African Journal of Social and Behavioural Sciences (AJSBS)
Volume 16, Number 6 (2026) ISSN: 2141-209X

RETHINKING AND MANAGING CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS TENSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL LABOUR POLICY REFORMS

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ABSTRACT: One of the objectives of the paper is to analyse the implications of global industrial relations tensions and how to integrate and adapt framework for national policy. The paper argued that, contemporary global industrial relations are undergoing profound transformation as geopolitical fragmentation, technological innovation, platform-mediated work, climate transitions, global supply chain reconfiguration, labour migration, and shifting demographic patterns increasingly reshape the governance of work. While these developments generate new economic opportunities, they simultaneously intensify institutional tensions by exposing the growing disconnect between rapidly evolving labour market realities and national labour policy frameworks that remain largely rooted in conventional employment models. Anchored in Dunlop's Systems Theory and complemented by institutional and political economy perspectives, the paper critically examines how these tensions reconfigure power relations among the state, employers, organised labour, and emerging labour market actors. It further demonstrates that resilient industrial relations systems depend upon labour policies capable of integrating flexibility with employment security, economic competitiveness with social justice, and national priorities with evolving international labour standards. Through a comparative analysis of national policy responses in Nigeria, South Africa, China, and the United Kingdom, the study evaluates labour legislation, collective bargaining institutions, social protection systems, employment regulation frameworks, and tripartite governance structures. The study concludes that adaptive, inclusive, and resilient labour policy frameworks, supported by strong institutions and international cooperation, are essential for promoting sustainable industrial relations systems in an increasingly interconnected global economy.

Keywords: Rethinking & Managing, Global Industrial Relations, Labour Policy, Policy Reforms, Future of Work, Employment Relations, Labour Market Governance

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has witnessed unprecedented transformations in the global economy, fundamentally altering the nature, structure, and practice of industrial relations across nations. Industrial relations, traditionally understood as the interaction among employers, employees, trade unions, and the state in the regulation of employment relationships, have evolved beyond national boundaries and increasingly operate within a complex global political economy (Budd, 2021). The acceleration of globalisation, technological innovation, labour migration, digitalisation, climate change, geopolitical conflicts, and changing employment patterns have created new challenges and tensions that demand a reconsideration of existing labour policies and institutional frameworks. Historically, industrial relations systems emerged primarily as mechanisms for managing conflicts arising from industrial capitalism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The expansion of industrial production, urbanisation, and wage labour necessitated the development of institutional arrangements such as collective bargaining, labour legislation, trade unionism, and state intervention to regulate employer-employee relations (Edwards, 2022).

However, the advent of globalisation since the late twentieth century has significantly transformed these traditional arrangements. Economic globalisation has facilitated the increased mobility of capital, labour, technology, and production networks across national borders, thereby weakening the regulatory capacity of nation-states and altering the balance of power between labour and capital (Hyman, 2023). Multinational corporations increasingly operate across multiple jurisdictions, often exploiting differences in labour standards and regulatory frameworks to maximise competitiveness and profitability. Consequently, labour markets have become more flexible, but also more precarious, contributing to growing tensions within industrial relations systems globally. Labour migration has become a crucial strategy for addressing labour shortages and promoting economic development; however, it has also generated concerns regarding workers' rights, wage competition, social integration, and employment discrimination (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020; International Labour Organization, 2025).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the vulnerabilities and inequalities embedded within contemporary industrial relations systems. The pandemic disrupted labour markets globally, resulting in mass unemployment, workplace closures, increased informalisation of labour, and heightened occupational health risks (ILO, 2023). It also accelerated trends towards remote work, digital labour platforms, and flexible employment arrangements, thereby intensifying debates regarding labour rights, social protection, and employment security. The experiences of the pandemic demonstrated that existing labour policy frameworks in many countries were inadequately prepared to respond to large-scale economic and social crises. In addition, emerging geopolitical tensions, international conflicts, economic sanctions, supply chain disruptions, and environmental crises have contributed to growing uncertainties within global industrial relations systems. Climate change and the transition toward green economies have introduced new challenges related to employment restructuring, industrial transformation, and social justice (United Nations, 2024).

Developing economies, particularly those in Africa, face unique challenges in navigating these global industrial relations transformations. Countries such as Nigeria continue to grapple with high unemployment rates, labour market informality, weak institutional capacity, declining union influence, inadequate social protection systems, and persistent industrial conflicts. These challenges are further exacerbated by global economic pressures, technological disruptions, and demographic changes. Consequently, there is growing recognition among scholars, policymakers, and labour organisations that existing labour policies require substantial reform to address emerging realities effectively (Fashoyin, 2024). One of the specific objectives driving the study is to critically examine the structural drivers, evolving manifestations, and institutional dimensions of contemporary global industrial relations tensions within the context of an increasingly interconnected and technologically driven global economy.

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a comparative qualitative methodology grounded in secondary sources such as policy documentary analysis, peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, reports from international organisations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the African Union (AU), and relevant national labour policy documents. These sources were purposively selected based on their relevance, credibility, recency, and contribution to contemporary debates on global industrial relations, labour governance, and policy reform. The institutional case comparison helps in assisting to examine how national labour policy reforms respond to contemporary global industrial relations tensions. In the case of research design, the paper employs a multiple-case study approach using four comparator countries: Nigeria, South Africa, China, and the United Kingdom. The selection is purposive driven to capture variation across IR models, levels of economic development, and regional contexts, while also reflecting interdependence through global trade, investment, and ILO governance (Yin, 2018).

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, involving the systematic coding, categorisation, and interpretation of textual materials to identify themes, emerging patterns, and conceptual relationships relating to industrial relations tensions, labour market transformations, institutional responses, and national labour policy reforms. Through a comparative and interpretive approach, the study synthesises evidence from diverse jurisdictions to examine how global economic restructuring, technological change, geopolitical dynamics, climate transitions, and evolving employment relations shape national labour policy responses.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored primarily in Dunlop's Industrial Relations Systems Theory and supplemented by insights from Marxian Conflict Theory and Institutional Theory.

