

Zimbabwe: General strike against fuel price rises

Chris Talbot
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A three-day general strike against the increase in the price of petrol began on April 23. It was called by the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) after the government increased fuel prices by 200 percent. The latest figures show that annual inflation in Zimbabwe is 228 percent, with the economy now in steep decline.

According to the BBC a majority of banks, offices and transport services were closed in the capital Harare and other cities. Streets in Zimbabwe's second city, Bulawayo, were nearly deserted. Even the state-run *Herald* newspaper reported banks and industry closed down with thousands stranded as transport services were halted. The strike was declared illegal, though reports indicate it was relatively peaceful with workers staying at home rather than taking to the streets. AP reported police manning roadblocks on main highways and troops patrolling the impoverished townships in eastern Harare. Before the strike began nine ZCTU leaders were arrested by the police.

Whilst the strike reflects the enormous anger in the Zimbabwean working class felt towards the regime of President Robert Mugabe, the ZCTU is closely allied with the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) which called for full support for the strike. The MDC is committed to free market economics and privatisation of the state sector and works closely with local businessmen opposed to the Mugabe regime. For that reason many employers backed the strike, with the right-wing British *Daily Telegraph* reporting a major industrialist saying that their interests and those of workers coincide: "[W]here we can we are paying them while they are on strike."

Last month the MDC called a two-day general strike against government policies and there have been a wave of strikes this year by workers demanding pay rises to cope with the huge deterioration in living standards caused by inflation. The government response has been to step up repressive measures against the population,

especially opposition supporters. Hundreds have been beaten and jailed and there are many well-documented cases of torture.

Mugabe's plan to respond to pressure from Western governments and the International Monetary Fund's demands by retreating into economic autarky has been increasingly exposed as hopeless. Tobacco, the country's main export crop, has suffered a drastic decline with production estimated this year to be at roughly a third of its 2001 level, according to the Zimbabwe Tobacco Association (ZTA). After driving several hundred larger-scale white farmers off the land, Mugabe claimed that small-scale black farmers would revive the economy. The ZTA, representing 25,000 such small farmers, had to admit that there has been a failure of the government to provide support, including the provision of coal needed to cure tobacco. Zimbabwe's main colliery has cut production due to lack of spare parts. With up to half the population now facing famine and relying on food aid, even the traditional base of support for Mugabe in the rural areas has been eroded.

Despite widespread opposition to the government, the MDC's response up to now has been to limit protest, claiming that brutal oppression by the regime had left people "disempowered." Initially this month the MDC announced there would be no further strikes, saying that they would concentrate on their approach of winning support from the "international community" to force Mugabe into negotiations. So far the backing for the MDC from Britain, the European Union and the United States has led to sanctions being imposed on the Zimbabwean regime and diplomatic pressure through South African President Thabo Mbeki to get Mugabe to retire.

The MDC fears the eruption of a movement of the working people of Zimbabwe because it may get out of control, so it has relied on Mbeki's attempts to promote a

coalition of the MDC and sections of the ruling ZANU-PF party as an alternative to Mugabe. This approach has met with little success, especially given that Mbeki, fearing opposition to his own government, has been reluctant to be seen as a stooge for the western powers.

The MDC's decision to now call for strike action could be because it has been emboldened by signs of a new initiative from the United States. According to the *South Africa Business Day* newspaper, the US intends to "cut through regional inaction" in demanding that Mugabe submit to an interim government and new elections. Departing from the previous policy of working through multilateral bodies such as the European Union, the G8 and the Southern African Development Community, an unnamed US state department official is quoted demanding regime change. He said, "The neighbourhood is starting to realise that there is a downside to giving aid and protection to comrade Bob." Asked to elaborate, he refused, saying, "there is stuff happening behind the scenes."

In what appears to be a quid pro quo for British backing in Iraq, the US is giving active support for longstanding British demands for Mugabe's removal. US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Affairs Walter Kansteiner is to visit South Africa and Botswana to coordinate moves against the Zimbabwe regime.

Reflecting the fears of African leaders, President Mbeki made a telling comment in a speech to the African Union earlier this month: "The prospect facing the people of Iraq should serve as sufficient warning that in future we too might have others descend on us, guns in hand, to force feed us with democracy. If the United Nations does not matter... why should we, the little countries of Africa ... think that we matter and will not be punished if we get out of line?"



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