



IFI ACTIONS MUST CONTRIBUTE TO BUILDING A FAIR AND SUSTAINABLE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Statement by Global Unions to the 2017 Spring Meetings of the IMF and World Bank Washington, 21-23 April 2017

Introduction

1. A slight uptick in global growth prospects announced in the international financial institutions' latest economic forecasts does not signal an improvement in the situation of working people. Global Unions¹ cite data showing wage stagnation and weak employment growth in much of the world, and urge the IFIs to focus on the creation of quality jobs, achieving the transition to a low-carbon future and reducing inequality. The trade union movement is concerned by the growth of right-wing nationalism in many countries, due in part to a lack of confidence in the global economic system. The IFIs should join those calling for fairer rules in international trade and investment agreements, not push for liberalization that further strengthens investors' rights at the expense of everyone else.

2. Global Unions' statement puts forward detailed recommendations for IFI action to make progress on gender equality and a just transition to a sustainable economy. The statement also recommends specific measures that the IMF and World Bank should take in order to contribute to reductions in income and wealth inequality. While welcoming the World Bank's first-time adoption in 2016 of a labour standards lending requirement, Global Unions urge the Bank to fulfil commitments to cooperate with trade unions and the ILO for its implementation. Joint work with other development banks that have several years' experience in applying labour safeguards is also suggested.

IFI forecasts do not announce improvements for working people

3. In updates to their global economic growth forecasts published at the beginning of the year, both the IMF and World Bank predict slightly higher growth for 2017 and 2018 due in large part to the impact on exporters of firmer prices for oil and some other commodities.

¹ The Global Unions group is made up of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which has 181 million members in 163 countries; the Global Union Federations (GUFs), which represent their respective sectors at the international trade union level (BWI, EI, IAEA, IFJ, IndustriALL, ITF, IUF, PSI and UNI); and the Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC) to the OECD.

The IMF also factored in expectations of fiscal stimulus applied by the US, but both IFIs emphasized that the high degree of current policy uncertainty has increased “downside risks”. Signs of tighter credit conditions and reduced investment in emerging and developing economies, along with political instability and uncertainty in several countries, could further undermine the positive trends suggested in the latest IFI forecasts.

4. It should be noted that the IFIs’ growth predictions have been widely off the mark in recent years because of the failure to correctly assess the impacts of austerity policies, continued high unemployment and under-employment, and stagnant wages. At the beginning of 2016, the Fund and the Bank also predicted a growth uptick for that year. Instead, 2016 registered the slowest rate of global economic growth since the Great Recession year 2009.

5. Even if the slightly higher growth for 2017 predicted by the IFIs materializes, it will not significantly improve the situation of working people. Recent reports published by the International Labour Organization identify a steady deceleration of wage growth since 2012 in developing and emerging countries, and forecast a modest increase in the global unemployment rate in 2017 due to a deterioration in emerging economies (*Global Wage Report 2016/17; World Employment and Social Outlook – Trends 2017*). The ILO further estimates that there will be only slight improvements for those at the bottom of the income scale in 2017. Close to 43 per cent of workers worldwide will remain in a situation of vulnerable employment and almost 29 per cent in “working poverty”. The fair and effective integration of migrants and refugees into labour markets is also a key concern, as these populations are often vulnerable to unemployment, low quality jobs and social exclusion.

6. The IFIs currently predict that the economies of emerging and developing countries will grow more than twice as fast as developed countries, which as a whole have grown at an average annual rate of only 1.6 per cent since 2010. Indications of increased joblessness and slowing wages in emerging economies identified by the ILO will undermine the IFIs’ predictions of improved growth prospects for the entire global economy in 2017 and 2018.

7. Some IFI forecasts note that political developments over the past year will further complicate attainment of a sustainable growth path for the global economy. The rise of right-wing nationalism in several countries is of great concern to trade unions around the world, but the response of policymakers should not be to ignore the growing lack of confidence in the global economic system. For years, some international institutions including the IFIs have shrugged off the adjustment costs from trade liberalization and the losses suffered by a significant number of working people from trade and investment agreements. Further liberalization without fairer rules for all is not the way forward. As a recent *Trade Union Statement to G20 Finance Ministers*² noted, policymakers must correctly identify the direction of causality between trade and growth when they formulate policy responses:

“The recent trend of trade slowing down is mainly caused by weak domestic demand (prompted by austerity, internal devaluation, debt deleveraging), not by a surge in protectionism. Ignoring this causality by trying to push for more trade runs

² TUAC, March 2017 (http://www.tuac.org/en/public/e-docs/00/00/13/2C/document_doc.phtml)

the risk of falling into the ‘competitiveness’ trap where economies depress wages in order to try to export themselves out of the crisis, which ends up deepening the global lack of demand, further slowing down trade dynamics.”

