

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

How Unions Meet COVID-19 Challenges – and Beyond
Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director
Guest: Ayuba Wabba, President, ITUC and Nigeria Labor Congress

Ayuba Wabba:

But as unions, we'll keep reminding our political leaders of the commitment that they have made, that they must keep, and that citizens, or people must be at the center point of our policies and programs.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hello sisters and brothers, and welcome to The Solidarity Center Podcast, an interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shauna Bader-Blau. I'm also the Executive Director of the Solidarity Center in Washington, D.C. We're the largest US-based international worker rights organization. We empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, for justice in their communities and for greater equality in the global economy, and for one, just future.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

What happens when millions of workers suddenly have no jobs and no income? The COVID-19 pandemic has made this a reality across the globe, and challenged all of us in the union movement. My guest today is Ayuba Wabba, president of the Nigerian Labor Congress, the NLC. He will give us an inside look at the work of the Nigerian labor movement in this time of crisis, how unions opened a dialogue with employers and the government to establish social protections for workers during the pandemic. Basic rights like sick leave, access to protective equipment and health care, and livable wages.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

But what happens when dialogue isn't enough? As we will hear, workers and their unions used their voice and their power when the government tried to raise taxes on key services like electricity and fuel to ensure there were no tax increases on basic goods. Ayuba is also president of the International Trade Union Confederation, the IUTC, which represents 207 million workers in 163 countries around the world. So he also tells us about efforts being made at the global level to build a post COVID world, where all workers are covered by social protections.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

As a global union leader, he is at the forefront of an international campaign to ensure the future of work ensures good jobs, as well as green jobs, that address the ongoing challenges of climate change. We are so fortunate brother Ayuba could join us today. His accomplishments as a distinguished public health specialist and union leader at the national and global levels are so impressive. As I listen back to this interview, it became clear that this is essentially a master class in how unions can respond in a crisis.

Ayuba Wabba:

My name is Ayuba Wabba, I'm the president of the Nigerian Labor Congress, and also the International Trade Union Confederation.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

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Well, thanks for joining us today. And I realize we're actually having this conversation a year into the global pandemic, which has devastated lives and livelihoods all over the world. And I wonder if you could describe, in your view, how are workers being impacted by this pandemic?

Ayuba Wabba:

Well, I think this is really a challenging period for workers, and even businesses globally. Because the negative impact of the COVID-19 on businesses, and on workers, is something that is unimaginable. Let me share my experience here in our country, where we have disruption in all the business lines, in the production lines. There have been disruption of production lines, and in most cases, workers are sent on leave without pay. And looking at our economy, where more than 70 percent is actually in the informal sector, is even very more challenging.

Ayuba Wabba:

And this is a sector where you don't have social security coverage for more than 82 percent. In fact, the figure for Africa is that 82 percent of the population is not covered by any form of social security benefits. And therefore, once you are sent home, you are on your own. You don't have sick leave benefits, you don't have leave benefit, and you don't have social security coverage. So is very challenging and pronounced in developing countries like Nigeria, and therefore, unions also have to find ways and means of even protecting jobs.

Ayuba Wabba:

We then had an accord with the employer's organization, Nigeria Employer's Organization. We are the first country to sign an MOU with the employer's organization that workers cannot be sick, or should not be sacked without social dialogue, where the issues can be put on the table, we can have a discussion and we can have ways and means of protecting those workers, and ensuring that their means of livelihood is not cut off without any social protection cover. And I think that has assisted to a larger extent.

Ayuba Wabba:

Secondly, because of the fact, also, that our health system is not perfect and the health system has been overstretched, just like other countries. And that's how we come up with an allowance called Inducement and Hazard Allowance. That all health workers, nurses, doctors, pharmacists, that are on the frontline, should be able to have 50 percent of their salary as inducement allowance. That is to encourage them and also to motivate them. We also had to fight for insurance cover, to cover those categories of health workers in the event they got infected, and possibly they die.

Ayuba Wabba:

That there should be full payment of insurance coverage for such a category of workers. So by and large, this had been the trend and we have continued, the unions have continued... In fact, we opened a platform, labor and civil society platform, where virtually, we have been discussing and interacting. And I've also led a team of labor leaders to interact directly with the presidential committee that is in charge of COVID, led by the secretary to the government of the Federation of Nigeria.

