

Mass outrage after Kenya's opposition Azimio party joins Ruto's "dialogue" initiative

Kipchumba Ochieng
10 July 2024

The crisis within the Kenyan ruling class intensified this week as anger erupted among youth and workers following the decision of the opposition Azimio la Umoja coalition, led by millionaire Raila Odinga, to join President William Ruto's "dialogue" initiative.

For nearly a month, Ruto has deployed police to teargas, assault, and shoot protesters opposing soaring living costs, youth unemployment, tax hikes, and subsidy cuts. He took the unprecedented step of deploying the Kenya Defence Forces onto the streets, in close coordination with Washington and the European Union, marking the first time the KDF has been used against unarmed protesters. Ruto's administration has also abducted activists and shut down social media platforms.

The violent crackdown has led to the deaths of at least 41 protesters, with hundreds more injured, some maimed for life.

Despite his token support for anti-austerity protesters in recent weeks, Odinga has been holding back-door discussions with Ruto. He has now agreed with the president to commence a six-day multi-sectoral forum, starting next Monday and concluding on Saturday, aimed at fostering "national dialogue."

On Tuesday, accompanied by Ruto, Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua, and various government and opposition allies like Kalonzo Musyoka, Odinga announced, "I am happy to confirm that after extensive consultations and discussions, we have agreed that dialogue is the way forward out of the crisis we are facing today in our country. We have agreed to give people an opportunity to be heard."

He continued, "We want the Dialogue between the government and the youths to be a very engaging conversation so that we deal with fundamental issues affecting our society. They are many but equally solvable!"

The press is now talking about discussions to form a government of national unity between Azimio and Ruto. Whether in or outside of government, the opposition is closing ranks with Ruto in response to the broad social upsurge. This show of unity also extends to Ruto's widely despised foreign policy, including Kenya's role as a "non-NATO" ally of the US, part Washington's efforts to control resources across Africa in its conflict with China. The opposition is also aligning with Ruto's support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza and the bombing of Yemen.

The Ruto-Odinga unification is designed to impose severe cuts, tax hikes, and privatizations demanded by the banks and global financial capital, spearheaded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It is a message to global finance, coming on the same day Moody's downgraded Kenya's credit rating, which will result in higher interest

rates for the country, and just days before the IMF is expected to delay approval of fresh funding for Kenya under its medium-term programme.

The "dialogue" farce is supported by the Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU-K), comprising 36 trade unions representing over 1.5 million workers. Secretary General Francis Atwoli declared that it would "help mitigate the ongoing demonstrations and promote social cohesion."

The decision of Azimio to join the government has led to a torrent of opposition which confirms that the growing upsurge, despite its limitations, is developing outside of the official parties of the ruling class and the trade unions.

One X user said, "Political class regrouping to secure selfish interests through an opposition handshake. But what we want to tell Raila Odinga is that those harmless youth didn't die on the streets for senseless dialogues. Raila, who are we? You're not our leader." Another said, "Raila, as you go ahead and dialogue, kindly don't involve us. Discuss your private matters. You don't speak on our behalf."

"Who is 'We'?" one posted. "We are the people. It's us versus the politicians now guys," he added.

Cyprian commented, "Raila Odinga is the biggest enemy of the Gen-Z movement. He has been worried all along because it's now clear that Kenyans can unite without him, putting his bargaining power at risk."

TheDragon said, "Raila is our enemy just like any other politician in Kenya, he's just playing for his own interests"

An anonymous letter widely circulating on social media stated, "Dear Raila Odinga, your decision today, to stand with our oppressors validates our choices for not wanting you involved in our protests from the beginning ... We will NOT allow you to hijack our movement to satisfy your political greed. YOU DO NOT speak for us and today you have shown that you stand with the thieves and the killers. WE WILL NOT BE SILENCED ... We will drain this swamp with you in it. This is not business as usual."

Photoshopped images showing Odinga donning Ruto's party UDA T-shirt widely circulated on X and Instagram.

One user, Japeth, said, "Raila Odinga won't use the old script to sabotage our movement. This time round, we don't accept any move to sink the Gen Z ship"

The "old script" is a reference to how Odinga has traditionally derailed mass popular movements against the Kenyan establishment. In the 1990s, amid mounting opposition to the hated Western-backed

Daniel arap Moi regime, Odinga, despite being tortured by Moi in 1982, organised mass protests only to then support Moi. He merged his then National Development Party with Moi's hated KANU party and served as energy minister.

