

Widespread protests against fuel increases in Zimbabwe

Our correspondent
23 June 2001

The past week has witnessed sporadic protest actions in many of Zimbabwe's urban areas against massive increases in fuel prices. The price hike was announced on state television on June 12. Petrol prices have risen by 74 percent, diesel by more than 67 percent and paraffin, which is used by most of the population for cooking and heating, has increased by 69 percent. The latest increases mean that fuel prices will have tripled over the last 18 months.

Commuter fares were immediately raised by up to 80 percent in and around the capital Harare, increasing by about 75 percent in Bulawayo. People travelling from suburbs such as Glen Norah, Glen View, Mufakose, Budiriro and Highfield to Harare city centre suffered increases of between 50 and 100 percent. Many workers and students were left stranded because they did not carry sufficient funds to pay the new fares.

The increases sparked widespread protests. Early last Thursday in Warren Park, young people barricaded the roads preventing commuter buses from carrying workers into the city centre and the industrial areas, leaving the usually crowded centre of Harare almost deserted. The riot police later dismantled the barricades and arrested several youths. There were reports of running battles in Kuwadzana between the police and members of the public over the fuel increases.

On Monday June 18, riot police fired tear gas to disperse groups of protesters in western Harare. Police patrolled the working class township of Mabvuku, 20 kilometres east of the city centre, after protesters attempted to negotiate with commuter bus operators. Residents' representatives asked them to limit their fare increases to 20 percent. After the meeting, spokesman Mike Banda told journalists that people had warned commuter operators to reduce their fares or operate at their own risk.

Cars and taxis were stopped and searched by the police. Protesters jeered police and rolled rocks and battered oil drums on to some roads. The police tried to break up any groups that gathered. In central Harare, the police manned roadblocks around the city in anticipation of more protests.

In southern Harare, some bus operators agreed to cut their fares. Others stayed parked up because owners feared violence if they did not do the same. Civic groups in Bulawayo have warned that the fuel increase will result in a steep rise in the price of basic commodities, leading to further civil unrest.

Many workers have been forced to walk to work because they cannot afford the new fares. This seems to have provoked a fare war between minibuses and "conventional" bus companies, with a few operators slashing their fares by half. Other operators parked their vehicles at Makoni Shopping Centre in Harare in protest, accusing conventional bus owners of selling out by not raising fares in solidarity.

The inflation rate in Zimbabwe is 70 percent at present and the increase in fuel prices are causing an even steeper rise in essential commodities. Already, basic foodstuffs and other services have gone up by an average of 40 percent, and electricity prices are expected to rise by 20 percent by the end of the month.

Recent statistics indicate that the majority of families in Zimbabwe live below the poverty line. Staple foods like maize meal, bread and milk are beyond the reach of many families. On June 14 the *Times* newspaper reported comments from Callistus Jongwe, a factory worker, "It is impossible. When I am finished paying for transport to work, I have almost nothing for food, rent and school fees for my three kids . [President] Mugabe is killing us and people are going to make a revolution."

The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) has written to President Mugabe and other government ministers demanding the reversal of the fuel price increases. They have given the government 14 days mandatory notice of a two-day national strike on July 2 and 3 unless the increases are withdrawn.

The ZCTU leadership is very concerned to keep control of any protest action. Collen Gwiyo, ZCTU acting secretary general, said the government had to act, given the explosive and tense atmosphere in light of the already eroded purchasing power and the ripple effects of the fuel increases. He warned of spontaneous actions by ordinary citizens.

Gwiyo told the Zimbabwean *Financial Gazette*, “Over the past few days, we have come and we are still coming under considerable pressure from Zimbabweans across the country to call for mass action now and not wait till July. We are asking people to bear with us but are assuring them that the mass action will be executed to force the government to reverse the hike.” He said that the ZCTU’s membership was in agreement with the dates set for the mass action, but it was the general public that was growing impatient. “We are even being blamed by people for pushing the dates further, but we had to take various issues into consideration before we arrived at that decision.”

The *Financial Gazette* also reported that Zimbabwe Republic Police, in collaboration with the government’s spy agency and the army, could be preparing to move troops into the urban areas around the country in time for the mass strike action. Some commentators are raising the possibility of the government declaring a state of emergency.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact