

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

'No to State Violence! Reimagining Policing

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guests: Francisco Maltés, president, Unitary Workers Center (CUT) in Colombia

Gbenga, general secretary and founder of the Federation of Informal Workers' Organizations of Nigeria

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hello, sisters and brothers, and welcome to the Solidarity Center Podcast. An interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shawna Bader-Blau. I'm also the Executive Director of the Solidarity Center in Washington, D.C. We're the largest U.S.-based international worker rights organization. We empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, for justice in their communities, for greater equality in the global economy. And for one, just future.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Today, we're taking a look at the police violence, part of a rising tide of global crackdowns targeting marginalized and impoverished communities, workers, and young people struggling to support themselves. This repression has escalated during Covid-19 as authoritarian minded governments take advantage of national lockdowns to silence legitimate social and labor movements, movements that have been addressing issues of inequality that existed long before the pandemic. These countries have seen continued protest and ongoing resistance. Here in the United States, inspired and led by the Black Lives Matter movement, workers and citizens alike are protesting police brutality and demanding new levels of accountability and reform for the agencies that have ostensibly been created to protect and serve their communities. We wanted to check in with a couple of our recent guests, who we know have themselves experienced extraordinary police repression to hear how they are saying no to state violence against their communities and in doing so reimagining policing.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

First, we dive into the situation in Nigeria, where in October 2020, young people across the country took to the streets calling for the government to disband an abusive police unit known as The Special Anti-Robbery Squad or SARS. The #EndSARS protest movement took off after a video was circulated that showed a young man shot by police and abandoned by the side of the road. Protest against this abuse and the decades-long police brutality that preceded it built up over the following weeks. The police responded by beating and killing those who peacefully demonstrated for their democratic rights to safe public space and fair treatment under the law. When the government disbanded SARS, the inquiry panels, they set up to investigate the decades of abuse by SARS officials were also inexplicably discontinued at the same time.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Yet, when people came out to mark the one-year anniversary of the protest in October, police threatened to arrest anyone who took part, and reports show continuing incidents of police brutality. Through The Federation of Informal Workers Organization of Nigeria, or FIWON, market vendors, and other workers in the informal economy are on the front lines of the struggle for justice, and to end violence. Together with young people, they are the movement behind the #EndSARS campaign, looking for a more just future. For details on the EndSARS campaign and the Nigerian government's response to it. Let's hear from Gbenga, Founder and Director of the Federation of Informal Workers Organization of Nigeria. We first spoke to brother Gbenga about informal employment in Nigeria in episode 10 of the podcast, and will link to that conversation in the show notes. Brother Gbenga, is an amazing leader. I really encourage you to listen to this show. He talks about working with some of the poorest and most

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disenfranchised people in his country to build power, voice and exercise their rights in a democracy to make real changes that affect real people's lives. And it's incredibly inspiring.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Brother Gbenga, we're interested in exploring more about the popular youth movement around EndSARS, in Nigeria. We've been looking over the last year in the COVID crisis, where there has been really in a lot of countries an epidemic of police brutality in many parts of the world. We think in the United States, after the murder of George Floyd, and the re-emergent national movement against racist police violence in the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement. We also know that in Nigeria, the EndSARS movement has similarly catalyzed, a lot of people across the country to demand fairness on the street. Can you tell us a little bit about the protests in Nigeria last year against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, SARS?

Gbenga:

Yes. Well, the SARS has been there for over a decade, ostensibly set up to tackle high level crime, especially armed robbery and kidnapping, ostensibly they report directly to the big man of the police force, the inspector general of police. They are kind of hidden, they operate even above the local police authorities in the states and the local communities. So they kind of ride roughshod over states and local communities. At first, they were apparently effective in actually addressing issues around violent crime, especially kidnapping and armed robbery that later progressively degenerated into a rogue police unit responsible for actually robbing their victims.

Gbenga:

Politicians, soldiers, use them to muscle in political opponents, but at more basic levels, I think the condition started to become intolerable when they started targeting young people. And it's interesting, the kind of young people they target. They actually target middle-class kids. Now we have different kind of police units. We also have some of police unions like we discussed earlier that target poor working people in the informal sector, like the traffic police, the environmental task forces and so on and so forth. Interestingly, those ones have defined some way of going about the daily routine of extortion and so forth. But this high level rogue police unit targets middle-class kids, and actually make very big demands in terms of monies for young people that fall victims of their operations. So they extort monies from these kids. And if you can't pay, we've had report of so many young people that were killed extra-judicially, tortured.

