



Universiteit  
Leiden

The Netherlands

## **ITUC-Africa's new year school, trade unions and the transformation of the world of work**

Bellucci, S.; Mwamadzingo, M.; Mote, H.; Pam Sha, D.

### **Citation**

Bellucci, S. (2024). ITUC-Africa's new year school, trade unions and the transformation of the world of work. In M. Mwamadzingo, H. Mote, & D. Pam Sha (Eds.), *African trade unions and the future of work* (pp. 203-220). Geneva: International labour office. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4214574>

Version: Publisher's Version  
License: [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)  
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4214574>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Postface

# ITUC-Africa's New Year School, trade unions and the transformation of the world of work

*Stefano Bellucci (Leiden University & IISH Amsterdam)*

This book represents a collaborative effort between ILO-ACTRAV, the African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa), trade unionists and scholars cooperating with the ITUC-Africa New Year School (NYS). The NYS is organized every year as part of ITUC-Africa's trade unions education programme. The first edition of the NYS took place in 2011. Now, after over a decade of NYS activity, this book tries to summarize the key discussions, debates and issues that African unions affiliated to ITUC-Africa felt were crucial for the world of work in Africa. The book therefore constitutes a compendium of ten years of trade union education, as well as a corpus of issues that matter for African trade unions and the workers they represent and struggle for.

The core themes covered by the different chapters are crucial insights into the world of work, trade union organizations and workers in Africa. They range from the relationship between trade unions and politics to issues of gender and youth; from education to research; from organizational strategies to environmental and climatic issues; and from decent work to structural economic transformations.

These subjects represent areas for action that African trade unions identified for themselves to be able to continue to make a difference in the world of work and in society at large. In other words, the "core themes" of

trade unions' education listed above – and as identified by ITUC-Africa itself – are defined by their relevance to the future of work in Africa.<sup>328</sup>

The studies presented here demonstrate that African trade unions have well-informed positions on key global social and economic issues, derived from a vibrant internal debate. African trade unions have their own “lived experiences” and therefore particular perspectives on the world of work and its meaning, including its past and future. Besides their informed views, trade unions are also crucial representatives of labour. Whereas trade unions typically organize formal-sector workers, they are the voice of all workers.<sup>329</sup> This aspect is often neglected by scholars who insist on the old-fashioned concept of “labour aristocracy”.<sup>330</sup> Aristocrats or not aristocrats, who else in Africa speaks for labour, if not trade unions? African trade unions are the largest membership organizations in most African countries – the one mass organization, in many cases.

The labour question is one of the most neglected issues in local and global public debates, in mainstream media and in political programmes. Regrettably, the world of work also tends to be neglected by various donors, international organizations, especially international and regional financial institutions, and funders of international and national NGOs.

Neglecting labour is a global problem, and at the same time it is an incomprehensible – or socially paradoxical – position, since labouring is the main activity of most human beings. It is what people do in order to live and to survive. Labour is a universal and fundamental aspect of human life. This is true from the poorer to the most affluent parts of society all over the world. Yet what happens to labour is seldomly on the first page of newspapers, as it should be.

The first decade of the ITUC-Africa NYS (2011–21) ended in coinciding with the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, the NYS also debated how the pandemic affected or exacerbated pre-existing challenges in

---

<sup>328</sup> Cf. ITUC-Africa, *Renewing the African Trade Union Movement towards African Emancipation*, Agenda Item 4 of the 2nd ITUC- Africa Congress, Johannesburg (South Africa), November 25–27, 2011, available online: [https://www.ituc-africa.org/IMG/pdf/Theme\\_Document.pdf](https://www.ituc-africa.org/IMG/pdf/Theme_Document.pdf)

<sup>329</sup> Cf. ILO, Trade Union Density Rate, available online: <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/union-membership>

<sup>330</sup> For a critique of the concept, see: Eddie Cottle, “The myth of a labour aristocracy in South Africa”, *Amandla!*, 66, October 2019.

the realm of labour. African trade unions responded to the global health crisis and the problems it created for workers and societies. They offered solutions, on a workplace level, but especially at a national level. Whether these solutions were embraced by governments varied in different African countries. However, ITUC-Africa proposed several solutions at a regional, continental level.<sup>331</sup>

Almost all chapters in this book attempted to analyse one core theme concerning the African world of work, trying to answer a series of overarching research questions: Which kind of transformation is labour undergoing in Africa? Which active and passive role did trade unions have and will have in such transformation? How did exogenous factors, such as climate change or COVID-19, affect the realm of work and what is or was the response of labour organizations? Besides these overarching questions, there is a more crucial issue that this work delves into, which is the daily struggles of trade unions and their members.

