

Nigeria: Youth rise up in #END SARS revolt

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On October 7, a mass revolt of Nigerian youth was triggered after a video showing police officers from the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, SARS, killing a teenager went viral. The guy who took the video was arrested and mass mobilisations in the streets ensued, using the hashtag #END SARS. The police used tear gas to break up the protests but they continued to escalate massively in all the major urban areas of Nigeria centring on Lagos, the biggest city, and also the federal capital Abuja.

This revolt had long been in the making. The killing of the teenager in Ughelli was not a one off act of brutality, it was the tipping point for youth who had suffered harassment and terror from SARS for many years. Its officers had acquired a notorious reputation for extrajudicial murders, extortions, kidnappings and rape, with young people most often in the firing line. Amnesty International has reported on at least 82 cases of torture, ill treatment and murder by SARS over the last three years. This figure is likely to be a huge underestimate.

On October 11, President Muhammadu Buhari disbanded the SARS unit and formed a new unit called Special Weapons and Tactics. Basically, it was the same unit under a different name. No one was going to be fooled by this ploy, this was the fifth time in as many years that the unit had been 'reformed'. More and bigger protests followed as #END SARS became #END SWAT. Buhari responded with more repression and, on October 20, tried to implement a 24-hour curfew in Lagos, the largest city in Africa, with a 14.5 million population, though some estimates reach 23 million!

Later that night, demonstrators defied the curfew at Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos. The military opened fire, killing at least twelve and wounding many more. Initially they denied it, but Reuters reported that 46 were killed across Nigeria on that day. The revolt widened and deepened with roadblocks and attacks on police stations and tollgates. There was also looting, not surprisingly given the widespread extreme poverty. Armed thugs in several areas attacked peaceful demonstrators, no doubt orchestrated by the police.

International support has been prominent with musicians who have supported the youth like Rihanna, Beyonce, Noname, Drake, Diddy, Trey Songz and Jack Dorsey and demonstrations in the US and London. In Nigeria, too, the son of the late Afrobeat pioneer, Fela Kuti, Seun Kuti, himself a musician, has condemned the government and police. Fela's family has long been a target of the military, Seun in that tradition keen to point out 'if the rich can loot then so can the poor?', a reference to the pilfering of Nigerian resources by imperialism and its clients.

ON THE BRINK

The youth revolt occurs against the backdrop of a major crisis for the Nigerian economy. Indeed the youth, those under 18, make up half of the population and unemployment has hit them particularly hard. The Nigerian unemployment rate for the second quarter of 2020 stands at 27.1 percent meaning 21.7 million people without jobs. A further 28.6 percent are underemployed. For those between 15 and 34, the figure

stands at 13.9 million people unemployed.

Between 2000 and 2014, Nigeria's GDP grew at an average rate of 7 percent a year. After the oil price collapse in 2014-16, GDP dropped to 2.7 percent in 2015. Nigeria is Africa's biggest oil exporter. In 2016, the Nigerian economy had its first recession in 25 years and growth, desultory ever since, has not been able to lift the bottom half of the population out of poverty.

The impact of the pandemic will prove to be disastrous. The World Bank reports that the collapse in oil prices is expected to plunge the economy into a severe recession, the worst since the 1980's. Oil represents more than 80 percent of Nigeria's exports, 30 percent of its banking sector credit and 50 percent of the overall government revenue. With the drop in oil prices, revenues are expected to fall from an already low 8 percent of GDP in 2019 to a projected 5 percent in 2020.

Meanwhile, the pandemic is already eating into private investment and reducing remittances to Nigerian households from the diaspora. This is particularly important for the economy, remittances in 2012 for instance accounted for 5 percent of GDP. The US Nigerian community is a significant contributor being the most educated and professional of all migrant communities there. Trump could only express his thanks for bleeding the country of its talent by placing a travel ban on Nigerians (for supposed security reasons!).

There are of course other problems facing Nigeria not least the Islamist Boko Haram insurgency in the north east, which has resulted in over 20,000 deaths, 2 million displaced people and adversely affected 6 million in terms of intensifying poverty. The World Bank has put up the princely sum of 200 million dollars credit to aid this crisis in the northeast, a drop in the ocean but adding to the country's many loans and credits built up since 1958.

So, Nigeria is very much tied by its debt to world imperialism which, in the form of the oil and gas multinationals, pitilessly exploits its resources, creating environmental pollution on an epic scale in the Niger delta. To this we can add financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that reap the interest on loans and set the austerity agenda for governments. The IMF has recently approved an emergency \$3.4 billion loan to address the impact of the pandemic on the economy.

Even before this loan, there had been a rising \$73 billion sovereign debt under Buhari. His response was to cut back even in the midst of the pandemic. A raft of austerity measures were implemented this year including price hikes, VAT rises, fuel and electricity increases, etc. The two trade union federations, the National Labour Congress, NLC, and the Trades Union Congress, TUC, called an indefinite general strike to stop petrol and electricity rises in September.

However, on the eve of the strike, the union leaders caved in and called off the strike without gaining any concessions from the government. There had been major pressure from the rank and file for action and subsequently a storm of denunciations from trade union branches and street protests against this sell out. This perfectly illustrates the need for an alternative fighting leadership in the unions and one which can organise and build a rank and file opposition throughout the movement, based on the perspective of taking action without the leaders if necessary.

REBELLION TO REVOLUTION

The scale of the #END SARS rebellion showed that this was not just about SARS but rather a deep seated alienation of youth from the endemic corruption and poverty that besets Nigeria. The movement was spontaneous and leaderless, early mobilisations stressing no politics and no leaflets. The militancy intensified in proportion to the police and military attacks as protesters began to call for the downfall of the

government.