Dunlop's Industrial Relations Systems Theory

Industrial relations scholars have long sought theoretical models capable of explaining the complex interactions among workers, employers, governments, and other institutional actors that shape employment relationships. Among the most enduring and influential perspectives is John T. Dunlop's Systems Theory, first articulated in Industrial Relations Systems (1958). Dunlop departed from the traditional tendency to examine labour relations exclusively from economic or legal perspectives by conceptualising industrial relations as a dynamic social subsystem embedded within the wider political, economic, technological, and cultural environment (Dunlop, 1958). At the core of Dunlop's theoretical proposition is the argument that every industrial relations system consists of a network of interacting actors operating within specific environmental contexts and bound together by a shared ideology that ultimately produces a 'web of rules' governing employment relationships. Rather than viewing industrial conflict as merely the outcome of wage disputes or competing economic interests, Dunlop argues that industrial relations should be understood as an institutional process through which various stakeholders continuously negotiate the rules, norms, and practices regulating work.

Dunlop identifies three principal categories of actors that collectively constitute the industrial relations system. The first comprises employers and their representative organisations, whose primary concern revolves around organisational efficiency, profitability, productivity, competitiveness, and managerial authority. The second consists of employees and their representative institutions, particularly trade unions, whose principal objective is the protection and advancement of workers' economic, social, and occupational interests through collective bargaining and workplace representation. The third actor is the state, which occupies a distinctive position by functioning simultaneously as regulator, legislator, employer, mediator, and guarantor of industrial justice through labour legislation, labour courts, arbitration mechanisms, and public policy interventions (Dunlop, 1958; Fajana, 2000). According to Dunlop, these actors interact within a specific environmental context characterised by technological conditions, market constraints, and political power relations. Through their interactions, they establish rules, norms, and procedures that govern employment relationships. Dunlop argued that industrial relations systems function as interconnected social systems that seek to maintain order, stability, and equilibrium within employment relationships. (Dunlop, 1958/1993). The relevance of Dunlop's theory to this study lies in its recognition that industrial relations systems do not operate in isolation but are profoundly influenced by external environmental factors.

The explanatory relevance of Dunlop's Systems Theory has become even more pronounced within the context of contemporary global industrial relations. For instance, the emergence of globalisation, geopolitical tensions and instability, digital technologies, artificial intelligence, platform capitalism, global value chains, multinational enterprises, climate transition policies, and increasing labour mobility has fundamentally transformed the environment within which industrial relations systems operate. These developments have generated new actors, altered traditional employment relationships, weakened conventional collective bargaining institutions in many countries, and created new forms of workplace conflict that extend beyond national boundaries (Budd, 2020).

From a Dunlopian perspective, globalisation represents a significant alteration of the environmental context rather than merely an economic phenomenon. The increasing integration of global production systems has expanded the range of actors participating in industrial relations beyond the traditional tripartite arrangement of employers, employees, and governments. Today, multinational corporations, international labour organisations, regional economic communities, global trade union federations, transnational advocacy networks, and international financial institutions increasingly influence national labour policies and workplace governance. Consequently, the industrial relations system has evolved from a predominantly national institution into a multi-layered global governance framework in which domestic labour policies are increasingly shaped by international economic and political forces.

Similarly, rapid technological advancement has profoundly altered the technological environment identified by Dunlop. Artificial intelligence, robotics, automation, digital surveillance technologies, algorithmic management systems, and platform-based employment have transformed how work is organised, supervised, and rewarded. Accordingly, Baccaro & Howell, (2017); ILO, (2024) have stated, digital labour platforms such as Uber, Bolt, Upwork, and Deliveroo have blurred the traditional distinction between employees and independent contractors, thereby creating significant regulatory uncertainty concerning employment rights, collective bargaining, occupational safety, and social protection. Dunlop's theoretical framework suggests that such technological disruptions inevitably require the renegotiation of institutional rules governing employment relationships by governments, employers, and trade unions (OECD, 2023).

International labour migration represents another contemporary phenomenon that can be effectively analysed using Dunlop's Systems Theory. The increasing cross-border mobility of skilled and unskilled workers has introduced additional complexity into national industrial relations systems. Migrant workers frequently encounter legal vulnerabilities, discriminatory employment practices, wage disparities, and limited access to collective representation. These realities require governments to formulate labour policies that ensure equal treatment, social protection portability, recognition of qualifications, and effective labour inspection mechanisms. Within Dunlop's framework, labour migration therefore necessitates an expansion of the web of rules governing employment in order to accommodate increasingly transnational labour markets. Dunlop, (1958); Flanders, (1968) the growing importance of climate change and environmental sustainability further illustrates the continuing relevance of Dunlop's systems approach. Global commitments towards decarbonisation, renewable energy transitions, and green industrial policies are reshaping labour markets through industrial restructuring, occupational displacement, and emerging skill requirements. These developments require employers, governments, and organised labour to negotiate policies supporting a “just transition” that protects workers while facilitating environmental sustainability.

Within the context of the study, Dunlop's Systems Theory provides a particularly appropriate analytical framework for examining contemporary global industrial relations tensions and their implications for national industrial labour policy reform. He has demonstrated that current workplace tensions are not isolated organisational problems but manifestations of broader transformations occurring within technological, economic, political, and institutional environments.

Nevertheless, despite its enduring relevance, Dunlop's Systems Theory has attracted substantial criticism. Marxist scholars, most notably Hyman (1975), argue that the theory overemphasises consensus and institutional stability while underestimating the structural conflicts arising from unequal power relations between labour and capital. Critics further contend that Dunlop assumes a level of shared ideology that may not exist in highly fragmented labour markets characterised by precarious employment, informal work, and weak trade union representation. Further, critics argue that Dunlop's theory places excessive emphasis on consensus and institutional stability while underestimating the significance of power struggles, conflicts, and inequalities within industrial relations systems (Edwards, 2022). This limitation necessitates complementing the theory with conflict-based perspectives. Despite these limitations, the theory retains considerable analytical value because its systems perspective remains sufficiently flexible to incorporate emerging actors, institutions, and environmental changes within contemporary industrial relations analysis.

