

STRIKING WHERE IT HURTS: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF GRADUATE TEACHERS STRIKES AND LABOUR RELATIONS IN GHANA'S PUBLIC EDUCATION SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the 2005 and 2006 strike actions of the National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT). It seeks to investigate the root causes of teacher grievances during the New Patriotic Party (NPP) government's administration; government responses to these agitations; and, finally, to highlight significant contours of the political economy of labour relations in Ghana's public education sector. It is demonstrated that, among other things, it was the lackadaisical attitude of government, the Education Ministry and the Ghana Education Service in resolving the teachers' grievances that resulted in the 2005 and 2006 strikes. I also argue that the posturing of the government and its institutions in resolving the teacher's grievances, once the strike had started, entrenched the attitudes of the striking teachers and prolonged the strike action. Government's failure to stifle teacher's discontent and find an amicable settlement resulted in legal pressure and threats of dismissal aimed at compelling the striking teachers to end their action. Government also attempted to drive a wedge between NAGRAT and the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT) by hiding behind the technicality of the use of the collective bargaining certificate in the education sector, and presented the strike action as a rift between GNAT and NAGRAT, rather than between NAGRAT and the government. Furthermore, government sought, subtly, to pitch the public (at least its sympathisers) against the striking

UNISA | 
university
of south africa



African Review of Economics and Finance
Volume 7 | Number 2 | 2015
pp. 60–83

Print ISSN 2042-1478 | Online ISSN 2410-4906
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African Finance and Economics Consult

teachers by constructing the strike action as politically inspired to discredit its administration. Primary sources used for the article were drawn from personal interviews, newspaper reports, observations, and official union documents, which include letters, memoranda and press releases.

Keywords: Ghana, Ghana Education Service, Ghana National Association of Teachers, National Association of Graduate Teachers, strikes, teachers' unions

INTRODUCTION

Globally, teachers' organisations, in recent times, appear to be at the forefront in a battle not only for the soul of education, but also for the interest of their members. Compton and Weiner (2008, p. 3) opine that in a global neoliberal economy, which emphasises cost at the expense of social justice, teachers are 'working for pittance, sometimes unpaid', and 'too often poorly paid'. This phenomenon, which Compton and Weiner acutely observe, is very pronounced in Africa. During periods of economic and political crisis in Africa in the closing decades of the 20th century and at the beginning of the present century, teachers in some countries faced regular delays in the payment of their meagre salaries and, in some cases, experienced drastic cuts in their already lean salaries (see Chagonda, 2012; Konings, 2005; Lambert, 2005). For this reason, amongst others, the status and prestige that teachers in Africa enjoyed in the past has diminished considerably. In response to the plummeting conditions of their members, teachers unions in Africa have come to be more assertive and confrontational, leaning more towards 'bread and butter' unionism, and blaming governments and education authorities for their predicament (Konings, 2005). I must, however, add that there is an inherent complexity in how teachers' unions relate to the state. Whereas the forces of neoliberalism may push them to act militantly, they may sometimes be cowed because they are enmeshed in a system of inter-relationships that enjoin them to be cautious not to offset the existing social order unnecessarily. They are, after all, simultaneously involved as partners (even if antagonistic) in the running of education – an endeavour which enjoins them to act more responsibly – for they are crucial in shaping the minds of the next generation. As we shall see in this study, teacher unions resort to strike action only as a last resort after having exhausted other alternatives in getting their grievances resolved.

Even though there seems to be growing scholarly interest in teacher union activism in Africa generally, teachers unions in Ghana have not received much scholarly attention. The one exception is Amoako (2014b and c), whose study of teacher unionism connects teacher union activism to broader socio-economic and political developments in colonial and early post-independent Ghana, as well as during the quasi-dictatorial rule of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC). Earlier works focused on the formation, development as well as the

successes, failures and internal rifts amongst early teacher associations in Ghana (see Asiedu-Akrofi, 1971; Osae, 1981). Elsewhere in Africa, however, a significant amount of work has focused on understanding and explaining militant proclivities amongst teachers' unions. Even so, many of these works are biased towards South Africa, where teacher unions (like other trade union movements) have been very active not only in associational life, but also in national politics. Govender (1996), focusing on instances of teacher militancy in South Africa from 1990 to 1993 and adopting a Marxian-class analysis, has demonstrated how teacher militancy in South Africa in the early 1990s was a response to the historical conjuncture in which teachers found themselves, 1) as a result of their contradictory class location in the capitalist apartheid economy, and 2) as members of a politically disenfranchised majority. Lekgoathi (2007) observes that it was the infusion of young politicised and proletarianised teachers into the teaching profession, and the availability of political opportunity for militant action, that engendered teacher militancy during the latter years of apartheid rule in South Africa.

Chisholm (1999), focusing on the complexity of the democratic transition in South Africa, examined how bureaucratic control over teachers' work during the dying days of apartheid engendered teacher resistance and the development of alternate professional forms and sources of authority and control, and how these have interacted with new managerial and state initiatives post-transition. Her conclusion was that far from teachers' resistance being muted after the transition, it assumed new forms in relation to new circumstances. Amoako (2014a), on the other hand, argues that the contested nature of the political transition, the apartheid government's decision to restructure education through cost-cutting policies as well as its heel-dragging over according recognition to the black-dominated teachers' union (the South African Democratic Teachers' Union) underscored the increased teacher militancy in South Africa during the last three years prior to the transition to a democratic dispensation. It is implicit in these works that the oppressive nature of the apartheid system played a large role in radicalising teachers' unions in South Africa. Shifting the focus to post-apartheid South Africa, Amoako (2012) has shown that teacher union activism is shaped and conditioned by the effects of the government's neoliberal economic policies on teachers' conditions of work, as well as their living conditions.

In other contexts, teacher union activism during periods of political reform has been examined. Konings (2005) has shown how the impact of economic decline, punctuated by structural adjustment policies as well as political repression, influenced teacher militancy in Cameroon. He demonstrates how the government's use of repression, clientelistic and divisive strategies, as well as an inherent weakness within trade unions in Cameroon denied teachers any significant gains in their working and living conditions. In Côte d'Ivoire Woods (1996) has shown how the fragility of the Ivorian economy in the 1990s, along with the struggle against the autocratic Félix

Houphouët-Boigny, placed Ivorian teacher organisations at the helm of contestation movements that contributed to ending one-party rule in the country.