Answers to such questions directly connect to the following issues: (a) the nature of African economies and employment; (b) the lack of decent work conditions, especially for young people and women; (c) inadequate social protection programmes and coverage and (d) how African trade unions are constantly under pressure to remain relevant and able to promote and defend the interests of their members.

## ► The transformation of labour and the call for a new social contract

In Chapter 3, Mohammed Mwamadzingo, Michael Watt, Dickson Wandeda, and George Owidhi, analyse the state of African trade unions and their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic from the point of view of ILO-ACTRAV.

<sup>331</sup> ITUC-Africa, *Meeting the Challenge of the COVID-19 Pandemic: ITUC-Africa Message to Affiliates*, 18 March 2020, document available online: <https://www.ccoo.es/cef60598899395cebd48567e6882d918000001.pdf>

The chapter gives a detailed overview of an important aspect of labour in Africa: the transforming nature of trade unions and their organization.

Trade unions are not representative of all workers in Africa – not all wage workers belong to trade unions. Given the high levels of informality in Africa, only a fraction of the labour force is unionized. Having said this, the role of trade unions and their agency goes well beyond the realm of formal labour. Trade unions tend to also have a political role as all-embracing organizations that struggle for dignifying labour as a whole. For example, the concept of decent work, which African unions embraced fully and with conviction, was developed as an idea, concept and policy programme applicable to all workers and not just formal wage workers, as Andreas Admasie and I explained in Chapter 5. Therefore, discussing the state of trade unions in Africa means dealing also with labour in its wider sense, including precarious, household and self-employed labour, and not only with formal wage labour.

The assumption made is that if trade unions are successful and effective in their struggle to dignify labour, this would ultimately benefit all African workers, including non-unionized ones. After all, countless studies point to the fact that labour is more protected not necessarily only where trade union density is high, but rather in situations where trade unions are properly organized and their rights legally recognized and respected. This must occur at national level (by law) as well as in the workplace (by the employer). This is evident if one compares the labour conditions in Western Europe or South Africa, where labour rights standards are high, with that of the United States or South Sudan, where they are much lower.<sup>332</sup>

Labour rights tend to be protected where trade union organization is solid. Organizational aspects of trade unionism are decisive for improvement within the world of work. The relevance and importance of a well-organized and institutionalized African labour force is more evident in moments of crisis, such as for example during the COVID-19 health crisis. Indeed, the global pandemic hit not merely as a medical emergency, but also as a social and economic calamity. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a litmus test for the labour movement in contemporary societies. Labour has clearly been badly and negatively affected by the pandemic, because of the subordinate

---

<sup>332</sup> For a global comparison between countries on the level labour rights, see: the ITUC Global (Labour) Rights Index 2022: <https://www.globalrightsindex.org/en/2022/countries>

position labour has in the dominant, neoliberal discourse – labour is de-humanized as a “human resource”, a factor of production, a commodity. Whereas for the ILO, labour is not a commodity.<sup>333</sup>

However, what the authors in this book and ITUC-Africa have pointed out is that the social and labour injustices and inequalities that intensified during the pandemic were already in place. As explained in studies and reports cited in the book, a new social contract is needed, centred on labour and workers. Former ILO Secretary-General Guy Ryder developed the idea for new social contracts at ITUC, and carried it over to the ILO. The ILO point of view on the new social contract can be found in *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2021*, where prospects for recovery are outlined.<sup>334</sup> Hence it is important to recall here that the idea of a “human-centred” strategy and a new social contract is central for both the ITUC and the ILO. During the pandemic, the ITUC outlined demands “to build recovery and resilience, putting people, jobs and the environment at the centre of the new social contract”.<sup>335</sup>

ITUC-Africa contributed to this discussion by putting forward its particular analysis, claims and demands, and this book represents a compendium of such views – i.e. how African trade unions should engage in global debates. Chapter 3 presents an important ILO-ACTRAV survey conducted during the pandemic among trade unions and all the worker constituents of the ILO.