Gbenga:

We also have strange cases of substituting criminals, I mean real criminals that were arrested. They are arresting innocent people and they arrest them and put them in place of the real criminal. They take money from the criminal, release and have the innocent kid answer for the crimes he or she did not commit. So, these are some of the atrocities, this police unit became very notorious for. And so it was not surprising that the protests led to the EndSARS movement, was actually started by a few middle class kids who decided to camp in the front of the legal constituent assembly to demand some kind of reform of the police units and to also demand accountability in their operations. But I think it'll be incorrect to just assume that these young people came from nowhere and did what they did. I think activities at other levels actually emboldened them and gave them the courage to start what they did.

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Specifically from 2019, when the revolutionary movement was launched, every other day we've had protests around issues not only about police brutality, issues centering on corruption, about nepotism and growing insecurity in the country.

Gbenga:

So the revolutionary movement have been coming out. The first one was on August 5, 2019, then October 1, 2019, and again, we had on August 5, 2020. Now August 5, 2020, was significant in the sense that we were just coming out of the COVID-19 lockdowns. And there was a lot of hunger and anger. So the August 5, 2020, protest was unusual in terms of public response to it. Then by September 2020, there were actually serious agitations by rank-and-file workers to have the Nigerian Labor Congress declare a national strike over the incessant increases in the price of petroleum products, the increase in the value added tax, the increase in electricity tariff. Workers were actually coming out to pressure the Labor bureaucracy to do something. And of course, the NLC declared the strike that was to happen on September 28, which they later called off.

Gbenga:

So by October 1, when the revolution movement declared it's own mass protest, it was seen as the outlets that everybody was waiting for. So, the October 1 protest was actually very massive. It happened in over 30 states of the country. And despite extreme police intimidation, people came out on October 1, to have that protest. But interestingly, while close to 50 people were detained in the aftermath of October 1 protest, so while I was still trying to get people out of police detention and all of that, these young people came October 10 to come before the Lagos State House of Assembly and the immediate spark for that was an incident, that happened in a small town in the Niger Delta, where a member of this rural police unit actually stopped a young man driving a posh car.

Gbenga:

Of course the town's people, young people driving posh cars, big cars, expensive cars, or wearing expensive clothings, or that are dressed in an expensive manner and so on and so forth. So this young chap was in the car and he was stopped by the police, the SARS guy. And I think he didn't stop in time, so he opened fire on him. Somebody else was streaming that live on Twitter.

Gbenga:

And it was like, oh, these people have come again. See how he has killed this young chap blah, blah, blah. So that went viral, it was later discovered that the guy didn't die anyway. But the story was already out that the guy had been murdered and that actually was immediate spark that led to these other guys that came out in Legos, camping before the Lagos State House Of Assembly, actually sleeping overnight, which was a new twist to protest in Nigeria. They refused to leave, so they were sleeping over. And so later on, when we got to know what was happening, we felt we should lend support to what they were doing because we were all affected anyway. And so more and more people joined.

Gbenga:

And so the protest became increasingly escalated and quite massive. So from October 3 to October 10, the protest was on and got increasingly bigger and bigger and more and more intense and more and

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more politicized. The demands started to increase beyond scrapping of the police unit, SARS. People started to raise issues about the humongous opinion, it would interest you to know that a Nigerian senator earns much more than the American president. So there were issues around the rulers were a lot into themselves while other most Nigerians were solving and so on, so forth.

Gbenga:

So the government at some point got very jittery. And so on October 10, they decided to move out the army, the police absolutely [inaudible 00:16:22] actually suppressing the protest. They tried other methods they have been using in the past, such as using [weapon]. They brought their [weapons] to beat up protestors. That didn't work because the number of protestors was so massive that no number of talk could overwhelm that. They use every other method in the books, it didn't work. And so they decided to bring out the army on the night of October 10, and then we had the shootings and killings. And so the protests became drowned in blood. That also ignited what I would call the second phase of the protest, because now we had people at Lekki Toll Gate, people with absolutely no stake in the system, homeless people and all of that coming out en masse and targeting police stations. In Lagos State around 20 police stations were bombed. Courts were also bombed. And it's interesting that these guys were targeting these institutions that represent pillars of oppression for them, so they were targeting police stations. They were targeting the homes of politicians. Interestingly, they were also targeting warehouses, where COVID-19 relief materials donated by corporations and foreign organizations was stored by politicians.

