

ORGANIZATION OF  
AFRICAN UNITY  
SECRETARIAT  
P. O. Box 3243



ORGANISATION DE L'UNITE  
AFRICAIN  
SECRETARIAT  
B. P. 3243

ADDIS ABABA

COUNCIL OF MINISTERS  
Seventeenth Ordinary Session  
June 1971

CM/400

ALL-AFRICAN TRADE UNION UNITY



ALL-AFRICAN TRADE UNION UNITY<sup>1/</sup>INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This document was submitted to the Conference of African Labour Ministers at its Tenth Session held in Geneva from 27 May to 1 June 1971. The General Secretariat has deemed it opportune to submit the same document to the Council of Ministers with a view to obtaining the observations and comments of Member States on important issues raised therein. These issues are contained in paragraphs 15 to 20 and in paragraph 24.

I - BACKGROUND

1. The trade unions are among the dynamic forces whose contribution is indispensable to Governments' efforts for economic, social and cultural development of their countries and consequently, of the continent. The association of African working masses with the building of African Unity, has been, since the inception of the Organization of African Unity in May 1963, among the social aims which must be reached in order to improve the social condition of the African peoples and strengthen collaboration among the African countries. The resolution on Social and Labour Matters adopted by the Heads of State and Government in May 1963 is excellent proof that the political leaders of the continent are aware of the importance of social standard for the African peoples and the essential contribution that can be made, through co-operation amongst the African countries in the social and labour fields, to establish greater solidarity between their peoples.
2. A few months later, the Council of Ministers of O.A.U., in conformity with the above mentioned resolution adopted by the Summit Conference, studied the problem of establishing an all-African trade union organization. The Council adopted a first resolution CM/Res.24(II) recommending that the Economic and Social Commission of O.A.U. which had just been instituted in December 1963 in Niamey, study the matter as quickly as possible and submit a detailed report.
3. The Economic and Social Commission of O.A.U. discussed this matter at its Second Session in 1965. The Commission said it was convinced that an all-African trade union movement, independent and unified, could assume the heavy responsibilities incumbent on the workers for the harmonious development of the continent. The Commission believed that such a movement could safeguard the interests of the workers and thus strengthen African unity. The same Commission was also convinced that the split in the African trade union movement was due solely to the

---

<sup>1/</sup> Attention is drawn to paragraphs 15-20 and 24.

problems of affiliation with non-African trade union movements; that this split was detrimental to the smooth development of the continent because it encouraged foreign interference in African countries and, consequently, the ideological struggle which rendered the action of the trade union movement futile and delayed economic development; that those risks justifying the independence of all-African organizations in respect to non-African trade union federations ought to apply as well to national organizations constituting the basis of every all-African organization;

4. Because the statutes of the African Trade Union Congress (ATUC) and the All-African Trade Union Federation (AATUF) - the two trade union organizations, which then shared the trade union movement in Africa - asserted their independence and autonomy towards non-African international organizations, the Commission adopted an important resolution wherein it made recommendations to Member States, the Administrative Secretary-General of O.A.U. and the African trade union organisations. Member States were requested to help the workers achieve unity and independence of the trade union movement at the national level, on the basis of the principle of non-alignment. The Administrative Secretary-General of O.A.U. was asked to provide, as soon as possible, all facilities to all the trade union organizations for meeting under the auspices of O.A.U. in order to enable them to seek together a common and dynamic formula for unity and independence of the African trade union movement. Furthermore, appropriate ways and means of granting consultative status to the independent trade union organization were to be studied. Lastly, the African trade union organizations were requested to base their action, when meeting, on the principles of the O.A.U. Charter and, in particular, on the principle of non-alignment;

## II - EVOLUTION

5. Therefore, practically speaking, since 1965 the course of action was mapped out, the mission of Member States defined, the task of the Secretary-General clearly spelt out and the trade unions' guiding

principle in their quest for unity and independence of the trade union movement in Africa clearly defined and accepted by all. Since then, although the Economic and Social Commission never did meet again, the question of all-African trade union unity was always included in the agenda of the sessions of the various institutions of the O.A.U. family. Hence, at its Fourth Ordinary Session, meeting in Accra in January 1966, the Conference of African Labour Ministers approached the problem of unity of the labour movement in Africa and reiterated the appeal to Member States and the African trade union organizations to do everything within their power to achieve all-African trade union unity and independence in respect to the international trade union organizations. The O.A.U. Council of Ministers, at its Ninth Session in Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo) in September 1967, instructed the Administrative Secretary-General to organize a meeting of trade unions before 30 April 1968 and appealed further to Governments of Member States to assist in the preparation and the holding of this meeting.