The present study contributes to the existing literature at two levels: First, it extends the very scant literature on teacher unionism in Ghana; and second, following the lead of Amoako (2012), it shifts the analysis of teacher union activism in Africa from autocratic and less liberal regimes to that of a liberal democratic dispensation, paying keen attention to the labour-relations dynamic of the teacher union–state relationship. This will add to our understanding of the factors influencing teacher militancy in African countries since the democratic transitions of the 1990s. By focusing on the 2005 and 2006 strike action, this article aims to highlight some dynamics of the political economy of labour relations in the public education sector in Ghana. It will be argued that, among other things, it was the government and the educational authorities' laxity in resolving the teachers' demands for an upward adjustment in salaries and related working conditions that eventually culminated in the graduate teachers' strikes. While these strikes had been called, the government and education authorities' benign authoritarian posturing and procedural manoeuvring in mediating the teachers' grievances only exacerbated the crisis. Government's attitude toward the striking teachers appeared to have been dictated by the macro-economic constraints it faced during that period. The cost of the strike action to public education was huge: by conservative estimates, over 50 working days were lost during the strikes in 2005 and 2006. Education was, however, not the only sector that suffered: the strike also had implications for the informal economy. Food vendors and their helpers who sold food to students in public secondary schools stayed out of work for as long as the strike action lasted. One can only speculate about the losses these vendors incurred.

The study draws on multiple primary sources, including in-depth interviews with union officials and members.¹ In all, ten informants were interviewed. The interviews, which were semi-structured, were conducted between December 2010 and February 2011. Information was also sourced from official union documents, press releases and observations. These sources were supplemented with newspaper reports. While acknowledging the problems associated with the use of newspaper reports (see Bob-Milliar & Obeng-Odoom, 2011), they are nonetheless useful sources of data. The Ghanaian media are credited with impartial reportage and are noted to be free from government manipulation. In 2009, this recognition won media houses in Ghana the highest ranking in terms of press freedom in Africa (see Bob-Milliar & Obeng-Odoom, 2011). Including media reports helped me to capture the multiple dimensions of the strike action, as media houses play a key role in reporting and moulding perceptions about such strikes (Bob-Milliar & Obeng-Odoom, 2011), which otherwise could not be gleaned easily from interviews and official

1 I draw extensively on data that was originally used for my Master's dissertation 'Teachers' unions and politics in Ghana and South Africa, 1990–2010' (2012).

documentation. In doing so, however, I was careful not to include reports from media which are noted to be pro-government or are overly critical of government. Rather, I depended to a large extent on reportage from newspapers such as *Daily Graphic* – noted to normally quote from ‘official sources’ (see Amoakohene cited in Bob-Milliar & Obeng-Odoom, 2011, p. 266) and to a lesser extent, on *GhanaWeb*, *Ghana News Agency* and *Modern Ghana News*.

TEACHER UNIONISM AND LABOUR RELATIONS IN GHANA’S EDUCATION SECTOR

Almost all teachers in public schools in Ghana are unionised. Two major teacher unions, the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT) and the National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT), represent teachers at the pre-tertiary level. GNAT, the larger of the two, has a paid-up membership of 178 000, with NAGRAT trailing it with about 20 000 paid-up members. The development of teacher associations in Ghana dates back to 1926, when the state initiated the formation of the Government School Teachers’ Association (GSTA, later National Union of Teachers’ [NUT]) (see Amoako, 2014b). Its goals were modest and were limited to ensuring effective schoolwork and improving the professional competence of its members. The effects of the 1930 world-wide economic depression spurred the formation of another union, the Assisted School Teachers Union (ASTU, renamed Gold Coast Union of Teachers in 1937) to defend mission-school teachers whose interests were most affected by a 25 per cent cut in the education budget (see Asiedu-Akrofi, 1971). By 1950, a number of fragmented associations (based on church affiliation, levels of education, subjects and levels of qualification) were formed. However, in 1958, state legislation compelled all these unions to combine with other education workers to form the Union of Teachers and Education Institute Workers (UTEIW) as an affiliate of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) (see Amoako, 2014b). The TUC has, since the promulgation of the *Industrial Relations Act*, 1958, functioned as the trade union centre and umbrella organisation for all national trade unions.² In 1962, teachers opted out of the TUC and reorganised to form GNAT, the single largest public sector union outside the TUC.

NAGRAT is a recent creation. It emerged as a pressure group of graduate teachers within GNAT who felt dissatisfied with how GNAT was representing the interests of graduate teachers. They contended that it was unfair for them to enter the teaching service on the same salary scale as teachers whose qualifications did not match theirs. Furthermore, GNAT was unable to fight effectively for improved

2 The progenitor of the TUC was inaugurated in the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1948. Currently, the TUC is the umbrella union for the 17 national unions and four labour associations.

pay levels and other conditions of service, when compared with those of graduates working in other sectors. Consequently, in 1998 they announced their breakaway from GNAT, and have since remained a union mainly for graduate teachers in the Ghana Education Service (GES) (Amoako, 2012a).

It appears there was no formal bargaining and negotiating mechanism for organised teachers in Ghana before 1950. A ‘terms and service committee’ was established by the Education Department in the early 1950s, in line with the recommendation of the Erzuah committee,³ to determine teachers’ salaries and conditions of service (Fynn, 1959). After independence, GNAT came under the umbrella of the TUC and hence benefited from the latter’s bargaining powers until 1962, when GNAT opted out and registered under the *Trustees’ Incorporation Act*, 1962 (Nyoagbe, 1996). After this period, teachers’ terms and conditions of service were negotiated through a ‘teachers’ terms and service’ committee, established under the *Education Act*, 1961, to advise the Minister of Education on the salaries and terms of conditions of teachers (Nimako, 1974, p. 9). The committee’s role, however, remained advisory since it had no executive powers. In 1972, with the formation of the National Tripartite Committee (NTC) by the National Redemption Council (NRC) government,⁴ GNAT, together with the TUC and other labour organisations, was represented in tripartite negotiations to fix minimum wages (International Labour Organisation, 2012). Similarly, in the late 1980s, GNAT was represented in the consultative labour forum set up by the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), which determined and fixed minimum wages (Kraus, 2007).