Marxian Conflict and Institutional Theories

The conflict perspective developed by Karl Marx views industrial relations as fundamentally characterised by conflicts arising from unequal distributions of economic power and resources. According to Marx, capitalist societies are inherently structured around antagonistic relationships between owners of capital and workers who sell their labour power. From this perspective, industrial disputes, labour unrest, wage conflicts, and struggles over working conditions are not abnormalities but rather natural consequences of structural inequalities within capitalist production systems (Haralambos & Holborn, 2022). Contemporary global industrial relations tensions, which among others include precarious employment, labour exploitation, declining union power, and widening income inequalities, are effectively therefore to be understood as manifestations of these enduring structural contradictions. Marxian analysis is particularly relevant in explaining how globalisation, technological innovation, and labour market flexibility policies have often strengthened capital while weakening labour protections and collective bargaining institutions. Institutional theory emphasises the role of formal and informal institutions in shaping employment relationships and labour market outcomes. According to institutional theorists, labour markets and industrial relations systems are socially and politically constructed rather than purely economic phenomena (Scott, 2022). Institutional arrangements such as labour laws, collective bargaining systems, social protection programmes, and regulatory agencies influence how industrial relations actors interact and resolve conflicts.

Anchoring the above theories, one has come to the understanding that the integration of Dunlop's Systems Theory, Marxian Conflict Theory, and Institutional Theory provides a comprehensive analytical framework for examining contemporary global industrial relations tensions. While Dunlop explains the institutional interactions among industrial relations actors, Marxian theory highlights the underlying power struggles and conflicts, whereas Institutional Theory explains variations in policy responses and regulatory adaptation. Together, these theoretical perspectives offer a robust framework for analysing how emerging global industrial relations challenges influence national labour policy reforms and shape the future of employment relations worldwide.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sources of Global Industrial Relations Tensions

The contemporary global industrial relations environment is characterised by profound structural transformations that have fundamentally altered the nature of work, employment relations, and labour governance. Unlike the industrial relations tensions of the twentieth century, which largely revolved around wages, working conditions, and collective bargaining; contemporary tensions are increasingly shaped by global economic integration, technological disruptions, labour mobility, environmental transitions, and changing institutional arrangements. These developments have generated complex and multidimensional challenges that transcend national boundaries and require innovative policy responses. Consequently, governments, employers, labour unions, and international organisations are confronted with the challenge of adapting existing industrial relations frameworks to rapidly evolving social and economic realities.

Economic Globalisation. Economic globalisation represents one of the most significant forces transforming contemporary industrial relations systems worldwide. Globalisation refers to the increasing integration of national economies through trade liberalisation, foreign direct investment, international production networks, technological diffusion, and labour mobility (Held & McGrew, 2022). While globalisation has facilitated economic growth, technological advancement, and increased productivity, it has simultaneously generated substantial tensions within labour markets and employment relations systems. One of the primary consequences of globalisation has been the increased mobility of capital relative to labour. Multinational corporations now possess greater flexibility to relocate production activities to countries offering lower labour costs, weaker labour regulations, and favourable investment conditions. This mobility has significantly altered the traditional balance of power between employers and workers, often reducing labour's bargaining capacity and increasing pressures for labour market flexibility (Hyman, 2023).

Global competition has also intensified the pressure on governments to implement market-oriented labour reforms aimed at attracting foreign investment. Such reforms frequently involve labour deregulation, privatisation, reduction in social protection programmes, and restrictions on collective bargaining rights. Although these policies may enhance economic competitiveness, they often contribute to employment insecurity, precarious work arrangements, and widening income inequalities. Furthermore, globalisation has facilitated the emergence of global supply chains, whereby production processes are fragmented across multiple countries. While global value chains have increased economic efficiency, they have also complicated labour governance and accountability. Workers employed within global supply chains frequently experience poor working conditions, limited legal protections, low wages, and weak union representation, particularly in developing countries (International Labour Organisation, 2024).

Technological Change and Artificial Intelligence: Technological transformation and the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) have become defining features of contemporary industrial relations systems. The Fourth Industrial Revolution, characterised by artificial intelligence, robotics, automation, machine learning, big data analytics, and digital communication technologies, has fundamentally reshaped employment relationships and workplace organisation (Schwab, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2025). The adoption of AI technologies has created both opportunities and challenges within labour markets. On one hand, technological innovations have increased productivity, enhanced workplace efficiency, created new occupational categories, and improved organisational competitiveness. On the other hand, automation has displaced workers across numerous sectors, particularly in manufacturing, transportation, finance, and administrative occupations.

The growing use of artificial intelligence in employment decision-making processes has introduced new forms of workplace control and surveillance. Employers increasingly utilise algorithmic management systems to monitor employee performance, allocate tasks, determine work schedules, and evaluate productivity. While these systems may improve organisational efficiency, they also raise concerns regarding worker autonomy, privacy rights, psychological stress, and workplace dignity (De Stefano, 2020). Another major challenge is technological unemployment and skills obsolescence. As machines increasingly perform tasks previously undertaken by human workers, concerns regarding job displacement, unemployment, and widening socioeconomic inequalities have intensified. Workers with lower educational attainment and fewer technological competencies face heightened risks of labour market exclusion. Moreover, technological change has accelerated labour market polarisation, whereby highly skilled workers benefit disproportionately from technological advancements while low-skilled workers experience increased economic vulnerability. This phenomenon contributes to growing income inequality and social stratification within labour markets.

The emergence of remote work and digital workplaces, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has further transformed industrial relations systems. Although remote work provides flexibility and productivity gains, it has also blurred traditional boundaries between work and private life, increased psychosocial risks, and complicated labour regulation and collective representation. Gig Economy and Platform Work: The rapid expansion of the gig economy and digital platform work constitutes one of the most transformative developments in contemporary employment relations. The gig economy refers to labour arrangements characterised by short-term contracts, freelance engagements, task-based employment, and digitally mediated work relationships facilitated through online platforms (Woodcock & Graham, 2020). Digital labour platforms such as ride-sharing services, food delivery applications, online freelancing platforms, and digital marketplaces have fundamentally altered traditional employment relationships.