Gbenga:

And that further inflamed passions, because we started seeing video recordings of a massive amount of food that were already spoiled. So it was inconceivable that why people were starving. This people are actually inhuman enough to keep that amount of food away from the people. We had situations where some politicians actually rebranded, donated food packages with their pictures. They wanted to use the rebranded food packages for political campaigns. So we had situations where enormous amount of money, materials, for instance, we had a situation where about 300 motorcycles were discovered at the home of a politician. So all of these of course were going by around social media, further gravitating anger, and some more people were coming out. And so the killings continued because the government felt exposed, blackmailed, thoroughly discredited, and they felt the only way they could maintain all their power was just to suppress the movement by force. So people talk a lot about October 10, but actually more people were killed after October 10, especially when the protests also became more violent, and police stations were getting targeted.

Gbenga:

So eventually, the protests were subdued by force. And we've had this uneasy quiet since October 2020. For us in the mass democratic movement, we see it as both as a challenge and also as an opportunity to actually deepen our work among working people and also to reiterate because people also gained more confidence from what the top politicians were demystified and exposed as cheap thieves and so the task now is actually to get people organized around the commonality of interest that unite everybody around livelihoods, around the need for security, the need for accountable governance. Because the other emergency scenario is the tendency toward ethnic religious mobilization. Increasingly we're also having people interpreting the crisis in terms of religious, ethnic differences. So they play off that and insist that

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the only way out is for the country to be divided along ethnic or religious lines. We feel that it's extremely dangerous.

Gbenga:

That takes away attention from the real issues. Because it means that the criminal politicians in all of this of this got across or the ethnicities or the religions that might be professed by these politicians it's got across. So we cannot reduce this crisis to such primordial sentiments, but those are sentiments that are also very quick to draw attention and to also achieve faster responses in terms of mobilization. So we are kind of caught in the middle. We have to fight an increasingly corrupt, extremely nepotistic government and of course the nepotism of the [inaudible 00:23:34] government and is obvious and dependency for the [inaudible 00:23:44] government to put the interest similarly of the full ID of the ethnic group, above every other interests to deepen the ethnic religious divide. So it makes our world very difficult. We have to argue with people to see this issue in a broader perspective of a privileged view that wants to maintain their old and the larger interest of all of us our religion or ethnicity.

Gbenga:

So, increasingly for us the challenge is to pass on that message to build a movement that will be above those sentiments because we fear that if we allow those sentiments to overrule the other major basic issues, then we may be ending for [inaudible 00:25:01] crisis because religions and ethnic war are actually more difficult and more blood to handle. So, that's where we are now to actually refocus popular attention to the fundamental social economic contradictions, to get everybody on board to rather than... We have also discovered some of these police are so responsible actually for sponsoring these religious agitations. So, they have enormous resources to mobilize very angry people to come out on these religious agitation, some mobilizations, whereas we don't have those kind of resources to work with, to actually organize our people in the neighborhoods. Particularly, it's becoming increasingly important for us to be able to organize and enable defense communities, to be able to defend themselves against the so-called [inaudible 00:26:12] and other criminal gangs that are actually playing on people, especially in the rural communities and making work impossible in rural communities.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I like what you said before about an opportunity for the grassroots democracy movement. The livelihoods, security, accountable governance, I'm quoting you, equity for everyone across difference, not letting corrupt politicians, self-interested leaders divide people by religion or ethnicity. And keeping focused on this kind of, what sounds like a pretty intense coalition of demonstrators out on the street fighting for these things. Everyone from middle-class kids to homeless population can be united around a vision of democracy that is inclusive of all and leads to accountable governance that the people of Nigeria and all people deserve. And I just really want to thank you again, brother Gbenga, for illuminating us on the EndSARS movement and the deeper importance of that movement for the future of Nigeria. It's also very important story, I'm glad we can share with our listeners. Thank you so much again, brother Gbenga.

