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African Human Right Day 2020: Advancing a new social contract to ensure the protection of rights and to build back better

The African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa www.ituc-africa.org) joins the African peoples in commemorating Africa Human Rights Day under the theme **“Human and peoples’ rights and the COVID-19 pandemic: protecting rights for building back better”**.

Thirty-five years ago, on 21 October 1985, the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights came into force, as African Governments committed themselves to respect, promote and protect human rights on the continent. ITUC-Africa joins in commemorating this event as part of her resolve to strive for guarantees for human rights enjoyment on the continent.

The COVID-19 global public health crisis and its consequent economic and social crisis has made urgent and more important the need to focus on the protection and enjoyment of human rights. Millions of workers are losing jobs and income, causing biting hardship to many households and communities. Women, migrants and those operating in the informal economy are the worst hit by the socio-economic assaults of the pandemic.

We have seen most African governments take necessary public health measures to slow and reduce the spread and infection of COVID-19. At the same time, we have sadly seen that the lockdowns or stay-at-home instructions also curtailed freedom of movement, hindered participatory democracy and contributed to increased domestic/gender-based violence and mental health cases. Further, we have also witnessed, with strong concerns, calls for greater flexibility in the management of workers’ rights and liberalization of labour standards. These calls are intended to use the pandemic as an excuse to undermine workers’ rights. Such calls are repressive, unacceptable and will be resisted.

ITUC-Africa affirms that the respect, protection and fulfillment of civil and political, as well as social, economic and cultural rights were settled as the basis of the African Charter. ITUC-Africa is, therefore, concerned that some African states are developing a repressive policy hostile to the trade union movement and adopting restrictive rules on the exercise of the right to strike and to free expression.

More than ever, human rights observance including economic and social rights, civil and political rights, are needed in responding to this health crisis. To make this possible, African states and governments must work together with trade unions, employers and civil society organizations to establish and consolidate a new social contract. This is required to address the profound changes in our society, reshape social relations, secure social protection for all, and deepen social justice, all as part of the effort to achieve equitable and sustainable development and peace in Africa. ITUC-Africa calls on all stakeholders to commit to making this happen. Let us commit to build back better!



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