

# Unity and revitalization of trade unions in Africa

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## Introduction

The emergence of organized trade unionism coincided with the struggle for the decolonization of Africa. The colonial powers – mostly the British and French – actively encouraged the formation of unions. This encouragement was born out of the need to focus workers' attention exclusively on industrial relations and away from political agitation. In furtherance of this objective, British and French unions were enlisted to support the development of unions in Africa. The unions that emerged were created in the image of metropolitan unions. When the struggle for independence intensified, African unions broke ranks with their European counterparts. Given their status as the most organized elements of society, the unions became the rallying point for mass protests in support of the professional politicians at the forefront of the independence struggle. The unions did more to accelerate the pace of the struggle than any other social force.

When independence came, the unions had won the hearts and minds of both the masses and the indigenous politicians who had taken over the governance of African States. The appreciative State and politicians bestowed several benefits on the unions. This included the "closed shop" arrangement, which guaranteed automatic membership for the unions. It also included a check-off system<sup>1</sup> for dues collection, which shored up the finances of the unions in the English-speaking African countries. In the French-speaking countries, the unions were rewarded with direct state funding in the form of annual contributions through the budget.

The ultimate manifestation of state benevolence bestowed on the early unions in Africa was the guarantee of legal protection that made them the sole or national trade union centres in their country. Thus, in Ghana, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) Ghana and its 17 affiliates were the only unions that, by law, could operate in the country. The Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and others enjoyed similar status. The union landscape was therefore characterized by enforced unity. The industrial relations laws in most of the countries did not permit the kinds of splintering that we witness today.

But this meant that unions across most of Africa lost their independence. In fact, many of them became appendages of the state, tightly incorporated into the apparatus of the single-party regimes that ruled African countries shortly after independence. The unions became state unions rather than unions for workers. In Ghana, the official flag of the TUC Ghana was replaced by the flag of the ruling party in 1964. A united trade union fraternity became so intertwined with the single parties that dominated African politics and state governments that the defence of workers' rights became secondary and eventually suffered.

The grip of state power over organized labour began to wane only in the early 1980s. The continent was in the throes of a debilitating economic crisis marked by high levels of debt. Structural adjustment programmes (SAP) were foisted on governments by the International

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<sup>1</sup> Check-off system: the automatic deduction and transfer of trade union membership dues.

Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The SAP entailed large-scale retrenchment of labour in the public sector. It ended import-substitution industrialization and instead encouraged liberalization of imports. The state-owned enterprises were sold to the private sector, mostly to foreign investors. These measures severely affected union membership numbers, but the SAP measures were forced through in the face of union protestations. The military regimes that implemented the SAP had very few links with the established unions; in fact, in some countries, the military was openly hostile to them. The unions protested, but they were met with nothing but brutality.

Towards the end of the 1980s, protests by the unions coincided with the emerging pro-democracy movements calling for the end of one-party dictatorship and military rule. The unions became an essential element in the struggle for democracy in the 1990s, just as they did in the struggle for independence in the 1950s and 1960s. The unions in the Congo, Mali and Niger were among the first to sever their relationships with the ruling parties. The Movement for Multiparty Democracy, in which the ZCTU played a key role, saw the election of former ZCTU President-General Frederick Chiluba as President of Zambia. On the eve of the establishment of Ghanaian Fourth Republic, the TUC Ghana declared itself non-partisan and hence independent of the parties vying to govern the country.

The democratization of the continent came hand in hand with the need to democratize the unions. Economic and political liberalization was extended to the industrial relations front. Labour laws were reformed, liberalizing the industrial relations scene. The monopoly of existing unions such as the TUC Ghana, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and ZCTU was ended with the adoption of the new labour codes. This development came at a time when structural adjustment policies had also removed the protections offered to workers. Rampant inflation and wage restraints led to declining real wages. The existing unions could not do much to change the fortunes of labour on the continent. Disaffection with the unions grew in leaps and bounds, the unions splintered and disaffected workers left established unions to form rival ones. Demagogues promising heaven among the chaos took advantage. The result was the emergence of multiple and atomized unions, which were weak both in terms of numbers of members and financially, to protect and defend the right of workers and the working class.

