

# Strike movement in Nigeria

Workers launch a wave of strikes in Nigeria in spite of attempts by the military regime to control the trade union movement. SHARON PARKER reports. <sup>+</sup>

Nigerian workers are amongst the most militant in Africa. On May Day 1988 workers were striking all over the country. Lagos international airport was closed. Transport workers went on strike and government officials had difficulty getting to work. Army security was reinforced at government headquarters, at Dodan Barracks and around oil installations. The action on May Day was the culmination of a wave of strike action in Nigeria, which came close to developing into a national general strike.

## Workers strike against high prices

The conflict between labour and the military government of Nigeria has been brewing for some time now. The government negotiated to borrow money from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Before lending the money, the IMF stipulated that the Nigerian government take measures to 'stabilise' the economy. Generally, the IMF measures would lower workers' standard of living. Amongst other things, the IMF insisted that the government raise the price of oil and petrol by 6%. This would have a ripple effect through the economy, pushing up the prices of virtually all goods.

Workers have been agitating against the IMF interference in the economy and particularly against the 6% price increase. There have been widespread protests against the military government's acceptance of the IMF package.

Students were the first to react against the price increases. Peaceful protests won public sympathy when police took action against protesters. Protests in Jos resulted in six deaths and spread to all eleven states in northern Nigeria. The military government's violent reaction to peaceful protest provoked workers into strike action. On 24 April,

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the government banned all strikes. But workers in banking, health, the civil service and other sectors ignored the ban.

Workers also raised demands about wages. The government was *attempting to amend the minimum wage law*, so that employers could pay lower wages. The minimum wage law was first passed in 1981, when a national strike forced the government to negotiate minimum wages with the National Labour Congress (NLC). Now, faced with government attempts to change this law, the NLC condemned this move and launched a campaign against lowering the minimum wage.

### **Riot police take over union offices**

The military government responded in March by sacking the executive of the NLC. A unit of fully armed riot police took over the union headquarters. Policemen armed with machine guns guarded the main gates to prevent NLC officials from entering the building. The military government later appointed an administrator to run union affairs and arrange elections for a new NLC executive.

But in spite of the repression, the strikes spread. This was the biggest strike wave since President Ibrahim Babangida came to office in 1985. A showdown between government and the labour movement seemed imminent.

### **Strikers win some demands**

The government had to contain the strike wave and prevent it from reaching national proportions. Eventually the government *conceded to the strikers' demands* to release strike leaders and not to victimise striking workers and to negotiate over wages. This is a major victory for workers who have faced arbitrary arrests and detentions of their leadership for many years. The government also agreed to withdraw the amendment to the minimum wage law, and promised to negotiate wages with the unions. In a TV interview the Minister of Labour said, "The withdrawal of the amendment upholds the will of the people."

The workers did not win their major demand for an end to the price increases. But it was their organised strength and their willingness to take action that won important concessions from the government.

### **Government interference in the labour movement**

During the 1970s there were four rival trade union federations in Nigeria. In 1978 the military government banned all the federations and established the NLC. This was an attempt to cut union leaders' dependence on funding from the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the

World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). It was also designed to sever any foreign influence on union matters. Often trade union leaders had no support from workers, and many had become corrupt.

As in most other post-independent African countries, state-appointed labour federations allow governments tight control over union matters. The Nigerian government claimed the right to appoint the president of the NLC. Moreover, the Nigerian government expects the NLC to prevent strikes and promote economic growth. However, the affiliates managed to gain some control over the NLC by forcing the government to recognise their democratically elected officials on the executive.

The old Nigerian labour federations were traditionally affiliated to either the pro-capitalist ICFTU or the pro-Soviet WFTU. But today the NLC is only affiliated to the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU), which aims to promote the building of a continent-wide labour movement.

Despite its support for the coup which led to Babangida becoming president, NLC leaders were subject to police harassment and arrests. Opposition to government proposals have met with harsh repression. When the NLC rallied against the proposed IMF package 16 union leaders, including the NLC president, were detained. The NLC had to resort to court action to ob-

tain the release of its leaders.

### **Split in NLC leadership**

While the working class in Nigeria were facing the onslaught of harsh government economic policies, they were also facing a crisis within the ranks of the NLC. The crisis came to a head on the eve of its official conference.

On the 23 February, one section organised a separate conference attended by 17 of the 42 industrial unions, and elected their own president. This section tried to take over the union building. The split occurred almost exactly ten years after the government imposed the NLC on unions by law.

But their manoeuvre failed, and the federation's old leader, Ali Chiroma, was re-elected president. Chiroma's supporters are considered to be "socialists". The NLC's adoption of a "socialist programme of action" was a possible reason for the split. At the adopting conference held in July 1986, the NLC declared socialism would be the method of overthrowing the military government, and discussed the need for a workers' political party.

No doubt the split has roots in the divisions between the four different federations before the NLC was formed by the government. A further possible cause of the split were corrupt practices such as the inflation of union membership figures.

But whatever the reasons, the

split in the NLC leadership gave the military government the opportunity to implement its harsh economic package.

### **Government forced to recognise workers' strength**

The government-appointed administrator of the NLC has been unable control the militancy and action of the organised working class. The strikers were not able to force the government to withdraw the latest price increases. But forcing the

military government to negotiate wages with the unions is a major victory, granting unions the de facto right to negotiate with the government on matters of economic policies.

Despite the splits in the NLC leadership, the strike wave proved that unions can organise protests which are disciplined and win mass support for their demands. A question which remains is whether the banned NLC leadership will be able to overcome their differences and act on behalf of their members.