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Dear Mr. President,

ITUC-Africa¹ (www.ituc-africa.org) has been following the initiatives of the Bureau of the African Union Heads of States and Governments in response to the emergence and spread of COVID-19 in Africa and commends your leadership and courage.

We acknowledge and welcome in particular your effort in championing both continental and global coordination in the response to the pandemic as well as your steps towards soliciting international support for Africa in this major battle. The appointment of AU Special Envoys in the endeavor to canvass debt relief and other repayment arrangements and financial concessions are critical for securing the needed fiscal space and resources for all African countries in these difficult times.

Given the enormity of the catastrophe that could befall Africa should the continent experience a full-scale outbreak of the epidemic, we deem it necessary to address the African Union on a number of urgent issues.

The African Situation

Africa is noted for its poor health infrastructure, poor sanitation and hygiene, inadequate provision of potable water, weak supply of electricity, poor mass education, poor housing and urban congestion, widespread absence of income protection and explosion of informality. These are compounded by the low observance of human and democratic rights and the poor use of social dialogue in addressing issues on the continent. These conditions have festered over decades and despite efforts at democratic governance in recent times resulted in considerable mistrust between the African people and many governments across the continent. These conditions haunt our different countries to varying degrees. They present African governments with

¹ The African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) is a pan-African workers' organisation with a current membership of 17 million from 52 of the 54 African countries.

enormous challenges as they race to institute effective measures for containing the virus and preventing it from assuming epidemic proportions.

Experience of dealing with COVID-19

ITUC-Africa acknowledges the range of emergency measures taken so far by different African countries in preventing the spread of the deadly virus. From imposition of restrictions on public gatherings and movement of people, closure of schools, places of worship and entertainment, to imposition of curfews and lockdowns, African governments are on the right path towards combatting COVID-19. These measures are needed to ensure effective social distancing despite their obvious economic and social ramifications. The measures appear to be derived from lessons from Asia, Europe and America where the coronavirus has already killed over one hundred and forty thousand people. The lessons indicate that the countries recording the most deaths from COVID-19 are those countries which failed to implement aggressive policies for social distancing early enough. These are the countries that allowed the virus to reach epidemic proportions before taking emergency measures.

Regrettably, we note that even though some emergency measures are being taken in a number of our countries, too many of such measures are half-hearted. The manner of their rollout and implementation do not fully convey the urgency with which the measures must be followed. It appears to us that in the main, reluctance in taking aggressive measures of restrictions and lockdown are driven by the reality of the conditions described above, namely, the sheer challenge of implementing such measures among populations who live in overcrowded premises, eke out living on a day to day basis and who have no means of actually practicing social distancing in their real living circumstances.

Need for Decisive Leadership

ITUC-Africa cries out to the African Union that this is the time for real leadership in Africa. As in the past, leadership failure will be catastrophic for the people of this continent in the present crisis. The danger of mass deaths for the people of Africa from COVID-19 leaves no room for ineptitude, lack of courage or political games in any part of the continent. We welcome the AU call for lifting of sanctions against Zimbabwe and Sudan so that like other African countries they can also harness all possible resources to help fight the pandemic. But in turn, we call on the AU to demand from these errant states the respect for human and trade union rights that make it possible for popular input into their decisions and measures for fighting COVID-19 within their territories.

ITUC-Africa fully welcomes the AU's coordinating role. We acknowledge the AU's demand for the Regional Economic Communities to coordinate effort at regional level. We have also noted the AU's call for coordination among the ministries of Finance, Health and Transport of our different countries in the fight against the pandemic. We call on the AU Bureau to use the experience gathered around the world and Africa so far in the fight against COVID-19 as well as the expertise and consultations with social partners available to it to develop guidelines that can help all member states in their responses to the growing crisis. This is necessary to ensure that Africa can avert a catastrophe. We believe that the current crisis with all its dangers still provides the opportunity for Africa to turn its fortunes round and to reclaim lost ground in providing

real development for its people. But this will depend on how our leaders organize the people and resources to respond to what is in effect an existential threat to us. The AU's leadership will be key going forward.

Total Mobilization

ITUC-Africa believes it should be obvious to all leaders on the continent that Africa cannot survive this crisis and secure a proper place in the new world that is bound to emerge out of it if we carry on business as usual. Governments in Africa face the enormous task of uniting all our people to fight as one against the coronavirus. Our governments owe us the duty to offer political leadership in uniting the different political forces and civil society groups to put our collective shoulders to the wheel in these difficult times.

This is the time for our governments to reach out strongly to our scientific communities, to our entrepreneurs and captains of industry, to trade unions and professional associations, youth associations and others. Our women's organisations and leaders also deserve particular attention in any effort at mass mobilization given their massive presence in the informal economy of most African countries and their central role in the survival of households. Governments are entreated to work closely with all these groups in finding creative solutions to the crisis we face and in exacting the necessary sacrifices in the current period.

As in a war situation, our collective survival is at stake. This demands that all well-meaning groups in society join forces to fight the common threat that faces our entire continent. All groups that claim to represent people in various ways and all persons who lay claim to leadership at any level are duty bound to stand up in this time of crisis to be counted and to live up to their responsibilities of leadership.

ITUC-Africa calls for emergency measures including possible total lockdowns to make social distancing effective in containing the virus and preventing further spread. We have heard loud voices against lockdowns for two main reasons: first, because it is very difficult to implement as a result of the high informality and urban overcrowding; and second, because of the terrible toll lockdowns will exact on African economies.