## **The trade union movement in Africa**

### ***Regional level***

The African regional trade union landscape is characterized by the existence of two main regional organizations: the African Regional Organization of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) and the Organization of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU). In addition to these two organizations, there is a regional secretariat of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). A string of unions in Benin, Senegal and South Africa and a few

others are linked or otherwise related to the WFTU. There also exist a number of subregional trade union organizations and regional formations of the global union federations.

OATUU was established in 1973 under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity (OAU, now the African Union (AU)), to provide an independent voice for African workers. OATUU was the result of a merger of the All-African Trade Union Federation (AATUF) and the African Trade Union Confederation (ATUC). The two regional organizations reflected the differences in the international trade union movement in the 1960s and 1970s arising from the cold war. Their existence and their inflexible stance on both African and international issues gravely undermined the unity of the emerging trade union movement on the continent.<sup>2</sup>

OATUU was founded to provide a framework for unity for all African workers, regardless of ideology or political inclination and affiliation. OATUU was prominent in the 1970s and 1980s, when the cold war was at its height. It maintained a provision in its statute that barred its member organizations from joining other international trade union organizations. OATUU currently has 88 national affiliated organizations in 54 African countries, and claims a membership of 25 million.

In view of its origins, OATUU gained early recognition in OAU structures. It has ensured the presence of African workers in the AU Specialised Technical Committee on Social Development, Labour and Employment and other AU forums including, more recently, the AU Economic, Social and Cultural Council. OATUU has also enjoyed recognition at the ILO since the early 1990s, as a representative of African workers. It maintains a range of relations with the WFTU, the Arab Trade Union Confederation and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). OATUU implements a range of activities and projects on education, conflict prevention and resolution, occupational safety and health and HIV/AIDS, social dialogue, decent work and employment, social protection, migration and the global financial and economic crises.

The ITUC-Africa is the product of the unification of the African Regional Organization of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU-AFRO) and the Democratic Organization of African Workers' Trade Unions (DOAWTU). Both were regional organizations of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL), respectively. The ITUC-Africa was founded by 86 national trade union centres with a total paid-up membership of 8,891,928, drawn from the affiliates of the erstwhile ICFTU-AFRO and DOAWTU and three independent national trade union centres within the African region that were already affiliated to the ITUC.

The ITUC-Africa's mission is to strengthen the trade unions in Africa and provide a common voice for all African workers in order to realize a healthy and safe working environment and

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<sup>2</sup> AATUF advocated non-affiliation of African trade unions to international trade union organizations as a variant of the non-alignment policy of a number of African States. ATUC, on the other hand, considered that African trade unions should freely associate with any international trade union organization of their choice.

a decent life for all by fighting all forms of exploitation and discrimination. The ITUC-Africa leads the African representation in international trade union delegations to the multilateral agencies, the G20 and United Nations (UN) high-level consultations and meetings, including those of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The ITUC-Africa also represents African workers within the workers' group of the ILO and in the AU Specialised Technical Committee on Social Development, Labour and Employment.

The ITUC-Africa has 105 affiliates (although a significant number of these are not in good standing) in 52 out of the 54 African countries, compared with the 88 affiliates of OATUU in all 54 African countries. There is a considerable overlap in affiliates between the two organizations; they share 50 affiliates from 45 countries. In addition, the ITUC-Africa has 38 affiliates that are not members of OATUU, while OATUU has 12 affiliates that are not members of the ITUC-Africa.

As a regional organization, the ITUC-Africa, like its counterparts in the Americas and the Asia-Pacific region, relies on the regional allocation from the ITUC as core funding for the operation of its secretariat. Limited subscriptions from members (accounting for 15–20 per cent of its total income) and grants/donations are its other sources of funding. OATUU relies for its core funding on subsidies from some African governments, limited subscriptions from affiliates and grants from solidarity support organizations and others. Both organizations share support from the ILO, the Japan International Labour Foundation, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation and Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees (LO-TCO) and Landsorganisasjonen i Norge (LO-Norway) for projects. While the ITUC-Africa implements a range of projects with support from various organizations,<sup>3</sup> OATUU implements other projects with the support of the ACFTU.

