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Corona virus pandemic highlighting the effect of lockdown on Nigerians

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Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected with this virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment.  Older people and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. You can protect yourself and others from infection by washing your hands or using an alcohol based rub frequently and not touching your face.

The best way to prevent and slow down transmission is be well informed about the COVID-19 virus, the disease it causes and how it spreads. The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes, so it’s important that you also practice respiratory etiquette (for example, by coughing into a flexed elbow). At this time, there are no specific vaccines or treatments for COVID-19. However, there are many ongoing clinical trials evaluating potential treatments.

It is in this vein that the leadership of labour must come out in defence 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 which started 11:59pm, 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 per cent 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 per cent 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. 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 mood that 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 State where the 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 protests 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 government in the past by way of inflated contracts, heavy tax holidays and other huge concessions that they have received in the past.

We all know that this lockdown is to prevent the spread of COVID-19 virus but it is making people suffer more which could lead to deaths even more than the ones caused by the virus. Thank you.