



Summary Report of the Virtual Meeting

## Caribbean Trade Unions Information Sharing Session on COVID-19 and the World of Work

11:00 am, 26 March 2020

### ► General Information

The objectives of the meeting were:

1. To share information on what Workers' Organizations in the world are doing and Governments responses on the use of International Labour Standards (ILS) in times of crisis;
2. To provide a virtual space for Workers' Organizations in the Region to share information on COVID-19; and
3. For the ILO to receive comments and inputs on the technical and practical support that the Office could provide to Trade Unions in these times of uncertainty.

The meeting brought together 28 trade unionists from the Caribbean.

Based on the interventions during the discussion, as well as names recognized on the list of participants in the webinar chat, representatives of trade unions from the following countries participated: Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Aruba, The Bahamas, Barbados, Bermuda, Grenada, Saint Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago. The Caribbean Congress of Labour (CCL) leadership was also present.

The meeting had two main parts. First a series of presentations from ILO officials to set the scene and share information. The second part was a Q&A where questions were asked in the webinar chat box and answered by the presenters during the session.

The meeting was hosted and moderated by Vera Guseva, Specialist for Workers' Activities, ILO Decent Work Team and Office for the Caribbean.

### ► Opening Remarks

In the opening remarks Maria Helena Andre', Director of the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities and Lars Johansen, Deputy Director of the ILO Decent Work Team and Office for the Caribbean, underlined the extraordinary circumstances with large uncertainty across the world in the times we are living. Although the number of people infected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) in the Caribbean is not as high as in other parts of the world, the situation could change rapidly and preparedness is key. The following points were made:

1. It is a human health pandemic that needs to be addressed at the health level as thousands of lives are being lost across the world – it is touching all countries, all ages, all sexes, all social classes, the more advanced and the less advanced world, it is a global problem that requires a global way of addressing it.
2. It will have serious impact at the social, economic and the developmental level of our societies. The ILO has produced a first analysis of the economic and social consequences of this health crisis. A rather conservative estimate which states that at least about 25 million people can be unemployed with a possible loss of income for workers of around 3.4 trillion USD.
3. The consequences will affect everyone in the economy, every enterprise, regardless of size, formality, or sector. As with any social impact, those most affected are those most disadvantaged and vulnerable.
4. In many countries there is already loss of income even with measures being put into place to reduce the impact of this loss. There will also be unemployment as not every company will be able to stay afloat through-out this crisis. There will be shut downs and closures of economic activities and there will be a rise in the unemployment levels, leading to the exacerbation of what is already a big problem in societies, a rise in the levels of inequalities resulting in higher levels of poverty. Everyone will be hit one way or the other, including workers in the health sector, the transport sector, the retail sector, the platform economy, workers occupied in fast food services, those that are in non-standard forms of employment, the self-employed, workers in the informal economy, in the Caribbean region, workers in the tourism sector with the shutdown of airports, people travelling, hotels being closed completely in some parts of the world, the oil sector, which will also affect the Caribbean, because there is less need for oil across the world, as well as domestic workers.

Based on the experiences from other countries as well as previous crises, Maria Helena provided some examples of what Trade Unions can do:

1. Move towards promoting a national and a coordinated answer, not exclusively but through a strengthened multilateral policy coordination.
2. One of the instruments to address the economic and social consequences is the need for strong social dialogue between workers and employers. More than ever trade unions need to be at the front line in terms of addressing the current situation and also in preparing for the mitigation of the economic and social consequences mentioned.
3. To be proactive, putting aside differences as this is the time for unity and solidarity - solidarity between the generations, solidarity between workers, solidarity between employers' and workers' organizations, solidarity with the government, and the joining of forces in order to develop this new solidarity that we have seen fading away so much in our societies over the past years.

4. Trade union organizations have to be sitting around the table with governments and with the employers' organizations, devising the policies that are to address the immediate impact of the crisis. Trade union organizations need to make sure that packages approved will ensure the continuity of the economic activity, and that we are not looking at large scale layoffs. These packages would be fundamental to keep companies afloat, which in some cases imply liquidity, money for the companies. They should also imply protection to the workers. These packages must ensure the continuity of the economic activity, and must give protection to those workers that have no protection, little protection, or those who will see their protection reduced as a result of the measures that are being undertaken. It is also important to ensure that fiscal and economic packages are designed in a way that will help avoid falling into a prolonged recession. It is fundamental to create the conditions for workers and companies which will allow them to restart quickly once the crisis seems to be ending.
5. At the workplace level, an important issue is the occupational safety and health principles that need to be respected and promoted by employers in order to make sure that workers are protected and safe. You also have to ensure that workers have access to good reliable information about what the real situation is with regards to COVID-19.

Both speakers underlined that the ILO stands ready to work with its tripartite constituents and support trade unions in this crisis. The ILO is having a very ambitious program that is being designed and discussed in Geneva, as well as in the Office for the Caribbean, in order to produce materials that answer to the needs of constituents.

## ► Presentations

The presentations that followed the opening elaborated on the topics highlighted in the opening session, in particular in areas of International Labour Standards and Social Protection.

- **Shingo Miyake, Labour Law and International Labour Standards Specialist in the ILO Decent Work Team and Office for the Caribbean**, presented the [ILO Note on COVID-19 and the World of Work: Impacts and Responses](#), with particular focus on the three key pillars to fight COVID-19, based on International Labour Standards:

The first pillar is a people policy pillar. This pillar contains measures to protect workers, such as:

- a. Improving measures for OSH;
- b. Encouraging flexible working arrangements such as teleworking;
- c. Preventing discrimination;
- d. Providing access to collectively-financed health services for all, including uninsured workers and their families; and
- e. Expanding access to collectively-financed paid sick leave and related entitlements such as sickness benefits, parental leave or care leave.

The second pillar is an economy and labour demand policy pillar. This pillar contains measures to stabilize economic activity. For instance:

- f. Active fiscal policies such as unemployment benefits, public investment and tax relief for low-income earners and micro, small and medium enterprises;
- g. Accommodative monetary policy (eg. interest rate reductions, reserve rate relaxation, targeted liquidity provisions); and
- h. Financial support for specific sectors to protect enterprises. Investment in health systems.

The third pillar is an employment and income policy pillar. This pillar suggests:

- i. Ensuring social protection through existing schemes to all workers, including informal, casual, seasonal, migrant and self-employed workers;
- j. Employment retention schemes (eg. Short-time work arrangements, partial unemployment benefits, wage subsidies); and
- k. Subsidies, credit mediation or refinancing for business continuity.

In the presentation it was emphasized that ILO Conventions and Recommendations provide guidance to these measures. Mr Miyake also mentioned that the ILO note contains background statistical and factual information and examples of social and economic measures taken in countries.

- **Claire la Hovary, Specialist for Workers' Activities in the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities**, further developed the topic of the relevance of International Labour Standards in times of crisis and presented the ILO Recommendation No. 205 on Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience (R205).

This Recommendation, which was adopted by the International Labour Conference in June 2017, deals exactly with the situation that we are currently facing with the Coronavirus (COVID-19). The Recommendation provides detailed guidance to constituents on actions that should be taken in the field of employment and decent work, both to prevent and to recover from crisis situations, as well as to build resilience. R205 places social dialogue, the role of employers' and workers' organizations, public services, education, social protection, rights at work and ILS, international cooperation – among others – at the centre of both preparedness and recovery. The guidelines of the Recommendation are based on International Labour Standards (ILS), but are specifically tailored to crisis situations arising from conflicts and disasters.

She guided the participants to a set of ILO materials and in particular the new note on [COVID-19 and R205](#).

- **Ariel Pino, Social Protection and OSH Specialist in the ILO Decent Work Team and Office for the Caribbean**, walked the participants through Social Protection measures that can be explored and implemented to cope with the effects of COVID-19 as well as International Labour Standards to keep in mind when developing and implementing these measures.

Some of the social protection measures that could be implemented are:

- a. Social security benefits;
- b. Social assistance benefits;
- c. Allowance for care;
- d. Delay in contribution payments;
- e. Emergency unemployment scheme;
- f. Expansion of sickness benefits;
- g. Health insurance; and
- h. Public employment programmes.

The presentation gave an overview of which measures are being developed or implemented in the Caribbean countries.

- **Diego Rei, Employment and Labour Market Specialist in the ILO Decent Work Team and Office for the Caribbean**, emphasized the importance of data to support the assessment of the economic consequences of COVID-19 in the workplaces during his presentation.
- **Ursula Kulke, Specialist for Workers' Activities in the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities**, shared some concrete measures implemented by Governments, Workers' and Employers' Organizations in other countries outside of the Caribbean region.

The presentation showed a number of countries that have implemented decisive measures to combat the spread of the disease, while ameliorating its pernicious effect on the economy and labour market across four policy pillars:

- Protecting workers in the workplace (e.g. working arrangement, including teleworking; expanded access to paid sick leave; advice on workplace OSH; prevention of discrimination and exclusion; support measures for working parents);
- Access to affordable health care and measures for medical personnel;
- Stimulating the economy and labour demand (e.g. active fiscal policy and accommodative monetary policy; lending and financial support to specific sectors, including the health sector); and
- Supporting employment and income (e.g. unemployment benefits; social assistance benefits or other forms of cash transfers).

The focus was placed on the following examples of response measures involving trade unions and social dialogue:

- **Germany:** IG Metall and Gesamtmetall signed a collective agreement including arrangements for short-time working securing 80 per cent of net remuneration; 8-day paid leave for parents with children up to the age of twelve; and Five-day paid childcare leave which will not be deducted from their annual leave.

- **Italy:** Government and social partners signed an agreement on 14 March 2020 to relax telework regulations to ensure the health and safety of workers who cannot work from home.
- **Kazakhstan:** Trade Unions Federations of Kazakhstan negotiated with the Minister of Employment and Social Protection on a Special Package for employees affected by COVID-19, including a compensation equal to the minimum wage for workers in quarantine; a bonus for medical personnel; delays in bank loans and utilities; and in-kind benefit for large families
- **Malawi:** The Malawi Congress of TU (MCTU) has urged employers with more than 1000 employees to split their workers into shifts to reduce congestion amid the threat of COVID-19.
- **Sweden:** On 18 March, Unionen, the Swedish white-collar trade union and Swedish Confederation of Enterprise, agreed on a nation-wide collective agreement on short-term work.
- **Paraguay:** The Trade Unions CUT, CUT-A, CNT, CGT, and CESITP, have jointly proposed to the Government the reduction of fuel and prices of public transport; controls on medicines and food; reduction of the VAT on basic basket; suspension of the IRP tax for young workers income; protection of employment and avoiding the payment of wages below the minimum wage; etc.

## ► Discussion

Following the presentations by the ILO colleagues, the floor was opened for comments and questions. The following trends could be noted:

- Despite the fact that trade unions are proactive in reaching out to the national governments, it is in a very few countries (e.g. The Bahamas) that they have been included in the national COVID-19 response discussions to date;
- Engagement with private sector and bi-partite dialogue seemed to be working better than tripartite dialogue;
- In some countries public sector unions have been involved in national processes, but not from the beginning;
- The aspect of psychological support (counselling), especially at the workplace, is left out;
- Issues with personal protective equipment for workers;
- The important role that the Caribbean Congress of Labour could play in bringing together trade unions in this challenging time, as well as delivering a strong message to the CARICOM Heads of State, was emphasised.

The participants asked whether ILO was reaching out to the Ministries of Labour in the same way as to trade unions. They got reassurance that the ILO was, and that there are various interactions planned, including tripartite virtual meetings.

It was agreed to continue to exchange information by e-mail.

### ▶ **Follow-up and next steps**

- Participants were invited to indicate their needs in terms of information, materials and research;
- ILO agreed to share the presentations, the report, as well as materials developed by the Organization on COVID-19 through regular communications channels, as was already being done;
- ILO will host more webinars as a means to spread information.

### ▶ **Useful links**

ILO topical portal COVID-19 and the world of work:

- <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/lang--en/index.htm>

Resources on R 205:

- <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/employment-promotion/recovery-and-reconstruction/r205/lang--en/index.htm>
- [https://www.ilo.org/actrav/info/pubs/WCMS\\_716841/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/actrav/info/pubs/WCMS_716841/lang--en/index.htm)
- [https://www.ilo.org/actrav/info/pubs/WCMS\\_646852/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/actrav/info/pubs/WCMS_646852/lang--en/index.htm)