

Kenyan police kill four protestors amid nationwide shutdown over fuel hikes prompted by US war against Iran

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The global ramifications of the US-Israeli war against Iran are being felt with explosive force in Kenya, where soaring fuel prices—driven by the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly one-fifth of global oil normally flows—have triggered a nationwide and ongoing transport shutdown. At least four protestors have been gunned down by the police, 348 arrested and at least 30 injured.

Bus operators called a nationwide strike on Monday, paralysing Nairobi and major towns across Kenya, as anger mounted over the latest fuel price hikes imposed by President William Ruto’s government, which has passed the full burden of the supply shock onto the working class, the rural masses and the middle class.

On Thursday, Ruto raised super petrol by Sh16.65 (\$0.13) per litre to Sh214.25 (\$1.66) and diesel by Sh46.29 (\$0.36) per litre to Sh242.92 (\$1.88) in Nairobi. Kerosene remained unchanged at Sh152.78 (\$1.19). This followed the previous month’s sharp hike; since then, super petrol has risen by 20 percent and diesel by 45 percent.

The following day, the Matatu Owners Association said operators would raise fares by 50 percent, immediately threatening millions of livelihoods. Matatus are privately owned minibuses and buses that carry much of the country’s workforce to and from work each day. In Nairobi alone, more than 10,000 matatus operate daily, carrying an estimated one million passengers across the capital.

On Sunday, the Matatu Owners Association and the Rig Owners Association announced a countrywide shutdown from the following day until the government lowers petroleum prices. But the action spread far beyond matatus. Ride-hailing services such as Bolt, Uber and Little Cab stayed off the roads, as did boda boda operators (motorbike taxis), truck drivers and cargo transport firms. The result was a de facto national transport strike that brought large parts of the economy to a halt.

Business was paralysed in major cities and towns across the country. Nairobi’s central business district, usually choked with traffic and commuters, was deserted. Shops remained closed, streets emptied, and thousands of workers were unable

to reach their jobs, with tens of thousands trying to walk to work.

In working-class areas, anger spilled into the streets. Protesters blocked the Nairobi-Tanzania road in Kitengela and Githurai, while demonstrations also erupted in Madaraka, Nyandarua, Rongai and Narok, where protestors pelted police with stones. Along the Nakuru-Nairobi highway, youth erected roadblocks, causing major traffic disruption. In Nandi County, Ruto’s own political base, youth blocked roads in protest.

This was not a working-class-led strike advancing its own independent demands. Initiated by matatu owners and transport operators, it amounted to a small-business lockout, aimed above all at protecting the profitability of their sector amid soaring fuel costs.

Nevertheless, the paralysis that followed demonstrated the enormous social power concentrated in the transport sector that, if consciously organised by transport workers armed with their own programme, could bring the economy to a halt. This would pose a direct challenge to the Ruto government and the entire post-independence ruling elite.

The government’s response started off with one of callous indifference. After meeting Christian pastors on Saturday in yet another attempt to use religion as a distraction, Ruto left for an official visit to Azerbaijan, leaving National Treasury Cabinet Secretary John Mbadi to defend the fuel hikes. Mbadi denounced the transport shutdown on Monday, stating, “The strike is completely uncalled for, even though the prices of fuel have gone up.”

Mbadi’s role is politically significant. He was nominated to the Treasury by the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) after his party joined Ruto’s government, marking its shift from posturing as an opponent of Ruto’s austerity measures to openly enforcing them. This is the legacy of the late political fixer Raila Odinga’s pro-capitalist politics. Odinga left the scene complicit in IMF austerity and in Ruto’s gunning down of hundreds of protestors during the Gen-Z protests 2024-2025.

Mbadi linked the fuel-price surge to the war against Iran, stating, “It is a war we have not caused and we do not have the ability to stop it, but it has hit our economy”. Mbadi was silent

on Kenya's backing of the US imperialist attack on Iran. By the end of the day, he was calling for negotiations with matatu operators.

