CONTEMPORARY DYNAMICS OF LABOUR UNIONISM AND STRIKE ACTIONS: A 21ST CENTURY APPROACH

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Abstract

Labour unionism remains a vital institution for the promotion of workers' rights, the development of industrial democracy and the design of socio-political reforms. Strikes have traditionally been a key strategy for unions in Nigeria, but their effectiveness is increasingly being shaped by digitalisation, precarious labour markets, restrictive legal structures, and media narratives. This study uses a systematic conceptual literature review to explore the changing role of unions and the strategic role of strikes in modern contexts. The analysis is based on Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) and Framing Theory (FT) to show how unions mobilise resources, frame narratives and adapt to fragmented labour markets. Findings show that unions are resilient, but their effectiveness is hampered by informality, risks of surveillance and delegitimising media frames. The study concludes that unions need to innovate through coalition-building, digital mobilisation and strategic framing to remain relevant. Recommendations include: integrating gig and informal workers into union structures; responsible use of online resources; advocating for legal changes and reframing strikes as public-interest struggles.

Keywords: ASUU, Digitalisation, Labour market, Labour union, Strike.

1. Introduction

Labour unionism is one of the most powerful institutional instruments for the protection of workers' rights, the improvement of their welfare and the development of industrial democracy in a wide range of national settings. In the past, unions have been collective organisations that are meant to counterbalance the imbalance of power between employers and employees, which has led to more just employment relations. Unions have played a crucial role in shaping sociopolitical changes that have occurred outside the workplace, including the development of social security, health care and education. According to recent research, unions are political organisations as well as economic players that have an impact on lobbying, electoral conduct, and strike dynamics. This makes their role more than just distributive bargaining (Kaplan & Naidu, 2025).

Strike action is a major part of union strategy, and involves a group of workers stopping work to force a government or employer to do something. Strikes have historically forced the acceptance of workers' demands and helped to reshape national labour laws, despite their disruptive nature. The Nigerian experience is a case in point of the value of strikes to unionism. The 1945 General Strike led by Michael Imoudu is a landmark in the country's labour history which paved the way for organised labour's future role in political and economic issues. The decades that followed were characterised by regular strikes by unions such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) to demand improved wages, working conditions and increased funding for public institutions (Onyiriuka, Chiedozie, Dim, Kamalu, & Ohakosim, 2026). Although the state's view of the strikes as threats to peace and order, they still serve to show the continued relevance of the strikes.

Nevertheless, the Industrial Relations (IR) environment is different in today's world, and so is the IR culture. One of the main forces for this change has been identified as digitalisation. Digital platforms have become the primary tools for unions to mobilise members, engage with stakeholders, and build unity these days. In Nigeria and others, apps like Facebook, X (previously Twitter), and WhatsApp are now essential for union organising (Ayodele, Gbajumo-Sheriff, & Elegbede, 2026). Digital campaigns can help unions to communicate with younger generations, cross geographical boundaries and build pressure on international platforms. Nevertheless, digitalisation also has its challenges, including algorithmic management, employers' ability to monitor employees, cybersecurity risks, and the challenge of ensuring uniformity across fragmented networks (Keming & Adingwupu, 2026). Therefore, digital tools are empowering and limiting, and they need to be governed and co-ordinated in a creative way.

The transformation of the employment market within the framework of neoliberal globalisation is another factor that affects modern unionism. The reduction in regular, full-time jobs and the increase in non-standard, precarious work have reduced the power and density of the unions. In Nigeria, more than 80% of workers are in precarious employment,

and this is a common feature of the country. The rise of the gig economy, where people are classified as independent contractors on sites such as Uber, Bolt and Upwork, exacerbates the issue, as these individuals are often incorrectly classified and denied union rights and labour laws. This erosion of the traditional sources of power of unions also poses important questions on the applicability of unions in fragmented labour markets (Onyiriuka et al., 2026).

In Nigeria, strikes are moulded by the rules that control them as well as the narratives that are conveyed about them; they are never simply about workers quitting their jobs. The freedom to organise and strike is guarantyd by international agreements such as ILO Conventions No. 87 and 98. However, in reality, striking is a strictly regulated process due to Nigerian legislation like the Trade Union Act and Labour Act. In important industries, workers are prohibited from going on solidarity strikes, must give notice, and must go through arbitration. Unions frequently have little actual power as a result of these regulations. According to academics, Nigeria's dispute settlement process is sluggish and significantly controlled by the executive, with rules pertaining to "vital services" functioning as nearly complete prohibitions (Akanle & Akanle, 2026).The right to strike is brittle without constitutional protection, and employees run the possibility of penalties like the "No Work, No Pay" regulation (Ojimah, 2025).

However, the legislation is not the whole story. The way strikes are depicted can be just as important in today's media-rich environment as the strikes themselves. This was evident in the way the 2022 ASUU strike was covered: television interviews presented the issue in a variety of ways, sometimes portraying it as a struggle for justice and other times as a hindrance to the advancement of the country. Public opinion was moulded by these conflicting narratives, which alternated between compassion for professors and annoyance over wasted school time (Abidoye, Akano, & Akano, 2026). Media framing actively influences whether strikes are viewed as justifiable or self-serving in addition to reporting events. These trends show that unionism is both resilient and vulnerable in the twenty-first century. Strikes are still essential to collective action, but their efficacy is becoming more and more dependent on outside variables including media narratives, digitalisation, unstable labour markets, and restrictive legal frameworks. These dynamics raise important questions: how can unions represent gig and informal workers and adapt to fragmented labour markets; how can they use digital tools while reducing cyber risks and surveillance; what tactics can be used to get around restrictive laws while maintaining the democratic nature of strike actions; and how can unions gain legitimacy in media environments that often undermine their struggles? By critically analysing the changing role of unions and the strategic role of strikes in modern contexts, this study aims to investigate these problems.

By critically analysing the changing role of unions and the strategic role of strikes in modern contexts, this study aims to investigate these problems. Its main goals include examining how digitalisation has changed communication and mobilisation tactics, analysing the effects of gig work and precarious labour markets on union density and strike patterns, analysing the influence of legal frameworks on the effectiveness and legitimacy of strikes, and analysing how public perceptions and media framing influence results. The study uses national and international studies to place Nigeria within a larger comparative framework and highlights both parallels and differences in labour union experiences.

2. Literature Review

The Evolving Role of Labour Unions in Contemporary Labour Markets

According to recent research, unions are now involved in both workplace negotiations and more general socio-political campaigning, particularly in the Global South (Aloko, 2023; Ifeanyi & Mondli, 2020). Unions have historically supported democratisation in South Africa and Nigeria, but their current roles increasingly involve advocating for public-goods outcomes (public health, education quality, and anti-corruption), forming alliances with civil society, and seeking sectoral solutions rather than just enterprise-level ones (Aloko, 2023; Rulashe, 2025). Unions continue to play a crucial role in mediating state-worker interactions in Nigeria's public sector, but they also have to deal with political wage setting, fiscal austerity, and sporadic government noncompliance with agreements (Umar, Bappi & Ibrahim, 2024; Uzougbo et al., 2023). From a conceptual standpoint, this repositioning represents a change from limited distributive bargaining to "movement-oriented" repertoires where member welfare and public interest arguments must be articulated for legitimacy (Ifeanyi & Mondli, 2020; Rulashe, 2025).

From an empirical perspective, there are still important stakes in union-management conflict and cooperation in the real economy (Elenwo and Okere, 2021). The institutional picture, however, is more complex, with unions engaging in cross-employer coordination and policy-level engagement due to the fragmentation and the lack of accountability associated with state reorganisation, outsourcing and complex value chains (Ofili, 2021; Ndema, 2022). In short, unions are still relevant, but they have to continuously adapt their claims and organisation to be relevant.

The Strategic Function of Strike Actions in Collective Bargaining

According to Cornell and Dukes (2025), strikes continue to be the most effective credible-threat tactic for obtaining concessions when talks come to a standstill. Comparative legal analysis (Cornell & Dukes, 2025) suggests that strike leverage is both democratic (meaning that it brings public discussion to bear on distributive decisions) and economic (meaning that it stops production/services). Strike action has increased across a variety of industries, according to recent statistics from the Labour Action Tracker (Iyer, O'Brien, Han, & Kallas, 2024), demonstrating the ongoing effectiveness of strikes as democratic and economic weapons. In Nigeria, evidence suggests that strikes are more prevalent in the public sector where the state is the employer and the regulator and wage-setting is politicised. This is a structure that facilitates disruptive collective action to address commitment problems in the implementation of an agreement (Omeje & Ogbu, 2019; Umar et al., 2024).

