

Nigerian unions suspend general strike as army deploys in cities

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17 January 2012

Nigeria's two main trade union federations, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC), have called off the general strike against President Goodluck Jonathan, as army forces moved into cities around the country.

Monday's capitulation took place after two weeks of protests since the government's removal of a subsidy on petrol on January 1. Demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, it doubled costs from 65 naira a litre (\$0.40), to more than 140 naira, or almost \$1.

The unions were forced to call a general strike on January 9, after a week of growing protests. Their move was intended to ensure that the mass movement did not escalate out of control and threaten the government. So that the stoppage would not have a significant effect on the economy, the unions refused to call out the strategically vital oil and gas workers. With production levels at more than two million barrels a day, the oil industry accounts for about 80 percent of the country's state revenue, about 65 percent of government budgetary revenues, and over 95 percent of export income.

The unions ended the strike after first calling off all scheduled street protests. On Sunday, they were still declaring that the government had not offered a concession great enough to justify ending the dispute. But Jonathan's televised address to the nation on Monday and a pledge to temporarily cut fuel prices by a third, to 97 naira (about \$0.60) per litre, gave the unions the pretext they were looking for to end strike action.

Jonathan's price cut was made while he pledged to "pursue full deregulation of the downstream petroleum sector", legislation which includes ending all subsidies on fuel costs.

The unions have sold out their members in the face of escalating repression, actions that will only escalate the danger of a return to open dictatorship.

The president warned that recent weeks had witnessed a "near-breakdown of law and order in certain parts of the country", which he blamed on forces seeking to "promote discord, anarchy, and insecurity to the detriment of public peace." Over the past week up to ten people have been killed and more than 600 injured in the protests. Entire regions of the country were placed under curfew.

Jonathan used his speech to threaten that his "Government will not condone brazen acts of criminality and subversion".

As he spoke the country was placed under a virtual state of emergency, with the army and riot police besieging every major urban centre in order to suppress any further protests.

In the heavily populated commercial capital, Lagos, riot police fired live bullets into the air and shot tear gas to disperse hundreds of protesters. Military forces were posted at a park in Lagos' Ojota district that was the location of a protest of more than 20,000 people on Friday.

The *Wall Street Journal* cited the comments of one of the protesters, a 33-year-old music promoter who had attended each protest in Lagos last week. "They're trying to enforce the [new] price using military force," he said. "People are still angry.... They say it's 65 naira or else."

For the first time since the protests began, army checkpoints were established in the city, cordoning off public squares and highway overpasses. One roadblock was set up to prevent access to Ikoyi Island, the home of some of Nigeria's wealthiest people. The area has the most expensive real estate on the African continent,

with the average new apartment selling for 120 million naira (around US \$1 million). Several oil companies have also moved their expatriate staff to the island, as the result of past social and political unrest.

Announcing the end of the strikes and protests, Abdulwahed Omar, the head of the Nigeria Labour Congress, told a news conference in the capital, Abuja: “Labour and its allies formally announce the suspension of the strike, mass rallies and protests across the country.”

Speaking in terms almost identical to those used by Jonathan, he stated that unions were ending the stoppages “because of security concerns,” citing the need to prevent “people outside organised labour” from trying to “hijack” the demonstrations.

Epitomising the role of the union bureaucracy as the main prop of the government and of the ruling class, Omar said the unions had “decided that in order to save lives and in the interest of national survival, these mass actions be suspended.”

The unity of the government and trade unions against the development of a social revolution was noted in the daily *Vanguard’s* Monday edition: “According to the Federal government, it has become imperative for it to take that decisive action of crushing the hoodlums because hijacking the strike and turning it into a riot was not the intention of Nigeria Labour Congress, NLC, Trade Union Congress and Civil society Organisations.”

The unions have no essential differences with the programme of the Jonathan government. Prior to the removal of the fuel subsidy on January 1, they were ensconced in talks over the issue. After they ended the strike, the president of Nigeria’s Trade Union Congress, Peter Esele, told the BBC that the unions were prepared to abolish the subsidy “down the road”.

Following the breakdown in talks on Saturday, the unions issued a joint statement from Acting General Secretary of the Nigeria Labour Congress Owei Lakemfa and General Secretary of the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria John Kolawole. It read: “The summary of Labour’s position at the meeting was that talks and consultations were on-going before government aborted them by announcing the 120-220 percent increase in the price of petrol, and that it is necessary to return to the status quo in order to douse tension, return the country to normalcy and allow for a

conducive atmosphere for consultations and talks.”

Noting that “the government’s only offer was to reduce the new prices while declining to allow a phased price increase”, they added, “We think that the government position will not return the country to normalcy.”

The central concern of the union bureaucracy, as such comments make clear, is to make sure the Jonathan government can return to “normalcy,” from which point it can negotiate further cuts with the unions.

Their statement stressed that the unions were “not campaigning for ‘Regime Change’. The Labour Movement is wedded to democracy, therefore, anybody or group that wants a change in the political leadership of the country at whatever level, should do so through the ballot box.”



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