



NIGERIA LABOUR CONGRESS

Covid-19 Pandemic and Its Socio-Economic Impact on the Nigerian Working Class

**Workers' Day Address of the
President of the Nigeria Labour Congress;**

Comrade Ayuba P. Wabba, *mni*

Presented in Commemoration of the 2020 May Day

Protocol

PREAMBLE:

On behalf of Organized Labour in Nigeria, we convey to Nigerian workers, pensioners, labour veterans, our allies in the civil society, public office holders, political leaders, women, youth and all people of goodwill very warm compliments on the commemoration of the 2020 May Day.

The May Day also known as the International Workers Day is value-laden. It is the most significant day in the life of workers. May Day was shaped by the events of the 1886 Haymarket Affair and embodies the aspirations, struggles, and sacrifices of workers for decent wages, dignified working conditions, sustainable livelihoods and increased stake in the reward of surplus value.

For Organized Labour in Nigeria, May Day presents a great opportunity to celebrate the contributions of workers to nation-building. May Day grants us an auspicious moment to reminisce on the invaluable sacrifices made by our forebears in the struggle for the advancement of the issues of the global working class. May Day is also an occasion to reflect on the progress and setbacks in the struggle to improve the lot of workers. Furthermore, May Day offers us an opportunity to speak to issues that affect the welfare and wellbeing of workers and seek solutions to same.

Fellow comrades, this year's May Day is very unusual. For the first time in a long time, the commemoration of the Workers' Day will be low key and will be taking place behind closed doors void of the usual pomp and parade that exemplify the "never-say-never" spirit of the working class. This is as a result of the novel corona virus disease (Covid-19) pandemic which is ravaging several cities and almost every country of the world right now.

As at today, 210 countries and territories of the world have recorded a total of about 3 million cases of Covid-19 infection. The world has lost more than 210,000 precious souls to this deadly virus. In Nigeria, the deadly fangs of the corona virus have not been any less brutal. More than a thousand Nigerians have been infected with about 40 deaths already recorded. The infection rate in Nigeria could be more than what the official figures present as our country's health system has struggled with contact tracing and testing for the virus.

Comrades, fellow workers, these are truly trying times for humanity. Since the Spanish flu of 1918-1920, the world has never witnessed a major public health scare of fatalistic proportions as the novel corona virus disease (Covid-19) pandemic. The accompanying global lockdown is perhaps the broadest since the end of the second World War. The reality is that the world is at war with an invisible biological enemy. Covid-19 is a deadly enemy that has no respect for borders, has no preference for race, has no regards for the rules of engagement, and shows no qualms about socio-economic status. We are dealing with a foe that desecrates sacred places with impunity, an enemy that cannot be forced to a negotiation table and cannot be tempered with a truce.

The invasion of the corona virus pandemic has altered the world the way we know it. Our world will never remain the same again. The contemporary world of work is in dire straits. There are even greater fears on the future of work. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has reported that the COVID-19 social lockdown measures have affected almost 2.7 billion workers worldwide. This represents around 81 per cent of the world's workforce. In these circumstances, businesses across a range of economic sectors are facing catastrophic losses. The threats to operations and solvency, among smaller enterprises, make millions of workers vulnerable to income loss and layoffs.

According to the Director General of the ILO, Mr. Guy Ryder, "this is no longer only a global health crisis, it is also a major labour market and economic crisis that is having a huge impact on people." A recent study by the ILO indicates that 25 million people would likely lose their jobs as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The report also warns of severe job contraction in the informal sector as the opportunity for people to be engaged would be highly restricted given the restriction in movement in many countries. The report also forecasts huge incidence of income loss for workers, up to USD 3.4 trillion. The report went on to predict that contraction in productivity would ultimately increase working poverty, affecting up to 35 million workers globally. Most of the endangered workers are those in the informal sector who live on daily income.

Despite the challenge posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, we are deeply enamored by the bravery and resourcefulness of our health care professionals who have put their lives on the line to contain the spread of the virus. In spite

of the relative deficit of material resources at their disposal, they have arguably recorded some of the best recovery rates in the world. We are immensely proud of the love, faith, courage, and sacrifice demonstrated by our frontline heroes and heroines who have certainly given more than the demand of the call of duty. Our gallant frontline workers have served and continue to serve as the resolute buffer between Covid-19 and mass infections cum deaths.

