective bargaining; and 84 per cent considered mediators or conciliators conducive to cordial relations. Yet only 20 per cent reported strict adherence to collective agreements, 77 per cent reported partial adherence, 92 per cent stated that delayed compliance caused disputes and 93 per cent believed full compliance would resolve them. This is among the clearest Nigerian demonstrations that reaching agreement and resolving conflict are not the same. The study is nevertheless a single-institution survey with only three management respondents and a heavily union-dominated sample, so its percentages should be interpreted as perceptions rather than objective national rates. Ejumudo's (2019) qualitative Chevron case similarly emphasises implementation and distributive inequality. Participants described repeated bargaining, management's limited commitment to agreements and large reward differentials between contract and mainstream employees. The case indicates that collective bargaining is necessary for voice but insufficient where employment status creates segmented labour markets. Its qualitative depth is valuable, but small focus-group evidence and historically specific salary figures cannot support national causal inference.

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Taken together, the studies are directionally consistent: union voice and conciliation are positively valued, but their effects are mediated by trust and implementation. They are also methodologically narrow. The literature is dominated by single sectors, cross-sectional perceptions and studies of formal public organisations. Informal workers, non-union employees, private small firms, women-dominated sectors and failed conciliations are under-researched. Publication bias is likely because successful or visible disputes attract more documentation than mundane unresolved grievances.

Table 2. Critical Synthesis of Selected Nigerian Empirical Evidence

Study	Design and sample	Reported evidence	What the evidence supports	Principal threats to validity
Obadara (2016)	Cross-sectional survey; 1,040 respondents in four academic unions and 16 South-West chapters.	Conciliation r = .441; mediation r = .213; arbitration r = .244; collaborative law r = .236.	Conciliation is associated with reported dispute resolution and is stronger than the other measured associations.	No causal identification; self-report common-method bias; sectoral and regional restriction; measurement and table-label ambiguities.
Otohinoyi et al. (2017)	Single-university survey; population 1,695; reported usable respondents 115, including only three managers.	90% bargaining promotes harmony; 84% conciliation helps relations; 20% strict agreement adherence; 92% delay causes disputes.	The largest weakness lies after settlement: implementation mediates durability.	Severe respondent imbalance; perceptions rather than administrative outcomes; single institution; questionable inferential aggregation.
Ejumudo (2019)	Qualitative focus groups involving union and management actors in Chevron Nigeria.	Recurring strikes, management non-commitment and large contract/mainstream reward differences.	Power and employment segmentation can defeat bargaining even where a union is present.	Small qualitative case; historical and company-specific figures; limited transferability.

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Study	Design and sample	Reported evidence	What the evidence supports	Principal threats to validity
NBS (2024) / ILOSTAT	National labour-force statistics; international labour indicators.	92.2% informal employment in 2023; union density shown as 9.9% for 2008; bargaining coverage unavailable.	The formal dispute-resolution system has a severe coverage and measurement problem.	Informality is not identical to absence of organisation; union-density figure is obsolete; administrative coverage data missing.

2.7 The Coverage-Settlement-Durability Framework

The literature suggests a sequential rather than binary model. First, coverage asks whether the affected workers can access a legitimate representative and whether the employer is identifiable and capable of bargaining. Secondly, settlement asks whether direct bargaining or conciliation produces an agreement that is voluntary, informed, specific and authorised. Thirdly, durability asks whether the agreement is implemented and whether the disputed conduct recurs. These are multiplicative conditions: weak coverage excludes workers; weak settlement creates ambiguity; weak durability destroys trust. The framework also identifies three distinct meanings of effectiveness. Procedural effectiveness means that the parties communicate and use lawful institutions. Instrumental effectiveness means that an agreement or cessation of industrial action is achieved. Transformative effectiveness means that the causes, rules and relationships generating the dispute are changed. Nigerian institutions are often procedurally active and sometimes instrumentally effective, but rarely evaluated transformatively.

