



## **NIGERIA LABOUR CONGRESS**

**MOTTO: LABOUR CREATES WEALTH**

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### **BEYOND SURVIVAL: NIGERIAN WORKERS AND PEOPLE DESERVE BETTER IN 2021**

*Text of a Goodwill Message to Nigerian Workers on New Year's Day, 2021, by Comrade Ayuba Wabba, mni, President, Nigeria Labour Congress*

On behalf of the National Executive Council (NEC) of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), I congratulate Nigerian workers, pensioners and people on the celebration of the 2021 New Year Day. There is indeed a lot to celebrate this New Year. We celebrate life. We celebrate hope. We celebrate our survival amidst the great turbulence, troubles and trials that marked the outgone year. Surviving 2020 is no mean feat. We thank the Almighty God whose grace and mercies saw us through the vicissitudes of 2020.

The year 2020 was largely defined by disruptions by the novel corona virus (COVID-19) in the way we work, live and play occasioning some of the broadest global lockdown and dislocation in recent history. The impact of the novel corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic with a current global death toll of more than one million seven hundred thousand and an infection rate of more than eighty-two million persons has left giant craters in our psyche and a lot of sour tales on the lips of billions of people in the world.

Perhaps, there is no other place where the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt than in the workplace. Millions of workers all over the world including Nigeria lost their jobs and means of livelihood as businesses contracted owing to the extensive lockdowns and the spill over economic shocks. According to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO), as at September 2020 about 94 percent of the global workforce were already impacted by the hiccups occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. The income losses from this impact currently stands at 495 million Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs. The monetary equivalent of this loss of income by workers totals to the tune of about 3.4 trillion United States Dollars. The real bite of the virus, apart from the high death toll, is the fact that it has recruited in its wake a huge army of working-class poor. The ILO estimates that the contraction in productivity as a result of the extensive lockdown and associated slow economic recovery has exacerbated and deepened the crisis of working class poverty globally.

The grim outlook painted in 2020 by the outbreak of the novel corona virus disease appears gloomier when we consider the fact that before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic the world was already faced with the prevalence of massive inequality: income inequality, racial injustice and gender discrimination in addition to the destruction resulting from extreme weather events due to climate change. We were also confronted with the choices associated with the best and worst impacts of technology which were devoid of a rights base. These events were already driving an age of anger barrage especially as marked by civil unrests and distrust in democracy in different countries of the world before Covid-19 made a landfall in virtually all the countries of the world.

Comrades and compatriots, the long shadows thrown by the COVID-19 insurgence will not just go away in 2021 by the wave of some magic wand. The global community would need to keep up with international solidarity and a great invocation of the appeal of our shared humanity if we are to survive the looming second wave of this deadly virus. The development of vaccines for the management of the novel corona virus is a step forward in the mobilization of our basic human instincts of survival for the great push back against this uncommon invisible foe. Yet, we must be modest to admit that the mere development of vaccine is not enough. We must think of how to make the vaccines affable, affordable, and available. We reiterate the call for the production of pro-poor vaccines for developing and under developed economies of the world. If there is one lesson that this virus has taught us, it is that we are all in this together.

While we await the mass production, distribution and administration of the vaccines, we use the occasion of this New Year to salute the contributions of the Nigerian working class in steering the narrative of 2020 away from the precipice of complete breakdown to a plateau of recovery, resilience and resurgence of hope. We salute the uncommon sacrifice of our frontline workers. To the nurses, doctors, laboratory workers, nutritionists, health environmentalists, morticians, transport workers, informal sector workers, security personnel and journalists who stoically kept the wheels of survival rolling at the most turbulent times of 2020, we owe you oceans of gratitude.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the devotion to duty by our frontline workers was the difference between deaths in millions and the lower casualty figure so far recorded in our clime since the outbreak of the pandemic. This is quite contrary to early prognostics by some foreign experts who predicted that the fatality toll in this part of the world would be in millions. Well, even as we continue to keep up our guards, we can say that we have consigned those prophecies to the dust bin of history thanks to the fervor, vigour and rigor of the excellent services provided by our frontline workers. We also take this moment to honour the memory and work of frontline workers who paid the supreme price in the line of duty. We owe you a world of gratitude for our survival. Your labours will not be in vain. Your sacrifice will always be remembered.

For us at the Nigeria Labour Congress, the year 2020 was a year of digging deep into a reservoir of initiatives to confront an unprecedented workplace health emergency. First, we understood the acute importance of knowledge in dealing with a novel pandemic. We assessed the situation through surveillance visits to the hotspots. In synergy with our affiliate unions especially those in the frontline sectors, we developed a worker-based strategy on dealing with Covid-19. Second, we acknowledged the primacy of collective leadership in dealing with the onslaught of the pandemic. This was what inspired the setting up of the Labour Civil Society Situation Room on COVID-19. This initiative was cascaded to the state level where we replicated State Councils Civil Society Situation Rooms on COVID-19. The purpose was to engage the social partners on effective and efficient management of the fallout of the pandemic.

Third, we matched our intentions with real actions on the field. Flowing from our observations on the field especially from hotspots where frontline workers are actively deployed in the battle against Covid-19, we engaged and communicated our concerns to relevant public authorities particularly the COVID-19 Presidential Task Force. These concerns include deficits in the supplies of critical care resources including personal protective equipment for health workers, conducive care environment for workers and patients and the need for adequate incentives and motivation for health workers.

Out of the importunity of the pandemic, we also saw opportunities. We saw a window to look inwards and mobilize our local resources in combating COVID-19 and in the process boost the domestic economy. We partnered with the National Union of Textile, Garment and Tailoring Workers of Nigeria (NUTGTWN), Abuja chapter to produce thousands of face masks. These masks were distributed free of charge to frontline workers especially those in healthcare, sanitation, media and the informal sector.

Media advocacy was kept on the front burner throughout the first phase of the pandemic and the associated lockdown. In partnership with the International Labour Organization (ILO), the NLC developed a number of public and workers education messages which were disseminated through mass media platforms particularly as radio jingles and social media adverts. The National and State chapters of the Labour Civil Society Situation Room also intermittently released press statements highlighting to government and private sector employers the concerns of Nigerian workers and people on the pandemic and offering workers perspectives on how to tackle the challenges.

Our modest efforts bore some fruits. One of the significant results was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on Jobs Protection between Organized Labour and the Nigeria Employers Consultative Association on June 15, 2020. The overarching aim of the MoU is to promote health, boost productivity, protect jobs, strengthen social dialogue cum tripartism and preserve the means of livelihood for millions of Nigerians.

Furthermore, in the course of our engagement with emerging public policy issues on COVID-19, Congress was able to secure reversals to a number of adversarial industrial pronouncements by both private sector employers and the government. One of the outstanding results in this regard was the reversal of the sack of thousands of workers by Access Bank PLC upon the relaxation of the general restrictions imposed at the cusp of the first wave of the novel corona virus pandemic. The intervention of Congress also aborted moves by other financial institutions, private sector employers, and small to medium scale businesses to follow suit and lay off workers in millions.

On the part of government, a number of poorly conceived policy actions were resisted by Congress. Upon the outbreak of the novel corona virus and while Nigerians were still under lockdown, the government on three occasions announced increases in the electricity tariff. The Nigerian Labour Congress and Organized Labour in Nigeria resisted the tariff increases. The government was forced to reverse the increases. There were also sustained efforts to increase the price of refined petroleum products especially the Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) commonly called petrol. Congress at different times was able to secure the suspension, reversal or reduction of the price increases.

During the struggle against the recent increase in the pump price of petrol which led to the declaration of a strike ultimatum for 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2020, government was forced to negotiate with Organized Labour. This yielded a number of milestones which if diligently pursued would permanently incinerate the causative pathogens responsible for the chaos that has for decades dogged Nigeria's downstream petroleum sub sector and which are fundamentally responsible for incessant increases in the pump price of refined petroleum products. These pathogens include the total collapse of our local petroleum refineries, dislocations in our products distribution network and the pervasive corruption that has crippled the proper governance of our carbon resources.

In 2020, we took some flaks from a section of the public. We understand that some of the misgivings are due to misunderstanding and mis-expectations on the role of labour in contemporary industrial relations milieu. While many perceive labour especially the Nigeria Labour Congress as the alternative army that can always unilaterally crush every adversarial policy and conduct of government and private sector employers, the truth is that the NLC is only a workers' representative organization whose primary duty is to project and protect the interest of Nigerian workers through dialogue, consultation, negotiations, collective bargaining and in extreme situation through resort to industrial actions. Even when we are pushed to deploy this means of last resort, it remains only a means to bring the other social partners to the negotiation table for win-win outcomes. To insist on strike actions when the other party is ready to negotiate is not only a betrayal of genuine working-class struggle but also a capitulation to anarchism. Trade unionism is not exactly subscription to anarcho-syndicalism! We are not anarchists.

The Nigeria Labour Congress has always been a foremost pan Nigerian, pro-poor working-class organization. We appreciate the historical burden placed on our shoulders and we remain committed to fully and truly discharging this responsibility to the Nigerian workers and people. Our unalloyed devotion to this call of duty would be renewed in the year ahead of us. This is particularly crucial given the fact that an Organized Capital under the pressure of economic downturns, as always, would want to have an easy pick of a sacrificial lamb from the stables of the working class. It is important at this point to reiterate that Nigerian workers and indeed workers all over the globe are no longer available as commodities of sacrifice for woes orchestrated by a greedy and overreaching capital. We will not stay duck to be picked by bullets of unfair redundancy, wage cuts, slave work conditions, unhealthy work environments and unbearable living conditions especially hyper-inflation amidst inflexible remuneration.

Certainly, Nigerian workers and people deserve better in 2021 and the years beyond it. We deserve decent and living wages including the national minimum wage paid as at when due. We deserve an enabling work environment that satisfies the demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century occupational safety and health standards. Nigerian pensioners deserve prompt and adequate payment of their pension and sundry retirement benefits. Nigerian youths, the aged and the vulnerable among us deserve a sustainable social security scheme that provides meaningful support while unemployed, during sickness and at times of great need such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. In short, Nigerians deserve a full life!

Overall, we, the Nigerian workers and people, demand freedom from the shackles of economic strangulation, social turmoil, political tumults and the resultant widespread insecurity that has shaken our dear country to its very foundations. We demand an end to the insurgency of terrorism. We demand an end to the rural banditry spreading like Harmattan fire all over the country. We demand an end to the criminal commoditization of human beings by organized kidnapping networks. We demand safety in our schools, workplaces and worship centers. We refuse to continue to live as refugees in our own country. We refuse to be cowed into silence. We just want to be normal human beings again. We believe we are not asking too much from our government at every level.

Pursuant to the foregoing demands, the Nigeria Labour Congress would be pursuing the following industrial and social actions in the year 2021:

### **1. Vigorous Campaign for Decent Work and Protection of Pensioners**

In 2021, the Nigeria Labour Congress will intensify the campaign for decent work. Our drive will be steered by the four strategic objectives of decent work - opportunities for full employment, rights at work, social protection especially for pensioners and social dialogue. We prioritize decent work because work is divine and of intrinsic value as both a means and the end of production and also as an invitation to co-create with God.

It is unfortunate that till now, some states have refused to pay the new national minimum wage. It has also been reported that some states that had signed collective bargaining agreements with our state councils on the payment of consequential salary adjustment and pension benefits owing to the new national minimum wage have started renegeing on their commitment. In the midst of the prevailing astronomical increase in the cost of living, it would only be tantamount to a death wish on workers for any State to refuse or renege to pay the new national minimum wage and the consequential salary adjustment. Accordingly, we call on all our state councils still struggling with their state governments on the payment of the national minimum wage and consequential salary increase and those whose state governments have unilaterally cut wages and are owing workers salary arrears to prepare for mass industrial action and protests this New Year.

Furthermore, we insist that government must make possible the enabling environment that would foster job creation and full employment in line with the constitutional responsibilities of the State to ensure the welfare and security of citizens. As we saw with the recent **“ENDSARS Protest”**, unemployment and poverty are perfect recipes for the breakdown of law and order and are also harbingers of widespread anarchy.

Comrades, in order to withstand further shocks from the resurgence of fresh outbreaks of Covid-19 and or other health and socio-economic dislocations, we must design a recovery plan that rebuilds the social contract between government and societies and hoisted on the foundations of resilience. In order to achieve this, we must ensure that Decent Work is at the centre of government actions to bring back economic growth and build a new national and global economy that puts people and the planet first.

## **2. Prioritization of the Security of Lives and Property**

In 2020, we witnessed some of the most audacious backlashes of the waves of insecurity in our country. Terrorists groups and cells of armed bandits overran large swathes of our lands carving out domains of operations at great cost to citizens' lives, limbs and livelihoods. Workers were not spared as many workers became victims of the outrageous bloody campaign by the agents of evil and misery. The recent murder of hundreds of farm workers in Koshobe, Borno State and its environs introduced a new angle of industrial safety concerns to the specter of terrorism in North East Nigeria.

In 2021, we will fully unfurl our plans for a national advocacy campaign on insecurity. Part of the plans is to convene a multi-stakeholders conference on insecurity in Nigeria. If there is anytime we must prioritize national security it is now as nobody knows what next the widening fissures in our national security walls would allow in. Consistent with the provisions of Article 10 of ILO Convention 190 which permits workers to remove themselves from work situations that could harm their persons, we might be forced to ask workers to withdraw their services from workplaces that are not secured and safe.

### **3. Promotion of Good Governance**

A key preamble of the ILO Constitution which was further buttressed in the 1944 Philadelphia Declaration posits that there can never be sustained progress anywhere until there is social justice and injustice anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere.

As has been our historical prerogative, the NLC will continue to champion the cause of good governance, inclusive growth, sustainable development and social justice. We will pay serious attention to the attributes that define good governance such as accountability, transparency, inclusion, rule of law, effective and efficient allocation of resources and popular participation in public governance. We shall insist that these attributes are not only restored as cardinal bearings in our body polity but also respected especially through institutional reforms including the reform of the electoral space.

### **4. Economic Recovery and Resilience**

As a patriotic organization, the Nigeria Labour Congress will in 2021 continue to pursue programs that would engender economic recovery and resilience especially after the backlashes of the COVID-19 outbreak. We will continue to promote backward integration policies that place premium attention on the use of local resources including domestic skills and expertise in optimizing our raw materials value chain.

The COVID-19 crisis makes our appeal more pertinent now than ever. No country develops by being the dumping ground for other people's creativity and enterprise. We must evolve sound policies and put in place the infrastructure that facilitate the production and distribution of "Made in Nigeria" goods. This way we will even our trade balance, strengthen the Naira, create sustainable jobs, improve the living conditions of our people and accumulate wealth for genuine economic diversification. Our starting point must be the recovery of our national oil refineries as agreed with government. This will save us the severe hemorrhage that our economy is subjected to.

### **5. Strengthening Tripartite Relations**

No person can clap with one hand. For the sake of industrial harmony, progress and sustainable development, we invite all the social partners to clap with both hands to the music of dignity of labour, fair allocation of proceeds of production and social justice.

We commend the National Industrial Court of Nigeria for signing off 2020 on the note of social justice. The recent judgement of the NICN affirming the subservience of our industrial relations practices to ratified international labour standards brings succor and hope to Nigerian workers as it strengthens labour's hand in its demand for workplace liberties, equity and justice. In 2021, we expect the strengthening of our national labour administration especially through improvement in labour inspection and social tripartism including collective bargaining and a just dispute resolution mechanism that is fair to all social partners. It would be easier to achieve all these through progressive labour law reform and institutionalization of tripartite social dialogue process.

## **6. Overcoming COVID-19**

Finally, we must all brace up to what could be the last frontier of the struggle against the novel corona virus disease in 2021. The resurgence of COVID-19 in many countries of the world especially with the discovery of new strains of the virus calls for measured but concerted response by governments globally. The occupational safety and health of workers especially frontline workers must continue to receive the deserved attention from public authorities. We renew our calls for the provision of adequate personal protective equipment, conducive work environment and enabling compensation cum health hazard allowances for workers who risk their lives to keep us safe and well.

It is heartwarming that in the already established COVID-19 vaccine distribution and administration protocol in many parts of the world, frontline health workers top the priority list. We call for the inclusion of all workers, the aged, the vulnerable, employers and public officials in the priority list of recipients of the COVID-19 vaccine.

We will never say enough of the need for a pro-poor vaccine. We reiterate our call on the international health community to work together to ensure that the already developed vaccines and future vaccine developments would not come at a price that would dig deeper holes in the pockets of developing countries which economies are already overwhelmed by the impact of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current global health insurgency is primarily a public health emergency and so the solution should not be commoditized but treated as a service of humanitarian gesture.

We call on the Nigerian government and governments of other African cum developing economies to take up the challenge of the corona virus by rejigging our public health systems, our capabilities for research and innovation and robust mobilization of public consensus for effective adherence to health protocols for our collective survival.

### **In Conclusion**

Beyond survival, we must thrive and flourish! This is our expectation and prayers for 2021. We will not only say our prayers. We must be ready to work our prayers. For faith without works is dead. Part of our work for 2021 is to ensure that we stay healthy by following COVID-19 safety rules. We must indulge the Holidays with caution. We must observe all health protocols. It is not over until it is over. I urge Nigerian workers to redouble their commitment to productivity. The investment of our labours will release the blessings – a fair share of the reward of surplus value and the future we truly deserve. Once again, I wish all of us a rewarding and a prosperous 2021!!!

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**Comrade Ayuba Wabba, mni**  
**President, NLC and ITUC**  
**31<sup>st</sup> December 2020**