

Kenyan teachers strike betrayed

Terry Cook
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Thousands of striking teachers have been betrayed by the leaders of the Kenya National Union of Teachers, who have called off a 15-day national strike only days before nationwide students exams were due to begin. The decision followed days of closed-door discussions by the union with government officials and church leaders.

The strike, involving 240,000 teachers, erupted on October 5 when the government of President Daniel Arap Moi refused to pay the second installment of a 150 percent wage increase that it had agreed to pay in stages over five years. The agreement was made just prior to the last federal elections. Most teachers are paid as little as 2,700 shillings (\$45) per year.

From the beginning of the strike teachers defied enormous state repression. Hundreds were attacked and injured by squads of riot police armed with whips, batons and tear gas, backed by gangs of thugs hired by the government. Many more teachers were arrested in centres around the country and some still remain in custody.

The union's national executive committee voted unanimously on Tuesday to end the strike despite statements by the government only days before that it would not meet the strikers' demands and that it was moving to annul the wage agreement altogether.

Announcing the decision to terminate the strike, the union's secretary general Ambrose Adong cynically declared: 'It has reached a time to show our sympathy to the nation.' He claimed that the decision was made 'out of our love for the parents and students'.

Angry teachers met the union's decision with derision. One teacher from Isoilo province, the site of major clashes between strikers and the police, condemned the decision as 'untimely, demoralising and a sign of cowardice'.

A teacher from Nakuru said: 'After all these days of sacrifice and police brutality it is a betrayal to call off

the strike with no concrete deal.' Another teacher slammed the decision as the worst kind of betrayal. 'The national union officials have let us down,' he said.

The sellout came when support for the strike was growing. Last week Labor Minister Joseph Ngutu threatened to sack teachers who did not report for work and to cut their entitlements, including medical benefits and assisted rents. Teachers defied the edict and hundreds more joined the strike while other non-union teachers joined the union. Groups of strikers also issued a declaration warning that they would take reprisals against head teachers and education officers scabbing in the strike.

The teachers' resistance provoked a severe crisis for the government. Only one week before the strike was stopped, the government faced a vote of no confidence in parliament and repeated calls for it to resign.

Both the government and the union feared that if the strike continued it might ignite widespread industrial unrest among other sections of public sector workers, whose pay agreements have also been cancelled following the suspension of a key International Monetary Fund loan to Kenya earlier this year.

The teachers' dispute was a reflection of a growing militancy in the Kenyan working class in opposition to the austerity measures being imposed at the behest of the IMF and international bankers.

A recent report shows a sharp rise in strikes in the past seven and half years. Some 317,327 working days were lost last year due to strike action, involving over 270,00 workers. In 1990 only 23,000 working days were lost in strikes involving 77,879 workers.

At the same time living conditions for masses of people have plummeted. The average income stands at only \$300 a year and over 50 percent of the population live below the poverty line.

Even so, the Federation of Kenya Employers is demanding changes to the wage fixing system to pave

the way for further pay cuts. The economic growth rate has dropped below 2.3 percent and large areas of agriculture are reported to be in a state of collapse. Workers in the sugar industry have not been paid wages.



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