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Global workers' call for universal access to Covid-19 vaccines and health products and technologies, governments must act urgently

Statement by the Council of Global Unions (CGU), 24 November 2021

It has been nearly two years since the outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Workers have stepped up, putting themselves at risk to safeguard people's lives, livelihoods, and the global economy, and driven outstanding advances in science and medicine with the rapid development of Covid-19 tests, treatments, drugs, medical devices, personal protective equipment and, most importantly, vaccines.

Despite the commitment of workers, a handful of governments are sabotaging global recovery by blocking the sharing of these medical advances, costing more lives and putting workers and communities at further risk. **Immediate collective action is needed to ensure equal and universal access to Covid-19 vaccines and wider health products and technologies.**

The international trade union movement **calls on all governments, in particular, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland, along with the European Commission, to take all actions needed to make Covid-19 vaccines available for all, and to support the temporary and targeted 'TRIPS waiver' proposed by South Africa and India at the World Trade Organisation (WTO)**, tackling a key obstacle to protecting workers and communities around the world as the coronavirus continues to impact. The WTO system envisages suspending intellectual property rules in exceptional circumstances: **the pandemic is clearly an exceptional circumstance.**

Workers have faced the brunt of the unequal access to vaccines, particularly those in the global south. In countries where supplies are scarce, health and other frontline workers are still waiting for their vaccinations. While they remain committed to keeping their societies safe, and critical supply chains moving and economies functioning, a handful of leaders and pharmaceutical companies are failing them.

The essential right to a safe workplace is only possible with access to vaccination, regardless of where one lives. Failure to ensure global equity in access to vaccines and treatments is an existential threat to workers' safety, and negatively impacts human rights including the right to life, the right to the highest attainable standard of health, the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress, and the right to development.

It also threatens the recovery of industry. The IMF has warned that failure to step up vaccination efforts could stall recovery and lead to global GDP losses of \$5.3 trillion over the next five years. The production, distribution and consumption of goods and services, and associated economic activities, are



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faced with unprecedented disruption. Delaying effective vaccination globally will only prolong the Covid-19 pandemic and trigger future economic crises.

Workers around the world want urgent action. Unions have already taken action in support of the waiver in 127 countries. Workers' lives and livelihoods, and our communities, depend on it.

Every day of delay means more lives lost and more setbacks to the recovery. Rent-seeking and profiteering in a pandemic are unacceptable. There cannot be any more excuses.

No one is safe until we are all safe.

Therefore, the Council of Global Unions (CGU) – representing more than 200 million workers from across the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and Global Union Federations (GUFs), including the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC):

- opposes the gross disparity between developing and developed countries in terms of equitable access and distribution of Covid-19 health products and technologies, including vaccines, diagnostics, devices, personal protective equipment, and drugs;
- backs trade union and civil society campaigns around the world for a temporary waiver of WTO intellectual property rules during the Covid-19 pandemic, as proposed by India and South Africa and the co-sponsors, and to the extent necessary to address the needs of the pandemic globally;
- welcomes the support given by over 100 governments for the waiver and calls on these countries, including the United States, China and Australia, to exert further pressure on those blocking the waiver as a matter of urgency;
- joins and supports the calls to use all possible ways, including temporary removal of barriers, towards development, production and approval of vaccines, treatments and diagnostics, and other health technologies;
- endorses the World Health Organisation (WHO) campaign for #VaccinEquity which aims to overcome the pandemic inequalities; however, notes that existing initiatives such as the Covid-19 Technology Access Pool, COVAX and the ACT Accelerator have so far failed to meet their own targets and provide the rapid and equitable distribution of Covid-19 vaccines that we need;
- calls on governments and vaccine manufacturers to expedite and urgently expand the availability of Covid-19 health products and technologies to lower income countries and to pursue initiatives, including the sharing of technology – particularly mRNA vaccine technology – to develop manufacturing capacity in many countries;
- underlines the importance of protecting integrity and quality of vaccines once restrictions are relaxed; and
- demands a common commitment by countries not to hoard or stockpile large number of vaccine doses including by limiting exports and calls upon all countries producing vaccines and their inputs to avoid measures that disrupt supply chains.