We will forever be in the debt of thousands of our courageous healthcare workers, transport workers, utility employees, journalists and workers in the informal sector who have continued to show up at their duty posts despite the stare of death, dearth of working tools and paucity of gratitude. We condole with the families of workers who have paid the supreme sacrifice in the fight against Covid-19. We assure you that their labours will not be in vain.

We commend the Federal government for the insurance cover and enhanced incentives provided for frontline health workers. We urge states to follow suit. We also applaud Sokoto and some other labour friendly state for setting the pace by granting a one hundred per cent increase in hazards allowance for healthcare workers in the state. We wish to stress that such gesture should be equally bestowed on all health workers as members of one team fighting one deadly foe.

Apart from the frontline workers especially the healthcare workers, millions of Nigerian workers are also fighting the Covid-12 battle from their homes. It is a tough call adjusting to a new social regime of lockdowns. Many workers are forced to 'telework' from home using internet technology. We commend the compliance of workers and other Nigerians with government's lockdown directive. That was a worthy contribution to the fight against Covid-19.

The Corona virus pandemic has raised a number of soft underbelly questions that we must confront as a nation and a people going forward. Amidst the onslaught of the Corona virus, the dusts raised by this pandemic has settled on the corrugated iron sheets of truth – "how have we treated ourselves? How have we treated the weak and vulnerable? How has Nigeria treated her longsuffering workers?"

It is on this note that we make the point that labour is not a commodity to be taken, trampled, and tossed aside. Workers create the wealth. It is no greed to demand a decent fraction of the reward of our efforts. We urge workers everywhere to continue to draw inspiration from the fact that without our sweat, no sweet gain can be made. Without the twitching of our muscles, no socio-economic puzzle can be solved. Without our intuition, no initiative can be sustained. Without our dedication, no dividend can ever be declared.

I wish to use the platform of this year's May Day to salute the courage, tenacity, and perseverance of Nigerian workers in building a future of shared prosperity. I also salute our pensioners, veterans and allies for staying the course and for keeping the faith. You will not miss your reward.

At the 2019 May Day, we reflected on our peculiar struggles as a class within the broader context of the global dynamics of the international solidarity especially as informed by the centenary celebration of the International Labour Organization. The theme chosen by the two Labour Centres – the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) were in sync with the mood of the day. Today, Corona virus has imposed a new mood on us. This mood has changed a lot of things around us including the bearing for this year's May Day. This has informed the theme for 2020 May Day "Corona Virus Pandemic and Its Socio-Economic Impact on the Nigerian Working Class".

The Socio-Economic Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has shaken the very cornerstones of the global socio-economic order. The economy of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) generally has been hit hard by the outbreak of COVID-19. International multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) expect the economies of the region to experience a contraction of between the most optimistic 1.6% and more realistic 5.1% in 2020. This would represent the lowest growth rate since 1970. The prospect of economic deceleration in SSA accords with the dire prognoses of the World Bank. Anyhow, the slide of 5.1% has frightening prospects for growth and job retention. As a result, the contraction will exert a devastating impact, with an accompanying recession.

The economic impact on monocultural economies such as Nigeria which depends on crude oil for nearly 90% of her foreign exchange earnings is very dire. Crude oil production has declined due to lagged demand. As the prices tumbled below thirty years cycle, hovering at times at sub-zero per barrel compared to above \$60 just before the pandemic, Nigeria's Federal Government is experiencing a fiscal crisis. Consequently, the budget estimates for 2020 are in serious disarray. As the mainstay of Nigeria's economy, the falling price of crude oil in the international market has severe implications for domestic consumption since the economy is largely import-dependent.

The current prices of crude oil, which are far below the budget's benchmark of \$57 per barrel, presage rough times. The plans to reduce the expenditure obligations in the 2020 budget confirm this fear. Unfortunately, the areas slated for reduction are those critical to human capital development at a time Nigeria needs to scale up the production of knowledge and domestication of the scientific temper. The budgetary outlays for education and health are slated to suffer diminution. Many infrastructure projects are also being considered to be shelved or not fully executed in the current budget cycle.

There is genuine premise to worry about possible threats to job retention both in the public and private sectors of the economy. For instance, the closure of the airspace has seen gross interruption and the near absence of passenger traffic and the associated services in the aviation sector. The social lockdown and physical distancing have reduced patronage of places of popular gathering. Workers in the hotel, recreation and tourism segments would be severely impacted as their workplaces have been largely shut. There is cause to be anxious about the fate of workers in these critical sectors of the economy.

