

# Global Issues

## Hardship in Nigeria: Popular Resistance and State Repression

*Baba Aye, Nigeria*

*The Global Labour Journal and the Global Labour Column (<https://globallabourcolumn.org>) are pleased to deepen their collaboration, which has allowed them to cross-publish articles over the years. In this issue, we republish two columns analysing recent protests in Nigeria and Kenya. Watch this space for more exchanges between the sister publications.*

Severe economic hardship in Nigeria has pushed millions of people in the country to the wall, resulting in waves of mass action from February to August. The last of these was the 1 to 10 August #EndBadGovernance nationwide #DaysOfRage protest. The government's threat and campaign of calumny to stop it failed. Protesters shut down major economic activities when the protests started, costing business US\$300 million just on the first day of action (Hassan, 2024).

The state cracked down brutally on the protesters. By the third day, more than forty people may have been killed, according to the Nigeria Labour Congress. More than 1 200 people were arrested. These included people rounded up on the streets during the protests and leftists identified from WhatsApp groups the state had infiltrated.

These repressive measures have failed to dampen the morale of the popular resistance. Mass mobilisation has been ongoing for yet another nationwide protest on 1 October, the country's national day.

The protest movement is being fuelled by mass hunger. And this is because of the neoliberal policies of the government, which has been the most rabid in pushing through economic policies inspired by the Bretton Woods institutions. President Bola Tinubu proudly called for Guinness World Records recognition of his economic reforms (Daramola, 2023). He removed the fuel subsidy on his inauguration day, in May 2023, resulting in a 240 per cent increase in the pump price. Electricity tariffs have also increased, by 300 per cent. And the country's currency was devalued by 70 per cent within a few months. Consumer price inflation, which had averaged 13 per cent between 2002 and 2022, now stands at 34 per cent. Millions can barely feed themselves, pay their rents or afford healthcare, in a country where more than 76 per cent of health expenditure is out-of-pocket. People now die from easily treatable ailments.

Meanwhile, the working-class demand for a living wage as the new national minimum wage was treated with contempt. The nominal increase from N30 000 to N70 000 agreed to in July represents a fall in real wages from US\$83.50 to US\$46.35.

Resistance to this widespread suffering started with spontaneous outbursts in February. These were organised by women who are peasants and traders in some states in the northern region. Within days they had spread across the country. The Nigeria Labour Congress's declaration of 27 and 28 February as nationwide workers' protest days further generalised the momentum, even though the unions mellowed after only the first day. The wave continued into March, in an atmosphere of an impending general strike, which the trade unions had created but failed to live up to.

A new wave of resistance kicked off in June with a general strike after minimum wage negotiations failed at the end of May. The “indefinite strike” was called off after only the first day, without its demands met. A two-day protest was organised for mid-June. Radical left groups organised a mass protest which coincided with this. The *Take It Back* movement, which had played a central role in the 2020 #EndSARS protests, was the pivotal force. Once again, in 2024, it was the key force on the left behind organising the protests on the ground, along with the People’s Redemption Party Vanguard (PRP-V) in the North.

For its part, the Nigerian state brought out its whole bag of tricks to prevent the nationwide #EndBadGovernance protest from taking place. State officials threatened to smash it. Pastors, bishops, imams, traditional rulers and some academics joined in calling for the protest to be called off. Attempts were also made to divide the ranks of the masses with ethnic mobilisation, to no avail. When all these failed, the government got the courts to issue orders that limited the protests to a few designated areas.

There were dynamics peculiar to the demonstrations in different regions and different states in the same regions. These partly reflect the nature of the social forces and the elements of difference in the histories of their repertoires of resistance. A lot has been said about the protests degenerating into violence, including by Egun-Olu Adegboruwa, a senior lawyer with an activist background. While he had stepped in as attorney for the organisers of the protest a few days earlier, he was quick to ask them to “withdraw themselves from the protest grounds” and “suspend the protests immediately and indefinitely”, because “the protests were said to have been hijacked with sponsored agents”, after just the first day (Odeniyi, 2024).

What these sorts of appeals failed to appreciate is not only the diverse nature of violence, but that the only consistent form, across virtually all states, was that unleashed by the state and its sponsored agents. In some instances, the police worked hand in hand with thugs to attack rallies. In most cases, where the thugs acted alone, in the first few days they were repulsed by the large numbers of demonstrators. Where the police acted alone, they were bolder, firing tear gas and even live bullets, resulting in fatal casualties. Violence was also unleashed by protesters in several northern states, especially in response to police violence. Once the genie of violence was let out of the bottle, burning and looting ensued. The state governments stepped in to protect property and reinstate order. Dawn to dusk curfews were declared in six states in the North. House-to-house searches were conducted and people were arrested in their homes.

But protesters defied the curfews, after a few days of compliance. On 3 August, protesters took to the streets again in Kano, the second largest city after Lagos. Several protesters in Kano and Katsina marched with the Russian flag. Some of them did not only wave the Russian flag; they also called for a military takeover to save the poor masses. This is what they assumed to be the situation in the Sahelian states, particularly Niger, just across the border, with which they share history, culture and family.

Violence in the southern states was largely one-sided, from the police and thugs. In Lagos, the epicentre was around the Gani Fawehinmi Freedom Park at Ojóta, a major entry point into the state, with thousands of protesters coming from different parts of the state each day. It was designated as the place for the protest by the state, with a catch; protesters were to go into the gated park. They resisted, and the police were forced to concede.

The ongoing nationwide protest is the third massive protest movement in 21st century Nigeria, after the 2012 #OccupyNigeria uprising and the 2020 #EndSARS Rebellion. But, while 2012 and 2020 started as largely spontaneous, popular responses with no set time, these #DaysOfRage started with clearly defined commencement and end dates. Within the “structurelessness” and “leaderful” “leaderlessness” that defined #EndSARS and most of the unfolding autonomist-

inspired social movements since *#OccupyWallStreet*, a sense of organisation is emerging. This is largely possible because of the role of a nationwide radical, non-sectarian Left platform, the *Take It Back* movement, which was equally central in cohering the demands and mobilisation of the *#EndSARS* movement.

The trade union bureaucracy might also be undermining the relevance of organised labour as *the* social force representative of the working class. What happened on day one and day two was effectively a general strike. But it would be crucial for the emergent movement to be able to go beyond passive involvement of rank-and-file workers to active engagement, in building working people's power.

It is also significant that this protest's demands started where the *#EndSARS* demands ended before it was drowned in blood; *#EndBadGovernance*. Fostering understanding of the need for system change and revolutionary democracy from below, rooted in working people's power, to "end bad governance" is of utmost importance for the Left's political work in the unfolding period. This would, amongst other things, help dispel the illusions in Putin, Russia and military vanguardism of any sort.

Most important in these days of protest is the soil it has ploughed for the seeds of a storm, which is likely to come quite soon. As the protest organisers pointed out when the state was finding people to hold responsible as mobilisers for the protest, the key mobilisers are hunger and generalised hardship in the land. And there is no sign that any of these are going away soon. The *#FearlessInOctober* protest on 1 October as a *#NationalDayOfSurvival* will further stir the embers of rebellion. With this, reaction will once again bare its teeth. Working people and their organisations across the world must stand with the struggle in Nigeria. Raise your voices to demand the release of all those thus far arrested and an end to state repression of a legitimate protest movement.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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