

Nigeria's trade union leaders sabotage general strike over minimum wage

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On the second day of a nationwide general strike calling for a higher minimum wage, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) leaders suspended the strike “for a week” and rushed into talks with the government and the employers’ association.

The unions are intent on suppressing massive opposition within the working class to Nigeria’s atrocious living conditions, intensified by the ruling class’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the soaring of prices due to the US-NATO war against Russia in the Ukraine and the government’s disastrous austerity policies. They are shoring up the country’s capitalist regime, which is facing its worst economic crisis in decades.

Workers across Nigeria began indefinite strike action on June 3 in a long-running battle to establish a liveable minimum wage for those holding down a regular job—92 percent work in the “informal sector” where they earn far less—and to oppose an increase in electricity prices. The strike shut down the power grid shortly after 2 a.m., throwing the whole country into darkness. Many flights were cancelled from Lagos, the busiest airport, and from the capital, Abuja. Schools, offices and hospitals remained closed.

With the minimum wage of N30,000 per month, agreed in 2019, having expired in April, the unions had sought N494,000 per month to keep up with the skyrocketing cost of living following President Bola Tinubu’s free market reforms. The government and the employers’ association were reportedly considering 62,000 naira (\$40) per month, a starvation-level payment about which the NLC had previously declared, “The Government’s counteroffer mocks the excruciating hardship brought on workers by its insensitive and oppressive economic policies.”

Information Minister Mohammed Idris said that the unions’ demand would increase the government wage bill by 9.5 trillion naira (\$6.3 billion), which is “capable of

destabilising the economy.”

The N494,000 was already lower than the N600,000 the unions had used in public speeches, while the government barely moved on its offer. Shittu Lawal, a civil servant in the northern city of Kano, told the BBC he wanted at least N100,000 a month. “Even 100,000 naira won’t be enough as prices in the market have gone up but it will be better than what we have now. I spend 500 naira to get to work every day which is not easy, we will return to work now and continue to push for more,” he said.

The unions have refused to restart the strike, claiming that the government was considering their latest demand of N250,000 per month, less than half the amount demanded by workers. In the same breath, they noted a “wide gulf” between that and the N62,000 a month apparently on offer from the president, an amount state governors have already rejected and which press reports had earlier said the unions had accepted.

The strike is the fourth major action since Bola Tinubu of the ruling All Progressives Congress became president in May last year, after winning less than 50 percent of the vote in an election marred by fraud and other irregularities and a 27 percent voter turnout that sparked angry protests and a dawn to dusk curfew in Kano state. There is widespread anger over mass unemployment, endemic poverty—some 87 million of Nigeria’s 229 million and predominantly young population live in poverty—and unprecedented social inequality in Africa’s most populous country.

Inheriting an empty treasury and a huge debt burden from his predecessor Muhammadu Buhari, who stepped down after his eight-year tenure, Tinubu moved swiftly to implement the demands of Nigeria’s creditors, including the removal of the fuel subsidy, introduced decades ago because despite being a major oil producer, Africa’s largest, Nigeria has little oil refinery capacity. The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) floated the naira, previously

pegged to the US dollar, to unify the exchange rate on the official and black markets. By February, the currency had fallen by 70 percent, forcing the CBN to authorize armed raids on currency exchanges across the country and arrest two executives from Binance, a cryptocurrency exchange platform, and the government to seek additional loans. The government, at both federal and state level, spends more on debt servicing than on public infrastructure and services.

With Nigeria dependent upon the import of most of its essential commodities, including food and medicine, the devaluation led to soaring inflation, 34 percent in April, the highest since March 1996, with food inflation reaching 41 percent, up from 25 percent a year ago. According to the International Monetary Fund, “per capita income has stagnated. Real GDP growth slowed to 2.9 percent in 2023, with weak agriculture and trade... despite the improvement in oil production and financial services.” The International Monetary Fund anticipates that Nigeria, once Africa’s largest economy, will slip to fourth place behind Egypt and Algeria.

Nigeria’s monthly minimum wage of N30,000, equal to \$84 in May 2019 and \$65 when Tinubu became President in May 2023, has fallen to just \$20 today. Children are going to bed hungry while the sick have to forego medication. People have died in stampedes for free sacks of rice.

The removal of the fuel subsidy, with 75 percent of Nigeria’s electricity supply coming from diesel and petrol-powered generators, tripled the cost of fuel, putting electricity and transport out of reach and driving up manufacturing costs.

Ethnic and religious conflicts have disrupted agriculture, including armed conflicts with jihadist groups in the northeast and Biafran separatists in the southeast, herder-farmer conflicts in north-central, the widespread operations of criminal gangs as well as kidnappings to extort a ransom. Nigeria, once a large net exporter of food, now has to import some of its food products.

In July last year, Tinubu declared a state of emergency. Since then, the situation deteriorated further. The Central Bank repeatedly raised interest rates to an unprecedented 26.25 percent in a bid to stabilize the naira and curb soaring inflation.

Every year, four to five million young Nigerians enter the job market and struggle to find work. According to official statistics, the unemployment rate had risen to 33.3 percent in 2020 and is now estimated at about 40 percent by the consultants KPMG, prompting a surge in the

number of young Nigerians trying to emigrate.

In some states, there have been cost-of-living protests with demonstrators blocking roads. Kano state’s Governor Alhaji Abba Kabir Yusuf admitted earlier this year that people were starving.

The cost-of-living crisis has provoked major protests in at least 12 other African countries, including Kenya, South Africa, Tunisia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Algeria, Sudan and Uganda. In a review of about 59,000 reports about protests in Africa collated by the Armed Conflict Location and Data Project between January 2016 and May 2024, more than 7,000 protests—most of which took place after March 2020--were driven by food, pay (wages and salaries) and price concerns.

This points to the failure of the national bourgeoisie to overcome the problems of imperialist oppression for the working class after independence. It confirms Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, which explains that in colonial and oppressed countries only the fight for power by the working class can advance the struggle against imperialism and ensure genuine national liberation and democratic and social rights for workers and the oppressed masses.

It means uniting the working class across racial, ethnic and gender lines and across national borders in a fight for socialism. These conditions are fuelling a powerful revolutionary movement of the working class, not only in Nigeria but across Africa and the entire world. The key task is to provide this movement with political and programmatic direction by building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in every country.



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