This depends on the circumstances and the results are variable. Research indicates that strikes have short-term productivity losses, reputational costs to businesses and agencies (Elenwo & Okere, 2021) and policy benefits such as financial pledges, regularisation of employment (Uzougbo et al., 2023; Ndema, 2022). Strikes are most effective when they are organized within a sequence of activities that includes the framing of the issue in the public eye, the building of a coalition, the disruption, and the settlement, as stated by Cornell and Dukes (2025) and Omeje and Ogbu (2019).

Digitalisation and Union Mobilisation

Digitalisation changes the recruitment processes, decision-making and actions of the Union. Ethnographic and organisational research describes ‘social media unionism' as unions enabling networked activity and striking a balance between autonomy and working alongside grassroots groups (Hau & Savage, 2023). Facebook and WhatsApp and similar apps lower mobilisation expenses, accelerate information transfer and are able to engage hard-to-organise groups, including migrants and platform couriers (Hau & Savage, 2023; Szabó, 2020). Recent statistics show that unions are increasingly turning to the internet to organise strikes. Online mobilisation has saved money and expanded reach as shown in global strike reports (Labour Action Tracker, 2024). In dynamic and unstable labour markets, digital affordances facilitate "connective action" to create aggregated signals, without the need for strict bureaucratic control, as the frames can be customised (Szabó, 2020).

However, deception, surveillance, and coordination problems between formal union hierarchies and horizontal internet groups are among the risks brought about by digital mobilisation (Hau & Savage, 2023). Conceptually, the challenge is governance: developing structures of interfaces (spokespersons, protocols and escalation procedures) that are flexible and ensure negotiating coherence. Successful examples show that unions still have the power to set mandates when delegating some of their online organising to affiliated networks (Hau & Savage, 2023; Szabó, 2020).

Changing Labour Markets, Gig Work, and Informal Employment

Evidence from both domestic and international sources shows that non-standard, outsourced, and platform-mediated work is continuously growing, particularly in emerging nations (Ofili, 2021; Ifeanyi & Mondli, 2020). Casualisation and contracting have divided workers into permanent and precarious tiers in Nigeria's public sector and services, weakening negotiating strength and making representational claims more difficult (Ofili, 2021; Ndema, 2022). From a conceptual standpoint, fragmentation challenges traditional workplace-based organising, driving unions towards sectoral/associational models and supporting legislative floors (social protection, minimum salaries) that cover non-standard workers (Ndema, 2022; Ifeanyi & Mondli, 2020). According to Jürgen et al. (2024), unions must integrate themselves into macroeconomic frameworks in order to adjust to fragmented labour markets. This highlights the necessity of sectoral and associational methods in situations such as Nigeria.

Dual imperatives are highlighted by gig-work research: (1) worker reclassification or hybrid statuses to activate labour rights; and (2) establishing new vehicles, co-ops, associations, or union-affiliated networks for scattered workers (Hau & Savage, 2023; Szabó, 2020). Nigerian and comparative examples show benefits when unions combine digital mobilisation with legal/policy efforts and incorporate gig workers into larger coalitions (Ofili, 2021; Uzougbo et al., 2023). However, in the absence of regulatory change and public procurement leverage, enforcement gaps and informality limit long-term progress (Ndema, 2022; Ifeanyi & Mondli, 2020).

Legal and Regulatory Frameworks Shaping Strike Prevalence

Institutional regulations have a significant impact on the timing and nature of strikes. ILO guidelines recognize that the government has the right to regulate processes and critical services, but they also recognize freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining as fundamental rights (ILO, 2019). Comparative legal study shows that many jurisdictions have made changes to damages/liability and to the requirements (ballots, notice, cooling-off) (Cornell & Dukes, 2025), which shifts risk to unions and reduces spontaneous action. Nigeria has similar layered barriers (conciliation/arbitration requirements and sectoral prohibitions). Such barriers are

exacerbated by the public sector's dominance, which results in more constrained strikes and, paradoxically, more frequent strikes when administrative non-compliance undermines trust (Umar et al., 2024; Uzougbo et al., 2023). Strikes often become political, as labour conflicts are linked to corruption and rent-seeking, which is very relevant in Nigeria's regulatory landscape, according to Kaplan & Naidu (2024).

