

Kenyan trade unions shut down aviation workers' strike in one of Africa's largest airports

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On Wednesday, hundreds of aviation workers at Kenya's main airport, Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA), went on strike against the privatization plans of the national unity government, which includes President William Ruto's administration and the opposition Orange Democratic Movement (ODM).

The strike grounded dozens of flights, paralysing one of the region's key economic and logistical hubs, and leaving hundreds of passengers stranded.

The walkout is part of a strike wave across the country, involving teachers, healthcare workers, lecturers and civil servants, against the government's International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated policies, which include tax increases, expenditure cuts in education and healthcare, and privatization and restructuring of State Owned Enterprises (SOEs). It is part of a broader surge of struggles across Africa and the imperialist centres, where workers are resisting the ruling class's assault on living standards and social rights, exacerbated by rising costs of living, which have been intensified by NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine and the Israeli genocide in Palestine.

The airport handled 8.8 million passengers and 380,000 tonnes of cargo in 2022-2023, making it one of Africa's busiest. It is crucial for Kenya's export industry, particularly in sectors like horticulture, where it facilitates the shipment of fresh flowers, fruits, and vegetables to Europe and other global markets, and supports over 250,000 jobs in Kenya, directly and indirectly. It contributes more than \$9.5 billion to the economy annually—around 4.6 percent of Kenya's GDP.

The unions, however, had no intention of fully leveraging workers' power—not only to bring significant parts of the economy to a standstill but, above all, to inspire workers nationwide and globally to push for their own demands, potentially sparking a broader working-class movement.

Instead, under increasing pressure from aviation workers, the Kenya Aviation Workers' Union (KAWU) only reluctantly called the strike on Tuesday night.

Hundreds of KAWU members protested outside the main terminals. Aviation workers shouted "Adani must go" as they blew whistles. They are opposed to the planned deal to lease, in

a de facto privatisation, Kenya's largest airport to the Adani Group for 30 years in return for an investment of \$1.85 billion. They are aware the deal would cut jobs and worsen job conditions.

The Adani Group is a major Indian multinational conglomerate, founded in 1988 by Gautam Adani, one of Asia's richest people. As of 2023, it reported revenues of \$16.8 billion and a net profit of approximately \$915 million.

The Adani Group has benefited from the far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in India led by Narendra Modi. As the WWS noted last year: "That the key to Adani's success has been his close ties to Modi and his government has long been an open secret. He has benefited from the privatization of huge swathes of publicly built infrastructure, including seaports, electricity generation and transmission, coal mines and airports. These assets were invariably sold off for way less than they were worth, and with much of the money for their purchase coming from unsecured loans extended to Adani by India's public sector banks."

The government announced that the build-and-operate agreement with Adani would lead to the renovation of JKIA, including the construction of an additional runway and terminal. Although it is evident that the airport's infrastructure is outdated and rapidly deteriorating, often hit by power outages and leaking roofs, the blame lies not with the workers who are being asked to pay the price, but with systemic disinvestment and the looting by corrupt state officials and the political elite.

Amid the strike, several were arrested, with videos surfacing online showing police brutality. In one Facebook video, a police officer is seen striking a worker with a baton.

Ruto also deployed the General Service Unit (GSU), a paramilitary force infamous for its repressive role since its creation by the British colonial administration to suppress the Mau Mau anti-colonial uprising in the 1950s. The GSU has since become a tool for post-independence governments to suppress workers' strikes.

By the afternoon, however, KAWU, in coordination with its umbrella federation the Central Organization of Trade Unions

(COTU) and the Ruto government, had called off the industrial action without securing any guarantees against privatization or protections for workers' jobs.

Francis Atwoli, secretary-general of the Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU), a close ally of Ruto, was sent to work with KAWU to shut down the strike. Without any vote, let alone a consultation with workers, Atwoli and KAWU Secretary General Moses Ndiema announced they were calling off the strike after a meeting with Transport Cabinet Secretary Davis Chirchir.

"We have received the most pertinent documents as requested by the Union. We undertake to go through them within 10 working days and flag out areas of our concern," said Atwoli. "The meeting shall be immediately convened after the said period of 10 working days."

"We have not said that we have accepted Adani. We will be given veto powers and our signature will be needed for the process to move forward," KAWU's Ndiema said. "If it is a bad deal, we will not sign," he added.

Workers should place no confidence in these words. Behind their empty rhetoric, COTU and KAWU are working with the Ruto regime—which butchered more than 60 protestors in the June-July youth-led demonstrations against tax hikes—to prevent a unified political and industrial fight by the working class against the government.

Prior to the strike, KAWU had systematically attempted to diffuse workers' opposition, constantly delaying strike action, issuing strike notices and then suspending them "pending discussions". On August 12, KAWU issued a strike noticed to strike in seven days if the proposed leasing of JKIA to Adani was not stopped, only to suspend it and then reissue another one on 31 August. Wednesday's shutdown was just the latest attempt to suppress the mounting opposition among workers by letting off some steam.

KAWU has also whipped up xenophobia and nationalism, as a way of fostering parochialism and dividing workers across national lines, claiming the selling of JKIA to an Indian firm is tantamount to selling "national sovereignty" and that it would mean JKIA would contract more foreign, namely Indian, workers.

In reality, workers face a common global fight. This has been made crystal clear by the mass protests that have rocked south Asia, including across Pakistan, India and Bangladesh against IMF-austerity, worsening conditions and job cuts. In the US, thousands of Washington state employees walked off the job on Tuesday demanding higher wages, as wildcat walkouts of thousands of machinists at the Boeing plant in Everett, Washington broke out.

As for COTU, Atwoli has worked day and night over past months to strangle working-class opposition to the Ruto regime. Initially, he defended Ruto's savage tax hikes included in the Finance Bill 2024 to raise \$2.7 billion. Subsequently, COTU celebrated Ruto's withdrawal of the bill to quell anger

and buy time amid mass protests, and then praised Ruto's manoeuvre of dissolving his government to form a coalition with the opposition leader, the billionaire Raila Odinga, that is now reinstating the tax hikes and privatisations.

Last month, he met Labour Cabinet Secretary Alfred Mutua to promise he would intensify his efforts to police the class struggle, stating he would "ensure social peace".

Atwoli, despite declaring before the meeting that ended the aviation strike, "We support this strike because the government has failed to address the workers' concerns," made it clear he has no intention of mobilizing COTU's 42 affiliate trade unions—of which KAWU is a member—representing over 2.5 million workers. He also opposed any attempt to unite KAWU workers with the ongoing strike actions by teachers, lecturers, civil servants, and healthcare workers—also members of COTU affiliates.

Nor should workers have any illusions in the High Court, which temporarily halted the airport's leasing following a suit filed by Kenyan human rights groups. The court is no defender of workers' rights. Its rulings—whether suspending the deployment of police as US-backed mercenaries in Haiti, opposing fuel tax increases, or blocking the use of force against Gen-Z protestors in late July—have routinely been ignored. Furthermore, the courts have frequently outlawed strikes, including the most recent teachers' strike, and upheld the deployment of troops against protestors on the streets of Nairobi.

The critical question aviation workers face is enforcing democratic control over their struggle. They must form rank-and-file committees, composed of trusted workers, to give them the ability to override decisions made by union bureaucrats that violate their will and prepare for a genuine struggle reaching out to the working class for the broadest possible support in Kenya, across the region and internationally.



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