

Kenyan anti-Ruto protests continue as Uber drivers walk out and truckers threaten to strike

Kipchumba Ochieng
16 July 2024

Tens of thousands protested yesterday across Kenya, demanding President William Ruto's resignation and calling for a "total shutdown." Voicing opposition to police repression, austerity measures, soaring living costs, and mass youth unemployment, the protests were the biggest since the June 25 demonstrations that forced Ruto to withdraw International Monetary Fund-dictated tax hikes.

Organised under the hashtags #OccupyEverywhere and #RutoMustGo, protests were launched across 23 of the country's 47 counties, including Nairobi, the capital, Mombasa, the second-largest city, Ruto's political stronghold of Eldoret, and Lodwar in remote northwestern Kenya. Shouting "Ruto must go" and "Stop killing us," the protesters defied police, who again used live ammunition, and state-sanctioned goons armed with clubs and pickaxe handles sent to intimidate them.

In Nairobi, businesses closed amid a heavy police presence. Major roads leading to Parliament, City Hall, and the Supreme Court were barricaded by anti-riot police and the military. By the afternoon, police teargassed and shot rubber bullets at even the smallest congregation of protestors, engaging in running battles for five hours in the Central Business District (CBD). Transport in and out of the CBD was at a complete standstill.

One of the most brutal scenes of police repression was Kitengela, on the outskirts of Nairobi, where police fired repeatedly at hundreds of protesters who blocked the busy Nairobi-Namanga Road connecting Kenya to Tanzania. One protestor was shot dead. In Nakuru, journalist Catherine Wanjeri was shot. In Kibwezi, two protestors were shot.

The latest mass demonstrations follow weeks of protests brutally repressed by Ruto's administration. According to the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, at least 50 people have been killed, most by live ammunition. To date, 413 people have been injured, 59 have been abducted or are missing, and 628 have been arbitrarily arrested.

The continued protests are a rebuke to Ruto who, trying to placate mounting opposition, dissolved his cabinet last Friday to pave the way for a "broad-based Government" with figures from the opposition. He also forced the resignation of hated police chief Japhet Koome, as hundreds of university students blocked a major highway, protesting the death of a student protestor whose body was found floating in a quarry on Nairobi's outskirts.

Ruto has promised to form a government of national unity to "deal with the burden of debt, raising domestic resources, expanding job opportunities, eliminate wastage and unnecessary duplication of a multiplicity of government agencies and slay the dragon of corruption." It was a call for the opposition and unions to close ranks behind the government.

The ruling class is determined to implement International Monetary Fund demands. Having already deployed police and military forces against protestors, all factions are moving toward the imposition of dictatorial forms of rule.

The protests are also a rejection to the opposition Azimio la Umoja, led by millionaire former Prime Minister, Raila Odinga, who jumped on Ruto's fraudulent "dialogue" initiative in attempts to deactivate the protests. This provoked a torrent of opposition across social media.

On Friday, leading members of the opposition hailed Ruto's dissolution of the cabinet. Rising star and Nairobi Senator Edwin Sifuna declared, "Sacking all the Cabinet Secretaries is a solid start". Spokesperson Makau Mutua said, "The deed is done. Thanks President William Ruto".

Divisions within the opposition are escalating, as its various factions, gripped by fear of the masses, grapple with the decision of whether to ally with Ruto or to remain outside and in a better position to mislead the protests. As *Standard* reported, "Odinga who last week joined Ruto in support of dialogue appears to have back peddled with Azimio principals Kalonzo Musyoka, Eugene Wamalwa and Martha Karua vehemently opposed to the talks".

All of these figures have been part of the Kenyan political establishment for decades. Musyoka has a filthy track record, working under the brutal dictatorship of Daniel arap Moi, serving as Foreign Affairs Minister, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly and National Organising Secretary of KANU—the only legal party under Moi—as workers, students and left-wing opponents of the regime were killed and tortured. Wamalwa, former Cabinet Secretary for Defense, started his career representing Uganda's three-decade dictator, Yoweri Museveni. Karua held different ministerial positions in Mwai Kibaki's government (2002-2013).

Even the churches, a legacy of British colonialism long used by Kenya's ruling class to suppress class struggle, are facing the wrath of protestors in a country where more than 80 percent of the

population is Christian.

