

Nigerian general strike escalates as government steps up repression

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Hundreds of thousands have demonstrated throughout Nigeria over the past three days in an escalating indefinite general strike against the government of President Goodluck Jonathan.

The strike is in opposition to the lifting of fuel subsidies on January 1, leading to a doubling of petrol prices overnight. Protests began immediately, with a general strike called by the Nigerian Labor Congress and the Trades Union Congress commencing Monday.

The strike spread Wednesday with the closure of Apapa port in Lagos, the most populous city, with 15 million inhabitants. The strike has cut off cargo shipments.

Many shops and offices, banks and restaurants remained closed nationally and airlines halted international flights. Large protests were held in the capital Abuja as well as in Kano. In the southern city of Warri, where many oil companies are based, protesters blocked road access to the port.

The government cracked down on large-scale unrest in the states of Niger and Kaduna, imposing a 24-hour curfew. In Niger's state capital, Minna, youth rioted and set fire to government and political party offices and targeted the homes of local politicians. The previous day, thousands of protesters attempted to enter a government office complex.

In Lagos, tens of thousands protested and young people set up burning roadblocks. Once again the police attacked peaceful protesters, shooting into a crowd and injuring one person. Several hundred protesters took over a major road leading to islands on which the wealthy live. Banners declared "Occupy Nigeria", referring to the international protests against inequality and the domination of the banks that began in New York last autumn.

Tens of thousands participated in nationwide protests

Tuesday. Many people demonstrated their anger at the police killing of a protester on the first day of the strike, with some carrying a mock coffin labelled "Badluck", referring to the president. A large protest was held in Abuja, forcing international companies such as Shell and Exxon Mobil to close their offices.

In the northern city of Bauchi police fired tear gas at demonstrators. In Kano the government imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew following the police killing of three people the previous day. According to one eyewitness, police fired on a crowd of demonstrators, injuring at least 13.

The strike began in defiance of an injunction by the National Industrial Court ruling it illegal. On Tuesday, the government threatened to stop the pay of striking state workers. Attorney General Mohammed Bello Adoke warned, "Continuing disregard of that order is [dangerous] to the public interest as it constitutes an open invitation to anarchy."

The doubling of fuel costs is only the latest attack on working people carried out by the Goodluck Jonathan government, whose policies are dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In a country with a population of 160 million people, 70 percent live in grinding poverty, surviving on the equivalent of less than £1.30 a day.

For many people, the fuel subsidy was the only form of welfare available. The doubling of the price of fuel has been accompanied by rises in food and transport costs.

Tens of millions of people have been thrown into abject poverty as a result of previous IMF "structural adjustment" policies. Wages have been slashed to the extent that the average manual worker in Nigeria earned 35 percent more in the 1970s than in 2012. Unemployment continues to soar, with youth

joblessness at nearly 50 percent.

A tiny elite have become super-rich by siphoning off the vast wealth produced by the nation's oil assets, with Lagos now the location of one of Africa's highest concentrations of billionaires. In contrast, 80 percent of the population do not have access to a regular supply of clean drinking water.

The ending of the fuel subsidy followed a trip in December to West Africa by Christine Lagarde, managing director of the IMF.

As well as Nigeria, Guinea, Cameroon, Ghana and Chad have all been instructed to cut fuel subsidies as part of a further deregulation of their economies. Ghana cut its fuel subsidy at the same time as Nigeria.

In December, Nigeria produced an average 2.2 million barrels of crude a day. It is the fifth largest provider of oil imports to the United States.

The international financial elite are playing for high stakes in backing the Nigerian government's confrontation with the working class. Antony Goldman, Nigeria specialist and head of London-based PM Consulting, said, "The strike is the first true test in policy terms of the Jonathan presidency. ... If they prevail, the prospects for reform in other delicate areas—the constitution, oil and gas, revenue—all improve. If the strikers prevail, the administration's credibility is massively damaged."

Under conditions of mounting social conflict, the trade unions are seeking to limit the impact of the mass movement of the working class. They have refused to bring out their members in the oil industry, calling on the government to reach a compromise.

On Tuesday, union officials in Kano said that while strike action would continue in the city, there would be no further demonstrations. Babatunte Oke of the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria threatened, "If government doesn't do something about the strike, then [oil production] will be shut by the weekend."

Chika Onuegbu, national industrial relations officer of oil workers' union PENGASSAN, said his members remained at work and that no decision to strike had been taken. Making clear his aversion to calling a strike, he said that if one began, "That will mark the beginning of the next phase of the protest against the removal of the fuel subsidy and it will be very disastrous for the country."

The government is seeking to use the terrorist activities of Boko Haram, an Islamist group that exploits the grievances of the predominantly Muslim north, the most impoverished part of the country, to justify further repression. Boko Haram has been blamed for hundreds of deaths over the past year. The government, working with the Obama administration in Washington, has sought to link the group to Al Qaeda.

The protests have for the most part been characterised by a high degree of unity between Christians and Muslims. But a number of killings have been attributed to Boko Haram during the past few days and there have been retaliatory attacks by Christian gunmen on Muslims.

This week, President Jonathan claimed that the highest levels of the state had been infiltrated by Boko Haram. "Some of them are in the executive arm of government", he stated. "Some of them are in the parliamentary/legislative arm of government, while some of them are even in the judiciary."

Citing the threat of sectarian conflict, Jonathan ordered a state of emergency in 15 local government areas on December 31. On Wednesday, it was revealed that the governors of these regions will now be taking orders directly from the president. The Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) also closed the country's borders Wednesday on orders from Jonathan. The NIS is to supervise the implementation of the state of emergency in Nigeria's states with international borders.



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