6. As in the case of previous decisions, many difficulties were encountered in the implementation of this decision. First, these difficulties, as was explained during the Ninth Session of the Labour Ministers, were due to the lack of information concerning the various names and addresses of national trade unions to which invitations had to be sent. Secondly, the financing of the meeting as regards secretariat, as well as subsistence and travel expenses of trade union delegates had also made it very difficult to organize and hold the meeting. Finally, the divergent views between the ATUC and AATUF did not make for a rapprochement between their respective leaders and constituted a not less serious obstacle to the mission of the O.A.U. Administrative Secretary-General.

7. Despite the various obstacles, the Secretary-General felt prompted to seek appropriate ways and means of implementing the decision of the Heads of State and Government. Consequently, he first undertook to solve the problem of the financing of the meeting.

Indeed, in February 1968, he requested and obtained from the Council of Ministers of O.A.U., funds to the tune of U.S.\$ 5,000 to cover secretariat expenses. Strengthened by this support, the Secretary-General continued his efforts. The convening of the trade union meeting for 29 July 1969 brought forth the already pending problem of travel and board and lodging expenses of the trade unionists. Indeed, the majority of the national trade union movements agreed to take part in the meeting but they all asked who would bear travel and subsistence expenses of the representatives. At the same time, the leaders of AATUF asked the Secretary-General to postpone the meeting to a later date so that AATUF and ATUC could continue the talks which had already started with a view to seeking a common basis for all-African trade union unity.

8. Because of the problem of the national trade unionists' travel and subsistence expenses and AATUF's request, the General Secretariat cancelled the meeting of 29 July and awaited the outcome of the deliberations between the two big movements. Thus, the problem of the subsistence and travel expenses was put before the high bodies of O.A.U. Indeed, in August/September 1968 at Algiers, the Secretary-General referred the problem to the Eleventh Session of the Council of Ministers and the Fifth Assembly of Heads of State and Government of our Organization. The Council of Ministers discussed the matter at length and decided to draw the attention of the Heads of State and Government to the political aspect of the problem of forming an all-African labour union and to the financial problems concerning the trade union meeting that the Secretariat had been instructed to organize. This was done and due note was taken of the difficulties without any solution being found, however, to the basic problem of who would bear the costs for transport, board and lodging of the trade unionists.

9. Moreover, the Secretary-General was never informed of the outcome of the talks between ATUC and AATUF. Be that as it may, from the agreement reached between the two organizations in March 1969 on the

possible ways and means of achieving unity of the labour movement in Africa, one might assume that the outcome of their deliberations was positive. Indeed, at the Eighth Session of the African Labour Ministers (Algiers, 10-15 March 1969) the duly appointed representatives of ATUC and AATUF met to study the most appropriate ways and means of achieving unification of the African trade union movement. At the end of their discussions, the two delegations published a joint communique in which they announced that they had agreed to:

- (a) convene a meeting in Algiers in July 1969, of a preparatory committee composed of the two secretariats. The Union Generale des Travailleurs Algeriens (General Union of Algerian Workers) was requested to prepare this meeting to work out the programme, constitution and policy of the future all-African central trade union organization. Furthermore, the Committee, composed of the two secretariats, was entrusted with the task of achieving the unification of the trade union movement at the national level;
- (b) convene and organize the constituent congress of the all-African trade union organization in Dakar in March 1970.

10. This agreement was favourably welcomed by the Labour Ministers in Algiers who, to show their interest in the problem of trade union unity at the continental level and encourage the trade unionists in their efforts to achieve this unity, adopted resolution MAT/Res.6(VIII) on trade union unity. In this resolution, the Ministers took note with satisfaction of the said agreement; they invited the signatories and all the African trade unionists to make every effort to implement their agreement; they decided that they, on the other hand, would do everything possible to promote trade union unity as defined by the Heads of State and Government of O.A.U. The same resolution invited the Administrative Secretary-General of O.A.U. to continue to follow the matter closely and to report regularly to the Conference of African Labour Ministers.

11. Two months later, while attending the Fiftieth Anniversary of ILO in June 1969 in Geneva, the Secretary-General took the opportunity to meet the leaders of ATUC and AATUF and enquire about the implementation of the Algiers Agreement. The leaders informed him that the meeting envisaged by the Algiers Agreement would take place during the latter half of September 1969, in other words, after the O.A.U. meeting. Now, during the meeting of the high bodies of our Organization in August/September 1969, the Secretariat was handed for its information, a photostat copy of a letter<sup>2/</sup> by the AATUF Representative, the Secretary-General of the Mauritanian Workers Union. The letter had been addressed to him by the National Workers Union of Congo (Kinshasa) and the Trade Union Congress of Ghana - who had taken the initiative, independent of ATUC and AATUF, to invite the African trade union leaders to constitute a committee to prepare the all-African trade union conference comprising all trade unions of the continent.