2.8 Hypotheses of the Study

The hypotheses are formulated for analytical evaluation through triangulated secondary evidence. Because nationally representative microdata and a complete administrative conciliation dataset are unavailable, the study does not present new population-level significance tests. It instead evaluates whether existing quantitative findings and case-process evidence are consistent with the propositions.

- H01: Trade-union representation has no meaningful positive relationship with the resolution of organisational conflict in Nigeria.
- H02: Conciliation does not improve the probability or quality of negotiated settlement beyond direct collective bargaining.
- H03: Implementation of collective agreements does not mediate the relationship between union or conciliation activity and durable conflict resolution.

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- H04: Labour-market formality and bargaining coverage do not moderate the reach of union-based and conciliatory conflict resolution.
- H05: The neutrality, authority and technical capacity of the conciliating institution do not influence settlement durability.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy and Design

The study adopts a critical-realist philosophy. Organisational conflict is treated as a real event with observable manifestations, but the causal mechanisms that generate or resolve it—power asymmetry, trust, representation, fiscal authority and enforcement—are not directly reducible to strike counts. Critical realism is suitable because the same mechanism may operate differently across an oil company, a university and an informal enterprise. The design is a convergent mixed-method secondary study combining doctrinal legal analysis, quantitative reinterpretation, documentary case analysis and critical evidence synthesis.

The design is explanatory rather than nationally predictive. It seeks to identify mechanisms and boundary conditions, not to estimate a national causal treatment effect of conciliation. This limitation is deliberate. A claim of national statistical causality would be indefensible without complete case registers, counterfactual comparison groups or worker-level panel data.

3.2 Sources and Inclusion Criteria

Four evidence streams were used:

1. Primary legal materials: the Trade Disputes Act, Trade Unions Act, National Industrial Court Act, the Constitution and relevant ILO conventions.

2. Official institutional and labour-market materials: NBS labour-force statistics, ILOSTAT indicators, Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment dispute reports, and National Assembly legislative records.

3. Peer-reviewed or institutionally archived Nigerian research that reported identifiable designs, samples or case evidence on collective bargaining, unions, conciliation or dispute settlement.

4. Structured dispute documents and credible contemporaneous reporting for six visible disputes from 2019–2024, selected to vary by sector, mechanism and apparent outcome.

Materials were included where they contained a clear Nigerian organisational or national labour dispute, identified the mechanism used and supplied evidence about at least one outcome. Commentary that merely asserted that unions were effective or ineffective without a traceable basis was excluded from the core analysis. Recent but unverified social-media claims were also excluded. The selected disputes are not a random sample and should not be used to infer a national settlement percentage.

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3.3 Variables and Analytical Procedure

The principal explanatory mechanisms are trade-union representation and conciliation. Union representation is operationalised through collective agenda-setting, bargaining, strike mobilisation, political access and enforcement activity. Conciliation is operationalised as third-party facilitation intended to secure voluntary settlement. The outcome is disaggregated into immediate de-escalation, written settlement, implementation and non-recurrence. Quantitative reinterpretation was limited to statistics reported in the source studies. For Obadara (2016), r^2 was calculated to prevent a moderate correlation from being misrepresented as comprehensive explanatory power. For Otohinoyi et al. (2017), percentage-point gaps were examined between perceived settlement effectiveness and strict implementation. NBS and ILOSTAT data were used to assess the population reach of formal institutions. No missing observations were imputed, and stale indicators were labelled as such. The case analysis used process tracing. For each dispute, the analysis identified the trigger, union intervention, third-party process, immediate outcome, implementation evidence and recurrence signal. An outcome was classified as strong only where there was evidence of a substantive agreement and implementation, not merely an announcement or return to work. Judicially compelled cessation was distinguished from consensual resolution. Triangulation was used to compare legal design, survey perception, labour-market reach and observed case processes. Contradictions were retained rather than averaged away. For example, high reported satisfaction with conciliation was interpreted alongside low agreement adherence. This is methodologically preferable to selecting only the optimistic statistic.

