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Kenya

A look back at the doctors' strike in Kenya

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Committed to a policy of austerity, the new Kenyan authorities have been forced to sit down at the negotiating table following a social conflict lasting almost two months with medical staff.

The doctors' strike, called by the Kenyan Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists Union (KMPDU) on 15 March, has just ended, following an agreement reached with the Ministry of Health.

Debt versus health

The strikers' demands covered several points. Respect for collective agreements, because the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) signed in 2017 and its 2021 memorandum of understanding have never been applied, working conditions, the assignment of trainee doctors (interns or junior doctors) and the refusal of the reduction in their salaries decided authoritatively by the authorities. However, as Muinde Nthusi, Chairman of the Kenya Medical, Dental and Pharmacy Interns Liaison Committee, points out, these interns represent 70% of the workforce in public establishments.

These demands are part of a wider popular protest movement against the austerity policy that William Ruto, the new president elected in September 2022, is trying to implement.

He was elected on a populist platform and also likes to be noted for his stance in defence of the global South. But the reality of his policies in the country is quite different. To remedy Kenya's indebtedness, Ruto has signed an agreement with the IMF and is applying to the letter its recommendations, which are based on the old recipes of structural adjustment policies.

The argument of a lack of money to justify the policy of social regression against health workers is undermined by the government's choice to repay the interest on a colossal debt of over 65 billion dollars at any cost.

Repressive and corrupt

Before the High Court of Justice in Nairobi ordered the authorities to negotiate, William Ruto's response to the demands of the health workers, apart from contempt by declaring that the workers must learn to live within their means, was repression. Union leader Dr Davji Bhimji Attallah was seriously injured by a bullet to the head fired by the police during a rally. Nearly a hundred doctors have been dismissed. Ruto is no stranger to violence. During demonstrations against his austerity policy, the crackdown resulted in several deaths and hundreds of arrests.

Kenya's anti-corruption commission ranked the Ministry of Health second only to the Ministry of the Interior for its "unethical conduct". One example is the embezzlement of more than \$17 million in the fight against Covid.

The agreement

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Although, according to KMPDU secretary Attallah, “the highly controversial issue of the secondment and remuneration of trainee doctors has still not been resolved”, since the matter is now in the hands of the courts, progress has been made on working and training conditions, the payment of salary arrears resulting from the application of the 2017 CBA and the lifting of all sanctions linked to the dispute.

The results of this strike have a double positive effect, showing that it is possible to force the government to negotiate and that austerity policies are not inevitable if the path of struggle is taken.

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Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Afriques en Lutte](#).

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