The WFTU is based in two regional offices in Africa: in Gabon for French-speaking countries and in South Africa, hosted by the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union and the Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union, which are affiliates of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). It is difficult to measure the WFTU's true membership, since its affiliates are confederations as well as federations and sector unions.

Given the stated preoccupations and programmes of OATUU and the ITUC-Africa and the overlap in their membership, it is reasonable to question why they should remain as separate organizations. It is curious that they are not actively exploring the possibility of becoming one organization, since this would enhance the focus, coordination and delivery of the needed services and benefits to African workers. It would help greatly in optimizing resources and mobilizing the united power of African workers to aggressively confront

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<sup>3</sup> American Center for International Labor Solidarity; Basque Workers' Solidarity; Canadian Labour Congress; Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (Belgium); Danish Trade Union Development Agency; French Democratic Confederation of Labour; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Germany); General Confederation of Labour (France); Italian Confederation of Workers Trade Unions; Italian General Confederation of Labour; Netherlands Trade Union Confederation; Quebec Federation of Labour; Syndicated Workers' Union (Spain); Trade Union Solidarity Centre of Finland; Trades Union Congress (United Kingdom); UN Environment Programme; Workers' Commissions (Spain).

the multiplicity of challenges facing unions and the workers of the continent. On the other hand, if the two organizations insist on staying separate, the question of separate membership should be considered, to give full meaning to plurality if that is the aim of having two organizations.

Again, since the end of the cold war in the early 1990s and the redemocratization of African countries, the sharp ideological divide among countries and the survival strategy of non-alignment adopted by countries in the global South have lost their perceived effectiveness. In the current regime of global affairs, which tends to deepen inequality within and among States, a united regional trade union front is more imperative than ever before.

### ***Subregional level***

Autonomous trade union centres also exist at subregional level in Africa, the most active among them being the Southern Africa Trade Union Coordinating Council and the East African Trade Union Confederation, and to a lesser extent the Organization of Trade Unions of West Africa, the Organization of Trade Unions of Central Africa, the Horn of Africa Confederation of Trade Unions and the Arab Trade Union Confederation (which groups some workers in North Africa with others in the Mediterranean region).

Regional formations of the global union federations also exist and provide a home and support for sector unions in various countries.<sup>4</sup> The federations operate autonomously, even though they try to find a common voice among themselves and with the ITUC-Africa and OATUU.

Other African workers' trade unions and platforms, such as the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (part of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) and other African workers' caucuses in Western countries and the Americas also exist and are functioning. The result of this dispersal of regional/continental and diaspora organizations is that the voice and representation of global African workers remains fragmented and weakened in their engagement with regional and global institutions, including the AU, the ILO, the UN, the World Trade Organization and international financial institutions.

### ***National level***

There are many unions at the national level. There are multiple trade union centres affiliated to the two continental organizations or linked to the WFTU secretariat, as well as others without international affiliations. These centres are marked by stark differences in size, strength and ideological or political orientation. There are also differences in internal

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<sup>4</sup> Global union federations in Africa include Building and Wood Workers' International; Education International; Federation of African Journalists, linked with the International Federation of Journalists; IndustriALL; International Domestic Workers Federation; International Transport Workers' Federation; International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations; Public Services International; and UNI Global Union.

democratic structures and practices, independence, representativeness and effectiveness. Some relatively big national centres have well over 1 million paid-up members. These include COSATU, the NLC, the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA) and the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF). Others with several hundreds of thousands of members include the Central Organization of Trade Unions Kenya (COTU-K), Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), TUC Ghana, the Moroccan Workers' Union (UMT) and the ZCTU. There are also smaller unions numbering membership in the thousands and tens of thousands.

The relatively smaller unions are in countries with smaller populations. However, multiple national trade union centres and unions (most of them small) exist in many African countries, being most prevalent in West and Central Africa.

Disunity also prevails at shopfloor and sectoral level, leading to a plurality of unions organizing similar groups of workers and hence to the existence of multiple unions for the same constituency. Thus, for example, many unions exist for teachers in a number of countries, especially in West Africa. Several unions organize primary school teachers; while several others organize teachers at secondary/high school and other levels.

