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# Trade Union Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic - Part 1

## A. REGIONAL PANDEMIC SITUATIONER: IMPACT ON BWI INDUSTRIES

### 1. Impact on BWI industries and affected workers

The SARS COV2 virus was recorded arriving in most parts of the region somewhat later than Asia and Europe. As the case numbers rose in the MENA sub-region and South Africa, many African countries with poor public health infrastructure and limited capacity to test for the virus were forced to institute strict precautionary lockdown measures to halt the spread.

By 1 April, 13 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) were under full national lockdowns and an additional 19 under localised lockdowns (normally in large urban centres). By mid-April, some 31 of the 45 SSA countries had imposed curfews or full lockdowns with only work on essential services continuing. 37 of these countries also incorporated a partial (15 countries) or full ban (22 countries) on public gatherings. The mobilisation of military and police to enforce lockdowns resulted in a number of deaths, beatings and other human rights violations. BWI affiliates have publicly called for restraint to be exercised by security forces. By late April a number of countries had begun to lift or phase out the stricter lockdown measures, fearing the risks of starvation for many in the informal sector and a more general economic collapse.



The pattern is similar in the MENA sub-region where several countries declared a state of national emergency and imposed strict lockdown measures including mandatory self-isolation and curfews. Some countries such as Lebanon have already extended the lockdown to ensure social distancing during the Ramadan period. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States, in some instances large migrant groups were quarantined when infections were detected in large over-crowded camps. Most construction sites have been closed in the region but some large infrastructure projects, such as sites for the FIFA World Cup, in Qatar in 2022 have continued all be it with limited workforce arrangements.

The construction sector is estimated to employ approximately 11.7 million workers in SSA and 16.5 million workers in the MENA sub-region. The forestry and wood-related industries employ approximately 2.3 million workers in both regions. Sections of the MENA sub-region, in particular the GCC States, employ mostly

1 South Africa, Kenya, Rwanda, Congo, Mauritius, Djibouti, Zimbabwe, Angola, Uganda, Eritrea, Lesotho prior to 1 April and Mozambique on 1 April;  
2 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52103747> and [africa@icnl.org](mailto:africa@icnl.org)

3 For example In South Africa, the Independent Police Investigative Directorate had registered six cases of "death as a result of police action" during the first week of the national Covid-19 lockdown exceeding the number of Covid 19 deaths. In Kenya, President Uhuru Kenyatta apologised to the public for police brutality.

4 This is based on multiple sources including World Bank data, ILOStat and McKinsey reports, union reports and individual country statistics data.

5 Based on FAO (2014) estimates of the formal sector and FAO (2018) estimate of informal sector multiplier of 1.6 for the informal sector;



Know more about BWI and Affiliates' COVID-19 Responses at:  
<https://odoo.bwint.org/cms/covid-19-union-response-1689>

migrant workers from Asia and Africa. There are an estimated 8 million migrant construction workers in the MENA sub-region, from afar afield as Ghana. The full or partial lockdowns in the GCC States have impacted these workers, many of whom have not been paid and cannot access relief measures limited to nationals. This in turn has a significant impact on remittance-dependent families in migrant-sending countries. Migrant workers live in labour camps often in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions, where the virus can spread easily. The BWI regional office and unions in the area have been campaigning for improvements in accommodation and working conditions for migrants.



Chinese contractors constitute a significant portion of civil construction capacity in Africa. Interruptions to materials and machinery supply from China led to early disruptions on construction sites starting in February. Many construction workers faced reduced hours and layoffs, alongside supply chain disruptions even before significant national lockdowns closed or limited work on most construction sites in the region.

Work has continued on some essential projects. Factory-based work in urban centres in furniture and paper was largely halted but some forestry activities have continued through national lockdowns such as in Gabon and in countries with urban-focused lockdowns.

## 2. Pathways and social partner agreements on COVID-19 policies

Most BWI affiliates have reported a range of experiences with employers, from bilateral engagements resulting in workers' wages and jobs being secured through the lockdown periods, to partial arrangements through employer and state contributions where these are available. Unfortunately reports also highlight many experiences of workers enduring no pay, unilateral layoffs and company closures.

