

Nigeria: cut in the fuel subsidy sparks general strike

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Millions of people in Nigeria are taking action against their government for cutting fuel subsidies, writes Dave Stockton. But the movements leaders are proving to be hopeless

Nigeria's two main trade union federations, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC), have called off the 8-day general strike against President Goodluck Jonathan? which mobilised 10 million workers and paralysed the country. They did so just as a key sector of workers the offshore oil workers were about to join the action. This would have proved a devastating blow to the government.

In fact the union leaders were already signalling that they wanted to end a strike which they never really wanted in the first place. Nigeria Labour Congress president Abdulwaheed Omar stated; "both sides have agreed to shift ground." In fact it is the union leaders who have shifted the most in letting down their members and the entire impoverished and exploited people of the country.

Their excuse for this flagrant betrayal was that the government came up with a "compromise" ? setting the pump price of petrol tat 97 naira (about \$0.60) per litre, instead of the 140 naira set on January 1. Even this price cut is only on a temporary basis- for a few months only. It still leaves the price of fuel almost doubled; it slashes and promises to eliminate what is in effect the only form of welfare subsidy available to millions of people.

The union leaders have offered wretched excuses for calling off the strike; claiming that lawless elements were trying to take it over and that there was threat to national unity if it continued. This latter argument is a brazen lie. The exact opposite was the case. The strike was truly nationwide, uniting North and South with huge demonstrations in Kano and Lagos, with Muslim and Christian workers in both areas declaring their solidarity and guarding each other?s places of worship. As for lawless elements the main lawlessness were the actions of the Nigerian Army, called out onto the streets by Goodluck Jonathan, where they killed three and hospitalised 600 demonstrators.

The general strike began on January 9 in response to the government's January 1 lifting of fuel subsidies, on behalf of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Petrol costs more than doubled overnight, from 65 naira a litre (\$0.40), to more than 140 naira, or almost \$1.

Basic food prices rose immediately, with a basket of tomatoes rising seven fold to 7,000 naira in a week.

Low petrol and fuel oil prices are that entire ordinary Nigerians see from the nation producing 2.4 million barrels of crude oil a day. The country's wealth flows into the coffers of Shell and the other big oil giants with kickbacks given to the country's political military and business elites. Not only does this affect transport but also is used powers the huge numbers of small generators that provide shops and homes with electricity in a nation with a hopelessly inadequate national power grid.

On 3 January mass rallies protesting the price hike forced an unwilling the leadership of the two union Trade federation to declare a strike starting on Monday 9th. . In the first days of the strike rallies across the country were huge and wildly enthusiastic, There were dozens of #OccupyNigeria protests, with young people mobilising via social media, mobile phones. There were constant references to Egypt and the worldwide Occupy movements by demonstrators testifying to the powerful social movement, which accompanied the general strike. The universal demand of both workers and youth was for an unconditional and total restoration of the fuel subsidy.

However it was ominous in the first week that the union leaderships waited a week before calling out the oil workers and at the same time cancelled the weekend rallies and demonstrations. Al Jazeera journalist Haru Mutasa reported the leaders "seem keen to end the strike. They don't want to go back on the streets on Monday.?"

Nigeria and its oil

Nigeria is the largest producer of crude in Africa, with oil accounting for about 80 percent of the country's state revenue, about 65 percent of government budgetary revenues, and over 95 percent of export income. It is also a supplier of eight per cent of the United States oil imports.

In a population of 160 million people, most are forced to live on less than \$2 each day. A 2007 survey by Amnesty International found that in the Niger River Delta, the main location of the country's oil reserves, 70 percent of its six million inhabitants live on less than \$1 a day.

The central question is the control of the oil reserves and their exploitation. Subsidies are indeed an ineffective way to give workers and the poor the lion's share of the country's wealth- the wealth they produce and they prone to corruption by the rich and the politicians. The answer it total nationalisation under workers control and ? the building of a refining industry, a national electricity grid and the ending of the horrific pollution by the oil multinationals.

The lessons of the betrayed Nigerian General Strike ? like those of the British General Strike of 1926 or the French General Strike of 1968 are:

? Never trust reformist trade union bureaucrats to lead a general strike to victory - they must be controlled and as soon as possible replaced by a national strike committee of strikers delegates

? Action councils need to be elected from mass assemblies in every city and locality to unite union members with delegates of youth, housewives, small shopkeepers and stallholders. Once formed these councils must strive to take charge of the strike ? and form a national coordination.

? The working class must come to recognise that a general strike - whatever its initial economic objectives - calls the power of the government and the army into question and therefore needs to be defended against repression by a workers and youth militia.

? A political alternative to the capitalist government has to be formed and brought to power ? a workers and poor farmers government.

The very fact that President Jonathan will continue with the IMF inspired robbery of the poor means that even this betrayal will in all probability not break the revolutionary rise of the masses. Nigerian workers urgently need to form rank and file organisations in the unions and to create a new revolutionary workers party not only from the union militants but also from the youth of the Occupy and other social movements.

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