

Regulating Conflict Under Unequal Power: A Critical Pluralist Framework For Sustainable Employment Relations In Nigerian Public And Private Organisations

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Awoniyi O.M¹, Owoborode S.B², Olubaji S.O³, Adedeji T.A⁴, Oyero S.A⁴

¹General Studies Department, Federal College of Fisheries and Marine Technology, Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria,

²Department of Computer Science, University of Ilesha, Osun State, Nigeria,

³Department of Computer Science, Osun State University, Ipetu Ijesha Campus, Nigeria,

⁴Department of Industrial and Labour Relations, Federal College of Fisheries and Marine Technology, Lagos, Nigeria

Correspondence: Awoniyi O.M, awoniyioluwafemi@gmail.com

Abstract

Employment-relations scholarship frequently associates organisational sustainability with industrial harmony, cooperation, effective dispute resolution and declining workplace conflict. Such indicators, however, cannot distinguish disagreement that has been institutionally regulated from disagreement that has become less visible because employees lack effective means of contestation. This conceptual paper develops institutional conflict-regulation capacity as a system-level construct for explaining how employment-relations institutions process disagreement under unequal power. Drawing on critical pluralism, structured antagonism, employee voice and institutional regulation, the framework identifies four interacting mechanisms: procedural fairness and reviewability; protected and effective employee voice; independent collective representation and bargaining; and credible institutional enforcement. Power asymmetry operates as a boundary condition rather than a fifth mechanism, while adaptive institutional learning operates recursively through conflict, institutional feedback and redesign. The framework distinguishes three conflict trajectories—regulated, suppressed and escalated—and argues that low visible conflict is not necessarily evidence of sustainable employment relations. Nigerian public, private, multinational, informal, temporary-agency and platform work provide contextual grounding for the framework rather than empirical validation. The paper's contribution lies in integrating established mechanisms into a conditional conflict-regulation architecture and specifying how their interaction changes under unequal power.

Keywords: Pluralism, Power, Voice, Bargaining, Enforcement

1. Introduction

Reframing Conflict in Employment Relations

Employment relations are often evaluated through the language of cooperation, harmony, employee satisfaction and industrial peace. These concepts are important, but they become analytically inadequate when they are treated as direct evidence of healthy employment relations. Employment is simultaneously a site of cooperation and structured disagreement. Employers and employees may depend upon one another for organisational survival while disagreeing over wages, workload, managerial authority, job security, discipline, recognition, technological change and the distribution of organisational gains and risks. The critical question is therefore not whether conflict exists, but whether employment-relations institutions possess the capacity to process disagreement without demanding either employee acquiescence or organisational breakdown. This distinction is especially important in Nigeria, where employment relations encompass public institutions, indigenous private organisations, multinational corporations, temporary agency work, informal employment and increasingly platform-mediated labour. The conventional equation between low conflict and organisational stability becomes problematic because cooperation has different meanings. It may represent genuine accommodation, negotiated compromise and shared problem-solving, but it may also represent constrained compliance where workers calculate that open disagreement is too costly. Bray et al. (2020) demonstrate that cooperation in employment relationships is conceptually heterogeneous rather than inherently harmonious. Similarly, scholarship on employee voice and silence has shown that speaking and remaining silent cannot be understood independently of organisational context, power and perceived consequences (Nechanska et al., 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2020). Nigerian evidence reinforces this concern. Emelifeonwu and Valk (2019) demonstrate how fear of victimisation, labour-market conditions and power distance can influence employee voice and silence, while Ikyanyon et al. (2020) show that institutional context shapes how human resource practices operate in Nigeria.

This paper therefore develops the construct of institutional conflict-regulation capacity, defined as the capacity of an employment-relations system to convert competing interests arising under unequal power into legitimate, expressible, negotiable and enforceable forms of contestation without requiring employee suppression or organisational breakdown. The construct is deliberately system-level. A grievance procedure may formally exist while offering little independent review. A union may be recognised while lacking bargaining capacity. Employees may be invited to speak while believing that doing so will damage their employment prospects. A statutory right may exist while the available remedy remains inaccessible, delayed or institutionally weak. Institutional presence is therefore not equivalent to institutional capacity. The paper's theoretical contribution is integrative rather than ingredient-based. Procedural fairness, employee voice, collective representation, bargaining and enforcement are well-established areas of employment-relations scholarship. What remains insufficiently specified is how these mechanisms interact as a system under unequal power and how their configuration affects the trajectory of conflict. The framework consequently distinguishes between regulated conflict, suppressed conflict and escalated conflict. Regulation preserves contestability; suppression reduces it; escalation occurs when institutional arrangements fail to process continuing disagreement.