In 1995, when the government passed the *Public Service Negotiating Act* (PNDC law 306), GNAT, like other public sector unions, acquired the right to negotiate directly with the employer (in this case the government), represented by the GES. This right was extended further with the promulgation of the *Labour Act*, 651 of 2003, which allowed GNAT to register as a trade union and wield a collective bargaining certificate,⁵ since it is the largest teachers’ union in the education sector. However, for the purpose of negotiating terms and conditions, GNAT is mandated

3 The Erzuah Committee was set up in 1951 to review the salaries and conditions of service of non-government teachers.

4 Ignatius Kutu Acheampong ousted the Progress Party government in 1972 and formed the NRC, which was later renamed the Supreme Military Council (SMC) I and Supreme Military Council II.

5 The collective bargaining certificate allows a union to negotiate about working conditions and terms of employment with the employer, with the aim of reaching an agreement wherein the terms serve as a code defining the rights and obligations of each party in the employment or industrial relations with one another (see ILO, 1981, convention no. 154). In Ghana, unions issued with a collective bargaining certificate have the right to enter into negotiations with the employer on behalf of the class of workers named in the certificate.

to liaise with NAGRAT to form a standing negotiating committee to negotiate with their employer. Before discussing the dynamics of the strike actions, it is useful to provide a snapshot of the political economy of labour relations under the New Patriotic Party (NPP) government.

THE NPP, POLITICAL ECONOMY AND LABOUR RELATIONS

The NPP was voted into office in December 2000, re-elected in 2004, and governed until 7 January 2009. Ideologically, it claims to belong to the centre-right political ambit and practises a kind of liberal conservatism which it calls ‘property-owning democracy’, emphasising private ownership of property (Bob-Milliar & Bob-Milliar, 2010, p. 58). The NPP government extended the liberal political reforms made under the Rawlings-led National Democratic Congress (NDC).⁶ It also focused on restructuring the macro-economy, which the new President, John Agyekum Kufour, described as being in a sorry state. He wrote in his State of the Nation Address:

Mismanagement, mass unemployment, low wages, high cost of living, a rapidly depreciating currency, a colossal national debt, high dependency on foreign aid, as well as declining educational and health opportunities, extensive corruption in public life, a cowed and demoralised private sector, hopelessness and despair – this is the legacy of the last two decades. (cited in Bob-Milliar & Bob-Milliar, 2010, p. 58)

Indeed, research conducted after the 2000 election concluded that the NDC’s management of the economy was one of the major reasons why it lost the election (Ayee, 2001). Thus, to improve this seemingly daunting economic situation, the NPP government adopted what seemed to be the most pragmatic but by no means popular choice: the Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative in 2001. The respite gained from this initiative, arguably enabled the government to stabilise the macro-economy (Bob-Milliar & Bob-Milliar, 2010, p. 58).

Despite the significant gains made in managing the macro-economy, the NPP government faced significant challenges, including growing fiscal excesses in its early years in office. This resulted mainly from a higher-than-budgeted public sector wage bill and subsidies to the petroleum, water and electricity sub-sectors. Sharp increases in the international price of petroleum and petroleum products, in particular, posed a major socio-political challenge for the government, which feared that a full pass-through of the cost to consumers was likely to cause sharp increases too early in the administration (see Center for Economic Policy Analysis [CEPA], 2009). Interestingly, when the government in 2003 introduced the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-tailored Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy I, after abandoning

6 The NDC under Rawlings formed the first and second governments (1993–2000) of the Fourth Republic.

the Ghana–IMF programme Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) II in November 2002, subsidies on petroleum products were to be removed. A full pass-through of the changes in the cedi value of world market prices of petroleum and petroleum products was to be passed on to consumers (CEPA, 2009). This policy was, however, tempered with political expediency. CEPA (2009, p. 12) puts it more succinctly:

Given the high social and political costs involved, however, the policy was not consistently implemented. Subsequent continued increases in international prices of petroleum and petroleum products were not fully passed through to domestic consumers. The Government of Ghana, apparently, could not countenance any such domestic price increases since (as was communicated to the IMF and the development partners) in its view, this could be politically destabilizing.

After the 2004 elections, however, the prices of petroleum and petroleum products were increased substantially: in January 2005, they rose on average by about 50 per cent (CEPA, 2009, p. 13). In the subsequent years, adverse socio-political reactions, with their potentially destabilising consequences, became evident particularly on the labour front.

There were, however, equally positive developments: the government passed a new labour law (Act 651 of 2003) which consolidated previous legislation on industrial relations. The Act, for the first time, provided for a National Labour Commission (NLC), composed of equal representation from labour, government and employers, and a chairman jointly nominated by all parties, to facilitate the settlement of industrial disputes. Unlike previous labour legislations, Act 651 provided for the possibility that two or more workers can form a union in conformity with the national constitution, thus extending the labour rights of workers (Republic of Ghana, 2003). It also encourages labour pluralism and permits two labour unions to represent workers in the same sector. In terms of rewards to labour, the government considerably adjusted public sector wages and salaries upwards. Indeed, in 2002, both the lowest and highest real wages increased by 11.6 and 12.9 per cent respectively. In similar vein, in 2003 the lowest and highest real wages rose again by 22.5 and 34.9 per cent respectively, and in 2005 real wages rose by more than 28 per cent (Bank of Ghana, 2007, p. 8).

