

Nigeria, October 2020: #EndSARS, Workers' Power, and War

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In October 2020, millions in Nigeria marched for two weeks in a revolt that shook the world. From Badagry to Yola, youth and workers rose in unity against the barbarism of police brutality and bad governance. Raising radical slogans and social media hashtags, and mobilizing spontaneous rallies, the rebellion was the most democratic movement in the history of Nigeria.

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The present shape of Nigeria's ruling-class oppression goes back to the mid-1980s, with the imposition, by the military junta of Ibrahim Babangida, of a comprehensive Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). The SAP was a state campaign to implement the harsh and anti-welfarist conditions required by the loans taken from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Workers and youth have resisted the SAP, which has led to a drastic reduction in government sponsorship of social infrastructure like education, healthcare, housing, and job creation. SAP is why most industries in glass, textiles, agriculture, automobile, and so on, were decimated by privatization and other neoliberal policies that transfer public wealth into private pockets, such as public-private partnerships. The business empires of a few billionaires are then bolstered through monopoly, hoarding, and other diabolical policies, while millions of people live in abject poverty.

The country's legacy of police brutality is the kernel of these decades of oppression, as epitomized by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police Force. Following the unit's founding in 1992 amid a rash of kidnappings and robberies in the city of Lagos, SARS officers, often dressed in plainclothes, were ostensibly tasked with the investigation and prosecution of individuals suspected of "violent crimes." The covert unit has since been implicated in a long and sordid history of abuse and brutality against civilians, including extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, extortion, blackmail, and forced disappearances; it has also been widely viewed as facilitating election rigging for the ruling parties. Popular resistance against the unit began with the birth of the #EndSARS movement in 2017, when youth activists began to organize mass mobilizations via social media. In spite of the alleged implication of some of these youth in cybercrime rings, the movement gained momentum when its founders were joined by other groups of activists at protests in the Lagos neighborhood of Ojota, which led to a rally at several nearby media outlets and police stations. Soon, agitation against the criminal tendencies of SARS officers became widespread as citizens testified publicly about illegal harassment, torture, and extortion by the police. By August 2019, some activists who had been part of the 2017 and 2018 #EndSARS protests had organized the #RevolutionNow campaign.

Subsequently, the ruling class, after pulling all its weight to win reelection for President Muhammadu Buhari in 2019, embarked on a sweeping campaign to authorize anti-people policies, including deregulation, the devaluation of the Nigerian naira, and refusal to require a meager 30,000 naira minimum wage. Buhari's government also harshly suppressed two general strikes, in May 2016 and September 2020. These followed seven earlier general strikes, the last of which was in January 2012, against the removal of fuel subsidies, which involved workers in over 45 cities and towns across Nigeria.

Today, as workers' power grows, from nurses' and doctors' to lecturers' strikes, many sleep with one eye open, as the hydra-headed horrors of violence and war rear their heads through both state and individual acts of terror. The Boko Haram war has shed the blood of thousands and turned citizens into "internally displaced persons" overnight. Hundreds of villages and towns are currently controlled by the insurgents. Bandits whose specialty is mass kidnapping, including recent abductions in the town of Kankara and at the Federal College of Forestry Mechanization in the state of Kaduna, have been terrorizing residents across the country.

Popular responses to these developments have taken two forms: first, self-determination (secessionist) groups, like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Yoruba Nation agitators; and second, the #RevolutionNow movement, which has been the most consistent in sustaining struggles and has deployed strategies that have had a great influence on the wider #EndSARS movement, as well as on worker and youth struggles more generally. #RevolutionNow is also firm in its principle of the unity of all the oppressed.

Below, I will examine both the rise of this revolutionary movement and its demands for self-determination, while dissecting the twin faces of state and individual terrorism that strengthen the arms of war. The two souls of revolution—youth revolts, like #EndSARS, and the rise in strikes that build workers' power, like the Judiciary Staff Union's shutdown of the courts in May of this year—must unite in order to give birth to a new Nigeria that rises from the ruins of the old.

Workers' Power Without a General Strike

In 2019, there were several major protests led by #RevolutionNow—campaigning alongside civil society groups like Concerned Nigerians, Enough Is Enough, and others—against the shrinking of public spaces. On August 3, two days before a planned #RevolutionNow national protest, democracy activist and former presidential candidate Omoyele Sowore was arrested, gestapo-style, by government security forces. Protests continued from August 5 until December 24, when Sowore was finally released. The Coalition for Revolution continued mass mobilizations from January 2020 until the one-year commemoration of the August 5 uprising, when protests were held in 14 cities and towns, including Abuja and Lagos, where over one hundred protesters were arrested and released within 48 hours.