The first meeting of the preparatory committee was scheduled for 25 September 1969 in Kinshasa.

12. This initiative coming a few months after the Algiers Agreement which had thrown some light on which course to follow in order to define the bases of trade union unity, caused confusion and indignation in African trade union circles. The confusion came from the fact that the Mauritanian Workers Union affiliate to AATUF, had been asked by the trade unionists from the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Ghana to be a member of the Committee. However, the Algiers Agreement did not only bind the leaders of the AATUF but also all its affiliates. Similarly, the National Workers Union of Congo (Kinshasa), co-sponsor of the meeting which was to open in Kinshasa on 25 September 1969, being an affiliate of ATUC was therefore equally bound by the Algiers Agreement. An initiative thus taken

---

<sup>2/</sup> Since this document was submitted to the Ninth Session, the Secretariat did not think it necessary to have it reproduced here.

caused contradiction, hesitation, in short, it created confusion. The National Workers Union of Tanganyika expressed its indignation in a letter of 18 September addressed to the Secretary-General of the National Workers Union of Congo (Kinshasa<sup>3/</sup>). This movement said it was surprised at the new initiative which could only be considered as an "imperialist manoeuvre" to prevent the African workers from achieving unity. This stand was reiterated by the AATUF representative at the Ninth Session in March 1970 when he said: "certain trade union leaders have circulated documents deliberately denying the O.A.U. any role in African trade union unity". Recalling the Algiers' Agreement, he reaffirmed that the representatives of ATUC had "agreed on a firm procedure for uniting the two organizations". Since the Algiers Conference, certain manoeuvres had been adopted by some trade union leaders who "announced themselves as representing certain divisive interests to confuse the issue of African workers unity".

13. Thus, the confusion grew gradually in the ranks of African trade unions. In fact, at the Third African Regional Conference of Labour (Accra, December 1969) the trade unionists participating in that conference circulated a Statement<sup>4/</sup> in which they expressed their conception of conditions and practical methods of achieving African unity in a more shaded manner. To them, the question of all-African trade union unity should be dealt with by the trade union leaders themselves; the trade unions should not be forced to accept any form of unity dictated from outside. A committee composed of representatives of the ATUC and AATUF Secretariats was set up to prepare the all-African trade union Conference scheduled to be held in the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the first half of 1970. This

- 
- 3/ Since this document was communicated to the Ninth Session of the Conference the Secretariat did not deem it necessary to have it reproduced here.
- 4/ This Statement was circulated during the Ninth Session of the Conference in Lusaka.



again was another initiative, another stand taken which diverged considerably from the programme drawn up in the Algiers Agreement and which showed that the trade unionists themselves were no longer unanimous on the need for the good offices of the Administrative Secretary-General of O.A.U. with a view to expediting the achievement of unity in liberty by the labour movement in Africa. It will be recalled that AATUF's representative to the Ninth Session of that Conference vigorously denounced the new initiative and described it as "The so-called statement on Trade Union unity in Africa". He declared that that initiative was taken by "certain confusionist elements without the knowledge and authority of AATUF or its Affiliates and, it is indicative of the extent to which some trade union leaders can go in preserving their profitable collusion with outside interests". From the point of view of AATUF, the Accra document was intended to confuse and over-shadow the Algiers' Agreement which was the only true and authoritative document. The AATUF considered the Accra statement as yet another attempt by the agents of forces inimical to Africa, to sabotage African trade union unity.

14. The situation thus created by these various and contradictory initiatives and stands of the trade unions rendered the task of the O.A.U. Administrative Secretary-General really difficult and delicate. The policy making bodies of O.A.U. and the Conference of African Labour Ministers did not, however, fail to renew the Secretary-General's mandate to do everything possible to help the trade unions make this much desired unity real and effective. Hence, the Council of Ministers, by its Resolution CM/Res.211(XIV) adopted in February 1970, reiterated O.A.U.'s determination to assist African trade union movements to work out practical methods for achieving their unity. Similarly, at its Ninth Session held in Lusaka in March 1970, the Conference of African Labour Ministers adopted Resolution MAT/Res.3(IX) by which it renewed its invitation to the Administrative Secretary-General of O.A.U. to continue intensifying his efforts so that African trade unions may achieve unity with the utmost speed and efficiency.

15. In carrying out all these decisions, the General Secretariat once again tried to bring the trade union leaders together during the 24th Session of the International Labour Conference (June 1970).