Furthermore, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has estimated that Nigeria's economy would shrink by 3.4 per cent and the consequent recession could last until 2021. For a middle-income country like Nigeria, the hard-hit sectors which are the informal sector and semi-informal sectors of the economy represent a high proportion of workers with non-fixed contracts of employment and with limited access to health services and social protection.

We commend the House of Representatives for passing the Emergency Economic Stimulus Bill, 2020 on 24th March, 2020. The bill seeks to provide fifty per cent tax rebate for employers and business owners who agree to retain existing staff in 2020. In effect, the bill aims to prevent job losses in the formal sector. However, the exclusion of informal workers from benefitting from the bill should be quickly addressed especially given that over 70% of Nigeria's workforce and businesses actually operate in the informal sector.

The Central Bank of Nigeria has also proposed a \$US3.5 billion as bailout stimulus package for small and medium scale enterprises, manufacturing plants and other vulnerable business concerns. We opine that the stimulus package should also include the transport, aviation, hospitality and the financial sector. Informal sector workers and artisans who earn their living on daily basis should also benefit from the stimulus package. We demand that the process of disbursing the bailout package should be inclusive especially in consultation with organized labour and the employers' association.

The Prognostics

Liquidity Crisis – Given the crash in the price of crude oil in the global commodities market, the government is clearly pressed for liquidity. Unfortunately, Nigeria's external reserve which could have served as a fiscal shock absorber has been on the decline since June 2019 when it stood at US\$45 billion. From Central Bank of Nigeria sources, as at January 2020, our external reserve was US\$38.61 billion. In February 2020, the reserves dropped to US\$37.5 billion. Just before the full bloom of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria, the country's external reserve took another dip to US\$36.22 billion.

The implication of the liquidity crisis would be a shortfall in federal allocations to the subnational governments. When this happens, the first causality is always workers' salaries. The over bogus salaries, allowances and other perks of office enjoyed by elected public officials are hardly touched. We warn that the Nigeria Labour Congress would not take kindly to any attempt to offer workers as the sacrificial lambs for the inordinate emoluments of public office holders and outright embezzlement of public funds by political leaders.

Debt Overhang – Nigeria needs more than \$6.9 billion in emergency funds from international lenders to deal with the Covid-19 challenge. The IMF, World Bank, the African Development Bank, and the Islamic Development Bank have been approached to raise the loans. According to Bloomberg, the IMF is set to grant Nigeria an Emergency Funding up to the tune of US\$3.5 billion. In December 2019, Nigeria's external debt hit a 16 year high of US\$27 billion with a debt servicing commitment of US\$1.5 billion per annum. That is about 5% of our 2020 federal budget and 75% of our external reserves.

As much as we need to deal with our liquidity challenge, we all must be concerned that we are taking steady steps back to the stormy and murky waters of bad loans to the Paris Club. It is very sad that our current total debt profile is almost at par with what we owed the Paris Club before the debt amnesty of about US\$18 billion from a total debt stock of US\$35.994 billion.

Internally, our borrowing status leaves no cheer. CBN records show that the Federal Government borrowed over N4.4 trillion by ways and means in 2019. This is far beyond the maximum of N4.5 billion allowed in CBN legal statutes.

There is nothing wrong in borrowing to finance development. Our worry as workers is that we are not seeing much of the development. We are largely borrowing to consume. Our hospitals are not being re-tooled with first class facilities. Public schools are still an eyesore to basic decency. Our roads network still does not support a 21st century economy. Apart from renewed vigour in the rails system, the rest of our transportation infrastructure belies our developmental aspirations. So, what exactly are we doing with our loans?

Leakage in the Pipeline – Related to the debt overhang is the contradictions in our petroleum sector. Our dependence on imported refined petroleum products have left us perpetually broke. The Nigeria Labour Congress continues to shout itself hoarse that the roadmap of massive petroleum products importation is a certain pathway to economic bankruptcy. No developing country would spend her scarce foreign exchange on the importation of refined petroleum products as we do and remain solvent.