There were a range of measures for population and worker support during the initial response period and emerging measures to attempt to re-stimulate the economies in the region. Worker protection measures are generally targeted through the employer and include measures to pay a proportion of wages to full wages for a specific period. As a trend it seems union consultation has been increasing as measures unfold from initial emergency declarations. From a sample of BWI affiliate reports, countries including Bahrain, Egypt, Ghana, Jordan, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Palestine, Senegal and Tunisia, have tripartite agreements that protect full or a portion of workers income from 2 weeks to 2 months and in some instances prevent immediate layoffs. Other measures such as a one-off payment to workers who have lost their jobs have also been used, such as in Namibia. Other countries such as Kenya, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Qatar along with other GCC States have announced unilateral measures, including wage subsidy payments, minimum wage support, or partial and full wage protection for specific periods of time. In addition, a number of measures, such as tax and social security contribution relief, utility fee discounts and wage subsidies have been used to support firms in the hope of avoiding closures. Non-labour related measures, including expedited social security payments, mobile payment methods, one-off or time-limited social security fund cash transfers and food parcels have also been mobilised for the most vulnerable in many countries. However, migrant, casual and informal sector workers are frequently not eligible for such benefits and non-compliant employers mean that workers are not able to access relief.

Tripartite and direct engagement with governments has been used by many unions to expand eligibility and access for vulnerable workers. Multilateral lending institutions have made funds available to governments for immediate COVID-19 responses and for temporary relief through social security mechanisms. At the level of the African Union, there is increasing advocacy for debt relief measures.

6 The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a regional political organisation comprising the energy rich Gulf monarchies – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates

7 Migrant workers are prohibited by law from joining unions in many of the GCC states.

Engaging the state on policy and stimulus measures will be particularly important in the coming years as it will take time to recover the lost development round in the region. Unions are deeply concerned at the level of debt in the African region and the importance that debt relief will play in the period of recovery. This is particularly a concern in the construction sector where fiscal resources are a key demand factor. Many countries have already started to mobilise capital and plan for economic stimulus packages to respond to economic contractions and increasing unemployment. These range from short-term indirect stimulus measures, such as in Nigeria where 50% of company PAYE contributions have been waived, to broad multi-sector packages.



## B. BWI AND ITS AFFILIATES IN ACTION

### 1. Employment and Wage Protection

According to many BWI affiliates the construction sector in particular has so many layers of subcontracting and multiple small employers it has been impossible to engage in bilateral negotiation across all these employers. Unions have focused on the main contractors to attempt to get compliance through the subcontracting chain and engage other employers when approached for assistance by workers. Another strategy to secure jobs and wages is to engage in centralised bargaining mechanisms and tripartite dialogue. Most unions have used a combination. Whilst some employers have acted appropriately in supporting workers in lockdowns in the region, there have also been many reports from affiliates of closures, retrenchments, workers being forced to use annual leave and no work no pay rules.

**Southern Africa.** The Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MANWU) in Namibia used national television to call for further tripartite dialogue to extend social security to all workers in the construction sector. Previous tripartite dialogue led to a government employment directive ensuring precautionary health and safety measures, condemning the termination of employment during the lockdown and calling on employers to pay workers fully for March and April. South African affiliates, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Building Construction and Allied Workers Union (BCAWU) have engaged in sector bilateral discussions within bargaining councils to ensure workers are able to access unemployment insurance benefits specifically designated for COVID income losses. The NUM has also discussed the construction sector crisis with the Minister of Public Works and is engaged in a Covid-19 Construction Rapid Response Task Team to look at the recovery of the industry post-lockdown. The industry currently estimates a sector contraction of 5.4% with a good case estimate of up to 140,000 job losses. The Construction Workers' Union of Mauritius (CMWEU), together with its partner unions from the CTSP national centre, held a dialogue with the Ministry of Labour and secured the commitment that there will be no job losses and compensation for workers' loss of income of up to 50% if companies are unable to pay their full salaries. CMWEU continues to demand that all workers whether migrant or casual should also benefit from this approach. In Mozambique, the construction union, SINTICIM, has engaged in tripartite dialogue through the national centre. Agreement was reached whereby in 435 companies where operations had been suspended, wages would be paid at a rate of 75% in the first month, 50% in the second month and 25% in the third month of lockdown measures.

**West Africa.** In Senegal, the National Union of Building and Construction Workers (SNTC/BTP) welcomed the government's announcement on 3 April to ban layoffs and guarantee the incomes of workers made redundant during the COVID-19 pandemic. The measure seeks to guarantee at least 70% of the workers average wage over the past 3 months is paid and companies that comply will be able to access stimulus measures such as tax relief to be implemented after the crisis.

