

Strike wave erupts across Kenya despite trade unions' attempt to strangle it

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Over two months after the so-called Gen Z protests erupted across Kenya in response to the government's imposition of International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures, hundreds of thousands of teachers, healthcare workers, airport staff, county civil servants, and lecturers are pushing for strike action to oppose budget cuts, privatisation schemes, and broken promises regarding wage increases and staffing.

The working class is confronting a supposed "broad-based" government—a newly installed coalition of President William Ruto and his United Kenya Party and the main opposition party, the Raila Odinga-led Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). It is committed to IMF austerity, and enjoys the backing of the Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU) and influential Christian and Muslim clergy.

Together, they are backtracking on the promises Ruto made in an effort to defuse the mass protest movement that erupted on June 25 against IMF austerity. At its height, millions took to the streets and parliament was stormed. The government is slowly reinstating the unpopular tax hikes that were withdrawn from Finance Bill 2024 and is rescinding proposed cuts to the lavish spending of the political class. It is also continuing with abductions of political activists and has abandoned its promises to investigate police officers responsible for brutal repression that left at least 60 protesters dead, hundreds injured and scores missing, and to compensate the families of victims.

The forces arrayed against the growing working class upsurge extend beyond the IMF, the Kenyan bourgeoisie and their representatives in the political establishment, and the courts that have been banning strikes. The US and European imperialist powers view Kenya as a crucial "anchor state" for imperialism in East Africa.

However, the greatest political obstacle to the development of a working class challenge to capitalist austerity and the ruling class' plans for Kenya to serve as a satrap for imperialism remains the trade union bureaucracy.

Spearheaded by the leaders of COTU and its 36 affiliated unions, which claim to speak on behalf of 1.5 million workers, the union bureaucracy is acting ruthlessly to stifle worker resistance. COTU General Secretary Francis Atwoli recently promised Ruto "industrial peace." Instead of opposing the social attacks, the trade union bureaucracy is actively dividing the workforce—issuing strike notices only to later cancel them, or organising fragmented and ineffectual one-day actions, while falsely suggesting that the Ruto-Odinga government can be pressured to change course.

Healthcare workers have again threatened strike action, just four months after unions called off a previous strike following promises from the Ministry of Health to uphold the 2017 Collective Bargaining Agreement and recruit intern doctors. Last week, the Kenya Medical

Practitioners and Dentists Union (KMPDU), alongside seven other healthcare trade unions, issued a 14-day strike notice to county governments, demanding resolution of issues including unpaid salaries, lack of medical cover, and non-remittance of deductions.

Representing over 82,000 workers—ranging from doctors, nurses, and clinical officers to lab technicians, dentists, morticians, and public health workers—the unions have warned that the strike will commence on September 19.

The situation has become so dire that many healthcare workers have gone without salaries for up to three months. Healthcare workers in four counties including Nyamira, Marsabit, Meru, and Taita Taveta are already on strike.

Civil servants from Kenya's 47 devolved administrative units are also threatening to go on strike. The Kenya County Government Workers Union (KCGWU), which represents various county employees, including firemen, refuse collectors, revenue clerks, and early childhood development teachers, TVET instructors, and ambulance attendants has issued a 21-day notice to the counties, in opposition to the withdrawal of a salary increase circular that initially applied to all public servants. Later, the government reinstated the increase for national government employees, but not county workers. Workers have not had a salary review since 2012.

The KCGWU acknowledged that their previous strike notices had been ineffective, yet they continue to foster illusions in Ruto. KCGWU General Secretary Roba Duba stated, "We addressed the President in a letter dated August 30, 2023, regarding the discrimination against county government workers. Although the Head of Public Service directed the State Department for Devolution to address the issue, no action has been taken, defying the President's directive."

These strike notices mainly serve to diffuse opposition, with trade unions appearing to defend workers' rights while not disrupting daily operations and fostering false hopes of government concessions. By threatening strikes without intending to act, the goal is to prevent a rank-and-file rebellion. Typically, unions negotiate last-minute deals to avoid strikes, claiming empty "victories." When the government breaks its promises, worker frustration builds, leading to another strike call once anger peaks.

This is evident in the ongoing struggle of airport workers at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, who are opposing the 30-year lease awarded to India's Adani Group Holdings to take over operations at East Africa's largest airport. This move represents a clear deepening of airport privatisation aimed at satisfying international investors and complying with IMF austerity measures—at the cost of job cuts and deteriorating working conditions.

The Kenya Aviation Workers Union has called for strike action three times in recent months, only to postpone each one at the last minute. Their greatest fear is mobilising workers in struggle, which would not only severely impact the profits of major airlines but, more importantly, disrupt the entire region's capitalist economy on a significant scale.