One of the principal challenges associated with platform work concerns employment classification. Many platform companies classify workers as independent contractors rather than employees, thereby excluding them from labour protections such as minimum wage guarantees, social security benefits, collective bargaining rights, occupational safety protections, and employment insurance (ILO, 2024). The algorithmic management systems utilised by platform companies also introduce new forms of labour control and surveillance. Workers frequently have limited autonomy over pricing, work allocation, performance evaluation, and disciplinary procedures. These practices create power asymmetries between workers and platform operators and contribute to employment insecurity and workplace stress. Furthermore, platform workers often experience unstable earnings, irregular working hours, lack of social protection, and limited opportunities for career advancement. Such conditions have contributed to increasing labour protests, legal disputes, and demands for regulatory reforms across numerous countries.

Labour Migration and Workforce Mobility: Labour migration and workforce mobility have become central features of the contemporary global economy. International migration facilitates the movement of human capital, addresses labour shortages, promotes economic development, and contributes to global integration (Castles et al., 2020). Nevertheless, labour migration also generates complex industrial relations tensions affecting both sending and receiving countries. The increasing international mobility of workers has created highly diverse workplaces characterised by varying cultural backgrounds, languages, employment expectations, and labour market experiences. While workforce diversity can enhance innovation and organisational performance, it may also contribute to workplace conflicts, discrimination, and social fragmentation. Migrant workers frequently occupy vulnerable positions within labour markets. Many experience exploitation, wage discrimination, poor working conditions, limited legal protections, and restricted access to social services. Temporary migrant workers, undocumented migrants, and refugee workers are particularly susceptible to labour rights violations.

Adding insightful expository, ILO, (2024) has contributed by noting that labour migration additionally influenced wage structures and employment opportunities within host countries. In some contexts, migrant labour is perceived as creating competition for employment opportunities and contributing to wage suppression, thereby generating social and political tensions. From the perspective of sending countries, labour migration may contribute to 'brain drain' whereby highly skilled workers emigrate, reducing domestic human capital capacity. However, migration also generates substantial remittance flows that contribute to economic development and poverty reduction.

Climate Change and Just Transition Policies

It is to note, ILO, (2024) has opined that climate change has emerged as a critical issue shaping contemporary industrial relations systems. Environmental degradation, climate-related disasters, and the transition towards low-carbon economies have profound implications for employment patterns, labour markets, and industrial relations institutions (United Nations, 2024). The transition from carbon-intensive industries to sustainable economic systems inevitably creates labour market disruptions. Workers employed in sectors such as fossil fuel extraction, mining, manufacturing, and traditional energy production may experience job displacement, occupational restructuring, and economic uncertainty. The concept of a "just transition" has consequently become central to international labour policy discourse. A just transition refers to policy approaches that seek to ensure that environmental sustainability initiatives do not disproportionately disadvantage workers and vulnerable communities (ILO, 2023). It emphasises social dialogue, worker participation, retraining programmes, social protection measures, and equitable distribution of transition costs and benefits. However, tensions frequently arise regarding the implementation of climate policies. Employers may prioritise economic competitiveness, governments may pursue environmental targets, and workers may seek employment security and income protection. These competing interests often generate industrial conflicts and policy disagreements. Climate change additionally affects occupational health and safety through increased exposure to extreme weather conditions, environmental hazards, and workplace risks. Agricultural workers, construction workers, and informal sector employees are particularly vulnerable to climate-related occupational hazards. Consequently, climate change represents not only an environmental challenge but also a significant industrial relations issue requiring integrated policy responses and enhanced social dialogue mechanisms (ILO, 2025).

Emerging Global Industrial Relations Challenges and Precarious Employment

The global industrial relations landscape is undergoing profound transformation due to economic restructuring, technological innovation, globalisation, demographic shifts, and changing employment patterns. In like manner, De Stefano (2020) has argued that these transformations have generated a new generation of industrial relations challenges that transcend traditional concerns surrounding wages, working conditions, and collective bargaining. Unlike earlier industrial relations problems that were primarily confined to national contexts, contemporary challenges increasingly operate within transnational, digital, and highly flexible labour market environments. Meanwhile, Woodcock & Graham (2020) have stated that the emergence of precarious employment, declining trade union influence, expansion of informal labour markets, cross-border labour disputes, remote work arrangements, digital workplace surveillance, and occupational health risks have significantly altered the traditional employment relationship. These challenges have weakened existing labour institutions and exposed the limitations of current labour policy frameworks in many countries. Consequently, governments, employers, labour unions, and international organisations are compelled to rethink existing industrial relations institutions and adopt innovative governance mechanisms capable of addressing twenty-first-century labour realities (Budd, 2021).

Precarious employment has become one of the most pressing challenges confronting contemporary industrial relations systems globally. Precarious employment refers to forms of work characterised by employment insecurity, unstable income, limited legal protection, lack of social security coverage, poor working conditions, and restricted opportunities for career advancement (Standing, 2021). Unlike traditional permanent employment relationships, precarious employment arrangements often involve temporary contracts, part-time work, casual employment, agency work, freelance arrangements, and platform-based employment. The expansion of precarious employment is closely associated with globalisation, labour market deregulation, technological advancement, and increasing competitive pressures within the global economy. Employers increasingly seek flexible labour arrangements to reduce production costs, improve competitiveness, and respond rapidly to changing market conditions. While labour flexibility may enhance organizational adaptability, it often shifts economic risks from employers to employees (Kalleberg, 2022). One of the most significant consequences of precarious employment is the erosion of employment security. Workers employed under precarious arrangements frequently experience uncertainty regarding income stability, job continuity, career progression, and access to social protection programmes. Such uncertainty contributes to increased psychological stress, reduced workplace commitment, and declining quality of life. Precarious employment also undermines traditional industrial relations institutions. Budd (2021) notes that in developing countries such as Nigeria, precarious employment is further exacerbated by high unemployment rates, weak labour institutions, inadequate social protection systems, and widespread informality. Youth workers, women, migrant workers, and low-skilled employees are particularly vulnerable to precarious employment conditions. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of workers engaged in precarious employment arrangements. Millions of temporary, casual, and gig workers experienced substantial income losses, unemployment, and exclusion from emergency social protection measures, thereby highlighting the inadequacy of existing labour policy frameworks (International Labour Organisation, 2023).