8 For example, South Africa has announced a 30 Billion USD package with funds leveraged from the IMF, World Bank and the so called BRICS Bank.

MENA sub-region. In Tunisia, the FGBB / UGTT Federation of Building and Wood used a tripartite meeting to discuss an initial payment of 100% wages in April and further discussions are due to take place in May. The General Services Employees Trade Unions of Lebanon (GSTU) called on the Lebanese government to establish a response fund to aid workers who have lost their jobs and other means of livelihood because of the COVID-19 pandemic. GTUCW in Jordan has agreed with companies to pay between 70% and 50% of wages. However unions report that many firms have not paid workers during the lockdown. Unions in Jordan and Lebanon also report many smaller companies closing.

## 2. Health and safety at the workplace

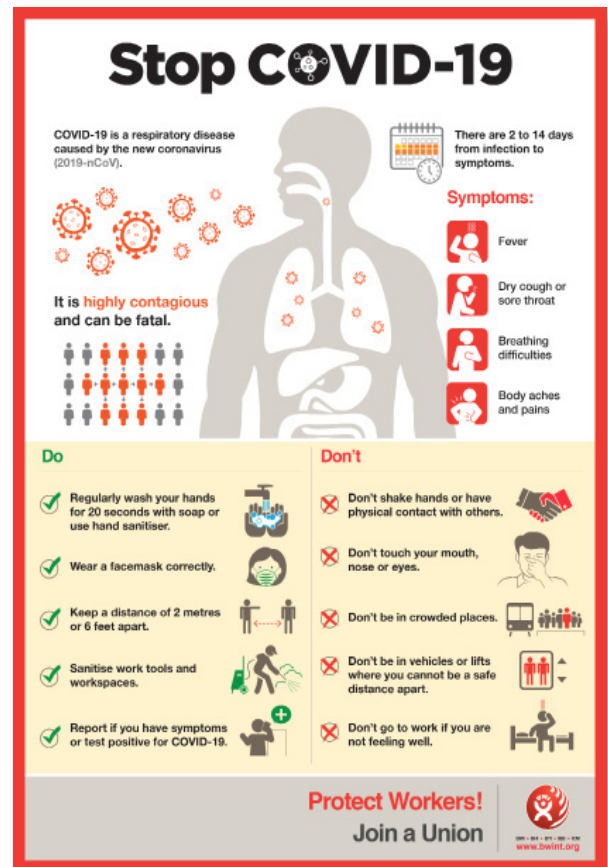
Health and safety has been a key area of engagement by BWI affiliates in the Africa-MENA region. The speed of the pandemic spread meant many people were unaware of basic information relating to the virus and disease. This was critical in the early period of March when most countries were still operating as usual.

As part of the BWI campaign entitled “Stop COVID-19, Protect workers!” affiliates are carrying out awareness campaigns on occupational health and safety (OHS) at workplaces through OHS committees or unions’ safety representatives, in social media and through bipartite and tripartite engagements. From early on BWI prioritised the use of masks when in many countries it was initially said that masks would not prevent the spread and should be used by health care workers only. When lockdowns were imposed, unions continued to educate workers in those sites that were still operational. As restrictions on work and movement are eased, unions are working continuously to ensure regulations relating to social distancing and sanitary measures, workplace temperature screening and worker transport and accommodation meet health and safety requirements.

East Africa. In Rwanda, the Trade Union of Workers Company in Construction and Carpentry (STECOMA) is using an SMS platform to reach its members and advise them on control and prevention measures in order to protect workers, their families and the community at large. The country is in a lockdown affecting some 324,000 construction workers and many in the forestry sector. The Tanzanian Union of Industrial and Commerce (TUICO) also carried out early preventive awareness work with its members even before the first case was reported in the country.

Southern Africa. NUM, BCAWU and CEPWAWU in South Africa have all been engaged in discussions around protection measures and the monitoring of sites where workers are returning. In Zimbabwe, both BWI affiliates, CLAWUZ and ZCATWU, managed to engage the employers of the sector through the National Employment Council bipartite forum. ZCATWU is producing union-branded masks for workers. In Mauritius, CMWQU has conducted awareness raising, engaged government on safety measures for the sector and distributed donated personal protective equipment (PPE) to workers.

