

General strike called as protests spread in Nigeria against gas price hike

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The two main unions in Nigeria, the Nigeria Labour Congress and the Trade Union Congress, have called for an indefinite general strike beginning on Monday if the Nigerian government does not reinstate fuel subsidies. The trade unions are scrambling to gain control of protests that began January 2 in response to a dramatic rise in gas prices.

President Goodluck Jonathan announced the removal of the subsidies to gas importers on January 1. Since then, gas prices have more than doubled, from 65 naira (\$0.41) per litre to more than 140 naira (\$0.96) per litre.

The gas subsidy was one of the few benefits that the majority of Nigerians received from the country's vast oil wealth. Nigeria produces approximately 2.4 million barrels of crude oil per day. Nearly all of the oil consumed by Nigeria is first refined outside of the country, and then shipped back for consumption.

The government spent approximately \$8 billion on gas subsidies in 2011; state officials claim that the savings from ending the subsidy will enable better investment in infrastructure and allow the state to pay down the national debt. While refusing to reconsider the removal of the subsidy, the government has tried to defuse growing opposition by ordering early payment of public workers' monthly salaries and announcing a new plan for updating the public transit system.

Protests have rapidly spread throughout the country, with hundreds of people marching on gas stations in Lagos and protestors in Benin City calling for the resignation of President Jonathan and Minister of Finance Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala.

A 23-year-old student, Muyideen Mustafa, was allegedly shot and killed by police during protests in the western state of Kwara. The *Guardian* notes: "under a controversial regulation known as Police Force Order 237, officers can shoot at rioters or

protesters whether or not they pose a threat to life. The regulation directs officers to fire 'at the knees of the rioters' and explicitly prohibits firing in the air."

On January 4, protestors marched through the streets of Kano, Nigeria's second largest city, demanding the immediate reinstatement of the fuel subsidy. They forced the closure of gas stations, burnt tires, and formed human chains to block major roadways.

In an echo of events in America and Egypt, the protests have been dubbed "Occupy Nigeria"; several hundred protestors occupied Kano's Silver Jubilee Square, renaming it "Liberation Square." This is an allusion to Tahrir Square, the Cairo square made famous by the struggles of the Egyptian revolution—whose name also means "Liberation Square."

Police forces moved in around 1am Thursday morning and dispersed the occupation of Silver Jubilee Square using tear gas and beating protestors with clubs. According to protestors, nearly 300 people were injured and 19 arrested.

The reactionary removal of the fuel subsidy, which kept gas prices fixed at 65 naira (\$0.41) per litre, has received backing from both the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Minister of Finance Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala served as a managing director of the World Bank from December 1, 2007 until her appointment to her current position last year.

The Jonathan administration claims that the end of the fuel subsidy is necessary for the survival of the Nigerian government, which is currently 5 trillion naira (around \$31 billion) in debt. The minister of information, Labaran Maku, stated in response to protestors' demands for a reversal, "To go back will cripple the economy. That is why we are calling on our citizens to bear with us."

The idea that there is no money to pay for programs such as the gas subsidy is a farce. The vast majority of Nigerians subsist on \$2 a day, while transnational oil companies and the local bourgeoisie extract vast amounts of oil wealth. As one of six oil companies operating in the country, Shell-Nigeria realized a profit of \$8.15 billion in 2010.

Secret diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks in 2010 revealed the extent to which companies like Shell Oil go to extract wealth from Nigeria. Shell representatives handed out bribes to Nigerian government officials to the tune of tens of millions of dollars. The money is used by elites such as the wife of former President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, who purchased a home in central London for \$10 million.

These protests come amid rising sectarian violence, to which the Nigerian government is responding by ramping up its repressive powers. Just days before he announced the removal of the fuel subsidy, President Jonathan declared a state of emergency in 15 local government areas in the northern states of Borno, Yobe, Plateau, and Niger. International borders with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon were closed as well.

The declaration was in response to a series of bombings on Christmas day which killed at least 42 people and injured more than 57 others. Boko Haram, a Muslim extremist group based in Borno State, claimed responsibility for the attack. The group has been engaged in a bombing campaign since 2009, and was founded in 2002 for the implementation of Muslim sharia law throughout the country.

In an address at a bombed out church in Abuja last Saturday, Jonathan stated, "We will crush the terrorists. If there are institutions ... which are harbouring terrorists, we will deal with them."



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