

# General strike over fuel hike paralyzes Nigeria

Bill Van Auken  
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Tens of thousands of Nigerians took to the streets Monday at the start of an indefinite nationwide general strike against the government's lifting of fuel subsidies, which led gasoline prices to double overnight.

By Monday evening, at least three protesters were reported killed and many wounded as security forces responded to unarmed demonstrators with live ammunition, tear gas and baton charges.

While called by the country's two main trade union federations, the strike movement began as a wave of nationwide protests which, in many areas, adopted the name Occupy Nigeria, in identification with movements in the United States and elsewhere that have broken out in opposition to economic deprivation and social inequality.

Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan announced the scrapping of the fuel subsidies on New Year's Day, resulting in an immediate doubling of gasoline prices from the equivalent of \$1.70 per gallon (\$0.45 per liter) to \$3.50 per gallon (\$0.94 per liter) or higher.

In Lagos, over ten thousand demonstrators poured into the city's Gani Fawehinni park. Singing and chanting slogans against "Badluck Jonathan", the protesters carried placards, many of them hand-written, with slogans such as "Subsidy removal is a huge economic fraud", "Nigeria is not Animal Farm", and "The poor will have nothing to eat but the rich." One popular poster portrayed Jonathan with a devil's horns and fangs pumping gas at a filling station. Large numbers of youth marched waving sticks and tree boughs.

The strike shut schools, government offices, businesses, banks and public transportation, leaving the streets of Lagos and other major cities empty except for demonstrators and heavily armed police.

In the political capital of Abuja, pickets shut down

the airport, halting all flights. The BBC reported that police using tear gas drove away youth who had occupied the city's Eagle Square.

In Lagos, protesters occupied a major highway, setting bonfires and burning tires. In the Ogba neighborhood of the city, however, the police opened fire on demonstrating youth, killing one and wounding several others. Angry youth wheeled the body of the slain demonstrator through the streets in a wheelbarrow, vowing revenge.

The worst repression took place in the northern city of Kano, where the government reported two killed, while residents said that at least three had died. Police opened fire on demonstrators after they laid siege to the state Government House. The local Red Cross reported at least 30 injured, most of them suffering gunshot wounds.

On Monday night, the state government announced a dusk-to-dawn curfew in Kano, which is the capital of the state bearing the same name.

In Kano and other cities, demonstrators have invoked the upheavals that toppled the Western-backed dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt, referring to the areas of protest as "Tahrir Square".

The strike came in defiance of an appeal made by President Jonathan in a televised speech delivered Saturday, in which he sought to deflect popular anger by announcing 25 percent pay cuts for himself and top government officials: "Tough choices have to be made to safeguard the economy and our collective survival as a nation."

Such "tough choices", however impose no hardship on Nigeria's wealthy elite and corrupt politicians, while spelling hunger and misery for the masses of working people and poor. The fuel hike has led to a spiraling of food prices, transportation costs, school

fees and other basic necessities, in a country where the great majority of its 160 million people subsist on \$2 or less a day, and over half of the work force is unemployed. Gasoline is also a major source of power as the electrical system is in shambles, and many depend upon gas generators.

Nigeria, the second-largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa, has since the 1970s been almost wholly dependent upon petroleum exports for its foreign earnings. The ruling elite has enriched itself by looting the country's oil wealth, while allowing basic infrastructure to disintegrate and leaving the masses destitute.

Jonathan and his minister of finance and economy, former World Bank Managing Director Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, have presented the scrapping of the fuel subsidy as a necessary reform to modernize the country's economy.

Last month, International Monetary Fund Director Christine Lagarde paid a visit to Nigeria, where she praised Jonathan's commitment to "free market" reforms. "I was extremely impressed with... the energy and pace at which he wants to transform the economy," she said, undoubtedly referring to the planned shock measure of eliminating the fuel subsidy.

While Nigeria produces over 2 million barrels of crude oil a day, its neglected state-owned refineries cannot meet more than a small fraction of the country's domestic fuel needs. As a result, fuel is imported from abroad, and the government paid a reported \$8 billion last year to make up the difference between world market prices demanded by international energy firms and the price fixed by the state.

Jonathan and his backers argue that instead of using billions to subsidize fuel prices, the money could be directed toward improving the country's infrastructure, while deregulation of the oil sector could attract foreign capital to modernize its refining sector.

His is by no means the first attempt to put an end to the subsidy. It has been tried repeatedly by previous governments, only to meet with mass resistance. Even the brutal dictatorship of Gen. Sani Abacha, which ruled Nigeria in the 1990s, was forced, in the face of popular opposition, to back down from a bid to scrap the subsidy.

The broad majority of the working population does not believe that money diverted from the subsidies will

go to improve infrastructure or better their lives. On the contrary, Nigerian workers understand from bitter experience that the billions of dollars coming from a subsidy cut would, instead, be funneled into the foreign bank accounts of the country's corrupt ruling oligarchy and its international business associates.

The US State Department used the day of the general strike as the occasion for issuing a formal condemnation of violence by Boko Haram, an Islamist group in the north of the country that was blamed for over 500 deaths last year. This included the Christmas Day bombings of a Catholic church and other targets that claimed 49 lives.

The group, whose name means "Western education is sacrilege", is a fundamentalist religious sect which has grown on the basis of deep-seated grievances in the predominantly Muslim north of the country, Nigeria's most impoverished region. But Washington has sought to link it to Al-Qaeda as a means of furthering US intervention in the oil-rich country. The Pentagon is already providing Nigerian troops with counter-terror training and supplying arms and "advisers".

Despite efforts to whip up sectarian divisions—and dire warnings from Jonathan that Nigeria is facing a worse threat than the civil war of the 1960s, which claimed over a million lives—the general strike and the preceding protests have demonstrated that the social and class questions in Nigeria, as elsewhere, outweigh sectarian concerns. Muslims and Christians have demonstrated and struck together throughout the country, and in the north, Muslim youth turned out to guard Christian churches on Sunday, while Christian youth did the same at local mosques.



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