MENA sub-region. In Bahrain, GFBW partnered with employers in promoting workers’ health and safety, with the theme: “We will fight COVID-19 together.” They provided members with information posters and the latest publications on COVID-19 from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Bahraini Ministry of Health. Information materials on how to properly disinfect workplaces and face masks were also distributed to workers. GTUBWW in Egypt has also engaged in education and awareness campaigns along with ensuring sanitary precautions and social distancing is observed in operational work sites during the partial lockdown in the country. NUBWW from Palestine is monitoring companies’ hygiene procedures and has distributed BWI safety information materials.



West Africa. In Nigeria, NUCECFWW engaged government and employers when hundreds of workers were continuing to work on the Dangote Refinery Construction Sites in violation of government directives. In Ghana, TWU has taken various measures to help its workers stay safe including awareness campaign through social media platforms and SMS. In collaboration with the union, employers have produced information posters on how to avoid infection from COVID-19.

### 3. International Framework Agreements and engaging multinational companies

In South Africa, CEPPWAWU engaged Staedtler SA after the lockdown forced workers home. The company planned to provide its workers only a small portion of their wages. When the company initially ignored the union's demand to pay wages, the union worked through the BWI and German affiliate, IG Metal, to engage Staedtler's headquarters in Germany about this violation of the International Framework Agreement (IFAs). As a result, workers have received their full wages through the lockdown period in South Africa.



The experience in Lebanon with Lafarge Holcim, a cement manufacturer, further illustrates the importance of IFAs. Lafarge before merging with Holcim had an IFA with BWI but has thus far failed to institute the agreement as the new merged entity. In Lebanon, workers in lockdown were to receive no pay, and in particular, a plant marked for sale wished to use the COVID-19 crisis to lay off workers. The GSTU in Lebanon intervened and signed an initial agreement with Lafarge Holcim to pay its workers, including daily wage earners, their full wages up to the end of March 2020. However negotiations still continue as the company apparently proposes to pay some workers 50%. Lafarge Holcim in Morocco, however, paid workers their full wage. An operative IFA would serve to protect workers so that international standards are met, and prevent such national-based opportunism by company divisions.

### 4. Migrant hotspots and support for migrant workers

BWI, together with a coalition of trade unions and civil society organisations, called on the GCC States for a strong commitment to provide adequate protection and support to migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Included in the coalition letters to the governments of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and United Arab Emirates are several policy proposals to ensure that the rights and welfare of migrant workers are protected. Some of these are: access to testing, medical treatment, protective equipment and basic provisions, stronger partnerships with national and sectoral unions, public information addressing discrimination against migrant workers as well as job, income and healthcare security.

In other parts of the MENA sub-region, such as Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, there are also significant numbers of migrant workers. Syrian refugees are also often employed in MENA states such as Egypt. There are also migrant and often undocumented workers in other middle-income countries, such as South Africa. They are employed in the construction and forestry industries and in the case of undocumented workers, will not be eligible for social security measures or food parcels during the extended lockdown in that country. Most migrant work is considered vulnerable, and more so in the case of undocumented workers, who suffer acute hardship during the lockdown. Affiliates in the MENA states, Mauritius and South Africa are carrying out awareness campaigns for migrant workers and calling for solidarity to support these workers. Some unions are monitoring the migration trends and providing assistance to migrant workers through BWI and international solidarity.

## 5. On humanitarian actions

Many affiliates in West Africa, including NUCECFWW, CBMWU, SNTC, FTBB, SNTBB and FNTCS, work in coalitions with NGOs to carry out humanitarian actions for workers in difficult situations because of COVID-19 and other climate change migration.




In Southern Africa, CMWEU construction union and CTSP national centre in Mauritius came to the aid of 44 unpaid Indian migrant workers employed by Swadeshi Pvt Ltd, an Indian construction company in Mauritius. The unions have also supported workers by distributing PPE and food parcels for the needy.





Mena sub-region. GTUBWW in Egypt donated 300,000 Egyptian Pounds to support informal sector workers through the Viva Egypt fund for the needy. The Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions donated USD1 million to support workers in need during the pandemic. The Tunisia General Labour Union (UGTT) and FGGB called on factories to revoke workers' termination notices issued during the crisis and decided to set up a "COVID-19 fighting fund" to help workers affected by the international health crisis. FGGB explained that the fund will be deducted from union members' day fee which represents TND 90 million. Food parcels were distributed to migrant workers. In Bahrain, the union created a fund to support migrant workers and has distributed food parcels. Unions in Jordan and Lebanon have distributed in-kind donations for needy workers.