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Ayuba Wabba:

And we insisted that despite the challenge of the COVID-19, because largely our economy is driven by informality, we interface with government to say that government also must intervene, to provide some form of supports to citizens. And I think there is a target to extend social security coverage to 24 million Nigerians, and they are creating 774,000 jobs from each of the local governments that we have, because the primary responsibility of every government is welfare and security of the people.

Ayuba Wabba:

But we have been up and doing to actually give a voice to those workers that we represent, to ensure that their voices are heard, we have done contestation using workers power, and using some rallies to actually raise concern about issues and areas where we think attention have not been given. So by and large, those are some of the areas we have tried to intervene, but the situation is really, really bad when you look at the economy, the health implication, the health situation. And the fact also that the main stake of our economy had been affected, because of

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Can you tell us a little bit about the impact on informal workers and other vulnerable workers in particular, that you've seen? What has the impact on lives and livelihoods been of this pandemic?

Ayuba Wabba:

For informal sector workers, in fact, they have been more on the receiving end because for formal sector workers, we have insisted that their salary must continue to be paid, even if they are lockdowns, and that has continued. But for informal sector workers, it has been very difficult, despite the fact that we have interface with the employer's organization, we had some understanding. But in the informal sector, many of them are not covered by unions, and many of them also, those small and medium scale enterprises are not covered by the employers organization.

Ayuba Wabba:

So that's where we had a lot of challenges, but the Central Bank of Nigeria, actually, intervened because we made a point that those businesses must be bailed out. There must be funds, actually, to bail out those businesses so that we can save jobs. And I'm happy to inform you that a lot of money have been released. Like private schools, money was given to them to pay salary of teachers, because at that time it's a private school, people are not paying school fees and therefore they couldn't pay their teachers, government intervened.

Ayuba Wabba:

Also in small- and medium-scale enterprises, government intervened, actually, to give them some packages so that they can also protect those vulnerable workers. But it has not been a 100 percent success, some workers were still affected and they were sacked, or they'll lose their jobs. And most of them became destitute, until we are able to tell government now to intervene through palliatives. So foods were distributed, and a lot of other palliatives were distributed, and I think that is what assisted.

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Ayuba Wabba:

But that didn't go down very well, because we realized that despite the fact that a lot of those items that were procured, some of the state governments actually hid some of those palliatives in warehouses. And you can see people carrying one bag of rice, somebody putting it on the head from the warehouse and walking away with it, and that is part of the desperation. But I must tell you the fact that the informal sector was worse hit. But I think a lot of innovations came, but with our population of more than 200 million people, it will be difficult.

Ayuba Wabba:

I'm talking about more than 70 percent of that population being in the informal sector, and most of them have to find their means of livelihood on daily basis. They go out in the morning and find what to eat for their family in the evening. So it makes it very difficult and very challenging, but I think by and large, we are getting out of it. And that's why, even with the second wave of the COVID, and you know the cases have actually even surpassed the first wave.

Ayuba Wabba:

But because of the fact that we need to strike a balance between allowing people to get means of livelihood, the economy may even crumble, because you realize that the main stake of our economy is the petroleum. And the price of petroleum have continued to dwindle, and therefore the revenue accruing to government is also at its lowest ebb this year.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I wanted to ask you about that, because I know behind these gains that the Nigerian Labor Congress has made during this year for workers, is also its negotiation and its power. And I know the Nigerian Labor Congress is not afraid to use its voice and power when needed. Can you tell me about a time this year, where workers stood up and fought back against things like electricity and petrol prices, and other challenges?

Ayuba Wabba:

Yes. Because of the challenge in the economy, because as I speak to you now, our budget for 2021 cannot be funded. In fact, they are trying to borrow because half of the sum required to fund the budget is not there, because the revenue accrued into government from taxes and sale of a petroleum product will not be able to fund the budget. So government now have resorted to taking some austerity measures, including the issue of removing subsidy that we used to enjoy on electricity, and also subsidy on the pump price of premium motor spirits.

