
Update on Ajaokuta Steel workers salary dispute

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All Africa.com reported that the Ajaokuta Steel Plant and National Iron Ore Mining Project, Itakpe workers' 10 month salaries were settled this week.

It ought to be heartwarming and cheering news except that what looks like 10 month savings of their salaries were mere drop in the pool of debts. The banks operating in the steel complex have since refused to extend advances and loans to the workers because of uncertainties arising from FG steel policy summersault. The workers resulted to borrowing from private creditors locally called money doublers who charge interest on such loans to the tune of 50% or more sometimes.

It would be recalled that a worker and his family at Ajaokuta Steel Plant cooked a toxic cassava for dinner which caused death to 3 members of that family early this year. The story has it too that two workers at NIOMP, Itakpe committed suicide because they could not bear the hardship any longer as a result of the non-payment of their salaries. Several others died because they could not afford either hospital bill or cost of buying drugs to treat themselves. Several children of the workers were dropped from the school beside many other consequential vices.

Meanwhile, Ms Diezani Allison Madueke minister of mines and steel development is on the verge of awarding contracts to carry out technical audit of Ajaokuta Steel and NIOMP, Itakpe to an Ukrainian firm and also to build Super Concentrate Plant at NIOMP. The contract for the latter is being considered for a German firm that built NIOMP, Itakpe initially. The minister revealed during her ministerial press briefing that the Federal Executive Council had approved these projects to commence soonest.

But the mines and steel development minister said latter that not only would she not be able to pay the workers salaries including balance of their arrears which would be 5 month by December 31st 2009, but she is considering to relegate some of them.

Both the technical auditing and construction of super concentrate plants demands for workers to be on site to work hand in hand with the foreign technicians. It is puzzling and beats ones imagination whether the minister would have to recruit new hands and train them before then.

When Ms Diezani Allison Madueke paid one day working visit to Ajaokuta Steel Plant and NIOMP, Itakpe on April 30th 2009 to assess the physical status of the plants, she promised to put the 8 mills to work as soon as possible. They were installed at 100% completion by the Russians from on-set. If the minister is contemplating to sack the plant workers, where are the trained and experienced hands to put the mills to work?

One can understand that, considering the slow nature of President Mr Yar'Adua's administration, it may be highly difficult to appropriate more money to pay the workers before the end of the year. Although, in other climes, idle fund could be transferred from one sector, department or agency to settle such salaries, since human lives are involved and at stake; in this instance. But it is highly imperative for the minister to award counter productive measures.

(Sourced from <http://allafrica.com>)

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