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### ***Prospects and Challenges of Ghana TUC, COSATU and NLC Trilateral Cooperation***

#### **Introduction**

I cherish the opportunity to make a contribution to the first trilateral conference of COSATU, NLC and Ghana TUC. This presentation will cover the origins of the trilateral cooperation of the three organizations, the nature and content of the relations to date. We will then turn to the broader context of the African condition, the challenge of achieving the African nation and unity, African institutions and the need for strengthening as well as engaging with them. We conclude by pointing to the strategic position of the African labour movement, strengthening its role and the critical challenge of trade union unity now and not later.

#### **Origins**

The origins of the trilateral cooperation may be traced to the similar and shared history of activist struggles by the three federations in the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggle. Over the years, leaders and cadre of the three organizations and others have maintained international contact among themselves during international meetings, e.g. International Labour Conferences and international trade union meetings and conferences.

During the 1980s a number of interactions mainly through education workshops, took place between NLC and Ghana TUC as well as the Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC) and the Gambia Workers Confederation (GWC) within the framework of educational activities of the Commonwealth Trade Union Council. Throughout the 1990s, strong contacts were maintained between the NLC and Ghana TUC. Over those years, contacts were also maintained by both organizations, more so by the NLC, with the comrades in the south, COSATU of South Africa. The beginning of the new century saw the strategic and conscious institution of bilateral leadership exchanges between COSATU and NLC and between NLC and Ghana TUC. In January 2000, 'not long after the NLC reclaimed itself from four and half years of military intervention and take-over of the federation' as NLC President Omar puts it, NLC hosted its first bilateral conference with COSATU in Abuja. This was followed in February 2002, with the NLC hosting another first bilateral conference with Ghana TUC in Lagos and Abuja. COSATU in turn hosted the NLC in a return bilateral conference in Johannesburg in September 2002. In May 2003, Ghana TUC hosted the second bilateral with the NLC under the theme 'strengthening our common bonds towards peace, democracy and development'.

The holding of bilateral conferences and exchange of high level delegations of COSATU/NLC and NLC/Ghana TUC as well as high level contacts between leaders of the three federations was followed by union to union contacts between affiliates of the three federations. We make exception of the union to union relations between Public Services Workers Union (PSWU) of Ghana TUC and Amalgamated Union of Public Corporations, Civil Service Technical and Recreational Services Employees (AUPCCSTRSE) of the NLC which already existed from the early 1990s. We recall readily the exchanges that developed between a number of affiliates of Ghana TUC and the NLC. They include those between the Teachers and Education Workers Union (TEWU) of Ghana TUC and the Non Academic Staff Union (NASU) of NLC, General Agricultural Workers Union (GAWU) of Ghana TUC and the Agricultural and Allied Employees Union (AAEU) of NLC, Local Government Workers Union (LGWU) of Ghana TUC and the Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) of NLC, General Transport Petroleum and Chemical Workers Union (GTPCWU) of Ghana TUC and the Nigerian Union of Petroleum Energy and Gas (NUPENG) of NLC. We also recall the union to union relations between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) of COSATU and the Ghana Mineworkers Union (GMWU) of Ghana TUC.

#### **Nature and content of relations**

The issues that featured in the bilateral conferences helped in laying the basis for the relations. The COSATU/NLC bilateral considered the state of the international trade union movement, organizational challenges in the new millennium, the informalization of labour and the two federations' responses to organizing in the informal economy, the African Union and NEPAD, and HIV/AIDS as a challenge for unionists. For the NLC/Ghana TUC bilateral the issues that were deliberated on included, internal democracy and organizational strengthening, democracy, peace and good governance, decent work and

core labour standards, NEPAD and the African development agenda, trade and macroeconomic issues, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and trade union responses, and rebuilding the Organization of Trade Unions of West Africa (OTUWA).

Further to these, the three federations have participated in each other's delegates' congresses since 2000. This participation has helped the organizations to know more about one other, especially regarding their common democratic credentials. There have also been special meetings of the top leaders of the organizations in Johannesburg and Abuja in 2003 and 2005 as well as during international meetings in Geneva, Vienna and elsewhere over the period. These meetings have helped their coordination of common positions on issues relating to the African and international trade union movement. There has also been participation in each other's training activities which has helped the development of links at various levels of organization and also added to the sharing of union experiences. Union to union exchanges between affiliates of the three federations have strengthened the bonds of solidarity and also facilitated the sharing of union experiences, especially in relation to collective bargaining and organizing.

It must be noted that more room for exchanges between the three federations and their affiliates exist given their range of experiences in organizing, social security, collective bargaining and social dialogue, policy engagement and advocacy and campaigns, and also workers' capital. Promoting trilateral cooperation around the identified areas and making each federation and its affiliates stronger in them contributes to strengthening the African trade union movement as a whole around those areas. Through further exchanges with other federations in other countries on the continent and through more effective coordination of initiatives at regional level the African trade union movement can make better progress on these issues.

