



## The 9<sup>th</sup> Edition of the ITUC-Africa New Year School

Date & venue: 11-15 February 2019, Lome, Togo

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***Theme: African Trade Unions: Time for change!"***

### **The Concept Note<sup>1</sup>**

#### **1. Background**

Trade unions are one of the oldest civil society organisations, which played a critical role in the evolution of African societies. They have made an important contribution towards the promotion of the rights of all, especially for working women and men. They promote and represent the interests of their members and subsequently shape the relations between the state, capital, labour, and the broader civil society. Since precolonial times, popular organizing and mass mobilizing have been central to advancing the interests of the African people. Trade unions across large parts of Africa marshalled popular forces and played significant roles in the anti-colonial struggle. The trade union movement thus emerged as an important source of countervailing power for securing short-to medium-term benefits for workers directly and for pushing the frontiers of politics and policy in the direction of social transformation for the benefit of the people as a whole.

In the development of the modern state, from the colonial era into what can be described today as the neo-colonial era, the systems of governance and institutions of public authority that have emerged often do not serve the interests of the working people. As a consequence, the trade union movement in Africa today is confronted with enormous challenges arising from the political and socio-economic realities confronting Africa and its people. Amongst the many trade union challenges are:

- Decreasing working class consciousness;
- Limited trade union structural power and hence low visibility and influence owed to low trade union density and Membership disfranchisement;
- Deepening disconnect between membership and leadership;
- Fragmentation, Polarity and disunity and Low capacities to engage various stakeholders;
- Growing internal un-democratic practices;
- Lack of political independence and growing elitism within unions (partially due to blind party-union relations);
- Low financial independence and absence of sustainability strategies;
- Limited understanding and inclusion of the diverse needs of the membership (e.g. youth, women, workers with disabilities, informally employed);
- Poor expression of solidarity with those in need (both within and outside countries);

Thus, overall, limited organizational structural power, voice and agency.

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<sup>1</sup> This concept note sets the tone for discussions for the forth-coming 2019 ITUC-Africa New Year School to be held under the theme "African Trade Unions: Which way?". The theme is informed by the outcomes of the study on the State of Trade Unions we concluded at the end of 2016. The school will bring together participants primarily drawn from the trade unions, labour academia to dialogue about how the world of work has changed and how African unions have to redefine their role to drive the structural social and economic changes in favor of labour. While the bulk of the participants shall consist of senior trade union leaders, the youth and women trade union activists shall also be participating. Additionally, civil society actors as well as labour academicians including researchers and educators shall be invited to participate.

The above-mentioned challenges are also externally induced and reinforced. As well known, neoliberal globalization has contributed to growing poverty and misery to the world's working poor and unemployed, as well as rising inequalities within countries and between regions of the world. Therefore, there is an urgent need for trade union renewal. African trade unions need to get more workers organized and mobilized to secure day-to-day collective interests and to advocate for the needed socio-economic transformations in the currently dominant paradigm of development. A fresh, broad-minded, gender and youth inclusive breed of trade union leadership is needed to steer Africa out of its difficulties; a leadership that can put pressure on the current political leadership to manage the affairs of the continent in favour of its people.

It is against this background that ITUC-Africa has expressed its concern about the state of trade union organisations at various platforms. As a result, the ITUC-Africa Congress of 2015 mandated the Africa Labour Research and Education Institute to carry out an assessment of the state of trade unions in a few selected countries. The study covered an array of issues including membership: recruitment, retention, tracking and organizing, governance and internal democracy as well as financial autonomy. The earlier mentioned challenges highlight some of the outcomes of the said study.

## **2. Purpose and Thematic Focus**

The 2019 New Year School shall be forward looking with the view to develop an action program that move away from lamenting to action. The school therefore shall:

- Briefly reflect on the state of the African trade unions based on the main conclusions and recommendations of the study conducted by ITUC-Africa
- Agree on common trade union strategies to addresses the challenges identified
- Formulate a continental labour strategy to build strong and united trade union organisations that can assist in fostering economic and social transformation in Africa

**The main shall include:**

- a) Trade Union Unity;
- b) Consolidating Democratic Governance in Trade Unions;
- c) Trade Union Membership and organizing and
- d) Building (financially) sustainable/autonomous trade union organizations.

## **3. Main Guiding Questions**

Arising from the above-mentioned themes, the Program will be guided by the following questions:

1. What in practical terms can be done about the various external and internal challenges facing Africa Trade Unions?
2. How can African Trade Unions equip themselves to better address the challenges confronting them?
3. How did some Trade Unions succeed and what can we learn from such experiences?
4. How can the youth and women spearhead the trade union transformation agenda?
5. What operational modalities are required for African Trade Unions to be effective and sustainable?

#### **4. Expected Outputs and Outcomes**

- A detailed report, including sections on key messages and recommendations;
- The Capacity of the participants in leading trade unions for better influence, impact and change is strengthened;
- Networking improved and sharing of experiences consolidated

#### **5. Format**

- The program will be organized over 5 days and shall include several thematic sessions and working groups. The methodology shall consist of a mixture of keynote plenaries, panel discussions and thematic working groups or commissions. The commissions shall present and submit their reports containing actionable points to plenary on the last day.

#### **6. Agenda**

A draft agenda will be attached separately.

#### **7. Organizer**

*ITUC-Africa* through its Research and Education Institute (ALREI).

#### **8. Who shall participate?**

The school shall bring together close to 100 external participants drawn primarily from the ITUC-Africa affiliates, comprising General Council members, ITUC-Africa Women Committee and Youth Committees; the sub-regional trade unions organizations, labour researchers and educators, Global union federations (GUFs); continental and international CSOs, academia and media amongst others as well as ILO representatives.

#### **9. Venue and Date**

ITUC-Africa Headquarter, Lome, Togo, 11-15 February 2019.

#### **10. Languages**

English and French will be the working languages.