

10 January 2024

**Protection of essential workers in the WHO draft instrument on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response**

Dear Minister,

As the international community, under the auspices of the World Health Organization (WHO), negotiates and drafts an unprecedented *international instrument on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response*, it is critical to draw on the lessons learnt during the recent COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the world is better prepared to face similar crises in the future. Therefore, I write to urge inclusion in the instrument adequate recognition of the indispensable contribution of essential workers and of their corresponding need for protection.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, while citizens worldwide were requested to stay home to contain the propagation of the virus, millions of workers continued to go to work, risking their lives to provide medical care and to guarantee access to food and essential services. The COVID-19 crisis has served to remind us of the importance of key workers, how our economies and societies would grind to a halt if these workers did not come to work, or if the enterprises and organizations that they worked for were to shut down.

More than 400,000 seafarers were stranded on board their vessels and continued to work, in some cases for more than two years, to ensure the uninterrupted functioning of supply chains. Other cross-border transport workers, including truck drivers, faced extremely dire conditions. The world applauded these persons and recognized them as essential workers. The international community will fail to be adequately prepared for the next pandemic unless consideration is given to how to effectively and equitably train, recruit and retain such workers, both in advance of and during a pandemic, consistent with decent work principles.

In this context, I wish to draw your attention to the amendments submitted by the International Labour Office to the latest version of draft text A/INB/7/3 (attached) and request your support to share this text with national representative workers' and employers' organizations as well as with the health authorities currently representing your Government at the WHO negotiations. This is particularly urgent, bearing in mind that the last two sessions of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body established by the WHO to discuss the draft instrument will occur in February and March 2024, respectively, leading to the examination and possible adoption by the World Health Assembly in May 2024.

It is precisely in times of crisis that the minimum protection provided by international labour standards assumes its full significance and needs to be most scrupulously applied. I therefore hope I may count on your Government's support to ensure that we do not miss this historic opportunity to ensure that the necessary measures will be put in place to guarantee that all essential workers will continue to benefit from decent working conditions during any future pandemic.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'G. Hougbo', with a horizontal line drawn above and below the signature.

Gilbert F. Hougbo