



## Concept Note

Organized at the side of AFREC, Johannesburg, South Africa

24th July 2026

### Why Labour Must Fight Back

#### Background and rationale

Labour is facing interconnected crises, including attacks on multilateralism and democratic space, wage erosion amid rising profits of multinational companies, and the growth of right-wing and authoritarian politics, which restrict the right to strike and protest. In the region, anti-strike tactics such as 'no work, no pay', policing demonstrations and court injunctions are being used to undermine collective action. Some public sector unions are still fighting for recognition, and independent trade unions and their leaders are being attacked. Meanwhile, the continent's public financing crisis is severe: the tax-to-GDP ratio is around 16%; the annual public service and infrastructure funding gap is estimated at USD 60–70 billion; debt burdens are high at around 68.6% of GDP; and approximately USD 89 billion is lost each year through illicit financial flows and related abuses. The result is underfunded public services and overburdened, underpaid workers.

Guided by the mandate of the adopted Program of Action at AFRECON 2025 and the 2023 World Congress, we are committed to building the region we want - a future of democratic governance and increased workers' collective power to secure quality public services as the foundation of dignity for all. This involves ensuring universal access to healthcare, education, energy, water, and sanitation, strengthening the quality of local government services, such as waste management, social care, public housing, public works delivered by well-funded, gender-responsive public institutions protected from privatization and corporate influence. Our mandate calls on us to organize, mobilize and fight back until these rights are realized.

Against the backdrop, a half-day forum is organized as part of AFREC to develop a shared analysis of attacks on society, workers and public services, and to agree on concrete, collective actions to fight back at regional level, feeding into the PSI global public service fight back agenda.

#### Objectives:

1. To share evidence and country examples of shrinking democratic space and attacks on trade union rights and interrogate the key drivers of these issues.
2. To strengthen the capacity of labour to understand and effectively unpack the political economy, shaping these multiple global and regional crises.
3. Agree on a unified narrative, priority demands and an action-oriented fightback roadmap.

**Expected outcomes:**

1. A shared evidence base is established on shrinking democratic spaces and growing attacks on trade union rights.
2. Trade unionists strengthen their ability to analyse the political economy of the multiple crises facing workers and public services, and to translate this analysis into effective advocacy and mobilisation.
3. A unified labour narrative, a set of common priority demands and an actionable roadmap for fighting back are agreed.

**Participants:**

AFREC participants; CSOs in South Africa; trade unions (non-affiliates) in South Africa; the media; partners and activists.

**Forum structure**

**Session 1** – Panel: Diagnosing the crisis and making the case for a fight back

Five-member panel-one serves as facilitator (list tbc)

**Session 2** – Plenary: Prioritize demands and agree on the next steps, roles, timelines and coordination mechanisms.

**Anticipated next steps:**

1. Constitute a small task team to coordinate implementation and follow-up check-ins.
2. Deepen alliances with communities and CSOs to defend quality public services and prepare escalation options where needed.