Following from the general increases in public sector wages, teachers received significant hikes in salaries at all levels between 2002 and 2006. For example, the average monthly basic salary of a graduate non-professional teacher increased from C1 422 836 (equivalent to \$160.7) in 2003 to 1 580 318 (equivalent to \$175.2) in 2004. Similarly, that of a graduate professional teacher rose from C1 641 465 (equivalent to \$185.4) in 2003 to C1 886 982 (equivalent to \$209.2) in 2004. By 2005, a graduate non-professional teacher was earning an average monthly basic salary of C2 070 646 (equivalent to \$228), while a graduate professional received C2 400 105 (\$264.3). In 2006, a graduate non-professional teacher earned C2 482

352 (equivalent to \$270.4), while a professional graduate teacher earned C2 877 726 (equivalent to \$313.5).⁷

In spite of these novel developments in terms of labour legislation and general salary increases, the government faced significant challenges from labour, especially after 2004, as workers struck persistently to demands for further salary adjustments and improved working conditions. Arguably, it appeared that the macro-economic gains made during the period did not practically reflect in workers' pockets, even in the face of upward adjustments in public sector wages. The pass-through effect of the changes in the cedi value of the international costs of petroleum and petroleum products on Ghanaian consumers after 2004, hikes in utility tariffs, and the tax on earnings to fund the National Health Insurance Scheme (Gocking, 2005) appeared to have watered down the respite offered by workers' wage increases, and this was not received with equanimity by the working population. As Gocking (2005, p. 274) puts it, 'the macro-economic successes that the donor agencies applauded seldom trickle[d] down to the masses in ways that [were] easily recognisable'. Thus, while it was true that the government achieved some degree of success in managing the macro-economy, the truth of the matter was that the gains made did not reflect in the micro-economic realities of the average Ghanaian worker. Beyond this, it appeared that after 2004 the government was under pressure to contain the public sector wage bill, which had become an important contributing source to budgetary excesses (CEPA, 2009). The government was thus reluctant to readily accede to labour's demands for wage increases in the years after 2004 – the concomitant effect of which was labour unrest. NAGRAT strikes were thus partly a response to economic difficulties during the period.

In the education labour terrain, other factors may have incensed graduate teachers for them to have assumed such a militant posture after 2004. First, it seemed that failed negotiations between the teachers' unions and government, coupled with frustration with government's empty promises, pushed teacher unions to resort to strike action. Indeed, the government during its early months in office readily met and negotiated with teacher organisations on their grievances. I suggest (though this is debatable), that these meetings and government promises to resolve the grievances of the teachers helped stem the tide of labour unrest in the education sector during the first four years of the NPP administration. For example, when GNAT scheduled a strike for 1 October 2001, to demand improved conditions of service and the implementation of a supervision allowance, leadership called it off, noting that government's position on their grievances was acceptable (*Modern Ghana News*,

7 These figures are all in old Ghana cedis. The new Ghana cedi was introduced in 2006. These averages were computed based on figures from the Ghana Universal Salary Structure schedule for the GES, for the years 2003 to 2006, compiled by E.A. Brakatu, Accra Metro Accountant for the GES. The average cedi-dollar exchange rate for 2004 was \$1 to C 9 019.45. In 2005 it was \$1 to C9 080.75 and in 2006 it was \$1 to C 9 179.

2001). Similarly, NAGRAT suspended a planned strike on 28 April 2004 to demand higher invigilation allowance, because ‘government’s position on their grievances sounded reasonable’ (NAGRAT, 2004a). The behaviour of the unions should be understood within the logic of their social role as teachers, which enmeshes them in a network of inter-relationships with pupils/students, parents, etc. which enjoin them to exercise restraint in pursuing militant actions – striking then becomes a last-resort action. Thus, the sudden turn towards strike action came with the teacher unions’ realisation of the futility of negotiation exercises, since these would not yield the desired results. Second, it seemed (but perhaps this was less significant) that the activist orientation of the President of NAGRAT, coupled with a general feeling graduate teachers that their interests were being neglected by GNAT, may have spurred NAGRAT to lead the fight to improve the conditions of its membership.⁸ Remember: the thrust for the formation of NAGRAT was the argument that the GNAT was unable to represent the best interest of its graduate members.

THE 2005 STRIKE

NAGRAT declared a strike action on 6 May 2005. Its president, Kwami Alorvi, argued that the strike was because of government’s lackadaisical attitude towards improving teachers’ salaries and conditions of service. He also accused the GES of failing to address teachers’ demands for increased responsibility allowance, and the reluctance of the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the GES to formally approve and fix dates for the promotion of assistant directors of education and grades above those. Closely related to this was the delayed issuance of letters to teachers who were promoted to the grades of Senior and Principal Superintendents (NAGRAT, 2004b). NAGRAT presented several letters to the GES on the issue of promotion and conversion, and requested redress. For instance, on 28 May 2004, NAGRAT wrote to the then Director General of Education, Ama Afo Blay, requesting that she take appropriate steps to resolve the confusion emanating from the issuance of letters of promotion to teachers promoted to the rank of Superintendent and Principal Superintendent respectively (NAGRAT, 2004c). NAGRAT argued that some District Directors of Education were not clear on whether to issue the letters to teachers in first cycle schools only, and whether the exercise excluded graduate non-professional teachers. It therefore advised the Director-General to act, to ensure that the District Directors were clear on what to do, so as to forestall any agitation amongst teachers (NAGRAT, 2004c). The Director-General failed to act on NAGRAT’s concerns in this regard. Consequently, in July 2004 NAGRAT wrote again to the Director-

8 Kwami Alorvi was a known activist during his university days. At the University of Cape Coast, he served as the president of the most militant student residence, Casely Hayford Hall. I have no doubt that his activist orientation influenced NAGRAT’s activities during his tenure as president.

General, reminding her of the matter and calling on her to resolve the issue (Alorvi, interview 2010). However, the Director remained unresponsive. While it is difficult to understand why the education authorities did not respond to NAGRAT's concerns, it is clear that they remained indifferent to these demands – a situation that frustrated NAGRAT and forced it to resort to strike action. It must be stressed that any promotion on the GES career ladder comes with increased remuneration and benefits, which makes delayed promotions central to teacher agitation.

The NAGRAT also accused the MoE of failing to resolve a complaint it had lodged regarding the automatic coding of teachers as GNAT members (Alorvi, interview 2010). This grievance looked more like an inter-union conflict between NAGRAT and GNAT over membership recruitment. The Deputy Minister of Education, Joe Donkor, aware of the consequences a rift between the two major teacher unions could have for education delivery, intervened to resolve the inter-union impasse. He convened a meeting which involved NAGRAT, the Controller and Accountant General's Department (CAGD) and GNAT to try to address, specifically, the automatic coding of teachers for the purposes of payment of dues to their preferred unions. The meeting agreed on a memorandum of understanding and resolved that the anomaly would be addressed with immediate effect (MoE, 2004). On 3 August 2004, NAGRAT wrote to the MoE and CAGD requesting another meeting to further discuss the objects contained in the memorandum. It stated that it was not pleased with the slow pace of implementation or the fact that some of the agreed-to items were not implemented at all (NAGRAT, 2004d).