Legal design affects how negotiations proceed, the likelihood of conflict and how it is resolved conceptually. Long-term strikes are less frequent in frameworks where there is strong associational rights, effective dispute resolution and enforcement of agreements; disruptive action is more frequent in frameworks where action is limited and compliance is not increased (ILO, 2019; Uzougbo et al., 2023).

Public Perception, Media Framing, and Strike Legitimacy

Legitimacy is a second area of contention, outside the negotiating table. A study on public-sector claims shows that the type of framing (narrow or broad) of a claim and the amplification of such framing by the media have an impact on the outcome of a dispute (Omeje & Ogbu, 2019; Szabó, 2020). In Nigeria, the prolonged strikes by health workers and university lecturers divide the opinion of the public, with one side expressing dismay at the disruption, while the other shows sympathy for the underfunded services (Omeje & Ogbu, 2019; Umar et al., 2024). Digital media makes it easier for unions to present facts (e.g., overcrowded wards, deteriorating infrastructure) that link worker demands to the welfare of citizens, and also enables rapid counter-narratives from the government and employers (Uzougbo et al., 2023; Hau & Savage, 2023).

Omeje and Ogbu (2019) and Uzougbo et al. (2023) conceptualize legitimacy as being co-produced through repertoire choice (minimal-harm techniques, escalation ladders), coalition breadth (students, patients, parents), transparency in demands, and obvious attempts to negotiate in good faith. Unions that keep their message inclusive and anchor strikes in frames that are considered public value increase settlement quality and durability.

Theoretical Review

Two theories, the Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) and the Framing Theory (FT) complement each other to form the theoretical framework for the study of labour unionism and strike activities in the twenty first century. When taken as a whole, these frameworks clarify how unions get and use resources to maintain strike actions as well as how they create convincing narratives to justify their actions in the eyes of the public and members.

Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) is a theory developed by John McCarthy and Mayer Zald in the 1970s (1977). It is a claim that social movements – trade unions included – are rational, organized, and resourceful projects in which money, membership, skills, and networks are mobilized, not some spontaneous explosions of discontent. (Jenkins, 1983) The basic principle of RMT is that the ability of a movement to obtain and transport resources efficiently is a key determinant of its success. This perspective highlights the importance of external collaborations, organizational capacity and leadership in sustaining collective activity, as argued by Edwards and McCarthy (2004). In the context of labour unionism, RMT highlights the role of digital platforms, strike funds, and legal expertise in organizing activities and creating unity for unions (Piazza, 2020). For example, unions have been able to lower mobilisation costs and increase outreach, particularly to precarious workers in the platform economy, thanks to the growing use of digital media (Schmalz, Ludwig & Webster, 2018). RMT's greatest asset is its emphasis on organisation and strategic planning, particularly when unions are faced with limited resources and powerful state and corporate actors. However, the theory's relative disregard for the cultural and emotional aspects of protest is a well-known flaw because it frequently views actors as unduly calculating and logical (Goodwin & Jasper, 2004).

William Gamson (1982) and later David Snow and Robert Benford (1988) were major proponents of Framing Theory (FT), which gained prominence in the 1980s and 1990s. According to FT, movements are successful when they successfully frame their complaints and objectives in a way that aligns with larger society values in addition to mobilising resources. Snow and Benford (1988) claim that frames are interpretative schemata that help movements to recognize problems (diagnostic framing), provide solutions (prognostic framing), and motivate action (motivational framing). Effective framing (Benford & Snow, 2000) can help unions build credibility, overcome negative stereotypes, and gain support from people who are not union members. Labour situations are particularly important with regard to framing strike actions, because unions must defend disruption of the public. By linking wage issues to issues such as social justice, service quality, or democratic accountability, unions can reframe strikes as serving the interests of the community as a whole, not just their own (Kelly, 2015). FT's ability to understand the importance of public discourse and meaning-making in group action is its strength. Frame resonance is not easily measured experimentally, however, due to its diffuse and context-dependent impact on public opinion and policy change (Croteau & Hicks, 2003).