3.4 Reliability, Validity and Ethical Considerations

Reliability was enhanced through a transparent coding structure and use of traceable sources. Construct validity was strengthened by separating de-escalation, settlement and durability. External validity remains limited because the workplace studies are concentrated in formal, unionised and often public organisations. The case set also overrepresents nationally visible disputes. The study addresses this bias explicitly rather than concealing it. The research uses public secondary materials and does not process personal or confidential employee data. Ethical risk lies primarily in misrepresentation. Accordingly, disputed statistics are not presented as settled national facts, old indicators are dated, and causal language is avoided where the design supports only association or process inference.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative reinterpretation of the evidence

The strongest reported association in Obadara (2016) was between collective bargaining and conciliation, $r = .441$. This is statistically meaningful within the study, but $r^2 = .194$. Thus, approximately 19.4 per cent of variance was shared between the measured constructs, leaving roughly 80.6 per cent unaccounted for by that bivariate relationship. The unspoken implication is

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that conciliation is neither trivial nor a complete solution. Organisational authority, financial capacity, agreement design, union legitimacy and implementation are likely to explain much of the remaining variation. The Ahmadu Bello University evidence reveals a sharper contradiction. Perceived process effectiveness was high: 90 per cent associated collective bargaining with harmony and 84 per cent credited mediation or conciliation with cordial relations. Strict implementation was only 20 per cent. The gap between positive perceptions of conciliation and strict adherence is therefore 64 percentage points. Furthermore, 77 per cent reported partial adherence and 92 per cent linked delayed compliance to disputes. The numbers indicate that Nigerian conflict management is strongest before and during agreement formation and weakest after signature. Coverage data impose a more fundamental limit. With 92.2 per cent of employment classified as informal in 2023, the formal institutional model directly fits only a minority of employment relationships. The complement, 7.8 per cent, should not be treated as a precise estimate of formal union coverage, because some informal workers organise and some formal workers are not unionised. It does, however, demonstrate that a theory built only around registered workplace unions and identifiable payroll employers cannot explain conflict resolution for most Nigerian workers. The available union-density evidence is also inadequate. ILOSTAT displays 9.9 per cent for 2008 and no current collective-bargaining coverage value. Using this as if it described 2026 would be methodologically unacceptable. The correct inference is not that density is exactly low today, but that policymakers cannot credibly evaluate reach without a current series. Measurement failure becomes a governance failure because resources cannot be targeted and institutional performance cannot be benchmarked.

Table 3. Quantitative Indicators and Defensible Interpretation

Indicator	Reported value	Derived or comparative result	Defensible interpretation	What must not be claimed
Conciliation association (Obadara, 2016)	r = .441	r^2 = .194 or 19.4% shared variance	Moderate positive association within a South-West academic-union sample.	That conciliation causally resolves 44.1% of Nigerian disputes.
Perceived conciliation value (Otohinoyi et al., 2017)	84%	64-point gap from 20% strict adherence	Facilitation can improve relations while implementation remains weak.	That 84% of Nigerian disputes are durably resolved.

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Indicator	Reported value	Derived or comparative result	Defensible interpretation	What must not be claimed
Delayed compliance (Otohinoyi et al., 2017)	92%	12 points above partial/strict combined framing is not meaningful due to overlapping questions	Delay is perceived as a dominant recurrence mechanism.	A causal national effect without objective longitudinal data.
Informal employment (NBS, 2024)	92.2%	Formal-employment complement = 7.8%	Formal union/conciliation institutions face a profound reach constraint.	That 92.2% of workers have no collective representation.
Trade-union density (ILOSTAT)	9.9% in 2008	No valid current trend inference	The public evidence base is stale and bargaining coverage is missing.	That density is 9.9% in 2026.

4.2 Comparative process analysis of selected disputes

Six disputes show how the same institution can produce different outcomes. They were selected for analytical variation rather than numerical representativeness. The cases include wage determination, electricity pricing, health services, judicial autonomy, university employment and a national wage award. Their value lies in revealing mechanisms, especially the difference between immediate de-escalation and durable implementation.