In addition, NAGRAT demanded an increase in invigilation and supervision allowances. For a long time, the GES has depended on the services of teachers to invigilate and supervise its external examinations conducted by the West African Examination Council (WAEC), which pays teachers allowances through the GES. It was this allowance which NAGRAT bemoaned as inadequate. In a meeting with the Director General, she promised to discuss the matter with WAEC, but she reneged on her promise and instead wrote to the Regional and District Directorates of Education to suggest they use office staff and retired teachers for invigilation, if necessary (NAGRAT, 2004e). However, the Director realised the futility of her position and convened another meeting with NAGRAT on the one hand, the Council of Heads of Secondary Schools (CHASS), the Conference of Regional Directors of Education (CRDE) and the GES management on the other, to consider NAGRAT's demands. It was agreed that invigilators would be paid ₵20 000 (equivalent to \$2.46), assistant supervisors ₵24 000 (equivalent to \$2.66) and supervisors ₵30 000 (equivalent to \$3.69). The condition was that these figures were to be renegotiated after the August examinations. However, this condition was not adhered to by the GES (Carbonu, interview 2010). When all channels used to seek redress had failed, NAGRAT decided to embark on strike action. Kwami Alorvi notes that 'as long as the GES continues to show indifference to our genuine concerns, we reserve the right to

employ any legitimate means to protect our social and economic interests' (*Daily Graphic*, 2005a, pp. 1 & 3).

It is difficult to estimate how many of NAGRAT's members of the total 15 658 graduate teachers teaching in senior secondary schools (renamed Senior High Schools, as of 2005) were involved in the strike. What was observable, however, was that many senior secondary school teachers stayed away from school.⁹ The strike assumed several intricate dynamics. In the first instance, government officials adopted a highly antagonistic attitude towards the striking teachers, resorting to threats so as to coerce teachers to end the strike (see, e.g., Addai-Poku, 2009, p. 9; *Daily Graphic*, 2005c, p. 3).¹⁰ For instance, on 11 May, six days into the strike, the acting Director General of Education, Michael Nsowah, ordered the striking teachers to resume work within ten days, or risk dismissal. NAGRAT's president responded by questioning the basis of the Director's order, arguing that the strike was legal and within the rights of the aggrieved teachers. He subsequently maintained that the association would not be 'intimidated by any threats from individuals or group of persons' (*Daily Graphic*, 2005c, p. 3). Perhaps, if the Director General had been polite with his order, the teachers would have reasoned with him.

Before the order, the Chairman of the National Labour Commission (NLC), J.A. Aryitey, had also described the strike as illegal (*Daily Graphic*, 2005a). Curiously, the NLC initiated arbitration with NAGRAT until 23 May, when talks collapsed following the NLC's pronouncement that NAGRAT did not exist by law. The position of the NLC and its initiation of arbitration with NAGRAT – if indeed NAGRAT was not recognised by law – appeared contradictory. I suggest that the NLC's approach points to a fundamental institutional inefficiency and paints a picture of a groping organisation, incapable of using internal mechanisms to resolve a simple teachers' strike – for the NLC did not have any business opening negotiations with NAGRAT if it did not recognise it as an official teachers' union. What appeared to be the case was that the NLC felt, by declaring the existence of NAGRAT illegal, the striking teachers would lose confidence in their action and return to work. However, the NLC's tactic failed, as the teachers continued with the strike action.

NAGRAT's reluctance to end the strike annoyed the education authorities who resorted to command and control tactics. On 30 May, the Education Minister, Yaw Osafo-Marfo, announced that his Ministry and the GES would recruit retired teachers

9 Direct observation. I was at the time teaching full-time in a junior high school at Diaso, in the Upper Denkyira West District in the Central Region of Ghana. So, I directly observed the situation there. Colleagues in other regions confirmed that the situation was no different.

10 Indeed, some head teachers were so hostile, particularly in 2005, that five striking teachers from the Holy Child Senior High School and another eight from St. Augustine's College (all in Cape Coast in the Central Region of Ghana) were released by their headmasters to look for vacancies in other schools (Addai-Poku, 2009, p. 9).

to replace striking teachers if they did not resume work. He threatened to invoke a clause in the condition of service for GES members to dismiss all striking teachers (Gobah, 2005b, p. 3). Indeed, article 15(vi) of the teachers' code of conduct states that 'a teacher who absents himself/herself from duty continuously for ten (10) days or more shall be deemed to have vacated post' (GES, 2008). Despite the minister's threat to enforce this provision, NAGRAT continued with the strike. The NAGRAT president's response to the minister was that no amount of threats would coerce them to end the strike until their demands were met (*Modern Ghana News*, 2005). He mentioned that his association was open to dialogue, but not when the 'dialogue turns into a monologue because some personalities believe that the association must ride on their backs as benevolent benefactors' (*Daily Graphic*, 2005c, p. 3). I suggest that the uncompromising stance adopted by both parties (government on the one hand and NAGRAT on the other) led to a stalemate which deepened the crisis.

Interestingly, at the heat of the strike, the GES initiated negotiations with GNAT on issues of contention between NAGRAT and the education authorities. This was legally acceptable, because GNAT and one other union, the Teachers' Education Workers Union (TEWU), are the only two unions recognised by law to negotiate with the GES on behalf of their members. Even though the *Labour Act*, 2003, recognises multiple unions in one sector, only the union with the highest membership is allowed to negotiate on behalf of all other workers in a particular sector (section 99). This provision appears to be problematic, as it hinders the amicable settlement of labour disputes. A striking party may be denied the opportunity to lead negotiations on its grievances which may, in turn, lead to inter-union rifts. As it happened, GNAT's invitation to negotiate with the education authorities created tension between itself and NAGRAT. The impression was one of inter-union conflict, rather than a conflict between NAGRAT and government and its allied education institutions. The general public viewed NAGRAT's actions as targeted against GNAT. Although GNAT extended an invitation to NAGRAT to join it in negotiations, NAGRAT declined and described GNAT's call as a face-saving tactic (*Daily Graphic*, 2005d, p. 9). It seemed NAGRAT refused to join in the negotiations because GNAT was not favourably disposed towards the strike action: indeed, GNAT officials' utterances portrayed their aversion to the strike. Its general secretary, Irene Duncan-Adanusa, stated:

