

# Nigeria: Labor pains

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**Today, the Nigeria labor Congress barely commands the respect of Nigerian workers.**

Over the past weeks, Nigerians have trooped out to the streets, protesting the unprecedented level of hunger and hardship in the country. In places like Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, and Osun, protesters were heard screaming, “Ebi n pa wa o,” meaning, “We are hungry.” We have also seen outbreaks of protest in parts of Edo, Kwara, Niger, and Katsina. From north to south, the issue is the same: an inability to afford the high cost of food. The minimum wage remains abysmally low, less than \$20 per month, while the cost of food, goods, and services is approaching highs far above the reach of the average worker. Since last year, students have battled an ongoing neoliberal siege on public education, protesting the wave of fee hikes across Nigerian campuses. Prisons were not excluded from the outbreak of resistance. Most recently, inmates of the Jos Prison were reported to have organized themselves in hundreds, protesting plans to reduce their rations of rice and beans due to the rising price of food and essential commodities.

Since his inauguration in May 2023, [President Bola Tinubu](#) has rigorously pursued the policies of the IMF and World Bank, removing subsidies on fuel and floating the naira. Consequently, the inflation rate has risen consistently for eleven months, standing at 29.9% as of January. A group from the organized private sector, the Nigeria Employers’ Consultative Association (NECA), has warned of a worsening employment crisis should the government fail to rethink its decision to remove fuel subsidies and float the naira. Incidentally, this warning came after the National Bureau of Statistics reported significant and progressive increases in the unemployment rate from the second quarter of 2023, when the policies were introduced, and the third quarter of the year.

Responding to the wave of resistance in the country, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) announced that February 27 and 28 would be days of nationwide protest. The congress advanced 18 demands, including a new minimum wage, education funding, the abandonment of IMF and World Bank policies, an end to privatization and the liberalization of the economy, and subsidies for farmers, among others. While the intervention of the trade union in the #EndHunger protest was commendable, and timely, events leading to the February 27 protest reveal the worrisome state of the labor movement, calling for deep reflection.

The turnout at the protest was abysmally low, measuring far below the potential of organized labor. In Lagos, the number of protesters almost competed with those of the security forces. The situation was worse in other parts of the country. Expectedly, only Abuja managed to pull a significant number of workers to the streets. There are several factors that may account for the disappointing turnout. For instance, while the Nigeria Labour Congress was mobilizing its members and the Nigerian people for protests, a sister labor center, the Trade Union Congress (TUC), led by Festus Osifo, spared no effort in massively demobilizing the movement. First, it wrote a widely circulated protest letter to the NLC, demanding that it shelve actions. The TUC then held a press conference 24 hours before the date of action, in which it dissociated itself from the protests and directed its members accordingly. It also followed up with a memo mandating all union workers to show up for work.

Student groups, historically representing the most militant and energetic arm of the movement, have been effectively hijacked by ruling-class interests. The National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), like the TUC, attempted to demobilize protests, appealing to the NLC to call off actions. With such a level of disorganization and incoherence, the labor movement may have scuttled and deprived the Nigerian people of a rare opportunity to turn the #EndHunger protests into a popular revolt like the #EndSARS movement.

Over the past decades, the labor movement in Nigeria, particularly the Nigeria Labour Congress, has battled colonial and military dictatorships and fought fiercely against neoliberalism. For this radical posturing, the union has suffered proscriptions, unlawful interferences, intimidations, and persecutions of its militant leaders. Some of its leaders, like Pa Michael Imoudu, were banned from partaking in union and political affairs by the military. Decades of casualization, liberalization, and privatization have also demobilized its ranks and undermined its power. The state of the labor movement is a result of repeated attacks it has suffered over the years.

Today, the Nigeria Labour Congress suffers from serious ideological and identity crises. It does not have popular support from the Nigerian people and barely commands the respect of Nigerian workers. The government knows this too. It is the reason that Imo State Governor Hope Uzodinma, in November 2023, had the temerity to mobilize police and thugs to disrupt the union's procession in the state. The NLC president was subsequently abducted, blindfolded, brutalized, and tortured. Many workers went about their daily lives as though nothing happened and, in many instances, mocked the NLC on social media. Eventually, after dragging its feet for 14 days, the unions went on an indefinite strike, which was poorly enforced and barely lasted beyond a day. Hence, the low turnout for the February 27 protest is but a recent testament to the declining capacity of the labor movement.

Yet the labor movement remains vital to the task of resisting the ongoing neoliberal siege against the Nigerian people by the government of Bola Tinubu. While the trade unions can play a leading role, history is replete with examples of [popular power built outside the trade unions](#). The #EndSARS revolt is the most recent demonstration of such a revolutionary prospect. In Lagos, for instance, the #EndSARS protest did not stop at shutting down the streets, it also grounded workplaces. While it is necessary to invest sustained effort in strengthening trade unions, it is equally important that the labor movement commits to the rigorous task of building popular power independently of the NLC and TUC.

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