

Nigerian unions concluding separate agreements over minimum wage

Our correspondent

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As nationwide unrest in Nigeria over the minimum wage persists into its second month, the unions are continuing their policy of fragmenting the struggle by attempting to make separate deals in each of the country's 36 states.

Nigerian President Olesegun Obasanjo had announced the N5,500 (\$55) minimum wage on May 1, (Labour Day) but then agreed to set a N7,500 minimum for federal workers. The unions then agreed a deal in which federal workers in the wealthier, oil-producing states would receive N7,500, N6,500 in other states and N5,500 in the private sector. The state governors argued that they could not afford the increase and refused to pay more than N5,500, prompting the strike action.

In Oyo State, where public service employees have been on strike since July 6, the governor has threatened to sack all of the 30,000 workers who fail to resume duty. Despite this and the presence of policemen around the secretariat to provide a shield for strike-breakers, none of the workers had returned to work last week. The police have been instructed to disperse any strikers who gathered in the area. Traditional chiefs have now become involved in the dispute, holding negotiations with union leaders in secret meetings.

The Anambra state government has also told the workers to suspend their four-week-old strike or consider themselves jobless. A statement by the Secretary to the State Government, Prince Ossy Ezenwa, and the Head of Service, Mrs. Elsie Ikemefuna, cited the financial position of the state as justification for the ultimatum.

In Sokoto state workers are continuing industrial action into the third week, as Governor Attahiru Dalhatu Bafarawa has so far failed to reach a settlement with the union on a minimum wage for the state.

Meanwhile, the Ondo state government has promised to pay a N6,500 minimum wage to primary school teachers, claiming this was to ensure the success of its free education programme. The teachers had threatened to go on strike if the issue of minimum wage was not resolved this week. The offer was accepted at a meeting between the teaching unions and the state government.

In Borno State, where a strike has begun recently, the secretariat of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) was attacked by thugs. An eyewitness, Abdullahi Ibu Abubakar, told the *Guardian* newspaper that the NLC meeting had been invaded by a gang led by someone known to be a close associate of a member of the state government. The attack on Friday evening came after a running battle between workers and the government over the minimum wage. Negotiations between the state government and the union have yielded no positive result. While the government has proposed to pay N5,500, the workers are insisting on N6,750 as monthly wages.

In Gusau, Zamfara state, union leaders have said they are happy with the N6,500 minimum proposed by the state government. Danda Bungudu announced the union's acceptance of the compromise figure, the third reported case of states reaching separate deals.

In the capital Lagos, where the unrest first started, the government and unions are going to the Industrial Arbitration Panel (IAP) following the fourth collapse of negotiations last week.

As reported previously, governors in several states have threatened to bring in rationalisations and sackings as the only way they will concede more than the N5,500 rate. The governor in Osun state, Chief Bisi Akande, has sacked 3,000 workers. The rival party in the state, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), has sought to capitalise on this by asking the sacked

workers to report at its secretariat for jobs.



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