There is no link between GNAT and NAGRAT and we have never expressed, by action, overt and covert, any show of solidarity on the issue of the current strike by NAGRAT. (*Daily Graphic*, 2005b, p. 1)

When it became apparent that NAGRAT could not be ignored, the Education Sub-committee of the National Parliament offered to broker peace between the disputing factions. After a series of meetings, the sub-committee prevailed on NAGRAT to call off the strike, while they continued with negotiations to find a lasting solution

to the dispute. NAGRAT had not made gains in any of its demands at this stage, but consented to allow the GES and the MoE time to resolve matters. The GES and MoE's failure to do so was the reason for the prolonged NAGRAT strike in 2006.

THE 2006 STRIKE

On 1 September 2006, NAGRAT embarked on a strike unprecedented in the history of Ghana's Fourth Republic. The strike in many respects was a continuation of 'unfinished issues' resulting from the 2005 strike. The position, demeanour and resolve of NAGRAT during the 2006 strike were clearly articulated by its Western Regional Chairman, Robin Andrew Faidoo:

We are all humans and the intervention of the public always bring us back to the classroom ... there is no need to win public sympathy this time around. We are sure the strike would go on for a longer time until our grievances are addressed. (cited in Aguiar, 2006, p. 31)

For eight weeks, NAGRAT members remained on strike, demanding higher salaries and general improvements in conditions of service. NAGRAT also demanded that government implement all outstanding issues on which the memorandum of understanding had been signed, including invigilation allowances for the then Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSSCE, later renamed West African Secondary School Certificate Examination [WASSCE]), letters of conversion to be issued to all newly promoted graduate teachers irrespective of whether they were professionals or not, and adequate responsibility allowance to be paid to teachers. Finally, they demanded the implementation of salary adjustments for teachers ranking as Assistant Directors of Education.

The demand for higher salaries and the payment of a meaningful responsibility/ invigilation allowance became the major bone of contention during the strike. In fact, salary hikes had been the clarion call of teachers since 2000, when graduate teachers in Accra declared a one-week strike to demand higher salaries and improved conditions of service (*Modern Ghana News*, 2000). Within the same period, teachers in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana (mainly GNAT members) declared a strike for similar reasons. While acknowledging the fact that the NPP government had improved teachers' salaries substantially, it appeared that the salaries did not wash in the face of the prevailing economic situation. Indeed, in May 2006, inflation had inched up to 10.2 per cent from 9.9 per cent in April, and the fuel price had shot up by 10 per cent (Republic of Ghana, 2006). The surge in inflation and the fuel price increase (with its concomitant effect on the price of basic consumer items and transport fares) obviously affected the real salaries of workers negatively. Ghanaian teachers, knowing that they were poorly remunerated, believed themselves to be worse off. Indeed, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) analysis of world education indicators in 2001 described

Ghanaian teachers as ‘overworked and underpaid’ (cited in Osei, 2006, p. 44). Osei (2006, p. 41) opines that even though the Ghanaian state expects a great deal from its teachers as her agents, it hardly rewards them well. Arguably, it was the low remuneration of Ghanaian teachers which pushed NAGRAT to make demands for upward salary adjustments and improved conditions of service.

Teachers were not the only aggrieved workers during that period. Indeed, the NAGRAT strike was staged on the heels of growing labour discontent – a development that led Coleman (2006, p. 7) to declare the period between February and June 2006 as a ‘season of strikes’, because of the number of labour disputes that were recorded. All of these strikes were in demand for improved conditions of service and wage hikes (Coleman, 2006, p. 7). What appeared to be the root cause of workers’ discontent was the mismatch between macro-economic gains and workers’ salaries, as well as the ever-increasing fuel prices and electrification tariffs, without a corresponding increase in salaries. Another underlying cause appeared to be government’s tactical decision to delay salary negotiations and wage settlements during the 2005 fiscal year (see CEPA, 2009). While government’s approach saved the nation an amount equivalent to 0.4 per cent of GDP, it did portend the labour unrest, which was witnessed in 2006 (CEPA, 2009, p. 19).

NAGRAT had exhausted both formal and informal negotiation channels to have its grievances addressed, before it finally struck. Earlier, on 25 July 2005, a month after ending its strike, it threatened to resume strike action because the GES had defaulted in the implementation of a roadmap for a peaceful resolution of the impasse. However, nothing was heard of this again until March 2006, when NAGRAT again threatened to embark on industrial action if its outstanding grievances from the 2005 strike were not resolved. The Education Minister, Yaw Osafo-Marfo, intervened and this time the matter was laid to rest. In a press release to put the strike on hold, NAGRAT remarked:

The National Officers are satisfied with the Minister’s sensitivity to our concerns and the genuine commitment to solving the problems. It is thus necessary to allow the Hon. Minister the chance to address the concerns in an atmosphere of industrial peace. (NAGRAT, 2006a, p. 1)

In a meeting with the minister before this press release, the GES and the MoE on the one hand, and NAGRAT on the other, signed a memorandum of understanding in which both parties agreed that the teachers’ responsibility allowance should be tabled as part of the GES agenda for the year. They also agreed that the MoE would pay the top-up for the invigilation allowance for WASSCE 2006. Furthermore, it was agreed that teachers whose salary arrears had not been paid since September 2003 were to be reimbursed. However, before the minister could implement the memorandum of understanding, he was removed from office. NAGRAT (2006b, p. 2) was suspicious

that his removal would delay the implementation of the agreement, and it therefore cautioned:

It will be disastrous for education in Ghana if the management of the Ghana Education Service should try again to hide behind the exit of Hon. Yaw Osafo-Marfo from the ministry to delay implementation of the understandings reached between the ministry and GES on one hand and NAGRAT on the other. Already, there are signs that GES is again renegeing on its commitment, a situation that has ignited agitation among graduate teachers.