In fact, a meeting took place between the African representatives of the various trade union movements then present in Geneva<sup>5/</sup> and the O.A.U. Assistant Secretary-General responsible for Economic and Social Affairs. Received first individually and then collectively, the trade unionists, for the first time, unambiguously expressed their views on the real difficulties preventing them from forming a representative trade union movement of African workers. Three essential points constituted the basis of the meeting; first, the need for all-African unity at the trade union level, secondly, the stand of African trade unions vis-a-vis the problem of their disaffiliation from non-African trade union movements and thirdly, the stages to be covered between the present situation of African trade unionism and the achievement of the ultimate goal of all-African trade union unity.

16. Without recounting here the details of all the statements made on that occasion, it is necessary to mention the following essential points which came to light as a result of the discussions. First, at the ATUC and AATUF level, each of them contested the representativeness of the other at the African level with each considering itself the more representative at the continental level. The AATUF reproached the ATUC for its intransigence with regard to the independence of African trade unions whereas that Trade Union itself (AATUF) maintains very close, if not privileged relations with the World Federation of Trade Unions and one of its principal members, that of Nigeria, is officially affiliated with the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). It will be recalled that at the Ninth Session of the Conference, the AATUF representative stated that "The All-African Trade Union Federation is an Organization which is independent of all International Trade Union Centres. It is composed of National

---

5/ Representatives of ATUC, AATUF and the non-affiliated Trade Unions.

Trade Union Organizations, to modify or influence the conceptions and the methods of the African Trade unionism." As far as AATUF was concerned, "only a policy of trade union independence for all National Centres could meet our needs". He went on that "the cardinal condition of the All-African Trade Union Federation is that the affiliates as well as the continental organizations of the contracting parties must not be appendages of Trade Union organizations beyond the shores of Africa". He remarked, in this regard, that "certain African Trade Union centres and groupings have found this condition impossible of fulfilment as they attach themselves to the purse and apron strings of Trade Unions connected with exploiting circles".

17. In Geneva, the ATUC for its part, states that it gave national trade union organizations which were its members entire liberty to decide their own course provided such orientation was not contrary to the principles and programmes of the ATUC. Furthermore, at the more general level of the various trade union movements met in Geneva, the following tendencies were noted:

- (1) All the trade union leaders were unanimous in acknowledging that the unity of the labour movement in Africa was necessary, but stressed that the achievement of that unity was the affair of the trade unions themselves. As could be seen, this stand corresponds exactly with the spirit of the Accra Statement which was mentioned in paragraph 13 above;
- (2) The trade union leaders affirmed that all African trade union movements, no matter their orientation, were bent on respecting all earlier undertakings made by the O.A.U. and the trade unions concerned with a view to achieving all-African trade union unity;
- (3) They all acknowledged that the question of disaffiliation had completely changed from what it used to be in 1964.

18. They consequently requested that their stand on that problem be reviewed by the policy-making bodies of O.A.U. and that they should no longer impose on them non-affiliation with non-African trade union movements as a condition. In fact, they realized that many national

trade union organizations would cease to function if they disaffiliated from international organizations which presently supported them, particularly, financially. It was observed that all the African trade unions did not have the same source of income: some received financial aid from international trade union organizations, others from their Governments or political parties, and others still, from various organizations. Therefore, to oblige trade unions to disaffiliate, without first considering the proper ways and means of ensuring their survival, would be tantamount to stifling the labour movement in Africa. This point of view was strengthened by another argument that it would be unjustified to impose on the trade unions the condition of disaffiliation with international trade union movements before achieving their unity whereas the Charter of the Organization of African Unity does not impose any condition on Governments wishing to become members of that Organization to sever their preferential relations with certain Governments or Groups of States.

19. With regard to the stages to be passed through to attain the desired objective of unity, some of them suggested two possibilities: first to achieve trade union unity on a sub-regional basis. It was however, immediately realized that that was a dangerous and a very long process which was likely to complicate matters the more. The second was to dissolve the ATUC and AATUF and to form a twelve-man Working Group of which 4 would represent the ATUC, 4 the AATUF and the other 4 the non-affiliated trade unions. That Group would be charged with the study of the Constitutions or Charters of the ATUC and AATUF as well as that of the non-Affiliated Trade Unions with a view to collating them into one Charter. From the point of view of the advocates of this possibility, as long as the ATUC and AATUF existed, the establishment of any new Organization would tantamount to the institution of a new force which would in no way facilitate the task.