The paper addresses two questions. First, how do procedural review, employee voice, collective representation, institutional enforcement and power asymmetry shape whether employment conflict becomes regulated, suppressed or escalated? Second, how can these mechanisms be integrated into a critical pluralist framework of sustainable employment relations across Nigerian public and private organisations? The paper does not claim causal validation or national prevalence. Instead, it develops a theoretically specified framework that can subsequently be subjected to comparative empirical testing.

2. Thematic Problematisation: Harmony, Silence And Structured Antagonism

The intellectual problem begins with the tension between harmony-centred and pluralist interpretations of employment relations. Unitarist perspectives tend to treat the organisation as possessing an underlying common interest, with conflict interpreted primarily as dysfunction, misunderstanding or a failure of managerial integration. Pluralist approaches instead recognise that employers and employees possess potentially divergent interests and that institutions such as collective bargaining, grievance procedures and representative structures provide legitimate means of processing those differences. Contemporary employment-relations scholarship has revisited these frames by recognising that pluralism itself contains competing interpretations concerning power, cooperation, conflict and institutional legitimacy (Ackers, 2021; Barry & Wilkinson, 2021). Critical pluralism moves the analysis further by asking whether actors who formally possess equal procedural status actually possess comparable capacities to exercise their interests. Van Buren et al. (2021) argue for attention to agonism and dissensus within pluralist employment relations, while Olsen and Van Buren (2024) emphasise the ethical significance of maintaining legitimate disagreement rather than attempting to domesticate every difference into consensus. Conflict can therefore be institutionally productive without being inherently desirable in every manifestation. What matters is whether disagreement remains capable of being expressed, negotiated and processed through institutions recognised as legitimate by the parties. The concept of structured antagonism is useful here because employment relations are not simply interpersonal relationships. The employer generally possesses authority over recruitment, work allocation, discipline, performance assessment, remuneration and, ultimately, continued employment. Employees possess labour power but frequently depend upon the employment relationship for income and social reproduction. These structural conditions mean that formally neutral procedures may operate differently according to the relative resources available to each side. Power is therefore embedded within the employment relationship rather than introduced only when conflict becomes visible.

The literature on employee voice and silence reinforces this argument. Voice is not merely the availability of a suggestion box, grievance portal, staff meeting or representative committee. Employees must believe that speaking can produce consequences and that participation will not expose them to unacceptable retaliation. Huang et al. (2024) demonstrate the importance of contextual voice efficacy, showing why the perceived capacity of voice to influence outcomes matters for understanding both speaking and silence. The implication for conflict regulation is significant: a formally available channel can coexist with practically suppressed contestation. The framework consequently distinguishes three trajectories. Regulated conflict exists when disagreement remains visible, legitimate and processable through credible institutions. Suppressed conflict exists when visible disagreement declines because employees perceive contestation as ineffective, unsafe, futile or too costly. Escalated conflict emerges when institutions cannot process continuing disagreement and contestation moves into strikes, litigation, collective resistance, recurrent grievances, withdrawal or turnover. These categories are analytically distinct. A decline in grievances cannot automatically be interpreted as improved regulation because the same numerical outcome may arise from institutional effectiveness or institutional silencing. This distinction also modifies the meaning of sustainable employment relations. Sustainability should not be reduced to low dispute frequency. In this framework, employment relations are sustainable when institutions can repeatedly process disagreement while preserving meaningful contestability and avoiding recurrent organisational breakdown. Sustainability therefore refers to the reproducibility of legitimate conflict-processing capacity over time, not the disappearance of conflict.

3. Theoretical Architecture: Critical Pluralism, Power And Institutional Regulation

The framework assigns different theoretical functions to the bodies of literature from which it draws.

