

Police repress Ugandan protests

A correspondent
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On Wednesday August 10, police in the city of Masaka, Uganda assaulted and tear-gassed protesters demonstrating against the ever-increasing cost of living.

Protesters had rallied at the stadium at Kasena, in the Nyendo Ssenyange Division of Masaka, to hear opposition leader Dr. Kizza Besigye of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC). After Besigye gave an address, protesters marched outside of the stadium in a procession to a gasoline station where a two-year-old child, Julian Nalwanga was shot dead by police in protests this April.

Police dispersed the crowd, firing rubber bullets and canisters of tear gas and striking protesters with police batons. Automatic weapons were fired into the air to intimidate the crowd. There were reports that the Ugandan military, Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF), was also on the scene.

Besigye ran for president and lost in the last election in February. He accused Uganda's election commission—which is appointed by President Yoweri Museveni—of stealing the election.

Museveni, a former guerilla soldier, has ruled Uganda for 25 years since coming to power in 1986. Besigye served in the military with Museveni, and was at one time his doctor. He ultimately fell out with Museveni, however, leaving the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) and mounting a competing presidential campaign in the 2001 elections.

People in Kampala overwhelmingly believe that social conditions will not improve as long as Museveni is in power.

The FDC and Besigye offer no alternative to the policies of Museveni, however. The fight between Museveni versus the various “opposition” parties, of which FDC is the largest, is typical of the internecine warfare of governing factions of the ruling elite that goes on in countries around the world.

As a scion of a wealthy family, Besigye has no desire to challenge the international financial elite that rule Africa with an iron fist. The FDC supports Western imperialism and the US-led “war on terror.” It recently released a statement that reads, “In an era of global instability, we are determined to play our full role in working constructively with other countries to combat terrorism.”

The “opposition” fears that working people might turn against it, as well as Museveni. Their concerns are deepening amid the rise of social protest and opposition in Europe and the United States, and especially after the outbreak of revolutionary working class struggles in Egypt and Tunisia that toppled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

In a recent statement, they explained: “There is nobody preparing Ugandans for an uprising, but if [current] conditions prevail the people will stand up. It's up to the government to make sure that such conditions don't prevail. Those people in government must address the problems in the country, ensure that there is democracy, stop mismanagement of public funds and promote good governance”.

As for President Museveni, he has demonstrated his contempt for the working class by insisting that his right-wing, pro-market policies be maintained. He dismissed criticism of his economic policies, insisting that foreign “exchange rates are determined by issues beyond Uganda's control, but Ugandans suffer because of over-reliance on imported goods... If people consumed more locally-produced goods and services, they would not be affected much by the exchange rate fluctuations.”

The claim that the Ugandan masses should try to rely on locally-produced goods is a fraud. Besides the lack of locally-produced goods and services, such comments ignore the causes of the skyrocketing cost of gasoline.

As world oil prices rise, Uganda's modest oil production is being largely allocated to big oil conglomerates for export—further limiting the supply available in Uganda itself.

Museveni insists that Ugandan state policy must benefit the financial aristocracy and obey the demands of international finance capital: “To promote sustainable growth and development, we must make hard choices targeted at improving the investment climate for both domestic and foreign investors. We should avoid cosmetic options that provide short-term relief and sustain distortions.”

Museveni has remained in power for 25 years with the blessing of Western imperialism. Uganda has historically been stricken with conflicts, suffered through a procession of brutal Western-backed dictatorships, and is currently held hostage by the neo-liberal policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The country is racked by corruption and nepotism. In recent months, the social crisis has exploded. Inflation has skyrocketed, and the prices of food and gasoline have reached all-time highs.

Due to IMF structural adjustment policies enacted by the Ugandan regime, almost all Uganda's infrastructure has been sold off to international corporations.



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