

# Kenya's civil servants threaten strike over wage delay as economic crisis deepens

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Hundreds of thousands of Kenyan health care workers and civil servants are threatening strike action that could paralyze the country.

The Kenyan government of billionaire President William Ruto has delayed salary payment of government and parastatal workers, save for some education workers and police, while imposing International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures and privatisations and waging war in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo in defense of US imperialist interests across the region.

Last Friday, health workers of eight unions, including the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists Union (KMPDU), Kenya National Union of Nurses, Kenya Union of Clinical Officers, Kenya National Union of Pharmaceutical Technologists, Kenya Health Professional Society, and Kenya Union of Nutritionists and Dieticians declared a strike in 12 of Kenya's 47 counties starting this Wednesday. They would join doctors and nurses in Nandi County already on strike over three months' salary arrears.

The unions are under mounting pressure from their members after Ruto's government's failed to pay March 2023 salaries. Other workers have gone without salaries for three months. This doesn't only affect civil servants and their immediate families, but also relatives from rural areas who depend on this lifeline to sustain their livelihoods.

The Kenyan economy is facing a deepening economic crisis, including inflation of 9.2 percent and a high cost of living intensified by NATO's war on Russia in Ukraine. Debt service is consuming over 60 percent of revenue, compounded by a weakening local Kenyan shilling currency and international market turmoil precipitated by the bank bailouts in the US and Switzerland, reflecting an intensification of the global capitalist crisis.

County governments, responsible for education and health care, have not received money for the fourth

consecutive month since December. By the end of March, counties said they were owed US\$907 million, with county governors blaming the withheld cash for their failure to pay workers' salaries. This is the longest period that the devolved units have gone without receiving revenue from the national government.

Last week, Kenya's government acknowledged it is grappling with a severe cash crunch. In his usual arrogant manner, Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua blamed the cash crisis on the massive debt contracted by the previous government, while making clear that the priority was repaying foreign lenders, not workers' salaries.

Gachagua said, 'They [the previous government] borrowed money left, right and centre', adding 'And because we are a responsible government, we have to pay this money. Last week, some loans matured. And they have to be paid because we have obligations.' Gachagua omitted the fact that Ruto was deputy president of the previous government.

The unions are seeking to contain and suppress overwhelming opposition from the membership to Ruto. In a pathetic joint statement, read by KMPDU Secretary General Davji Bhimji, the unions made clear that they were forced into strike action and intended to call it off through backdoor channels with Ruto.

Bhimji said, "We wish to emphasize that this is not a strike notice but rather a demonstration of the inability of our members to attend work due to lack of resources." Rather than appealing to other sections of workers in a political confrontation with the government, Bhimji said, 'We remain open to further discussions with you [Ruto] and hope for a speedy resolution to this matter.'

Bhimji refused to broaden the struggle beyond health care workers, even though 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, confirmed receipt of strike notices

from the Union of Kenya Civil Servants and the Kenya County Government Workers Union last week. Both unions represent tens of thousands of civil servants.

COTU's members, including the KMPDU and the Kenya National Union of Teachers, have a track record of calling off strikes at the last minute, seizing on supposed "advances" in negotiations. When strikes do erupt, they work to isolate them, like last November's strike of pilots at Kenya Airways. After Ruto's government outlawed the action, the unions refused to come to the strikers' defence.

The Ruto government has made clear it will not take loans to pay for salaries or make even the slightest concessions.

Kenyan and world capitalism faces an economic, social and political crisis that increasingly assumes revolutionary dimensions, as demonstrated by the mass upheaval in France over Macron's pension reform. Under conditions of war against Russia in Ukraine, an economic recession and the impact of climate change reflected in a drought affecting millions across the Horn of Africa, a major upsurge of the class struggle is starting to erupt in Kenya as part of a growing global movement of the international working class. Unbearable living conditions are pushing millions into a confrontation with the Ruto government, the major corporations and the state.

The struggle can only be waged as a political struggle directed against all factions of the ruling class, including the union bureaucracy and the Azimio la Umoja coalition. Azimio is led by billionaire Raila Odinga, who belongs to the super-rich oligarchy in Kenya. According to Oxfam, this consists of 8,300 individuals owning more wealth than the bottom 99.9 percent (more than 44 million people).

In March, under mounting social pressure, Odinga called for limited protests demanding that Ruto "solve the high costs of living," an ambiguous demand without any concrete measures besides vague calls for Ruto to reintroduce subsidies. His cuts had led to price hikes on key commodities like fuel and maize flour, leaving millions in need of food support.

Thousands responded to the opposition's call, mainly in the capital city Nairobi, and in Western Kenya, Odinga's home region and political stronghold, despite a violent crackdown by the Ruto government that included banning demonstrations and teargassing and arresting hundreds of protesters. Two protesters were shot dead. Odinga responded by calling the protests off, fearing he would lose control and the protests would intersect with the

looming civil servants' strikes.

Odinga also received a personal visit from a delegation from the US led by the senator for Delaware, Chris Coons, known as US President's Joe Biden's main representative in the Senate. Coons also met with Ruto government officials. While the content of the backroom discussions has not been revealed, Washington is clearly concerned that a mass upheaval in Kenya would destabilize its control over East Africa, under conditions of its war against Russia and advanced preparations for war against China.

Weeks before, in February, the US launched Justified Accord 2023 in Kenya, the most important military maneuvers to date by the United States Africa Military Command (AFRICOM) in East Africa, mobilizing over 2,000 troops from Uganda, Djibouti and Rwanda. The drill took place as the South African, Chinese and Russian navies conducted joint maneuvers in South African waters.

Above all, Odinga feared that the protests were intersecting with social struggles across Africa, including South Africa, Nigeria and Tunisia, against high living costs, corruption, authoritarianism, fraudulent elections and unemployment. This shows the potential of coordinating struggles across national borders artificially created by the European colonial powers during the 19th century.

As social anger mounts, the decisive task remains to build a political movement in the working class in opposition to all factions of the Kenyan ruling class, organised in action committees of the rank-and-file independent of the trade unions and Azimio, alongside a political movement to transfer state power to the workers and rural masses.



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