Declining Trade Union Influence

The decline of trade union influence represents another major challenge confronting contemporary industrial relations system globally. Historically, trade unions have served as essential institutions for protecting workers' rights, promoting collective bargaining, facilitating social dialogue, and maintaining industrial peace. However, over the past several decades, union membership and collective bargaining coverage have declined significantly in many countries (Hyman, 2023). Several structural factors account for this decline. Economic globalisation has increased competition among firms and encouraged labour market flexibility, thereby reducing employers' willingness to engage in collective bargaining arrangements. Simultaneously, technological change and the transition from manufacturing-based economies to service-oriented economies have fragmented traditional labour markets and weakened collective worker identities. The expansion of non-standard employment arrangements, including temporary work, contract employment, and platform work, has also contributed to declining union density. Workers engaged in precarious employment frequently encounter barriers to unionisation due to legal restrictions, employment insecurity, geographic dispersion, and employer opposition (Visser, 2022).

Furthermore, Chen (2022); Baccaro & Howell (2022) have added their voices by arguing that the neoliberal economic reforms implemented in numerous countries have weakened labour institutions through privatisation, deregulation, and restrictions on collective bargaining rights. Governments increasingly prioritise labour market flexibility and economic competitiveness, often at the expense of collective labour rights.

In Africa, including Nigeria, trade unions continue to play important roles in labour governance; however, they face considerable challenges arising from informalisation, political interference, declining membership, and changing employment structures (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Remote Work and Digital Surveillance

The rapid expansion of remote work constitutes one of the most transformative developments in contemporary industrial relations. Advances in information and communication technologies, combined with the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerated the adoption of remote and hybrid work arrangements across numerous sectors worldwide (Messenger, 2022). Another critical implication concerns the vulnerability of African economies to global economic shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic, international financial crises, geopolitical conflicts, and supply chain disruptions demonstrated the extent to which African labour markets remain dependent upon global economic conditions. Such vulnerabilities highlight the importance of developing resilient labour market institutions and diversified economic structures (United Nations Development Programme, 2024; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023). Remote work offers several advantages, including but not limited to, increased flexibility, reduced commuting costs, improved work-life balance, and expanded employment opportunities.

However, it also generates substantial industrial relations challenges. One of such important challenge concerns digital surveillance and algorithmic management. Employers increasingly utilise digital monitoring technologies to track employee performance, communication patterns, productivity levels, internet usage, and workplace behaviour. Although such technologies may enhance organizational efficiency, they also raise serious concerns regarding privacy rights, worker autonomy, dignity, and workplace trust (De Stefano, 2020). Remote work arrangements also create challenges for labour regulation and collective representation. Trade unions encounter difficulties organising remote workers, conducting collective bargaining activities, and maintaining worker solidarity within virtual work environments. Furthermore, remote work may exacerbate existing inequalities. Workers with limited technological access, inadequate digital skills, or unsuitable home environments may experience significant disadvantages. Gender inequalities may also intensify due to unequal caregiving responsibilities.

Occupational Health and Psychosocial Risks

Occupational health and safety have traditionally focused on physical workplace hazards such as accidents, injuries, and exposure to harmful substances. However, contemporary industrial relations systems increasingly recognise psychosocial risks as critical components of occupational health governance (World Health Organisation, 2023). Psychosocial risks refer to organizational and social factors that negatively affect workers' psychological well-being, physical health, and social functioning. These risks include excessive workload, job insecurity, workplace harassment, emotional labour, occupational stress, burnout, bullying, discrimination, and poor work-life balance.

Similarly, workers engaged in platform work and remote employment often experience social isolation and emotional exhaustion. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased awareness of workplace mental health challenges. Healthcare workers, essential service providers, and remote employees experienced unprecedented levels of occupational stress, burnout, and psychological distress (WHO, 2023). Moreover, psychosocial risks have important economic and industrial relations consequences. Poor mental health contributes to reduced productivity, increased absenteeism, workplace conflicts, labour turnover, and rising healthcare costs. Addressing occupational health and psychosocial risks therefore requires comprehensive strategies involving employers, governments, labour organisations, and health institutions to create healthier, safer, and more sustainable workplaces.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL POLICY RESPONSES: NIGERIA, SOUTH AFRICA, CHINA, AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

The justification for the comparator cases of Nigeria, South Africa, China, and the United Kingdom is theoretically and empirically grounded in the need to capture the diversity, tension, and interdependence of contemporary global industrial relations systems within a single analytical frame.

Firstly, these four economies represent distinct yet interrelated institutional trajectories of labour regulation. The United Kingdom exemplifies a liberal market economy with a long history of voluntarism, deregulation, and recent shifts towards precarious work governance post-Brexit (Hyman, 2021). On the other hand, China represents a state-corporatist model where industrial relations are tightly coordinated with developmental and political objectives, yet increasingly challenged by platform work and labour unrest (Chan, 2020). In like manner, South Africa embodies a post-apartheid, constitutionalised system of social dialogue and centralised bargaining, but one strained by high unemployment and union fragmentation (Bendix, 2022). And finally, Nigeria reflects a developing economy with a dualistic labour market, weak institutional enforcement, and a growing reliance on informal and digital work arrangements (Fashoyin, 2003; ILO, 2023).

