

Nigerian unions suspend general strike

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Nigeria's two main trade union federations suspended strike action on Friday, the fifth day of a general strike against the government of President Goodluck Jonathan. Mass rallies set to take place this weekend were also cancelled.

The union bureaucracy's move to betray the struggle against the government was made on the pretext of supposed compromises offered during talks on Thursday attended by Jonathan. More than a dozen trade union heads attended the talks, which also included the Nigerian vice-president, finance minister, senate president and seven state governors.

Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) spoke of discussions as "fruitful." Its president, Abdulwaheed Omar, stated that "both sides have agreed to shift ground."

According to Nigerian Finance Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, an offer has been made by the government, which unions were considering. Further talks between the parties are to be held over the weekend.

The unions immediately scaled down scheduled protests on Friday, with an NLC official stating, "We are conscious of the security situation, given it is Friday and Friday is a day of prayer [for Muslims]."

He spoke in tacit support of the government's clampdown following recent sectarian killings attributed to the Islamist group Boko Haram, and violent retaliations by Christian organisations.

The general strike began Monday in response to the government's January 1 lifting of fuel subsidies at the behest of the International Monetary Fund. The subsidies are worth up to \$8 billion a year; their lifting rapidly led to a doubling of petrol prices. Within days a litre of fuel had risen in price from 65 naira, or \$0.40, to more than 140 naira, almost a US dollar. The knock-on effect is an immediate drastic increase in the cost of living, with a hike in transportation and food costs, in a country where 70 percent of the population of 160

million live in dire poverty.

It is estimated that the strike has cost Africa's second biggest economy more than \$600 million a day, a total of nearly \$3 billion.

The scant information available points to a rotten cave in by the unions.

The demand of workers and youth is for the unconditional restoration of the fuel subsidy. To keep control over escalating protests and a restive workforce, the unions were forced to call the strike, but only after waiting a week.

According to the *Financial Times*, all the government has offered is a possible reintroduction of the subsidy, "for a few months, albeit at a reduced level that would price petrol at about 100 or 120 naira a litre."

An agreement on this basis—a temporary cut of just 20 naira—leaves the price of fuel almost doubled for a few months, after which it will be allowed to rise unchecked. It would eliminate what is in effect the only form of welfare subsidy available to millions of people in Nigeria.

The actions of the union bureaucracy are dictated by its own fear of an insurgent movement of the working class. Following initial talks with the government, the unions initially feigned opposition, stating that strikes would still continue as negotiations resumed. "Until we conclude the discussions, we maintain the status quo," Abdulwahed Omar said.

Workers joined protests in cities on Friday, after trade unions broke off talks with Jonathan and said they would not restart until Saturday. But the strike was called off almost immediately.

"The labour movement and its civil society allies after nationwide consultations has decided that Saturday and Sunday will be observed as strike, protest and rally-free days," a joint statement from Nigeria's main labour unions said.

Not only were the unions aware that the strikes

remained solid and determined. They calculated that they would not be able to continue to hold back the all-important oil and gas workers from joining the action.

The decision to end the strike came just hours after the largest oil workers' union PENGASSAN, representing 20,000 oil and gas workers, was forced to announce that, without an agreement, it planned to pull out its members from Sunday.

Nigeria is the largest producer of crude in Africa, with oil accounting for about 80 percent of state revenue and over 95 percent of export income. Producing more than two million barrels of oil per day, it is a key supplier of crude to the United States (630,000 barrels a day) and the European Union.

Action by oil workers would have stopped Nigeria's oil and gas production, rapidly leading to a shutdown of the economy. According to one analyst, if new oil production was halted, the country had only enough supplies for six weeks of exports.

As the strike escalated this week, the mood of the demonstrators became increasingly militant with demands for the bringing down of the government. In response to the brutal repression of the state, in which riot police have indiscriminately attacked peaceful demonstrations, killing at least three and injuring many more, the strikes and protests widened. Hundreds of thousands of people have protested in many cities and towns, forcing the government to impose curfews in several states in response to large-scale unrest.

In Kano, the largest city in the north, hundreds of thousands protested Thursday. Another large protest was held in Lagos, with more than 10,000 people attending a rally in Gawi Fawehinmi Park. Many sang anti-government songs and carried placards reading, "Jonathan must go now" or "Revolution Now! They have the guns—We have the Guts."

The mouthpiece of the US financial elite, the *Wall Street Journal*, cited the comments of Bismark Rewane, the managing director of Financial Derivatives Co, based in Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital. "Both the unions and the government have lost control of this process," he warned.

Despite the unions' attempts to minimise all protests on Friday, thousands still came out in Lagos. Reuters said many present, "said they were determined to carry on until the government met their original demands."

The development of a mass movement against the

Jonathan regime, and its International Monetary Fund-inspired policies, reveals yet again that in every country, no matter their formal political complexion, the trade unions act at all times as bitter opponents of the class struggle. They function as a bulwark dedicated to safeguarding the ruling elite and the profit system itself against any threat from below.

Nothing can be secured by the working class outside of a rebellion against these organisations—which are wholly controlled by a pro-business fifth column of privileged functionaries—and the construction of new rank-and-file organs of struggle armed with a socialist programme.



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