A number of the small unions have survived thanks to their dependence on donor support and/or government subsidies. This is particularly the case in the French-speaking countries of West Africa. Also, at national level in many countries with relatively small populations (less than 5 million inhabitants), multiple national trade union centres exist that claim to represent the national interests of workers. Most large and medium-sized unions employ technical and professional staff to support union action and service delivery in respect of industrial relations, occupational health and safety, legal aid, education and training, organizing, research and policy, social security and pensions. On the other hand, most small unions are not able to mobilize resources internally to engage much needed human resources for their trade union work.

These factors notwithstanding, in terms of capability of autonomous action in pursuit of workers' interests, a number of trade unions perform creditably. Over the last few decades, a number of unions have taken independent action against employers and governments in pursuit of workers' interests. Examples of notable union actions have been recorded in Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, South Africa, Tunisia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, among others. Where union action has not been significant or effective, this has largely been because workers in multiple union centres have not presented a united front, as seen in the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Madagascar, Mauritania, Mauritius and Togo. Some national centres stand out from the crowd, but are unable to exert the needed impact because they do not act in concert with one another. There are instances of the different unions pushing in different directions, which ultimately undermines workers' interests.

## **In pursuit of trade union unity in Africa**

Following the Second World War and in the succeeding decades, divisions based on ideology and politics were a notable feature of the international trade union movement. These divisions also played out in the African, South American and Asia-Pacific regions. From the 1950s through the 1960s and 1970s, the main protagonists were the ICFTU and the WFTU. The WCL also assumed some prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, which impacted the regional organizations.

In November 1959, Kwame Nkrumah, the President of Ghana, sponsored the formation of AATUF as a pan-African trade union confederation. This was an attempt to keep African trade unions from affiliating with the rival international trade union confederations, the ICFTU and the WFTU. ATUC was founded in 1962 as a rival organization to AATUF; unlike the latter, however, ATUC sought to encourage African trade unions to affiliate with international organizations. In 1973, under the aegis of the OAU, OATUU was formed out of a merger of AATUF, ATUC and the Pan African Trade Union Organization. OATUU emerged as an umbrella organization providing a home for all trade union tendencies. As a unified continental trade union centre, OATUU had a provision in its statute (article 8), which prevented its national trade union affiliates from affiliating with any international trade union confederation.

Towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the wave of democratization across Africa and the end of the cold war radically transformed relations between African trade union organizations and the international trade union movement. In a number of countries, particularly in West and Central Africa, single national trade union centres that had been linked with one-party States saw the emergence of another centre or multiple centres. At the same time, the international trade union movement was reviewing ways of penetrating Africa and integrating its working class and trade unions into the global labour movement.

ICFTU-AFRO, which was originally formed in 1959, went through various struggles and existential challenges as an organ of African workers' organization directly linked with the international trade union movement. This was during the cold war, when there was controversy about the international alliances that African States and trade unions should maintain in their own best interests. The number of affiliates of ICFTU-AFRO fell from 20 in 1960 to 8 in 1977. The organization was relaunched in 1992, with a secretariat based in Nairobi, Kenya. Notwithstanding article 8 of the OATUU Constitution, which barred its affiliates from affiliating with international trade union confederations, the majority of OATUU affiliates joined ICFTU-AFRO after the relaunch. Andrew Kailembo became its General Secretary.

Throughout the 1990s, there was considerable rivalry between the two main organizations, ICFTU-AFRO and OATUU, under the leadership of Kailembo and Hassan Sunmonu, respectively. It is to the credit of these two leaders, however, that over time the rivalry waned and they sought avenues for cooperation. The ILO and the AU Labour and Social



Affairs Commission (now the Specialised Technical Committee on Social Development, Labour and Employment) suggested ways in which they could cooperate.

The two organizations drew their authority from a number of different affiliates, the majority of which belonged to both.<sup>5</sup> As the rivalry between the two main organizations persisted, OATUU had the tendency to align more with the WFTU at international level than with the ICFTU. The WFTU also remained active on the continent, with a limited number of affiliates in a few countries including Benin, Senegal and South Africa, but this contributed to the disunity within the ranks of the trade union movement in Africa as a whole.

