



2020 WORLD DECENT WORK DAY

A New Social Contract for Recovery and Resilience

- Text of the Address by the President of the Nigeria Labour Congress, Comrade Ayuba Wabba, mni on the Occasion of the 2020 World Decent Work Day

Workers and Trade Unions around the world are commemorating this year's World Decent Work Day with the theme: **“A New Social Contract for Recovery and Resilience”**, in the midst of the devastating effect of the novel Covid-19 on jobs, health and economies of the world.

The novel Covid-19 pandemic has further exposed the inadequacies of the current flawed economic model of globalization occasioned by wealth accumulation and lack of social justice.

Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, we were already faced with the prevalence of massive inequality – income inequality, racial injustice and gender discrimination in addition to the destruction resulting from extreme weather events due to climate change. We were also confronted with the choices associated with the best and worst impacts of technology, devoid of a rights base. These events were already driving an age of anger with civil unrest and distrust in democracy in different countries of the world before Covid-19 made a landfall in virtually all the countries of the world.

Comrades, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the attendant risks to economies and societies are very palpable. Already the fatality cases occasioned by Covid-19 has grossed about **one million, forty-two thousand, three hundred and ninety-eight** (1042398) deaths. The infection rate all over the world as at yesterday, 6th October 2020, stands at **thirty-five million, five hundred and twenty-three thousand, five hundred and eighteen** persons. With the world medical and health research community still grappling with the development of effective therapy and vaccine for Covid-19, there is no telling when the storm of this evil pandemic will be over.

What we have is today! And today is World Decent Work Day. This gives us the ample opportunity to speak to the issues and workplace challenges that have been thrown up by the Covid-19 crisis and the other social dislocations that preceded the pandemic.

There is no other sphere that the impact of the Covid-19 was more brutally felt than the world of work. Currently, apart from the humungous health fatalities of which most of the affected are workers, more than 400 million jobs have been lost to the pandemic. Hundreds of millions of livelihoods sustained by the informal sector have been wiped off, deepening an already broken narrative of vulnerability and despondency among workers who earn their living on day to day basis.

In Nigeria, Covid-19 only compounded the frail shape of an already existing fragility in our industrial space and associated social support system. Owing to the extensive public health protocols and measures adopted by the government to stem the spread of the Covid-19 virus, Nigeria's economy contracted by 6.1% year on year in the second quarter of this year. A recent report from Nigeria Bureau Statistics (NBS) show that the dip follows thirteen quarters of positive but low growth rates. The -6.1% decline is also Nigeria's steepest in the last 10 years. Many employers of labour have latched on this economic slow-down to vent their venom on poor workers with many workplaces effecting massive layoffs, retrenchment and retirement. We would recall upon the first phase of the easing of the lockdown, Access Bank fired 800 of its staff. Access Bank was only testing the waters as other banks were already primed to follow suit.

It took the intervention of the Nigeria Labour Congress to halt the anti-workers purge in our banking sector and indeed other sectors of the national economy. Through the instrumentality of the Labour Civil Society Situation Room on Covid-19 which we set up both at the national level and in all our state councils, Congress wrote strongly worded letters to the Federal Government, the Central Bank of Nigeria and other regulatory agencies warning of the dire consequences of offering workers as the sacrificial lamb during the pandemic. We wondered what happened to the surplus profits realized from the toil and sweat of workers when the going was good. We also reached out to the employers in the private sector through the auspices of the Nigeria Employers Consultative Association (NECA). The fruit of that strategic engagement was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for Job Protection.

It is gratifying that the Federal Government and the regulatory agencies listened to the voice of reason and halted the move to bleed the workforce in Nigeria of thousands of jobs. The Central Bank of Nigeria placed an embargo on the termination of employment in our banking sector. In order to create an enabling environment for businesses to recover and become resilient post Covid-19 lockdown phase and in response to the demand of Organized Labour in Nigeria, the House of Representatives

put together an **Emergency Economic Stimulus Bill 2020**, which seeks to protect the employment status of Nigerians by providing tax breaks to employers who do not lay off employees during the prevalence of the novel corona disease in Nigeria.