Table 4. Selected Nigerian disputes and depth of resolution

Dispute	Union and conciliatory intervention	Immediate outcome	Durability assessment	Analytical verdict
2019 consequential adjustment after the ₦30,000 minimum wage	NLC/TUC bargaining with federal representatives produced agreed	Threatened escalation was avoided and a federal	Federal implementation advanced, but state-level	Substantial settlement; nationally uneven implementation.

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	adjustment percentages.	agreement was reached.	capacity and adoption varied.	
2020 electricity-tariff and petrol-price strike threat	Organised labour suspended a planned strike after federal negotiations, temporary tariff suspension and a technical committee.	Strike averted and dialogue institutionalised.	The temporary nature of the arrangement deferred rather than eliminated distributional conflict.	Strong de-escalation; partial substantive resolution.
2021 resident doctors' dispute	Federal intervention produced a memorandum of action intended to avert a strike; an addendum and later disputes exposed implementation frictions.	A negotiated document and temporary stabilisation.	Recurrence indicates that signature did not secure complete compliance.	Process success; weak durability.
2021 JUSUN/PASAN autonomy dispute	Ministerial and political conciliation produced memoranda and enabled reopening of courts and assemblies.	Work resumed and institutional commitments were recorded.	Implementation depended on governors and constitutional-fiscal actors beyond the immediate table.	Partial resolution constrained by fragmented authority.

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2022 ASUU university strike	Repeated dialogue failed; government referred the dispute to the National Industrial Court, and appellate pressure preceded suspension after about eight months.	The stoppage ended.	Coercive cessation did not demonstrate consensual settlement of the underlying funding and agreement disputes.	Industrial action terminated; conflict not fully resolved.
2023–2024 wage award and 2024 national minimum wage	Unions used ultimatums and a June 2024 general strike; tripartite and presidential bargaining produced agreement on ₦70,000 and subsequent legislation.	A national compromise replaced initial positions and created a three-year review cycle.	Legislation strengthened enforceability, but real value and subnational compliance require monitoring.	The strongest recent example of union pressure plus conciliation producing a formal policy outcome.

The 2020 tariff case demonstrates the comparative advantage of conciliation in crisis containment. Labour had operational leverage and government faced immediate economic risk. A short suspension and technical committee allowed both sides to retreat from public positions. Yet the remedy was mainly procedural: it created time and a forum. Where the disputed policy was driven by wider fiscal and electricity-sector reform, conciliation could not permanently remove the underlying price conflict. The 2022 ASUU case exposes the limit of dialogue without credible implementation. After prolonged negotiations failed, the dispute moved to the National Industrial Court. The eventual suspension of an approximately eight-month strike followed judicial pressure. A court can authoritatively order a return to work, but adjudication cannot by itself create budgetary trust or renegotiate a disputed funding model. Counting the return as a successful resolution would confuse compliance with consent. The 2024 national minimum-wage case provides the strongest positive counterexample. Unions aggregated worker anger over severe real-wage erosion, demonstrated disruptive capacity, suspended action to permit negotiations, reduced their demand,

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engaged presidential bargaining and obtained a ₦70,000 statutory wage with a shorter three-year review cycle. The process combined power and conciliation: without union leverage, bargaining may have remained symbolic; without negotiated compromise, leverage alone could have produced prolonged disruption. Yet even this outcome must be evaluated through state-level compliance, inflation-adjusted value and the proportion of workers legally and practically covered.

Across the cases, trade unions were consistently effective at agenda-setting and often effective at forcing access to decision-makers. Conciliation was most useful when there was a zone of possible agreement and authorised representatives could trade across issues. It was least effective where the dispute depended on actors absent from the table, where previous agreements lacked credibility, or where resources were unavailable. The decisive variable was not simply the skill of the conciliator but whether the agreement could be implemented by those who signed it.