As soon as comrades were released from the mass crackdown on August 5, planning for the next mass actions on October 1, Nigeria's Independence Day, began. In Abuja, protests took place at two venues, Unity Fountain and Berger.

Alongside 27 others, I was arrested around 9:30 a.m. at Unity Fountain by a group of more than 50 armed members of the government's COVID-19 task force. They came in four vans, jam-packed like sardines, while the protesters observed social-distancing precautions and wore face masks. Nevertheless, they attacked, seizing our masks and beating and torturing us, while threatening to kill us if we did not stop the agitations for revolution. Forty-one other comrades from the city of Gwagwalada, who had joined the Berger protests, were also targeted; after being beaten, they were

brought to join us at Eagle Square, where we were being detained. In Lagos, protests were held at Ikeja Underbridge, with hundreds of protesters braving the violence of the police. About 15 comrades were arrested and beaten. Such brutality against the protests occurred all over the country.

However, by October 1 the momentum had grown so much that the federal government had to cancel all Independence Day celebrations, with widespread mobilizations for mass actions underway—including on the part of self-determination groups like the Yoruba Nation agitators.

On the day itself, it was only the #RevolutionNow campaigners who stormed the streets. In Lagos, about a thousand protesters marched from Ojota to the neighborhood of Maryland. Actions took place in 26 other cities and towns, including Benin, Port Harcourt, Yola, Kano, Bauchi, Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ore, Osogbo, and Abuja. On the heels of a betrayal of the people's trust on the part of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC), which had undemocratically called off a general strike scheduled for September 28, the October 1 protests finally broke the state's hold on the opening of public spaces.

The current leaders of both national labor organizations have close ties to the state and tend to make more excuses for state actions than do government officials themselves. The general strike of April 2016, for instance, was intentionally sabotaged by the labor bureaucracy as they compromised with the Buhari government. State councils were mobilized in lackluster fashion while cowardly statements were made over the airwaves, demoralizing workers. The Joint Action Front and United Action for Democracy, leading radical groups in 2016, had been weakened through inactivity on the part of their leadership, as well by as the loyalty of many key activists to so-called class collaboration with the "progressive bourgeoisie" in the All Progressives Congress, one of Nigeria's two main political parties. Neither group, despite many efforts at revival, has yet recovered from these missteps.

However, workers keep going on sectoral strike upon strike, from nurses and doctors to the current judiciary workers' strikes over financial autonomy of the executive branch of government, which have continued for a month as of this writing. In May, the Kaduna chapter of the NLC led a five-day workers' strike in Kaduna State, where Nasir el-Rufai, a proud fascist, is governor. Labor has repeatedly brought state operations to a halt and fought off state thugs who are being sponsored to violently attack demonstrations.

But the bureaucracy still has considerable power, and it has shown that it can successfully suppress agitation for a general strike within the labor movement. In fact, many of those who participated in the #EndSARS protests were workers who would have loved their unions to formally join the movement and call a general strike. This must be why by October 18, agitation for a youth strike began at the barricades, especially in the Alausa district just north of Lagos, which was the organizational center of the revolt.

#EndSARS: 14 Days That Shook the World

As noted above, October 1, 2020, was a watershed, following the labor bureaucracy's cancellation of the September 28 general strike. Confidence among activists was largely restored; as video of SARS brutality in Sapele trended globally, youth organizers began to plan a major intervention through the #EndSARS campaign. But, after only two of the campaign's agenda setters on Twitter proposed actionable tactics, Omoyele Sowore of #RevolutionNow took up the baton with a proposal to occupy police headquarters all over the country; at the same time, Runtown, a well-known songwriter and producer, proposed a protest rally and march on Lagos Island.

By October 6, while 31 protesters who had been arrested during the #RevolutionNow protests on October 1 were being released, Sowore led a protest of thousands to police headquarters in Abuja. A small group of youth led by Rinu, a Twitter influencer and student activist, surrounded the Lagos Police Command with mats and music. About ten #RevolutionNow comrades joined them, and proceeded to hold a vigil at the Police Command. By the second day, protesters moved to the Lagos State Assembly Complex in Alausa, where hundreds of protesters joined. On the third day, Rinu and others in the leadership met with the Lagos State Assembly speaker Mudashiru Obasa and other legislators. Some agreements were drafted. Then, the leaders proceed to call off the protest—without consulting with the hundreds of protesters still dancing and singing outside.