The airport handles 7.5 million passengers annually, making it one of Africa's busiest. It is crucial for Kenya's export industry, particularly in sectors like horticulture, where it facilitates the shipment of fresh flowers, fruits, and vegetables to Europe and other global markets, supporting over 250,000 jobs in Kenya, directly and indirectly, and contributing more than US \$9.5 billion to the economy annually—around 4.6 percent of Kenya's GDP.

Another sector in struggle are educators and school support staff.

Mass anger has erupted among hundreds of thousands of teachers after the Kenya Union of Post Primary Education Teachers (KUPPET) abruptly called off a strike, which had paralysed secondary high schools nationwide for a week, including in defiance of a court order declaring their action illegal.

Teachers are demanding better pay, promotion of 130,000 teachers, absorption of 46,000 Junior Secondary School (JSS) teachers on permanent and pensionable terms, the employment of 20,000 new teachers, and immediate remittance of capitation to the medical insurer to allow service providers to offer medical services to sick teachers and their families. They are also demanding the government adhere to the 2021-2025 Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA), on which it has repeatedly reneged.

KUPPET members were presented with a *fait accompli*. They were given no opportunity to discuss or vote on the decision to end the strike, which was unilaterally called off by union president Akelo Misori after Ruto's Teachers Service Commission made a series of vague promises to address teachers' concern "as and when funds are made available by Parliament."

COTU had worked to undermine the strike even before it began, with the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT), which represents primary school teachers and support staff, pulling out on the eve of what had been planned as a joint strike with the KUPPET teachers.

Opposition among teachers to these betrayals is mounting. COTU's general secretary, Atwoli, personally intervened to hysterically denounce the teachers last Thursday, stating "Support your leadership and allow them to lead you. I'm appealing for peace, calm, and continued support within KUPPET." He added "Once you are at the talking table, you cannot continue with the strike, let's not blame each other, this is not war, it is industrial relations."

University lecturers are also involved in a fight with the government over non-payment of their full salaries and delayed implementation of their 2017-2021 Collective Bargaining Agreement. Members of the Universities Academic Staff Union walked out on indefinite strike, Sept. 4.

Anger among university students is also escalating. Students are opposed to the increased tuition and accommodation fees imposed under a new university "funding model." It includes a "Means Testing Instrument" under which students are classified into five bands depending on the financial capacity of their families. Students from the University of Nairobi's Student Council issued a notice stating "we must reject the new funding model imposed upon us. Our education is not a commodity to be exploited for profit."

Other sections of the population are also entering into struggle. Tens

of thousands of ride-hailing drivers are threatening to strike against the exorbitant commissions that the billion-dollar riding app corporations like Uber and Bolt squeeze from them.

The drivers of privately-owned minibuses and vans, known as *matatus*, which form the backbone of Kenya's urban transport system, are also threatening to strike. These *matatus* transport millions of Kenyans daily. Two weeks ago, the Matatu Owners Association announced a strike in response to the government's decision to raise the Road Maintenance Levy by Ksh7 per litre of fuel, increasing it from Ksh18 to Ksh25. However, the strike was called off at the last minute to, in the words of the Association, "allow for negotiations." Despite these discussions, the government has maintained the levy, citing it as a crucial measure for generating funds to service Kenya's IMF debts.

Workers must be warned. Ruto has no intention of offering concessions to the working class. On the contrary, he is gearing up for a brutal confrontation with them. The government has begun implementing a 40 percent wage increase for the police, one of the few social constituencies that still remains loyal to the regime. A 20 percent increase has already been in effect since July. In addition, the Ruto government is considering further benefits and allowances for the police, including housing, healthcare, and education support.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on workers to draw the crucial lessons from recent developments. The struggle facing workers and youth is not merely over unfulfilled collective bargaining agreements, but is a broader political fight against the entire post-independence, capitalist political and socio-economic order, which is backed by Washington. Opposition leader Raila Odinga has joined forces with Ruto to impose austerity measures through police state methods and deepen Nairobi's subordinate alliance with US imperialism. A key architect of this right-government is COTU. It initially supported Ruto's IMF-driven Finance Bill 2024, only to later call for its withdrawal in favor of a "national unity" government with Odinga. Now, COTU has become the chief enforcer of so-called "social peace."

Jobs, wages, and working conditions can only be defended by workers breaking free from the COTU bureaucracy. To achieve this, rank-and-file committees, run democratically by workers themselves must be established in every workplace to enforce their democratic will and countermand sellouts by the bureaucracy. The unity of the ruling class at the top must be met with a unified struggle from below, transcending national borders and linking the fight against austerity in Africa with those in Europe and the US, where workers are also facing austerity and the diversion of funds for war.

Above all, what is required is the fight for a socialist programme to place all the resources of the national and international economy under the control of the workers and oppressed masses. The Ruto-Odinga regime must be replaced with a workers' government pledged to repudiating the foreign debt and implementing socialist policies.



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