Our response to the seeming difficulty of implementing lockdowns is that the tragedy that can face us in millions of dead people across the continent from the virus demands that we devise every means as in a war of survival to make it possible to implement that measure. On the heavy cost of lockdowns to African economies, our simple response is that if we are able to organize during this period to assure our survival we can surely mobilize to rebuild our economies once the crisis is over. The envisaged economic costs of lockdowns pale into insignificance compared to the probable human tragedy that would befall the continent should the virus spread to epidemic levels.

Indeed the process of mobilizing to implement emergency measures for survival may well carry within them the seeds for how we mobilize to rebuild and reorder our societies during the post-crisis recovery.

Declaring War on COVID-19 - Imposition of Restrictions, Lockdowns and Related Measures

Every single day lost in taking decisive action moves us closer to tragedy. Africa's political leaders are therefore called upon to **declare war on the novel coronavirus as the invisible enemy** that threatens to ravage our societies. ITUC-Africa calls on the African Union to develop guidelines relating to the following:

1. The imposition of severe restrictions on social activities to prevent the spread of the virus.

- This requires implementing comprehensive measures to achieve social distancing in order to suppress the virus and prevent the occurrence of a full-blown epidemic;
- Countries must be encouraged to dig into their reserves to provide income and food support to persons who have no social safety nets and cannot survive if they do not step out daily to earn a living;
- To achieve effective social distancing we must deal decisively with overcrowding in communities and settlements; there is need to consider transforming empty school premises and/or other public premises into camps for temporary accommodation. This must be followed with short- to medium-term projects to expand low cost housing as part of post crisis recovery and reconstruction effort;
- Investment in mass education, communication and popular messaging on COVID-19 - on preventive measures and the application of the prescribed hygiene protocols and social distancing for controlling and suppressing the virus; on how to identify symptoms of the disease and resort immediately to the health authorities for medical attention.
- Needed caution and education against gender-based violence within locked up communities.

2. Priority investment in public health with particular attention to the following:

- securing, and where possible, production of Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) for health workers;
- increasing the number of health workers and supporting staff;
- provisioning for extensive testing and contact tracing of persons who may be infected with the virus;
- provisioning or requisitioning of premises for isolation and quarantine of cases and suspected cases and treatment of infected persons;
- requisitioning all necessary facilities and resources in each country needed

to prosecute this fight;

- provision of insurance and incentives to health professionals and workers.

3. Clear identification of essential goods and services that need to be produced and distributed to secure the survival of the people under restrictions and lockdowns. These will include food, water, electricity, sanitation, health and medical supplies, telecommunication, media and mobilising our scientific community, our entrepreneurs and captains of industry and work force for the production of such necessities.

4. Food support also requires paying attention to nutrition that can boost the immune systems of our people. This means encouraging the consumption of many of the available foods on the continent that are rich in vitamins A, C and D as against the junk food that many of our people are gradually becoming dependent on.

5. Provision of the necessary security, protection and incentives for workers who are engaged in the provision of essential goods and services and the organisation of their work in such a manner that those who can work from home do so.

6. Institution of fiscal and monetary measures to support medium and small-scale enterprises that have to operate to provide essential goods and services during this period.

7. Pay closer attention to internal production and trade within the Regional Economic Communities and the creation of supply chains across Africa during this period when the countries that Africa has tended to depend on are primarily concerned with their own survival and interests. This can create the basis for accelerated implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in a self-driven manner.

8. Encourage all countries to implement measures to protect and support businesses and workers, including providing:

- Sick leave
- Wage support
- Income support
- Rent and mortgage reliefs

Implementing such measures also require the full use of social dialogue among governments, employers and trade unions to create the appropriate conditions for joint effort that maintains productive capacity and safeguards jobs.

9. Roles must be carved out for the armed forces in the organization and mobilization of our communities and in the provision of essential goods and services. Further, members of the security forces who play roles in enforcing restrictions and lockdown directives must be oriented to do so in the most civil and humane ways. Governments must also be cautioned against using the necessary restrictions required by the times to violate and abuse the human rights of their people.

10. Pay attention to the needs of migrant workers in various African countries and employ political and diplomatic means to protect African citizens and all persons of

African descent anywhere in the world against xenophobia, discrimination and racism that may be perpetrated under the pretext of enforcing COVID-19 preventive measures.

11. Push for further debt relief, deferred repayment of debts that are due this year and other financial concessions from the International Financial Institutions, creditor nations and all other multilateral agencies for all African countries to provide them with the necessary fiscal space and capability to respond to the health crisis and its economic and social costs.

12. Continue to engage with the World Health Organization (WHO) and support its leadership role towards achieving global coordination in the fight against COVID-19.

COVID-19 has already changed the world. It is not hard to imagine a remarkably different world when the pandemic is over. Africa must, therefore, pull together properly in fighting this pandemic to create a strong basis for developing our countries and improving the living conditions of our peoples. African workers and the people at large look to the AU under your leadership to take those steady steps that are necessary to avert the calamity that can befall us with COVID-19 and to lead Africans to prepare and be ready for the world that will emerge when the COVID-19 pandemic has been defeated.

Yours in service of African workers,



Kwasi Adu-Amankwah
General Secretary of ITUC-Africa.

April 17, 2020

cc: **H.E. Moussa Faki**
The Chairperson, African Union Commission
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia