Strikes resume in Nigeria after collapse of talks between unions and government

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Strike action against the Nigerian government of President Goodluck Jonathan is set to resume after the collapse of talks between the two main trade union federations, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress, and the regime.

The general strike began on January 9 in response to the government's January 1 lifting of fuel subsidies, on behalf of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Petrol costs more than doubled overnight, from 65 naira a litre ($0.40), to more than 140 naira, or almost $1.

The unions suspended the general strike on Friday, after talks with the government in the capital Abuja on Saturday. The unions had described talks on Thursday, attended by President Jonathan, as "fruitful," claiming the government had shifted its position and offered concessions.

In reality, the government has offered nothing and is determined to impose its measures. A joint statement by the union federations Sunday stated that talks the previous day had "stalled due to differences on the methodology in finding a solution to the crisis."

The unions are seeking to limit the impact of the strikes, refusing to call out the oil workers, and trying to obtain concessions from the government as an excuse to end mass protests against measures dictated by the IMF on behalf of finance capital.

In a clear indication that the unions are prepared to abandon the basic demand of workers and youth that the fuel subsidy is restored, the statement concluded, "The Labour Movement pledges that whenever and wherever government invites us for talks, we shall be there without any conditionality."

Al Jazeera's Haru Mutasa said of the trade union leaders: "They seem keen to end the strike. They don't want to go back on the streets on Monday, say some union leaders."

Though forced to allow the strike to resume in the absence of any government concession, the unions called off threatened action by the country's oil and gas industry workers. NLC President Abdulwaheed Omar stated that the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), the main oil workers union with 20,000 members, "will not shut down oil production, as earlier planned for Sunday".

When asked if there were in fact any plans for an oil strike, he replied: "No, we are taking this thing gradually. We are still giving peace a chance."

Despite the depth of opposition to the Jonathan regime, a strike that does not target the oil industry is deprived of its central weapon.

Nigeria depends on oil for the vast profits reaped by transnational companies and the ruling elite. It is the largest producer of crude in Africa, with oil accounting for about 80 percent of the country's state revenue, about 65 percent of government budgetary revenues, 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 (eight percent of US oil imports are from Nigeria) and the European Union, as well as Asian nations. Nigerian oil is classified as light sweet crude, which requires less refining, increasing its importance as a commodity on the world markets. It was estimated last week by an oil industry analyst that if striking oil workers halted new oil production, the country would only have enough supplies for six weeks of exports.

This is why the trade unions, headed by privileged defenders of the status quo, have refused to bring out the key section of Nigeria's working class.

The attempt to secure a rotten agreement comes after a week in which the government has bloodily suppressed demonstrations, leading to at least three

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deaths. The International Committee of the Red Cross reported on Friday that it had treated more than 600 people for injuries in the previous four days. In the states of Niger and Kaduna, the regime imposed curfews in response to widespread anti-government disturbances.

The struggle is an expression of broad social opposition to the entire free market agenda of the government, and the grinding poverty facing tens of millions of people. In a population of 160 million people, most are forced to live on less than $2 each day. A 2007 survey by Amnesty International found that in the oil-rich Niger River Delta, 70 percent of the six million inhabitants survive on less than $1 a day.

The fuel subsidy is the main social benefit for the majority of people. As a result of its abolition, millions face even greater impoverishment. Basic food staples have shot up in price, with a basket of tomatoes rising seven fold to 7,000 naira in a week.

While seeking an accommodation with the Jonathan government, the central role of the union bureaucracy is to cultivate a layer of "left" talking bourgeois "opposition" figures as an alternative leadership, should Jonathan be driven from office. As was shown by the events following the "Arab Spring", notably in Egypt, such layers play the central role in the ruling class's attempts to ensure that mass protests do not escalate out of the control of the unions and develop in a revolutionary direction.

Tanko Yakasai was previously a Special Adviser to former President Shehu Shagari, who ruled as the leader of Nigeria's Second Republic from 1979–1983. In a media interview, he contemplated the threat of revolution facing Nigeria and the need for a leadership to direct protests in a manner that does not threaten the strategic interests of the bourgeoisie.

"I studied revolution," he said. "I was once a revolutionary. You cannot have a revolution without a revolutionary movement, a revolutionary ideology, a revolutionary leadership and a revolutionary party. If they want a revolution, let them organize a revolutionary movement, give it leadership ... the greatest danger is a revolution without an objective. A spontaneous revolution is very dangerous. It can go either way. It can be positive, it can be negative. Do not pray for it. It is not something that one should pray for."

The issue of leadership and perspective is indeed decisive. Yakasai speaks as one who wants to preserve the leadership of the trade union bureaucracy over the mass movement and to strengthen its ties to the bourgeois opposition parties.

The stranglehold of the unions over the working class must be broken. The mass movement must reject all attempts to reconcile with Jonathan's regime and any of his capitalist opponents. A socialist and internationalist political strategy must be adopted, based on the fight for a workers' government that is led by rank-and-file organisations and a new party representing the independent interests of workers and youth.

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