In Africa alone, 136 trade unions from different African countries were involved in the research. The information collected is important for understanding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on African trade unionism and on labour more generally. It has been observed that “the pandemic impacted negatively on the overall activities of trade unions in the region”.<sup>336</sup>

<sup>333</sup> Cf. Alain Supiot, “Labour is not a commodity: The content and meaning of work in the twenty-first century” *International Labour Review*, 160 (1) 2021, 1–20.

<sup>334</sup> Cf. ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2021*, ILO Report, Geneva 2021, [https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2021/WCMS\\_795453/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2021/WCMS_795453/lang-en/index.htm)

<sup>335</sup> Cf. ITUC, *A New Social Contract for Recovery and Resilience*, Brussels 2021, <https://www.ituc-csi.org/new-social-contract-five-demands> The ITUC document contains five demands: creation of climate-friendly jobs; rights for all workers; universal social protection; equality; and inclusion. These are the basis of the new social contract according to the ITUC.

<sup>336</sup> See page 51 in this book.

Membership, activities and services were all trade union activities that were affected by the crisis. The crisis also influenced collective agreements, workers' rights and labour conditions, and contributed to unemployment, which is already the perhaps the major problem in Africa. Taking all this into consideration, Kwasi Adu-Amankwah, General Secretary of ITUC-Africa, repeated on various occasions that it was about time to put "the trade union movement on a war footing".<sup>337</sup>

African trade unions have now shouldered a new post-crisis task: re-building a better world of work. This is only possible through a reinforcement of trade unionism. Governments, if serious about a new social contract and a more just society – as they often publicly claim – must recognize and encourage trade unionism and unionization of workers. It cannot be possible to discuss labour without taking into consideration the state in which trade unions find themselves due to the pandemic crisis.<sup>338</sup>

Other chapters explain how the pandemic has negatively affected trade union functioning, producing tremendous inequalities of treatment among workers. The pandemic happened in the aftermath of the ILO deliberations on the Future of Work (FoW).<sup>339</sup> It is an irony of history that the pandemic hit in the very early days after the ILO's Centenary Declaration. Various authors in this book, therefore, explain how COVID-19 was an aggravating circumstance and not the cause of injustice and inequality in the world of work and in society at large. The ten-page-long ILO *Centenary Declaration on the Future of Work* calls for a "human-centred approach" focusing on people's and institutional capabilities as well as on decent and sustainable work.<sup>340</sup> In article II/C, the International Labour Conference, in Geneva, established that to "ensure safe and productive workplaces" it is crucial to ensure "not to undermine the role of trade unions".<sup>341</sup>

<sup>337</sup> See citation of Kwasi in Chapter 9 in this book.

<sup>338</sup> On the impact of COVID-19 on African workers and trade unions, see: ITUC-Africa, "African Responses to the COVID-19 Health Crisis: The Role of Unions", *Newsletter* (Special Edition), 17 (4) 2020, also available online: [https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ituc-africa\\_-\\_newsletter\\_special\\_edition.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ituc-africa_-_newsletter_special_edition.pdf)

<sup>339</sup> On the ILO's Future of Work initiative, cf. <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/future-of-work/lang--en/index.htm>

<sup>340</sup> ILO, *Centenary Declaration on the Future of Work*, Geneva 2019, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed\\_norm/@relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_711674.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_norm/@relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_711674.pdf)

<sup>341</sup> Ivi, p. 6.

Hence, African trade unions can and must play a central role as representatives of African workers for the purpose of the FoW initiative. The symbiosis of labour and life is the basis of a constructive social dialogue and a crucial element of the “new social contract” (as proposed by both ITUC and the ILO). Labour and life must inevitably be conceptualized beyond the pandemic crisis, for a just future regardless.

As Dung Pam Sha explains in Chapter 1, on the relationship trade unionism and politics, collective bargaining and social dialogue have been constantly hampered by governments. One of the crucial contributions of the chapter is its explication of the relationship between trade unions and political parties. In most African countries, trade unions have to navigate difficult and exclusionary political terrains in order to pursue their goal of improving workers’ rights. It did not always weaken the trade unions’ position, but the continent-wide balance shows that political – particularly ruling – parties have tended to prey on the trade unions’ position.

