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Kenya lecturers' strike paralyzes public universities

Lecturers at public universities across Kenya went on strike on March 1, citing low salaries and back pay owed to them. The action is a renewed effort by the lecturers' unions—the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) and the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists Union (KMPDU)—nearly three months after a strike in December that ended with lecturers receiving non-binding promises from the government to negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement, including increased salaries.

This time the lecturers have vowed to continue the strike until their demands for increased salaries and funding to upgrade facilities are met by the government.

The lecturers have additionally demanded access to other services that are generally available to employees in the public sector, such as car loans and higher quality medical insurance. On the issue of poor wages, the lecturers and other public employees have blamed pervasive government corruption, which allows officials to swipe funds allocated to the public sector.

In announcing the strike, UASU General Secretary Constantine Wasonga stated, “We want salary structures that will do away with distortions that barely make sense. As a professor, I earn less than my students who are KMPDU members.”

The walkout by lecturers has paralyzed public universities across the country, with facilities shuttered and classes suspended. A number of public hospitals and clinics have also been closed, as several hundred medical student interns are participating in the strike.

At the center of the conflict between the lecturers and the Ministry of Education is the previous year's budget, which factored in paltry salary increases for lecturers and professors employed at Kenya's 31 public universities. The other major issue is the Vice Chancellor's Committee's failure to implement the pay increases.

Many public universities have fallen into disrepair and neglect after successive governments slashed funding for the public university system, leaving facilities in desperate need of renovation. The ability of universities to provide quality education has been undermined by obsolete facilities and equipment, together with overworked and underpaid academic staff.

The lack of funding for Kenya's public university system was illustrated in a February 12 letter addressed to Ministry of Education Secretary Amina Mohamed titled "Crisis in Public Universities Due to Underfunding." The letter, signed by numerous academic staff from several public universities, paints a grim picture of a university system on the brink of collapse.

Besides the funding shortfall for renovation of facilities and salaries of current staff, the letter highlights a deficit of 3.5 billion Kenyan shillings (more than \$34 million) in pension benefits owed to retired staff.

For its part, the Kenyatta government has displayed its contempt for academic staff and students alike by refusing to respond or table a counter-offer to lecturers. Officials have made various statements in the media painting striking workers as criminals and blackguarding them for delaying students' education and graduation.

The Kenyan ruling elite sits atop a social powder keg that threatens to erupt into open class struggle. At one end a corrupt elite hoards massive wealth, while at the other end the Kenyan masses struggle to survive.

For their part, the UASU and KMPDU pursue the material interests of the Kenyan elite. These organizations seek to subjugate workers to the authority of the profit system and are neither able nor willing to carry out the necessary fight to unite the entire Kenyan working class against capitalism, which is the root cause of declining wages and social inequality.