Ayuba Wabba:

But this will have, also devastating effect on workers, because their wages have remained stagnant, so if you add to the out-of-pocket expenses, it then means that it will be a double tragedy. The tragedy of COVID-19 and also the tragedy of multiplicity of taxes. So when that pronouncement was made without any consultation with labor, we had to issue notice of national strike, and quickly government had to

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resort to inviting us for dialogue at the highest level. And therefore we had to stop first that increase of electricity tariff and go into dialogue.

Ayuba Wabba:

In fact, by and large, many Nigerians supported that action we took, and many Nigerians were ready to join because of the fact that many Nigerians are in very difficult situations right now, because of the challenge of COVID-19. Because businesses are underperforming and people that earn income, most of their income had been disrupted and therefore it is survival that is so difficult. So that is why we had to respond, to actually draw the attention of government.

Ayuba Wabba:

And a such approach is very, very necessary, if not, absolute power with governments, they know that they will always work not in the interests of citizens. And now we taught that governance should be about justice.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

You have just made the case for why the right to strike and the right to have unions are fundamental to democracy and fundamental to good governance, and good outcomes of policy around the world. I mean, really congratulations for standing up and making that change on behalf of Nigerian citizens, who all benefit inside and outside the labor movement. It's very inspiring. And I've been thinking, as well as you're talking about your role as the president of the International Trade Union Confederation, and I know that this year you have been promoting the idea of a Global Social Protection Fund.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I read an ITUC survey, that showed only 50 percent of people around the world had any social protection responses from their government during the pandemic. You talked about excluded, vulnerable, informal workers, and there are many others in countries where they got no social support, no social protection, despite the lockdowns and the hardship economically. And I wonder if you could just tell us a little bit about this idea of a Global Social Protection Fund, what would it mean, what would it do?

Ayuba Wabba:

Well, thank you very much. It is true that before the crisis, only half of the world population had access to any form of social protection, and only a third of the world population had access to comprehensive social protection in line with the ILO standards. So you can see how challenging it is. And therefore, the COVID-19 challenge has exposed the inadequacies in the entire social protection system. That's why we thought that it's important that we try to now advance the issue of universal social protection.

Ayuba Wabba:

So that there will be funds to be able to make sure that the current shock, and even subsequent shocks can be able to be addressed in various countries, if we have the issue of having pools that will be dedicated to social protection, in protecting workers. So basically there is, actually, the idea of also campaign for new social contracts. The new social contract is to ensure that we're able to accommodate

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this issue of universal social protection in our collective bargaining agreements, and also in our various instruments that we have used to protect workers interests.

Ayuba Wabba:

This is very important and fundamental, because of the fact that a lot of resources will be required, and many countries don't have this resources. And that's why I gave you the example of, particularly Africa, where 82 percent of the population is not covered by any form of social benefits. So it has been a priority of ITUC, it has been a priority of our leadership to actually lead the campaign for a new social contract that will guarantee a social protection for everybody.

Ayuba Wabba:

In fact, if we're able to look at the various support that multinational agencies are giving countries, and we're able to harness those resources together. We are also trying to have a campaign, to make sure that COVID-19 is one of the diseases that is also covered by occupational health and safety. For instance, workers contract the COVID, they will be able to be entitled to sick pay, they will be able to be entitled to all forms of coverage. All workers, including casual workers, including migrant workers, including workers that are working in the precarious sector, because this is very important. If not, the inequality gap between the rich and the poor will continue to be widened.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

So I heard you talk about health and safety as a human right for everyone, no discrimination, rights for all workers, living wages and universal social protection as foundational for a new social contract. And I wanted to ask you specifically about the issue of discrimination, and I know that the Nigerian Labor Congress is a leader in Africa, and in the global labor movement in promoting an end to gender-based violence in the workplace, and gender discrimination.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

And I wondered if you could share just a little bit about how the vision of ending discrimination on the basis of race, or gender, or immigration status, or any other form of discrimination is part of the ITUC's vision for a new social contract?

Ayuba Wabba:

As we speak, only half of the world population had access to any form of social protection, and only a third of the world population had access to comprehensive social protection in line with ILO standards. In the context of Africa, including my country, Nigeria, this situation is even more acute. So you cannot have social justice in such a perverse situation. And that is why ITUC is leading the campaign for a new social contract. One that will guarantee fundamental rights, both human and traditional rights.

Ayuba Wabba:

That will guarantee also equal opportunity for everybody, including gender rights, including climate issues. We believe that the new social contracts will be very comprehensive, that will also address the issue of sick leave, even for those that are in temporary jobs, or those that are in the informal sector.

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Because as I said, those in the informal sector are even more in number. In my country, more than 70 percent of our workforce are in the informal sector, and those category of people are not covered.

Ayuba Wabba:

And the COVID-19 challenge has exposed the inadequacies in the current global system, where you have a situation where many have no means of livelihood, they cannot be able to pay their bills, they can't send their children to school. In some cases, they can't even access health care, which is a fundamental right of every citizen. And so this is why we are leading the campaign for a new social contract for social justice. And as I said, the foundation of peace around the world as enshrined in the ILO constitution of 1919, is social justice.

Ayuba Wabba:

It's clearly stated that the panacea to global peace, and that was coming after the first World War, is to say that social justice is the panacea to global peace. And you can have a connect with that, possibility that's why we're having this social upheaval in many countries, because many people have been alienated. So basically, I think that foundation principle is what's ITUC is promoting, that for us to have peace there must be social justice. And having a new social contract that promotes universal social protection is one of those social justices that is required at this point in time.

Ayuba Wabba:

As I said earlier, when you see the structure of the world today, in the last one decade, wealth has more than tripled, it's a fact. But in many, many of our countries, including the very rich countries, poverty has also been very perverse. And therefore the inequality gap between the rich and the poor have continued to be weighted. That should not be the case if we have a social security coverage that actually set a basis, a minimum standard, a minimum threshold that can be able to address this current challenge and even future shocks.

Ayuba Wabba:

And that is why we are, actually, canvassing for a new social contract and all of us at the ITUC, through our organs led by the General Secretary and my humble self. All of us are committed to making sure that this take place.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

When the government tried to increase prices and taxes in the middle of the pandemic, Nigerian workers and their unions stood up to hold the government accountable. That's what working people can accomplish through their unions, that's democracy. Our conversation with Ayuba Wabba continues after the break.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hi there, it's Shawna again, I just wanted to take a minute to invite you to check out RadioLabour, the international labor movement's, radio service. RadioLabour produces daily newscasts about union events and issues, and it also produces special programs to support labor campaigns around the world. Check out RadioLabour at R-A-D-I-O-L-A-B-O-U-R.net, and find out more about worker rights struggles

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around the world, and how the movement is supporting their efforts for decent wages, fair treatment, and strong communities. Follow and subscribe at radioLabor.net.

Ayuba Wabba:

And if I could shift gears a little bit, building off your comments about a new social contract to achieve peace through social justice. When you think about the future of work, and you think about coming out of COVID and building back better, how does climate change and the climate crisis play into your thoughts about the future of work, and the post-COVID building back better that we, as the working class, need to do globally?

Ayuba Wabba:

The issue of climate change have been affecting the world of work negatively in many countries. In fact, the mainstay of our economy, outside oil and gas, is farming. But of recent, there have been a lot of changes. Where through desert desertification, the savannah vegetation is being eroded, and in most cases, you can see that the clash between the herders and farmers have become a major issue in Nigeria. Because herders are migrating from the northern part of the country toward the southern part of the country, where you have the Atlantic ocean, so that there are cows and the animals can be able to this.

Ayuba Wabba:

So it's an ongoing issue that trade unions need to engage. And in fact, it's one of the priorities of the ILO, International Labor Organization, and also one of our key campaign pillars of the International Trade Union Confederation. We are part of institutions that are supposed to promote countries to key into those initiatives, and also declarations that have been made, to make sure that the issue of climate change is taken very seriously and also is taken, so that we can be able to address some of those issues.

Ayuba Wabba:

So trade unions are part and parcel of those issues because we don't operate in isolation. And in some trades, there had been a challenge of even job losses arising from the challenge of climate change, and also climate issues. And that's why it's also one of our priorities. And we thank God that even in some climes now, particularly the U.S., the new government is now committed to joining the world. And I think that is something that is cheering, and I want to commend the American Federation of Labor and the Solidarity Center for all the good work that went into the campaigns.

