

Zimbabwean teachers refuse to work as government reopens schools without COVID-19 protection

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Zimbabwe's teachers are in their second week of strike action against the government's back-to-school campaign being rammed through with minimal protections and over poverty level wages.

It follows a three-month strike by 16,000 nurses over a lack of personal protective equipment and low wages, betrayed by the Zimbabwe Nurses Association. The actions are part of a growing wave of opposition by teachers and health workers against the reckless and homicidal response of capitalist governments around the world to the coronavirus pandemic.

Teachers refused to resume teaching on September 28 when schools reopened for the first time since March for those students taking exams in December. Regular classes for all students were due to resume on October 5.

The reopening of schools is bound up with the government's efforts to drive parents back to work and to start generating profits for multinational corporations and the national bourgeoisie.

Schools have been starved of funds for years, with parents providing most of the funding after the introduction of user charges in the 1990s. Classroom conditions are abysmal. Tawanda Chikondo, a 29-year-old teacher, told Bloomberg, "Our school looks like something from a war film, because I doubt it's been painted in 25 or 30 years. There are broken windows, crumbling walls and we don't have water. This is Zimbabwe, can you imagine? Africa's most-educated nation has to teach children under trees because the classrooms are squalid and unkempt."

There is an acute shortage of schools, particularly in rural areas, with more than 2,000 extra schools needed. Teacher to pupil ratios range between 1:45 and 1:120 because of the shortage of teachers and classrooms available, making social distancing impossible.

Teachers and students lack the most basic safety measures. Limited hand sanitiser has been made available under conditions where even clean water is a scarce commodity, as

Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education officials acknowledge.

Teachers are demanding that as frontline workers they should have regular testing, adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), and risk allowances before they are prepared to start work again.

The closing of schools has affected nearly 5 million children. Even before the onset of the pandemic, among the 4.6 million children of school age (3 to 12 years) at least 1.2 million (35 percent), were in need of emergency and specialized education services. Many children, reliant on the school system, lost access to food supplies and protection, while all but the most affluent 5 percent who go to the elite schools had no access to remote learning. Only 20 percent of primary schools and 40 percent of secondary schools have access to the internet, with the vast majority of children deprived of formal education during the past six months. Many children must work as street vendors or in the fields as well as going to school.

Teachers are paid an abysmal \$45 per month after the government unilaterally cut their salaries in October 2018 as it switched to pegging their salaries to the local currency. They are demanding the government pay them at least \$520 a month plus sector-specific allowances. Soaring inflation, which stands at around 800 percent, and a collapsed currency have destroyed workers' living standards. Many teachers complain they are not even able to pay for their own children's schooling, with reports of some teachers engaging in illegal mining and work as street vendors to make ends meet.

Teachers have rejected ZANU-PF President Emmerson Mnangagwa's 40 percent cost of living adjustment and a \$75 COVID-19 allowance extended to December, vowing to continue their strike.

Zimbabwe is facing an economic and social catastrophe. The currency has collapsed while the price of food, fuel and other basics has skyrocketed. At least 8.6 million people or

60 percent of the 15 million population are expected to be acutely food-insecure this year. In urban areas the number of food insecure people is expected to rise from 2.2 million people to 3 million people. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has warned the country is likely to see a large increase in malnutrition as result of the pandemic.

Zimbabwe has recorded nearly 8,000 cases of coronavirus and 229 deaths amid a healthcare system that is haemorrhaging. According to Bloomberg, the government is attempting to stop doctors from leaving the country as medical professionals flee due to economic ruin and the woefully underfunded health care system.

The stock market is teetering on the brink of collapse as overseas investors have sold \$52 million worth of stocks. Currency shortages had previously prevented a sell-off but following the government's stimulus package the availability of foreign currency prompted an exit of capital.

According to Justice Matanda-Moyo of the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC), the country has lost \$3.2 billion "through tax evasion, smuggling, corruption, fraud, drug trafficking and money laundering." Over the course of two decades Zimbabwe has lost more than \$32 billion through illicit financial flows.

Political infighting over how to deal with the mounting social and economic crisis threatens to erupt into violent conflict. In June, the country's top military generals pledged support for Mnangagwa, denying speculation of an imminent coup after the order to close Zimbabwe's stock market by the Joint Operations Command (JOC) that includes top officials from the military, police and intelligence.

The hostility between Mnangagwa and his deputy Constantino Chiwenga has grown increasingly bitter. Chiwenga, a former general with strong support in the military, is viewed as Mnangagwa's rival for the presidency despite having played a prominent role in the 2017 coup that ousted long time ruler Robert Mugabe and brought Mnangagwa to power.

According to *Zimbabwe Independent*, the struggle between Mnangagwa and Chiwenga has intensified following the reintroduction of District Coordinating Committees (DCCs) for organising elections within ZANU-PF, as the factions around Mnangagwa and Chiwenga battle for dominance within the party and the state.

The DCCs were disbanded in 2012 after the ZANU-PF alleged they were being used to fan the flames of factional warfare between Mnangagwa and then vice-president Joice Mujuru. Mnangagwa has reintroduced the DCCs to undermine Chiwenga after handing him the poisoned chalice of health minister—a manoeuvre which has largely failed as

the healthcare workers' unions have forced the nurses and doctors back to work as they negotiate with the government.

With the reintroduction of DCCs, Mnangagwa is hoping to thwart any opposition to his rule while providing a pseudo-democratic cover to his authoritarian measures.

A ZANU-PF politburo member told the *Zimbabwe Independent*, "There is commotion all over the country. People are burning the midnight oil plotting. The elections [within ZANU-PF] themselves are promising fireworks. There are widespread allegations of vote-buying and imposition of candidates by senior officials who want to assert control of the lower structures and it's getting messy."

Mnangagwa is attempting to direct social discontent outwards. According to Bloomberg, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Tibor Nagy and Zimbabwe Foreign Minister Sibusiso Moyo, another former general who played a prominent role in the coup that deposed Mugabe, have been in secret talks to help suppress a growing insurgency that has displaced over 300,000 people in neighbouring Mozambique.

The Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado, the northernmost and impoverished province of Mozambique where France's Total and the US's Exxon Mobil Corp are among those that have planned massive investments in the province's off-shore gas fields, is rapidly becoming internationalised.

US imperialism, whose offer to help the Frelimo government has apparently been rebuffed, views Zimbabwe's military as a battle-hardened subcontractor providing Washington with deniability for any criminality in suppressing the insurgency.

Zimbabwe's ruling elite, for its part, doubtless sees this as another valuable looting operation. Mnangagwa became a billionaire via the illicit diamond trade that dominated Zimbabwe's military interests in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) during the suppression of rebel forces in that country, while Moyo headed the company that facilitated the illegal movement of diamonds, arms and other illicit goods in and out of the Congo.



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