

“Achieving Fair Migration” an Africa regional conference in
cooperation with the ITUC Africa

Opening Presentation

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Good morning, and welcome colleagues and friends, brothers and sisters, comrades. And thank you:

- Kassahun Follo, First Vice-President, ITUC-Africa
- Representatives from ITUC Africa and Brussels, and from the global unions IndustriAll, BWI, ITF, PSI
- The hosts from the great labor movement of South Africa, what a privilege to share this next few days with you
- Staff of the ILO Pretoria office, and our colleagues at USAID
- Leadership of the SATUCC, EATUC, OTUWA
- Maina Kiai, UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association
- and the more than 120 union, migrant rights and labor rights activists in the room, from 2 countries across the continent and guests from around the world

It's so exciting to be with everyone here today, in this powerfully devoted and dynamic crowd. I join my brother and comrade from Ethiopia - Welcome all!

So many different important issues arise with labor migration. First, the obvious point—is that labor migration fuels the world economy. 150 million people have traveled across borders and are right now migrant workers in another country. They send home global remittances totaling 601 billion dollars, which is more than double official development

assistance, and generate untold billions in other economic activity. Conflict, abuse, disasters (like flooding, famine) and the abject lack of decent work at home—or often those issues operating together—push the majority of people to migrate abroad for work.

Meanwhile some 65 million people have been displaced by war and persecution—many of them right here in Africa—more than ever in human history. On average, refugees are displaced (according to the United Nations and International Labor Organization) for 17 years. Thirty percent of the world’s internally displaced people, 12.4 million people, are in Africa. Another 5.4 million Africans are refugees, which means they crossed an international border to escape danger and deprivation.

The sheer scale and magnitude of the global migration crisis led the UN General Assembly to adopt a 2-year plan of action last September to develop “global compacts” on migration and refugees, which we will be discussing how to influence, here this week.

There are “pull” factors as well. We know that individuals, families and communities, driven by their own hopes and dreams for a better life, may choose to migrate. A job in another country, under the right circumstances, provides the opportunity for a life- and family-sustaining career or maybe reunification with family and friends. Hundreds of thousands of workers across the African continent move across borders to find a better life for themselves and their families by securing a job that can’t be found or doesn’t exist at home.

It’s hard to diminish the sheer will and optimism of so many women and men who migrate for work, and who risk so much

to do it. And the beauty of global movement of people, learning from each other and intermingling... is quite inspirational, from a human and progressive perspective. Indeed that vision represents the opposite of what we are witnessing so much today—rising hatred, nativism and discrimination against migrants and refugees.

But the hopes of labor migration are too often dashed by abuse.

This summer, the Kenyan domestic workers' union, Kudeiha, introduced me to a young man named Frank, who had recently become a union member. He had just returned from Dubai where he had worked for 2 years. Frank was the eldest son of a very poor family who relied on him. So, when the burdens of struggling daily to find work in Mombasa finally became too much, he learned from a friend that he could work as a driver in Dubai for 90,000 Kenyan schillings (or 865 dollars) a month. But the job cost money. He borrowed most of the 1,250 dollars it cost to get the job from a friend, and Frank cried as he recounted how his father sold two head of cattle to make up the difference—despite the deeper poverty for his family that sale implied. But when he landed, he learned that he wasn't to be a driver but rather a loader in the airport. And he would not be paid 90,000 schillings a month, he would get only 20,000 (\$192), just barely more than he was making in Kenya to begin with. Deeply in debt, but stuck in Dubai, he had to take the job and, over two years, endured racist comments, wage theft, sexual harassment and intimidation whenever he spoke up.

He was a Kenyan man working in an airport in Dubai, but he could have come from anywhere. Because the truth is that what happened to Frank when he migrated to work is common for low-wage migrant workers everywhere. He could

have been From El Salvador, or Bangladesh. And he could have been a woman.

Women comprise just under half the global migrant workforce, and have since 1960.

Already excluded from many legal rights because they are in a new country where they are not citizens, women migrants often just trade one patriarchy for another. A study of female labor migrants in Canada showed that almost one-third migrated to work and to escape an abusive male partner. One study in the United States found that a full 80 percent of female migrant agricultural workers on legal guest-worker programs experienced sexual harassment and violence, but felt they had no access justice. Studies we have conducted in Swaziland and Kenya show high levels of discrimination and harassment against women workers in the garment industry and on tea plantations, where many workers are migrants. And the sexual division of labor means that woman's employability is often limited by or dictated to her by her gender. We hear of labor recruiters that will only recruit men for construction jobs and women for domestic work, even though the employers have not asked them to use gender in their recruitment strategy

The story is repeated endlessly and tragically around the globe, another permanent feature of labor migration. And labor migration is increasing in a context of massive and growing global inequality; and within a highly charged political environment that stokes anti-migrant and anti-refugee sentiments while fueling resurgent authoritarianism. Indeed, fueling entire presidential campaigns.

