# Nigeria in midst of strike wave

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Nigeria has been gripped by a strike wave over the level at which a new minimum wage should be set. The action began two weeks ago with a strike by civil servants in Lagos state, and quickly spread throughout the country.

Forty-seven thousand public sector workers have been on strike for two weeks in Lagos, with refuse dumps not cleared, water taps running dry and health services collapsing. Civil servants in at least 12 states, including Anambra, Abia and Ondo, began indefinite strikes this week. The dispute has been joined by other sections of workers, including those in the textile and clothing industry.

Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo has been in talks with government officials. On Monday, the governors of the country's 36 states said they would only agree to 5,500 naira ($55) a month as the level for the minimum wage. Workers are demanding between N6,500 and N7,500.

The minimum wage has a long tradition in Nigeria. Even the last military dictatorship of General Abdulsalami Abubakar had a minimum wage of N3,000. Workers regard the level of the minimum wage as a means of resisting the downward pressure on their living standards as the deregulation of the Nigerian economy gathers pace under Obasanjo and his IMF backers.

The current strike wave follows on from a general strike in response to the 50 percent fuel price increase. Obasanjo saw this increase as a first step towards bringing all Nigerian prices into line with the world market. The difficulty in pushing it through led to a split in the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). Sunday Awoniyi, leader of the splinter group in the PDP, said, "The blunt but exceedingly painful truth we must accept without prevarication is that if we went back to the electorate today, we could not possibly record anything near the kind of result we had last year in a free and fair election." Awoniyi was speaking before party members at a meeting (declared illegal by the ruling faction) in the capital Abuja.

Obasanjo and the PDP are fanning the flames of separatist feelings in the regions to prevent any unified response to the massive fall in living standards. Instead of bringing in a national minimum wage as had been done prior to the military government of Sani Abacha, the PDP left it to individual states to decide the rate, whilst contributing only N4,300 towards it.

Abacha had decentralised collective bargaining and negotiations for the minimum wage in his 1997 budget speech, but it largely remained on the drawing board until his sudden death in June 1998. The only exception was the public sector union in Kaduna state, which attempted to implement Abacha's policy with serious consequences. The Kaduna Joint Negotiation Council began talks with the state government on a settlement, but negotiations broke down. Police immediately arrested 19 labour leaders. When workers took strike action to demand their release, Lt. Col. Hameed Ali, the state military administrator, sacked 21,000 of them. Since then, Kaduna has become the focus of violent religious clashes between Muslim groups—funded by big business who want to break away from central government control and implement Sharia law—and the minority Christians.

Since Abacha's death, the NLC (Nigeria Labour Congress) has made no attempt to oppose the increasingly decentralised and deregulated economy. Despite the unity between state governors on the N5,500 minimum, the NLC and the leaders of the various unions are attempting to keep the strike action at the level of a series of separate struggles in the different areas for differing minimum rates. Emboldened by the lack of an effective response, some governors are now threatening redundancies to pay for salary increases. Speaking last Thursday after abortive

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talks to resolve the eight-day strike, Lagos governor Bola Tinubu said his administration was now considering staff rationalisation as a way out of the wages crisis.

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