Secondly, the cases are interconnected through global production and policy diffusion. Multinational firms, trade agreements, and ILO conventions link labour practices across these contexts. For example, UK-based firms operate in Nigeria and South Africa, while Chinese foreign direct investment increasingly shapes industrial policy in both African states (UNCTAD, 2023). This makes policy learning and policy failure in one jurisdiction directly relevant to the others. Thirdly, they jointly illustrate the core contemporary tensions driving national labour policy reform: the rise of the gig economy, declining union density, wage inequality, youth unemployment, and the pressure to balance competitiveness with decent work (International Labour Organization, 2022; ILO, 2024). Examining them together allows for a comparative analysis of how different state capacities, union traditions, and political economies navigate similar global shocks with divergent policy responses.

Therefore, Nigeria and South Africa provide insights from the Global South and African regionalism; China offers a perspective on state-led capitalism in transition; and the United Kingdom represents a post-industrial, liberal democracy grappling with post-globalisation reforms. Together, they form an integrative comparative matrix that reveals both convergence pressures and path-dependent divergences in navigating contemporary industrial relations tensions, and the implications this holds for national labour policy reform.

The contemporary challenges confronting global industrial relations systems have compelled national governments to adopt diverse policy responses aimed at balancing economic competitiveness, labour market flexibility, workers' rights, and social protection. This section comparatively and briefly examines the policy responses of Nigeria, South Africa, China, and the United Kingdom across five critical dimensions: labour legislation, collective bargaining structures, social protection systems, employment regulation, and tripartite institutions. These countries represent diverse industrial relations traditions and developmental contexts, thereby providing useful insights into the evolving nature of labour governance in the contemporary global economy.

Labour Legislation

Labour legislation constitutes the legal foundation upon which industrial relations systems are constructed. Labour laws regulate employment relationships, establish workers' rights, define employer obligations, and provide mechanisms for conflict resolution. Despite global pressures towards labour market flexibility, significant variations exist among countries regarding the scope and effectiveness of labour legislation. In Nigeria, labour legislation remains largely rooted in post-colonial and military-era legal frameworks. Major labour laws include the Labour Act of 1974, the Trade Unions Act, the Trade Disputes Act, and the National Industrial Court Act. Although these laws provide formal protections regarding employment contracts, trade union activities, and dispute resolution, critics argue that they inadequately address contemporary labour market realities such as gig work, platform employment, remote work, and informal labour arrangements (Fashoyin, 2001). Enforcement mechanisms also remain relatively weak due to institutional limitations and widespread informality.

In South Africa, labour legislation is among the most comprehensive and progressive in the developing world. Following the end of apartheid, the government enacted extensive labour reforms designed to promote social justice, workplace democracy, and labour rights protection. Key legislation includes the Labour Relations Act of 1995, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, and the Employment Equity Act. South Africa's labour laws strongly emphasise collective bargaining, employment equity, social dialogue, and worker protection (Webster & Francis, 2022). However, critics argue that extensive labour regulations may sometimes constrain labour market flexibility and employment creation.

China's labour legislation has evolved significantly over the past three decades in response to economic liberalisation and globalisation. The Labour Law of 1994 and the Labour Contract Law of 2008 strengthened employment protections, contractual obligations, and dispute resolution procedures. Nevertheless, China's labour regulatory framework continues to operate within a state-centred industrial relations model in which labour rights remain subordinate to broader economic development objectives (Chan, 2023). The rapid expansion of platform work and digital labour markets has created additional regulatory challenges.

The United Kingdom possesses one of the oldest and most developed labour law systems globally. British labour legislation has undergone substantial transformation since the 1980s, reflecting a shift towards labour market flexibility and deregulation. Contemporary legislation balances employment protection with market competitiveness through laws governing employment rights, workplace equality, health and safety, and industrial relations (Budd, 2021). Recent policy debates have increasingly focused on regulating platform work, zero-hour contracts, and remote employment arrangements.

Collective Bargaining Structures

In Nigeria, collective bargaining operates through a decentralised and fragmented structure. Trade unions negotiate primarily at enterprise, sectoral, and national levels, particularly within the public sector. The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) remain influential actors in labour relations. Nevertheless, collective bargaining effectiveness is frequently undermined by government intervention, political influence, weak enforcement mechanisms, and the growing informalisation of employment (Fashoyin, 2024). Industrial actions, including strikes and protests, continue to constitute major instruments of labour negotiation.

South Africa maintains one of the strongest collective bargaining systems in Africa. Collective bargaining occurs through sectoral bargaining councils, workplace negotiations, and centralised labour institutions. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) remains a powerful actor within the industrial relations system. South Africa's institutional framework strongly supports collective bargaining as a mechanism for promoting industrial democracy and social justice (Webster & Francis, 2022). However, increasing labour market fragmentation and unemployment have created pressures on existing bargaining structures.

In China, collective bargaining remains relatively limited and state-controlled. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) functions as the sole officially recognised trade union organisation. Although collective consultations have expanded in recent years, genuine independent collective bargaining remains constrained by political and institutional factors (Chan, 2023). Labour disputes are often resolved through mediation, arbitration, and administrative intervention rather than traditional collective bargaining processes.

The United Kingdom has experienced a significant decline in collective bargaining coverage over recent decades. Decentralised enterprise-level bargaining has increasingly replaced industry-wide agreements. Trade union membership has declined substantially since the 1980s due to economic restructuring, labour market flexibilisation, and legislative reforms (Brown et al., 2022). Nonetheless, collective bargaining remains important in sectors such as public administration, education, transportation, and healthcare. (Taylor-Gooby, 2023). (International Labour Organization, 2024). (Seekings & Nattrass, 2021). Lee, 2022).

Employment Regulation and Tripartite Institutions

Employment regulation refers to policies governing hiring practices, employment contracts, workplace conditions, termination procedures, labour standards, and workplace rights. Employment regulation seeks to balance labour market flexibility with worker protection. In Nigeria, employment regulation remains characterised by legal pluralism, institutional weaknesses, and enforcement challenges. Although labour laws establish minimum employment standards, compliance remains inconsistent due to widespread informal employment and limited regulatory capacity (Fashoyin, 2003). Emerging employment forms such as gig work and digital labour remain largely unregulated.