Critical pluralism explains why conflict is legitimate within employment relations. Structured antagonism explains why conflict recurs even when organisations develop sophisticated cooperation practices. Employee voice and silence explain how individual and collective concerns become expressed or withheld. Collective representation explains how dispersed interests acquire organisational capacity. Institutional regulation and enforcement explain whether claims and negotiated outcomes acquire practical force. Adaptive institutional learning explains how the institutional system changes after conflict. This division of labour prevents the framework from becoming an accumulation of loosely connected theories.

The first theoretical commitment is that employment conflict is not necessarily institutional failure. Organisations may possess legitimate and enduring differences concerning distribution, authority and work organisation. Conflict becomes institutionally problematic when employees cannot contest decisions, when representation cannot aggregate interests, when procedures are inaccessible or when settlements lack enforceability. The appropriate analytical question is consequently whether institutional arrangements preserve legitimate contestation.

The second commitment concerns power. Power asymmetry is treated as a boundary condition, not as another institutional mechanism. It refers to systematic differences in control over employment continuity, information, resources, organisational decisions and the consequences of contestation. This positioning matters because power does not operate only through one institutional channel. It simultaneously affects whether employees use voice, whether representatives can bargain, whether procedural review is meaningful and whether enforcement can be activated.

The third commitment concerns institutional capacity. The framework distinguishes between the existence of an institution and its capacity to regulate conflict. A grievance system may exist but lack independent review. A union may be recognised but lack bargaining leverage. An employee voice system may produce extensive data but little decision-making influence. A legal remedy may be available formally but inaccessible because of cost, delay or procedural complexity. The relevant construct must therefore capture the relationship between institutional design and practical contestability.

The framework also incorporates an efficiency–equity–voice perspective. Marzionna (2026) demonstrates in a Global South dispute-resolution context that mechanisms may perform differently across efficiency, equity and voice, and that institutional conditions can shape the trade-offs among these dimensions. This is valuable for the present framework because an institution that resolves disputes quickly is not necessarily equitable, while a procedurally elaborate institution is not necessarily accessible. Efficiency can become particularly problematic when it is achieved by reducing participation or limiting opportunities for independent challenge. The framework therefore treats efficiency, equity and voice as a diagnostic lens, rather than as a fifth institutional mechanism. It asks whether a conflict-regulation system is efficient enough to function, equitable enough to retain legitimacy and participatory enough to preserve contestability. The EEV lens is particularly useful for exposing situations in which organisational calm is purchased at the expense of voice or fairness.

4. Methodological Approach: Critical Integrative Conceptual Synthesis

This paper adopts a critical integrative conceptual theory-building approach. The purpose is not to claim the systematic empirical validation associated with a quantitative study, but to develop a theoretically coherent model from established employment-relations scholarship and contextual evidence. The analytical procedure follows four linked stages.

First, the paper identifies a theoretical problem in harmony-centred approaches: the assumption that lower visible conflict necessarily reflects better employment relations. Pluralist and critical-pluralist scholarship

is then used to establish conflict, competing interests and power as legitimate analytical objects. Second, the paper integrates research on voice and silence, procedural fairness, collective representation, bargaining and institutional enforcement. The aim is not to merge these constructs indiscriminately but to determine what each contributes to a conflict-regulation system.

Third, the paper differentiates the outcomes of institutional arrangements. Existing research frequently measures conflict through strikes, grievances, litigation, turnover or reported dissatisfaction. These indicators remain useful but become ambiguous when considered independently. A low strike rate may indicate successful bargaining or the inability of workers to mobilise. A low grievance rate may indicate effective early resolution or employee silence. The conceptual framework therefore treats observable conflict as requiring interpretation through institutional capacity.

Fourth, Nigerian and Global South studies are used as contextual material for theoretical plausibility. They do not constitute evidence that the proposed relationships hold uniformly across Nigeria. Chukwu et al. (2025), for example, demonstrate how informal employment and power asymmetry interact with regulatory and sociocultural conditions in Nigerian small-scale enterprises. Cieslik et al. (2022) similarly demonstrate that platform work in Lagos cannot be analysed through a conventional employment model without considering informality, labour standards and social dialogue. Such evidence strengthens the contextual relevance of the framework while leaving empirical validation to future research.

The resulting analytical unit is the employment-relations institutional system. The framework does not treat procedural fairness, voice, representation and enforcement as four independent variables that simply add together. Their value depends partly upon interaction. Voice may generate information required for procedural review; representation can aggregate concerns that individual voice cannot sustain; enforcement can make negotiated outcomes credible; and procedural legitimacy can encourage continued participation. Conversely, weakness in one mechanism can undermine the others.