4.3 Hypothesis assessment

Table 5. Analytical disposition of the hypotheses

Hypothesis	Evidence-based disposition	Reasoning
H01: no meaningful union–resolution relationship	Rejected conditionally	Unions repeatedly create voice, agenda access, bargaining power and settlements. Effectiveness is strongest for formal workers and visible disputes, not universal.
H02: conciliation adds no value beyond direct bargaining	Rejected conditionally	The largest published association is for conciliation, and cases show value in de-escalation and issue structuring. It adds little where there is no implementable bargaining range.
H03: implementation does not mediate durability	Rejected strongly	The 64-point perception–adherence gap, 92% delay response and recurrent disputes make implementation the central mediating mechanism.
H04: formality and coverage do not moderate reach	Rejected strongly	A labour market with 92.2% informal employment cannot be comprehensively served by workplace institutions designed around formal employers and registered bargaining units.

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H05: conciliator neutrality, authority and capacity do not matter	Rejected conceptually and through cases	Government's dual employer–conciliator role, absent fiscal principals and weak monitoring reduce credibility and implementation.

4.4 Discussion

The analysis yields nine principal findings. Trade unions emerge as necessary but not sufficient institutions of resolution: they solve a representation problem by aggregating grievances and correcting individual power asymmetry, and the evidence does not support the view that organisational conflict in Nigeria can be resolved effectively by management without organised worker voice, though union presence alone cannot guarantee an affordable, lawful or implementable settlement. Conciliation, in turn, is most effective as a bridge rather than a substitute for power or resources; it restores communication, narrows issues and protects face when direct bargaining becomes positional, but it cannot create fiscal capacity, compel absent decision-makers or compensate for chronic bad faith, so its success remains conditional on a real bargaining zone and authorised parties. A consistent pattern across the selected cases and workplace evidence is that short-run effectiveness is materially higher than durable effectiveness: strike suspension, signed memoranda and committee formation occur frequently, while complete implementation and non-recurrence are far less well evidenced, meaning Nigeria's system is better described as an industrial-conflict stabilisation regime than a consistently durable resolution regime. This points to implementation as the critical bottleneck, since the strongest quantitative contradiction in the evidence lies between the high perceived value of bargaining or conciliation and low strict adherence to agreements, with ambiguous wording, unfunded commitments, changing political principals, absent deadlines and weak monitoring transforming settlements into future grievances.

State duality further weakens neutrality and agreement credibility, because in public-sector disputes government may simultaneously act as employer, regulator, conciliator and legislator; while a ministry can facilitate useful compromise, this overlap produces perceived bias and allows responsibility to move among agencies, which suggests that conciliation should be institutionally insulated even when publicly funded. Relatedly, formal-sector success cannot be generalised to the Nigerian labour market as a whole, since the overwhelming prevalence of informal employment means most workers do not fit the standard model of a registered workplace union negotiating with a stable employer, and any national claim about union effectiveness that ignores this denominator is biased towards organised insiders. Compounding these structural limits, the evidence system itself is too weak to sustain confident national performance claims: recent public data on union density, bargaining coverage, conciliation referrals, settlement time, implementation and recurrence are missing or stale, an absence that favours anecdote, political self-reporting and survivorship bias, making measurement reform an integral part of dispute-resolution reform. The findings also show that judicialisation can stop action without resolving relationships — the ASUU

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case demonstrates that legal authority is essential where statutory obligations or public harm require urgent control, yet adjudication tends to answer legal questions and compel conduct without necessarily rebuilding trust, creating integrative options or securing future compliance. Finally, the most successful outcomes combine union leverage, credible facilitation and enforceable instruments: the 2024 minimum-wage settlement moved from collapsed talks and disruptive action to compromise and legislation, an outcome that neither industrial power nor conciliation alone explains, indicating that durable resolution requires their combination with enforceability and periodic review.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

How far, then, can organisational conflict in Nigeria be resolved by trade unions and conciliation? The answer is: far enough to make conflict visible, collective, negotiable and often temporarily governable; not far enough, on their own, to guarantee comprehensive or durable resolution. Trade unions are indispensable because they create representative voice and bargaining power. Conciliation is valuable because it converts confrontation into structured problem-solving and can help parties accept compromise. The evidence rejects the claim that either institution is irrelevant. The more difficult conclusion is that Nigerian practice frequently mistakes process completion for problem resolution. Meetings, memoranda and returns to work are intermediate outputs. Full resolution requires implementation, grievance closure and non-recurrence. Where agreements are not funded, authorised, monitored or enforced, each settlement becomes evidence supporting the next strike. The system then develops a low-trust equilibrium in which employers postpone action until disruption is threatened and unions escalate early because routine dialogue lacks credibility.

