



# DEFEND THE FRONTLINE WORKERS!



**T**he Coronavirus infections have just surpassed one million whilst fatalities are steadily approaching hundred thousand around the world. In many countries, the horrifying mathematical models projecting an explosive viral spread and its catastrophic death trails are beginning to translate into reality. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that up to 25 million jobs could be lost worldwide as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Worst still, the working class, especially the public health workers and other workers delivering essential services are going to bear the heaviest burden of this COVID-19 disease.

Whilst these workers have earned the respect of their compatriots in how they have put their lives in the frontlines of resistance against the sweeping offensive of the Coronavirus, in almost every country they are now crying out and calling on their trade unions to come to their defence in the face of their continuing exposure to danger.

We salute many trade unions around the world, especially across the WFTU family engaged in ongoing

struggles, amongst others, to ensure that:

- Workers in the critical frontlines in the face of the Coronavirus and COVID-19 are provided with the Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs).
- Workers who have contracted COVID-19 are entitled to paid sick leave.
- Workers who are absent from work for the purpose of quarantine or for undergoing preventive or curative medical care and whose salary is suspended must be granted a sickness benefit.
- A worker with family responsibilities in relation to a dependent child or another family member who needs that worker's care or support must get leave of absence in the case of the family member's illness.
- Employers must not unilaterally require workers to use their annual leave in case of a precautionary measure to avoid potential exposure.

According to the ILO's Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155):

- Employers have the overall responsibility of ensuring that all practicable preventive and protective measures are taken to minimize occupational risks. Employers are responsible for providing, where necessary and in so far as it is reasonably practicable,



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adequate protective clothing and protective equipment, at no cost to the worker.

- Employers are responsible for providing adequate information and appropriate training on OSH; consulting workers on OSH aspects associated with their work; providing measures to deal with emergencies; and notifying the labour inspectorate of cases of occupational diseases.
- OSH measures shall not involve any expenditure for workers.
- Arrangements in workplaces shall mandate workers to report to their immediate supervisor any situation which they have reasonable justification to believe presents an imminent and serious danger to their life or health. Until the employer has taken remedial action, the employer cannot require workers to return to a work situation where there is continuing imminent and serious danger to life or health.
- Workers have the right to remove themselves from a work situation that they have reasonable justification to believe presents an imminent and serious danger to their life or health. When a staff member exercises this right, he or she shall be protected from any undue consequences.

Comrades, the public service and allied workers, in particular healthcare workers, have sustained devastating death tolls in this fight, and this is mainly because of the failure of their governments to secure in time the PPEs and other preventative measures in workplaces. Therefore, as part of WFTU's call for the protections of the frontline workers in particular, the working class in general, the TUI of Public Service & Allied reiterate this calls.

To advance this workers' struggle, we draw attention to the ILO's Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205) which was adopted by an overwhelming majority of all constituents, including your governments. It proceeds from the need for social dialogue to ensure that employers do not impose their solutions on the workers, and it emphasises consultation and the vital role of workers' organizations in crisis response. This component of the International Labour Standards (ILS) emphasizes that crisis responses need to ensure respect for all human rights and the rule of law, including respect for fundamental principles and rights at work and for ILS.

On the 23 March 2020 the ILO confirmed that COVID-19 disease could be considered as occupational diseases.

Therefore, affected workers "should be entitled to cash compensation and medical and allied care, as set out in the Employment Injury Benefits Convention, 1964 (No. 121)." It further says that persons affected by COVID-19 should have access, for as long as required, to adequate health care and services of a preventive and curative nature, including general practitioner care specialist care (at hospitals and outside); the necessary pharmaceutical supplies; hospitalisation where necessary; and medical rehabilitation.

Despite our critical attitude towards the ILO, we call on all our affiliates to exploit its conventions and ILS to the advantage of the workers in order to defend their interests. We must hold our bosses and governments accountable because many of them have signed to the Employment Promotion and Protection against Unemployment Convention, 1988 12 (No. 168) and the Employment Promotion and Protection against Unemployment Recommendation, 1988 (No. 176). These components of the ILS require that:

- Workers whose employment is suspended, reduced or terminated due to health and safety reasons should be entitled to unemployment benefits or assistance to compensate for the loss of earnings incurred as a consequence.
- Workers who have lost their jobs should have access to employment promotion measures, including employment services and vocational training with a view to their reintegration into the labour market.
- In situations of collective dismissals, Convention No. 158 provides that an employer contemplating terminations for economic reasons shall provide workers' representatives with relevant information, including the reasons for the terminations, the number and categories of workers likely to be affected and the period over which the terminations are intended to be carried out.

As the ongoing twin crises of the Coronavirus pandemic and capitalism deepen, we must make sure that the workers' health and lives are not sacrificed in the interest of monopoly finance capital that is going to use its control over the politicians to impose austerity measures in the period ahead. Let's use the rising popular recognition of the importance of the public health services to fight for nationalisation not only of private healthcare but also the pharmaceutical industry and laboratories. Let's fight for universal health coverage to claim healthcare as a social use-value and not a commodity.