
HISTORICAL REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF THE UASU AND KUSU PROTEST MUSIC SLOGAN' SOLIDARITY FOREVER, FOR THE UNION MAKES US STRONG' IN KENYAN UNIVERSITIES' INDUSTRIAL STRIKES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the history, adoption, and symbolic significance of the protest music slogan “*Solidarity Forever, For the union makes us strong*” by the University Academic Staff Union (UASU) and Kenya Universities Staff Union (KUSU) in Kenya today, with the recent one being September, 2025, involving 42 public universities and their constituent Colleges. The industrial action lasted for nearly seven weeks disrupting teaching and learning in higher education institutions. Drawing on historical accounts, media reports, and union archives, the paper analyzes how this iconic labour anthem has been appropriated in Kenyan higher education industrial disputes. It highlights the dual role of protest music in unifying striking staff and projecting their demands related to salaries, allowances, and the implementation of Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs). to the public and authorities. The paper also reflects on the limited use of protest music in ensuring structural change. Findings suggest that the slogan strengthens collective identity and morale, amplifies public visibility, and situates Kenyan staff struggles within a transnational labour heritage. However, over-reliance on symbolic performance risks diminishing material effectiveness.

KEYWORDS: Solidarity Forever, UASU, KUSU, protest music, industrial strike, Kenya, labour movements.

INTRODUCTION

Industrial strikes in Kenyan public universities have increasingly become stages upon which workers negotiate not only material conditions but also symbolic power. Within these spaces of resistance, the slogan and song “Solidarity Forever, for the Union Makes us strong” has emerged as one of the most persistent communicative artefacts employed by the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) and the Kenya Universities Staff Union (KUSU). Although the phrase originates from North American labour struggles of the early twentieth century, protest music has historically served as a powerful tool for labour movements worldwide, linking collective action to cultural expression. This has been re-contextualized in Kenya as an anthem of defiance, dignity, and collective endurance.

During strikes, it functions as a sonic banner under which workers gather, chant, march, and articulate their grievances, transforming industrial disputes into moral and political performances. In Kenya, the University Academic Staff Union (UASU) and Kenya Universities Staff Union (KUSU), like other labour unions, have over the years integrated the slogan “Solidarity Forever for the union makes us strong” into industrial strike actions to amplify their grievances. This paper examines how “Solidarity Forever,” as deployed by UASU and KUSU, operates simultaneously as a mobilizing slogan, a tool of emotional synchrony, and a narrative frame through which workers interpret their struggle. The paper further, explores the historical trajectory of this slogan, its workability, and implications for labour activism and higher education governance while critically reflecting on its limitations in achieving structural change.

Statement of the problem

In recent times, there have been a series of industrial strikes in public universities by University Academic Staff Union (UASU) and Kenya Universities Staff Union (KUSU). The reasons have been demands related to salaries, allowances, and the implementation of Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs). There seems to be limited reputable news article, union publication, academic study, or publicly accessible recording that names a protest song used by UASU in demanding for their right. Are there credible source lists neither a playlist, hymn sheet, nor union-songbook for UASU strikes that records specific songs (domestic or international).

Wide-ranging music protest studies of Kenyan social movements for example the recent youth/Gen-Z protests, do not mention UASU or university-staff strikes; their focus is on youth activism rather than labour/university staff unionism. In one study of broader Kenyan

protest music, songs like *Anguka Nayo* and *Reject the Law* are mentioned but in the context of youth-led anti-government protests, **not** academic staff strikes. Therefore, this study was necessary to undertake a historical reflection of the use, effectiveness and limitations of “Solidarity Forever, for the Union Makes us strong” slogan.

Objectives of this study

This study set out to;

1. Trace the origin and adoption of the protest song, solidarity forever, for the union makes us strong, usually sung whenever University staff members engage in industrial strike.
2. Establish historical trends and adoption of the Slogan ‘Solidarity forever, for the union makes us strong’, by UASU and KUSU.
3. Analysis symbolic, cultural, and strategic functions of the Slogan ‘Solidarity forever, for the union makes us strong’, by UASU and KUSU.
4. Examine the challenges faced by reliance on protest music by UASU and KUSU.

Research Questions

What are the historical origins of the slogan “*Solidarity Forever, for the Union makes us strong*” in Kenyan higher education industrial action?

1. How has the slogan circulated and transformed across successive protests?
2. What meanings do academic staff, students, and union leaders attribute to this slogan?
3. How does the slogan shape identity, mobilization, and solidarity within strike cultures?