20. While the confusion developed in African trade union circles, a change of attitude was noted in certain governments vis-a-vis the problem of all-African trade union unity. In fact, since the Eleventh Session of the O.A.U. Council of Ministers held in Algiers in September 1968, the question of establishing one central Trade Union Organization has given rise to a long and passionate debate. Since that time, some Governments have taken a stand which tended to bring certain nuances in the support which they had had hitherto given to trade unionists in their endeavours to achieve trade union unity. This stand was particularly shown when Governments had to decide on meeting the cost of transport and boarding and lodging of trade unionists accredited to attend the constituent meeting of the all-African trade union movement. It appeared that for some Governments, the achievement of trade union unity at the national level, a sine qua non for the establishment of a real all-African trade union movement, was no longer an objective to be pursued. Finally, some Member States expressed serious reservations on the opportuneness for O.A.U. to give its total support for the establishment of a central continental trade union organization. It appeared as if, to some, the O.A.U., as an inter-governmental Organization, should refrain as much as possible from influencing in one way or the other, the efforts being made by African trade unionists to unify their movements.

### III - CONCLUSION

21. The question of all-African trade union unity has hitherto been the subject of many long debates at the various meetings of the policy-making bodies of O.A.U. and the Conference of African Labour Ministers. Numerous resolutions adopted on that issue have never been completely and effectively implemented. Before proposing the task of this Conference in tackling the study of that problem, it would first be necessary to recall the causes behind the failure of many resolutions which nonetheless expressed the strong determination of both the political leaders and the African trade union leaders to unite the labour movements in Africa.

22. In the first place, there is lack of information, as could be seen from the preceeding paragraphs, on national trade unions legally recognized in Member States. The lack of or little co-operation between Member States and the General Secretariat is thus regrettable. Faced with inadequate financial means, the General Secretariat could not take it upon itself to send a mission to all African capitals to gather such information; only an effective co-operation of member Governments could facilitate the task of the Secretary-General. Secondly, the disagreement between the ATUC and the AATUF whose views on the affiliation of their member national trade union centres is ever growing without any hope of compromise, was not a favourable situation that could bring their various leaders together. Thirdly, the financial difficulties of the Secretary-General with regard to the expenditures of the Secretariat were only partially solved. Notwithstanding the persistent requests of the Administrative Secretary-General, these difficulties relating to the financing of cost of travelling and boarding and lodging of accredited trade union delegates to the meeting have still not been solved.

23. Moreover, the various initiatives of the trade unions themselves to convene their meeting and the stands they adopted on the role of O.A.U. in this matter have caused such confusion that everybody is now at a loss as to what to abide by. Finally, it is worth-while mentioning the open stand of the trade unionists against their disaffiliation from international trade union Organizations which has consequently posed a fresh and serious problem to the policy-making bodies of O.A.U. as well as the Conference of African Labour Ministers. The argument advanced in proof of this seems to be relevant. This is why the present Session is called upon not to make fresh appeals to the trade unions, Governments and the Administrative Secretary-General to strive to achieve all-African trade union unity, but to take a decision on the main problem of disaffiliation.

24. In fact, the General Secretariat is of the view that it would be proper to adopt one of the following stands on this matter which is the main cause of the failure of all previous endeavours. The trade unionists have been asked to be inspired, at their meeting, by the principle of non-alignment which does not necessarily mean breaking off of all links of co-operation with other movements or world Organizations. In the first place, governments could be tempted to maintain their stand that the trade unions disaffiliate completely from Organizations in order to better achieve their unity. In this respect, it will be necessary to answer the question raised by the trade unionists: how will the African trade union centres which receive assistance from abroad survive? Practical solutions should be found if there is the real desire to establish an all-African Organization of workers. In the second place, if divergencies of opinion should prevent Governments from adopting the above stand with all its inherent consequences, then the only way out would be for them to compromise their stand on the question of disaffiliation by yielding to the request of the trade unionists themselves that disaffiliation should no longer be considered as a pre-condition for achieving the unity of the labour movement in Africa.

25. It is no longer necessary to adopt fresh and vague resolutions devoid of any concrete and effective action. The order of the day is realism and practical consideration. It should be noted that for the first time that this problem was raised at the continental level, nearly all the African trade union centres disaffiliated from the international trade union organizations; but with the delays in implementing the O.A.U. resolutions on that matter, the enthusiasm with which the idea had been hailed died. The Conference of African Labour Ministers should tackle this question with conviction, make frank and objective discussions, and formulate practical recommendations for the policy-making bodies of O.A.U.; recommendations which when implemented, will lead to the achievement of this much desired trade union unity.

1971-06

# All-African Trade Union Unity

## Organization of African Unity

Organization of African Unity

---

<https://archives.au.int/handle/123456789/7635>

*Downloaded from African Union Common Repository*