A few weeks ago, government reduced the pump price of Premium Motor Spirit by about N18 owing to over recovery as dictated by the global plunge in the price of crude oil. Nigerian workers insist that it is anomalous to subject the price of a product sourced from Nigeria to the volatilities of global commodities market. Nigerians should be the first partakers of the fruits of our resources.

To fix our leaking oil revenue pipeline, we must recover, resuscitate and revamp our refineries. The habit of being penny wise pound foolish must end. It is no rocket science to fix old refineries. The technology for modular refinery is handy. We cannot rely on the promise of private refineries to fix the shame of being the only OPEC country that does not refine her crude. Furthermore, we must deal with the inefficiencies and corruption in the oil sector. The time is now! The current plunge in the price of crude oil might be our last warning to take full control of our oil resources and genuinely diversify our economy.

The Future of Work: About six months ago at the 4th National Leadership Retreat of the NLC in Enugu, we were discussing and strategizing on the future of work. Of major concern to us was the role of information communication technology especially with regards to advanced internet services, 5G technology, robotics and artificial intelligence in re-shaping the world of work. Owing to the prevailing Covid-19 challenge, it appears the future was suddenly fast forwarded. New phrases such as ‘teleworking’ have been introduced in our work lexicon. Leveraging on advanced internet capabilities, work is now going on in virtual spaces. Meetings and conferences are being held real time over smart applications such as Zoom and Skype.

Comrades, right before our eyes the future of work is being born. The increased encroachment of devices, machines and artificial intelligence in spaces where human beings held forte will bring with it a host of new challenges in the work place. In many advanced economies, the discussion is gravitating towards universal social welfare system where human beings are paid basic allowances to take care of their needs while machines do most of the work. Conscious that human beings are at the centre of existence and production, we must be prepared. We must gear up to protect income, promote decent jobs, and advance sustainable livelihood. We must be willing to learn new skills that will keep us relevant in the 21st century workplace.

The Response of Nigeria Labour Congress in the Wake of Covid-19 Challenge

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Nigeria Labour Congress has been very proactive. Our first task was to undertake an assessment of the situation. In consultation with members of our National Administrative Council and affiliate unions especially those in the frontline sectors, we were able to develop a worker-based strategy on dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. Another outcome of our brainstorming was the set-up of our internal Situation Room and the development of a set of health and safety guidelines. These guidelines which majored on how best to navigate through the rapids of the Covid-19 ravage were disseminated to workers through affiliate unions.

We also went a step further to undertake surveillance visits to workplaces where our frontline workers are actively deployed in the battle against Covid-19. We made our observations on the shortage of personal protective equipment for healthcare workers, and the need to make the isolation centres more patient and worker-friendly. We engaged the relevant ministries, departments, agencies and committees of government on our observations. We also released a number of press statements including appearance at the Presidential Task Force Daily Briefings to further buttress our positions.

The Nigeria Labour Congress has partnered with the National Union of Textile, Garment and Tailoring Workers of Nigeria (NUTGTWN), Abuja chapter to produce thousands of face masks for free distribution to our frontline workers. We also made available some of the masks to members of the Presidential Task Force Committee and members of the Fourth Estate of the Realm.

In order to institutionalize our engagement on the Covid-19 challenge, we expanded our situation room to a **Labour-Civil Society Situation Room on Covid-19**. This include our sister labour centre – the Trade Union Congress, our allies in civil society and other professional organizations. During the lockdown, the Labour-Civil Society Situation Room Meetings has been holding through virtual and physical meetings.

On the 28th of April 2020, the Labour-Civil Society Situation Room commemorated the 2020 International Workers' Memorial Day. The day is set aside to remember the contributions and sacrifices of workers especially those

who got injured, got maimed or even lost their lives in the course of work. Leaders of our movement and the civil society addressed the press on the key concerns of workers in the face of the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Comrades, the International Labour Organization has identified four overarching responses to the Covid-19 challenge. The responses are as follows:

- 1. Stimulating the economy and demand for labour by using available fiscal and monetary tools and debt relief.** The emphasis here is on public investment in health systems so that they are doubly effective as a crucial contribution to beating the pandemic and creating decent jobs.
- 2. Providing immediate assistance to sustain enterprises, preserve jobs and support incomes.** The particular need here is to invest in social protection measures, which can help mitigate the worst shocks of the crisis while acting as an economic stabiliser.
- 3. Ensuring adequate protection for all those who continue to work during the crisis.** This requires guarantees for safety and health in the workplace, properly designed work arrangements such as teleworking, and access to sick pay.
- 4. Making full use of social dialogue between governments, and workers and employers' organisations.** This has a proven record of generating effective, practical, and equitable solutions to the type of challenges now confronting the world of work

Our response as an organization and as a labour movement to the four cardinal goalposts established by the ILO has been very strident.