On several occasions, governments used COVID-19 to break agreements between themselves and trade unions. Government decisions were taken unilaterally, disregarding the principle of a tripartite balance between governments, trade unions and employers. Dung Pam Sha uses the example of the Nigerian Labour Congress and the memorandum of understanding it signed with the government and the Nigerian Employers Consultative Association to defend jobs. This agreement was completely disregarded during the pandemic, which was actually used precisely to hinder the tripartite deal. As a result a decrease in wages and allowances occurred.

So far, it seems that the two or three decade-long transformation of labour did not result in an improvement for the world of work. Capital seems to have won on many fronts. It is very important to note, though, that in Africa capital does not necessarily coincide with the employers. It is not paradoxical to state that stronger African employers’ organizations would perhaps be more beneficial for the African world of work as a whole than weak employers’ associations.

Increasing unemployment, declining income (and increasing profit) and “precarization” of labour represent three negative trajectories that most chapters in the book identify as the way in which African labour is transforming. These issues have been widely debated at the NYS. All economic sectors have been affected by this trend. And the pandemic crisis



only exacerbated an existing tendency and was certainly not the cause of the problem.

Women and youth are usually the most affected by negative labour trends. This is clear after over ten years of debate at the NYS. Naome Chakanya, in Chapter 6, and Grayson Koyi, in Chapter 7, explain how African women and youth have been affected the most by negative transformations in the realm of work. These two chapters explain how limited access to formal jobs for these two categories of workers contributed to the marginalization of women and youth not only in society but within the trade unions themselves. Marginalization is caused by low numbers, which results in the exclusion from decision-making positions. More likely to be excluded from the formal sector, women and youth are more present in the informal economy. This, of course, has implications for their involvement in trade union activities and membership. Further research is needed to explore ways to include categories of workers within trade unions without legitimizing precarity. As explained in various chapters of the book, informality remains a problem that has not only to be acknowledged but seriously tackled.

As constantly emphasized by the ILO, it is not possible to talk of labour or the FoW without giving working women and youth a prominent place in the discussion. Gender and generational inequalities remain a major concern in Africa. Koyi suggests that trade unions should be more attentive to the composition of their ranks. Youth should be given more space in trade union organizations and more effort should be placed on trying to attract younger workers to join trade unions. This is not easy as youth and early career workers tend to be in a weaker position vis-à-vis employers, who often do not welcome trade unions into the work floor. Hence, African trade unions have a role to play also in the enhancement of weaker categories of workers. The ITUC-Africa NYS has constantly stressed both aspects by addressing them in all its editions (see Appendix 1, which provides an overview of the NYS themes and debates).

The transformation of labour in Africa cannot leave aside the problem of labour informality or precarity. Informal or precarious labour was discussed at various editions of the NYS. It is not coincidental that representatives of informal economy workers' organizations, such as for example WEIGO, StreetNet International as well as those of domestic labour such as the International Domestic Work Union (IDWN) and organizations representing Workers with Disabilities such as the Africa Disability Alliance (ADA), have been invited to the NYS. Akua Britwum and Angela Akorsu give their account

of labour transformations in terms of its informalization in Africa (Chapter 8). The authors examine African trade unions' responses to informality.

In Africa, precarious labour has a long history. Indeed, according to some observers, the extent to which this phenomenon is so widespread makes the concept of precarity almost analytically meaningless. This does not of course mean that precarity is not an important issue. Quite the contrary. Moreover, the very fact that of its ubiquity renders every act aimed at tackling the problem a socially subversive act, at least potentially. In the past, efforts have been made by various African governments to create better employment conditions. In the 1950s and 1960s, a good job was a stable and legally protected job. More recently, however, the hegemonic idea is that a growing or efficient economy depends on a flexible labour force. This is the dogma advanced by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF since the 1980s. The application of this paradigm – called the neoliberal paradigm – did not lead to an improvement in the world of work. With neoliberalism, precarity seems destined to persist undisturbed in African societies.<sup>342</sup>

