



**Friedrich
Ebert** 
Stiftung

When Organising Leads to accountability

Building power for Change!

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Trade union leaders from across Africa gathered in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, from 13–15 May 2026 for the Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) Africa Network on Organising in Chinese Multinational Corporations (MNCs) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. Hosted in partnership with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Trade Union Competence Centre (FES TUCC), the workshop brought together trade union leaders, labour inspectors, occupational health and safety specialists, representatives of the International Labour Organization (ILO), and experts in Business and Human Rights (BHR) to strengthen organising strategies in one of the fastest-growing sectors of global investment.

The meeting took place against the backdrop of rapid infrastructure development across Africa. Chinese multinational corporations have become major actors in the construction, transport, energy and public infrastructure sectors, often supported by financing from international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank and KfW. While these investments promise development and employment opportunities, workers continue to face significant challenges, including precarious employment, unsafe working conditions, labour broking, anti-union practices,

sexual harassment, inadequate parental rights protections and weak enforcement of labour standards.

Leaders engaged in robust discussions on how to ensure that economic development and infrastructure investment do not come at the expense of workers' rights and community wellbeing. A central theme throughout the workshop was the need to challenge the notion that the erosion of labour rights is an inevitable cost of development. Instead, participants emphasised that development must be people-centred and grounded in respect for human dignity, labour rights and community participation.

Building Workers' Power

Building workers' power remained at the centre of the discussions. Organising workers in sectors characterised by insecurity, high levels of precarity and employer resistance remains one of the labour movement's most urgent priorities. The trade union leaders stressed the importance of increasing union membership, creating safe spaces for workers to meet and discuss their concerns, and reinforcing the understanding that collective organisation remains workers' most powerful tool. When workers are organised, they are better positioned to negotiate with employers, defend their rights and, where necessary, exercise collective action that can influence production

and profitability. Strong organisation also strengthens workers' ability to utilise legal and institutional mechanisms available to them.

One of the strongest messages to emerge from the discussions was: **“Speak to the worker first and then the employer after.”** The statement reaffirmed that the primary responsibility of trade unions is to represent and advance the interests of workers.

Building Societal Power Through Community Alliances

The workshop emphasised that workers' power cannot be built in isolation from the communities in which workers live. Trade unions are not merely workplace organisations; they are social movements rooted in working-class communities. Workers leave their workplaces and return to communities every day. When wages are inadequate, when workers are injured, when contracts are insecure or when labour rights are violated, the impact is felt not only by the individual worker but also by their families and communities.

The leaders reflected on how large infrastructure projects often have significant impacts on local communities. Construction projects can place pressure on local water supplies, sanitation systems and public infrastructure, while noise, dust and environmental degradation can affect residents' quality of life. At the same time, communities frequently provide indirect support to projects, whether through local services, food, accommodation, transport or informal care arrangements. Yet despite carrying many of these burdens, communities are often excluded from decisions about development and rarely share equitably in its benefits.

For this reason, the leaders argued that building societal power is essential to strengthening workers' power. Communities and workers have a common interest in ensuring that development projects create decent work, respect human rights and contribute to local development. When workers and communities act together, they can create a powerful force capable of challenging abusive employers, demanding accountability from governments and financiers, and influencing the direction of development itself.

The workshop highlighted the importance of unions developing stronger relationships with community organisations, social movements, faith-based organisations, women's groups and youth formations. Such alliances can strengthen campaigns, increase public visibility of labour disputes and create broader social legitimacy for workers' demands. The leaders highlighted that employers often attempt to isolate workers from the broader society during disputes; therefore, building strong



community alliances is an important counterweight to employer power. Strong unions build strong communities, and strong communities strengthen the capacity of workers to organise, negotiate and defend their rights.

Using Business and Human Rights Frameworks

A major focus of the workshop was the strategic use of Business and Human Rights frameworks and International Financial Institution (IFI) safeguard mechanisms. The leaders explored how workers can utilise the standards and accountability systems of development finance institutions to hold companies accountable for labour rights violations.

Drawing lessons from organising experiences in Kenya and Uganda, participants examined examples where unions successfully engaged financiers such as KfW and the World Bank to address labour rights abuses. These experiences demonstrated that when local remedies are ineffective or blocked, workers and their unions can elevate complaints to international accountability mechanisms, compelling financiers and project owners to respond.

The discussions underscored the importance of understanding safeguard policies, grievance mechanisms and human rights standards attached to development financing. These tools provide workers with additional avenues through which to pursue justice and strengthen collective bargaining efforts.

Strengthening Labour Inspection and Monitoring

The trade union leaders acknowledged the existence of state institutions and regulatory systems tasked with protecting workers' rights. While recognising the many challenges facing labour inspectorates, including limited capacity, inconsistent enforcement and political pressures,

the leaders emphasised the need to utilise these mechanisms strategically in the interests of workers. The discussions highlighted that stronger labour inspection systems and more rigorous monitoring of labour standards remain critical to improving working conditions in Chinese multinational corporations and infrastructure projects across Africa.

At the same time, the leaders recognised that workers cannot rely solely on state institutions to enforce their rights. The workshop therefore emphasised the importance of developing worker-led monitoring systems that enable workers and unions to document labour rights violations, gather evidence, monitor workplace conditions and systematically pursue grievances. Such initiatives not only strengthen workers' own capacity to hold employers accountable but also provide valuable information that can support labour inspectors and regulatory authorities in their oversight functions. The leaders concluded that the most effective protection of workers' rights emerges when organised workers and state oversight mechanisms reinforce one another.

Gender Justice, Occupational Health and Safety

Although the construction sector remains overwhelmingly male-dominated, gender justice emerged as a critical theme throughout the workshop. The trade union leaders highlighted the continued prevalence of sexual harassment, gender-based discrimination and exclusionary workplace practices that undermine the dignity, safety and participation of women workers. Discussions emphasised that these challenges are not isolated incidents but are often rooted in broader workplace cultures that devalue workers and perpetuate unequal power relations.

The leaders stressed that occupational health and safety must be understood as a workers' rights issue and a gender justice issue. Safe workplaces require more than compliance with technical regulations; they require workplaces that recognise and respond to the diverse needs of all workers. This includes ensuring properly fitted PPE, adequate sanitation facilities, effective sexual harassment prevention measures, gender-sensitive risk assessments and the meaningful participation of women in workplace health and safety structures.

Looking Forward

Under the leadership of Madame Chairperson: Comfort Agambaa and Vice-Chairperson: Patrick Sakala, and with the support of the trade union leaders from across the region, the network continues to serve as an important platform for sharing practical organising experiences and strategies. Leaders exchanged lessons on worker education, social media campaigns, strategic communications, collective bargaining, accountability mechanisms and cross-border solidarity.

The workshop concluded with a renewed commitment to building workers' power across Chinese multinational corporations operating in Africa. As Chinese investment continues to expand throughout the region, trade unions are increasingly positioning themselves not only as defenders of workers in the workplace, but also as key actors in shaping a model of development that is accountable, human rights-based and centred on the interests of working-class people.