5. Institutional Conflict-Regulation Capacity: Four Interdependent Mechanisms

The first mechanism is **procedural fairness and reviewability**. Procedural fairness concerns whether employees receive understandable reasons, opportunities to present their cases, consistent treatment and meaningful avenues for challenge. The critical addition is reviewability. Procedures controlled entirely by the original decision-maker may provide consistency without genuine independence. The relevant question is therefore not simply whether a grievance procedure exists but whether employees can challenge decisions before an actor capable of revising them.

Proposition 1: Procedural fairness is more likely to contribute to sustainable conflict regulation when employees possess meaningful opportunities for independent review and challenge than when procedural consistency remains exclusively under managerial control.

The second mechanism is a protected and effective employee voice. Voice must be distinguished from channel availability. Employees may have access to meetings, surveys, grievance systems or representatives while believing that participation cannot influence outcomes. Huang et al. (2024) makes contextual voice efficacy particularly important here. Nigerian evidence similarly indicates that employee voice and silence are shaped by organisational and institutional conditions rather than simply by the presence of formal mechanisms (Emelifeonwu & Valk, 2019). Voice therefore requires three properties: availability, efficacy and protection.

Proposition 2: Employee voice is more likely to contribute to sustainable conflict regulation when employees perceive that their participation can influence outcomes and possess credible protection against retaliation.

The third mechanism is independent collective representation and bargaining. Collective representation can counterbalance the fragmentation inherent in individual employment relationships by aggregating worker interests. It does not, however, automatically regulate conflict. Representation can become dependent, symbolic or disconnected from the workforce. Bargaining can also produce agreements that lack implementation. Its conflict-regulating effect therefore depends upon independence, bargaining capacity, coverage and enforceability.

Proposition 3: Collective representation is more likely to regulate distributive employment conflict when worker representatives possess sufficient independence, bargaining capacity is credible and negotiated outcomes are enforceable.

The fourth mechanism is credible institutional enforcement. Enforcement closes the gap between formal rights and practical remedy. It involves accessibility, independence, timeliness and the capacity to produce consequences or remedies recognised by the parties. The significance of this mechanism extends beyond formal state enforcement. Workplace grievance systems, collective agreements, professional bodies and other regulatory actors may all contribute to enforcement. Sutherland and Selvarajah (2025) demonstrate that formal and informal regulatory processes can interact within a polycentric dispute-resolution system rather than operating as separate worlds.

Proposition 4: The conflict-regulating effects of employment-relations institutions are stronger when rights and negotiated outcomes are supported by accessible, independent, timely and credible enforcement mechanisms.

The four mechanisms should therefore be understood as interdependent. Voice without protection can increase exposure to retaliation. Representation without enforcement can produce agreements without implementation. Procedural fairness without independent review can reproduce managerial discretion. Enforcement without an accessible voice may respond only after conflict has already escalated. Institutional conflict-regulation capacity therefore cannot be reduced to the arithmetic sum of four institutional scores.

6. Power Asymmetry And The Efficiency–Equity–Voice Tension

Power asymmetry is the principal boundary condition of the framework. It encompasses differences in employment security, control over information, access to organisational resources, decision-making authority and the consequences attached to contestation. These differences are particularly significant in precarious and informal work, where employees may possess fewer realistic alternatives to the existing employment relationship. The Nigerian context demonstrates why employment relations cannot be treated as institutionally uniform. Public-sector employees may operate within relatively formal procedural arrangements while still encountering bureaucratic or political constraints. Private-sector workers may encounter flexible HR systems but stronger managerial discretion. Multinational organisations may introduce formal voice mechanisms while local labour-market conditions influence their credibility. Temporary-agency and platform workers may face fragmented responsibility between the worker, intermediary and principal organisation.

The interaction between power and voice is particularly important. Where employment insecurity is high, the cost of contestation may rise even if formal voice channels remain unchanged. Oyetunde et al. (2026) show the importance of managerial silencing and worker resistance among temporary-agency and platform workers in a developing-country context. The implication is not that precarious workers are inherently silent, but that the institutional conditions under which they speak, remain silent or organise differ from those of workers in more secure employment.

