

Thousands mourn those slain by Kenya's Ruto government, as health workers strike

Kipchumba Ochieng
8 July 2024

On Sunday, thousands of Kenyan youths concentrated in Uhuru Park grounds, the main park in central Nairobi, dressed in black and waving Kenyan flags to honour those killed during anti-Finance Bill protests by the William Ruto government.

Surrounded by a heavy police presence, protesters erected makeshift crosses bearing the names of those who died over the past three weeks. According to the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC), at least 43 people were slaughtered across the country, the majority in Nairobi, during the demonstrations, and over 600 were injured, many with bullet wounds.

A few kilometres away, army and police were deployed near Parliament and State House and major roads.

Sunday's actions came after smaller protests organised on Tuesday and Thursday last week. There is a sense that the mass anti-Finance Bill 2024 movement, which evolved into broader opposition against the entire post-independence political establishment, is receding. This does not represent any lessening of the hatred felt by millions against the Ruto regime, but rather growing frustration with the bankrupt political perspective pushed by the opposition Azimio la Umoja and the trade union bureaucracy.

Significantly, workers are now mobilizing to fight for better wages and against precarious working conditions, despite trade union efforts to suppress opposition to Ruto. In recent weeks, workers have joined protests alongside youth and sections of the professional middle class on an individual basis, without leveraging their industrial power in key economic sectors.

Last Thursday, the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists Union (KMPDU), with over 7,000 members, including doctors, pharmacists, and dentists, announced an indefinite strike effective Monday and a plan to occupy the Ministry of Health's premises. On Sunday night during a zoom meeting with KMPDU members, Deputy Secretary General Dennis Miskellah denounced them. He said, "if you want to occupy MOH, go and occupy MOH and do whatever you want, but KMPDU will not be part of that ... accept batch posting [of interns] or stay at home."

On Monday, KMPDU Secretary General Davji Bhimji Atellah suddenly called off the strike in an official X account. "We are suspending the occupation of Afya House. This

decision comes as a result of ongoing discussions" with the Ministry of Health, he wrote.

The statement was quickly deleted after it provoked mass anger from KMPDU members and other workers on social media. Many users accused Atellah of being bribed by the Ruto government.

Atellah ludicrously claimed that the union's X account had been hacked. "Reports circulating to the effect that #OccupyMoH has been suspended is false. The union handle has been compromised and we are trying our best to gain control of it and clean it."

Interns are currently camping outside of the MOH.

Many KMPDU members have participated in the mass protests, particularly healthcare professionals offering medical assistance to injured protesters for free. Many were attacked by police with live ammunition, batons and teargas.

On Monday, the Kenya Union of Clinical Officers (KUCO), with a membership of 20,000, called off their nationwide strike after 99 days. The strike, which had paralysed services in public hospitals, ended following an agreement with the Council of Governors (CoG). The full agreement has not been disclosed, but the major grievances leading to the strike included demands for higher salaries, risk allowances, comprehensive medical coverage, guarantees for career progression, confirmation of clinical officers working on contracts as permanent staff with pensions, and the recruitment of 20,000 additional clinical officers.

KUCO Secretary General George Gibore directed all members to resume their duties immediately and the deal is widely perceived as a betrayal.

On social media, one worker said, "100 days on strike with nothing substantial, bure kabisa [useless] ... This union needs to be dissolved, Nothing said on interns." Another, under the name Kenya West, declared, "Matako nyinyi [you asses], you throw interns under the bus!". Another asked, "What are the contents of the RTWF [Return to Work Formula] ??? Once again a full disappointment." A doctor from Kisumu said, "This is a malunion." Another said, "Nothing gained."

The Kenya Union of Journalists (KUJ) has issued a 14-day strike notice at the Standard Group PLC, one of the largest media houses, over accumulated salary arrears for seven

months and failure to remit dues for their savings and credit cooperatives. Media workers at Standard's Radio Maisha have been on a wildcat strike since last week, demanding unpaid wages.