Comrades, as proactive as our efforts are, we admit that the measures currently put in place to safeguard jobs and employment are only short to medium term. A lasting and fundamental approach to dealing with the workplace dislocations occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic including the huge gale of indecent work is to demand for a **New Social Contract**. A New Social Contract anchored on shared prosperity and social justice is central to charting the path to recovery from the effects COVID-19. This is an important step in offering hope to working people all over the world.

Comrades, in order to withstand further shocks from the resurgence of fresh outbreaks of Covid-19 and or other health and socio-economic dislocations, we must design a recovery plan that rebuilds the social contract between government and societies and hoisted on the foundations of resilience. In order to achieve this, we must ensure that Decent Work is at the centre of government actions to bring back economic growth and build a new global economy that puts people and the planet first.

In this wise, we call on the Nigerian government and governments around the world to put in place recovery and resilience plans which prioritize jobs, secured employment, workplace rights, income protection, minimum living wages, occupational safety and health, and universal social protection especially basic income for workers in the informal sector, the sick, the elderly and for those without employment.

In pursuit of a New Social Contract that guarantees Decent Work, we also call for the universal right to freedom of association and collective bargaining, provisions for safe workplaces in tandem with global best practices, equality and inclusion especially through equal economic participation of women, all racial groups, migrant workers and young workers and a guarantee that these vulnerable segments of the workforce are protected from any form discrimination, harassment and violence in line with Convention 190 of the International Labour Organization. We demand these as basic minimum fundamental rights of working persons in the formal and informal sectors.

In order to create the enabling broader environment for the sustenance of these fundamental rights at work, we also call for a rejig of the world economic system. The current global economic model is flawed as it has entrenched inequality and insecurity for working people and their families both in Nigeria and other parts of the world. In order to promote inclusion and reduce the inequality gap, we call for adequately funded universal public health, education and care. We also demand that Just Transitions for climate and technology should be central in economic planning and policy framing.

Work is a divine attribute and quality of invaluable intrinsic value. Work is the real critical value in the chain of production. Work is a participation in the divine mandate to Co-create with God. It is only through work that man (woman) exercises dominion over the earth to subdue nature, transform same and adapt it to his (her) needs and therefrom achieve fulfillment as a free and rational human being unlike plants and non-rational animals. It is on this basis that we understand work as an occasion for the exercise of justice, charity, and creative participation in the perpetuation of the common good, human progress and by extension the work of the Supreme Creator. Therefore, no genuine human work is mere work. For the ultimate end of human work is participation in a community of persons, both human and divine. Therefore, workers are both the means and end of production.

It on the basis of the foregoing that we insist that Decent Work through a New Social Contract is non-negotiable. We call on our trade unions to rededicate themselves to the pursuit of Decent Work in all our workplaces. As you can clearly see, pursuing decent work is not only a just task but also a divine mandate. We must rally together to stamp out every vestige of casualization of labour, unjust wages and the denial of workers' fundamental rights to form, join and participate in the activities of trade unions.

We must also keep our eyes strong on the eternal cause of ensuring the socialization of the means of production. Workers create the wealth and deserves a fair share of the proceeds of production and a good portion of the wealth they create. It is in this light that we call on the Nigerian government to respect Chapter Two of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria which demands that the commanding heights of our economy must not be left in a few hands but must be managed by government in the interest of the majority of citizens. It is on this note that we insist that government must respect the terms of the recent agreement signed with labour especially with regards to the overhauling of our national refineries. We also demand the reversal of the failed privatization of our power sector. We insist that Government has business in business.

Fellow Comrades, let me conclude by saluting the efforts of workers in keeping the national economy afloat despite great challenges. I also salute the huge contributions of frontline workers in staving off Covid-19. Your dedication to duty was the difference between deaths in hundreds and deaths in millions. On this day, we salute the memory of Nigerian workers and workers all over the world who paid the supreme price protecting the rest of us from the treacherous hands of Covid-19. We can only immortalize their contributions and memories by delivering on the Decent Work Agenda especially through a **New Social Contract for Recovery and Resilience**.



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