### **The African Condition**

Hardly anyone from among us needs to be informed anew that Africa is at the "bottom of the heap" as far as the human development indicators are concerned. 34 out of 49 least developed countries are reported to be in Africa. Unemployment in countries across Africa goes up to 40 per cent even by conservative estimates. Underemployment is widespread. This is especially reflected in the large informal economy which accounts for up to 90 per cent of the labour force in some African countries. Massive inequalities exist in incomes and living conditions, with the three countries of our federations, South Africa, Nigeria and Ghana, providing some of the worst examples in the world.

Africa represents the paradox of the endowed land with poor people. The modern history of Africa can be traced with Africa experiencing waves of globalization and contact with the rest of the world that have always left Africa and its people worse off overall. In the last millennia and half Africa has experienced the trans-Saharan slave trade accompanied by Islamization and considerable Arabization; the trans-Atlantic slave trade duly accompanied and followed by colonial conquest, Christianization and westernization. Colonization marked a high point of domination over Africa since the beginning of the last millennia and was consolidated by the dismemberment of Africa and its parceling out in 1885 at the Berlin Conference attended by leaders and representatives of European nations and the USA who created African states with borders according to the interests of the colonial powers. Colonization further consummated the cultural invasion and imposition on Africa resulting in the loss of African heritage, the adoption and use of foreign languages as the medium of modern socialization and education; and the virtual destruction of the self-confidence of African people.

In the period since, with the pacification of Africa and its integration into a global system of western domination according to the terms of foreign economic and geopolitical interests, Africa has carried on with a loss of identity and continuing crises of governance, demonstrated by conflicts, political instability and a caricature of democracy with its predominance of fraudulent elections and widespread violation or absence of rights. Africa remains locked up in this situation largely because it is led and managed by elites that neither recognize the fundamental contradiction between the African condition and the interests of world capitalism nor perceive the challenge of Africa acting as one in its relations with the rest of the world as the precondition for her progress and that of her people. Africa's elites have led in perpetuating Africa according to the spaces in which it was dismembered by the colonial predators.

We pose the question as to where the trade unions and their leadership position themselves between these elites and the masses of Africa? In answering this question one of the imperatives we raise is the issue of trade union unity and the fragmentation of the trade union movement in Africa, with the existence of two regional trade union organizations as one of the main symptoms of this weakness. While accepting that the existence of the Organization of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) and the African Regional Organization of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) is rooted in the history of the movement in Africa, it is time to pose the question as to whether we should be simply trapped by that history or be ready to consciously address the issue of unity of the movement in Africa. While the two

organizations have agreed to cooperate, their continued existence as separate organizations, with similar representative structures, both laying claim to representing African workers, virtually epitomizes the absurdity of 'one body with two heads and also in this case two stomachs'. African workers' leadership and representation is thereby weakened.

### **Challenge of African Nation and unity**

Nations are products of community, history and culture of a people or peoples. But they do not at the same time simply grow spontaneously. Nations are created and built. They are nurtured and constructed by women and men acting as conscious agents. Modern nations have been the results of the conscious effort of organized and fighting peoples, adventurers, explorers, inventors, healers, entrepreneurs, cultural and spiritual workers, working women and men.

Major work has been done in Africa to canvass the quest for the African nation. I would like to refer comrades to *The African Nation: The State of the Nation* by Kwesi Kwaa Prah and published by the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Societies (CASAS based in Cape Town, South Africa). The publication spells out the place of Africa in history, shows the impact on Africa of her relations with the rest of the world and points to the imperative of African unity and the construction of the African nation as a condition for the emancipation of African people.

Again, we underline to comrades that the intellectual and historical foundations have already been established/laid for a united Africa. We refer you to *Black Africa: The Economic and Cultural Basis for a Federated State* by Cheikh Anta Diop (published by Lawrence Hill, New Haven, Connecticut). According to Ayi Kwei Armah in *New African Magazine*, February, 2010, Diop's work

*presents a thorough overview of Africa's inventory of energy (fossil, geothermal, solar, wind, tidal, nuclear, hydroelectric and biological), mineral, water, agricultural and human resources. It surveys the distribution patterns of these resources, and suggests adjustments that could be made in order to organize them to create a series of regional industrial, agricultural and energy bases serving the people of the whole continent...This wide range of feasible improvements in African life depends on one design condition: that our planners approach Africa not as a jumble of disconnected sovereign states, but as a unified field...The thesis ...is that in Africa today, economic, social and cultural improvements are feasible, but only if the enabling condition – African unity – is achieved.*

Clearly, the case for the African nation and unity has long been made and eloquently too.

