

Devastating Economic and Social Crisis in sub-Saharan Africa: Ghana Workers on the March

Thousands demonstrate against inflation fueled by the economic crisis

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Thousands of Ghanaian workers made good on their promise to hold demonstrations on July 24 against what they say is the deteriorating economic situation inside the West African state.

Following the Republic Day actions on July 1 outside Flagstaff House, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and other labor organizations took to the streets to protest against inflation and the inability of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) government headed by President John Mahama to address the worsening situation facing working people.

Wearing red t-shirts, the workers blocked traffic and denounced the government's neo-liberal policies that have resulted in an annual inflation rate of 15 percent. The workers called for the re-institution of subsidies for fuel in order to make petrol more affordable to motorists.

The rate of inflation has resulted in a significant depreciation of the cedi, the national currency. Prices have skyrocketed along with taxes causing an at least 50 percent increase in the cost of living.

These demonstrations come at a time when Ghana is being praised for what western analysts say is phenomenal economic growth. The country is now an oil-producer yet most people have not seen an improvement in their living conditions.

Workers converged at the Obra Spot near Kwame Nkrumah Circle in the capital of Accra despite efforts by the police to dissuade them. The police made a tactical decision to hold back and consequently averted a possible violent clash between trade unionists and the authorities.

Demonstrations and other protest actions also took place in Ho, Kumasi and Cape Coast. In Tema, workers protested as well against the inflationary spiral plaguing the country.

Earlier in the week, the Railway Workers Union (RWU) threatened to strike over the poor conditions under which they are toiling. A sit-down protest by the RWU hampered routes between Tema and Accra.

A report on the unrest published by Spy Ghana emphasized that, "There are plenty labor agitations, from the Polytechnic Teachers Association of Ghana (POTAG), the Ghana Medical Association (GMA), the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the Ghana National Association of

Teachers on Pensions, Ghana National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT), nurses, importers and exporters, headmasters of public schools, Teachers and Educational Workers Union (TEWU), Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), the 'Occupy Flagstaff House' Movement to traditional rulers. The organizers of the demonstrations that have been held as well as those yet to come cite high cost of living, deteriorating economic prospects, empty promises by the government, the fast falling of the cedi and unreliable utility services and bad roads, among other things, as the causes." (July 22)

General Secretary of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), Solomon Kotei, told the international press that the protests were organized to apply pressure on the Mahama government to develop policies which will improve the national economy. "We are not talking about wages at all in this struggle...we have spoken about the ability [of government] to halt the depreciation of the cedi against the major trading currencies, review prices of petroleum products in a way that continuous price increments that is affecting the economy will be minimized," Kotei stressed. (cajnewsagency.com, July 24)

NDC Government Attempts to Assuage Workers

During the demonstrations the Minister of Labor and Employment for the NDC government, Haruna Iddrisu, attempted to talk to the crowd. He was met by further chanting and derisive language.

A four-page petition was submitted to Iddrisu calling upon the government to take immediate action on the subsidies and other measures to stabilize the economy. Although the labor minister sought to convince the workers of the government's good intentions, they would not agree to end their protests.

Iddrisu told the workers that the NDC government would work

"fastidiously to invigorate the economy to make life easier not harder for the working people and citizens of Ghana. You have made eloquent pronouncements of concerns through this act of demonstration... the placards you carry reflect a mirror some of your concerns," he noted. (BBC World News, July 24)

How Far Will the Workers Go?

Some analysts observing the situation in Ghana say that the current labor actions could lead to broader social unrest. After being told of the purported economic achievements of the country, workers are demanding that there be fundamental changes to place emphasis on infrastructural improvements and the betterment of the social conditions of the people.

According to Ghana Web,

"The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) is warning of a revolution in Ghana if government fails to address the growing workers agitations and protests across the country. While the revolution may not take the form of the Arab Spring, Coordinator of the Network, Isaac Bayor told Joy News the powers that be must not underestimate the widespread agitations in the country." (July 23)

Judging from the history of the working class in Ghana, formerly the Gold Coast, they have played a pivotal role since the post-World War II period. The February 28, 1948 rebellion involved both the ex-servicemen demanding adequate compensation for their tenure under British imperialism during the war and the economic boycott initiated by Ga traditional leaders protesting the cost of colonial products.

The five day rebellion of 1948 thrust Kwame Nkrumah into the forefront of the national liberation movement. In 1949, Nkrumah and his Committee on Youth Organization (CYO) broke with the more moderate United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC), demanding self-government now.

On June 12, 1949, the Convention People's Party (CPP) was formed under the leadership of Nkrumah. Some seven months later on January 8, 1950, the CPP in alliance with the working class movement would call a general strike and boycott known as "Positive Action."

Although Nkrumah was imprisoned after the general strike which was eventually broken by the colonial authorities, the impact of the actions led to the ascendancy of the CPP in the British reform elections of February 1951, prompting the release of Nkrumah and the formation of a coalition government with the British who eventually relinquished colonial control on March 6, 1957.

Under the CPP government during the 1951-1966 transitional and independence period, Ghana became the leading anti-colonial state in Africa. The political example set by the Ghana Revolution laid the groundwork for other national liberation struggles throughout the continent and the African Diaspora.

The Nkrumah government was stifled in its national development "program for work and happiness" by the world decline in cocoa prices during the early and mid-1960s, coupled with internal divisions within the CPP and outside agitation by right-wing opposition parties. The CPP was overthrown on Feb. 24, 1966 by sections of the military and police engineered by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the State Department opposed to Nkrumah's revolutionary Pan-Africanist and socialist policies.

Today Ghana remains trapped by the neo-colonial phase of world imperialism which Nkrumah identified during the last phase of his leadership in the 1960s. In addition to its militancy, Ghanaian workers must advance a program which addresses the social conditions at their root.

Africa cannot truly develop under the existing system of world capitalism, neo-colonialism and imperialism. The ideological and political struggle between exploitative systems and socialism can only be resolved through a fundamental change in the relationships between the western imperialist states still dominant in the global system and the aspirations of the majority of workers, farmers and youth in Africa and indeed throughout the world.

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