

Bloodbath in Nairobi as millions protest Kenyan President Ruto and parliament is stormed

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Kenyan President William Ruto has called out the army after millions protested his mass austerity Finance Bill. Describing protesters as “treasonous” and “dangerous criminals” in a televised address, he said he would “treat every threat as an existential threat to our republic.”

In the early hours of the morning, anti-Finance Bill protesters surrounded the parliament building in the capital, Nairobi, in an attempt to shut down the economy and force Ruto to withdraw plans to raise more than \$2 billion in new taxes from workers and the rural poor, as dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Despite threats of police violence, internet shutdowns, and the arrests of hundreds the previous week, as well as the abductions of at least seven bloggers, activists, and social media political influencers, the mainly young protesters refused to be intimidated.

In a country that saw the Western-backed Daniel Arap Moi dictatorship carry out disappearances of left-wing workers and students by the Special Branch, they were fully aware they were confronting a bloody regime that had gunned down 75 protesters during anti-austerity protests last year.

In the afternoon, protesters stormed parliament and set parts of it ablaze after lawmakers passed the austerity bill now awaiting Ruto’s signature. They also torched a police vehicle. Lawmakers fled using underground tunnels or hid in ambulances.

Outside, police used live ammunition, teargas and truncheons, resulting in the deaths of at least 14 protesters. Police snipers reportedly shot protesters from rooftops.

In Nairobi’s central Kenyatta National Hospital, over 200 people were attended to with gunshot wounds.

Potentially thousands have been injured, and hundreds arrested.

Across the country, mass protests cut across the tribal divides that the Kenyan ruling class systematically cultivates. Protesters paralysed transport services and forced major businesses to close in Nairobi, Kisumu, Mombasa, Kakamega, Nakuru and even Kericho, where residents pulled down Ruto’s party wheelbarrow symbol. The main chants were “Reject” and

“Ruto must go.”

In Eldoret, Ruto’s hometown, the county court and police offices were torched.

In Nairobi Central Business District (CBD), most shops remained closed throughout the day. Police attempted to disperse protesters in the morning, hurling teargas canisters. This failed, as tens of thousands marched into the CBD, disrupting traffic along the capital’s major arteries.

Small diaspora-led protests also took place in Los Angeles and Washington D.C in the US and in London, UK.

KTN news and other media said they had received orders from the government to stop covering the protests. Authorities also slowed down the Internet throughout the evening, while social media such as X/Twitter were shut down.

The popular uprising has shaken the government and the entire Kenyan ruling class. It has raised fears in capitals around the African continent and internationally of an eruption of mass opposition driven by a global capitalist crisis that has been compounded first by the COVID-19 pandemic, then the US-NATO war on Russia, and now the Israeli genocide of Palestinians.

Small protests centered in Nairobi last Tuesday quickly escalated into a mass movement. By Thursday, demonstrations had spread across major cities and towns as lawmakers passed a second reading of the Finance Bill. The day ended with the gunning down of a 29-year-old protester, which fueled calls for yesterday’s national shutdown. A poster calling for a national strike spread across social media.

Clinical officers striking for over 85 days have joined the protests and volunteered to provide emergency medical teams. Workers at the Nairobi Women’s Hospital, one of the largest in Nairobi, have gone on strike over nonpayment of wages.

Despite these limited and isolated actions, the trade union apparatus is the major restraining hand on workers joining the anti-austerity movement with their own demands, despite many members participating.

The trade unions are not instruments for waging class struggle, but appendages of the employers and the government for suppressing it. They have refused to mobilise the tens of

thousands employed in the manufacturing, food processing, chemical production, plastics and metal works in the industrial area in Nairobi.

Across the country, hundreds of thousands of teachers and healthcare workers, who have repeatedly struck over the past five years against low wages and precarious job contracts, could be mobilised. In the port of Mombasa, six thousand workers could halt Ruto's privatization plans, bringing the region to a standstill. Thousands of aviation workers, including at Kenya Airways, could block Kenya's airspace. In rural areas, millions of tea, coffee, and horticulture wage workers could paralyse the countryside, in a country where 60 percent of revenue comes from the agriculture sector.