On June 28, media workers from Standard's Radio Maisha, Spice FM, Berur FM, and Vybez Radio staged a walkout and went off air.

The Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU-K) has declined to even express solidarity with the KUUJ. COTU, comprising 36 trade unions representing over 1.5 million workers, has not mobilised support from other member unions.

Every section of the working class—from workers in Nairobi's Industrial Area, to tea, coffee, and horticulture workers, to port workers in Mombasa (East Africa's largest port), as well as teachers and healthcare workers—should have united in action to defeat Ruto's austerity measures, police state measures and the deployment of the army. COTU instead is working with Ruto to impose austerity.

Secretary General Francis Atwoli infamously defended the Finance Bill, before the massacre on June 25 that killed dozens forced him to appeal to Ruto to withdraw the bill. He is now promoting illusions in Ruto's "dialogue" with the youth. On Monday, Atwoli called on Ruto to consider reviving an employment initiative inspired by President Jomo Kenyatta to "help mitigate the ongoing demonstrations and promote social cohesion."

Appeals to the Ruto regime will not defend workers' jobs, wages and social conditions. Bitter struggles over the past years have highlighted the futility of such measures. Ruto will use any breathing space provided by the trade unions to impose \$2.7 billion of brutal austerity measures to cover the revenue shortfalls brought by the rejection of Finance Bill 2024. Last Friday, Ruto disclosed plans for the dissolution and privatization of over 40 state-owned companies, with the loss of thousands of civil service jobs.

More budget cuts are expected in education, national healthcare facilities, social welfare, housing, and infrastructure, as well as the funding of the 47 counties that oversee devolved functions such as primary healthcare, pre-primary education, county roads, public works, and other vital services.

The working class cannot effectively fight for better wages, jobs, and conditions, nor resist the austerity measures imposed by the Ruto government under the dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), if they remain confined within unions that act as industrial enforcers for the government and big business. Workers need to take control of their own struggles by building rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions and the capitalist parties, including the opposition Azimio la Umoja coalition led by millionaire Raila Odinga, in every workplace, plantation and major economic centre.

Above all, workers can turn to their brothers and sisters internationally. Across Africa, the ruling class is terrified of the contagion of Kenya-style mass anti-austerity protests. Social

media posts have called for protests and shutdowns in Nigeria, Malawi, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Like Kenya, all four are heavily indebted and are raising taxes steeply while their governments are accused of corruption, nepotism and police-state repression.

In Malawi, the highly anticipated national shutdown demonstration scheduled for this week against the high cost of living was postponed, citing high school examinations. One of its organisers, Edwards Kambanje, expressed fear things could get out of control, stating "in the spirit of unity.... We recognize that collective action and constructive engagement are crucial for building a harmonious and prosperous society."

On the other side of the continent, the former president of Ghana (2012-2017), John Mahama, urged MPs to tread carefully lest they find themselves confronting mass opposition, as in Kenya. He warned, "The Kenyan public are beating up Members of Parliament for passing bad laws. Mr Speaker, it is a serious matter. I saw colleagues Members of Parliament beaten to a pulp... We should be worried. It is not a laughing matter. It is not a joke. It's serious. I saw one running and the police ushering him through a tunnel to escape."

In Nigeria, a poster under the hash tag #ENDBGIN is circulating on social media calling for nationwide protests in early August against soaring costs of living. Organisers have rallied people to support the demonstration regardless of their tribe, region or religion, which, like Kenya, have long been used to divide workers and the rural masses.

Daily Trust, owned by Media Trustone of the leading media companies in Nigeria, featured a commentary by Eugene Enahoro titled "Nigeria is not Kenya!" He accused the organisers of behaving "irresponsibly," urging Nigerians to "wake up and make the sacrifices that Kenyans have made because that is the only way we can have a better country."

Enahoro warned of a military coup if protests were organized: "Bearing in mind our nation's history of ill-advised military interventions, and the current trend in West Africa, anyone calling for violent street protests in Nigeria places our democracy at risk."



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact