

Imo protest: One feared dead, others injured, Ajaero brutalised

OWERRI—One person was feared killed and many others injured yesterday as the President of Nigeria Labour Congress, NLC, Joe Ajaero, was abducted by security agents at the ongoing Organised Labour protest in Owerri, the Imo State capital.

This is as thugs descended on Labour leaders and other protesters, smashing vehicles, inflicting injuries and dispossessing handsets, money, ATM cards among other valuables from labour leaders and others that had gathered at the NLC State secretariat to begin the scheduled protest over pending labour issues.

The NLC President, other national leaders of NLC and their Trade Union Congress of Nigeria, TUC, counterpart, were at the State Secretariat in Owerri to begin the planned protest ahead of strike today (Thursday) over backlog of unpaid salaries and allowances among others perceived sins of Imo State government against workers in the State.

Among alleged sins of the Imo State government include refusal to implement previous agreements, outstanding salary arrears, unjust declaration of workers as ghost workers, destruction of NLC state secretariat, implementation of discriminatory pay and unpaid gratuity arrears.

Others are non-compliance with National Minimum Wage, intimidation and harassment of trade union leaders, use of violence and thuggery, misappropriation of union dues, declaration of pensioners as ghosts, systematic harassment and intimidation of workforce, resistance to social dialogue and collective bargaining, interference with workers' democratic processes.

Trouble started at about 8 am when workers were trooping into the state Secretariat of the NLC for the protest, when suddenly thugs in about 10 mini-buses armed with dangerous weapons stormed the Secretariat and attacked labour leaders, workers and chased them away.

It was a rowdy sight as union leaders and Journalists scampered for safety.

However, the workers reassembled at the Secretariat but this time led by the NLC president and General Secretary, Emma Ugboaja to commence the protest.

It was gathered that as Ajaero was about to address the gathering, a team of armed Policemen and hooded men in trucks stormed the venue and arrested him alongside some labour leaders and some journalists, shooting sporadically.

An unconfirmed report said a yet-to-be-identified unionist was killed while the TVC camera man was arrested and his camera smashed.

Already the TVC reporter and others who also sustained injuries went into hiding for fear of further attacks.

Speaking, NLC's Head of Information and Publicity, Benson Upah had earlier informed of Ajaero's arrest by the Police led by the Commissioner of Police.

He said: "The NLC President was abducted by Policemen armed to their teeth at the Imo state NLC secretariat on Wednesday as we are about to commence our lawful protest against the violation of trade Union rights of the workers."

Also while giving account of

- Labour alleges attempted assassination
- Thugs unleash mayhem on Labour leaders, other protesters
- CP led attack, Labour alleges
- We've no hand in Ajaero's arrest —Govt



• The brutalized NLC President, Ajaero (middle), flanked by other Labour officials, after his ordeal.

the incident, NLC's Assistant General Secretary and Chief of Staff to the NLC president, Chris Onyeka said he was standing with Ajaero when he was brutalized and arrested.

"As workers were gathering to protest their maltreatment by the state government in Owerri, Imo State and the President of NLC was about to address the workers, the Police came amidst attacks by thugs to arrest Ajaero."

"Thugs first attacked and dragged Ajaero from the platform before Police came to arrest him along with another senior official of the NLC."

Speaking to Vanguard, NLC's General Secretary, Emma Ugboaja, alleged that the State Commissioner of Police led the attack under the instructions of the state government.

He claimed that the government had mobilized "his thugs" as early as 6 am and took over the area, noting "when they (thugs) saw the (NLC) President, the CP led the thugs into the place."

"There were about five naval personnel on duty. The Police arrested and brutalized the President and took him to their Tiger base and nobody has sighted him."

Brutalized Ajaero rushed to FMC Owerri

However, Vanguard gathered, at the time of this report that Ajaero had been released and hospitalized as he was brutally brutalized by the police.

Confirming his release, NLC's Information officer, Benson Upah, described what happened to Ajaero as an act of abduction that degenerated into attempted murder.

He said that "contact has been made with Congress President, Comrade Joe Ajaero this evening around 15:30 hours at the Police Hospital in Owerri from where he was taken to

Federal Medical Centre, Owerri, where he is receiving medical attention.

"He was thoroughly brutalized, his right eye at the time of contact was completely shut. Ajaero, who spoke little, stated that immediately after his arrest, he was beaten up and blind-folded and taken to an unknown destination where more brutalisation took place, sometimes with bottles. His phones, money and other personal effects were taken from him and have not been returned to him."

Vanguard gathered, last night, that Ajaero, who has been on a neck collar with weals all over his skin, had been "referred for ophthalmic investigation, a head/brain scan, a full body scan, and cervical spine therapy, among other investigations."

NUPENG threatens nationwide strike

The Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers, NUPENG, has put its members on alert for a nationwide strike over the attack and brutalization of Nigeria Labour Congress, NLC, President, Joe Ajaero and other labour leaders by perceived agents of the Imo State government.

Speaking on the development, NUPENG's President, Prince Williams Akporeha, said "We condemn with the strongest term the arrest and brutalization of Congress President, Comrade Joe Ajaero and other labour leaders by the agents of Imo State Government. We reject the act of violence and barbarism being unleashed on labour leaders, workers and others by Hope Uzodimma and his government. We cannot accept this uncivilised behaviour in a democracy."