On debt relief, we issued a press statement to draw the attention of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and other international multilateral and bilateral creditor countries and organizations on the need to include Nigeria on the debt relief packages for developing economies. The result was almost instant. In less than 48 hours, Nigeria was included in the countries granted debt relief package by the G20 countries and China.

Just three days ago, precisely on April 28, 2020, Nigeria was also granted an Emergency Relief Fund by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) through the Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI) totalling US\$3.4 billion. As we had cautioned earlier, foreign debts should not be a way of life. There are a lot of landmines in the plot of debt servitude.

On providing immediate assistance to sustain enterprises, preserve jobs and support incomes, the NLC has written the Federal Government of Nigeria through the Presidential Task Force on Covid-19 to demand that the recent \$US3.5 billion stimulus package for SMEs and other businesses as announced by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) should go to businesses that need it the most. A major criterion for access to this grant must be a signed commitment by the beneficiary businesses not to lay off workers or undermine the existing wage structure in their organizations. We also demanded that the disbursement of the grant should accommodate inputs from organized labour and employers' association in order to ensure that the bailout funds get to the businesses, industries and production lines that need the money most.

On ensuring adequate protection for all those who continue to work during the crisis, we have through surveillance visits, active feedbacks channels, and a series of our Covid-19 response press statements harped that the Nigerian government must prioritize funding for the health sector. We have also written to the Federal Government through the Presidential Task Force on Covid-19 that all our frontline health workers must be sufficiently provided with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), hand sanitizers, decent wash rooms, rest rooms, reasonable work schedule and occupational hazard incentives.

Making full use of social dialogue between governments, workers and employers' organisations. The whole essence of the Labour-Civil Society Situation Room on Covid-19 is to pursue robust dialogue with the social partners on the impact and mitigation of the corona virus pandemic during and after the lockdown. We are reaching out to the government and the employers' organisations on the best ways to deal with Covid-19 challenge and maximize job protection, income support and social resilience.

Dealing with a Post Covid-19 World: The Way Forward

The world will never remain the same again after this current episode of the Covid-19 challenge. I urge workers everywhere to be alert and proactive to the changes happening around us. Going forward, we have a lot of lessons to learn from the tumult in the global socio-economic order due to Covid-19.

- 1. It Must be People Before Profit:** Human beings are at the heart of existence and production. In Nigeria, we must find ways to recover our dilapidated social infrastructure particularly our health and education sectors. We must realize that the greatest wealth of Nigeria is not crude oil but the Nigerian people. We must educate our people. We must cultivate a healthy population. We cannot just keep loading our out-of-school children onto the back of lorries each time there is a pandemic. We need to fix our eye sore of 16 million out-of-school children.

Covid-19 has amplified the need to fix our primary healthcare system. We must revamp our secondary and tertiary health institutions. We must reconstruct a robust public health emergency system. We press that a huge chunk of the donations commendably made by Corporate Nigeria on Covid-19 and debt relief grants be deployed to tackling the deficits in our education and health sectors. We can reverse the trend of oversea medical tourism by matching our highly skilled medical personnel with hi-tech medical machines procured directly from Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs). We must adequately remunerate and incentivize our education and health personnel. We must stop treating labour as a commodity whose entitlements can be withheld or withdrawn at will.

- 2. We must Grow our Local Economy.** Instead of the craze of globe strutting in the name of looking for investors, we must look inwards to encourage local talents, innovations and enterprise. We want to see government take the challenge of local innovations seriously. This also means that we must adequately fund research. A country that neglects research is a country that has consigned herself to perpetual servitude. Nobody would grow our economy for us. The reality is that capital mobility would be a lot harder in the next few years following the Covid-19 pandemic as richer countries are also struggling to rebuild their own economies.

The Naira has taken some hit in the cause of the Covid-19 onslaught especially with the run on our external reserves. Now is the time to grow the Naira. The best way to defend our local currency is to produce what we consume. We must recover our industrialization zest. We must bring back our factories. We must rally round our local rice, tomato puree, palm oil, vegetable oil, pasteurized milk, textiles, leather and other goods that can be easily manufactured in our country. We can manufacture some of the materials used in the battle against Covid-19 including face masks, test kits, personal protective equipment, and ventilators. Government must provide the enabling infrastructure and policy framework.