So we are gathered here to decide, together, what we think labor should be doing about it, recommitting to that right here at this conference. And there are several issues we will need to tackle.

First thing we should really grapple with is the fact that global migration management schemes are designed to control labor migrants by limiting their agency. Very often, migrant workers are barred by law from forming or joining organizations that empower average people and workers—like informal economy associations or trade unions or political parties or other civic advocacy groups in destination countries. And they are then often banned from participating in collective action. They may or may not be covered by anti-discrimination laws or laws that protect women from sexual harassment. Often they are legally excluded from social protections like maternity leave and occupational health benefits, and their access to courts is limited.

When migrant workers are excluded from laws that protect their fundamental human and labor rights—especially from the right to organize and collectively bargain to improve wages and working conditions—they are forced to rely on the good will of employers to improve things, which has never been how wages rise and workplaces improve. We know that as trade unionists. Indeed, making sure all working people have the right to join and form trade unions is the heart and soul of our work. How do we make sure migrant workers have these rights?

The second thing we should consider, is that labor migration takes place in a global economy set up entirely on the belief that the free movement of capital and profit across borders is desirable, even sacrosanct; and that lack of regulation is what

we need to make this happen. In fact, the whole post-Cold War global economic architecture as represented by global trade agreements, multilateral lending agencies like the World Bank and IMF, and institutions of economic governance like the WTO and the like, rest on those assumptions. Meanwhile there has been no commensurate systemic expansion of the rights of the working people to go along with the incredible expansion of the rights of business. In fact, the opposite has occurred.

The labor that creates all this wealth in the global economy, is HIGHLY regulated and restricted. And that is getting worse. Globally we are experiencing a resurgent authoritarianism directly or indirectly backed by global capital from governments north to south, cracking down on labor unions, infringing on human rights and closing space for civil society everywhere. The good news is ... Protecting workers from exploitation in the global economy and challenging powerful entities that control wealth and manipulate political systems ... that is what the labor movement does when we are at our best! That is what we were born for, that is *why we exist*. Yet the force and impact of our work is lessened, and the authoritarians gain the upper hand when we choose to ignore large groups of workers among us, simply because they are migrants. We need to decide that organizing migrant workers is a priority, if we are going to win.

Third, I would argue that, absent a truly rights-based approach to labor migration championed by labor movements, the whole system of global labor migration can end up relegating the lowest-wage workers to a permanent underclass, one that is fully segregated by level of income, and by gender, and suppresses their voices.

For example, why does a migrant construction worker in Singapore, where per capita GDP is nearly \$50,000, need to make only \$300 a month and live in a labor camp, far from his family? Or why is it OK that a woman from Ethiopia—cleaning homes, cooking meals and raising other peoples' children—works too many hours for too little pay to be able to bring her children to live with her? Why do generations of Bangladeshi women have to travel to the Gulf to find low-paying, exploitive jobs with no access to justice? *Why does being “low wage” and “migrant” mean you are sentenced to a life being separated from your family?*

It shouldn't and it doesn't have to. And it won't if the labor movement stands with and for migrant workers and their equal labor rights. And that is why so many labor leaders have traveled from so many countries to be here. So let's really try to understand together, the nature of the problem so we can address it. Why do governments and global business prefer labor migration schemes that distance people from their rights?

For some perspective, we can look at the Gulf and at the United States. Gulf nations have relied on a steady stream of migrants for 100 years to help build their economies. Fifty years ago, migration from poorer Arab states like Egypt or Syria dominated—but when these workers began to join forces with citizens for rights and voice, they were systematically replaced with a far more “foreign” workforce with no claims on common cultural identity, language or heritage. Asians replaced Arabs in many categories of work, just as now Africans are increasingly replacing Asians who are starting to command higher wages. Across the monarchies of the GCC, freedom of association for workers and all people, is severely repressed for citizens and migrants alike. These are political decisions

made by political and economic elites in the Gulf, for the purposes of maintaining their power and wealth—simple as that.