Ayuba Wabba:

I think last year I was in Atlanta, Georgia when the CBTU had their world congress. I was there as a guest, and I recall I saw a lot of effort that went into the campaign. I remember even at that meeting, they had their primaries for all the candidates, and I remember, even Joe Biden was the person, actually, that won the primaries. That is, I think, one or two years before the general election. So I think I must commend them, and I think it's one of the issues were taken on board, that we must also be politically conscious. If we don't get the right people in politics, to be able to change those situation.

Ayuba Wabba:

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We may have the numbers, but if we have the numbers and we don't use the numbers, we don't use worker's power to stay on the positive side.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Thank you. And we are really pleased to be back in the Paris Climate Agreement. And I was thinking when you were talking about that story of people competing for livelihoods in Nigeria, between herders and farmers, because of desertification and the loss of arable land and the loss of lake water, that people need to survive. I was thinking about how climate change is causing right now, real life crises for peoples and working peoples, and poor peoples all over the world.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I was also thinking about how in some countries, that are big carbon emitters, like industrialized countries, there's often this debate about, "You have to have either a good environment or jobs, that we can't like lose certain jobs at the expense of having a good environment." It's like a debate, a dichotomy. It feels almost like there's a sense that we can't have a good healthy environment and strong, healthy jobs, that it has to be a zero sum game. I wonder if you could talk a little about that from your experience and your perspective?

Ayuba Wabba:

We can have, actually, jobs and also have a clean environment. And that's why the Green Energy Initiative is one issue that we are pushing. You don't need to contaminate the environment for you to be able to return jobs, jobs can be retained. And we can, actually, continue to produce using greener forms of energy that, actually, emit a small amount of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Because all of us will be at risk if the entire environment is contaminated.

Ayuba Wabba:

You are talking of many, many trades, fishermen here now, before, if they go fishing, they will be able to have a bumper fishing, but now because of the climate change and the warming, it's very difficult for them even to continue to survive. In my country now, there is, actually, a particular ministry that is actually working on greener energy, and we have a target, we have a plan. We have a priority to ensure that we're able to deliver on the mandate and the goal of achieving greener energy in the next couple of years. So I think it's do-able, If all of us are committed to doing it.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I was going to ask you, do trade union members in Nigeria think about the climate fight and the climate struggle as a priority?

Ayuba Wabba:

We have a desk officer now in NLC that is actually responding to the issue of climate change. And all our affiliates have established a desk to engage workers and get them to be on the same page, discussing the issue of climate change and also making them understand the arguments, so that in every fora they will be able to speak for the issue and also protect workers interests.

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Shawna Bader-Blau:

As you're talking about a greener energy future with good jobs, global social protections, to protect people from terrible shocks to the economy that happened from time to time, and all over the world, a new social contract that ensures rights, I'm imagining a different world than we have now, that achieves all those gains. And someone like you, who works both domestically in your home country and globally on these issues, I wonder if you could share a little bit more about what that vision of the future looks like to you?

Shawna Bader-Blau:

What should the world look like, what are we not doing right now that the labor movement can lead and change in the future? What does that look like to you?

Ayuba Wabba:

The global architecture as it is today, as I said, is not working for the majority and it's not delivering. And that is why, if you look at the challenges that are confronting us at the world of work, they are not quite different from one country to another. And therefore the issue of a lack of social justice, the issue of gender, which is not mainstream in many countries, the issue of climate change, even the COVID we are discussing, which has shocked the entire world, because even the advanced countries are confronting the issue, as well as countries that are developing.

Ayuba Wabba:

Because before now, we thought that we have reached some level of technological advancement that issues like COVID will have been addressed, if they came, nobody imagined that there will be a disease called COVID that will incapacitate the entire world, and that flights would not fly, and workers, even pilots will be at home for months, and that ships will not move, and that workers will not go to work, and that production lines will be disrupted. So I think we must have a system where the reoccurrence of this will have a solution.

Ayuba Wabba:

And that's why we said there is need for new social contract, to address the current shock and also shocks that may likely come in the future. Unless we do that, then we are not also planning to address our future challenges. And I think the future challenges are challenges that we must continue to plan to work around them now. And that's why at the level of ITUC, we say, "Yes, with this challenge, where it has left more than half of the global population without any form of social security coverage, and where many people have lost their job. There is something that needed to be done, and it needs to get a global buy-in."