DOAWTU was formed in 1993 as a regional organization of the WCL and became the third significant organization on the continent. ICFTU-AFRO and DOAWTU provided homes and support for new trade union centres that had broken away from national organizations that were affiliates of OATUU. OATUU had a policy of having one national centre affiliate per country. The causes of breakaways from national union centres, leading to multiple trade union centres and the formation of new centres, have been well documented. They included issues of weak internal democracy and poor management of trade unions; election disputes; leaders perpetuating themselves in office; leaders serving their own selfish interests rather than those of their membership; political interference; and external interference by donor organizations (ITUC-Africa 2011), among others. Disunity allows for the exploitation of the differences between unions to undermine the collective demands and interests of workers.

At the turn of the century, the consolidation of neo-liberalism, which had been increasing since the 1980s, highlighted more sharply the asymmetry of interest between workers' organizations and foreign investors in industrialized countries. It also worsened the development-related crises in non-industrialized countries on the periphery of world capitalism. Overall, the trends in the global political economy contributed to resolving some of the differences among the working classes of the world, leading to greater cooperation within the international trade union movement. Under the leadership of Guy Ryder of the ICFTU and Willie Thys of the WCL, this trend culminated in the unification of the two organizations creating the ITUC in June 2006. The ITUC brought together 176 million workers from 312 affiliates in 155 countries and territories around the world. The WFTU remained a minority, with its affiliates concentrated in parts of Europe, the Middle East, Africa and South America, claiming a membership of about 80 million. The ITUC has since grown to 200 million members with 332 affiliates in 163 countries and territories around the world.

The regional organizations of the ICFTU and the WCL, ICFTU-AFRO and DOAWTU, merged to create the ITUC-Africa in 2007, following the merger of their parent organizations in 2006.

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<sup>5</sup> OATUU drew its strength mainly from the NLC, COTU-K, UGTA, the National Confederation of Workers of Guinea, the National Workers' Union of Mali, the National Confederation of Workers of Togo, the General Union of Workers of Côte d'Ivoire, the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers and non-ITUC affiliates ETUF and the Sudan Workers' Trade Union Federation. The ICFTU-AFRO also drew its strength from the ZCTU (Zambia), Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions, TUC Ghana, the National Confederation of Workers of Senegal, the Sierra Leone Labour Congress, the UGTT, the UMT, CSA-Benin and COSATU.

The process of merging the two organizations did not take full account of the history of unionism on the continent that had produced OATUU and the strong attachment that a number of established unions had to the organization. Beyond narrowly negotiating the fusion of the ICFTU-AFRO and DOAWTU, the unification process did not address the existence of OATUU and some formation of the WFTU, or how these factors would affect the broader unity of African workers; hence OATUU's claim that it could not join the process of unification because it should have been consulted earlier, when the whole question of global trade union unity was being considered. There is merit in that claim. However, it is not more important than unity and the contribution unity can make to the struggles of African workers.

At the national level, debt-ridden African States became sucked into the neo-liberal economic and political order. African governments were advised and to some extent coerced by international financial institutions to deregulate the labour market by reforming labour laws. Among other things, the new labour laws promoted multiple unions or trade union pluralism at the enterprise, sector and national levels. This has created a situation where unions compete for membership. Thus trade union unity has been severely undermined.

The declining membership and fragmentation of unions at both the national and continental levels have combined to weaken trade unions on the continent. The unions are no longer in a position to serve their members as expected. Workers' rights are violated by both local and foreign investors with impunity. Many African workers are denied access to basic benefits such as social security, pensions and medical insurance, even when such benefits are provided for in ratified ILO Conventions and in national labour legislation.

### ***Impact of divisions and disunity***

At regional/continental level, the two main continental trade union organizations have not been able to secure common and concerted representation within AU structures or engagement with global institutions and organs. Both organizations have relatively weak and disparate representation in AU structures and in canvassing for the interests of African workers where it matters most. There is virtually no united voice at international level in dealing with international financial institutions and other multilateral agencies. International financial institutions have had a profound adverse impact on employment and conditions of labour in Africa, but the unions have not consistently engaged with them. The disunity at the regional level itself provides a bad example for national affiliates and other organizations. The activities of the two main regional bodies are uncoordinated and often executed at cross purposes. At the continental level, there is no organization that champions campaigns or advocates strongly for African workers. The two organizations operate with some cooperation within the ILO and the AU, but they are unable to achieve the necessary synergies and influence that would be attained by a united organization acting for African workers.