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the following theories. Social Movement Theory, Framing Theory, Cultural Resistance and Collective Identity Theory. Social Movement Theory posits that collective action arises from structural opportunities, resource mobilization, and shared grievances. In this case protest music slogans like “*Solidarity Forever, for the Union makes us strong*” can be seen as mobilizing symbols that create a collective identity, facilitate resource mobilization (emotional, cognitive, organizational) and build networks of solidarity. Proponents OF Social Movement Theory such as Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, and Doug McAdam highlight the importance of shared frames, cultural expressions, and collective identity in movements. Protest music contributes to framing grievances and signaling unity. Framing Theory (Erving Goffman; Snow & Benford) explains how movements interpret and present grievances so that participants make sense of their struggle. Protest music slogans function as collective frames. They are said to encode values such as justice, solidarity,

simplify complex issues and facilitate resonance with targeted audiences. In this regard, The slogan “*Solidarity Forever...*” exemplifies a master frame which is an adaptable cultural frame used across different contexts to express the necessity of unity in collective bargaining. As far as Cultural Resistance is concerned, scholars such as, Ron Eyerman & Andrew Jamison, argue that culture, music inclusive is not peripheral but central to how movements construct meaning and identity. Within the lens that; music helps sustain morale during strikes, slogans embedded in song become discourse tools of resistance and that they resonate across generational and institutional boundaries.

Collective identity theory posits that Collective identity emerges when individuals see themselves as part of a political whole. As Alberto Melucci argued that; Identity is a process, shaped by interaction and shared expression, music and slogans become vehicles for self-definition and intersubjective meaning making. For this reason, the UASU and KUSU slogan fosters a sense of common purpose among university strikers. All the above theories are used to examine how “*Solidarity Forever...*” has shaped perceptions, participation, and discourse in Kenyan university industrial action.

Literature Review

Research on protest music has consistently shown that; Music functions not just as background but as **strategic mobilization** tool (Denisoff, 1972; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998), songs shape narratives of struggle (Roy, 2010) and that they help sustain morale and visualize alternatives (Garofalo, 1989). Further studies indicate that protest music and chants reinforce solidarity in labor movements globally (Titon, 2002), transmits historical memory (Rose, 1994) and frames resistance narratives (Mattern, 1998). However, few studies systematically trace specific slogans over multiple waves of industrial action especially in African higher education contexts, the issues which this study addressed.

Political communication and social movement scholars point to slogans as; condensed frames of collective emotion and cognition (Snow & Bedford, 1988), rhetorical tools that simplify complex demands and anchors for movement identity (Fillieule & Mule, 2009). However, there remains limited empirical work on how slogans migrate between contexts (e.g., from global unionism to local campus activism), especially in Kenya. This study on Historical Reflection and Analysis of the UASU Protest Music Slogan’ Solidarity Forever, for the Union makes us strong’ in Kenyan Universities’ Industrial Strikes fills this gap.

Existing studies on strikes in higher education emphasize that grievances are in most cases tied to pay, governance, resource allocation, academic autonomy (Altbach, 2002.) Industrial

action reshapes scholar-administrator-student relationships (Hornsby & Osman, 2017). Student involvement in strikes can vary widely, influenced by ideology and institutional culture. Specifically, existing literature on Kenyan universities points to the fact that repetitive strikes due to systemic governance challenges as well as emergent student activism shaped by local and global influences. Still, there is limited research on the role of cultural **expressions** such as music and slogans in shaping strike dynamics and collective memory among academic communities.

African protest music studies highlight the use of music as resistance against authoritarianism, economic policies, and social injustice (Okoye, 2015) and also as an interplay between performance, identity, and political consciousness (West, 2004). It should be noted however that there exists a scholarly silence on the specific role of protest music within union led industrial actions on campuses. Generally, there seems to be no comprehensive investigation on the historical roots, dissemination, and impact of the slogan *"Solidarity Forever, for the Union makes us strong"* within Kenyan universities' industrial action, particularly as a cultural artifact mediating solidarity and identity. Your research is positioned to fill this gap.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, historical-interpretive approach is appropriate, as the study sought meaning, memory, and cultural significance rather than quantitative measurement. The study combined Historical document analysis, Narrative interviews, Discourse analysis and Archival research. Purposive Sampling technique was employed and targeted; Unions leaders, both current and former UASU and KUSU executives, academic staff and nonacademic staff involved in strikes (senior & junior cadres) student activists, Archivists/Historians and Media practitioners with coverage experience. At the end of the study 50 interviewees were involved after thematic saturation.