8. The IMF and World Bank should endorse a rebalancing of investors’ rights and obligations in trade and investment agreements by supporting the inclusion of enforceable labour provisions based on ILO standards, as well as the repeal of investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms that undermine governments’ right to regulate. To respond to the global lack of aggregate demand, growing inequality and the challenge of climate change, Global Unions urge the IFIs to support an extensive programme of public investment in energy efficient infrastructure and quality public services, and coordinated wage increases.

Promote gender equality through decent work and public investment in social infrastructure

9. Gender equality and female labour force participation efforts must deliver lasting economic empowerment for women. Working women around the world are often concentrated in precarious, low-wage jobs in the service sector, domestic work and the bottom end of global value chains, and women are more likely than men to have informal jobs. Meaningful progress on decent work and transition from the informal to formal economy will be a particular boon for women and drive inclusive development. The global economy currently functions through the underpaid and unpaid work of women. Increasing female labour force participation in isolation from a decent work agenda will fail to adequately address gender equality.

10. Progress on gender equality is undermined by policy advice and conditionality involving austerity for social programmes, public sector retrenchments, labour market deregulation, cutbacks in public services and dismantling of collective bargaining systems. In Greece, labour market reforms and austerity applied at the behest of the IMF and EU creditors disproportionately affected women through job losses in the majority-female public sector, increased precarious work and a spike in gender-based firings. Women suffer most when social programmes are cut and care reverts to unpaid labour. Global Unions commend the IMF for supporting increased female labour force participation, for example in the 2016 Egypt programme, but caution that the failed model of austerity now being applied in the Middle East and North Africa will harm women and risks outweighing progress in participation.

11. Global Unions urge the IFIs to support public investment in social infrastructure, including health, education and care systems. Investing in the care economy in particular, would help to create jobs, raise productivity, reduce the burden of unpaid labour and catalyse economic growth.³ Responsible public investment is needed in this sector along with improved job quality for care workers in order to improve the attractiveness of jobs in the sector, address shortages in the supply of care services and ensure the accessibility and quality of these services. Expansion of social infrastructure will create new physical infrastructure projects and procurement that offer further economic benefits. Global

³ ITUC, *Investing in the Care Economy*, January 2017 and March 2016 (<https://www.ituc-csi.org/investing-in-the-care-economy>)

Unions support investments in both physical and social infrastructure, and call on the IFIs to promote them in tandem.

12. Gender budgeting with the participation of social partners will also help achieve gender equality. In Iceland, where 86 per cent of the workforce is unionized, tripartite dialogue led to adoption of the Equal Pay Standard, a trailblazing initiative and global example. The core labour standards of collective bargaining and freedom of association give women effective tools to create safe workplaces free from violence, harassment, discrimination and health and safety risks. The full realization of these rights is central to gender equality.

Financing a just transition to a sustainable global economy

13. A zero-carbon, zero-poverty future is possible through a coherent response to the social, economic and climate challenges facing our world. The influence and financial resources of the IFIs are necessary to reach this future through a just and equitable transition. The conversion to a sustainable economy can be a net creator of jobs, but the substantial economic changes involved could leave workers behind and create further inequality. The danger of unemployment, forced migration and rising energy costs loom over working people.

14. Sustainable infrastructure built in the coming years can form the backbone of a sustainable global economy involving better transport, agriculture, industry and more. Public investment in essential services – such as housing, electricity, sanitation and water – is also essential in order to enable individuals to fully participate in society as well as the labour market. Major climate change mitigation projects are also necessary. Global Unions urge the World Bank to take a leadership role in ensuring that global infrastructure is sustainably built, energy-efficient and creates quality jobs. The IMF and World Bank can assist countries in policy and fiscal planning for a just transition and the achievement of the Nationally Defined Commitments under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Additionally, the IFIs can follow up on their research on carbon taxes as well as discussions held with trade unions and other parties and move toward implementation. Equitable carbon taxes can fund a just transition and investments in infrastructure.

15. The shocks of climate change, including rising sea levels and temperature changes, will increasingly displace people from their jobs and homes. This problem will particularly affect lower-income people in developing countries. Adequate, universal social protection is needed to help working people survive and adjust. Whenever possible, plans should be made to directly help fossil fuel workers transition to new jobs. This is especially important for communities with low levels of economic diversification that rely on a single facility or sector, where retooling facilities to sustainable activities is one way to create a direct path to jobs. Social dialogue is crucial to planning these changes at the local, national and international level. Global Unions ask the IFIs to support dialogue and the negotiation of binding agreements for sustainable economic transformation.