## 6. On organising and member retention

Unions across the region have reported various difficulties in organising. Travel restrictions have meant workers cannot be reached in many countries. Because wages have not been paid, union dues have not been received, straining organisational resources in a time of intense worker support activities. Layoffs are also already reflected in membership figures. For instance, the Kenya Building, Construction, Timber, Furniture and Industries Employees Union reported a 25% decline in membership over the past two months even though Kenya has not been subject to a total lockdown. In response to these challenges, BWI and its affiliates are developing innovative ways of organising members. The strategies include the use of new technology (WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Zoom, Teams, and Skype) and also the involvement of women and youth in recruitment processes through the BWI Youth Organising Academy.

## 7. Matrix of Actions relative to the 7 BWI convergences

BWI Convergence	Summary of Actions and Outputs Relative to COVID-19 Pandemic
	Unions have given inputs to national lockdown and similar measures along with engaging employers and government to ensure the suspension of terminations, ongoing pay and the protection of migrants and vulnerable workers' rights during the implementation of extraordinary measures. Unions have also advised workers of their rights regarding COVID-19 and health and safety in the workplace. In some instances, unions have engaged in advocacy on broader human and socio-economic rights.
	Unions leveraged the global and regional organisation to rapidly share and spread knowledge, information and practices between themselves and then into national and workplace engagement and education efforts at a time when there was great uncertainty. Unions have educated workers on safety measures and rights regarding COVID-19 in the workplace, participated in the development of general and industry-specific health and safety protocols in the workplace along with the monitoring of compliance with national regulations and protocols.
	Unions have used various media platforms to convey information on the nature of the pandemic and the need to protect all ages in society. Specific youth structures have been mobilised in campaigning on health and economic support mechanisms for workers. Unions have also raised awareness of the economic and social implications of layoffs for the pre-existing youth unemployment crisis in the region and the critical role of BWI sectors for absorbing youth unemployment.

	<p>Unions have drawn attention to and shared information about the growing scale of gender-based violence (GBV) during lockdowns. The Zimbabwe Construction and Allied Trades Workers' Union partnered with the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe which reported that at least 764 cases of GBV occurred during the first 11 days of the COVID-19 national lockdown, above the monthly average of 500 GBV cases. The importance of women in workplace protocols has also been raised by many unions and regional and union gender structures have responded rapidly to distribute information during the crisis.</p>
	<p>Unions have emphasised that the response to the pandemic needs to incorporate rebuilding industries to address climate change and employment sustainability.</p>
	<p>In Qatar, BWI has been assisting networks of migrant workers and workers committees to organise in the large-scale construction projects for the 2022 World Cup. These networks enabled BWI to intervene and support migrant workers at the onset of the pandemic. The BWI has a cooperation agreement with Qatar's Supreme Committee on Delivery and Legacy (SDCL) and has jointly conducted OSH inspections. In April a 'virtual' delegation from BWI represented by General Secretary Ambet Yuson, along with union health and safety inspectors and experts from UK's UNITE, Australia's CMFEU and the Swedish Painters engaged with these structures in order to assess safety measures for workers still on site as well as in workers' accommodation, some of which have been locked down after workers were tested positive with COVID-19.</p>
	<p>The BWI region has convened several online meetings for different industry groupings such as the construction network to coordinate strategies. Cement and timber workers have also strengthened their global organisation through the supply value chains. This has been important for engaging in renewing organising strategies in different countries.</p>

BWI is the Global Union Federation grouping free and democratic unions with members in the Building, Building Materials, Wood, Forestry and Allied sectors.

BWI brings together around 334 trade unions representing around 12 million members in 130 countries. The Headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland while the Regional Offices are in Panama, Malaysia, and South Africa.

Our mission is to defend and advance workers' rights, and to improve working and living conditions in our sectors. The BWI, above all, has a rights-based approach. We believe that trade union rights are human rights and are based on equality, solidarity and democracy, and that trade unions are indispensable to good governance.

BWI goals include 1) to promote and defend human and trade union rights; 2) to increase trade union strength; 3) to promote a stable and high level of employment in our sectors; and 4) to influence policy and strengthen the capacity of institutions and tripartite structures in our sectors.

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