Gbenga:

The pleasure is mine. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

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Shawna Bader-Blau:

Gbenga just painted an amazing picture of how workers and the most marginalized communities across Nigeria are taking back their communities by joining together, organizing together, standing up to injustice. They are opposing decades of widespread systemic corruption that feeds off unbridled and multiple sources of state sponsored violence. And Gbenga, also demonstrated so clearly how police violence embodied in the Nigerian Special Anti-Robbery Squad, is a manifestation of the economic and social inequality and a lack of justice and fairness that too many people across Nigeria experience every day. In Nigeria, #EndSARS is not only a call to stop police violence. It's a call for fairness and social justice.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hi there. It's Shawna again. I just wanted to take a minute to invite you to check out RadioLabour, the international labor movement's radio service. RadioLabour produces daily newscasts about union events and issues. And it also produces special programs to support labor campaigns around the world. Check out RadioLabour @radiolabour.net and find out more about worker rights struggles around the world and how the movement is supporting their efforts for decent wages, fair treatment, and strong communities. Follow and subscribe @radiolabor.net

Shawna Bader-Blau:

When we spoke this past summer with Francisco Maltés, he told us how huge, months-long nationwide protests earlier this year succeeded in preserving public health care and halting government moves to give wealthy corporations and rich individuals big tax breaks while raising taxes on working people. These protests continued despite widespread state violence that was often directed against workers, women, and Black and Indigenous communities. As Francisco tells us, state violence against the most marginalized, it's been happening for a long time. So when a diverse coalition stood up to a government that was serving the wealthy at the expense of everyone else and were met with extraordinary violence from the security forces. The Unitary Worker Center, or CUT as it's known in Columbia, worked through the National Strike Committee to demand real reforms in policing. Brother Francisco, can you give us a brief summary of how police violence has been directed specifically at marginalized communities in Columbia? Black communities and mixed race communities in particular have seen an enormous amount of police violence and brutality. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Francisco Maltés:

Justice and police activity in Columbia can be characterized as being directed at poor people. There are hundreds of cases of embezzlement among government organizations or agencies that are not investigated, or when they are, people receive a slap on the wrist. Recently, an influencer damaged some public property that was of little importance and was sentenced to six years in prison, while there are people who steal billions of pesos and nothing is done with them. Likewise, in terms of the police people or the police who shot at young people at peaceful protestors are not being investigated and who the police do act against are rural agricultural workers, Indigenous people, people in the LGBTQ community, peaceful protestors. And so we say that justice and repression in Columbia have a common goal, which is to bother people who are struggling while nothing happens to people who are doing well.

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And so what does police reform look like to you? Given what you've just described, like brutality directed at poor people in a country over many years with total impunity, what would you like to see from a reform of the police?

Francisco Maltés:

The National Strike Committee has proposed a bill for reforming the national police force. The first part of this is proposed to have the national police removed from operating under the Defense Ministry to being under a Civil Ministry. The second point is to change the national police's militaristic orientation to be civilian focused. The third point is to establish measures as to who can become a police person to put in place a rigorous selection process, to ensure that the best people join the police force. The fourth is to carry out a civilian audit to investigate and sanction police so that the police don't continue to, for lack of a better word self-police or investigate themselves. This would be an outside body that would carry out this audit to investigate and sanction the members of the police who had committed violations, and the sanctions would be strict. So that, what is happening currently would not continue to happen. That is our proposed bill, as far as reforming the national police.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Thank you so much. I really appreciate it. Thank you for your time. Thank you for your leadership.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Francisco and Gbenga described the horrific instances of police violence against social change movements. And they made the point that widespread police violence doesn't happen in a vacuum. It goes hand-in-hand with social and economic inequality and state sponsored repression of democratic freedoms. But, in Nigeria and in Columbia, with organizations like FIWON and CUT, people are standing up to this repression that is targeting democratic rights and freedoms. These organizations are offering specific multi-point plans to address police reforms to their governments and proposing alternative solutions that address inequalities, disenfranchisement and put people's needs first. Thanks to Gbenga and Francisco for spending time with us again, to share how people are taking back their communities and saying 'No' to police violence and to government policies that benefit the rich at the expense of everyone else.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

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A special thanks to the staff of the Solidarity Center, who assisted with this podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world, we work to ensure a righteous future for workers, dignity, freedom, equality, and justice.

For the Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.