Reduction of inequality: Actions should follow words

16. The IFIs' increased attention to the negative impacts of income and wealth inequality and its causes is a welcome development. The World Bank has emphasized that

measures to make income distribution more equal are a necessary condition for attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 1.1 on eradicating extreme poverty, as well as SDG 10.1 on boosting the bottom 40 per cent (*Poverty and Shared Prosperity*, October 2016). The IMF has published several research papers showing that countries with lower inequality have higher and more durable growth; that fiscal policies have become less redistributive in most countries; and that weaker labour market regulations and institutions, reflected in declining trade union density and collective bargaining coverage, are the main drivers of increased inequality in many countries.

17. However, action in lending programmes or country-level policy advice has been slow to catch up to the IFIs' discourse and research on the need to reduce inequality. Many IMF programmes or policy recommendations continue to support measures that weaken minimum wages, employment protection regulations or collective bargaining institutions. For example, the IMF has encouraged many countries to substantially weaken or dismantle national or sector-level collective bargaining, despite the role that coordinated collective bargaining systems have played in achieving more equal income distribution. In February 2017, the UN's Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations submitted a report to the Human Rights Council, which documented numerous cases of the IMF promoting austerity-related labour market reforms that erode workers' rights.⁴ The report found little evidence that the deregulatory measures, put forward on the pretext of preventing or resolving debt crisis, contributed to economic recovery; but they did contribute to increased inequality.

18. The Fund's advice or loan conditions in the area of social policy have also had potentially troubling impacts on inequality. Some IMF programmes include a "social spending floor" as a Quantitative Indicative Target, but these are purely symbolic since a failure to meet minimum spending targets has no effect on loan disbursements. The main object of IMF involvement in social programme reforms is to control their fiscal cost, not to improve their adequacy or coverage. In some countries, for example in Egypt, the Fund and the Bank have supported the extreme targeting of social benefits over universal approaches: for example by replacing universal consumer subsidies with severely means-tested benefits. The "proxy means test" mechanism often used has been shown to typically exclude 50 per cent or more of those that should be eligible by virtue of income level, according to research published by the ILO.⁵ Social protection reform measures promoted by the IFIs that leave a majority of lowest-income people without any assistance are incompatible with inequality reduction and shared prosperity goals.

19. To its credit, the World Bank has in recent years expressed support for universal healthcare coverage and universal social protection. In 2016, it launched a joint programme with the ILO for increasing the number of countries with universal protection. The Bank has endorsed these initiatives in conformity with its support for the SDGs, specifically targets 1.3 on social protection for all and 3.8 on universal health coverage. The Bank should ensure that its country programmes deliver on the promise of protection

⁴ United Nations Human Rights Council, A/HRC/34/57, 27 December 2016 (http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/34/57)

⁵ Kidd, Gelders and Bailey-Athias, *Exclusion by design: An assessment of the effectiveness of the proxy means test poverty targeting mechanism*, (<http://www.developmentpathways.co.uk/resources/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Exclusion-by-design-An-assessment-of-the-effectiveness-of-the-proxy-means-test-poverty-targeting-mechanism-.pdf>)

for all by helping establish comprehensive systems based, for example, on the social protection floor concept developed at the ILO. The IMF should also support this approach, following up on country-level research work it has already been involved in for identifying fiscal space for social protection floors.

20. Additionally, the World Bank has supported the SDG targets linked to Goal 4 on ensuring inclusive and quality education for all, which is another key instrument for achieving more equal distribution of income as well as contributing to countries' growth of productivity and access to prosperity. The Bank's 2018 *World Development Report*, on the theme of "Education for Development", provides an opportunity for the institution to describe in detail the strategies it needs to develop to support education targets, starting with SDG target 4.1: "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes". The Bank should make certain that all the schooling initiatives it supports are consistent with and supportive of the commitment to free, equitable and quality education.

Cooperation for implementing World Bank's new labour safeguard

21. If the World Bank's announced plans are respected, in 2018 it will join several other multilateral development banks (MDBs) that, over the past several years, have implemented comprehensive labour standards lending requirements or safeguards. "Environmental and Social Standard 2: Labour and Working Conditions" (ESS 2) is part of the Bank's new *Environmental and Social Framework*, adopted in August 2016. ESS 2 provides for basic occupational health and safety requirements, obligations to provide information to workers and a requirement to respect certain fundamental workers' rights.