Data Sources included both primary and secondary. Primary sources included; Semi-structured interviews, Union newsletters, flyers, posters Recorded protest songs and slogans, Official strike communiqués. Secondary sources were; Newspaper archives, Scholarly articles on Kenyan strikes, books on protest music and Social media documentation (Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok archives). Data Collection Procedures involved; Historical Document Retrieval, Access university archives Digitize union communications and Compiled media reports. Interviews made use of; open-ended questions, audio record (with consent) and Probe for interpretive accounts of meaning.

Data Analysis involved three main levels; Thematic Analysis that involved Transcription of interviews, coding in NVivo/ATLAS.ti, identify themes such as origins, functions, interpretations, mobilization effects. Discourse Analysis, which involved An analysis on how the slogan is framed in media and union texts, and examining linguistic patterns and metaphors. Historical Interpretation was achieved through contextualizing slogan evolution against chronological strike events and Tracing inter-textual links to global labour music such as IWW heritage.

Study Findings and Discussions

Historical Background of *Solidarity Forever*

Ralph Chaplin originally wrote solidarity Forever in 1915 for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) as a unifying anthem for labour struggles. Its refrain, “for the union makes us strong” — emphasizes collective power as essential to workers’ rights and dignity. The tune, borrowed from the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” has allowed the song to spread globally, becoming a hallmark of labour solidarity in North America, Europe, and beyond (Chaplin, 1915; voices.pitt.edu). Because of its message and tune (borrowed from the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” / “John Brown’s Body”), the song has long served as a rallying cry for labour rights, collective bargaining, solidarity, and protest against economic injustice. Thus, *Solidarity Forever* embodies a tradition of protest music deeply rooted in labour struggle and the idea that collective organization is key to workers' strength and dignity.

In Kenya, the song’s adaptation by UASU and KUSU reflects a transnational labour culture in which global symbols of worker unity are re-contextualized to local industrial disputes. UASU traces its modern origins to 1992, when lecturers from several public universities revived efforts to register a union. Over time, UASU came to represent academic staff in many public universities. Its struggle has frequently involved labour disputes over pay, allowances, and non-implementation of Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs).

Since at least 2010s, university staff, academic and non-academic, have used strikes and protests to demand implementation of CBAs, salary increments, and harmonisation of benefits. The more recent wave (2025) saw nationwide action: UASU and KUSU branches at multiple public universities downed tools, disrupting learning and invoking solidarity among staff. In these protests, music, chants, and singing have featured prominently: news reports note lecturers and staff “chanting solidarity slogans,” “singing,” “chanting in unison,” and “singing protest songs” during marches and demonstrations.

Adoption of the Slogan by UASU and KUSU

The adoption of *Solidarity Forever* in Kenyan strikes can be traced to media reports and union documentation. During the 2017 strike by university staff across multiple public universities, newspapers reported that lecturers chanted “*Solidarity Forever / For the union makes us strong*” in rallies and marches (Standard Media, 2017). Social media posts during the 2025 nationwide strike indicate that the slogan was displayed on placards, chanted in protest marches, and used to unite staff across 42 public universities (The Star, 2025). The slogan’s use serves multiple functions: it fosters collective identity, boosts morale during prolonged strikes, and communicates a sense of legitimacy and unity to the public and government authorities.

Timeline of Major Strikes and Protest Music Usage

Year	University / Scope	Trigger / Cause	Protest Actions	Use of <i>Solidarity Forever</i>
1992–1993	Multi-university	Union recognition	Strikes, picketing	No documented song
1995	UoN, Moi	Salary arrears	Campus rallies	Chanting noted; song not specified
2012	Multi-university	CBA negotiation	Strikes, rallies	Informal protest songs reported
2017	Multi-university	Delayed salaries, benefits	Prolonged strikes (~4 weeks)	<i>Solidarity Forever</i> chanted (Standard Media, 2017)
2024	Maasai Mara University	Salary disputes	Marches, picketing	Chanting solidarity slogans; song reported
2025	Nationwide	CBA implementation, arrears	Nationwide strike (~4–5 weeks)	<i>Solidarity Forever</i> chanted, on placards, social media posts (The Star, 2025)

Source: UASU and KUSU archive records.

The timeline demonstrates an evolution from informal slogans in early strikes to the widespread, documented adoption of *Solidarity Forever* from 2017 onwards.