Proposition 5: Institutional conflict-regulation capacity decreases as power asymmetry increases unless independent representation, credible voice protection and enforceable rights provide countervailing institutional resources.

This proposition also explains why apparent harmony must be interpreted cautiously.

Proposition 6: Apparent reductions in employment conflict are less likely to indicate sustainable regulation when they occur alongside low voice efficacy, weak protection, limited representation or reduced confidence in institutional remedies.

The efficiency–equity–voice framework sharpens this argument. A mechanism may be efficient because it is fast, inexpensive and organisationally convenient while simultaneously limiting employee participation. Conversely, a highly formal process may protect equity while imposing costs that discourage economically vulnerable workers from using it. Marzionna (2026) demonstrates that these dimensions can diverge and that institutional context influences how the trade-offs are experienced. Sustainable conflict regulation therefore requires attention to all three.

The EEV lens consequently becomes a diagnostic instrument for detecting false efficiency. A reduction in disputes that results from rapid managerial closure may appear efficient while actually weakening equity and voice. The same numerical reduction produced by credible bargaining and independent review represents a different institutional outcome.

Proposition 7: Efficiency gains do not necessarily increase sustainable conflict-regulation capacity when faster or cheaper dispute resolution is accompanied by declining equity, meaningful voice or independent reviewability.

7. Collective, Informal And Digital Forms Of Conflict Regulation

A major limitation of conventional employment-relations frameworks is their tendency to assume stable employment relationships, identifiable employers and institutionalised collective representation. Contemporary Nigerian employment relations complicate each assumption. Informal workers, temporary-agency workers and platform workers may operate outside or at the margins of conventional labour institutions.

Cieslik et al. (2022) demonstrate this problem directly in Lagos. E-hailing work can provide income opportunities and certain material benefits while remaining embedded within informal employment structures and limited labour protection. Their analysis also identifies organised labour movements among platform workers. This is theoretically significant because the absence of conventional employment status does not necessarily imply the absence of collective agency. Digital platforms can simultaneously fragment workers and create new infrastructures for mobilisation. Oyetunde et al. (2026) demonstrate how workers subjected to managerial silencing can develop forms of resistance and voice under conditions of precarious employment. Digital communication can therefore become a substitute for, complement to, or challenge to conventional representation. The institutional question is not whether digital voice is inherently empowering but whether it can translate expression into consequential bargaining or regulatory capacity. Informal employment generates a parallel challenge. Chukwu et al. (2025) show how Nigerian small-scale enterprises are shaped by employer–employee power differences, regulatory gaps and sociocultural conditions. These findings reinforce the argument that formal institutional presence cannot be used as the sole indicator of conflict-regulation capacity. Workers may rely on informal negotiation, peer networks, associations, social pressure or community relationships where formal mechanisms are unavailable or ineffective. The broader implication is that conflict regulation is increasingly polycentric. Formal state institutions, employers, unions, worker associations, professional bodies, digital networks and community

actors may interact. Sutherland and Selvarajah (2025) show how formal and informal mechanisms can operate together within a labour-dispute regime. Informality should therefore not be romanticised as inherently democratic; informal mechanisms can also reproduce unequal power. The theoretical point is that institutional regulation may occur through multiple overlapping sites.

This leads to a further proposition:

Proposition 8: Conflict-regulation capacity is more likely to be sustained in non-standard employment when formal and informal representative institutions can convert dispersed worker concerns into credible collective voice, negotiation and enforceable outcomes.

This extension allows the framework to move beyond the conventional organisation without abandoning its central construct. The unit of analysis remains the institutional system through which employment disagreement becomes expressed, negotiated or suppressed.

8. Adaptive Institutional Learning And Conflict Trajectories

Institutions do not remain static after conflict. Organisations restructure grievance systems, unions modify bargaining strategies, regulators revise procedures and workers develop alternative forms of organisation. Conflict therefore produces information about institutional performance. Adaptive institutional learning describes the process through which that information feeds back into institutional redesign.