### **African Institutions**

It is useful to recall that often when Africans act together in their own institutions or during international forums the common positions taken are progressive and are largely in the interests of the majority of Africans. This is notwithstanding the fact of the many weaknesses of nascent African institutions. Growing and strengthening African civil society participation in African institutions can contribute to reshape them into genuine organs for the development of African unity and progress/emancipation. The African institution most accessible by African trade unions is the African Union Labour and Social Affairs Commission (AULSAC). There is also the newly established African Union Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) as well as African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights. The AULSAC is supposed to be tripartite, bringing together Ministry of Labour bureaucrats and their Ministers, employers and trade unions. It has a broad mandate to cover issues related to labour, the world of work and social issues and until this year, 2010, has been meeting annually for more than fifteen years. ECOSOC is multi-partite and brings together a range of non state and civil society actors, including trade unions. This body has only been constituted in the last two years and has the potential of representing African civil society voice with regard to the AU Council of Ministers and the AU Summit itself. The ACHPR on the other hand, has been in existence for more than a decade and represents a body to which individuals and civil society groups can make representation in defense and protection of human rights.

At sub-regional level, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), East African Community (EAC), Common Market of East and Southern Africa (COMESA), and others exist as institutions that trade unions and organized civil society can reshape and strengthen for the benefit and progress of Africa.

### **Strengthening and Engaging African institutions**

The potential for full trade union intervention in these structures has neither been pursued nor achieved. This is either due to the absence of the appropriate procedures and the opportunities for intervention or the weaknesses of trade union capacity for making the requisite input into decision making. The AULSAC which is tripartite is composed by representatives of employers, workers and ministries of labour. The conclusions of their meetings which are considered as those of experts are normally placed before the meetings of Labour Ministers which immediately follows for adoption. While acknowledging

that of all AU bodies until recently, this is the one that provides an opportunity for the voice of labour to be heard at all, it is also a fact that the structure of its meetings does not allow for the full realization of its potential. Even though the voice of workers can get heard in this structure, its decisions and conclusions are not made in such a manner as to ensure that what actually emerges is the negotiated agreement between all the three parties. A lot remains to be done to ensure that the rules and procedures for engagement within the AULSAC makes it truly tripartite and an African institution for sharing common cause and agreement on matters of employment, workers' rights, labour markets, migration and other issues that fall within its mandate.

Other AU structures like the ECOSOC, ACHPR as well as the sub-regional organs exist as ones in which the trade union movement can intervene for the benefit of African workers, but the absence of a united African regional trade union movement contributes in large measure to the weakness of the movement in strengthening these African institutions and engaging with them for the benefit of the African people. With a united front and purpose by the African trade union movement, these African institutions can be reformed to provide the requisite space for input into decision making by organized workers and other civil society.

We also pose for consideration, in time to come, some general but pertinent issues for our progress towards achieving unity and forging the African nation. The need to pursue a policy for recognizing Africa's space as one and for opening up its borders for the free movement of people, goods and services within the region as a whole. This should be accompanied by improved policing and attention to security. The need to operate as one entity in multilateral trade relations and the need to establish an African institution with responsibility for conducting free and fair elections in all African countries.

### **Strengthening the African labour movement**

The history of the African labour movement, and certainly of the three federations meeting in this trilateral conference, attests to the critical role of the trade unions in Africa's struggle for progress and emancipation. The contributions of the Nigeria Labour Congress and the Ghana Trades Union Congress to the independence struggles of Nigeria and Ghana are well known and so also is the contribution of the Congress of South African Trade Unions to the struggle against apartheid well known. Since independence and the fall of apartheid, all three federations have been involved in defending and promoting the rights of freedom of association and expression, in protecting and promoting the interests of workers in the world of work, in fighting for the consolidation of democracy, and in striving to achieve genuine national independence in their countries.

The achievement and experience of the three federations in engaging with national institutions should also be transformed into engagement with African institutions and conscious contribution to their development. They can best make this contribution through strengthening African regional trade union organization and making it the medium for engaging with African institutions. In this effort the African workers and people stand to benefit if the trade union movement operates as a united organization and optimizes its synergies and potential. The forthrightness of the three federations in addressing the challenge of unity that faces the African labour movement is important for making progress on this critical issue. We must welcome the COSATU resolution on African trade union unity adopted at their last congress in September, 2009. I invite the NLC and Ghana TUC to consciously address this issue in their governing structures and to make the necessary contribution towards achieving African trade union unity. It is time to face up to the question of the necessity or not for the existence of two regional trade union organizations for African workers.

The three federations need to continue to explore common positions on issues of concern to African workers at international level. They also need to continue the exchanges that build each other's capacity in dealing with core issues of trade unions – employment, incomes, social security, occupational health and safety, social dialogue, sustainable development. This includes their continued interest and valued contribution to the work of the African Labour Research Network (ALRN) and the African Labour Educators Network (ALLEN). We also invite the three federations to contribute to the foundations for an Annual African New Year School at which African trade union leaders and cadre engage over current and critical issues for African workers and people.

In addressing the **challenge to act now and not later** we invite the three federations to acknowledge the necessity for African unity as a condition for African emancipation and genuine progress of her people. This requires that the three federations to pay close attention to pursuing African trade union unity in order to empower the African trade union movement to make its rightful impact on African regional institutions and within the international trade union movement as a whole. We need to act now for good effect and to prevent the African people from being further marginalized and pressed to the bottom.

We conclude with the maxim: *Organization Decides Everything!*

