

The betrayal of Nigeria's general strike

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The betrayal of the nationwide general strike by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) provides crucial lessons for workers and young people the world over.

The strike began January 9. It was officially called off on January 16, following talks with the People's Democratic Party government of President Goodluck Jonathan, but the unions had done everything possible to sabotage the strike from day one.

Action by the unions was called only after spontaneous mass protests against the government's removal, on January 1, of a fuel subsidy that had led to an immediate doubling in price. Over the course of its first five days, the general strike developed into the largest social movement in Nigeria's history. Millions struck and mass protests were held in every major urban centre, from Lagos in the south, with a population of 15 million, to Kano in the north. Banners reading "Occupy Nigeria" identified the struggle as part of an international movement in opposition to economic deprivation and social inequality.

It was met with savage repression. At least 16 people were killed and hundreds injured by the police and military. Curfews were imposed in entire states and roadblocks set up in towns and cities. On the day the strike ended the government mobilised the military to put down any further protests.

Nigeria joins Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, Greece, Spain, Portugal and other countries as the site of mass movements against ever more brutal capitalist exploitation. But, as in these other countries, the Nigerian events point to the impossibility of the working class waging a successful struggle against the governments of the financial oligarchy under the leadership of the trade unions and their political apologists.

In removing the fuel subsidy overnight, Jonathan was playing for high stakes and under direct orders from the

International Monetary Fund and World Bank. The abolition of the subsidy was just one manifestation of a far broader campaign of privatisations and spending cuts that are further impoverishing an already desperate population. Abolition therefore became the focal point for a broad anti-capitalist social movement, including opposition to mass unemployment, standing at 40 percent for those under 40 years of age, and the lack of basic necessities such as electricity and clean drinking water in a country where more than 70 percent of the population live on less than \$2 a day.

The trade unions called the general strike to re-establish their control over the developing mass movement. They insisted that the only issue to be addressed was restoration of the fuel subsidy, stressing throughout that they were not seeking regime-change. They made sure that workers in the strategically vital oil industry, which accounts for the vast bulk of Nigeria's economy, were not called out.

After just four days, on January 12, the NLC announced that progress had been made in talks and the Jonathan regime had offered concessions. The strike and protests were suspended the following day, Friday, supposedly to allow for further talks on Saturday. These talks were a sham. No concessions were offered, with the president and vice president not even attending. The strike was to be resumed Monday, January 16, the union leaders declared. But a threatened strike of oil workers, scheduled for Sunday, was cancelled.

Finally, on the day strike action had resumed after a three-day hiatus, Jonathan appeared on television to declare that fuel costs would be cut temporarily by a third. With the army on the streets, the unions dutifully called off the strike and all further protests.

The filthy betrayal by the Nigerian unions is not an isolated development. There is not a country in the world where the unions are not playing a similar role,

acting as the instruments of a highly privileged bureaucratic stratum in suppressing the class struggle on behalf of big business. That is why everything depends on the working class breaking with the trade unions and constructing genuine organisations of class struggle, based on a socialist programme.

The Nigerian events also demonstrate that the most determined defenders of the domination of the union bureaucracy over the working class are the various ex-left groupings. Typical is the Committee for a Workers International (CWI), whose Nigerian affiliate is called the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM).

In an article published on the first day of the strike, the DSM admitted that the unions in Nigeria have long played a despicable role and declared that it was necessary “to avoid this struggle meeting the same fate as that of the many previous general strikes held since 2000—namely, a rotten compromise with little or no gains for working people.”

Rather than avoid such an outcome, however, the DSM argued that “mass mobilizations and warning strikes” had to be conducted by “the NLC and TUC leaders.”

“We do not want a repeat of the situation where Labour leaders declare, without preparation, an unlimited general strike, only to call it off within days,” they wrote. But all they offered to supposedly prevent this was “the formation of strike/action committees,” whose goal would be “to ensure full compliance with the NLC directive”—that is, to uphold the authority of the union apparatus!

The DSM and its parent body, the Socialist Party in Britain, committed a conscious deception. While acknowledging that a general strike posed the question of power and presented the “possibility of revolutionary change in Nigeria,” the DSM endorsed control over the movement by the very force most opposed to such an outcome.

This was carried out by a party that claims to base itself on Trotsky’s strategic writings on the 1926 General Strike in Britain, which the Communist Party, under Stalin’s leadership, allowed to be betrayed precisely through its insistence that the British Trades Union Congress be allowed to determine its fate.

The DSM’s statement prior to the strike declared that what was required was the building of a “mass workers party armed with socialist policies.” But the content of

this demand was made apparent in a statement published the day after the capitulation of the unions, which declared, “The trade unions, given their large working class membership and their strategic importance within the modern economy and society, are in a key position to launch the building of this kind of alternative party.”

Subordination of the working class to the trade union bureaucracy and the organisations of the bureaucracy, in which these fake-socialists enjoy leadership rank and its attendant privileges, is fundamental to the politics of the CWI and the entire ex-left swamp. It defines them as the most determined and insidious opponents of the struggle for socialism.

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