In the bid to grow our economy and bolster the Naira, we must pay critical attention to the recovery of our downstream petroleum sub sector. Now is the time to hold a national conversation on the resuscitation of our four national refineries. Workers will resist any further attempt to transfer the cost of government ineptitude, corruption and inefficiencies in the downstream petroleum sub sector to poor Nigerians. We can no longer go on wasting precious foreign exchange reserves in the name of importing refined petroleum products.

The so called under recovery costs or petroleum subsidy are basically the costs of shipping, and demurrage which would be eliminated once we start local refining. Also, the whole fuel subsidy regime remains opaque. Nigerians are yet to be told the mechanism for the recent reduction in the price of the Premium Motor Spirit (PMS). Nigerians also wonder why the price of other derivatives of crude oil such as diesel and kerosene did not benefit from the unilateral reduction in the pump price of PMS.

We also warn that government cannot outsource carbon governance to one private refinery. We need our four public refineries and even more to be up and running as this would provide the perfect competition for locally produced petroleum derivatives. While we welcome the emergence of private refineries, we implore government to respect the provisions of Chapter 2 of our constitution which mandates government to take control of the commanding heights of our economy especially our mineral resources. Government will always have business in business.

- 3. We Must Diversify our Economy:** These trying times teach us that we must now genuinely diversify our economy and create more decent jobs. The current plunge in crude oil price might be our last warning. There are many untapped opportunities in our agricultural value chain that can help in jump starting our economy. We also have a gold mine in Information Communication Technology (ICT). The world is moving fast in ICT. We cannot continue to sit back as mere spectators. We must support our entertainment industry which provides a means of livelihood for the teeming mass of our people especially the youth. This is the time to wean our collective survival from the uncertain juices of crude oil.

The diversification of our economy requires very robust investment in modern and enduring infrastructure. If we aspire to build a 21st century economy, we must be inspired to build the commensurate infrastructure. Of great importance in this regard is power generation. It is scandalous that our total national electricity generation is less than what the City of New York requires on a daily basis to run. We call for an urgent review of the power privatization programme. We demand a stop to the exploitation of electricity consumers in Nigeria through estimated billing. We also call for the expansion and improvement of our existing road network, ports, railways, internal waterways, and our aviation sector.

- 4. Expand and Strengthen the Social Safety Nets:** While we commend the Federal and many State governments for offering palliatives to poor Nigerians during the period of this lockdown, we call on government to expand and strengthen the social safety nets by capturing more poor Nigerians especially the urban poor, and the working poor particularly workers in the informal sector who depend on daily income for survival. We also demand that the entitlements and needs of our pensioners, most of whom are highly vulnerable to Covid-19 infection and fatality are well catered for during the lockdowns and throughout this pandemic.

Mass-based groups and faith-based organizations should be involved in the distribution of palliatives to improve accountability and to ensure that they get to those who really need them – the poorest of the poor.

- 5. National Development Planning:** The socio-economic turmoil generated by the Covid-19 crisis must jolt us to return to national development planning. Nigerian workers are worried by constraints imposed by the dearth of deliberate planning of our national economy for many years. We urge all the tiers of Government in Nigeria to make deliberate efforts to return to national development planning. The advantages in doing so are many, including fixing the weak plan-budget link and thereby addressing the poor coherence in programmes and projects implementation. There is need for systematic and credible monitoring of the implementation of development programmes to ensure that they meet set targets and service identified needs. One thing is sure, a post Covid-19 world will severely punish any clime that fails to effectively plan.
- 6. Anti-Corruption Fight and Fiscal Discipline:** With dwindling resources available to governments all over the world to service the needs of their people, no thanks to Covid-19, it would be suicidal for any government to still tolerate waste and outright embezzlement of public funds. Right now, it is important for all Nigerians to see the fight against corruption as a collective battle for survival. This fight must be fought in a transparent and holistic way. Corrupt persons in and outside government must be dutifully tracked and diligently prosecuted. This requires a reformed justice system. We also reiterate our demand for specialised courts to speed up the prosecution of all corruption cases. Corruption cases must be dispensed with in a specific period of time. We also demand that recovered looted funds must be accounted for and utilized to revitalize the economy and attend to citizens welfare.