Trade unions and conciliation should therefore be understood as components of a resolution ecosystem. Their performance depends on coverage, internal democracy, employer recognition, mediator independence, accurate data, agreement quality, fiscal authority and enforcement. The greatest opportunity is not to replace collective bargaining with courts or to suppress strikes, but to strengthen the institutional chain from grievance to implementation.

5.1 Recommendations

The study offers twelve recommendations for strengthening Nigeria's dispute-resolution architecture. An independent Nigerian Conciliation and Mediation Service should be established, operationally insulated from the employer function of government; while publicly funded, it should have independent appointments, professional case managers, sector expertise and published performance standards, with the ministry retaining policy oversight while individual facilitators are perceived as neutral. This should be paired with a national digital trade-dispute register that publishes anonymised data on sector, cause, parties, referral date, intervention stage, settlement date, terms, implementation milestones, arbitration or court referral and recurrence, so that settlement rates without implementation rates are no longer accepted as performance evidence. Implementation architecture should also be made mandatory in every collective agreement, with

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agreements identifying responsible officers, funding sources, measurable milestones, payment or policy dates, verification documents, escalation procedures and consequences of default, so that vague phrases such as "government will look into" no longer qualify as settlement terms. This should be reinforced by post-settlement monitoring for at least twelve months, whereby conciliation does not close when a memorandum is signed but the conciliator convenes scheduled implementation reviews and publishes a closure certificate only once obligations are verified, with recurrence within the monitoring period recorded against the original case rather than presented as a new dispute.

Authorised fiscal decision-makers should be placed at the table, with public-sector negotiations including the agencies that control budgets, payroll and subnational implementation, and representatives unable to commit resources barred from signing financial terms without documented ratification, thereby reducing the recurrent gap between political promise and administrative execution. Union governance and representativeness should be strengthened, with unions publishing audited membership figures, bargaining mandates, voting procedures and agreement ratification results, and ensuring women, junior staff, outsourced workers and precarious employees are represented in bargaining teams, since stronger internal democracy would improve legitimacy and reduce leader–member agency problems. Collective voice should also be extended to informal and fragmented work, with policy supporting sectoral bargaining, worker associations, cooperatives and simplified dispute services for transport, domestic work, construction, platform work and micro-enterprises, since the formal workplace model should not be assumed to cover a labour market in which informality is dominant. Early-warning and continuous consultation systems should be introduced, with large organisations and public sectors maintaining joint consultative committees, digital grievance tracking and quarterly implementation dashboards, given that requiring unions to threaten a strike before senior officials engage is institutionally perverse and should cease.

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The Trade Disputes Act should be modernised, with reform updating obsolete sanctions, clarifying timelines, permitting secure digital filings, defining the relationship among mediation, conciliation and arbitration, strengthening enforcement of settlement memoranda and protecting the voluntary character of bargaining while preserving emergency safeguards. Evidence-based conciliation practice should be adopted, with conciliators trained in interest-based negotiation, labour economics, public finance, gender-sensitive practice, psychological safety and data analysis, and reality testing incorporating transparent costing and distributional analysis rather than political assertions of affordability. Success should be evaluated through a balanced scorecard whose core indicators include access and coverage, time to first intervention, settlement quality, verified implementation, stakeholder procedural-justice ratings and recurrence at twelve and twenty-four months, so that a case producing a rapid but unimplemented memorandum scores poorly despite short-term calm. Finally, a national research programme should be developed, with universities, the labour ministry, the National Bureau of Statistics, unions and employers producing current union-density and bargaining-coverage estimates, longitudinal case data and comparative studies of unionised and non-union workplaces, and future research including informal workers and failed cases, using multi-source outcome data and avoiding the treatment of self-reported perceptions as causal proof.

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