



ITUC-AP Statement on COVID-19

'Bold and decisive measures of solidarity for a truly sustainable world'

27 March 2020

The International Trade Union Confederation – Asia Pacific (ITUC-AP), effectively representing 60 million workers in 34 countries and territories in Asia and the Pacific, expresses our solidarity with workers at all the corners of the globe to wage war against COVID-19 pandemic. We reaffirm our utmost priority to protect the lives and livelihoods of worker and their families and communities facing a global health and economic crisis.

As of today, the virus has taken over 24,000 lives worldwide among 532,000 people having been infected. This has caused grave social and economic difficulties, which requires bold and decisive measures of solidarity.

A large number of workers on the front line to contain the virus are at great risk with chronic underinvestment in necessary public services as well as no clear national occupational health and safety framework. Millions of workers including the self-employed have been losing their jobs without proper social protection. Furthermore, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly and other human rights are broadly and unilaterally restricted while tensions among countries have been growing. The deficiencies and deficits in all dimensions of our world today have been accentuated by this global pandemic,

Now the global economy, which had already shown a slowdown before the pandemic of COVID-19, is plunging into another global economic crisis which could be more severe than that of 2007/8 with significant supply and demand shocks. Service industries have been sharply declining due to the restriction of movement. Disruptions in the manufacturing sector, exacerbated further through global supply chains, have been increasing. Quarantines and lockdowns are severely limiting business operation.

The impact of COVID-19 on the demand side through the labour market in Asia and the Pacific could be much more significant as the region has serious deficits in decent work with a large number of informal workers and the working poor. The most vulnerable groups of workers – women, youth, older workers, migrant workers, self-employed and workers in precarious employment – have been worst affected by the crisis.

Moreover, adequate social protection for all including active labour market policies has not been developed in most of the countries in Asia and the Pacific. With growing uncertainty and unemployment, there will be obviously lesser consumption and investment, which will perpetuate the global economic sluggishness by accentuating the downward pressure on production. In many countries of Asia and the Pacific, in particular, domestic consumption is the largest contributor to economic growth as well as job creation.

In order to tackle the global health and economic crisis, the decent work agenda should be at the centre of immediate and decisive measures to prioritise employment retention and income support with extended social protection.

Furthermore, we are at the critical juncture not only to contain COVID-19 pandemic today but also to prepare a post COVID-19 world.

COVID-19 makes our problems much clearer. Deficits in public health systems and no investment in the care economy have been highlighted. A lack of openness and transparency, key processes of democracy, and declining multilateralism have made situations much worse with mistrust in governments as well as tension among countries with rising xenophobia and discrimination.

In addition, COVID-19 could alter the pattern of our daily life, including consumption and production. This would make the world more fragile and vulnerable with increasing precarious jobs and income inequality.

We must cure the world of these deficiencies and deficits in order to make the post COVID-19 world truly inclusive, resilient and sustainable. This can only be done by building trust in governance systems and institutions, and increasing confidence in the future with a new social contract on the basis of international commitments including the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement. Furthermore, we must shift our growth paradigm to 'Income-led growth', which is well compatible with supply side policies, based on high-income and pro-labour distributional policies, accompanied by legislative and structural policies aiming at building strong labour market institutions.

Therefore, the ITUC-AP calls upon **governments** to:

- Deal with COVID-19 in a more open and transparent manner while promoting social dialogue as a key institution to address the social, economic and health impacts;
- Strengthen occupational health and safety measures for all workers, especially those working on the front line to deal with the virus, and ensure the provision of sufficient and adequate protective equipment;
- Upgrade social protection programmes together with timely and adequate fiscal measures such as health care services, paid sick leave, maternity/parental leave and unemployment benefits for all workers regardless of their employment status. In particular, the most vulnerable groups of workers - women, youth, older workers, migrant workers, workers in informal and precarious employment - should be given an extra care;
- Implement employment retention measures such as work-sharing, flexible or short working hours arrangements, subsidies for skill training and education with income support for all workers;
- Increase public investment, especially in the care economy, and support active labour market policies for those who lose their jobs;

- Maintain or adopt accommodative monetary policies with a mechanism to ensure its effectiveness on the real economy to coordinated with fiscal policies to stimulate economic activity;
- Increase cooperation and engagement among countries to fight COVID-19 collectively. In particular, supports for countries with less effective healthcare systems are essential in stopping the global pandemic;
- Ensure migrant workers and their families to be well-protected from the virus and any economic hardship and, if necessary, to return their home country in cooperation between sending and destination countries; and
- Rationalise supports for companies, who are compliant with the international labour standards, and SMEs who employ a large number of workers.

Further, the ITUC-AP strongly urges **employers** to:

- Bargain with trade unions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the workplace to protect the health and safety of all workers and their family members, as well as to mitigate the negative impacts of the virus while avoiding any lay-offs;
- Work together with trade unions to ensure that governments' measures are implemented for all workers; and
- Ensure the non-stigmatisation, non-discrimination or non-disadvantage against any worker under the pretext of dealing with the virus.

Again, it must be emphasised that all benefits and supports as a response to COVID-19 should be extended to all workers. Further, it is assured that we never accept any compromise with regard to the suppression of workers and the infringement of fundamental workers' rights under the pretext of COVID-19.

This is the time to work together to contain the virus and to ensure that our post-COVID-19 world is sustainable and resilience. Democracy, multilateralism and tripartism with all international labour standards should be respected more than ever. We will prevail only with solidarity.

Shoya Yoshida
General Secretary