

# Nigerian Workers Accuse Government of Dancing To Dictates of IMF

by Goddy Ikeh

Nigerian workers under the aegis of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), a powerful union, have accused the Nigerian government of dancing to the dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and have warned that they will resist any attempt by the government to privatize the country's ailing refineries and raise the prices of petroleum products.

With the exception of the new Port Harcourt refinery, the other three refineries, in Kaduna, Warri, and Port Harcourt, have been malfunctioning, causing the government to import large consignments of petroleum products to augment locally refined products. All four refineries have installed capacity to process 445,000 barrels of petroleum products daily, while 300,000 barrels of crude oil are dedicated for local refining and consumption daily.

The union, which fought the government over the hike in the prices of petroleum products in the oil-rich West African country earlier this year, reacted at a news conference in late November to recent comments attributed to Nigerian Vice President Atiku Abubakar, while he was in Brazil, that Nigeria's refineries would be sold to interested buyers in order to allow the downstream sector of the Nigerian oil industry to operate competitively.

NLC Deputy President Lucas Damulack told a news conference in Lagos that the Congress would mobilize workers and other Nigerians against the plan to privatize the refineries, as it did last June when it called out workers for a nationwide strike that crippled the country's economy for about four days, to protest a hike in fuel prices.

Damulack, who accused the government of dancing to IMF dictates in its bid to secure a \$1 billion standby loan, said that Nigerians could not watch "economic vampires" take over the petroleum sector, which is the nerve center of the Nigerian economy. He said that the plans to privatize the refineries were the continuation of the economic deprivation of Nigerians by "a clique of the ruling elite whose main characteristics in the last 40 years of our nation's independence have been to collude and conspire with foreign interests to bleed our country white through massive and shameless looting of the people's collective wealth." Additionally, the objection of the Labour Congress to the proposed privatization of the refineries and fuel hike coincided with the disclosure by



*Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo's privatization of oil refineries is drawing fire from organized labor.*

President Olusegun Obasanjo of the government's decision to evolve a comprehensive policy to guide the establishment of private refineries.

## Higher Fuel Prices

Vice President Abubakar said during his trip to Brazil that the privatization of Nigerian refineries would only succeed when the pump price of petrol had been revised upwards. Abubakar explained that if the pump price were not increased, investors would find it difficult to buy up the refineries in the country. And, justifying the proposed privatization, he said that the motive behind every business was to make profit, and that if investors would be operating the refineries at a loss, they would not be interested. He explained that the current, lower price was because of a government subsidy, and that it would be a different ball game if the facility were removed and the refineries handed over to private concerns. He also claimed that another advantage of privatizing refineries, was that it would be an end to the vandalism of pipelines in the country, which had contributed to fuel scarcity.

According to the NLC official, the determination of the government to privatize the refineries is an indication that it has already succumbed to the IMF's pressure, so that it can receive the IMF standby loan facility.

"We find this capitulation to the dictates of the IMF a betrayal of the Nigerian people. It is totally unjust and therefore unacceptable to workers and the Nigerian people," Damulack said. He added that Nigerians had waited patiently for the repairs of these refineries and the completion of the turnaround maintenance, for which millions of dollars had been committed to end the perennial scarcity of fuel in the country.