At the same time, a clearly orchestrated politicization of labor migration accompanied by xenophobic rhetoric has arisen around the world, giving rise to right-wing populist leaders and governments attacking labor migrants for political reasons—very clearly, for example, in my own country. Within the past 6 or 7 years, politically conservative American states like Alabama and Arizona—which, incidentally, are also anti-union states—instituted draconian laws targeting migrants from Mexico and Central America. The purveyors of these laws made spurious claims that migrant workers bring disease and criminality, that they undermine jobs for American workers and are a drain on the social safety net. Then, they turned their ire on Syrian refugees fleeing war. And now, we just saw a U.S. presidential election that whipped up fears of the *other* – specifically denigrating labor migrants in the United States, mimicking rising nationalist and nativist campaigns across several countries in Europe.

And why not? Racism and xenophobia have historically been used to mobilize, when a politician has no real vision beyond his own quest for power. The result is that some of the people who need access to enforceable and protected human rights the most—are the most excluded from them. So low-wage labor migrants, whose jobs tie them to their employers, cannot leave even if they are abused, or not paid and the law is not mobilized to protect them. The anti-immigrant State is not on their side. And instead of the 90,000 unaccompanied minor children from Central America arriving as refugees in the United States between 2014-2016 being treated with dignity, the atmosphere of racism and xenophobia against migrants

contributed to many children becoming victims of trafficking; being detained and imprisoned in holding centers along the border with Mexico; or being deported back to the violence-ridden cities they had fled in Central America, to face uncertain futures. 31 American states passed laws trying to ban the federal government from settling poor Syrian refugees there. As if building a wall to keep “them” out will reign in corporate greed, or the other true drivers of economic and political inequality that are hurting average citizens. And when we close our hearts and doors to refugees in part because of their religion...and actively discriminate against labor migrants based on their national origin... No inclusive and democratic society can sustain itself as such, if it starts to pick and choose among victims of war and economic deprivation in that way.

Because even a decent legal regime for migrant workers in democracies, like South Africa (where xenophobia has made migrant workers vulnerable to abuse) and the United States, will ultimately go unenforced and erode over time if the broader cultural dynamic screams—these people are *lesser* than us. When politicians and citizens insist on demonizing refugees and labor migrants and try to diminish their humanity, ignore their struggles, discount their contributions, declare them to be “lesser,” well, that is dangerous:

After all, isn't that is the concept slavery was built on?

But it isn't the concept the labor movement was built on.

This is a huge global crisis with serious implications across Africa and beyond. It calls for a renewed labor rights movement, one that directly confronts powers that are disenfranchising people from their rights—and organizes to challenge them. That is our task the next three days.

Because the notion of “lesser” ISN’T the concept the labor movement was built on. No, we are about equality. And dignity.

Right here, in this room, we have the architects of a brand new regional network on migration created just last summer under the ITUC-Africa umbrella – so much promise in that. We have representatives of labor movements who will talk about their work at the level of the SADC and EAC, to use their power and voice to make common cause with migrant workers and stand with them against injustice. And we have migrant-led NGOs that have risked their own safety to push governments to do the right thing. In this room we can challenge ourselves over the next few days to dream bigger! Like:

- What if core labor rights were portable, and binding, and reflected the specific hopes and vulnerabilities of women?
- What if your gender didn’t dictate your overseas job conditions, or opportunities at the time of recruitment?
- What if we remade the labor migration system from the perspective of the migrant worker, the refugee, and her hopes and dreams for herself, her family, her community—what would that look like?

The system is global and we have to push back together in a global way. Let’s commit to that. In all our plenaries and workshops, let’s organize to:

- Be bolder in our analysis of the push factors. The lack of decent work doesn’t come about magically, it is the result of failed national and global economic policies that don’t put people first. Let’s hold our governments accountable

- to the creation of decent work at home so migration is truly a choice
- Build national, cross-border and global coalitions to advance human rights in trade agreements and regional economic integration schemes specifically like we have across Africa, and let's work harder together to end the double standard of investor rights over worker rights
 - Immediately ensure migrant workers have equal human rights at work. Rights to form unions and to speak out without fear of retaliation, to health and safety protections, to gender pay equity, and visa portability. To the right to be free from gender-based violence at work
 - And of course in so many of our countries, no one's labor rights, or human rights, are secure. That is why we need to make common cause among the broad array of organizations represented here, especially trade unions and NGOs, and academics and allies across civil society. Let's recommit to building those alliances, right here

Let's take a page out of South Africa under Apartheid and Tunisia under a brutal dictator. Labor movements from both countries have taught us powerful lessons about how critical freedom of association is to challenging oppressive systems, and for bringing on democratic transformation. They took a risk and dreamt of something bigger and something better, and they changed the face of their nations. Together, the next three days, let's really work and make it happen.

Thank you again.