Both regional organizations are financially weak, reflecting the financial weakness and dependence of most of their affiliates and their relatively low levels of union membership and density. The two organizations both try to access the same resources, which could be harnessed more effectively for the benefit of African workers if they were merged. Both depend primarily on external resources to remain viable: the ITUC-Africa on the ITUC and OATUU on a number of African governments. This has fostered a dependency mentality, limiting the possibilities for independent planning and execution by both organizations. For one thing, projects that are predominantly funded from external sources offer only limited scope for sustainability, and such projects often do not tackle the fundamental challenges facing workers.

At national level, multiple national centres and unions face a challenge in securing their representativity. Union density in most African countries is already low. In most countries, no more than 10 per cent of the workforce is organized into unions. Having multiple national trade union centres and unions brings negative implications for the representativeness of each of the national centres or unions.

A major consequence of the multiplicity of national centres and sectoral unions is that organizations are weak, both in terms of numbers of members and financially, and become financially dependent, as witnessed in many countries of West and Central Africa. This destroys their independence and ability to serve the interests of their members. Multiplicity then undermines the strength of unions at industrial or sectoral level, and likewise undermines their strength and ability at national level. When unions are not financially autonomous, there is even less likelihood of ensuring the financial autonomy of the national centres, to which many are affiliated and must pay affiliation fees. The membership of unions operating as one of multiple unions ranges from a low of thousands to a high of tens of thousands. In countries where there is less multiplicity membership of national centres ranges from a few hundreds of thousands to a few unions with more than 1.5 million members.

Unions' lack of financial autonomy exposes them to undue influence and manipulation by employers, governments or foreign donors, which may wish to secure spheres of influence for various purposes. Unions that are compromised in their relations with employers, governments and/or foreign donors, or are the objects of their manipulation, are unlikely to serve the interests of their members properly. We see this in the inability of unions to stand up to growing violations of workers' rights across the continent and the increasing vulnerability of African workers.

Also in the absence of financial autonomy, unions are unable to recruit qualified technical personnel to serve their members. This affects the union's ability to deliver on a range of important services to affiliates or members – education, research, negotiation, social security and pensions, communication, information and campaigns, legal support and other activities that may be deemed appropriate.

A considerable number of the organizations have small membership numbers that render them financially unsustainable and dependent on donors or governments to maintain themselves. In the few cases where national centres are big enough to sustain their own administration, limited means and a syndrome of dependency that has developed over time still leads to some reliance on external financial support for the execution of important activities.

At its 4th Ordinary Congress in Abuja, Nigeria in 2019, the ITUC-Africa adopted a declaration: Unite and Make a Difference. It did so partly to reaffirm the mandate of the global labour movement to organize to build workers' power to change the rules of the global economy for the benefit of working people and their families. It set the goal of achieving cohesion and unity within the trade union movement at the continental level during the quadrennium. It also called for the development of a programme for achieving unity among trade unions at national level as well as within and across sectors (ITUC-Africa 2019). Little has been achieved since the adoption of this declaration.

## **Recommendations**

One important aspect of the quest for African trade union unity is its value for strengthening African unity and African institutions in advancing the common interests of the African workers and people. Since its integration into a global system dominated by Western countries, Africa has experienced a loss of identity. The continent is mired in crises of governance, conflict, political instability and a caricature of democracy with its predominance of fraudulent elections and widespread violation or absence of rights. Africa remains locked in this situation largely because it is led and managed by elites that neither recognize the fundamental contradiction between the African condition and the interests of world capitalism, nor perceive the benefit of Africa acting as one in its relations with the rest of the world (Adu-Amankwah 2010).

A new regime of economic policies and management and political governance is urgently needed to prevent a further slide into irrelevance and continued suffering on the continent. Governance that strengthens the State and its role in economic development is needed, without scuttling markets and the incentives they provide for the pursuit of enterprise, as well as a system of governance that deters corruption both by Africans and by foreign agents and addresses the large-scale pillaging of Africa's resources that leaves Africans high and dry. Installing such a system will not be easy. It will essentially involve denying the powerful benefactors of the current system of failed policies the benefits they have come to expect. It will require organized opposition to the status quo that bestows enormous benefits on the few and misery on the majority. Organized opposition is required, and this can best be achieved by the existing organized element of society, with trade unions at the forefront.

Unions cannot expect to achieve the transformation of African societies and economies if they are in disunity. A fragmented union movement can achieve coherence in narrating

the ills of society, but can never achieve united action that forces a change of the narrative which they collectively deride. Forging a united front, above all else, is paramount. For this to happen, they must dispel the illusion that fragmented and atomized unions beholden to governments and foreign donors and not connected by a common ideology can somehow work together to achieve enduring change. At best, some ephemeral changes on the fringes of the core issues may be achieved. For system-wide change that is enduring, the fragmented unions must be consolidated into bigger unions that are financially and operationally independent of the prevailing forces.

Workers' leaders and activists who profess their commitment to unity must pursue it diligently moving forward from cogitation and lamentation to practical action to address a challenge that is all too well identified. The quest for unity must focus on action at the global, continental and regional levels (ITUC-Africa, OATUU, the WFTU), and by subregional organizations and global union federations. But the main area of action for trade unions will be at the national level, where the large number of unions and their disunity are profoundly detrimental.

The issue at global level has to do with the relations to be developed with workers and their organizations in the African diaspora – in the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

At the regional level, a good starting point would be to address the existence of two regional trade union organizations. While accepting that OATUU and the ITUC-Africa are rooted in the history of the movement in Africa, it is time to move on and not be trapped by that history. The challenges we face should lead us to consciously address the issue of unity of the trade union movement in Africa. While the two organizations have agreed to cooperate, their continued existence as separate organizations, with similar representative structures and both laying claims to representing African workers, virtually epitomizes the absurdity of "one body with two heads and, in this case, two stomachs" (Adu-Amankwah 2010). The leadership and representation of African workers is thereby weakened.

At national level, multiple national centres must focus on moving towards unity, beginning with full cooperation. Workers face common challenges of unsafe and insecure employment, decent-work deficits, rights violations, low wages, weak social protection, inequality and the impact of climate change. There are challenges relating to digitalization and technology, working from home, occupational safety and health, low vaccinations, declining real incomes and mounting public debt. There are also issues of organizing in the informal economy, extension of social protection and promotion of the social economy, as well as the development of cooperatives. The national centres that are affiliated to the ITUC-Africa and OATUU must be instructed to begin simultaneous processes of engagement for unity, with monitoring at the regional level. Sectoral processes can also be initiated with the encouragement of the global union federations. A united trade union movement will be of immense benefit, not only to workers, but also to Africans in general. A small but powerful

minority of current union leaders will lose out: a framework for unity must seek to address their fears and concerns so that they do not frustrate the process.

The quest for unity, however grandiosely it is proclaimed by unionists and friends of the labour movement, will continue to elude Africa until champions of African trade union unity find ways to bring back ideology. It takes just a small amount of engagement with trade union leaders across the continent to realize the ideological near-bankruptcy of the fragmented unions. In fact, the very existence of so many splinter unions and further attempts to splinter off over trivial matters demonstrate that most unions on the continent are not bound by considerations beyond the intentions of their leaders. Rigorous research must be pursued to lay bare these self-seeking tendencies, in which people split unions, only to replicate the tendencies they themselves complain about. This research must be backed up by mass education of the African workforce on trade union ideology, the commonality of the challenges facing Africa and the indispensability of large, united and stronger unions in overcoming them. The world now has affordable media to provide mass education, and we must make use of it.

The global organizations of trade unions can play a catalytic role in the quest to unite unions in Africa. The ITUC and WFTU must actively encourage their affiliates on the continent to seek unity. They must make special dispensations in their administrative and structural arrangements to accommodate the demands of a united trade union movement in Africa. The ILO can provide technical support for the processes involved in forging trade union unity. Funding from the international partners should now be channelled into the pursuit of unity. This funding should be used for research and education in trade union ideology and values to support the unity project.

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