Ayuba Wabba:

We need global champions. We need countries that are global champions, and thank God at the last centenary of the International Labor Organization, what as unions as we are aware, we'll keep reminding our political leaders of the commitment that they have made, that they must keep. And that citizens, or people must be at the center point of our policies and programs. It's not just about capital,

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it's not just about accumulating wealth, it's about the welfare and wellbeing of every citizen of the world. That will be the panacea to peace and progress everywhere in the world.

Ayuba Wabba:

So the absence of peace, and the absence of social justice, certainly, will be affecting every one of our countries if we are not very careful in our planning. So our perspective is to see to it that every leader is committed, and leaders that are not committed, citizens must be able to point out that very clearly to them, and workers must also assert their authority, including using the workers' power, to change the rules. The rules must be changed to work for the people, the majority.

Ayuba Wabba:

The rules should not work for the few, because what is happening now, the global rules is working for the few. As I said, I mentioned the issue of illicit financial flow, where resources from many countries are taken outside their countries, but yet people in those countries are living in abject poverty. So is the condition of many African countries that are very rich in mineral resources, but majority, 90 percent, are also extremely poor. So there is a challenge before all of us, and that is why the unions are there to continue to support workers and to continue to be engaged that those rules must change to work for us.

Ayuba Wabba:

So our expectation is that, we want to see a situation that the rules are changed, we want to see the global system working for the majority, not working for the few. We want to see a just transition, and we want to see all of us, all our leaders, committed to the issue of climate change, and we want all the variables delivered on time. And we should hold every of our leaders responsible for not delivering.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

It's a powerful reminder that trade unions are behind an unspeakably large number of advancements for human and social rights across the world, from national liberation struggles for democracy, to movements for more equality. In countries and between countries, trade union movements are foundational to social progress, social change, and social peace. And your powerful story today really paints that inspiring picture, and I just want to ask you one last question. With all this work and all of these obstacles, what motivates you, what keeps you going?

Ayuba Wabba:

Well, once I turned back and see the array of workers that are committed to bringing about positive change, it inspires me. Because in the context of Nigeria, we have led struggles, where thousands of workers came out using workers power and using solidarity to address and change a lot of issues. And I think when I see this multitude of workers, which is part of the history of our struggle, I become excited and I become more committed because it means they look at us as leaders or the trade union around the world to change the narrative, to make sure that system works for the majority.

Ayuba Wabba:

And I think that is the power that workers have. We need to use that workers' power to be able to represent them effectively. And I think in the context of Nigeria, I think, workers are very conscious of

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the fact that trade union power can change a lot of things. And nothing that we have gotten on a platter of gold. It has always been through collective struggle. Even during our long years of military rule, where you remember that NLC was prescribed on two occasions because of the struggle to represent workers interests.

Ayuba Wabba:

Because of the struggle to entrench a democracy that worked for the people, the military prescribed NLC on two occasions. But we have come back very stronger, stronger because the will is there and the workers are committed. In the past couple of years, we have had more than 20 campaigns where we mobilize workers to come out in the streets. We do campaigns, we march to the doorstep of employers that undermine workers' interests, that undermine fundamental trade union and human rights, that we must march to their doorstep and engage them.

Ayuba Wabba:

We have also engaged in several strikes that have forced government, actually, to take some actions. So this is the only language that some of our employers understand. They don't understand social dialogue on the business of equality of our organization to come to the table and have a meaningful social dialogue, where we can have collective bargaining agreement. No, in most cases, we force them to come to the table and then negotiate, and then we can be able to have a package to represent the interests of our members.

Ayuba Wabba:

So I think that is what propel some of us, and inspire us to continue to give quality leadership that represent the interests of the workers, because in the trade union movement, power is from beneath. Our motto put it, "Injury to one, remains injury to all of us." And therefore for one worker, we can bring out 5,000 workers to actually protest and protect his interests. And that is the unity and solidarity that workers enjoy globally. And for one country, we can also do solidarity action to support one country among the 163 member countries of the International Trade Union Confederation.