"We have put our members across the country on alert for a nationwide strike if Uzodimma continues with this uncivilized, uncultured and barbaric attacks and brutalization of labour leaders and workers of the state. The workers of Imo State must be freed. We are determined to free the state workers because injury to one is injury to all."

Maritime workers kick

Condemning the brutalization of NLC President and others, the Maritime Workers' Union of Nigeria, MWUN, said two of its national officials were among those injured, saying "two national officers of MWUN: Abubakar Bello (Vice President-General), and Abudu Eroje (Deputy Secretary General) were brutally attacked, sustaining grave injuries and losing valuables such as their phones, money and important documents."

In a statement, President of MWUN, Prince Adewale Adeyanju, among others, said "we strongly condemn the violent attack on the national officers of MWUN by hoodlums and miscreants at the premises of the state secretariat of the NLC Imo State chapter where they sustained grievous bodily harm and loss of their personal property including money, and phones."

MWUN also condemns the arbitrary arrest and illegal detention of the President of NLC, Comrade Joe Ajaero by Imo State Police Command. This abuse of power is unwarranted, illegal and downright inimical to the foundational tenets of democracy and its attendant civil liberties.

It is pertinent to note that the call for a mass demonstration in Owerri by the NLC is as legitimate as it is necessary to liberate the ordinary citizens of the state who are under the bondage of the state government. As at the time of this press release, the two MWUN these officials are still in intensive care."

JAF fumes

Similarly, the pro-labour civil society groups, the Joint Action Front, JAF, condemned the arrest of Ajaero and the alleged terror unleashed on workers and journalists by the police and thugs at the behest of Imo State Governor Hope Uzodimma.

Secretary of JAF, Abiodun Aremu, in a statement lamented that Ajaero was not just arrested but was also physically assaulted before being taken into custody.

"We consider the arrest of the NLC President and the repression of the protest as a brazen affront on the labour movement. We strongly hold that there must be a response with the full force of the labour

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movement. We strongly hold that there must be a response with the full force of the labour movement.

"We therefore propose a one-day general strike and nationwide protest to register a strong statement against the arrest of Ajaero, tck of democratic rights and inhuman treatment of workers in Imo State. Even if the NLC President is released, we propose that the strike should still be held.

"The strike must also be in solidarity with the demands of Imo workers and to put on the front burner the objection and rejection of the anti poor capitalist policies of Bola Tinubu government which are responsible for the serious socio-economic hardship being currently faced by the vast majority of Nigerians."

Police economical with truth —Falana

Human rights lawyer, Femi Falana, SAN, has picked hole in the Police version of the abduction and brutalisation of

Ajaero, saying: "The police version of the brutalisation of the NLC President, Comrade Joe Ajaero is full of loopholes."

The State Police Command had earlier claimed its men were not responsible for the arrest and brutalisation of Ajaero

Faulting the Police claims, Falana said "As soon as Comrade Ajaero showed up at the venue of the rally, he was surrounded by a team of police personnel led by the Commissioner of Police of Imo State. Why did the police allow Comrade Ajaero to be brutalised by the so called miscreants? In other words, why did the police not protect him from the violent attack?

By the way, why did the police officers not arrest the miscreants who brutalised the NLC President in their presence?

So the police who witnessed the attack without making any arrest suddenly turned round to take the victim to the police clinic. The members of the public who decried the barbaric attack took pictures which have exposed the misleading version of the police.

It is disturbing that the police justified the action of the so called

miscreants by saying that Comrade Ajaero has disobeyed the order of a court. Why did the police not allow the court to purge Comrade Ajero of contempt of court?

Count us out of Ajaero's arrest —Police

Reacting, the Imo State Police Command said its men were not involved in the arrest of the President of NLC.

The Police Public Relations Officer, PPRO, Henry Okoye, who stated this while commenting on the arrest of Ajaero by security said: "The Imo State Police Command wishes to clarify some sketchy reports alleging the arrest of the President of the Nigeria Labour Congress, Comrade Joe Ajaero, in Owerri. It is pertinent to state that the NLC President was in Owerri as part of arrangements of the Congress to mobilize workers for a mega protest rally in the state.

"In the course of their planning, it was reported that suggestions arose for the

lockdown of some essential facilities particularly the airport which led to some workers and other individuals resisting the picketing process leading to scuffles and heated arguments and an eventual attack on the person of the president by a mob.

"Upon receiving this report, the Imo Police Command swiftly deployed police operatives to the scene where the Officer in Charge exercised his operational discretion by taking the NLC President into protective custody at the State Command Headquarters to ensure the protection of his life and that he was not lynched in the scuffle that followed. The Commissioner of Police thereafter directed that he should be taken to the Police Medical Services, Owerri, where he would be accorded medical attention as a result of the attack. He has therefore been accorded adequate security cover to proceed on his other legitimate

engagements for the day."

We 've no hand in Ajaero's arrest —Imogovt

Reacting, Imo State government washed its hands off the arrest of Ajaero.

Commissioner for Information and Strategy, Declan Emelumba, said those accusing the government of arresting the NLC president were perennial mischief makers always crying wolf where there was none. "The Commissioner recalled that the purported strike in the state had been stopped by the National Industrial Court, NIC, in Owerri, which makes the planned action illegal, noting that in compliance with the Court order, the Imo State chapter of NLC announced that it was pulling out of the strike.

He wondered what Ajaero was doing in Owerri in defiance of the order of the court, which warned of severe consequences against disobedience.

58 OAU students released from EFCC custody