South Africa's employment regulatory framework emphasises worker protection, employment equity, anti-discrimination measures, and labour rights enforcement. Regulatory institutions actively monitor compliance with employment standards and workplace regulations. However, critics argue that stringent employment regulations may discourage investment and job creation, particularly among small enterprises (Webster & Francis, 2022).

In China, employment regulation operates within a hybrid model combining market-oriented reforms with strong state intervention. Employment contracts, wage standards, occupational safety regulations, and labour dispute resolution mechanisms have expanded considerably. However, concerns persist regarding enforcement disparities, migrant worker protections, and restrictions on labour rights (Chan, 2023).

The United Kingdom adopts a relatively flexible employment regulatory approach compared to many European countries. Employment legislation provides protections against discrimination, unfair dismissal, and workplace exploitation while maintaining substantial labour market flexibility. Contemporary policy debates increasingly focus on regulating platform employment, artificial intelligence, and remote work arrangements (Brown et al., 2022). This comparison illustrates the continuing tension between labour market flexibility and employment protection within contemporary industrial relations systems.

Tripartite institutions represent collaborative arrangements involving governments, employers, and labour organisations in labour policy formulation and industrial governance. Effective tripartism promotes social dialogue, industrial peace, and policy consensus. In Nigeria, tripartite institutions exist through organisations such as the National Labour Advisory Council and various wage commissions. However, the effectiveness of tripartite dialogue is frequently constrained by political interference, institutional weaknesses, and adversarial labour relations (Fashoyin, 2003). Industrial conflicts often emerge due to inadequate consultation and implementation failures. South Africa possesses one of the strongest tripartite systems globally through the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC). NEDLAC provides institutional mechanisms for consultation among government, business, labour, and civil society organisations. This framework has contributed significantly to social dialogue and labour policy development since democratisation (Webster & Francis, 2022).

In China, tripartite institutions operate within a state-centred governance framework. The government, employers' organisations, and the official trade union federation participate in labour policy consultations and dispute resolution processes. However, the absence of independent labour organisations limits the autonomy and effectiveness of tripartite arrangements (Lee, 2022). The United Kingdom historically maintained strong traditions of social partnership and tripartite consultation. Although formal tripartite institutions have weakened since the 1980s, government-employer-union consultations continue in areas such as employment policy, skills development, occupational health, and economic reform (Taylor-Gooby, 2023).

NATIONAL POLICY DIRECTIONS TOWARDS RESPONSIVE AND INCLUSIVE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS SYSTEM

The increasing complexity of contemporary industrial relations tensions has exposed the limitations of traditional labour policy frameworks across the world. Globalisation, technological disruption, demographic transitions, labour migration, climate change, and changing employment relationships have fundamentally transformed the world of work, necessitating a comprehensive rethinking of national policy directions. Existing labour institutions and regulatory systems, many of which were developed during the industrial era, often prove inadequate in addressing the realities of twenty-first-century labour markets. This section examines critical areas requiring policy reforms to strengthen industrial relations system and promote sustainable labour governance in both developed and developing economies.

Labour Market Governance

Labour market governance refers to the institutions, policies, regulations, and mechanisms through which employment relationships and labour markets are organised, regulated, and managed. Effective labour market governance promotes employment creation, protects workers' rights, enhances productivity, and facilitates social cohesion (International Labour Organization ILO, 2024). Contemporary labour market governance systems face substantial challenges arising from globalisation, technological disruption, labour market fragmentation, and the expansion of non-standard employment arrangements. Traditional governance structures were primarily designed to regulate stable employment relationships within nationally bounded economies. However, modern labour markets increasingly involve flexible employment arrangements, platform work, transnational labour mobility, and digital employment ecosystems (OECD, 2023).

Consequently, labour market governance frameworks require substantial reform to become more responsive to changing labour market conditions. Governments should adopt integrated labour market policies that balance flexibility with security, often referred to as "flexicurity" approaches.

Such approaches seek to maintain labour market adaptability while ensuring adequate social protection and employment security for workers (Bredgaard & Larsen, 2021). For developing countries such as Nigeria, labour market governance reforms should prioritise formalisation strategies, institutional strengthening, employment creation programmes, and improved enforcement mechanisms (ILO, 2023).

Human Capital Development and Social Security Expansion

Human capital development has become increasingly central to contemporary labour policy due to rapid technological advancement, demographic changes, and evolving labour market requirements. Human capital refers to the knowledge, skills, competencies, health, and capabilities individuals possess that contribute to economic productivity and social development (Becker, 1993). The Fourth Industrial Revolution has accelerated demand for new skills while rendering many traditional occupations obsolete. Consequently, governments face growing pressure to develop labour policies that facilitate lifelong learning, skills development, and workforce adaptation (World Economic Forum, 2025). National labour policy reforms should prioritise investment in education, vocational training, technical skills development, digital literacy, and professional reskilling programmes.

The expansion of social security systems represents a critical component of contemporary labour policy reform. Social security provides protection against unemployment, sickness, disability, old age, occupational injury, and other social risks, thereby contributing to economic stability and social cohesion (International Social Security Association, 2024). Contemporary labour market transformations have exposed significant weaknesses in existing social protection systems. Workers engaged in informal employment, gig work, temporary employment, and self-employment frequently remain excluded from social security programmes. National policy reforms should therefore prioritise universal and inclusive social protection systems. Governments should expand coverage to vulnerable workers, informal sector employees, migrant workers, and platform workers. Social protection programmes should also become more flexible and portable to accommodate increasingly dynamic employment patterns. Castles et al., (2020) the concept of social protection floors promoted by international organisations offers an important framework for ensuring minimum levels of social security for all citizens. Such programmes contribute to poverty reduction, economic resilience, and social inclusion.

Digital Labour Regulation

The digital transformation of labour markets has generated unprecedented challenges for traditional labour regulation systems. Platform work, artificial intelligence, algorithmic management, remote employment, and digital surveillance have fundamentally altered employment relationships and workplace governance structures (De Stefano, 2020). Existing labour regulations were primarily designed for conventional employment arrangements and often fail to address emerging digital employment realities. Consequently, governments worldwide face increasing pressure to develop comprehensive digital labour regulatory frameworks.