Analysis: Symbolic, Cultural, and Strategic Functions of solidarity Forever by UASU and KUSU.

It can be noted that adopting a global labour anthem situates Kenyan university staff in a symbolic transnational solidarity within an international tradition of worker activism, signaling legitimacy and historical continuity. Singing the anthem during strikes reinforces a sense of morale and collective identity, which is reflected in unity and shared purpose, reducing the likelihood of “strike-breaking” behaviour. Chants and songs transform industrial

action into a performative, media-friendly event that communicates grievances to the public and authorities and thus ensures public visibility as it were.

During strikes, staff members both teaching and non-teaching, who hail from diverse ethnic, regional, and disciplinary backgrounds, sing in unison to foster a sense of shared purpose and unity, ignore social differences in favour of union identity. The act of chanting or singing together, especially when accompanied by banners, vuvuzelas, or marches, externalizes internal unity and conveys strength publicly (to other staff, students, government).

Songs and chants work as rallying cries, reinforcing demands (salary arrears, CBA implementation, equal treatment) and framing the protest as just and collective. The auditory power of music (chorus, repetition, rhythm) helps maintain energy during long protests, counter fatigue, and sustain morale over weeks of strike action (as in 2025). Even if “Solidarity Forever” is not explicitly used, the stylistic and thematic influence of global labour-movement anthems is likely: Kenyan union activists may draw inspiration from global union culture. This situates Kenyan university protests within a transnational tradition of labour struggle, linking local grievances to a broader history of class solidarity.

In a context where academic staff fear reprisal (e.g. interdiction, pressure), singing collectively becomes a form of non-violent resistance, both symbolic and psychological. It asserts that staff are not isolated individuals but a unified collective, making individual retaliation costly and collective suppression harder. Lyrics evoke dignity, justice, and collective power, framing staff demands as ethically justified rather than personal complaints and thus enhances moral and emotional appeal. Further, from the study it can be deduced that the reuse of a century-old anthem links contemporary struggles to a legacy of labour rights advocacy enriches historical continuity.

Challenges and Limitations of the reliance solidarity forever protest music by UASU and KUSU

Despite its effectiveness, reliance on protest music has limitations as discussed below; first, repetition and symbolic overemphasis hinders the song’s meaning to ritual without affecting negotiation outcomes. Secondly, chanting cannot enforce salary releases or policy implementation without amicable discussions in boardrooms. In this case, structural engagement and negotiations remains necessary for industrial disputes. Third, Frequent strikes and loud protest displays may alienate students and public stakeholders. This lead to public negative perception and reduction in reputation. Third, it should be realized that over-

reliance on strikes can strain relationships with government and management, leading to zero-sum games as this will result to wastage of time and resources.

CONCLUSION

“Solidarity Forever” for the Union makes us strong occupies a central place in the industrial action repertoire of UASU and KUSU. Its power lies in its versatility: it is a chant, a symbol, a moral statement, a negotiation tool, an identity-maker, and a digital emblem. Through semiotic, discourse-analytic, and ethnographic lenses. This study has demonstrated that slogan does more than express unity but rather it creates unity among the striking staff. It binds workers across ranks, generations, and institutional boundaries.

In a sector marked by financial insecurity, governance tensions, and structural inequality, the slogan provides continuity, coherence, and moral grounding. It transforms frustration into collective strength, uncertainty into resolve, and individual grievances into shared purpose. The slogan’s global lineage enriches its local meaning. For Kenyan university workers, chanting “Solidarity Forever” situates their struggles within a worldwide tradition of labour resistance. It affirms that their demands are legitimate and historically grounded. The reality on the ground is that , the slogan’s enduring power reflects a deeper truth that solidarity remains one of the strongest tools available to workers navigating uncertain institutional realities. It should be observed that as long as inequalities persist in universities, “Solidarity Forever” will remain not only a chant of protest but also an anthem of hope.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Further research which include ethnographic interviews with union members to get their feelings and suggestions to inform policy.
2. Archival documentation of strike songs is key for historical continuity. In this future studies should prioritize documenting these musical expressions (recordings, interviews, song-books)
3. There is need for the analysis of public perception over successive strikes.
4. Carrying out further study will have a deeper understanding of music’s role in Kenyan labour *Mobilization*. International Social Movement Research.
5. Foundational work on how collective action frames (including slogans) should help movements to mobilize and resonate with participants and also useful for framing theory in one’s study.

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