RMT and FT together provide a comprehensive theory. FT discusses the rhetorical and symbolic strength of unions to gain legitimacy and support while RMT discusses the structural and organisational ability of unions to conduct strike actions. Their intersectional use, in the context of

digitalisation, of changing labour markets and of changing legal frameworks, gives a comprehensive knowledge of labour unionism in the twenty first century.

3. Methodology

In order to investigate the changing role of labour unions and strike activities in modern labour markets, this study used a systematic conceptual literature review (SCLR). The method can be used without primary data to synthesize and integrate theoretical and empirical information from different sources to create conceptual clarity (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016).

Secondary data were obtained from government publications, books, ILO reports and peer-reviewed journals. For comprehensive search, databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ProQuest and Google Scholar were used (Booth, Sutton & Papaioannou, 2016). Boolean keyword combinations used in the search included: "labour unionism," "strike activities," "digitalisation," "gig economy," "informal employment," "labour law," and "media framing. The review included only the publications published in English in the period 2010-2025. The inclusion criteria were met by works that focused on the philosophical or theoretical aspects of union efficacy, digitalisation, gig employment, legislative frameworks, and/or media framing. Grey literature, which was only descriptive or non-scholarly, was not included.

The results were analysed using the six-step thematic analysis method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) to identify themes across five objectives: digital mobilisation, gig work problems, regulatory shaping, media legitimacy, and adaptive strategies. This method made it more relevant and reliable to the study as it ensured that theory was included in the current discussion (Nowell et al., 2017).

4. Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Labour unions and strike action have undergone a dramatic shift in their role in today's job market. Digitalisation, the rise of gig and informal jobs, restrictive regulations and shifting public attitudes have changed the nature of how unions mobilise, negotiate and justify their legitimacy. Nevertheless, the literature is divided as to whether unions are in decline or are reviving themselves in new ways. These arguments are analysed critically by juxtaposing and comparing the empirical results and interpreting the data on the basis of Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) and Framing Theory (FT).

The Evolving Role of Labour Unions

Many academics insist that unions remain significant but often in a different guise. To overcome resource constraints and fragmentation, African unions are reviving themselves by creating partnerships with civil society organisations and across national borders (Anyigba, Wiredu, Homevoh, Peels and Mote 2026). This aligns with Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) that suggests that coalition building overcomes declining membership density. However, N'Cho and Nanfosso (2026) highlight that governmental interference, internal conflicts, and fragile labour markets also continue to harm unions in countries such as Nigeria, raising questions about their institutional strength. Anyigba et al (2026) highlight the importance of resilience in collaboration, and N'Cho and Nanfosso (2026) highlight fragility as a result of structural barriers. Both sides acknowledge the challenges facing unions, but have different conclusions.

Unions have placed themselves more and more as players in larger battles for social justice, climate justice, and inequality in developed countries. The shift reflects an increasing realization that, in the era of global challenges, the old model of collective bargaining in the workplace is becoming less relevant. The 2023-2025 discussions provide an excellent example of unions' reimagining of their role as agents of systemic change. Crawford and Whyte (2025) argue, for instance, that climate action must become a more political arena, and that unions must link ecological issues with workers' struggles against intensification and precarity. Their analysis is that unions are leading the way in climate justice as they are also negotiating for sustainable working conditions and protection from environmental damages as well as pay.

Similarly, the International Labour Organisation (2025) depicts unions as key to the progress of a new social contract post-2030. Inequality, digitalisation and climate shocks have highlighted the fragility of existing economic arrangements. Therefore, unions are considered as the architects of a new social agreement that will help to tackle gender imbalance, decent work and informality. To support this argument, Mwamadzingo (2025) notes that unions are increasingly becoming "actors for change," playing a role in policy discussions, inclusive governance, and integrating social justice into institutional reforms.

The Strategic Function of Strike Actions

While it is uncertain whether strikes have a contemporary function, they are still a traditional means of a trade union's work. Cornell and Dukes (2025) state that strikes are not merely economic weapons but are practices of democracy which continue collective bargaining. As FT has consistently noted, strikes are not disruptive; they are civil, and that is evident in the way that they are discussed in European contexts, even in the face of restrictive legislation.