Learning is not treated as a fifth mechanism because it does not independently regulate conflict in the same manner as voice, representation or enforcement. Rather, it is a recursive process through which the system evaluates and modifies its mechanisms. An institution that repeatedly encounters unresolved grievances may redesign its review process. A union confronted by fragmented platform work may develop new forms of representation. A regulator encountering repeated enforcement failures may change access procedures or strengthen oversight. The concept must nevertheless be treated critically. Institutions can learn to suppress conflict more efficiently. An organisation may redesign a grievance procedure so that complaints are closed more rapidly without increasing employee influence. A regulator may create additional reporting requirements without improving actual remedies. Learning therefore cannot be judged solely by institutional efficiency. The relevant criterion is whether learning expands or contracts legitimate contestability. This distinction reinforces the difference between regulated and suppressed conflict. Regulation allows disagreement to generate information that can improve institutional arrangements. Suppression removes the information by discouraging its expression. Adaptive learning is particularly important under technological and labour-market change. Algorithmic management, platform work, restructuring and changing contractual arrangements can alter the distribution of information and control. Existing institutional arrangements may become poorly matched to new forms of employment. The framework therefore treats sustainability as a continuing institutional achievement rather than a permanent organisational state.

Proposition 9: Institutional conflict-regulation capacity is more sustainable when worker participation and representative knowledge are incorporated into the revision of procedures, bargaining arrangements and enforcement mechanisms following organisational, technological and labour-market change.

The recursive model can therefore be represented conceptually as:

Power asymmetry → institutional mechanisms → conflict-regulation capacity → regulated/suppressed/escalated conflict → institutional learning → institutional redesign → renewed institutional capacity.

Power asymmetry surrounds the mechanism system as a boundary condition rather than functioning as a sequential causal stage. Adaptive learning feeds back into the mechanisms rather than appearing as an

additional independent dimension.

9. Integrated Framework And Nigerian Context

The integrated framework places institutional conflict-regulation capacity at the centre of the employment-relations system. Four mechanisms—procedural fairness and reviewability, protected and effective voice, independent collective representation and bargaining, and credible institutional enforcement—interact within a context characterised by varying degrees of power asymmetry. The framework predicts that the same formal institution may produce different outcomes under different power conditions. A grievance mechanism may be effective in an organisation where employees have strong employment security and independent representation but produce suppression where workers fear dismissal. A collective agreement may regulate conflict where implementation is credible but intensify distrust where management routinely ignores negotiated outcomes. A voice system may generate valuable information where employees believe participation matters but produce organisational silence where employees expect retaliation. The Nigerian context is theoretically useful because it contains substantial variation across organisational forms. Public institutions, private organisations, multinational corporations, small-scale enterprises, temporary-agency work and platform employment expose different combinations of authority, insecurity, representation and enforcement. Ikyanyon et al. (2020) demonstrate the significance of institutional context for HRM in Nigeria, while Emelifeonwu and Valk (2019) show that voice and silence are shaped by organisational and cultural conditions. Chukwu et al. (2025) extend this logic into informal and small-enterprise employment, while Cieslik et al. (2022) demonstrate how platform labour in Lagos complicates conventional employment categories.

The framework should not, however, be interpreted as claiming that Nigerian organisations uniformly experience weak institutions or high power asymmetry. Such a conclusion would reproduce the very institutional homogenisation that the framework seeks to avoid. The theoretical value of Nigeria lies instead in its heterogeneity. Different employment settings permit examination of how the same mechanisms operate under different configurations of power, representation and regulatory exposure. The integrated framework also clarifies the empirical implications. Future studies should distinguish institutional availability from institutional efficacy. Procedural fairness should be operationalised through reviewability, independence, access and remedy. Voice should be measured through availability, influence and protection. Representation should distinguish formal recognition from independence and bargaining capacity. Enforcement should capture accessibility, timeliness, independence and actual remedy. Power asymmetry should incorporate employment dependency, information asymmetry, managerial discretion and worker alternatives.

The framework therefore provides a basis for structural equation modelling, multilevel analysis and configurational approaches. Importantly, empirical research should not use strike frequency or grievance counts as the sole measure of conflict regulation. Studies should distinguish constructive voice, suppressed silence, formal grievances, litigation, collective action, turnover, withdrawal and other forms of contestation. Longitudinal research could further examine whether institutional learning following disputes produces stronger regulation or more sophisticated suppression.

