

Kenyan government threatens crackdown against cost-of-living demonstration, as protests erupt across Africa

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The Kenyan government of President William Ruto is threatening police violence against Monday's protest against high costs-of-living. The protest is organised by billionaire opposition leader and former prime minister Raila Odinga of the Azimio la Umoja—One Kenya Coalition Party. It coincides with mass rallies across Africa and Europe.

Odinga has declared the demonstration on the streets of Nairobi the “mother of all protests,” while continuing his calls for an investigation into fraud in last August's presidential election.

Sunday, Nairobi police chief Adamson Bungei said Monday's protest is illegal and the security forces would not allow it. “Any person who will breach the peace or break the law during the procession shall be dealt with according to the law,” he said.

Last week, Ruto declared, “The government will not allow loss of life, destruction of property and looting. We will not allow a few individuals who have refused to accept election results to cause chaos among peace-loving people.” His deputy, Rigathi Gachuga, threatened “finding a final solution to Raila.”

In anticipation of the rally, the government converted Nairobi into a fortress, deploying 5,000 heavily armed police offices and the notorious paramilitary, the General Service Unit (GSU). Created by British imperialism to suppress the Mau Mau anti-colonial insurgency in the 1950s, the GSU has been used by successive regimes to crush worker and peasant protests and strikes.

Throughout the week there have been demonstrations in various parts of the country including Kisumu, Mombasa, Nairobi, Kiambu and parts of the Mount Kenya region, an area with few Azimio supporters. Videos of citizens complaining about the high cost of living have gone viral on social media.

For over a month, the government had been stepping up police repression against workers and youth. In February, police arrested popular comedian Eric Omondi and 17 other

protesters after hurling tear gas. In March, 40 people were arrested in another protest.

On Saturday, 50 university students were arrested by police at a city hotel after holding a press conference in support of Monday's rally. They were handcuffed and bundled to the Central Police Station, charged with engaging in an illegal gathering.

Everywhere the ruling class, whether in the former colonial countries or the imperialist centres, is breaking with democratic forms of rule, seeking to criminalize working class struggles. Monday's protest in Kenya coincides with demonstrations across the world against austerity and worsening social conditions, marking a growing revolutionary situation internationally.

Across Africa, five mass protests are being held today. In South Africa, the opposition Economic Freedom Fighters is organising nationwide marches against power rationing, high unemployment and low public spending on education and has called on African National Congress President Cyril Ramaphosa to resign. Police have said that the planned protests are an attempt to overthrow the government and are mobilizing 18,000 security officers to suppress the demonstration.

In Nigeria's capital Lagos, opposition politicians have called for street protests over what they have described as rigging in last month's presidential elections, intersecting with others against fuel shortage and currency swapping difficulties. In Tunisia, protesters marched against the rising cost of living, insecurity and the drive to authoritarian forms of rule by President Kais Saied.

Another protest is being held in Dakar, Senegal, after weeklong protests gathering thousands as President Macky Sall intensifies repression ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

In France, the epicentre of workers' struggles in Europe, hundreds of thousands continue to protest against Macron's pension reform. For weeks, millions across Europe have

been striking and protesting to express their anger against the planned attacks and pro-war policies.

Like other opposition parties' demonstrations against sitting governments, Kenya's Odinga does not represent a genuine alternative. The demonstration is a means of cynically exploiting and also containing mounting opposition against Ruto, amid soaring inflation of 9.2 percent, sharp tax hikes, and soaring food and energy prices. Latest data from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics shows that households spent 13.3 percent more on food compared to a year earlier. Food accounts for nearly a third of the shopping basket for Kenyan families.

Terrified at the spectre of anger exploding outside of Kenya's corrupt political framework, Odinga called today's limited protest action. *The Star* reported that sources who attended an internal Azimio meeting on whether to cancel the demonstration said, "We told him it is too late, our supporters are already psyched up and we cannot disappoint them because if you keep on cancelling such activities, nobody will take you seriously next time."

Odinga, with an estimated net worth of \$3.3 billion, has refused to present any concrete demands, besides vague calls for Ruto to reintroduce food and fuel subsidies, while insisting that exerting more pressure on the government will force it to reverse social attacks. Odinga is aware that any policies against inflation would impinge on the wealthy that he himself represents and anger his imperialist backers, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is demanding savage austerity.

The Ruto government, composed of 24 cabinet members collectively worth US\$120 million, is determined to unload the full burden of the economic crisis, which has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, a prolonged drought that is resulting in 3.5 million Kenyans facing starvation, and the soaring of prices due to the ongoing US-NATO war against Russia. The economy is suffering falling foreign exchange reserves, depreciating of the Kenyan shilling, and mounting debt and debt servicing obligations amid a shortage of US dollars.

In the first 100 days of his presidency, Ruto has dutifully imposed the dictates of the IMF. The government has eliminated subsidies on the staple unga (maize flour) and fuel, announced new tax hikes on excisable goods and services, introduced new charges for bank-to-mobile money transfers, increased the rate of withholding (income) tax and raised mandatory National Social Security Fund contributions.

He is now preparing a privatisation programme, including the Kenya Ports Authority (KPA). KPA's privatisation has the potential of sparking mass opposition among its 5,000-strong workforce, a traditionally militant section of

the working class that can paralyse operations at the Mombasa Port, blocking the supply chain of goods across East Africa.

While the police-state methods to impose the dictates of the IMF, US and European imperialism are reminiscent of the austerity attacks by Western-backed dictator Daniel Arap Moi—Ruto's political mentor—during the 1980s and 1990s, the crisis of capitalism in Kenya and globally is far deeper today than it was four decades ago. Mass protest and strikes across the world have shaken bourgeois rule to its very core.

The working class and rural masses must forge their own methods of struggle against this savage austerity programme. This requires above all an understanding that neither the Ruto nor the Odinga factions of the ruling class can resolve the international crises facing Kenyan society. The working class cannot count on the trade unions, which are tied to the capitalist system.

The Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU), consisting of 36 trade unions representing more than 1.5 million workers in the public and private sectors, has refused to mobilise its members against Ruto's austerity programme. On Saturday, COTU Deputy Secretary-General Benson Okwaro implored Ruto to embrace dialogue with Odinga "so that our country can be saved." He urged workers to report to work, saying, "Let us not be used by politicians. This country is bigger than us all. We must leave the country as peacefully as we found it. History will judge us well."

COTU's members, as well as the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists Union and the Kenya National Union of Teachers, have called off strikes to increase salaries and improve working conditions over the past months. In November, the Kenya Airline Pilots Association called off a strike at Kenya Airways, after Ruto's government outlawed the action. The ending of the strike was also supported by Odinga's Azimio.



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