Kenyan doctors have been on strike for over two months now. They have made several demands including: better remuneration, availability of more doctors in public hospitals, better equipment and availability of drugs in these facilities, and more allocation of funds to health research. They are, in essence, demanding for better healthcare for all citizens of the Kenyan state.

The doctors’ demands have been spurned by government, and the media to some extent, in what is part of a wider effort to portray the doctors as individuals who are greedy beyond imagination. The negotiation process has been long and tortuous, with the government side not keen on implementing a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) it signed with the doctors in 2013. Private healthcare providers on the other hand stealthily lie like vultures – waiting for the public healthcare system to implode so they can expand their ‘investments’ in Kenya, a country that’s been described as ‘a lucrative market for private healthcare service provision’. One can almost imagine that this is part of a wider scheme to privatize the Kenyan healthcare system, a move which would drive the cost of treatment beyond reach of the majority.

On the 13 February 2017, the labour court sentenced officials of the Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentists Union (KMPDU) to a month in jail for refusing to call off their strike. For standing up for the truth. For refusing to bow down to a local colonialist class. They were released two days later after the Court of Appeal ruled that they should resume negotiations.

The wheeler-dealers and fat cats who recently stole billions of Kenya shillings through the Ministry of Health’s bungled procurement of mobile clinics are, meanwhile, sitting pretty and enjoying their freedom. The state is using the police force to intimidate striking doctors - notwithstanding the fact that the police are also victims of an inefficient public healthcare system. Kenyans are busy lamenting on social media, but taking no real action to demand for better healthcare.

The current health crisis would long have been solved if it had a procurement angle to it, and it presented an opportunity for wheeler-dealers to get their cut from a dysfunctional government procurement system that they are able to easily manipulate. It would have long been solved if it was our politicians demanding for higher pay - like in 2013 when they arm-twisted the Salaries and Remuneration Commission into awarding them higher perks. But there is no urgency in solving this crisis because it’s only a crisis for the hoi polloi, whose lives are considered expendable.

The health crisis is a class struggle

In his book Facing Mt. Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta writes, “When the missionaries arrived, the Afrikans had the land and the missionaries had the bible. They taught us how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the bible.” There was an almost similar
occurrence in 1963 when Kenya attained her ‘independence’. We were given a flag, but got no real social, political and economic independence. By the time we were done celebrating this ‘independence’, a local proxy black elite had control of the land and resources, and we had nothing.

This is a country with millions of disenfranchised citizens: a youthful population with very limited access to opportunities for self-advancement, women oppressed beyond comprehension, and activists intimidated into submission. This is not what the country the Mau Mau fought to liberate from the colonialists.

The current Kenyan state operates on a philosophy of beg, borrow, and steal. This involves unsustainable borrowing, followed by a swift action-plan of wanton plunder of public resources. It’s high time the government made an admission: that it has failed in its mandate as stipulated under Article 43(1) of the Constitution of Kenya (2010), which guarantees all Kenyans access to the highest attainable standard of health - which includes the right to health care services, including reproductive health care. Access to healthcare means there must be a solution to the perennial issue of understaffed healthcare facilities, having well remunerated and motivated doctors, and an adequate supply of equipment and drugs in our public healthcare facilities.

A section of our political class has been terming the doctors’ demands as unrealistic and motivated by greed. But this political class has no moral authority to claim our doctors are greedy, for Kenyan Members of Parliament are among the highest paid legislators in the world. Their lavish lifestyles are supported by an overtaxed citizenry. The doctors are asking for what is rightfully theirs, and ours: a share of our taxes.

Kenya was ranked 145 out of 176 in Transparency International’s corruption perception index in 2016. We can no longer stand by and watch as up to a third of the Kenyan budget is lost to corruption, and disappears into the pockets of a select few. We can no longer stand by and watch the state audaciously claim it cannot pay our doctors. We just cannot afford to be spectators in such a matter of life and death.

Kenya is a country where poverty and suffering have been normalised, if not romanticized. As Bob Marley says, “You can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can’t fool all the people all the time.” With each passing day, we have more and more people awakening to the structural issues confining them to the dungeons of poverty. But there still exists a greater need to draw awareness to the fact that the current health crisis is a class struggle. That trade unions, like the Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentists Union, are at the frontlines of this struggle, and that their current efforts will greatly advance the struggle for justice and equality in Kenyan society.

**A call to action**

Human and societal existence is cyclic in nature. There might sometimes exist long periods in this cycle when no change happens. But the good thing about change is that it’s an inevitable eventuality, as no society is static. The millions of disenfranchised and disillusioned youth must speak truth to power, and demand for a dignified existence.

Injustice calls for resistance. To the youth of this country, history will judge you harshly if you stand by and watch as Kenya is raped and plundered. This is a call to the young people of this country. This is a call to resistance – resistance against inequality; resistance against oppression; resistance against capitalism. Get off your computers and do something for your country. We deserve better. Kenya deserves better. Future generations surely deserve something better than this.

To our doctors, revolutionary salute!

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* THE VIEWS OF THE ABOVE ARTICLE ARE THOSE OF THE AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THE VIEWS OF THE PAMBAZUKA NEWS EDITORIAL TEAM
The doctors' strike now in its third month in Kenya has caused great suffering to the majority poor people who cannot afford medical care in private hospitals. All Kenyans ought to come out and support the doctors. The strike is not merely about the welfare of the healthcare workers. It is about a public health system crumbling under deliberate state neglect and corruption.

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