10. Contributions, Implications, Limitations And Conclusion

The paper makes four principal theoretical contributions. First, it reframes sustainable employment relations from a problem of conflict elimination to conflict regulation. This challenges the assumption that harmony, cooperation or low dispute frequency necessarily represent institutional success. Second, it develops institutional conflict-regulation capacity as a system-level construct composed of four interacting mechanisms. The contribution is not the invention of procedural fairness, voice, representation or

enforcement; it lies in specifying their interaction as a conditional institutional architecture.

Third, the framework positions power asymmetry as a boundary condition. This creates a more precise theoretical account than treating power merely as a background characteristic. The effectiveness of voice, representation, procedure and enforcement can change as employment dependency and managerial control change. Fourth, the framework introduces adaptive institutional learning as a recursive process and distinguishes regulated, suppressed and escalated conflict. This makes it possible to examine whether apparent institutional stability represents successful regulation or declining contestability.

The paper also contributes to Nigerian employment-relations scholarship by connecting conventional organisational employment relations with informal, temporary and platform-mediated work. Cieslik et al. (2022) demonstrate that platform work in Lagos cannot be adequately understood through conventional employment categories, while Chukwu et al. (2025) show the importance of power, informality and regulatory conditions in Nigerian small-scale enterprises. Oyetunde et al. (2026) further demonstrates that managerial silencing and worker resistance take differentiated forms across precarious employment contexts. These studies do not validate the framework empirically, but they demonstrate why a system-oriented model of conflict regulation is theoretically relevant to the Nigerian setting.

The practical implications follow from the same logic. Organisations should assess voice systems by their efficacy and protection rather than channel availability alone. Grievance systems should provide meaningful review rather than managerial self-review. Collective bargaining should be assessed through representational independence, bargaining capacity and implementation. Enforcement systems should be evaluated through accessibility, independence, timeliness and remedy. Managers and policymakers should also avoid interpreting lower conflict as automatic evidence of improvement without examining whether employees have become less willing or able to contest decisions.

The framework also suggests that labour policy should be evaluated across the institutional chain from rights to voice, representation, procedure and remedy. Formal rights without credible enforcement can generate institutional legitimacy without effective protection. This concern is particularly important for non-standard workers whose formal classification may place them outside conventional labour protections. The experience of Lagos platform work illustrates how technological intermediation can complicate the conventional distinction between employee and independent contractor (Cieslik et al., 2022).

The paper has limitations. It is conceptual and therefore does not establish causal relationships, national prevalence or cross-sector effect sizes. Nigerian studies provide contextual grounding but cannot be treated as representative of the entire Nigerian labour market. The framework may also face construct-overlap problems if future researchers operationalise voice, fairness, representation and enforcement using poorly differentiated indicators. Empirical research must therefore establish discriminant validity while testing the interaction rather than merely correlating the mechanisms independently.

A second limitation concerns the classification of suppressed conflict. Suppression must not become a tautological label applied whenever visible conflict is low. Future empirical studies should identify observable indicators such as declining voice efficacy, fear of retaliation, reduced representation, non-use of available grievance channels and discrepancies between reported organisational harmony and workers' perceptions of institutional safety. Suppression should be demonstrated through evidence rather than inferred from silence alone.

The central conclusion follows directly from the framework. Sustainable employment relations do not require the disappearance of disagreement. They require institutions capable of keeping disagreement legitimate, expressible, negotiable and enforceable without demanding employee silence or allowing

conflict to become recurrently destructive. The critical pluralist framework therefore shifts attention from whether organisations are calm to why they are calm.

Its originality lies in this analytical shift. Procedural fairness, employee voice, collective representation, bargaining and institutional enforcement are established areas of scholarship. Their theoretical significance changes, however, when they are understood as mutually dependent mechanisms operating under unequal power. Institutional conflict-regulation capacity emerges not from the isolated presence of these mechanisms but from their configuration, credibility and capacity to preserve contestability. Where they function together, conflict can remain visible and negotiable. Where they weaken while contestation becomes costly, conflict may be suppressed. Where institutional failure combines with continuing contestation, conflict may escalate. The resulting framework offers a basis for comparative empirical research across Nigerian public and private organisations and across conventional and non-standard forms of employment. More importantly, it provides a more demanding conception of sustainability: an employment-relations system is sustainable not when workers cease to disagree, but when institutions remain capable of processing disagreement fairly, credibly and repeatedly under changing conditions of power.

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