



EDUCATION



■ President and CEO Commonwealth of Learning, Professor Aisha Kanwar (middle) and Vice Chancellor, National Open University of Nigeria, Professor Abdalla Uba Adamu pay a courtesy visit to Permanent Secretary Federal Ministry of Education Architect Sonny Echono (left) in Abuja recently

Photo: FME

Abia teachers in limbo over 10 months' salary delay

By Linus Effiong, Umuahia

The overall quality of education improves greatly with motivation and incentives to teachers. Thus as salary incentive encourages the teachers, that also associates with high level of student performance.

So both private and public schools are expected to make effort to deal with weak teacher incentives including reward for regular attendance, adjusting salaries based on students exam scores and increased community supervision,

However, in Abia State, the morale of public schools' teachers is said to be on the decline due to low and delayed salary payment.

Consequently, teachers under the umbrella of Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT), Abia State chapter, have gone on strike twice in 10 months over delayed salaries among others. They were somewhat persuaded to return to classrooms after signing of agreements with state authorities. But despite the agreements agreed upon, the demands of the teachers are yet to be met.

Hundreds of public school teachers in the state haven't received salaries since October, 2018 and government is said to be responsible for the delayed salaries in the past 10 months. Most teachers said they have been living a dog's life as a result of the delay and that has also affected their performance in the class.

At the time of this report, a seven-day strike notice has been issued to the state government by the teachers; for the third time. The union has described the impending strike as 'the mother of all industrial actions' in the

state, should the authorities fail to respond to its demands.

It would be recalled that the previous strike by public school teachers which started in April 2019, was suspended on June 7, after an agreement with the government that all the outstanding salaries would be paid; but the teachers are yet to be paid the salaries.

During the last industrial action, it was learnt that primary school teachers in the state demanded the payment of their salaries in TSS scale, while their secondary school counterparts insisted for their 10 months' salary arrears.

The chairman, Nigeria Labour Congress, Abia State, Comrade Uchenna Obigwe, had on the June 7 confirmed the suspension of the strike.

According to him, the strike was suspended after a meeting between organized labour and the state government.

He said Governor Okezie Ikpeazu was present at the meeting and that both parties reached a consensus and decided to suspend the strike.

He said, "After deliberating on many issues, the governor accepted that the government had reneged on some agreements reached in the past.

"But the NUT agreed to suspend the strike awaiting the reaction of the governor within two weeks during which a report of another committee set up to look into primary school teachers TSS claim, fraudulent taxation of the teachers and other issues, would have been tackled by the governor.

"The governor appealed that there was no need for the strike since he had been addressing the issues raised by the teachers."

Comrade Obigwe added that Governor Ikpeazu promised to pay the salary arrears of secondary school teachers using a modality of 'one current month and one month previous arrears' until the debt was completely paid.

But three months after, despite the agreement reached between the organised labour and Governor Ikpeazu, the state government appeared to have forgotten about her pact with the teachers, especially secondary school teachers, who are yet to receive any salaries in the past 10 months, he said.

Findings reveal that, most teachers in secondary schools in the state were mandated to report to work promptly or face disciplinary action despite 10 months' salary delay.

It was gathered that nearly all teachers involved in the salary backlog have obtained loans and embraced full-scale commercial agriculture while some ventured into transport business using tricycle taxis to make ends meet.

Our correspondent visited Ibeku High School, Umuahia in the city centre and spoke with some teachers.

An economics teacher who identified himself as Ahamefue Johnson said he held his wife in high regard for taking over his responsibility as the breadwinner of his family in the trying times.

"My wife who works with a Federal Medical Centre has been feeding the family for the last 10 months, paying my children's school fees, though I have to withdraw my kids to a less expensive school.

"The situation has not been this bad in our state, I don't know why the state government has refused to pay us our salaries," he



■ Governor Okezie Ikpeazu said.

Mrs Nkechi Nwagborogu of the same school also expressed concern over the plight of her colleagues saying her husband is a secondary school teacher too, but in different location.

She said life has become difficult for her family because she and her husband must go to work daily, even without salaries for fear of disciplinary action.

She said, "inspectors are everywhere, we are suffering as teachers and still forced to come to work." She said her family has gone into farming to get some relief.

"With the help of my brother, we have been able to get a loan from one of the micro finance banks to purchase a tricycle for my husband and every week, he will remit N10, 000 to the bank. He buys tickets, fuel and service the tricycle and there is little left for the family of four kids to manage," she noted.

Miss Nnena Benjamin said her confidence was much higher before and that her morale is on the decline by the day due to non-payment of salaries.

She said, "Can you imagine, as

a young lady, I still depend on my parents for food and my upkeep after they have invested much on my education. I appeal to the governor to pay our salaries without further delay."

One of the vice principals, who will not want to be named, said he could not make comments on the matter because the authorities recently demoted some heads of schools to classroom teachers for allegedly giving press interviews.

Rather, he conducted this reporter round his farm where he worked after school hours to make ends meet.

"I just have few years to retire and take up farming full time," he said.

Mr Ejike Chinonso who works with the Secondary Education Board, said officials of the board suffered the same fate as the teachers.

Records show that students in Abia State have consistently performed well in West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in the past three years.

Reacting to the salary delay saga, the chief press secretary to the governor, Barrister Onyebuchi Ememanka, said the government was working hard to abridge the salary gaps.

He said, "plans are on to engage every stakeholder," adding that it is an unfortunate situation. "Any reasonable government will take the welfare of teachers seriously and the governor is not happy about the situation.

"Government will engage the secondary school teachers meaningfully and we will utilize the seven-day ultimatum to ensure that our beautiful relationship with the organised labour is not destroyed," he said.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

When there is no middle class, and the poor greatly exceed in number, troubles arise, and the state soon comes to an end- Aristotle