Ayuba Wabba:

And we have demonstrated that severally. And I think that is the way to go in this unequal world, to bring about social justice, and to also bring about peace and stability.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Thanks for that inspiring story. And again, I really want to appreciate your leadership in the global labor movement. It's really for us, a real privilege and a pleasure to have you with us. Was there anything I didn't ask you that you wanted to comment on?

Ayuba Wabba:

Part of our very rich history, here at the Nigeria Labor Congress, is the fact that we have had, consecutively, leaders that are committed to workers issues and workers welfare. From the first NLC, which came into being in the 40s, our labor leader number one, we call him Michael Imoudi, from the railway, to the current NLC, which was then formed in 1978, which pioneer president Hassan

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Sunmonu, who later became the General Secretary of Organization of African Trade Union Unity, up to myself, is because of that very rich tradition.

Ayuba Wabba:

And that we have earned the confidence of our employers, we have earned the confidence of the citizens, and that is a tradition that we want to keep. And I think that is one tradition that a trade unionists is around the world need to keep. So it's not that there are no challenges, there are challenges. But other challenges come, we'll continue to engage those challenges so that we keep the sanctity of this organization, that is protecting the interests of workers globally.

Ayuba Wabba:

And every regime that has come, they have tried to undermine workers' interests by trying to whittle down the powers of organized labor, including trying to build a dichotomy between workers. I think there is a price to pay for us to continue to remain relevant, is eternal vigilance. So trade unions must continue to be eternally vigilant and continue to be committed to the ideals of the trade union movement and ideology. And also remain focused in making sure that we're able to achieve for our members, and also for our movement.

Ayuba Wabba:

So I think that is one area that I think is worth sharing with global colleagues, including American Federation of Labor, because I read their history. I read also the history of the TUC in UK, which used to be very vibrant until Margaret Thatcher came with so many reforms to now undermine workers interests, because they believe that was workers are united, then there is no limits to what they can be able to achieve. So I think it's one inspiring thing, that we need to focus on it to make sure that our collective interest is not undermined at any point in time.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Thank you so much for your generosity with your time today, and for this really inspiring conversation. And I just really want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for doing this.

Ayuba Wabba:

Thank you very much.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

More than 82 percent of workers and their families in Africa are not covered by social protections. And half of the workers around the world had no social protection before the pandemic at all. Informal economy workers, frontline health workers, all workers everywhere must know that when they are on the job, they are safe. That when they lose their job, they will still be able to feed their children and send them to school, that when they are sick, they can stay home and get well without losing their job, or taking a pay cut.

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The global labor movement is committed to a future of work, a future after COVID where workers everywhere have a new social contract. A new social contract is what we need to protect workers against shocks like a pandemic, a new social contract for workers means social justice. We know that to build back better, we must plan a future of work with green jobs, that don't harm the environment, but support workers and their families. The best way to achieve this future is with workers themselves working through their unions, where they have a voice, they have power.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Thanks again to my brother Ayuba Wabba, for his incredible leadership on behalf of workers in Nigeria and throughout the world. All of us in the global union movement are so lucky to have him as our leader. As we close this first season of The Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm so grateful to the brave and amazing worker advocates who shared their stories with us. I hope you, like me, got inspiration from hearing how they stand up for democracy and the face of repression, or join shoulder to shoulder with workers to build a workplace and a world where everyone is treated with dignity on the job.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

And I'm also grateful to all of you, who have listened this season, who have shared the incredible stories of these labor heroes on social media and recommended the show to a friend. I'm happy to announce that we're already at work planning for season two of the Solidarity Center Podcast for Fall 2021. If you're not already a subscriber, be sure to hit "subscribe" or "follow," and don't miss a minute. Until then, you can keep up with the latest developments in global labor rights at our website, solidaritycenter.org, and through our social media channels on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram @solidaritycenter.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

This podcast is a production of thestoryproducer.com, with Executive Producer, Tyler Green, and Producer and Engineer Adam Yoffee. The Solidarity Center Podcast is a member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network. And special thanks to the staff of the Solidarity Center, who assisted with this podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world, we work to ensure a righteous future for workers, dignity, freedom, equality, and justice. For The Solidarity Center podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.