Evidently, it was the failure of the GES and the MoE to resolve the teachers' grievances that prompted NAGRAT to embark on strike action. The strike took the form of a stay-away, therefore, it is difficult to provide details of graduate teacher involvement.

The strike was characterised with many interesting dynamics: the government resorting to threats and the use of legal instruments; the unions resolving to achieve their demands at whatever cost – all of which stalled negotiation and deepened antagonism. The National Labour Commission was the first to act. As it did in 2005, it declared the strike illegal and ordered NAGRAT members to resume work (National Labour Commission 2006). However, NAGRAT persisted, hoping that the authorities would soften and seek a quick resolution. In an interview, Carbonu (2010) explained:

We thought the political authorities would be more responsible than they were. We thought the political authorities saw education as a vital ingredient in national development and we were surprised that despite this thinking, state authorities allowed the strike to go on that long. Instead of sitting down to dialogue, they rather felt that they were going to engage us to prove to the public who was right and who was wrong.

NAGRAT members were not the only aggrieved teachers. Indeed, GNAT members were equally frustrated and they demonstrated their anger by embarking on wild-cat solidarity strikes to support NAGRAT, even though the national executive of GNAT distanced itself from such actions. The first group to go on strike in solidarity was the Concerned GNAT members of Wa in the Upper West region, on 2 October 2006. The group's leader, Khalid Abdul-Rahman, in an address to a gathering of about 300 teachers, called on the government to put teachers on the same salary scale as health workers¹¹ (*Ghana News Agency*, 2006a). Similarly, the GNAT Zabzugu/Tatale district branch in the Northern region declared an indefinite strike from 3 October.

11 In 2005, the government, to appease health workers, introduced the Additional Hours Duty Allowance (ADHA) as part of their basic pay. This facility at once gave health workers a comfortable compensation for their work. The ADHA was, however, a smart move by the government to avoid a salary increase that could have had ramifications for the entire public sector. Graduate teachers felt that this was unfair, as it made the financial position of nurses – even those without university degrees – better than that of graduate teachers.

The chairman of the branch, Atchulo Issah, indicated that the action was necessitated by the inability of the GNAT national executive to negotiate satisfactory salaries and work conditions for teachers (*Ghana News Agency*, 2006b). In similar vein, GNAT members in the Ga East district, which included schools in Adenta, Madina, Abokobi and Pantang, threatened to begin a strike on 31 October, if the government did not resolve NAGRAT's grievances. The secretary of the group, Andreas Awutey, accused the government and GNAT leadership of paying lip-service to teachers (see myjoyonline.com, 2006). Other concerned GNAT members in Accra, led by Daniel Obodai and Raphael Ameho, called for the resignation of GNAT's leadership, after a peaceful demonstration on 14 November 2006, accusing them of 'prolonged years of accumulated failures in negotiating ... better conditions of service for teachers' (*Daily Graphic*, 2006f, p. 15). Earlier, the Accra Metro Branch of GNAT had called for the resignation of the national executive, accusing them of being 'insensitive to the plight of poor teachers' (*Daily Graphic*, 2006a, pp. 1 & 3). Arguably, it appears from these developments that the concerns of NAGRAT were germane to the grievances of the entire teaching service.

The intensity of the strike action compelled the President, John Agyekum Kufour, to intervene to persuade striking teachers to calm down. At a press briefing organised by the Ministry of Information on 13 October, the president appealed to NAGRAT to exercise restraint and for teachers to resume their duties. He informed the striking teachers that the precarious nature of the economy could not support their demands. NAGRAT remained unmoved by the president's appeal. Consequent to NAGRAT's refusal to call off the strike action, the National Labour Commission instituted a legal action against NAGRAT for embarking on an illegal strike. The NLC prayed the court to order NAGRAT to call off the strike (*Daily Graphic*, 2006e, p. 1). The Fast-Track High Court, presided over by Justice Richard Asamoah, ruled on 31 October in favour of the NLC and ordered NAGRAT to call off the strike. Although NAGRAT appealed the ruling, it obeyed the initial verdict and ordered its members to resume work, while awaiting the hearing of the appeal (*Modern Ghana News*, 2006). The NAGRAT president however, described the court action as misconceived. He saw it as calculated to compel the association to call off a strike that was aimed at articulating its grievances (*Daily Graphic*, 2006e, p. 1). NAGRAT finally decided to drop its appeal against the court verdict, after the Ghana Conference of Religions for Peace intervened to settle differences between the disputing parties (see *The Statesman*, 2006).

Three significant developments during the strike are noteworthy: first, all teachers who were involved in the strike had their October salary blocked by the GES. This was the first time teachers in Ghana had lost their salary for having embarked on industrial action. This had serious political consequence for the ruling government, as the striking teachers interpreted it as insensitivity on the part of government. In an interview, Comfort Ebi, an English teacher at Presbyterian Senior

High School (Teshie) and a Greater Accra Regional official of NAGRAT, lamented: ‘The worst of all was that it was the first government that ceased teachers’ salary and ever prosecuted teachers’ (Ebi, interview 2010). Adani, a teacher at Achimota School and a representative of NAGRAT in the school said: ‘They withdrew our salaries and even threatened to replace us with retired teachers if we did not go back to work. This tells you the way government sees teaching’ (Adani, interview 2010). When the strike ended, the teachers demanded that their blocked salaries be paid back. While the Minister of Education said it was not within his power to reimburse the affected teachers, the GES demanded that NAGRAT apologise to the public before the withheld salaries would be released. The issue dragged on until 2008, when President Kufour ordered that the salaries be unblocked. The order came just at the time when Ghana was about to hold its fifth election under the Fourth Republic. Francis Tyron, a former Greater Accra Regional Chairman of NAGRAT (1998–2003) and a teacher at Presbyterian Boys’ Senior High School, described the president’s instruction as a political gimmick, arguing that it was meant to placate teachers, so as to canvass for their votes (Tyron, interview 2010). Kwei Laryea, Assistant Headmaster in charge of academics at Achimota School, concurred:

And what happened? They decided not to pay the teachers. They withheld our salaries for months and when the election was approaching, government in order to win some votes decided to pay the money to teachers. (Laryea, interview 2010)