Since taking office, Ruto has cozied up to Church leaders, who have flocked to State House, with the president citing the Bible to justify social cuts and tax hikes. Ruto has even been forced to ban the ostentatious practice of “harambee”, where politicians give large sums of money to the Church to receive their backing or as part of money laundering schemes. Anger has intensified as Church leaders visited Ruto during the protests, while police were gunning down demonstrators.

Bishop Simon Kamomoe pathetically said, “We don’t want to lose you, we don’t want to lose our young people,” adding “The Catholic bishops are so concerned about losing this generation.”

Unlike last year’s anti-austerity protests, the opposition is not in control. The demonstrations are part of a far broader protest wave encompassing by working people, students, sections of the middle class and the rural masses, driven by skyrocketing prices, mass unemployment and hatred of the corrupt, super-rich political establishment, and its dreaded police.

The politically diverse movement is united by the slogan “Ruto must resign” and the need to address Kenya’s social and economic crises. They oppose Kenya’s role as a proxy for US imperialism in East Africa and the Caribbean, as Washington intensifies its war against nuclear-armed Russia in Ukraine, plans for war with China, and arms the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza.

The entry of the working class into this movement with its own demands has been blocked by the trade unions, above all the Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU), consisting of 36 trade unions representing more than 1.5 million workers.

COTU has welcomed Ruto’s cabinet dissolution manoeuvre. COTU Secretary General Francis Atwoli said it was “a significant step towards this much-needed rebirth [...] addressing the grievances and aspirations of the Kenyan people.”

Despite this, strikes are now spreading. On Monday, tens of thousands of ride hailing corporations—Uber, Little Cab Kenya, Bolt Kenya, Faras and other e-taxis—went on a one-day strike in a bid to increase their fares per mileage.

Over the years, drivers—often precarious workers earning between \$211 and \$352 a month, who either rent or have purchased cars with loans—have opposed high commission rates imposed on them. These high commissions force drivers to work longer hours for minimal pay, especially as fuel costs have surged by approximately 94 percent from 2019 to 2024.

On Monday too, the 12,000-strong Truckers Association issued a strike notice over insecurity following reports of brutal attacks meted out on truckers at the Kenya- South Sudan border point. The truckers say that eleven drivers have been killed so far by criminals.

Medical interns are still engaged in protests, demanding immediate posting. Most have been waiting for posting for two years. Despite the government and the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists Union (KMPDU) reaching a return-to-work agreement in May based on the promise interns would be posted, the issue remains unresolved.

There is mass anger against the KMPDU. One medical intern told the *Nation* last week, “We had a meeting with KMPDU officials and we are so angry that they are in bed with the

government on things like the idea of batch posting”. Another said “KMPDU is in bed with the government.”

Workers have nothing to negotiate with Ruto. “National unity” agreements are designed to impose severe cuts, tax hikes, and privatizations demanded by the banks and global financial capital, spearheaded by the IMF.

Ruto is preparing to escalate repression, claiming that behind these protests are “foreign forces”. On Monday, he accused the Ford Foundation of being behind the protests. “We ask the Ford Foundation to explain to Kenyans its role in the recent protests. We will call out all those who are bent on rolling out hard-won democracy”, said Ruto.

This is ludicrous. The Ford Foundation is one of the most powerful private foundations in the world, with close ties to Wall Street and the US government. It receives the bulk of its endowment from corporate contributors and very wealthy donors and maintains close ties to US military and intelligence agencies. Historian Frances Stonor Saunders described the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations in her book *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* as “conscious instruments of covert US policy, with directors and officers who were closely connected to, or even members of American intelligence.”

Far from being an enemy of the Ford Foundation, Ruto is a stooge of American imperialism. It is barely a few months since Ruto was declared a non-NATO ally, allowing Kenya to buy advanced weaponry in exchange for making Kenya’s soldiers available as proxies for US imperialism.

As part of the deal, last week Kenya received two of the sixteen military helicopters donated by the US. As Ruto deploys the Kenyan army on the streets against unarmed protestors for the first time in history, Washington is signalling that it is backing Kenya’s military in preparation to smash domestic opposition and to carry out its proxy wars abroad.



To contact the WWSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact