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Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

An Open Letter from African Workers to the African Union Member States and the Prospective Candidates in the Election of the African Union (AU) Commission Chairperson: Prioritise Competency, Values, and Commitment to AU Agenda 2063

On behalf of the African Regional Organization of the International Trade Union Confederation, ITUC-Africa, (<https://www.ituc-africa.org/>), we extend our greetings and best wishes to the African Union (AU) Member States and the prospective candidates in the lead-up to the pivotal election of the AU Commission Chairperson in February 2025. This election represents a crucial juncture for the continent, providing an opportunity to elect a chairperson and leaders who will follow through with the vision and aspirations of Agenda 2063 and the broader goals of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

We note with commendation that some strides have been made notably in the areas of promoting trade as an instrument of economic growth through the coming into effect of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), improvement in labour migration governance heralded by the signing of the Africa and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States and Jordan and Lebanon Labour Migration Dialogue now known as Doha Dialogue, and steady, though slow, efforts to undertake fundamental reforms within the AUC. We equally acknowledge the AUC's efforts to contain insecurity and the spread of violent and civil conflicts on the continent. African workers also recognise the position of keeping fate with the AUC's position on constitutional democracy and civilian governance. Efforts to ensure genuine women's empowerment and improve their socio-economic, political and cultural conditions remain promising. However, gaps abound in the afore-listed areas and others, which the African Union Commission, its Members States, the new Chairperson and leaders must prioritise.

African workers reiterate that the office of the Chairperson of the AU Commission plays a central role in steering the continent toward a future of inclusive growth, social justice, and human and labour rights. As the representative body of African workers, ITUC-Africa urges that the selection of the new Chairperson and Commissioners should focus on demonstrated competency, alignment with the values of social justice, and a solid commitment to advancing the rights and welfare of African workers.

Your Excellencies and dear prospective candidates, the following are some of the key issues impacting African workers, where the newly elected AU Commission Chairperson, Commissioners, and leaders can significantly impact the lives of African workers:

1. Democracy and Governance

While the continent has recorded progress, there are growing concerns about the decline in democratic participation, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to recent assessments, voter turnout in several African countries has dropped partly because of the absence of the dividends of democracy. We have witnessed an alarming trend of shrinking spaces for the enjoyment of civil liberties, especially freedom of association, express and assembly with these rights being denied, repressed and criminalised. Governance and state institutional capture are evident in the increased co-option of vital democratic institutions to serve narrow interests. The African Union must champion a genuinely participatory democracy where citizens have a meaningful and effective roles in ensuring

accountability and shaping the future of their nations. Empowering human rights defenders and ensuring that civil liberties are respected are critical to rebuilding trust in democratic systems.

2. Economic Hardship and Wage Suppression

The global economic environment has left many African countries vulnerable to inflationary pressures, and responses to this challenge have been tepid. The cost-of-living crisis has left millions of Africans in hardship and misery. Moreover, wages, which should be a tool for improving the well-being of workers, are instead being used as instruments of suppression, with wages in many sectors being kept low, frozen, or even depressed. This practice exacerbates inequality and undermines the very fabric of our economies. A renewed focus on fair and liveable wages is essential to lift millions out of poverty and create equitable societies.

3. Trade and investment – the case of African Continental Free Trade Areas (AfCFTA) and related multilateral trade agreements

Good trade and investment handling can contribute to economic job-led growth. The AGOA (Africa Growth and Opportunity Act) is opening up some African economies for better export-led production and bringing in gains. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is an economic integration booster that can significantly boost intra-African trade, which accounts for only about 16% of the continent's total trade, valued at approximately \$70 billion to \$100 billion annually. With the reduction of tariffs and trade barriers, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) projects that AfCFTA could increase intra-African trade by over 50%, potentially reaching between \$150 billion and \$250 billion annually by 2030. This growth is expected to benefit critical sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, and services, fostering economic diversification and deeper regional integration. We want the new chairperson and leaders to prioritise the AfCFTA agreement and include the necessary labour recommendations in all the existing AfCFTA protocols. It is critical that other trade facilitators, such as coherent trade policies, enabling and endurable infrastructure, smooth payment systems, human capacities and skills, among others, are encouraged. African trade unions are ready with ideas and energies to work with the AUC to advance AfCFTA in ways that can effectively contribute to the continent's shared prosperity.

4. Infrastructure and Free Movement

The infrastructure gaps across Africa are widening. According to the African Development Bank (AfDB), Africa needs to spend between \$130 billion to \$170 billion annually on infrastructure to close these gaps. Yet, the continent faces a financing shortfall of \$68 billion to \$108 billion annually. These gaps are in roads, energy, and water systems and the digital infrastructure required for Africa to compete in a globalised world. The next *Chairperson and leadership* of the AUC must prioritise infrastructure development, ensuring that projects are designed and implemented to benefit all Africans, particularly those in rural and underserved areas.

Moreover, the free movement of people remains a critical issue. Although Africa has recorded some progress with visa-on-arrival policies, many Africans still need to be subjected to visa restrictions, which limits integration and opportunities across the continent. The African Union must continue to push for the realisation of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, which will bolster intra-African trade and deepen the benefits of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

5. Environmental Degradation and Unregulated Mining

Environmental degradation is another pressing concern, especially in regions rich in critical minerals. Illegal mining activities, such as galamsey in Ghana, mining in northern Nigeria, copper mining in Zambia, and cobalt extraction in the Democratic Republic of Congo, continue to wreak havoc on local communities and ecosystems. These activities, often unregulated, degrade the environment and pose serious health risks to the population. It is imperative that the African Union pushes for stricter regulations on mining practices and ensures that extracting Africa's natural resources is both sustainable and beneficial to the mineral-bearing communities.

6. Youth Employment and Industrialisation

Africa is home to the world's youngest population, over 60% under 25. Yet, youth unemployment and underemployment remain at dangerously high levels. According to recent statistics, one in five young Africans is unemployed, and many who are employed work in informal, low-paying jobs. Industrialisation and manufacturing are vital to creating sustainable employment for Africa's youth, but Africa's share of global manufacturing output remains below 2%. The next *Chairperson and Commissioners* must work to give effects to the policies that enhance Africa's manufacturing capacity, promoting value addition and ensuring that African countries move beyond exporting raw materials to creating finished products for global markets.

7. Women's Empowerment and Social Protection

While efforts toward women's empowerment have been commendable, more must be done. African women continue to face significant barriers to economic participation, and social protection systems are often inadequate. We call on the next AUC leadership to prioritize the ratification and implementation of the African Charter on Social Protection, which will ensure that women, youth, and other vulnerable groups have access to the social safety nets they need. A more substantial commitment to gender equity, alongside broader social protection policies, will drive inclusive economic growth across the continent.

8. Trade Union Position and Call to Action

As representatives of African workers, ITUC-Africa calls on the successive leadership of the African Union to prioritize these issues, which are essential to the well-being and prosperity of our continent. Our position is clear: *the AU must focus on creating decent work, fair wages, and social protections for all African workers*. These are not just labour issues but central to achieving inclusive economic growth, reducing inequality, and building a more resilient Africa.

- Africa's infrastructure gap continues to hinder economic growth and integration. We call on future AU leadership to prioritize infrastructure projects that unlock the continent's full economic potential and facilitate regional trade, investment, and development.
- The full implementation of the **African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)** and the **Protocol on Free Movement of Persons** is crucial. These initiatives will not only enhance trade but also allow for the free movement of people, which is essential for deepening economic ties and fostering unity across the continent. **The following review should also include adequate labour provisions in the existing AfCFTA protocols.**
- Africa must move beyond dependence on exporting raw materials. Progressive continental policies that encourage manufacturing and value-added industries will create jobs and stimulate economic diversification, reducing the continent's vulnerability to global commodity price fluctuations.
- With Africa's young population increasing, it is critical to implement policies that equip youth with the skills they need for gainful employment. We urge a focus on **education, skills development, innovation**, and entrepreneurship to prepare Africa's youth for a modern workforce.
- Strengthening democracy across Africa requires empowering **civil society** and **human rights defenders**. Their role in holding governments accountable ensures democracy remains participatory, transparent, and inclusive for all Africans.
- The ratification and implementation of the **African Charter on Social Protection** by all member states should be a top priority. This will ensure that vulnerable populations, particularly women and youth, have access to the necessary safety nets, contributing to a more just and equitable society.

We urge all candidates vying for leadership positions within the African Union Commission, notably the candidates for the Chairperson and Commissioners, to consider these African trade unions' positions critical elements for the African economic transformation agenda. These matters will define Africa's future, and we must ensure that those who lead us are committed to addressing them with the urgency they deserve.

Sincerely,



Akhator Joel Odigie.

General Secretary, ITUC-Africa, for and on behalf of African workers

Cc:

- **Prof. Paul Ngarambe**, Burundi, representing the Central Region
- **H.E Amb. Konjit SineGiorgis**, Ethiopia, representing the Eastern Region
- **H.E Amb. Nozipho Joyce Mxakato-Diseko**, South Africa, representing the Southern Region
- **H.E Amb. Patrick Hayford**, Ghana, representing the Western Region