

Striking Kenyan teachers defy government intimidation

Our correspondent

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Strikers were overjoyed on October 1 when High Court Justice Andrew Hayanga intervened in the teachers dispute and overturned the government's decision to revoke the 1997 wage agreement.

Education Minister Henry Kosgey's action in cancelling the agreement was illegal, since three parties—the Education Ministry, the Teachers' Service Commission (TSC) and the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT)—signed it. Also the *Nation* pointed out that a judgement in the Industrial Court in 1970 ruled that all Teachers Service Remuneration Committee agreements “must be gazetted and implemented in toto”.

In the meantime, Kosgey has criticised the government officials who signed the agreement in 1997. In fact it was only settled when President Moi made the offer to secure a return to work after a 12-day teachers' strike.

The nationwide teachers strike, which began on September 22 and involves 240,000 teachers, remains solid, despite the Kenyan government's attempts to force a return to work. The action is to secure the full implementation of a salary agreement award of between 150 and 200 percent.

Just two days after the strike began, Kosgey arbitrarily cancelled the 1997 order that agreed the increase. On the following day he instructed the TSC to block payment of the salaries of striking teachers, even though they had worked for three weeks in September. He also ordered the TSC to start recruiting unemployed teachers to replace those on strike.

In an attempt to deny funds to the union, Labour Minister Joseph Ngutu has suspended the check off arrangement for union subscriptions.

TSC secretary Benjamin Sogomo ordered school Boards of Governors (BOGs) to evict all striking

teachers from school houses. This proved unsuccessful because the TSC has no tenancy agreement with teachers and thus has no power to evict them.

Negotiations over the implementation of the award had been taking place over months. Earlier this year Ngutu appointed a conciliation panel to arbitrate between the union and the TSC, but the panel withdrew from negotiations because of government unwillingness to compromise.

Feelings are running very high amongst the strikers, who are warning KNUT's National Executive Council not to give in to government pressure to call off the strike. Marches and demonstrations have been held all over the country. At a demonstration in Siaya town on October 1, an effigy of Education Minister Kosgey was burned. In Machakos, police arrested local KNUT branch treasurer who was found addressing an illegal assembly. He was later released on bond.

There is widespread support for the strike. In Nairobi students at the Moi Girls High School defied their principal's appeal to stay calm, and marched out of school demanding that it be closed. Even though parents have already paid a full term's school fees and have no means of caring for the children at home, many parent organisations have been lobbying district education offices to demand that the government pays the teachers. The Kenya National Association of Parents placed an advertisement in the *Sunday Nation* declaring that it will mobilise parents and children to camp at education offices throughout the country to push the government to resolve the dispute.

An editorial in the *Nation* on September 28 commented, “The government's credibility is on test—it is seen as unreliable, vindictive and vengeful—a tag it must strive to doff.”



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