

Workers End Strikes in Kenya, Continue Actions in Tunisia, Egypt and South Africa

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A significant strike impacting the universities and colleges throughout the East African state of Kenya has been settled. Representatives of the Kenya Universities Staff Union (KUSU) and the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) told their members to return to work on March 20 after an agreement had been reached with management.

Workers were seeking the payment of a cash settlement agreed upon during a previous labor struggle in 2012 which resulted in a collective bargaining agreement. The government had sought legal action to prevent the strike but the union told their members to disregard the order and leave work that they had a constitutional right to strike.

Charles Mukhwaya, Secretary General of KUSU, told the Kenyan press that “We are happy to announce that the strike has been called off following fruitful talks with the Vice Chancellors. We have reached an amicable solution after a deal was struck that all the monies owed to us will be paid to all our members. We would like to ask our workers to go back to work at 8am tomorrow (Thursday, March 20).” (Capital FM, Kenya, March 20)

He continued by saying “Yes, it is true that we have reached a deal. All our members will be paid what is owed to them and measures should be put in place to ensure that this incident never repeats itself again. We have advised our lecturers to go back to class and continue teaching.”

Earlier in March Kenya had been hit with a transport drivers’ strike which jammed traffic for miles in and around the capital of Nairobi. Costs associated with driving buses and taxis, known as “Matatus,” have tripled since 2013.

An agreement between the Matatu Welfare Association (MWA) and the government to lower costs by 65 percent has not been implemented, according to Dickson Mbugua the national chairman of the MWA. The strike on March 4 was not officially organized by the MWA but an informal group designed to shut down public transport.

Kenya is a close ally of the United States and often participates in military operations initiated by the Pentagon in East Africa. At present Nairobi has deployed at least 2,000 troops to neighboring Somalia aimed at preventing the Al-Shabaab Islamic organization from increasing its bases inside the country.

Although the current administration of President Uhuru Kenyatta was not supported by the U.S. when it was elected during 2013, efforts to prosecute both Kenyatta and Deputy

President William Ruto before the International Criminal Court (ICC) have not been opposed by the Obama administration.

Tunisia and Egypt Workers Demand Jobs, Pay Increases In Tunisia, the birthplace of the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East in 2010-2011, university graduates have formed a union and are demanding jobs. A demonstration of the Union of Unemployed Graduates (UDC) took place on March 17 in downtown Tunis. High unemployment and poverty was a key element in the rebellions which swept the country beginning in December 2010. Since the overthrow of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011, the three subsequent governments in Tunis have not been able to stabilize the political and economic situation inside the country. With the collapse of the previous government of Prime Minister Ali Larayedh and the installation of a more “technocratic” cabinet under Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa, a freeze has been placed on hiring in the public sector during the so-called transition period.

“Our demands are not political. We are protesting for jobs. We are asking for bread, bread and bread,” said Halima, an unemployed graduate protester. (Press TV, March 17)

“This austerity budget will result in higher unemployment rates,” said Wafa Ben Slimane, the UDC spokesperson. Even though the dictatorial regime of Ben Ali was removed, Tunisia remains firmly in the world capitalist system where high unemployment, austerity and rising poverty characterize the current period.

In Egypt where an uprising against the National Democratic Party (NDP) of ousted President Hosni Mubarak erupted after Tunisia on January 25, 2011, strikes and other forms of unrest among workers has continued. Since the beginning of 2014, union and independent workers’ actions have taken place partially causing a shake-up in the interim military-backed regime that was installed after the coup against former President Mohamed Morsi on July 3, 2013.

The resignation of interim Prime Minister Hazem el-Biblawi, a leader in the Social Democratic Party of Egypt, and the replacement by Ibrahim Mehleb, represented sharp disagreements over how to respond to the current political crisis. Thousands of members and leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood and its allied political party the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) have been killed, wounded and detained since July 3.

Political repression has continued in Egypt with the March 24 mass sentencing to death of 529 members and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. Demonstrations by students and workers have been banned since October with those arrested facing harsh prison sentences. Simultaneously workers are demanding better wages and conditions of employment in both the private and public sectors. Constant disruptions in services and production are reflection of the disenchantment with the present dispensation.

In a report published by Al-Monitor, “Meanwhile, protests have spread outward from Mahalla, the spiritual home of the Egyptian workers’ movement, to the very heart of Cairo. Workers at Mahalla’s state-owned Misr Spinning and Weaving Company walked out on Feb. 10, demanding the removal of holding company Chairman Fouad Abdel-Alim and the application of the minimum wage. Workers at this factory first demanded a minimum wage in 2006.” (Feb. 26)

This same article goes on to note that “After a wave of solidarity strikes and sit-ins at textile

operations around Egypt, more public sector workers have walked out. Strikes are currently being staged by around 100,000 postal workers, bus drivers, government notary employees, street cleaners, field surveyors and medical professionals, according to Mada Masr.”

The impact of the workers’ actions on the transport sector are immense as Al-Monitor reports that “An ongoing public transportation strike has halted buses in all 28 of the Greater Cairo Authority’s garages, costing the city an estimated 800,000 Egyptian pounds (\$115,000) a day, according to Cairo Gov. Galal al-Saeed.” The Egyptian military has attempted to appeal to patriotism in efforts to persuade employees to return to work.

Nonetheless, these appeals have not taken root with the workers and are nothing new in the ideological arsenal of the neo-colonial state. According to Josh Stacer, a political scientist and analyst on Egyptian affairs, “This is the same discourse used after the initial 18 days [of the January 25 Revolution] by [former Field Marshal Mohamed] Tantawi and company. It’s about demobilizing workers.” (Al-Monitor, Feb. 26)

South African Platinum Strike Continues Amid Election Campaigning There is no end in sight to the two month-old strike led by the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) taking place in the North West province in the Republic of South Africa. AMCU is a breakaway union from the parent National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) which is affiliated with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), a close ally of the ruling African National Congress (ANC). Members of AMCU marched on the headquarters of Anglo American Platinum (Amplats) in Johannesburg on March 18 to deliver a list of demands. As of March 24 there had been no response from the bosses.

AMCU is striking during the period of the election campaigning for the upcoming May 7 national poll. Although AMCU has taken a position hostile to the ANC, the ruling party appears to be heading for another huge margin of victory.

In a survey published by the Sunday Times, the ANC would win 66.1 percent of the vote, up from the 65.9 percent it gained during the 2009 national elections. With no electoral strategy AMCU has no effective means of pressuring the government to end the strike. An investigative commission looking into the upgrading of President Jacob Zuma’s home has issued its report saying that irregularities took place in regard to cost allocations. The ANC was quick to respond to the report and says that it will take the findings seriously. The opposition Democratic Alliance (DA), which has the next largest bloc within the National Assembly, approximately 17 percent, has called for the impeachment of President Zuma. The so-called Nkandla Report is not an indictment and its real impact may take some time to assess.

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