Meanwhile, a young street musician named Small Doctor led over two thousand protesters from the Lagos suburb of Agege to a major roundabout in nearby Allen, where they merged with a group of hundreds led by Juwon Sanyaolu of #RevolutionNow. Together, the two groups moved toward Alausa. On their arrival, a congress was called, moderated by Sanyaolu. Thousands agreed to continue the actions “until the president responds,” given that the State Assembly has no constitutional power to dismantle SARS. Protesters also agreed to block the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway, hold a festival, and return for an evening congress.

By evening, the police moved in to stop protesters from another vigil, citing fears of chaos and the rumor that the protest was about to be hijacked. #RevolutionNow comrades immediately intervened, ultimately prevailing in the debate with the police over their right to hold another vigil. Organizers proceeded to set up committees on security, discipline, and the provision of food. The open debates with the police and among the protesters were aired live on social media, as well as covered by the Sahara Reporters news agency and the BBC.

By the second morning, thousands had joined the protests at Alausa, at which point a culture of congresses and democratic engagement and debate became the norm. For two days, the protesters debated whether the occupation should have leadership or demands. Many cited lessons learned from the betrayals of the labor bureaucracy and previous protests; accordingly, the first proposal, regarding the creation of leadership roles, was rejected. But the second proposal, to craft a list of demands, was accepted. So, at an afternoon congress on October 9, led by Sanyaolu, the following five demands were issued:

- 1) The immediate release of all arrested protesters
- 2) Justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families
- 3) The formation, within a period of ten days, of an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reported police misconduct
- 4) The implementation of psychological evaluations of all disbanded SARS personnel prior to any redeployment, to be verified by an independent body
- 5) An increase to police salaries to provide adequate compensation for their role protecting lives and property.

The Buhari government did not immediately respond to these #5for5 demands. With help from singer-songwriter Davido and others, they were then presented to the inspector general of police. Over the next few days, the government made no concrete promises, and the revolt continued to grow all over the country. A congress in Alausa on October 13 saw the addition of two other demands, calling for the resignation of the inspector general and President Buhari, and the hashtag #EndBadGovernance began to trend widely. By October 17, over 253 barricades had been mounted

all over Lagos, even in far-flung neighborhoods.

Days earlier, state-sponsored thugs had been unleashed on protesters in the neighborhoods of Alausa, Lekki, and Oworonshoki. Protesters in Ketu, in particular, were the target of inter-cult attacks, while the police never intervened. Ruling party leader Bola Tinubu, along with President Buhari's advisor Itse Sagay, had written on October 18 that the Buhari government should employ force to quell the protest. Many prominent former activists, including Debo Adeniran, Jiti Ogunye, and others, supported this position. Lagos State governor Jide Sanwo-Olu was also holding meetings with former activists and military and police leadership about how to stop the protests. In Abuja, thugs engaged protesters, burned their cars, and even threatened them—all live on air, while the police watched.

The #EndSARS protesters were aware of the credibility of such threats. The first martyr of the movement, Jimoh Isiaka, a student at Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, had been felled by police bullets in Ogbomosho on October 11. All barricades of the #EndSARS nationwide held candlelight vigils and rallies in his honor. He was but one among numerous protesters who would be killed for their participation in the movement in the days to come.

A youth strike was declared at the Alausa barricade congress on the night of October 18, and by 5 a.m. the next morning, all workplaces were closed, given that transit routes were shut down. Only the protesters, in their millions, had free movement. The strike began to place increasing pressure on the working class, and activists called on the NLC and TUC to make it official by declaration. This was not to be.

By the morning of October 20, rumors began to circulate that the army was deploying soldiers to quell the protests. Radio jingles telling parents to withdraw their children from the barricades filled the airwaves. State propagandists and social media influencers started blackmailing the revolt. Jiti Ogunye called it “anarchy” on Facebook, while civil rights campaigner Segun “Segalink” Awosanya (another former supporter of #EndSARS) called it an “insurrection” on Twitter. Meanwhile, activists at the major barricades held meetings and made plans to strengthen their security committees.

