

# Four-day general strike in Nigeria

Barbara Slaughter  
22 October 2004

Economic life in Nigeria was virtually brought to a standstill in a four-day general strike that began on October 11. The strike was called by the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), which represents 29 of the country's blue-collar unions. It was in protest against a recent 25 percent increase in the price of fuel. Fuel prices have more than doubled since some subsidies were removed in October 2003.

This was the sixth strike to be organised by the NLC since President Obasanjo began to phase out fuel subsidies three years ago. Support for the action was widespread. All over the country factories, shops, banks, government offices, filling stations, schools and hospitals remaining closed, leaving the streets of major cities almost deserted.

In Abuja and in many other states, armed police took to the streets in an attempt to intimidate the strikers. On the first day of the strike, police fought running battles in the northern city of Kaduna with protesters. The police killed a 12-year-old boy and 14 demonstrators were arrested.

In Ibadan 30 Polytechnic students were wounded when police threw tear gas into their halls of residence. In Awka nine strike leaders were arrested.

In Benin young demonstrators bore placards that read, "No to fuel increase. Obasanjo must go, or we must die if Obasanjo remains."

NLC spokesman Owei Lakemfa told Agence France Presse (AFP) that armed gangs attacked NLC activists in Lagos while police stood by and did nothing. He said, "Many cars in the convoy, including those belonging to labour leaders, were damaged. Many people, including journalists and NLC officials, were injured. As human beings, if we are attacked next time we will defend ourselves."

Two days before the strike began, Adams Oshiomhole, president of the NLC, was arrested by 15 members of the State Security Service (SSS) at Abuja

airport as he was about to board a flight to Lagos. He was released several hours later.

The strike was supported by civic groups and opposition parties. Femi Aborisade, general secretary of the National Conscience Party, was arrested by the SSS when he was being questioned at police headquarters in Abuja in an attempt to pressure him to drop his support for the strike.

Some workers in the oil industry were called out, but the union leaders did not set out to seriously disrupt production.

Mojibayo Fadakinte, general secretary of NUPENG, the blue-collar oil workers' union, insisted, "Our members are part of the strike. But as for oil production, skeletal operations are going on."

Union members working in the offices were asked to stay at home and the union refused to allow crew changes at oil platforms and export terminals, but had not asked members there to down tools.

Mojibayo Fadakinte, general secretary of the white-collar union PENGASSAN, which is not a member of the NLC, told AFP, "The strike has not disrupted oil production and it will not. We have not asked our members to shut down oil production."

Royal Dutch Shell claimed that the oil was still flowing. But the BBC reported that production had been reduced by at least 20,000 barrels a day because of a pipeline fire in the area of the Niger Delta. The village where the fire broke out is in the homeland of the Ogoni people, who have had a long running dispute with Shell.

The Nigerian government is claiming that the strike is illegal because of a court ruling four weeks ago that the NLC could only call strike action over working conditions. The issue is being referred to the court of appeal. Legislation aimed at the deregulation of the NLC is currently passing through the Nigerian House of Representatives. Under its terms the labour minister

would only sanction “umbrella” union organisations if he was satisfied that they posed no threat to national security.

On the first day of the general strike, President Oluaegun Obasanjo set up a task force, including NLC President Oshiomhole and other union leaders, to “look into the effects of the fuel price rises” and to devise ways of bringing “short-term relief and medium-term positive impact” to Nigerians suffering from the steady rise in fuel prices”.

After its inaugural meeting Oshiomhole told reporters, “The strike continues tomorrow, because before you can begin to tinker with the strike, you have to have irreversible progress. We haven’t got there.”

He told the BBC that the strike would be suspended after four days “to give the government the opportunity to change its position and start talking to the unions.” But if the prices remained unchanged after the two weeks, there would be an indefinite general strike.

Since the strike, the situation in Nigeria has remained very tense. On October 18, troops and riot-police were deployed on the streets of Kaduna to quell an angry demonstration of local youth who accused the police of killing innocent citizens. The demonstration began after police and health officials were seen burying corpses in the Tudun Wada cemetery on the previous night. Suspicions grew that some of the arrested strikers had been killed.

According to *Concord Times* (Freetown), the protestors attempted to exhume the dead bodies, claiming that some were identified as close relatives. In radio and television broadcasts, State Governor Alhaji Ahmed Mohammed Makarfi claimed that the bodies were of suspected armed robbers killed in exchanges of fire with the police. But the brutal record of Nigeria’s police means that few people accept his reassurances.

The area around the cemetery has been sealed off and Makarfi has attempted to restore calm by promising an investigation into the facts about the mass burial.

Nigeria has recently been designated the most corrupt regime in Africa by Transparency International. According to the BBC, out of 145 countries only Haiti and Bangladesh were rated more corrupt.

It is the world’s sixth oil producer—exporting around 2.5 million barrels a day—and despite the historic high price of oil at over \$US50 a barrel, most of the country’s population lives in poverty. More than 70

percent of the Nigerian people live on less than one US dollar a day. They see cheap fuel as being the only benefit they receive.

This corrupt and dictatorial regime is fully backed by the western powers. President Obasanjo’s policy of eliminating all subsidies on oil products is part of a series of economic reforms backed by the International Monetary Fund. The international bankers, who hold Nigeria’s external debt of \$30 billion, view the abolition of fuel subsidies as an absolutely necessary economic reform.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**