The five demands emerging from the movement are:

- ? The immediate release of all arrested protesters.
- ? Justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families.
- ? The setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reports of police misconduct (within 10 days).
- ? In line with the new Police Act, psychological evaluation and retraining (to be confirmed by an independent body) of all disbanded SARS officers before they can be redeployed.
- ? An increased police salary so that they are adequately compensated for protecting lives and property of citizens.

The demands perfectly sum up the justified call for an end to repression but the 'lack of politics' or, more accurately, the illusions in the state, are clearly expressed in the last two demands. The police, like the armed forces and the judiciary, are an integral part of the capitalist state's control over the exploited and oppressed. Their repressive role will not change through giving them more money! Revolutionary socialists should point out that there is no peaceful reforming of these bodies whilst capitalism remains.

What is rather more astonishing though is that some socialists, in the midst of a mass struggle against the police, would demand rewarding a corrupt and a brutal police force with an increase in wages. This has been echoed by two of the so-called revolutionary groups in Nigeria. The recently split Committee for a Workers' International - CWI's Democratic Socialism Movement, DSM, and the International Socialist Alternative's Movement for a Socialist Alternative, MSA, both argue for this as well as for police unions alongside community committees to control the police.

It is certainly necessary to place demands relating to the police in terms of disarming and weakening their repressive role but democratising the police cannot take place outside of a struggle to smash the capitalist state and building new bodies of self defence for workers and the youth. The police are not 'workers in uniform' but the frontline agents of the state whose primary reason for existence is putting down working class struggle. We should exclude police unions from union federations just as we would any scab organisation.

The same groups have rightly argued for the organised working class to mount solidarity but have not outlined a focussed action programme that could take the currently limited struggle to a generalised fight for workers' power. The League for a Fifth International believes that such a programme should be the revolutionary party's main weapon in providing a transitional strategy for socialism. The key axes of such a programme would be, Councils of Action, a Workers' Militia with the goal of a Workers' Government accountable to those organs. The failure of these groups to raise these key demands for revolutionary organisation is consistent with their tailing of the movement and their misunderstanding of the Marxist theory of the state.

WHERE NEXT?

The #END SARS movement right now is at a crossroads. The Coalition of Protest Groups say 'we will deprioritise the physical protests', 'clean up' and go online, even more ominously 'we put forward a diverse group to represent the different coalitions; from celebrities to activists, legal minds to strategists, journalists to entrepreneurs'. Hardly a turn to the workers and poor! So who is actually making these decisions when they claim there are no leaders?

The initial spontaneity and drive of the rebellion must not be dissipated but channelled into a movement that can democratically meet, formulate demands going forward and decide on a political direction. Democracy is essential, 'leaderless' movements invariably are discovered to have leaders but ones that are not accountable to anyone. They risk dissipating if not disappearing the movement without a clear way forward and thus letting President Buhari off the hook.

That's why democratic mass assemblies of youth should be organised to take control of the movement. These bodies could become embryonic Councils of Action, organised in every area. They should link up and be coordinated nationally. They should seek to draw in workers' organisations, students, women, the unemployed and of course the youth. The Councils should be the staunchest defenders of democratic rights but it is vital that a fight back against Buhari's and imperialism's austerity and corruption be launched as well. They should organise a general strike to bring down the Buhari government.

The struggle against SARS has brought hundreds of thousands of youth together against the state, a state that represents corruption, endemic poverty, pollution and collaboration with imperialism. Radicalised youth must demand political answers and solutions to the unfolding economic crisis in Nigeria and seek unity with organised labour. It is imperative that the Nigerian working class show their solidarity with the youth. The NLC and TUC have verbally supported the youth but show no sign of action. So, rather than wait for these sell out bureaucrats of the union federations, the rank and file in the workplaces and in the trade union branches must mobilise independently within the unions and strike in support of the youth and in defence of their living standards.

As we have already seen, any movement pitted against the state will be physically attacked. This goes for demonstrations as much as it applies to strikes. The question of self defence against the armed forces and state sponsored thugs is crucial. It cannot be wished away by calls for reforming the police. Democratic assemblies that are based on mass working class organisations and the youth should not just steward demos but organise disciplined and armed units that are effective forms of defence in workplaces no less than in the community.

The development of Councils of Action and their defence will pose the question of who rules in society in a very direct way. We would call on all the leaders of the working class to break with capitalism and form a Workers' Government based on democratic workers' councils to solve the crisis in the interests of the working class. This means cancelling the IMF/World Bank debt, expropriating industry and the banks and recognising workers' control of them. It also means addressing the severe land problems in Nigeria as in the farmer/herdsmen conflict and winning the support of the rural poor.

Finally, this perspective will not come to fruition without a revolutionary party. Since military rule ended in 1999, Nigeria has been blighted by a double whammy of two corrupt bourgeois parties in the All Progressives Congress and the People's Democratic Party. Half-hearted attempts have been made by the NLC bureaucrats to establish a small Nigerian Labour Party. The need for a new mass workers' party becomes apparent by the day and revolutionaries would fight within it to adopt a complete political break with the bosses and capitalism and for a revolutionary socialist programme.

Those on the left in Nigeria like the DSM and the MSA, both apparently building the Socialist Party of Nigeria, and the IMT's Campaign for a Workers' and Youth Alternative (CWA), and the Joint Action Front (coalition of labour and civil groups) should call for a new mass workers' party. Alongside this they should fight for a revolutionary programme which is unequivocal in its call for smashing the capitalist state by workers and peasants in Nigeria. A Workers' State, based on councils of delegates from workplaces, schools, universities, communities, etc and defended by a Workers' Militia, must set about the task of

expropriating native and foreign capital and dispatching the Nigerian ruling class to the dustbin of history.

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