By 5:30 p.m. on the twentieth, three vans with 15 soldiers stormed the Alausa barricade. We were not caught totally off guard, as we had been warned by those at the Allen occupation, where the protesters had swarmed the soldiers before they could attack. In shock, soldiers had pleaded with the protesters, claiming they had come to secure peace. While they left, news filtered in that in the same manner, three vans of soldiers had attacked the Lekki barricade, where they had shot and killed a number of protestors. DJ Switch, a well-known musician and supporter of the #EndSARS movement, aired the attack live.

A congress was called immediately. Most argued that we had to continue despite the killings. The security committee started serious discussions and activities. By 7:45 p.m., the police vans withdrew, but they began to make new preparations, and to block newly arrived protesters from joining the vigil. Moreover, the police succeeded in shutting off the streetlights, meaning the barricade now depended on the headlights of nearby cars to see. A few minutes after 8 p.m., seven vans with about 45 soldiers suddenly sped in from the expressway.

Over a thousand protesters were still sitting on the ground, angry and vigilant. The security committee confronted the soldiers immediately. This time, the soldiers acted more fiercely, jumping down from the vans and taking shooting positions, led by an officer wielding a pistol. A mass of protesters swiftly converged, forming a ring around the soldiers, whom they outnumbered twenty to one. Gbenga Komolafe of the Federation of Informal Workers, also a co-convenor of the Coalition for Revolution, stood behind us as the engagement with the soldiers continued. He described the mood

thus: “I have never seen soldiers armed to the teeth and ready for action get so jittery ... they were practically shivering.”

Cornered, the officer approached us and spoke to the coordinators: “You guys think you are powerful. I must clear this place. It’s orders from above.” We shouted back at him! His troops then retreated, and we followed close behind until they got in their vans and moved farther away.

The security committee started the evacuation of all the protesters at the Alausa barricade. But as it was underway, police and soldiers attacked, unleashing a hail of bullets and tear gas. Two protesters were shot, as witnessed by injured comrades who were hiding. But the evacuation was still largely successful.

At Lekki, however, a full-scale massacre was being conducted by soldiers and police, supervised by governor Sanwo-Olu himself. In the time since the protest, a judicial panel of inquiry has seen all the evidence from that night of bloodshed, but no one has much confidence in the panel. Justice, in the view of most of the youth, lay with the 2020 second wave of protests #EndSARS Season 2.*

After the massacre, many angry youth reacted by storming government establishments, including courthouses and police stations. More than twenty stations were burned in Lagos alone. Palaces and houses belonging to ruling-class elements—including the king of Lagos, Rilwan Akiolu, and Bola Tinubu—were attacked and looted. While these attacks were uncoordinated and poorly managed, the items emerging from these residences led to a great revelation: state governments and politicians were stealing and hoarding relief shipments intended to allay the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic! By comparison, the “great lockdown” had been enforced for nearly three months without citizens being given access to any of these supplies. In fact, #RevolutionNow campaigners had led a massive “pots and pans” protest online in April 2020 demanding access to healthcare.

The largest uncovering and mass rescue of COVID-19 relief was in the city of Jos, in Plateau State, where hundreds of thousands were pictured helping themselves to foodstuffs that had been withheld from the people. Lagos politicians were repackaging the COVID-19 relief supplies as “stomach infrastructure,” handed out to party members and supporters during birthday celebrations and other events.

The Lekki massacre halted the #EndSARS revolts, but it never broke the movement. As I write, the hashtag #EndSARS continues to trend. Illustrating the resilience of the movement, activists initiated #OccupyLekkiTollGate on February 13, 2021 at the city’s new toll plaza, against the plan of the Lagos government to start charging drivers to enter the city. Forty-six protesters were arrested, beaten, and tortured, yet the movement prevailed: as of this writing, the toll plaza remains closed.

There was, however, one thing that was missing in the #EndSARS revolt: general strikes by workers. After all, it was at the outset of the youth strike that the #EndSARS revolt became most effective. The state responded by drowning the protests in blood, from Lekki to Abuja. Even journalists were not spared. Pelumi Onifade, a 19-year-old reporter with GBUA TV was murdered for filming the recovery of pandemic relief supplies. Earlier, Onifade had broken news of the horrible event where a member of the House of Representatives, Abiodun Bolarinwa, shot sporadically at protesters in the Abule Egba neighborhood in Lagos, killing three, on October 21, 2020.

