Kenyan trade unions suppress strike action by doctors, airport workers

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Kenyan trade unions have suppressed strikes scheduled to take place across the country over the Christmas period. The industrial action would have seen thousands of aviation and health care workers down tools for several days, shutting airports during one of the busiest times of the year for international travel and significantly impacting 50 public hospitals across Kenya.

Workers at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA) in Nairobi—Kenya's largest airport and a crucial transport hub for the country's economy—as well as other airports nationwide were set to walk out in opposition to low wages and pay discrimination in a longstanding dispute with the Kenya Airports Authority (KAA).

In a statement issued on Wednesday, December 18, Kenya Aviation Workers' Union (KAWU) Secretary-General Moses Ndiema had claimed: "Should there be no agreement [with the government and airport management] by December 21, we will hold the mother of all strikes in this country." More than a week later, no action has been called and no further statements have been made, in an attempt by the union to curtail the strike or delay it until a less impactful moment.

Employees at Kenya Airways, one of the main airlines that would be targeted by the strike, have not received a pay rise in ten years, while the company's top management has received several large salary increases. With inflation rates averaging 6.27 percent per year over this period, this means that workers have in fact suffered a significant pay cut. KAWU also cited the failure of the KAA to implement the terms of a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) signed in September after the unions ended a previous strike.

September's industrial action had been taken to oppose a planned deal to lease JKIA to Indian multinational conglomerate Adani Group, an agreement which would have amounted to a de facto privatisation and would have led to job cuts and worsening conditions. The one-day strike on September 11 grounded dozens of flights and left hundreds of passengers stranded, before being called off by KAWU in coordination with the umbrella federation the Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU) and the hated government of President William Ruto.

The union had already postponed the strike, originally planned for August, by several weeks in order to enter into talks with the government over the Adani deal. The action in September was calculated as a manoeuvre to allow workers to let off steam after months of mounting tensions without posing a serious challenge to the government or airline industry.

In November, the government ultimately announced that it had cancelled the proposed deal with Adani under growing pressure at home and after the indictment of Adani leader Gautam Adani in the US on charges of fraud. A separate 30-year public-private partnership between Adani and Kenya's Ministry of Energy and Petroleum to construct power transmission lines was also called off.

In a statement on November 22, COTU Secretary-General Francis Atwoli praised the cancellation of the deal as "a bold, timely and unequivocal action", claiming that the "Presidential proclamation, issued during the State of the Nation Address in Parliament, has restored workers' confidence across all sectors, particularly those represented by the [KAWU] under the Kenya Airports Authority."

In reality, the junking of the Adani deal has not provided any guarantees to aviation workers, who continue to work for poverty wages amid a devastating cost-of-living crisis.

A nationwide strike by healthcare workers scheduled to begin on Sunday, December 22 was also called off only two days before it was due to begin, after a last-minute deal between the Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentists Union (KMPDU), the Ministry of Health and the Council of Governors.

According to the agreement, intern doctors, who make up around 27 percent of all medical staff in Kenya's public hospitals, will receive an immediate pay increase to KSh206,000 a month (US$1,600), up from a monthly wage of between KSh40,000 (US$310) and KSh70,000 (US$545). Many intern doctors had reported that they had not received any pay at all in the four months up to the planned strike.

The pay increase marks the implementation of one of the provisions of a 2017 CBA, signed by the unions and the government after a 100-day strike by healthcare workers beginning in December 2016—the longest period of industrial action in Kenya’s history. Following a long-established pattern in Kenyan industrial disputes, however, the government has repeatedly refused to implement the full CBA, safe in the knowledge that unions will do nothing to fight for its enforcement.

The refusal to fulfil the agreement led to a further round of strike action beginning in March this year, lasting 56 days. The strike had been called to demand the payment of medical workers’ salary arrears, and the immediate hiring and paying of recently graduated trainee doctors, but was called off by the KMPDU with the issue of trainee and intern doctors still unresolved.

While the most recent deal marks a significant improvement in pay for intern doctors, it will do little to address the severe crisis facing Kenya’s healthcare system.

Health services in Kenya are chronically underfunded, with the Kenyan government spending only 3.7 percent of its annual budget on health—far below the World Health Organization’s (WHO) recommendation of 5 percent for low- and middle-income countries. This is also a tiny fraction of the 15 percent it committed to spending on health as part of the 2001 Abuja Declaration, in which African Union leaders pledged to address the multiple health crises facing the continent, including the HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis epidemics.

Kenyan public hospitals are also facing acute staffing shortages, with an average of only 19 doctors per 100,000 people across the country, five times worse than the WHO recommendation of one doctor per 1,000 people. Many student doctors struggle to gain employment upon graduation due to hospital budget constraints, with those who do find work as interns regularly doing 36-hour shifts with no breaks. Over the last two months, at least five medical workers have died by suicide in Kenya due to mental illness associated with their appalling working conditions.

Workers and young people across Kenya have been involved in months of sustained strikes and protests against the government’s International Monetary Fund (IMF)–dictated policies, which include tax increases, spending cuts and privatisations.

In September, hundreds of thousands of teachers, health care workers, airport staff, county civil servants and lecturers took part in strike action to oppose budget cuts, privatisation schemes and broken promises over wages and staffing. This followed months of anti-austerity protests by Kenyan workers and youth over the summer against the Ruto government. Police responded to the demonstrations with mass violence, killing dozens of protestors and injuring hundreds more.

The Kenyan government has no intention of rowing back on its anti-worker, pro-business policies, despite mass popular opposition. In its attempts to suppress the class struggle, the ruling class knows it can rely on the complicity of the trade unions in suppressing workers’ opposition.

The trade union bureaucracy does not represent the interests of workers but of an affluent layer of the middle class that is inexorably opposed to a movement of the working class which could threaten Kenya’s capitalist economy. Throughout the so-called “Gen Z protests” over the summer, trade union leaders continuously worked to scale down strikes and sow illusions that the Ruto government could be pressured to change course.

At the end of November, Francis Atwoli, leader of COTU—which claims to represent 1.5 million Kenyan workers organised in 36 affiliated unions—declared that Ruto will be re-elected as president again in 2027 and called for the extension of presidential term limits from five years to seven. He cited as a positive example the government of Uganda, whose autocratic president Yoweri Museveni has ruled for 40 years as the head of a police-state dictatorship. In 2005, the Ugandan parliament removed a term limit that would have prevented Museveni from contesting elections the following year.

To defend jobs, wages and conditions, Kenyan workers must throw off the stranglehold of the union bureaucracies. This requires the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions, democratically organised by workers themselves and in coordination with their class allies in Africa and internationally. Above all, this requires the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Kenya and across the world as part of a struggle for socialism.

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