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By Stephan McCoy
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Zimbabwe nurses strike as economic crisis brings threat of second coup and military dictatorship

Nurses in Zimbabwe have gone on strike for the second time this year, over poverty wages and the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE).

They are being forced to take pay as low as ZW\$3,000 (US\$59) per month. This is while inflation of 786 percent forces the price of basics—which are now scarce—to skyrocket, as fears of the hyperinflation of a decade ago continue to grow.

The ZANU-PF government promised a US\$75 allowance and salary increment of 50 percent to head off strike action by the nurses but has not given them even this abysmal increase. The nurses unions rejected the deal as inadequate. Speaking to *fin24*, a nurse said that they had “not yet received the announced package.”

A top civil servant speaking to *News Day* said, “The position of the civil servants is very clear, government is collecting taxes in US dollars, they collect duties in US dollars, but they don’t want to pay workers in the same.”

The Zimbabwe Nurses Association (Zina), which represents 15,000 nurses, has responded to members’ discontent and anger by attempting to negotiate with the government and shutting down the strike. Last year, Zina President Enock Dongo attempted to posture as being on the side of the nurses, but proclaimed that there was a “need to give the president a chance”—after the union had called off a strike by nurses the day before it was set to happen. Earlier, Dongo attempted to pit doctors against nurses during the doctors’ strike, stating, “Nurses were at work suffering without resources. Those who were abandoning

patients, going on strike... [are] smiling.” Nurses and doctors rejected this attempt to divide them, with both groups of workers striking on June 19.

ZANU-PF youth and the Zimbabwean secret service sought to intimidate nurses at St. Alberts Mission Hospital, Mt. Darwin, after they had informed district medical officer Kelvin Mupunga of their intentions to strike. At least 15 nurses at Victoria Chitepo Hospital were arrested.

Nurses infected by the coronavirus have been abandoned by the government in dilapidated and underfunded quarantine centres. As many as 197 health care workers have been infected and placed in quarantine. Many quarantine centres do not provide food or basic hygiene services. After outrage at these conditions started to surface, the government allowed for lodges and hotels to be used as quarantine areas. The change of venue, however, means nurses are forced to pay for the cost of living in this better accommodation. The dire situation they face is made even worse as skeleton crews left behind during the strike to attend to the sick are becoming infected with COVID-19. At United Bulawayo Hospitals, 68 nurses tested positive for the coronavirus in one day.

The government attempted to undermine the strike by nurses and doctors by hiring more nurses. However, many of the new nurses refuse to work because of low pay and the fear of catching the coronavirus. One male nurse told *Times Live*, “I was assigned to a COVID-19 centre. I won’t go because my contract stipulates that I have three months to report for duty. This is like being deployed to the war front after training and above all there’s no money.”

As of July 3, Zimbabwe had recorded 617 confirmed coronavirus cases and seven deaths and performed only 65,000 tests. Norman Matara, of the Zimbabwe Association of Human Rights Doctors, warned of an inevitable surge in cases, saying, “Previously there was a period that we went through for almost one week without reporting a single case of COVID-19, but that did not mean we were out of the woods yet. With cases of COVID-19 continuing to increase in neighbouring South Africa—and we have people returning home from that country—we should always remain on high alert. It is definitely not time to relax.” The Health Ministry added, “Fourteen cases tested positive for COVID-19 today (Wednesday). These include a returnee from South Africa and 13 local cases who are isolated.”

The Zimbabwean economy is crumbling and facing collapse. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) prediction that the economy is set to contract by 10 percent means that

industry will require at least US\$1 billion to be “rescued.” The Zimbabwean dollar has collapsed in value against the dollar, trading at US\$1 to ZW\$83. The haemorrhaging of the national currency is such that the ZW\$18 billion economic recovery package (valued at US\$720 million when the bank rate was US\$1 to ZW\$25) has shrunk in half. This meant that by May, when the package was announced, it was only worth \$US430 million “at parallel market rates” and is now worth only US\$225 million.

Two of the highest denominational notes are unable to buy a loaf of bread valued at ZW\$50. According to Bloomberg , the country has US\$8 billion in foreign debt. Appeals by Finance Minister Mtuli Ncube to the IMF for US\$200 million has only brought US\$21 million.

As the dire economic situation worsens, Emmerson Mnangagwa’s government is preparing to confront mounting opposition in the working class through dictatorial forms of rule and the abrogation of democratic rights—even as it is being threatened by the possibility of a coup.

In an unprecedented development following rumours of a coup plot, several generals were forced to call a press conference to say they were not plotting Mnangagwa’s overthrow. Home Affairs Minister Kazembe Kazembe declared, “There is no coup in the making.” However, as the economic crisis intensifies, the impatience of the top military command with Mnangagwa means that such a possibility is not ruled out.

According to Bloomberg , the shutdown of the stock market on June 26 was carried out not by Mnangagwa but by the Joint Operations Command (JOC). It reported, “The JOC includes officials from the military, police and secret service and is the highest body in terms of coordinating state security, though it doesn’t usually pronounce on economic matters.”

The JOC sidelined the country’s top economic leaders to institute the shutdown. Ringisai Chikohomero, an analyst at the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies, said, “It could be a preemptive move, it could be the generals saying we are in charge. [The military] are the guarantors of the regime: They have a clear stake and key interests.”

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