In 2007, after then-President Mwai Kibaki stole the election from him, Odinga called off mass opposition and entered into government as Second Prime Minister, even though his supporters had been gunned down by Kibaki's security forces. Ruto, then an ally of Odinga, played a criminal role, whipping up ethnic violence for which he was indicted by the International Criminal Court. Over 1,300 people died, and at least 650,000 others were displaced in the most violent post-election in Kenya's history. Odinga would rule with Kibaki for five years, until 2013.

In 2018, following another disputed election the year before involving Uhuru Kenyatta, Odinga again made a deal.

Last year, Odinga intermittently mobilised protests against Ruto's Finance Bill 2023, which was the first batch of austerity in the form of subsidy cuts and tax hikes. Odinga aimed to defuse opposition, ultimately calling them off when they threatened to intersect with strikes by civil servants, doctors, and teachers.

A year later, conditions are radically different. As the ruling class is well aware, the ability of Azimio and Odinga to play their apportioned role depends on their having any credibility in the working class.

A study by Jalale Getachew Birru for ACLED—an NGO collecting data on violent conflict and protest in the world—shows that a significant shift has taken place in the nature and leadership of Kenya's tax protests between 2023 to 2024. In 2023, there were 140 demonstrations organized by Odinga's Azimio and his supporters against Ruto's tax hikes and subsidy cuts. These were drowned in blood, with 75 deaths.

In contrast, this year's 45 demonstrations identified from February up to June 21—this excludes the mass protests of millions across the country on June 25—followed youth-led social media campaigns employing hashtags like #OccupyParliament and #RejectFinanceBill2024. Participants in these demonstrations have included, according to the study, “among others, lawyers' associations, labor groups, and student groups”.

The ruling class fears that unless the protests are brought to an end a far broader political movement involving the working class will erupt, and not only in Kenya but across the region.

Wiper Leader Kalonzo Musyoka is a veteran politician, with a track record working for Moi's police state as Foreign Affairs Minister (1993-1998), Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly (1988-1992) and National Organising Secretary of KANU—the only legal party under Moi, as workers, students and left-wing opponents of the regime were killed and tortured. Standing next to Raila, he warned, “If we are not careful, all of us will be thrown out by Gen Z as they say they have come of age and they are no longer the leaders of tomorrow”.

Odinga has always presented himself as leading the democratic faction of the ruling class, one of the main men who led the country through its “Second Liberation” in the 1990s to multi-party democracy against the Western-backed Moi dictatorship (1978 to 2002). But he has always been an imperialist stooge, backing US-led imperialist interventions in Somalia and France's intervention in Ivory Coast in 2011. Odinga, like Ruto, 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).

In his autobiography, *The Flame of Freedom* (2013), Odinga

described how shortly before the 2007 elections he auditioned before the bankers and big business, distancing himself from his father Jaramogi Odinga's ties with the Soviet bureaucracy as Kenya's first vice-president:

Because of my father's and my longstanding support for equitable distribution of national resources, I had often been accused of being left-wing anti-capitalist (the latter a strange misconception about a man who, like his father before him, had long been involved in private enterprise). It was said that, as president, I would reverse some privatisations and make radical changes to the Kenyan stock market. The latter probably also had a connection with the charge I had made that the extensive profits from illegal drug-dealing had been ploughed into the national bourse. In mid-October, I visited the Nairobi Stock Exchange to offer assurances of my support for its continued activities.

As the ruling class unites above, the working class needs to unite from below and across borders, building its own organisations to fight to defend its basic democratic and social rights. Rank-and-file committees must be established in every workplace, factory and neighbourhood, elected democratically and independent of the trade unions and every capitalist party to rally other oppressed people and the poor. In this struggle, workers can turn to their class brothers and sisters in every country who confront a similar social disaster.

The crisis directly poses the question of building an international revolutionary leadership providing a socialist perspective to the working class.

The bitter experiences of the past century and first two decades of the 21st century have vindicated Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. In countries of a belated capitalist development, the bourgeoisie cannot lead the struggle for social and democratic rights and establish its independence from imperialism. That task falls to the international working class, fighting for the overthrow of capitalism as part of the world socialist revolution. Against imperialism, the battle cry of workers across the region must be: For the United Socialist States of Africa!

We urge workers and youth to join us and build sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution founded by Leon Trotsky.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)