



## **NATIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND LABOUR COUNCIL**

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### **PRESS STATEMENT**

#### **OUTCOME OF NEDLAC SPECIAL EXCO ON THE COVID-19 EPIDEMIC**

We are committed together to save lives and save the economy was the message from a special Executive Council meeting of National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac) convened to discuss a common programme to slow down the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

Over 60 leaders from organised business, labour, government and community attended the meeting including the Presidents of both COSATU and NACTU, the leadership of BUSA and BBC and the Ministers of Labour, Trade, Industry and Competition, Finance and Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development and the Deputy Ministers of Health and Trade, Industry and Competition.

The social partners acknowledged that this situation is unprecedented and requires an unprecedented response. “The Covid 19 crisis will require the best traditions of social partnership to ensure that we contain the spread of the virus and make every effort to protect employment, earnings and industrial output”, said the Minister of Trade, Industry and Competition, Ebrahim Patel.

The meeting agreed to work together in the following areas to support the call of the President, Cyril Ramaphosa on 15th March 2020 for “co-operation, collaboration and common action:

- **Enhancing the public health response**

The social partners committed to intensify public health messages as well as implementing the identified ways of improving hygiene to curb the spread of the virus to workplaces and into communities including through using national and local champions.

- **Containing the virus**

The meeting recognised the importance of tracing contacts and testing to identify people who have contracted the virus. The social partners agreed to work together with the Department of Health to ensure that every single person who has been in contact with someone who has the virus is tracked, traced and

monitored so that they can if necessary be requested to self-isolate or go into quarantine. There was also agreement on the need to make testing accessible.

- **Security of health supplies and medical equipment**

Ensuring security of health supplies such as hand sanitizers, protective equipment for health professionals, and stocks for testing and treatment as well as ARV and other chronic medicines is critical. Especially at a time when existing supply chains may be vulnerable and ineffective.

The social partners committed to work together to fast track, support and address the constraints to the importation, manufacturing and distribution of health supplies and medical equipment. In this regard, the meeting condemned panic buying which would put more and unnecessary pressures on supply chains.

- **Workplace adaption**

The message from the meeting was that it can't be regarded as 'working as usual' in this period. Workplaces will need to adapt in different ways to respond to the Covid-19 epidemic.

Employers and trade unions agreed to work together to manage issues like short time, shift work, changing working hours and lunch breaks to reduce too many workers congregating in one place. There was an acknowledgement that working from home and using online and technology platforms were important, where possible.

It was recognised that in the medium term, some of these workplace adaptations can also lead to economic opportunities such as an increase in the use of electronic technology for workplace communication.

- **Support to workers and companies who are negatively impacted by the virus**

It was acknowledged that many economic sectors and especially small and medium enterprises will be severely affected by the epidemic and that workers should not be punished by a reduction of income due to factors outside of their control.

"Employers have a legal duty of care towards their employees," stressed the Minister of Labour, Thulas Nxesi. He indicated that the current occupational health and safety, unemployment insurance and compensation fund legislation provides for such circumstances including special leave where unemployment insurance can be claimed and where compensation can be given if an employee contracts the virus at his/her workplace.

Government indicated that they are committed to a number of additional measures to support companies and their employees who become distressed

due to the negative impact of the Covid-19 epidemic including the recently established Temporary Employee Employer Relief Scheme administered jointly by the CCMA and UIF. However it was stressed that proper processes should be put in place so that these measures are not abused.

Thulani Tshufuta representing the community constituency at Nedlac stressed that there can be no place for stigmatisation and discrimination, because if this happens, then workers and community members are not likely to come forward about their symptoms of ill health.

- **Macro-economic impact and potential interventions**

The government indicated that they are monitoring the economic impact of the virus and noted suggestions made by the social partners regarding economic impact of this virus at a time when our economy is already very stressed.

Finally, the meeting recognised that there were areas that needed more attention to develop mitigation measures – most pressing was ways to contain the epidemic spreading through public transport and the impact of school closures on school feeding schemes.

The meeting agreed unanimously that a Nedlac Response Team should be set up urgently to address this and take forward the other issues discussed above. In addition, organised business and labour were urged to embark on sector specific engagements to give effect to the common commitments agreed.

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