

Nigeria: General strike against fuel price increases

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Millions of workers in Nigeria are taking part in a general strike against fuel price increases. The strike, which began June 9 and is intended to last 21 days, was called by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) as well as the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Congress of Free Trade Unions (CFTU). These union federations include the main oil workers unions, as well as workers in banks, schools, retail outlets and transport. The airline pilots voted to join the strike from June 10.

Gasoline is currently being sold at \$1.44 per gallon after an increase of 20 percent was implemented May 29. This is a massive blow to the 80 million or more Nigerians forced to live on less than US\$1 per day. The price of kerosene—widely used for cooking—was also increased.

Oil workers union leaders said they did not expect any immediate impact on production and exports, which involve a high degree of automation. According to the BBC, the oil multinationals say they have made contingency plans to continue shipments. However, ships that are unloading gasoline in Lagos—Nigeria has a lack of oil refining facilities and has to import fuel—would be blocked by the strike.

Nigeria's high court instructed the unions to call off the strike and directed the government to reduce fuel prices to February levels. The government ignored the court ruling. Such is the widespread anger against Olusegun Obasanjo's government that the strike has gone ahead. On previous occasions the NLC has responded to such legal decisions by calling off strike action.

The fuel price increases are in response to pressure from the IMF and other creditors for Nigeria to lift all subsidies. Prices have more than doubled since last June when the government abolished price controls and subsidies. However, the government still influences

prices through an oil industry "stakeholders' committee."

Nigeria is the seventh-biggest oil exporter in the world, and the source of one-fifth of oil imports to the US. It produces 2.5 million barrels a day, and its revenue from this production has risen markedly in recent months. Low fuel prices are the only way that ordinary Nigerians benefit from this oil wealth. Even the previous military dictatorships were reluctant to increase fuel prices due to the destabilisation it would cause.

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There is widespread scepticism about the trade unions' determination to continue with strike action, after it has backed down several times over the past five years in similar confrontations with the government. In January this year the NLC abandoned a planned strike over a fuel tax, believing that the government would accept a court ruling to abandon the tax.

Jonathan Musa, the chairman of the state chapter of NLC in Kaduna, has made clear that there should be no rallies or processions in the state during the general strike, claiming that this was necessary to prevent "mischief makers" using rallies for their own ends. Other state chapters of the NLC have issued similar instructions.

This prostration on the part of the union leaders has not deterred the government from instructing the police to put the NLC president, Adams Oshiomhole, on the wanted list of those to be arrested.



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