

“Walk-To-Work” protests shake Ugandan capital city

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Tear gas and gunshots shook downtown Kampala as the “Walk-To-Work” protests resumed on Monday morning after a hiatus in April. Police moved to violently disperse the crowd of demonstrators, firing tear gas into the crowd and gunshots into the air. There were several reports of beatings of protesters by baton-wielding police. Many businesses in the area closed early due to the chaos created by the police’s brutal response.

Angry protesters threw stones at police and taunted them for their brutality. At 9:30 a.m., despite the police assurances to the media that the situation had calmed, shops remained closed in Kisekka Market, the Equatorial Shopping Arcade, and at other business areas, amid rising social anger at police repression.

Police lobbed a tear gas canister into the grounds of Kololo High School, disrupting students’ exams, claiming to be responding to “a threat by the walk-to-work protesters.”

The Inspector General for the Uganda Police Force, Major General Kale Kayihura, has warned the group organizing the protest, called Activists For Change, that the police “will crush the protests.” Kayihura also equated the protesters to terrorists threatening the national order of Uganda.

Underscoring the police-state atmosphere, police wearing civilian clothes arrested 10 activists at the Activists For Change headquarters in Kampala and took them to an undisclosed location. Three others were arrested at the police station when they inquired on their colleagues’ whereabouts

Police spokeswoman Judith Nabakooba told the media that the activists were found with “exhibits in connection to the walk-to-work.”

Police and security personnel surrounded a hotel in Seeta, Mukono, where former Forum for Democratic

Change (FDC) presidential candidate and Walk-To-Work campaigner Dr. Kizza Besigye addressed a gathering of FDC members. Besigye was overseeing a two-day retreat for the party to “brainstorm for ideas for the direction of the party” and campaign strategies for upcoming elections.

The protests occur amid a severe economic crisis and social deterioration in Uganda. The cost of living has skyrocketed, with prices of food and gasoline at all-time highs, putting a punishing strain on Ugandans, most of whom live on very low wages.

The “Walk-To-Work” protest campaign first began earlier this year after the presidential elections, in an attempt to appeal to mass anger over deteriorating economic and social conditions. The campaign is organized by an elite social layer represented by Besigye and the FDC party, together with another group of the political opposition, “Activists For Change”.

The national coordinator of Activists For Change is Mathias Mpuuga, a current member of parliament for the municipality of Masaka. Activists For Change is trying to cynically use the crisis as a stepping-stone to greater political influence in official Ugandan politics. The FDC and other “opposition” parties supporting Activists For Change comprise wealthy individuals and layers of the upper middle class.

There is a real fear in the political establishment of the emergence of independent struggles by the working class, free from the control of the established political parties, trade unions, and pseudo “left” organizations. The Walk-To-Work protests provide a safety valve to dissipate social tensions in the working class and to disorient them away from looking to change the social order.

The Walk-To-Work protests coincide with the

“Senior Four” examinations in high schools across Uganda. President Yoweri Museveni seized on this in an attempt to justify a crackdown: “I have heard that some people want to disrupt the national examinations. I want to warn them that they will not disrupt the examinations. We shall not tolerate anybody to disrupt the examinations of the children.”

This illustrates Museveni’s callous refusal to address the abject social conditions afflicting Uganda, and his comical attempt to slander the protesters as troublemakers disrupting education.

Various members of Museveni’s NRM government at a recent press conference went so far as to deny there is an economic crisis occurring in Uganda. The Bank of Uganda governor, Emmanuel Tumusiime-Mutebile, said, “Is the economy in crisis? My answer is: Absolutely not.”

Museveni’s statements at the press conference were equally divorced from reality: “It is the fault of the political class and the media because you are not serious.... [Y]ou are the ones who tell lies without research. The situation in Uganda is actually good; we only need to produce more.”

The hostility of the “opposition” to the protesters they claim to lead became clear the day after the protests, in a statement issued by Livingstone Ssewanyana, the executive director of the Foundation of Human Rights Initiative. He began by calling for dialogue between protesters and the government over the economic crisis—which he wanted to resolve with banal nostrums like “innovations, prudent fiscal policies, zero tolerance to corruption, and maximum utilization of the available resources.”

Ssewanyana then backed Museveni’s absurd attacks on the protesters for disrupting ongoing national examinations: “While the campaign raises serious issues, the timing when students are doing examinations is not proper. You cannot engage in an activity that goes contrary to the interests of the community.”

Med Kagwa of the Uganda Human Rights Commission also weighed in: “These protests are uncalled for. They are interfering with other peoples’ rights because the [examinations] time table is done once a year.”

In the view of these corrupt so-called “left” organizations that purport to be concerned over human

rights, it is the protesters who are to blame for the brutality of the police!

Such remarks underscore that the entire political establishment—right or “left,” including the trade unions and other groups—cannot and will not answer the demands of the working class, to which they are deeply hostile.



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