

# Kenyan trade union leader urges youth to “stay home and remain silent” after Ruto regime’s massacre of protesters

**Kipchumba Ochieng****20 July 2025**

At the International Trade Union Confederation Africa (ITUC Africa) Regional Conference on Peace and Security July 18, a high-level gathering of trade union bureaucrats from over 30 African countries convened in Nairobi to discuss how to safeguard the capitalist order they serve.

Francis Atwoli, Secretary General of the Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU), delivered a chilling directive to the country’s youth.

“As COTU(K), we cannot afford to be bystanders and allow for political instability to creep in and destroy the peace that many depend on for economic and social reasons,” he declared. “For the young men, the Gen Zs, I want you to forget about demonstrations, remain home, silent, and promote peace. Demonstrations are scaring investors away, patience pays, embrace dialogue.”

Atwoli’s concern for profits, and not the 1.5 million workers across 36 affiliated unions that he nominally represents, confirms his longstanding role as a mouthpiece for capitalist interests. He routinely speaks like an International Monetary Fund (IMF) official, preoccupied with maintaining Kenya’s appeal to foreign capital. What made his remarks especially grotesque was their timing. It came just days after one of the bloodiest acts of state repression by the Kenyan bourgeoisie since independence: the July 7, 2025 “Saba Saba” massacre.

The 2025 massacre vastly surpassed the scale and brutality employed against the original Saba Saba protest of 1990, which it commemorated. That historic protest, named after the date “seven seven” in Kiswahili, was organised by sections of the bourgeois opposition against the Western-backed police state of President Daniel arap Moi. Thousands took to the streets demanding the reintroduction of multiparty democracy and democratic rights. The regime responded with arrests, beatings, and the killing of 20 people.

Three and a half decades later, the Ruto regime transformed this day of remembrance into a bloodbath.

Hundreds of thousands of youth and workers marched in cities and towns across the country, defying explicit threats issued by President William Ruto and Interior Cabinet Secretary Kipchumba Murkomen in the wake of the June 25 demonstrations. That earlier protest, marking the first anniversary of the 2024 Gen Z uprising against IMF dictated austerity and tax hikes, had already been met with brutal force. At least 18 were shot dead by police.

In the days that followed, the government ramped up its incitement of the police, branding demonstrators as criminals, saboteurs, and enemies of the state. Atwoli echoed Ruto, calling on “the national government to implement firm measures to curb the unrest,” lamenting that “investors are being scared away” and cynically claiming “women and children were the most affected.”

By July 7, the state had prepared a coordinated national crackdown, including erecting police road blocks across Nairobi. Far from intimidating the masses, hundreds of thousands marched in Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, Nakuru, Eldoret, and beyond. The government responded with live-fire squads, tear-gas units, mass arrests, and “disappearances”. Eyewitness accounts and video footage show officers in uniform and plain-clothes executing protestors at point-blank and removing bodies from the streets. Hospitals were overwhelmed and ambulances blocked by the police. The repression rapidly swelled to 57 dead and 600 injured.

The next day, Prime Cabinet Secretary Musalia Mudavadi met privately with Atwoli. Emerging from this closed door meeting, Atwoli launched a tirade against the protesters, parroting the government’s narrative that the movement was orchestrated by the opposition. “Those people you saw burning police stations and taking guns, that’s not something Gen Z can do,” he said. “The people you saw in the streets, like Maraga... Maraga was the Chief Justice; he’s not Gen Z. He was escorting his grandchildren to go destroy people’s property.”

It is now widely acknowledged that the state itself deployed goons to loot and incite chaos, fabricating a pretext for violent repression and sowing tribal division to fracture the movement. Claims that the opposition was behind the protests are a transparent ploy to delegitimise a popular uprising that has arisen independently of Kenya's bankrupt political establishment.

The Saba Saba massacre of 2025 now stands among the worst state atrocities carried out by the Kenyan bourgeoisie since independence. It must be counted alongside the 1969 Kisumu massacre and the 1984 Wagalla massacre in Wajir. In Kisumu, President Jomo Kenyatta's security forces opened fire on a crowd protesting during his visit to the opposition stronghold, killing more than 100 people. Fifteen years later, Moi rounded up 5,000 ethnic Somali men at the Wagalla airstrip in Wajir. Held without food or water for days, they were tortured, starved, and executed. At least 1,000 were killed.

Atwoli's speech at the International Trade Union Confederation Africa is a signal that COTU fully endorses the Ruto regime's shoot-to-kill policy that has claimed the lives of over 160 protesters and maimed thousands more. Days after the Saba Saba massacre, Ruto doubled down, publicly instructing police to shoot protesters in the legs, a directive that his government would continue using live ammunition to terrorise the population as he proceeds to impose IMF austerity and tax hikes amid soaring costs of living.

Atwoli's speech has been condemned across Facebook, X, Instagram, and TikTok, where thousands of youth and workers denounced him with contempt. One user on Facebook replied: "Haiya, to remain silent so you can eat without disturbance? Wonders never cease." Another echoed the popular slogan "Ruto must go" and said "you must go too."

BuzzFeed Kenya's Instagram page, witnessed a torrent of anger: "What he's basically saying is: don't protest so they can steal quietly," wrote one. "Expired product, this one," read a third. "You can't serve two masters," a user snapped.

More combative users wrote: "You, the old guard, thieves of our taxes, on God! Your time is very near. Even if you fill the rivers with the bodies of young people, abduct, torture, rape, intimidate or murder us, your time is ending." Others ridiculed COTU directly: "COTU is eating the chickens workers are rearing at home. Leave our young people alone." One comment summed up the general sentiment: "This guy and his whole organisation called COTU is a useless waste of money."

Fuelling this outrage was a viral online rumour that Atwoli had announced plans to use artificial intelligence to scan the social media profiles of job applicants and blacklist anyone

who had participated in the protests. The post attributed to Atwoli read: "With the help of artificial intelligence, we will scan through social media accounts of job applicants to identify anyone who participated in protests. If your name shows up, no jobs for you." Atwoli dismissed the post as a fabrication, calling it a "fake post alert."

Last April, Atwoli publicly called for social media censorship, attacking users of being unpatriotic by criticising Ruto.

The eruption of public anger at Atwoli reflects deepening hostility towards the entire trade union bureaucracy, long integrated into the state machinery. Leading COTU for nearly a quarter of a century, the seventy-five-year-old regularly flaunts his wealth—gold jewellery, Franck Muller watches worth over \$2,000, a Mercedes Maybach 6 Cabriolet valued at nearly half a million dollars—and owns a lavish estate in Ildamat, Kajiado County, reportedly with a helipad. He has homes in Nairobi, Nakuru, Kilifi, and his rural base in Khwiser.

Behind him stands an entire layer of union bureaucrats who are prepared to say and do anything to defend their privileges and protect the capitalist system.

Workers must begin to build rank-and-file committees, independent organs of struggle rooted in the factories, plantations, neighbourhoods, and schools and universities, democratically controlled by their members and committed to fighting for their real interests. These committees must unify workers across tribal, regional, and sectoral lines, and link up with the youth already in rebellion against the capitalist system.

The decisive question is political leadership. The uprising of the Kenyan masses must be armed with a socialist programme. This requires the building of a Kenyan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, rooted in the international working class, uncompromising in its opposition to imperialism, the IMF, and their local agents, and dedicated to the political education and mobilisation of workers and youth.



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