Instead, Francis Atwoli, secretary general of the Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU), has defended the Finance Bill, stating that "people are being taxed everywhere and, indeed, if we pay tax and the money is used properly we will evade the issue of borrowing money."

COTU consists of 36 trade unions representing more than 1.5 million workers, but these unions have a sordid history of suppressing strikes and protests, including that by 4,000 doctors earlier this year.

Ruto is preparing to impose more police state measures, such as the Assembly and Demonstration Bill, 2024, restricting where protests can take place and imposing draconian fines for "violations" of up to \$770, equivalent to half a year's average wage.

Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua is stoking communalist politics in central Kenya by promoting Kikuyu tribalism to drive a wedge into the working class and oppressed masses.

Government spokesperson Isaac Mwaura has accused protesters of being manipulated by "foreign hands," with veiled references to Russia and even the US, which only weeks ago declared Kenya a non-NATO US ally.

"America and Kenya: Divided by distance. United by democratic values," said President Biden during Ruto's visit. Yesterday, these "democratic" values were exposed in the blood-covered streets of Nairobi, and as Ruto dispatched 400 police to Haiti to terrorise the population of the Caribbean island in the service of US imperialism.

The developing movement is a challenge not just to Ruto and his government, but to the entire political establishment, including the Azimio coalition opposition led by millionaire Raila Odinga, who has been noticeably absent from the demonstrations.

Last year, Odinga called off mass opposition to Ruto over the Finance Bill 2023, when the movement threatened to intersect with calls for strike action by civil servants. Odinga is part of the 0.1 percent of the Kenyan population (8,300 people) which, according to Oxfam, owns more wealth than the bottom 99.9 percent (more than 48 million people).

Yesterday, in a token gesture of opposition, Azimio lawmakers left parliament to join the protesters, saying that

amendments to the Bill would have come to naught.

The movement threatens other authoritarian East African regimes facing similar conditions as Kenya, such as Uganda and Rwanda, run by despotic US allies, Paul Kagame in Rwanda and Yoweri Museveni in Uganda.

Earlier this month, Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, ground to a halt, with electricity cut and major airports closed as workers went on strike at key transmission stations and in aviation to demand salary increases. Nigeria's President Bola Ahmed Tinubu has ended fuel subsidies and devalued the naira, leading to inflation surging to a 28-year high.

The movement is also a threat to big business and global capital, including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which are seeking to make working people pay for the capitalist crisis. They are imposing similar measures in Argentina, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and elsewhere.

So far, the movement is politically amorphous, unified around the slogan "Ruto must go." It has been dominated by middle-class sections of human rights and anti-corruption activists and influencers, many making appeals to MPs to stop the law from passing, accusing the political class of treachery and lack of patriotism, and insisting on "no politics" and "no leadership," which resonates within the working class because politics is associated with the hated capitalist elite.

However, calls for a "national strike" expresses a recognition that the working class needs to be mobilised.

Calls for a "democratic revolution" against the political establishment are a dead end.

Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution demonstrates that the colonial and semi-colonial peoples cannot achieve any of their most basic needs—freedom from imperialist oppression, democratic rights, jobs, social equality, and an end to ceaselessly stoked up tribalism—under the leadership of any section of the national bourgeoisie, whether Ruto, Raila or any other stooge of imperialism.

Trotsky insisted that in the imperialist epoch, the realisation of the basic democratic and national tasks in the oppressed nations poses the taking of power by the working class, the only social force that can put an end to imperialist domination. This could be achieved only as part of the struggle for world socialist revolution, to place all the resources of the national and international economy under the control of the workers and oppressed masses.

We call on workers and youth in Kenya to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* to discuss how to take forward their struggle.



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