Organized Labour in Nigeria views the huge severance payment and pension to political office holders as a form of corruption. It is even more disturbing when many of the recipients of these self-sponsored and self-benefitting allowances are State Governors who left office with piles of unpaid salaries, gratuity and pension liabilities. The truth is that if we tackle official corruption and waste, there will be enough funds to pay workers' salaries. The slowdown in the economy will never be accepted as an excuse to owe workers or to lay off workers from their jobs.

7. We Must Now End the Cycle of Insecurity: We receive with delight the information from our military high command that the Nigerian defence forces are in the last phase of battle against the Boko Haram terrorists. While we salute the efforts and sacrifice of our armed forces, we urge them to make their promise good this time. Nigerians especially those in the North East zone cannot wait to get a feel of what it means to live a normal life again free from the vicissitudes of guns, bombs and mortar.

Our military, police, civil defence and the intelligence corps must also not lose sight of internal insurgencies and violent crimes especially kidnapping, herdsmen violence, cattle rustling, armed robbery and communal clashes. We urge our security forces to bring back the peace in our cities, towns and villages. Now is the time to restore our rural economy, communal living and peaceful co-existence. The emergence of regional security outfits must bring solutions and not exacerbate the current security blues in our country. We commiserate with Nigerians especially workers who lost dear ones, got injured or lost their livelihood amidst the insecurity in our country. May these sacrifices not be in vain.

We commend our security personnel for the risks they took while enforcing the lockdowns in different parts of Nigeria. Many of our security agents were professional in the discharge of their duties. We call on government to ensure that these hardworking men and women are motivated with necessary logistics and adequate protective wears.

Sadly, some of our security agents failed to live up to public expectations. There were reports of citizens harassment, use of disproportionate force and acceptance of bribes to compromise the lockdown. It is deeply reprehensible that during this lockdown more Nigerians have lost their lives to rogue security operatives than to the corona virus disease.

We particularly condemn the harassment of informal sector workers especially foodstuff sellers and drivers whose hard work ensures that there is food on the table of every Nigerian. While calling for the free movement of goods and personnel on essential duties, we demand thorough investigation of these infractions and diligent prosecution of law enforcement agents in dereliction of their responsibilities at this time.

8. Managing the Emerging Industrial Relations Milieu

One of the biggest impacts of the Covid-19 health insurgency is massive loss of jobs. In the United States alone, nearly 30 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits at the peak of the pandemic. There has never been such a surge of the army of the unemployed in the US since the Great Depression. The government of the United Kingdom offered to make up a substantial part of the wages of workers whose employers cannot keep up with salaries, in some cases up to 80 per cent. In Nigeria, some private firms have started laying off workers. We recognize that the gender vectors of this development tilts against women.

We appeal to private and informal sector employers to weigh in on the sacrifice made by workers to keep all of us safe during these perilous times. We ask employers to reciprocate and show some solidarity with the sacrifice of our workers by ensuring wage protection, income support especially through paid leave, and sick leave. This is not the time to stop or deduct from workers' salaries. Such would be both illogical and illegal as workers' salaries are core elements of employment contracts and collective bargaining agreements. We have asked our affiliates and state councils to resist any salary deduction on the account of Covid-19.

We also call on state governments who have not negotiated with workers on salary adjustment consequent on the new national minimum wage to quickly attend to this very urgent business. Already, the global commodity market crises consequent on Covid-19 and its impact on our local economy has left us with galloping inflation. We demand that the salary adjustment in our states should reflect these realities. After the lockdown, we will not hesitate to mobilize against state governments that fail to deliver wage justice to the working class in their states.

On this May Day, we remind ourselves of the cardinal lesson of Covid-19 pandemic – we are all humans – we are all in this together. There will be no more polemics to slave drivers who treat workers as sub-humans through casualization and anti-unionization. We warn you to cease and desist. Otherwise, we will find you! We will dare you!! We will win you!!!

