

OYETUNJI NAHEEMOT

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LAW

CORONAVIRUS IN NIGERIA

The history of human coronaviruses began in 1965 when Tyrrell and Bynoe¹ found that they could passage a virus named B814. It was found in human embryonic tracheal organ cultures obtained from the respiratory tract of an adult with a common cold. The presence of an infectious agent was demonstrated by inoculating the medium from these cultures intranasally in human volunteers; colds were produced in a significant proportion of subjects, but Tyrrell and Bynoe were unable to grow the agent in tissue culture at that time. At about the same time, Hamre and Procknow² were able to grow a virus with unusual properties in tissue culture from samples obtained from medical students with colds. Both B814 and Hamre's virus, which she called 229E, were ether-sensitive and therefore presumably a lipid-containing coat for infectivity, but these 2 viruses were not related to any known myxo- or paramyxoviruses. While working in the laboratory of Robert Chanock at the National Institutes of Health, McIntosh et al³ reported the recovery of multiple strains of ether-sensitive agents from the human respiratory tract by using a technique similar to that of Tyrrell and Bynoe. These viruses were termed "OC" to designate that they were grown in organ cultures.

Within the same time frame, Almeida and Tyrrell⁴ performed electron microscopy on fluids from organ cultures infected with B814 and found particles that resembled the infectious bronchitis virus of chickens. The particles were medium-sized (80–150 nm), pleomorphic, membrane-coated, and covered with widely spaced club-shaped surface projections. The 229E agent identified by Hamre and Procknow² and the previous OC viruses identified by McIntosh et al³ had a similar morphology

The coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19) is a highly transmittable and pathogenic viral infection caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which emerged in Wuhan, China and spread around the world. Genomic analysis revealed that SARS-CoV-2 is phylogenetically related to severe acute respiratory syndrome-like (SARS-like) bat viruses, therefore bats could be the possible primary reservoir. The intermediate source of origin and transfer to humans is not known, however, the rapid human to human transfer has been confirmed widely. There is no clinically approved antiviral drug or vaccine available to be used against COVID-19. However, few broad-spectrum antiviral drugs have been evaluated against COVID-19 in clinical trials, resulted in clinical recovery.

The first confirmed case of the pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 in Nigeria was announced on 27 February 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus, caused by SARS-CoV-2. On 9 March 2020, a second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian citizen. Nigeria has an estimated population of 200 million people, a very poor doctor to patients ratio of 4 doctors to 10,000 patients, worsening daily because doctors, including the newly graduated ones, continue to emigrate to Europe, North America, the Middle East, etc. at the slightest opportunity (compare this to the UK – 26:10000, or the US – 24: 10,000). The scenario is even worse for the nursing workforce that requires less stringent professional requirements to work in the aforementioned countries.

It is in this vein that the leadership of labor must come out in defense of the workers on the issue of lockdown. As parts of the efforts to curtail the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government ordered a lockdown on Lagos, Ogun and the FCT Abuja, for an initial period of two weeks starting 11:59 pm, 30 March 2020, now extended by another 2 weeks from 13 April 2020. Many other states are already applying one stay-at-home rule or the other up to state boundaries closure. However, locking people down at home in the Nigerian context is like asking people to go hungry for the duration of the lockdown. More than 60 percent of Nigerians survive on daily pay from menial jobs and petty trading. A lockdown means their means of daily livelihood have been locked down. The plight of private-sector employees is no better. Many private employers have maintained a 'no salary during lockdown' stance, or at best a 50 percent pay cut. Some have even completely laid the workers off. Labor must agitate for full pay for workers, whether private or government employed, for as long as the lockdown lasts. The government must also distribute foodstuff and domestic essentials to the poor masses to cushion the effect of the lockdown.

Pangs of hunger will lead to widespread anger. Protests in different forms are already being seen within the communities. People are protesting against a lockdown without palliatives, against the high-handedness of law enforcement agents, and even rejecting all manner of palliatives that smack of insult to their intelligence, such as packs of food that are not enough to feed a family of six in 2 weeks being distributed to be shared among 60-80 families in a cluster. This protest is brewing has the potential to transform into a movement that would pose a serious challenge to the lockdown if the hunger question is not resolved. It could also get a lot worse, as we are beginning to see in some places in Lagos and Ogun States where a layer of lumpen youth, pushed to extreme hunger by the lockdown, go on mass looting of shops and houses, carting away ordinary people's food and belongings.

The necessity for the labor movement to be visible on issues that concern the workers and poor masses cannot be over-emphasized at this moment. Labor must organize and harness these pockets of protest and demand adequate food distribution to all households in need. In the same vein, labor must also expose the hypocrisy of the politicians in government and their deceitful billionaire cronies. Their donations of billions to the COVID-19 containment fund should be noted as deceitful; it is borne not so much out of altruism but as a way of paying back little from the multibillion naira milked off the government in the past by way of inflated contracts, heavy tax holidays and other huge concessions that they have received in the past.

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