However, Uzoh (2021) questions the strikes at the Nigerian universities, particularly ASUU, arguing

that they have a negative impact on the quality of education and public sympathy. In this instance strikes lose credibility as they are not framed to serve the interests of the society as a whole. The difference brings to the fore a crucial insight, that of the importance of not just the disruption of strikes, but how they are perceived and presented. Uzoh (2021) illustrates the delegitimising power of strikes in Nigeria, and Cornell and Dukes (2025) illustrate the strengthening power of strikes for democracy in Europe.

Theoretically, RMT views strikes as expensive mobilisation tactics that call for substantial organisational resources. In circumstances where unions are not financially or densely organised, long-term strikes are not viable. By demonstrating that strikes succeed or fail based on narrative resonance, FT adds another level. When taken as a whole, these viewpoints imply that strikes are not always planned and that their results depend on the availability of resources as well as how well they are framed.

Digitalisation and Union Mobilisation

Digital technologies are often mentioned as revolutionary tools for union mobilisation. According to Hau and Savage (2023), social media platforms facilitate "social media unionism," which enables unions to swiftly mobilise workers and avoid conventional hierarchies. They give examples of how workers' voices have been amplified worldwide through hashtags and viral campaigns, suggesting a democratisation of workers' communication.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2022) is more conservative, however, noting that digital tools create a risk of unequal access, misinformation and spying for unions. Internet mobilisation has the potential of excluding informal and rural workers in Nigeria, where there are still significant digital divides (Umar, Bappi, & Ibrahim, 2024). Thus, digitisation introduces new vulnerabilities in underdeveloped economies, and new opportunities in resource-rich environments.

ILO (2022) warns of the risks of digitalisation, however, Hau and Savage (2023) say that digitalisation empowers. Both sides have a point, but the criticism is that digitalisation does not immediately level the playing field. Instead, it makes already-existing disparities worse. RMT says digital platforms can make mobilisation more affordable, but require extra organisational skills. The same goes for FT here: unions need to be adept at shaping internet discourse, if they are to challenge employer discourses and governmental propaganda.

Changing Labour Markets: Gig and Informal Employment

Gig work and informality is perhaps the biggest challenge to the effectiveness of unions. Kalleberg and Vallas (2021) state that insecure employment weakens permanent jobs and breaks up traditional union structures. They see informality as a systemic deterioration of unionism. Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020) show, on the contrary, how platform workers in Europe have developed new ways of cooperation, including legal cooperatives and grassroots unions. This suggests that informalism not only diminishes the density of traditional unions, but also helps to foster new forms of organisation. Similarly, Woodcock (2021) is critical of the idea of informality as disempowerment, as he records gig worker strikes organised via digital platforms.

However, that hope is not shared by Nigerian data. Umar, Bappi and Ibrahim (2024) argue that informality reinforces fragmentation and makes it hard for unions to organise in non-official work sectors. This highlights a contextual distinction: Social movements and strong legal protections in Europe enable innovation, Nigeria's structural issues do not allow experimentation. In the case of Nigeria this flexibility is restricted as a result of weak institutional systems, even though the RMT theory posits that innovation is a process of recombination of resources. As unions in Africa are exploring the possibilities of transnational cooperation, Anyigba et al. (2026) show that it is essential that the governance structures are supportive and that institutional robustness exists. Hence, while gig work and informality are reshaping unionism globally, the impact is not uniform, and there is innovation in some contexts, and fragmentation in others.

Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

Legal situations have a significant impact on the tactics and frequency of strikes used by the unions. ILO (2019) points out that although law in the US and Europe has become more restrictive about what counts as acceptable strike behaviour, unions have responded by emphasizing the constitutional rights of workers instead of labour disputes. Similarly, Cornell and Dukes (2025) argue that union identity is reinforced through legislative restrictions, which result in strikes being symbolic.

Adebayo (2026) noted that unions in Nigeria are often discredited by restrictive laws and longstanding policies. Recent analysis shows the state has persistently been interfering in union leadership, occupying union property and employing security forces against union leaders to try to curb union activity and strikes. The difference, on the other hand, emphasizes that law is not a limitation but a field of meaning that is contested. FT highlights that unions can make laws legitimate, but RMT sees restrictive laws as increasing the costs of mobilisation. Nevertheless, the facts from Nigeria reveal that propaganda tactics are not enough to regain credibility when official propaganda takes over.