9. Restarting the Nigerian Economy: We understand the public health imperatives for the lockdown in many parts of the country. As much as it is important to keep many Nigerians from the corona virus, loss of income and the accompanying destitution can also be a pathfinder for numerous other sicknesses and deaths. This is the time to play the balancing game. It is gratifying that President Muhammadu Buhari in his last nationwide broadcast on Covid-19 announced an imminent relaxation of the lockdown in the FCT, Ogun and Lagos States. The truth is that our economy might collapse into prolonged coma if the total lockdown in many parts of our country persists. Lockdowns are best effective in the short term. In the medium to long term, the human instinct to survive would kick in and restraint might lead to the collapse of law and order.

We call for a smart, gradual and evidence-based restarting of the economy. To ensure a safe restart, Federal and State governments should collaborate to build at least one test centre in each state. Efforts at Covid-19 testing, contact tracing, public fumigation, environmental sanitation and robust public health education should be expanded and intensified.

In the course of the gradual relaxation of the lockdown, it is important to stress that individual citizens and corporate organizations have both personal and collective responsibility to adhere to all health guidelines.

We call on the leadership of our industrial unions and state councils to continue working with the different cadres of workers' leadership in the states and unions to ensure that health and safety facilities and guidelines such as running water, soaps, hand sanitizers, use of protective masks and social distancing are made available and enforced at different workplaces. We encourage workers not to hesitate to contact the National Secretariat of NLC in the event of any Covid-19 related work place infraction, injustice, negligence and gender-based discrimination.

Aware of the backlash of Covid-19 stigmatization, the Nigeria Labour Congress will embark on a nationwide education and awareness campaign to discourage the stigmatization of workers and Nigerians who were Covid-19 victims. We urge every Nigerian to treat Covid-19 survivors as heroes and heroines. Such noble gesture would encourage

infected cases to boldly come forward knowing that they would not be stigmatized. This kind of response is crucial in preventing a second wave of Covid-19 in Nigeria. We need all hands to be on deck in this regard.

10. International Solidarity:

The Nigeria Labour Congress and International Trade Union Confederation condemn the current brickbat and blame games on Covid-19. This is not the time to trade blames. Right now, what is important are common actions to defeat the pandemic. This is not the time to withdraw support from commitments to global institutions. Covid-19 does not recognize borders. The actions of world governments must reflect this. We are in this together.

Given the lesson of shared humanity as espoused by Covid-19 pandemic, we call for the removal of trade embargoes and sanctions against Cuba, Venezuela and other countries who are being punished for the ideology of their leadership. We commend the government of Cuba for continuing in the fine tradition of medical solidarity to many countries where the fire of Covid-19 is raging. Your invaluable gift of life is stamped in so many hearts.

We call for the release of trade union leaders and activists in prison. Top on our list is President Luiz Inacio Lula Da Silva. Recent political developments in Brazil affirm his innocence. We also call for the release of our comrades held by the government of Cameroun because of their political convictions.

We cannot end this May Day Speech without drawing attention to the cause of the Saharawi Republic – Africa's last colonial outpost. We call on all African and world governments to keep up the pressure on Morocco and France until the people of Saharawi get their independence.

Conclusion

While we commend the contributions of Corporate Nigeria, big business concerns and other public-spirited Nigerians to the Covid-19 Mitigation Fund, we want to call on our political leaders to demonstrate leadership and goodwill at these trying times. Many of our political leaders declared humungous wealth in the form of assets and liquidity before assuming their current positions. We want them to assist the poor from their accumulated wealth instead of further exertion on the poor through salary deductions.

It is also important to commend the good work being done by the Presidential Task Force on Covid-19 chaired by the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (PTF). The Presidential Task Force has really done very well especially with regards to the daily briefing on Covid-19. This has helped to bridge the information gap and keep many Nigerians abreast with the correct information on Covid-19. In the same breath, we also commend the work being done by the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) all over the country to control the Covid-19 pandemic.

I want to end this 2020 May Day Speech by once again eulogizing the immense sacrifice offered by Nigerian workers during this lockdown. We cannot thank our frontline workers enough particularly our healthcare workers for their unquantifiable sacrifice, resilience, grit and excellent contributions to the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.

Fellow workers, your compliance with the stay at home order was a valueless contribution to the Covid-19 challenge. I salute our veterans, pensioners and allies for holding forth despite all odds. We are certain that this would soon pass. Until we meet at work, please stay safe!

Long Live the Nigeria Labour Congress
Long Live Working-Class Solidarity
Long Live International Solidarity
Long Live the Federal Republic of Nigeria



Comrade Ayuba Wabba, mni
President, Nigeria Labour Congress

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