African governments, one after the other, adopted structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) that cancelled many gains that trade unions had managed to achieve before and after independence,<sup>343</sup> when most African countries registered a very slow but steady process of labour formalization, accompanied by a relative expansion of welfare State measures. The SAPs reversed this trend. First, they produced a generalized weakening of the public sector and a process of de-industrialization of the continent. Secondly, major job losses occurred, especially in labour-intensive sectors of the economy such as commercial agriculture and manufacture. Thirdly,

<sup>342</sup> Cf. ITUC, *The ITUC Global Rights Index: The World's Worst Countries for Workers*, ITUC, Brussels 2019: <https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/2019-06-ituc-global-rights-index-2019-report-en-2.pdf>. The flagship ILO's report on global wages, points out that inflation and COVID-19 produced a global decline in wages. However, both inflation and COVID-19 are only triggers, and the causes of low wages and labour precarity are indeed structural. Cf. ILO, *Global Wage Report 2022-2023*, ILO, Geneva 2023: <https://www.ilo.org/digitalguides/en-gb/story/globalwagereport2022-23#home>.

<sup>343</sup> For a summary and compendium, see: Bassirou Tidjani "African Unions Under Structural Adjustment Programs", *Industrial Relations*, 53 (2) 1998, 278-29; and Piet Konings, "Organised labour and neoliberal economic and political reforms in west and central Africa", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 21 (3) 2003, 447-471.

the SAPs contributed to an impoverishment especially of rural workers and therefore resulted in mass urbanization (rural-to-urban migrations) and the expansion of poor urban settlements, where informality thrives. And lastly, thanks to SAPs, Africa saw an increase in income inequalities. African trade unions, which in the 1990s had emerged as major civil society actors, resisted or tried to resist these trends, but the struggle was simply overwhelming. The balance of forces was completely averse to workers' organizations.

At the turn of the century, African trade unions seem to have increasingly adopted a variety of strategies that included critical confrontation of capital-friendly policies (as designed by the international financial institutions and similar organizations). Confronting means an acknowledgement of the historical situation and the current balance of forces. Education and continental unity (discussed below) are two pillars of this new strategy.

In Chapter 4, Hilma Mote and Michael Akuupa make clear how workers consciousness is crucial to mobilize workers. To reverse the neoliberal trend, it is necessary to emancipate workers. Worker education is an important tool of trade unions in this regard. The NYS is in fact a key part of this new strategy. It represents, in this sense, not only a space for dialogue but also a platform for action.

If the transformation of labour in Africa has been a neoliberal one, African trade unions have not remained inactive. This is because deteriorating working conditions and declining labour rights were possible because neoliberal policies imply a weakening of trade unions. Being aware of these processes, trade unions responded in at least two ways: the call for a new social contract (that the ILO acknowledged) and the expansion of trade union education at a continental level.

The message is clear: the negative trend cannot continue. A transformation of labour must lead to more and better jobs, more inclusion (of women and youth), more stable employment (less precarity) and increased remuneration.

## ► Trade unions: the reorganization of a unitarian path

---

A point of convergence among the authors in this book is that trade unions not only matter for workers themselves but to African economic development and social progress in general. The decline in union membership and density (the number of unionized workers over the total labour force in a given country or sector) is often used to as an argument to assert that trade unions are increasingly irrelevant actors in the economy and society. On the one hand, it is true that when trade union density declines, income inequality increases.<sup>344</sup> Furthermore, the social and political roles of trade unions – as promoters of social progress – do not always depend on their size or density. More research is certainly needed on this topic.<sup>345</sup>

Contrary to what most people believe, trade unions, whose history pertains to the history of global capitalism, remain the best suited institutions for dealing with labour rights and workers' conditions. The legal recognition of workers as individuals and not as property of a local chief or a commodity for companies is one of the main achievements of African trade unions. Diverse ideologies (from socialist to Christian and Islamic) as well as the ILO played a role in achieving this goal.<sup>346</sup>

Trade unions have also contributed to the introduction and the development of collective agreements and social welfare provisions (even if smaller in scale compared with the rich world) in many African countries. Trade unions contributed to the formalization of labour relations. Since precarity is a major contributing factor to the decline of labour income, it is possible

---

<sup>344</sup> Cf. Pasquale Tridico, "The determinants of income inequality in OECD countries", *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 42 (4) 2018, 1,009–1,042.

<sup>345</sup> Union can make a difference also when small in numbers. This was the case at the beginning of trade unionism in Africa, see: Stefano Bellucci, "The Ascent of African Labour Internationalism: Trade Unions, Cold War Politics and the ILO, 1919–1960", in S. Bellucci and H. Weiss, *The Internationalisation of the Labour Question: Ideological Antagonism, Workers' Movements and the ILO since 1919*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2019, 351–381.

<sup>346</sup> See, for example, the ILO's Declaration of Philadelphia in 1944, where it is clearly stated that "labour is not a commodity".

to understand how precarious labour affects the entire labour force and ultimately society as a whole.

On various occasions, the ITUC-Africa NYS has called for the African labour movement to join forces with informal economy workers. This is by no means a way to recognize the legitimacy of informal conditions – which trade unions seek to eradicate – but rather a way to forge an alliance for the mutual benefit of both workers in the informal economy seeking to attain formal legal rights and trade unions struggling to expand their presence.

Enlarging trade unions' labour constituency would be a great achievement for labour in Africa. However, as noted by Kwasi Adu-Amankwah, ITUC-Africa's General Secretary, in Chapter 2, an increase in trade union density and membership in Africa has often coincided with a fragmentation and weakening of the labour movement. On the one hand, plurality is a welcome development for any democratic setting, including the labour movement; but on the other hand, it has its limits. Kwasi Adu-Amankwah points to the damage that disunity and trade union proliferation has caused to the continental movement.<sup>347</sup>

Some researchers call for a balanced relationship between proliferation and unity. This is not the point of view of trade unions, which tend to pursue unity rather than plurality. But the two are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to have plurality and unity. There are currently two major regional organizations in Africa, ITUC-Africa and the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU). As Kwasi Adu-Amankwah explains, these organizations are, in many respects, replicating the same functions. And many African trade unions even belong to both organizations, thus making the continental labour movement weaker. This is especially true if one considers that, due to ever-expanding markets and trade integration, many trade union struggles are to be conducted at an international level. It is indeed also at this level that unity is crucial.

To further complicate matters, at an international and global level there also exist sectorial trade unions. "Regional formations of the Global Union Federations (GUFs) also exist and provide a home and support to sector unions in various countries. The GUFs operate autonomously even though they try to find common voice among themselves and with the ITUC-Africa

---

<sup>347</sup> See Appendix 2 for an overview of African trade unions and their regional or continental affiliations.

and OATUU".<sup>348</sup> So the view presented by Kwasi Adu-Amankwah on GUFs is not necessarily one of replication and confrontation but rather one of complementarity.

A final issue concerning trade union unity in Africa is the existence of subregional organizations. Like for unity at a continental level, subregional organizations are seen by Kwasi Adu-Amankwah as functional actors within a hierarchical, continental structure. They serve to increase plurality and hence have an overall positive function for the African labour movement as a whole. The attention to coordination, however, remains fundamental. Subregional trade union centres are autonomous organizations and some – such as the Southern African Trade Union Coordinating Council (SATUCC) and the East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC) – are more active than others. It is crucial that subregional centres coordinate their actions with the national and the continental trade union organizations. The territorial element is important and the national-subregional-continental structure is actually a positive instrument of coordination and policy. Issues can arise when unions multiply at the same geographical level (local, national, regional) or in the same economic or industrial sector.

During the Cold War, a divisive aspect of trade unions generated from the confrontation between ideological blocks; each constituting an invisible force that pulled trade unions towards each other.<sup>349</sup> Trade unions competed fiercely for members and for political support on the basis of ideology. Therefore replication existed on the basis of important and fundamental differences on how to conceive and shape the world of work.

However, it has been noted that pluralism existed next to competition even during the Cold War. This is because ideological alternatives were indeed real alternatives, and this ultimately benefitted workers. Another major problem caused by the Cold War was authoritarianism, which badly affected trade unions. Authoritarian governments unrestrainedly tried (with success) to co-opt or repress trade unions.<sup>350</sup>

At the NYS, the question asked is the following: if trade unions' proliferation continues, not based on ideological divisions, does this produce pluralism

<sup>348</sup> See page 37 in this book.

<sup>349</sup> Cf. S. Bellucci, "The Ascent of African Internationalism", op. cit., 2019.

<sup>350</sup> See the chapter "Le syndicalisme captif du politique 1960-1990" in Gérard Fontenau, *Histoire du syndicalisme en Afrique*, Karthala, Paris 2004.

or fragmentation? There is no clear-cut answer to this question. However, proliferation creates a problem at least in connection to decision-making processes. A formula widely used at the NYS has been: “unity amidst pluralism but following a coordinated logic”. In other words, pluralism is a positive element for democratic practices, but it cannot distract trade unions from their ultimate goal, which is the protection of the rights and conditions of workers. Unity does not mean suppression of plurality; it means not to forget the role of trade unions as representatives of the labour force.

## ► Trade union responses to exogenous factors: COVID-19

---

Government programmes and employers’ strategies are not the only cause of labour transformation in Africa. As explained above, “transformation” meant precarization and declining workers’ income. As most authors in this book point out, this is a trend that was not caused by exogenous factors such as COVID-19, climate change, war, etc. The negative transformation of the world of work was already in motion when COVID-19 hit. A factor is “exogenous” when it did not belong to an existing trend but interferes with it, either improving or worsening the situation.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the most recent negatively impacting exogenous factor. In Chapter 1, Dung Pam Sha explains how the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics reported 42 per cent job losses in the country’s manufacturing, construction, aviation, hospitality and tourism sectors, directly related to COVID-19 measures.<sup>351</sup>

Wage cuts and loss of allowances and income were other problems workers had to face in Africa during the pandemic. Without the support of the State, workers in Africa had to bear the dire consequences of COVID-19-related restrictions. As already explained, COVID-19 is not a cause but an exogenous factor that exasperated the already precarious condition of African labour.

---

<sup>351</sup> See page 23 in this book.

The pandemic has put a strain on the Decent Work Agenda programmes and provisions. As noted by me and Samuel Andreas Admasie, African trade unions rallied to prevent worsening of precarisation of working conditions in the wake of the pandemic.<sup>352</sup>

In relation to workers' education, Hilma Mote and Michael Akuupa put forward another argument: how COVID-19 affected the transmission of knowledge.<sup>353</sup> This is a crucial aspect of contemporary trade unionism. Not only have workers' educational structures themselves been affected, but "while the overarching impacts of COVID-19 on trade union education provision in Africa is not yet fully documented, the rapid change from face-to-face interactions, enhanced through social distancing measures have massively affected worker education".<sup>354</sup>

Naome Chakanya highlights another paradox: the "opportunities" offered by the pandemic crisis. COVID-19, while affecting women more negatively than men, has also brought to the fore the vulnerabilities of women vis-à-vis men.<sup>355</sup> Discussions and actions are taking place on issues such as domestic work, unpaid care and reproductive work. These are all issues that disproportionately affect African women in comparison with women in other parts of the world. In Africa, COVID-19 has produced a feminization of vulnerable employment and of non-standard employment. In other words, decent work deficits pertain particularly to women. The central message in this chapter is that trade unions must advance policies that ensure that women are adequately represented in the workplace. Hence, trade unions will have a major role to play in fighting for decent work for women during the post-pandemic recovery phase.

Climate change is also an exogenous factor that affects the African world of work. Some political economy approaches would categorize climate change as an endogenous factor, because climate change would be the result of the capitalist mode of production and market-driven economies. The point made by the authors in this book is that although this might be, true African workers have suffered proportionately more than employers and even workers in other parts of the world.

---

<sup>352</sup> See Chapter 5 in this book.

<sup>353</sup> See Chapter 4 in this book.

<sup>354</sup> See page 76 in this book.

<sup>355</sup> See Chapter 6 in this book.



Climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic are somehow issues connected to one another as they are both the result of humans unwisely intermingling with nature. The consumerist culture nurtured in capitalist societies is what drives the climate and environmental crisis. ITUC-Africa and the NYS have repeatedly emphasized the importance of trade unions in dealing with climate change. After all, climate change affects workers and society directly, and therefore trade unions as well. Hence, workers' organizations cannot avoid tackling these issue. As stated by Rhoda Boateng in Chapter 9, "trade unions as workers' organizations, have a responsibility to contribute towards climate policy through mobilization and effective social dialogue mechanisms".<sup>356</sup>

Certainly trade unions in Africa have the capacity to mobilize sections of the society to meet ecological goals. Extreme weather events, water crises, natural disasters, etc. affect workers and their families. Also, the lower the income, the worse the effect of climate change on the household. This is why ITUC-Africa and its affiliates regard climate change as a major labour issue in Africa. This is also why the NYS constantly tackles the climate and environmental issues. Africa is a continent deeply affected by changing climatic conditions. Since the causes of this crisis are also to be found outside the continent, the struggle inevitably becomes a global one. Here, too, African trade unions have some capacity to engage in global action thanks to their international ties. After all, ITUC itself is a global network of trade unions.

The ILO has also committed itself to tackling the issue of climate change, as the matter was made part of the dialogues that take place nationally on the Future of Work.<sup>357</sup> The ILO calculated that the losses for African labour will

---

<sup>356</sup> See page 117 in this book.

<sup>357</sup> "The ILO marks its Centenary at a time of transformative change in the world of work, driven by technological innovations, demographic shifts, environmental and climate change, and globalization, as well as at a time of persistent inequalities, which have profound impacts on the nature and future of work, and on the place and dignity of people in it", ILO, *ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2019, available online: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed\\_norm/@relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_711674.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_norm/@relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_711674.pdf)

be significantly higher than for those in other regions of the world.<sup>358</sup> African societies and the African labour movement must also be prepared for these challenges. The NYS and African trade unions' education programmes must pay close attention to the global economic reconversion – often referred to as the “great reset”.

Finally, let's not forget that when a crisis occurs, those in weaker positions tend to be more negatively affected than other categories. In the African world of work, these are precarious workers or the working poor, often women and children in rural areas. Precarious labour being a widespread phenomenon in Africa, unprotected workers are even more marginalized than they were before the crisis. Britwum and Akorsu present a proposal for fiscal and other government policies to alleviate the position of precarious or informal economy workers. This shows that although trade unions are not representative of informal economy workers, they are certainly proponents of dignified labour.<sup>359</sup>

## ► Conclusions

This book has brought together trade unionists, academics and practitioners who have been involved in different ways with ITUC-Africa's NYS, which is a major workers' education exercise in Africa. As explained by Hilma Mote and Michael Akuupa, education is crucial to building “workers consciousness”, which can develop only via “critical thinking”.<sup>360</sup> Mote and Akuupa continue by stating that education cannot be an abstraction and should always be linked to the needs and aspirations of workers as a group and individuals as part of a political society. Trade unions can be (and have been) fundamental actors in this: they have the knowledge and experience to pursue their

<sup>358</sup> ILO, *Working on a Warmer Planet: The Impact of Heat Stress on Labour Productivity and Decent Work*, International Labour Office, Geneva 2019, available online: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_711919.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_711919.pdf)

<sup>359</sup> See Chapter 8 in this book.

<sup>360</sup> See Chapter 4 in this book.

goal of improving working condition in Africa. Apart from this structural capacity, trade unions connect the world of work with society at large.

There are at least two major points raised in this book. First, African trade unions are certainly better equipped than many civil society organizations operating in Africa to make a real difference in society. The problem is actually that trade unions do not always realize they have this social potential. Education also serves this purpose. Education for workers is not like traditional education. Workers' education means knowledge based on needs. If based on workers' needs, knowledge can only be "critical".

Secondly, the ITUC-Africa NYS identified crucial problems in the African world of work: from the difficult relationship of trade unions with politics and governments to the issue of unity in order to form a united block with greater bargaining power; from the attention to the weaker sections of the labour force within market-driven capitalism, women and youth, to the debate on decent work; from the ecological to the health crisis. Looming over these issues is precarity and informality in labour relations. All chapters more or less deal with informal labour, which is basically the result of excessive labour exploitation, which is linked to the inactivity of many African governments in dealing with industrial planning, which is the cause of unemployment, the major problem for Africans. In this respect, the ITUC-Africa NYS message can be resumed as follows: to tackle the labour question and make work more decent in Africa means to critically rethink societies and the economy. This also implies reconsidering the historical position that Africa assumed in the global economy. African workers' debate and education must continue, and African trade unions are in the best position to advance it.