Media Framing and Public Perception

How strikes are reported is increasingly shaping the outcome of strikes. In Hungary, strikes by health

workers were popular when they were called for to protect patients' welfare instead of wages, as Szabó (2020) found. In a similar vein, Hau and Savage (2023) emphasise how digital campaigns enable unions to create frameworks of justice and fairness that appeal to larger audiences.

However, findings from Nigeria (Omeje & Ogbu, 2019) show that the media often portrays strikes as disruptive, particularly in the education sector, where the strikes of ASUU are considered as self-serving. The fact that this discrepancy is present illustrates the power of framing: In some cases, the conflict of narratives undermines the legitimacy of the union, while in others, it can be effective in making the union's struggle resonate with the public interest.

In this, FT has a convincing explanation: narrative resonance is essential for legitimacy. The Nigerian data also indicates structural constraints, however, that unions may not be able to dominate public discourse due to the control of the media and state power.

Synthesis and Critique

There are two important theoretical findings that can be found throughout the literature. First, RMT identifies the adaptive strategies that unions have adopted, such as coalition building, digital mobilisation and experimenting with new organisational forms. The Nigerian data, however, shows that the optimism of RMT is not necessarily applicable in other contexts, particularly in terms of structural constraints such as informality and state repression and resource scarcity. Second, FT highlights the importance of the framing of the narratives in sustaining the legitimacy of strikes. However, not all narratives have an equal chance of being framed; in constrained political settings, unions often lose narrative battles.

It is worth noting that unions in Europe and in some areas of the Global North seem to be more resilient, as they have implemented frameworks and resources to remain relevant. Nevertheless, deeper structural impediments make changes more difficult for African unions, especially in Nigeria. This difference implies that theories with explanatory power should be applied in context. The fate of unions is not necessarily dictated by global trends, but rather by a combination of resources, stories and institutional factors.

Labour union issues are not only academic issues about institutions and laws but also have an effect on the lives of millions of Nigerian workers. We can observe the impact of digitalisation, changing job markets, legal regulations and media on people's aspirations and sense of community.

Digitalisation and Mobilisation

For many Nigerian workers, union rooms have been replaced with Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups. Rather than gathering in dingy offices or waiting for printed fliers to distribute, workers increasingly rely on their mobile phones to organise protests, enlist support and disseminate updates in real time. This 'social media unionism' (Hau & Savage, 2023) creates an impression of solidarity as if it were happening in real time, and it also decreases the expense of mobilisation. However, workers are exposed through the very tools that empower them. Misinformation spreads swiftly, employers can keep an eye on online activities, and those without dependable internet, typically the poorest people, are left behind (Umar, Bappi, & Ibrahim, 2024). So, digitalisation is a blessing and a curse, as it establishes links but also divides.

Changing Labour Markets

Informality prevails in the Nigerian labour market. According to Onyiriuka et al. (2026), over 80% of workers make their living outside of official frameworks. These include street sellers and ride-hailing drivers, as well as craftspeople whose livelihoods are precarious and who are not often seen in the negotiating room. To defend their rights, gig workers in Europe have tried out new ways to associate (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). Nevertheless, Nigerian unions struggle to accommodate these workers. Many precarious workers are still under-represented due to weak institutions and inflexible customs (Anyigba et al., 2026). The growing gap between the unions and the masses of workers means that millions of workers are denied collective protection.

Legal and Regulatory Constraints

The law often stands in the way of the unions' mobilisation efforts. In Nigeria, strikes are absolutely banned, with labour laws stipulating that they must be preceded by lengthy conciliation and arbitration processes (Akanle & Akanle, 2026). The "No Work, No Pay" rule makes it harder for workers to balance their demands and their pay, increasing their fear (Ojimah, 2025). These barriers make strikes less effective and drain a movement's energy, especially one that faces numerous challenges. The law appears to be a prison rather than a protection to the workers.