The Impact of War

As noted above, a series of sectional wars and upheavals are taking place across the country, from Boko Haram to bandit attacks, and most recently attacks by unknown gunmen. The federal

government has been openly appealing for peace, but, as we have seen, the same government continues to conduct massacres of peaceful protesters, among other terrorist acts.

Boko Haram has taken over a quarter of Borno State while also holding on to several villages across the northeast. It is now very clear that the intent of Boko Haram (and ISIS) is to conquer the northeast (or even the whole country) and turn it into an “Islamic nation.” Over time, the epidemic of violence it has unleashed has weakened the Nigerian army—an effect only exacerbated by the fact that generals and officers in the army are more interested in the multi-million-dollar bounties involved than they are in defeating the insurgents. Numerous exposés have shown that the military is compromised and shattered. As General Tukur Buratai and other service chiefs have been forced out by President Buhari, it has been discovered that billions of dollars budgeted for ammunition have been looted. Nevertheless, the same Buratai and others have now been appointed “presidential ambassadors.”

Today, battles are ongoing between the state and Boko Haram; bandits and farmers/peasants in the northwest and central Nigeria; herders and farmers in the southwest; and the state and IPOB/Eastern Security Network (ESN) in the southeast. In all of these conflicts, from north to south, it is working people who suffer the most. The Buhari government continues to fuel these crises with its own ethno-religious agenda, perpetuation of state impunity, and fascistic policies. Meanwhile, the expression of grievances on the part of the people increasingly leads to uprisings that demand revolution or secession. While those in favor of secession focus more on the lack of public safety and government impunity, #RevolutionNow campaigners believe in the need for a total overhaul of the system. They continue to campaign against police brutality, just as many more-liberal organizations have continued to mobilize against police brutality.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Revolution Is the Answer

There are two ways forward in the current situation: to break up Nigeria, or to make revolution. Both will only happen under conditions approaching those of open warfare. The ruling class from north to south is united against both secession and revolution. They would prefer a coup, or a crackdown from the top. But if faced with the choice of either secession or revolution, the rulers would prefer secession.

Secession of the eastern state of Biafra would most likely lead to a civil war, which would favor local members of the ruling class. Many so-called “baby tyrants” would emerge, and conditions countrywide would deteriorate to resemble those in Somalia or South Sudan, where the situation, in popular street parlance, is described as “yam pepper scatter scatter!” In fact, many of the self-determination agitations are secretly backed by politicians eyeing the presidency in 2023. Those secessionist agitations serve as instruments to strengthen mass support in those regions. Yoruba Nation agitator Sunday Igboho recently proclaimed the obvious when he urged Bola Tinubu, the former Lagos governor and national leader of the ruling party, to agree to be president of the Yoruba Nation. Southeastern governors are equally united against IPOB and its military wing, the ESN. The governors promptly launched a counterinsurgency outfit, codenamed “Ebube Agu,” that collaborates with government soldiers to confront IPOB/ESN.

However, the safest and the most harmonious solution is revolution. In the wake of #EndSARS, which struck fear into our thieving ruling class, a united action of all the oppressed is the way forward. In fact, the IPOB garnered its greatest support so far by joining the #EndSARS revolt.

The African Action Congress is the most consistent and largest revolutionary party involved in #EndSARS. There is a need for the party to work assiduously toward uniting all oppressed workers

and youth under the banner of the #RevolutionNow campaigns, led by the Coalition for Revolution. In the north, the task is to build resistance against not only Boko Haram and the bandits, but also the neoliberal and pro-terrorism policies of the northern oligarchy. In the south, there is a dire need to intervene concretely to bolster support for workers' strikes and unite them with youth agitations like #EndSARS.

What is needed is for the working class that organized the January 2012 uprising against the removal of fuel subsidies to collaborate with the #EndSARS movement. If these two boiling points burn together to produce the fire next time, a new Nigeria will be possible.

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P.S.

- New Politics. Summer 2021 (new-politics-vol-xviii-no-3-whole-number-71):
https://newpol.org/issue_post/nigeria-endsars-workers-power-and-war/
- KUNLE WIZEMAN AJAYI, a labor activist and poet, was an #EndSARS Organizer at the Alausa barricades. He chairs the African Action Congress in Lagos.