

Mounting attacks on Nigerian workers

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Workers in Nigeria face escalating attacks on their livelihoods following the betrayal of last month's national general strike against the regime of President Goodluck Jonathan.

The Peoples Democratic Party government has utilised the treachery of the trade union bureaucracy to go on the offensive against an already impoverished population. Following the slashing of fuel subsidies, the government is to impose a massive increase in electricity tariffs. In preparation for the privatisation of 18 state-run power companies later this year, tariffs will rise from April by between 25 and 88 percent, with the majority facing a 50 percent increase.

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Nigeria's finance minister and a former managing director at the World Bank, last week said the government would soon remove the fuel subsidy in its entirety and boasted, "I don't think any government in the world would have the courage to do what Nigeria has done on subsidy phase out. Look at Greece. They didn't have the courage to implement reform".

Such attacks are being imposed on a population that already lives in crippling poverty, with almost 100 million people now existing on less than a US\$1 a day. In 2010, nearly 112.5 million people (60.9 percent) were living in "absolute poverty", according to Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). Almost all respondents nationally to an NBS survey, 93.9 percent, said they considered themselves poor.

As a result, the political situation has been fundamentally transformed. Above all, the trade unions have been discredited among the Nigerian masses for their blatant support for the government.

At the beginning of January, the government removed fuel subsidies, doubling prices overnight. Mass demonstrations and protests erupted, forcing the trade unions to call a national strike on January 9 to try to regain control. Tens of millions were involved in the

biggest social movement in the history of the country. Fearful of the movement's revolutionary implications, with many protesters calling for the bringing down of the government, the unions moved to end the strike just four days later.

Since then, the trade unions have moved to cement their relations with the government through their pledges of support for the crackdown against the Islamic sect Boko Haram. Translated as "Western education is forbidden", Boko Haram was founded in 2002 and feeds on deep-seated grievances in the predominantly Muslim north, which suffers discrimination and the highest levels of poverty. A number of terrorist attacks have been attributed to the organisation, including immediately before and after the general strike. But these may have been instigated by provocateurs.

On February 13, Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUC) leaders Peter Esele and John Kolawole heaped praise on the government for the arrest of a suspected Boko Haram leader and demanded further action. The arrest was "an opportunity to dig deeper into activities of the Boko Haram sect exposing and unravelling its operational dynamics, field tactics, operatives and their local and international connections including collaborators in the government."

Days later, the daily *Vanguard* editorialised, "A nation faced with a common enemy must put aside their differences and face the enemy together."

Boko Haram is cited as the "enemy", but the government knows that the main threat comes from the working class. As the general strike ended, on January 16, troops were stationed throughout Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital and largest city. Far from any concessions being made, later that day Jonathan announced that fuel prices would be cut only temporarily. His speech was immediately followed by the trade unions calling off the strike and all planned

protests and rallies. Those demonstrations that went ahead were brutally attacked by the security forces. Lagos remained under a state of siege for a further eight days.

As it became clear that the unions were preparing a sell-out, the *Leadership* newspaper reported gangs of young males, known as “area boys”, “bombed the NLC Secretariat at Yaba, warning the labour leaders and others not to compromise or else they will be dealt with.”

A number of prominent union leaders held a “press briefing where they insisted that labour and its affiliates would not compromise or betray the masses.”

The newspaper warned that of those it had spoken to, “over 90 percent were not happy with the NLC [Nigerian Labour Congress] for calling off the strike.... People who reacted to the actions of labour said they had betrayed the masses.... They also insinuated, with some saying it openly, that they must have been ‘settled’ to dance to the tune of government.”

Many workers have voiced their hostility and disgust in online forums and in the comments sections underneath newspaper articles.

Concerned for the fate of the union bureaucracy, the ruling elite have launched a campaign to defend their actions. The Nigeria Employers’ Consultative Association praised the unions for calling off the strike, as did the Nigeria Bar Association. However, the overt support of big business for the unions, meant as a supportive gesture, has only further angered workers.

To cover for this pro-business line-up behind the unions, the ruling class has called on the services of Femi Falana, a prominent human rights activist, lawyer and a leader of the National Conscience Party—long promoted as a radical alternative by the various pseudo-left organisations. He insisted that calling off the strike “was not a case of betrayal. I can vouch for the integrity of the labour leaders. I don’t believe they were bought.”

Evidence proves that they were. The government is now pressing ahead with the full deregulation of Nigeria’s lucrative oil sector with its Petroleum Industry Bill. The union bureaucracy is to receive its share of the spoils for services rendered. Within hours of the general strike being ended, it was announced that TUC leader Peter Esele had been appointed to the board of the Petroleum Industry Bill.

The central lesson of the betrayal of the general strike is that the trade unions operate as the frontline police force for the capitalist class. The working class must build new organisations of class struggle and its own socialist and internationalist party.



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