Second, the government, desperate to win the teachers back to the classroom, resorted to a media backlash, accusing particularly the leadership of NAGRAT of using the strike to settle a political score. Indeed, President Kufour was quoted as questioning the basis of the use of the term ‘graduate teachers’, describing it as discriminatory and likening NAGRAT’s action to an apartheid-style system, with NAGRAT members regarding themselves as superior to other teachers in the education system (Addai-Poku, 2009, pp. 9–10). In another instance, a sympathetic newspaper, the *Daily Guide*, branded the president of NAGRAT a member of the opposition party, the NDC. The strike was therefore perceived to be a grand design to destabilise the NPP administration (*Daily Graphic*, 2006d, p. 3). This type of ‘media blackmail’ fanned the flames and created acute antagonism between NAGRAT and the government. Branding the NAGRAT president a member of the opposition brought in an ethnic dimension, because he was Ewe – while the NDC is perceived as an Ewe-dominated party, the NPP is considered an Asante/Akan party, thus mischievously tagging individuals as pro-NDC or pro-NPP depending on their ethnic background. Therefore, while acknowledging this trouble-mongering, it was not strange that Alorvi was considered pro-NDC, given his ethnic background:

The government viewed NAGRAT as a political association because our president was Ewe; so they tagged the NAGRAT as NDC. So we had it tough with them; there was serious antagonism. (Ebi, interview 2010)

This ‘partisan-politicisation’ of the strike and its subtle ethnic implications deflected attention away from the substance of the teachers’ agitation and polarised public sympathy, depending on which ethnic and political divide you belonged to. In an interview, Addae Poku (2010) explained:

You know the whole country is polarised between NDC and NPP and depending on the ‘tribe’ one belongs to, an action is read to be (pulse), for instance in 2006, we had a Ewe president and Ewes are deemed to be pro-NDC. Because the president came from that ‘tribe’ the substance of the issues were put aside and then people started pursuing political angle to the whole problem, knowing perfectly well that teachers were disadvantaged.

Ethnicity and the ‘ethnicisation’ of politics has been an endemic and a notorious feature of the body politic in Ghana. The political awareness and sensitivity of ethnic groups has been conjured up in many different ways by successive governments after the fall of the CPP, so as to pursue varying goals at different historical times. Chazan (1982, pp. 463–464) points out that the ethnicisation of politics in Ghana is a function of state actions and fluctuations of state power, and may be in response to a particular measure or context. Thus, it can be conjectured that branding the NAGRAT president as pro-NDC, because of his ethnic background, was a calculated propaganda move aimed at deflecting public sympathy from the striking teachers and hence the substance of their agitation.

Third, similar to what happened in 2005, a salary negotiating committee comprising GNAT and GES representatives was established on 12 October 2006, when the NAGRAT strike had gathered momentum. GNAT extended an invitation to NAGRAT to join the negotiation committee, but NAGRAT refused (*Daily Graphic*, 2006c, pp. 1 & 3). NAGRAT argued that its employer was the GES and not GNAT, hence any invitation for negotiation should come from the GES. The NAGRAT president further averred that GNAT had not really invited NAGRAT to be on the negotiating team, but rather to submit proposals and representatives to draft a new collective agreement to be negotiated with the GES (*Daily Graphic*, 2006c, p. 3). NAGRAT’s conflict with GNAT created the impression of inter-union dispute, rather than disputes with the MoE and the GES. Remember: the same impression was created in 2005. It appeared that this was a strategy the government adopted to discredit NAGRAT.

CONCLUSION

The root cause of the teachers’ grievances, which culminated in the 2005 and 2006 strikes, was the government and the education authorities’ laxity in resolving graduate teachers’ demands for higher salaries and improvements in their conditions of service. The government appeared to have been constrained in meeting the teachers’ demands because of economic challenges. The teachers’ demands thus seemed to have been fuelled by the impact stresses and strains in the economy had on the

work and living conditions of workers generally. The government responded to these strikes using threats and legal procedures to coerce striking teachers to resume work. Even though this strategy seemed to succeed in getting teachers back to work, the cost to public education in terms of time/days lost is worth noting. The use of threats and legal procedures to pressure teachers to resume work hardened attitudes and kept teachers out of work for longer than anticipated. Additionally, the fact that the state resorted to procedural wrangling and other forms of delay tactics to stall negotiations pushed NAGRAT to strike, so as to press home its demands. Interestingly, attempts by government sympathisers to use the media to lash out at striking teachers, particularly in 2006, resulted in the partisan-politicisation and subtle ethnicisation of the teachers' strike action. The President of NAGRAT, an Ewe, was accused of using the strike to score political points to favour the opposition NDC party. Without doubt, such accusations divided public sympathy for the striking teachers.

Although the passage of the PNDC law 309 and *Labour Act*, 2003, significantly enhanced the labour rights of teachers and other public sector workers by allowing teacher organisations to register as trade unions, and for the largest of the unions (GNAT) to negotiate directly with government, the use of this collective bargaining certificate created significant problems. GNAT's legal right to negotiate disputes that did not emanate from its membership appeared to create antagonism between GNAT and NAGRAT. This deflected attention away from the government as the party in dispute with NAGRAT. The government often honed in on the technicality of using this bargaining certificate to drive a wedge between the teachers' unions. The tactic seemed to have worked, since government was able to divert attention away from itself and onto the internal bickering of the teacher unions, making it seem as if the unions were in dispute amongst themselves, rather than with the state. A teacher unionist stated:

What we have realised is that when GNAT comes out with such statements and we decide to engage them, it directs attention from our focus – that is the employer who we are supposed to fight. In 2006 for instance, when we struck a minister for employment stated that that NAGRAT was not on strike because of poor conditions of service but because we were at loggerheads with GNAT – which was not the case. (Addai-Poku, interview 2010)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Dr. George Bob-Milliar who gave perceptive comments on an earlier draft. A version of this paper was presented at the 3rd Social Science Conference, 'Bringing the Gown to Town: Academic Voices in a Global Village', University of Education, Winneba, 12–14 March 2014. I thank the participants for their insightful comments. I am also grateful to the two reviewers of the journal and the editor

for insightful comments and suggestions. All other errors, factual inaccuracies and incorrect interpretations are, however, my sole responsibility.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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