22. The World Bank's introduction of a labour safeguard is an important development, but the effectiveness may be impaired by the fact that in some aspects its version is weaker than those of the other MDBs. Principal among the weaknesses is the absence of any reference to the core labour standards (CLS) conventions of the ILO, which prohibit discrimination, child labour and forced labour, and require respect for freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. Whereas ESS 2 stipulates that the first three practices will not be tolerated in Bank-funded projects whether or not they are prohibited in the client country's law, it requires respect of freedom of association only "in a manner consistent with national law". This proviso is at odds with the requirements of the other MDBs and also contrary to the universal nature of the CLS as established by the ILO since 1998.

23. In order to avoid that weaknesses or ambiguities in ESS 2 lead to tolerance of unacceptable labour practices or denial of workers' rights in Bank-financed activities, it will be imperative that the Bank cooperates fully with parties knowledgeable about the labour conditions in its projects and programmes, notably the ILO and trade unions. The Bank should move forward with cooperation as it develops staff directives, training material, monitoring mechanisms and consultation procedures for implementing ESS 2. The Bank should also examine possibilities of working jointly with other MDBs that have had years of prior experience in implementing labour safeguards. Joint work could take place, for example, in training of staff and project managers on labour standards

requirements, and in establishing effective monitoring and information-gathering procedures to identify risks of safeguards violation.

Global Unions' recommendations

Measures to support economic recovery

24. The IMF and World Bank should

- Support and help implement a global recovery strategy aimed at boosting aggregate demand and consisting of a policy mix of public investment stimulus and coordinated wage increases to reverse the falling labour share in national income
- Contribute, as part of this strategy, to public investments in education, the care economy, water and sanitation and other quality public services, including actions to support the integration of migrants and refugees
- Support public investments in energy-efficient infrastructure and climate change mitigation projects to protect against climate change damages, improve long-term productive potential, and support the transition to a low-carbon economy including through the adoption of carbon taxes
- Support the inclusion in trade and investment agreements of enforceable labour provisions based on ILO standards and the repeal of investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms that undermine governments' right to regulate

Measures for creating decent work and reducing inequality

25. The IMF and World Bank should

- End the promotion of labour market deregulation, including through its funding conditionality, and instead help to reverse the rise in income inequality by supporting social dialogue, strengthened collective bargaining and robust minimum wages as part of a coherent set of labour market and social policies for more inclusive growth. This work should entail enhanced cooperation with international organizations with expertise in labour market and social policy, such as the ILO and World Health Organization.
- Support gender equality and women's economic empowerment through wage increases, formalization and respect of workers' rights in majority-female sectors, along with public investments, notably in the care economy, to create quality jobs and reduce the burden of unpaid labour.
- Help countries restore or establish fiscal policies that reduce inequality through more progressive tax regimes including through greater tax revenues from higher incomes, and increased coverage of social protection programmes

- Develop actions to contribute to attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals, which include targets on full and productive employment, protection of workers' rights, reduction of inequality, universal health coverage, universal primary and secondary education, and national social protection systems for all including floors

26. The World Bank should

- Ensure that its projects and programmes respect fundamental workers' rights and provide safe working conditions and adequate wages, and work jointly with trade unions and the ILO in the implementation of "Environmental and Social Standard 2: Labour and Working Conditions" to ensure that Bank-financed activities comply fully with recognized international labour standards
- Examine possibilities of joint work with other development banks that have adopted labour safeguards on their implementation, for example in training activities and developing effective monitoring procedures

Measures for effective financial regulation and taxation

27. The IMF should

- Support the extension and completion of steps taken since 2008 to correct under-regulation of the financial sector, such as shadow banking systems, too-big-to-fail financial groups and under-taxation of the financial industry, and oppose efforts to roll back the measures already adopted
- Support the creation of a multilateral framework for negotiating binding international debt restructuring agreements when countries face unsustainable sovereign debt
- Promote stronger actions to counter the erosion of tax bases and achieve reform of taxation systems in order to move towards broader-based and more progressive taxes, and to shift taxation from employment to environmentally damaging and non-productive activities
- Support stronger measures to ensure that fiscal revenue is not lost through tax havens by requiring automatic exchange of information and action to stop base erosion and profit shifting by multinational enterprises
- Support the introduction of financial transactions taxes to discourage speculative behaviour and create new sources of finance, including by offering assistance for the coordinated implementation of the comprehensive FTT initiative supported by several Eurozone countries