

Ivorian Oil Workers Strike as ICC Trial of Former Leaders Continues

Limitations of foreign direct investment revealed while economy weakens

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Hundreds of oil workers from a state-owned petroleum corporation in the West African state of Ivory Coast walked off the job in a three day strike on February 2. They were protesting against the lay-offs of nearly 10 percent of the firm's employees.

Some accounts of the situation say that as many as 200 workers could lose their jobs out of work force of approximately 600 employees. Company officials are offering a severance package which has been rejected by the union representing the workers.

Reuters press agency reported that "Petroci offered to pay 10 dismissed managers six months of their salaries while the 40 other laid-off employees were to receive eight months. However, a member of the company's management said the union was demanding 20 months." (Feb. 5)

"That's not possible. We don't have all that money," a company official told Reuters without revealing their name.

Workers at Petroci announced after three days of striking on February 5, that they would extend the industrial action for another 72 hours hoping that their demands would be met. The company is a relatively small oil and natural gas producer but controls 36 percent of petroleum distribution along with 30 filling stations.

Petroci has joint operations with companies engaged in production and exploration operations as well as manages a base for logistical support for offshore production blocks. The union, SYNTEPCI, represents employees from 16 companies in addition to Petroci.

Efforts are underway by the union leadership to win the cooperation of other workers who could be called upon to strike out of solidarity. These other entities include the state-owned Societe Ivoirienne de Raffinage (SIR), which manages a refinery with the production capacity of 65,000 barrels per day. Other logistical firms and fuel retailers are also involved in Ivory Coast such as the French-based Total.

Geremie N'Guessan Wondje, secretary general of the SYNTEPCI union said on February 5, "Next week we will intensify the strike and see if other employees from other companies in the sector join the Petroci employees in this strike." (Reuters)

Ivory Coast is suffering from the overproduction of oil globally which is impacting other developing states in Africa as well. After substantial foreign direct investment in the oil and

natural gas exploration industries, prices have drastically declined driving down currency values and bond prices in so-called emerging economies not only on the continent but in the Middle East, Asia and Latin America as well.

A website focusing on oil and gas production said of the country that is the world's largest producer of cocoa and a significant coffee grower that "Cote d'Ivoire lies on the West Africa Transform Margin, which has yielded oil discoveries in the multi-hundred-million-barrel range in its neighbor Ghana to the east. Cote d'Ivoire has set a goal of producing 200,000 boe/d by 2020, more than three times the current 60,000 boe/d." (info.drillinginfo.com, Nov. 6, 2014)

In the aftermath of the war of regime-change led by France resulting in the overthrow former President Dr. Laurent Gbagbo and the installation of the current leader Alassane Ouattara, multi-national oil and gas firms began to increase their investments in production. President Ouattara was a former functionaries of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) based in Washington, D.C.

This same above-mentioned website declared "New mining contract terms were recently implemented and earlier this year the UN lifted its ban on Cote d'Ivoire diamonds. The prime minister also said he expects the boundary issue with Ghana to be 'peacefully resolved' in short order. On the oil and gas front the petroleum code was amended in 2012, while improvements were made to both the Production Sharing Contract model and the governance of the hydrocarbon sector. Investment credits are now offered for explorers in deep and ultra-deep waters, and 20 PSCs have been awarded since 2011."

Imperialism and the International Criminal Court (ICC)

This oil workers' strike is taking place while former left-leaning President Laurent Gbagbo and youth leader Charles Ble Goude are standing trial in the Netherlands in front of the controversial and pro-imperialist International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague.

Gbagbo and Goude have pleaded not guilty to a host of charges which their defense lawyers say have no merit. The leader of the Popular Front of Ivory Coast (FPI) is the highest-ranking government official ever tried by the ICC.

The court has been heavily criticized by the regional 54-member African Union where a proposal for withdrawal from the so-called Rome Statute, since its application has proven to be biased against Africa where all of the cases have been centered with the exception of Georgia, remains before the continental body. Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta presented the proposal related to the ICC after a case against him collapsed due to lack of evidence.

Illustrating the incompetency of the ICC, the names of witnesses which may be called in the trial against Gbagbo were inadvertently released to the press complicating further the political atmosphere surround the legal proceedings. The Court claims that the protection of the identities of witnesses is essential to the process of their prosecutorial conduct.

An article published by Agence France Press (AFP), notes on February 5 "a closed session of Gbagbo's crimes against humanity trial was mistakenly broadcast on the court's public channel," and that this incident "will be investigated", according to the ICC's director of public information Sonia Robla.

The AFP reveals that a “clip of the hearing (was) widely circulated on social media including on YouTube, showing ICC Judge Cuno Tarfusser calling for the trial to go into a closed session at the request of lead prosecutor Eric MacDonald. But the microphones are left open and MacDonald can be heard saying that he wanted to raise the issue of witness protection.”

This incident on February 5 was not the first of its kind in the trial. On February 3, the prosecution’s initial witness, labelled “P547,” accidentally blurted out his name later indicating that he would be testifying on behalf of the prosecution.

Soon enough ICC Judge Tarfusser suspended proceedings and ordered reporters not to utilize the witness’s name. Journalists were then required to give their names to ICC security agents.

Reeling from pressure generated by criticisms from inside the AU and other organizations, the western-installed current President Ouattara has told his French counterpart Francois Hollande that there was no need for any other Ivorians to be tried by the ICC. Ouattara said that the country was capable today of handling its own legal issues.

During the course of a brief visit to Paris, Ouattara told Hollande, “The ICC has played the role it should. Coming out of the electoral crisis, we did not have justice, the country was completely in tatters ... Now we have a justice system that is operational and has begun to judge everyone without exception.” (Africanews.com, Feb. 5)

Nonetheless, the wife of Laurent Gbagbo, Simone, was sentenced to 20 years in prison under conditions that were biased and legally questionable. Simone Gbagbo, the former first lady of Ivory Coast, is a political figure in her own right having served as the President of the Parliamentary Group for the FPI.

First lady Gbagbo was arrested alongside the former president in April 2011 by gendarmes in the capital of Abidjan led by French paratroopers occupying the country to maintain its colonial interests. She was tried and convicted of “undermining state security” for defending the country against the western-backed seizure of power.

Although Ivory Coast has been lauded for its foreign direct investment from the capitalist states, economic problems persists prompting industrial unrest. The trial of Gbagbo could serve to destabilize the state since the former president maintains broad support inside the country.

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