The killing of four protesters Monday is the opening stage of a broader campaign of state violence. Since the first mass protests under Ruto's rule in 2023, state security forces have killed more than 240 people during demonstrations, while carrying out thousands of illegal arrests, scores of abductions and acts of torture.

As usual, the government has sought to justify repression by blaming "foreign" or "rogue" elements. Interior Minister Kipchumba Murkomen denounced the protests as the work of "criminal elements" allegedly "mobilised and deployed by rogue politicians to target government projects, property, personal property, pro-government and also property of pro-government leaders."

This is the standard language of the Kenyan ruling elite, portraying mass anger over unbearable social conditions as a criminal conspiracy, then used to legitimise murdering protesters.

Ruto will only intensify this bloodshed as he attempts to impose a new round of austerity through the Finance Bill 2026. It includes a 25 percent excise duty on mobile phones, VAT on digital and platform-based financial services, higher taxation affecting second-hand clothes, an increase in monthly rental income tax from 7.5 percent to 10 percent, and tighter tax-compliance rules that will strengthen the Kenya Revenue Authority against small businesses and informal workers. These measures will raise the basic necessities for millions who already survive on the edge.

The rotten capitalist opposition has rushed to posture as the champion of the transport shutdown, seeking to contain popular anger and channel it behind itself. Its leading figures are not opponents of austerity, repression or police violence, but representatives of the same Kenyan ruling class that has imposed these policies for decades.

Among them is Jubilee Deputy Party Leader Fred Matiang'i, who, as interior minister under Uhuru Kenyatta, led the 2017 post-election crackdown in which police killed 36 protesters and innocent civilians, including a six-month-old baby.

Martha Karua, leader of the People's Liberation Party and a prominent figure in the official opposition, served as justice minister in Mwai Kibaki's government and publicly defended the administration during Kibaki's 2007 election theft, which sparked post-election violence that left more than 1,200 people dead and around half a million displaced. The security forces of the government she defended were responsible for the majority of the killings.

Rigathi Gachagua now poses as a defender of ordinary Kenyans, but he occupied the second-highest office in the state while protesters were being shot and abducted during the Gen-Z protests against the 2024 Finance Bill and IMF-backed austerity. His break with Ruto was not over principle, but over

patronage and the division of spoils within the ruling elite.

Wiper leader Kalonzo Musyoka served for decades under Daniel arap Moi's Western-backed dictatorship, including as a leading figure in KANU, the ruling party during the one-party era when left-wing opponents, students, trade unionists and intellectuals opposing IMF austerity were detained, tortured and crushed in the regime's torture chambers.

No less rotten is the role of the trade union bureaucracy. The Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU), a federation nominally representing 1.5 million workers across 36 affiliated unions, has issued no call for a working-class struggle, no demand for a general strike and no statement of opposition to the government's fuel hikes. This is because COTU openly backs state repression to impose cuts and tax hikes.

Only last month, during the "Total Shutdown Tuesday" protests against the previous fuel hike, COTU Secretary-General Francis Atwoli openly denounced the demonstrators, declaring that if the unions "supported it blindly, we [workers] would be the losers." Atwoli has urged Ruto to ban protests, impose social media censorship and "firm measures to curb the unrest."

Atwoli's position exposes the real function of the trade union apparatus: an industrial police force for the Kenyan ruling class and its imperialist backers, defending fuel levies and deploying police against youth and workers.

The Kenyan shutdown continues and is a warning of far greater social explosions to come. The US-Israeli war against Iran is part of a global capitalist crisis whose costs are being imposed directly on workers and rural masses. What is unfolding in Kenya will spread across the globe. On Saturday, a protester was killed by police in The Comoros, an archipelago off the east coast of Africa, amid days of ongoing protests over fuel prices.

Workers on all continents, including the imperialist centres of America, Europe and Australia, are likewise being made to pay with austerity for war and the enrichment of the corporate and financial oligarchy. The decisive question is the building of an international socialist movement of the working class fighting against war, and for workers' power and the socialist reorganisation of society.



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