Governments should establish clear legal standards regarding the status of platform workers and ensure their access to labour protections and social security benefits (Hyman, 2023). Furthermore, the International Labour Organisation (2024) recommends that regulatory frameworks should promote transparency and accountability in algorithmic decision-making processes. Employers utilising artificial intelligence systems for recruitment, performance evaluation, and workplace management should be required to ensure fairness, transparency, and non-discrimination. International cooperation is also essential because digital labour platforms frequently operate across national boundaries. Harmonised international standards may help prevent regulatory arbitrage and protect workers within global digital labour markets. The regulation of digital labour therefore represents one of the most important policy priorities facing contemporary industrial relations systems (World Economic Forum, 2025).

GLOBAL INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS TENSIONS FOR DEVELOPING ECONOMIES: FOCUS ON NIGERIA AND SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA AS EMERGING ECONOMIES

The contemporary transformations occurring within global industrial relations systems have profound implications for developing economies. While globalisation, technological advancement, labour mobility, and economic integration have created opportunities for economic growth and labour market expansion, they have simultaneously intensified existing structural vulnerabilities within developing countries. These challenges are particularly pronounced in countries characterised by weak labour institutions, high levels of informality, limited social protection systems, and persistent socioeconomic inequalities (International Labour Organization, 2024).

Implications for Nigeria

Nigeria, as Africa's largest economy and one of the continent's most populous countries, presents a particularly important case for examining the impact of contemporary industrial relations transformations. The Nigerian labour market is characterised by significant structural challenges, including high unemployment rates, underemployment, labour informality, weak institutional capacity, and recurrent industrial disputes. One of the most significant implications of contemporary global industrial relations tensions for Nigeria is the continued expansion of precarious and informal employment. Economic globalisation and labour market restructuring have contributed to the growth of non-standard employment arrangements, including temporary contracts, casual labour, outsourcing, and platform-based employment. While these arrangements may create employment opportunities, they frequently provide limited social protection, inadequate job security, and restricted labour rights (Fashoyin, 2001). Consequently, workers increasingly face employment insecurity and economic vulnerability.

Technological transformation also presents both opportunities and challenges for Nigeria's labour market. Digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and automation offer prospects for increased productivity and economic diversification. However, Nigeria's limited technological infrastructure, inadequate digital skills base, and educational deficiencies may exacerbate labour market inequalities and increase unemployment among vulnerable populations (World Economic Forum, 2025). Without significant investments in human capital development and digital infrastructure, technological disruption may intensify existing socioeconomic disparities. Furthermore, the emigration of skilled professionals such as healthcare, academics, engineers, and other skilled workers reduces domestic human capital capacity and undermines national development efforts resulting in 'Brain drain' (Castles et al., 2020).

Implications for Sub-Saharan Africa

The implications of contemporary global industrial relations tensions extend beyond individual countries to affect the broader Sub-Saharan African region. Despite significant economic growth experienced in several African countries over recent decades, labour markets throughout the region continue to face substantial structural challenges. One of the most significant characteristics of Sub-Saharan African labour markets is the dominance of informal employment. In many countries, over 70 per cent of the labour force operates within informal economic activities, limiting access to social protection, labour rights, and collective representation (ILO, 2024). The expansion of global economic integration and labour market flexibility has further reinforced patterns of informal employment, thereby complicating labour governance and regulatory enforcement.

The region also experiences substantial demographic pressures due to rapid population growth and youth unemployment. Africa possesses the world's youngest population, creating both opportunities and challenges for labour market development. While a youthful population may contribute to economic dynamism and innovation, inadequate job creation and skills development programmes risk generating increased unemployment, social exclusion, and political instability (African Development Bank, 2024). Technological transformation similarly presents a double-edged challenge for Sub-Saharan Africa. Digital technologies have expanded access to employment opportunities, financial services, and educational resources. However, unequal access to technology, inadequate infrastructure, and digital skill deficits may contribute to widening socioeconomic inequalities both within and between countries.

Conclusion

The emerging challenges confronting contemporary industrial relations systems reflect the profound transformations occurring within the global economy and labour markets. Precarious employment, declining trade union influence, expanding informality, cross-border labour disputes, remote work, digital surveillance, and psychosocial risks collectively challenge traditional industrial relations institutions and regulatory frameworks. These developments underscore the urgent need for innovative labour policies, strengthened social dialogue mechanisms, enhanced worker protections, and more inclusive employment governance systems capable of responding effectively to the realities of twenty-first-century work. The comparative analysis demonstrates that there is no single model of industrial relations governance capable of addressing all contemporary labour market challenges. Rather, national policy responses reflect specific historical experiences, institutional capacities, political systems, and developmental priorities. While South Africa emphasises social justice and institutionalised social dialogue, the United Kingdom prioritises labour market flexibility and regulatory adaptation. China adopts a state-centred developmental approach, whereas Nigeria continues to confront challenges associated with institutional weakness, labour informality, and policy implementation deficits. These comparative experiences provide valuable lessons for the development of more inclusive, resilient, and adaptive national labour policy frameworks capable of addressing emerging global industrial relations tensions.

Policy Recommendations

Promoting Social Partnership as a way of encouraging greater cooperation among governments, employers, trade unions, and civil society organisations through strengthened social dialogue and tripartite consultation mechanisms. Effective social partnerships contribute significantly to economic stability, social cohesion, and conflict resolution.

Harmonising digital labour standards and shift from wage suppression to productivity-linked social protection to counter regulatory arbitrary and precarity exposed by transnational productivity across the four comparators. Such frameworks will help to integrate employment protection, social security, and active labour market policies.

National labour reforms must institutionalise inclusive social dialogue that extends legal protections to gig, informal, and migrant workers, to address the gaps evident in the chosen countries in the comparative analysis. If this is done, it will help to balance international cooperation through multilateral organisations, regional institutions, and bilateral agreements.

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