Media Framing and Public Perception

Public opinion can make or break a strike and in Nigeria, the media plays a key role. The coverage of the 2022 ASUU strike ranged from anger at the closed campuses to sympathy for the teachers (Abidoye, Akano, & Akano, 2026). Strikes are legitimate when they are sold as serving the public good, for example, better hospitals or schools. Nevertheless, the support is removed when they are offered as self-serving (Uzoh, 2021). This means that workers are not only protesting in court or on the streets but also in the media. Winning over

concessions is another important part of winning hearts and minds.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In Nigeria as well as throughout the world, labour unions are undergoing a significant transition. Although strikes remain at the core of collective bargaining, factors outside of the unions themselves, such as new technology, unstable employment markets, restrictive legislation, and how the media portrays their actions, have a growing impact on how strikes unfold. Theories such as Resource Mobilisation and Framing suggest that the power of a union is not only based on their resources but also on how effectively they present their issues to the public.

Fragile institutions, government meddling, and informality in the workplace are just a few of the serious issues that unions must deal with. They are also incredibly strong, forming alliances and mobilising support via the internet. This means that unions are still relevant, but they have to evolve. They have to adapt and realign their strategies on a regular basis to keep their relevance and negotiating power alive in the present-day divided labour markets. Today's trade unions are at a turning point, confronting both previously unheard-of opportunities and challenges. If they are to remain effective and relevant, they need to rethink their approach in ways that resonate with the lived experience of workers, but hold the scholarly rigor of labour study.

First, in a time when online mobilisation is becoming more common, unions need to embrace digital tools as lifelines of solidarity as well as communication tools. Encrypted messaging, virtual town halls and social media campaigns can energize members and engage those who may not be engaged. Nevertheless, there are dangers to this digital transition. When it comes to safeguarding sensitive information against external risks, cybersecurity is a top priority. Additionally, unions need to make sure that urban, tech-savvy workers are not the only ones who benefit from digital mobilisation. Rural and informal workers should be targeted as specific strategies for outreach, as they are often the ones who are the most disadvantaged and least connected to the digital world, and as a way of showing that solidarity is universal (ILO, 2022; Hau & Savage, 2023).

Secondly, informal economies and gig platforms have transformed the nature of work, often leaving millions of people without reliable protections. In turn, unions will need to develop hybrid forms of organisation, including sectoral unions, cooperatives and other flexible unions that are able to represent workers who are employed in unstable and fractured ways. These models should also promote statutory measures such as social insurance, minimum wages, and bargaining rights, as well as provide a collective voice. Unions make themselves more morally and politically legitimate by including gig and informal workers, ensuring that no worker is left outside the circle of solidarity (Woodcock, 2021; Anyigba et al., 2026).

Thirdly, the robustness of labour rights is related to the protection afforded by law. Thus, unions should advocate for a change that will guarantee the right to strike is not manipulated by politics and is incorporated into constitutional structures. Although a redefinition of "vital services" would help governments avoid undue restrictions on the right to strike, the more the procedures for resolving disputes are streamlined, the less time and frustration will be spent that could weaken workers' resolve. These changes are not just theoretical legal exercise, but are necessary protections for dignity and democratic engagement of workers (Akanle & Akanle, 2026).

Fourth, public opinion can help or hinder a strike. To counter narratives that suggest strikes are self-serving or disruptive, unions should speak of them as fights over public goods, such as social justice, health care and education. By emphasizing the broader social benefits of unions' demands, unions can help foster community empathy and build credibility. Labour movements' moral authority is enhanced by redefining strikes as a community fight for justice and equity (Cornell & Dukes, 2025; Abidoye et al., 2026).

Finally, unions can't function on their own. Fragmentation and resource constraints can be addressed through alliances with global labour networks, student organisations and civil society organisations. These partnerships enhance campaigns, build broader solidarity and put labour struggles in the context of broader democratic and human rights movements. By doing this, unions reiterate that their goal is about creating a more equitable society rather than just salaries and working conditions (Anyigba et al., 2026).

Finally, creativity and inclusiveness are necessary to bring about a revival of the trade unions. Unions may continue to be effective change agents by adopting digital tools, incorporating precarious workers, pushing for legislative changes, reframing their issues in the media, and forming large coalitions. A sincere call to action, a reminder that the fight for social justice and dignity at work go hand in hand.

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