

COVID-19 worsens already difficult conditions for the working people of Angola

Angola confirmed its first two positive cases of COVID-19 on 21st March, 2020. Both were imported cases from Portugal. As elsewhere in most of Africa, the Government of Angola quickly adopted a number of measures with the view to containing the spread of the virus and preventing it from spreading widely within the population.

Measures of restriction

The Government of Angola declared a State of Emergency initially for 15 days subject to renewal and imposed a number of restrictions. These included:

Closure of educational institutions

Ban on entry or exiting the country, with exemptions for cargo.

Restriction on movements between provinces within the country.

Suspension of public services with the exception of essential services such as hospitals and pharmacies.

Prohibition of meetings comprising more than 50 persons.

Prohibition of all leisure, recreational and religious gatherings.

Commercial activity to be closed with the exception of essential supplies such as food, banks, media, hotels, takeaway food, gas stations.

Industrial and agriculture to remain closed with the exception, among others, of food and beverage production, essential health products, oil industry and oilfield service providers, and mining.

Government also pronounced some labour protection rules whereby certain groups of people who were at risk and needed to be released from working at their usual working site were not to be dismissed by employers due to their absence at work.

The State of Emergency was renewed two times till May 10, 2020, before Government began to slowly relax the restrictions. Meanwhile on April 10, 257 Cuban doctors arrived in Angola to help with the fight against COVID-19.

As of May 14, 2020, the number of confirmed cases in Angola stood at 45 with 14 recoveries and 2 deaths.

Visible Impacts on Workers

Angola has seen a sharp rise in prices of food products and essential commodities since the enactment of measures to contain and prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Many workers have, thus, found it extremely difficult to cater for themselves and their families.

Even though the wages of workers in general were supposed to be protected by the Presidential Decree that was issued as part of the declaration of State of Emergency, in practice, many employers have not adhered to the Decree. Reports indicate that many workers have received notification of termination of contracts. A number of workers in the hospitality sector have gone without wages since restrictions were announced. Employers cite lack of resources for their inability to pay wages.

In the private education sector, proprietors have demanded the payment of 60% of tuition from students even though classes had been suspended since March.

Meanwhile within communities, shortages of potable water for drinking and for maintaining basic hygiene has negatively affected the fight against the coronavirus.

Again, people who tested positive for COVID-19 have also suffered discrimination and stigmatization.

Trade Unions and their role

Government responses and interventions have been formulated without consultation with unions, in spite of the impacts the measures have had on workers.

Thus far, trade unions have been faced with a major challenge of financing because payment of union dues has fallen drastically. Most trade union offices have been closed. A Confederation like the National Union of Angolan Workers (UNTA), has had to set up a daily rotating work schedule with two employees and a manager. Reports from union officials indicate that teleworking or working virtually is hardly possible because of the high cost of internet connectivity in the country. Statistics show that the monthly cost of internet data is equal to or higher than four times the national minimum wage in Angola. By and large, social distancing measures are being practiced by all union members in line with the prohibition against public gatherings under the State of Emergency. The difficulties of union work notwithstanding, three national trade union centres led by UNTA have tried to work together in the fight against COVID-19. On 1st of May, 2020, during the commemoration of International Workers Day, the organizations released a joint statement calling for the safety and protection of workers, maintenance of jobs, protection of workers' rights and improvement in social dialogue.

UNTA has further produced educational videos on COVID-19 health protocols to sensitize its

members and the public through social media platforms. This is in addition to several appearances by union officials in television and radio discussions to voice out the concerns and needs of workers during the period of restrictions. Some of the unions affiliated to UNTA have also been involved in providing Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) to hospitals and protective gear for workers in the informal sector. A number of local unions have also signed agreements with employers to ensure the retention of jobs during this period. To date, there has been no tripartite session to address issues pertaining to COVID-19. Employers and workers have had separate meetings to address employment issues in the light of COVID-19.

Conclusion

While the Angolan Government appears to have adopted a fair number of measures around restrictions of movement of persons to contain the spread of the virus, there is little evidence that these measures have been accompanied by adequate social provisions to alleviate the burden of the crises on working people and the most vulnerable in society.

Angola's capital, Luanda, ranks as one of the most expensive cities in the world. However around half of the Angola population lives on less than \$2 a day. Thus, the restrictions imposed to contain the spread of the coronavirus without the benefit of accompanying social measures could only have meant more hardship for the majority of Angola's people.

The country has recorded high economic growth rates following years of oil boom. But this growth has not been accompanied by investments in needed public services like public health, education and other social services and has only led to huge economic inequalities over the years. The absence of adequate potable water nationwide has been the most telling index of the social deprivation in Angola during the health crisis.

Again, the absence of Government consultation with relevant key stakeholders such as trade unions and employers in the formulation of policy interventions in the face of a national emergency like the public health crisis posed by the coronavirus pandemic is a major cause for worry.

Like other unions in Africa and elsewhere in the world, the unions of Angola have to become more demanding in the bid to influence the changing world that is bound to emerge out of the COVID-19 pandemic. As our countries begin to move away from restrictions and to define a new normal in our economic and social lives, unions must intensify efforts to put occupational safety and health for workers, living wages and social protection at the top of the agenda of economic and social policies for our countries.

We must resolve to fight harder going forward!