

UNITE, FIGHT, WIN!

KENYA MEDICAL PRACTITIONERS, PHARMACISTS & DENTISTS UNION (KMPDU)

Keynote Address: Strategic Retrospective and the Path to Solidarity

Date: 30th November 2024

Speaker: Dr. Davji Bhimji Atellah, Secretary General

Venue: Jambo Room, Safari Park Hotel, Nairobi

Colleagues, Distinguished Delegates, and Comrades,

Let us be completely honest with ourselves today. The decisions we are making in this room cannot be about emotion; they must be about impact, and they must be about definitive results. As your elected leadership, we must begin this conference by looking directly into the mirror and recognizing the missteps that have brought us to this precarious point. None of us are born with a perfect, error-free blueprint for these complex labor struggles. Leading a national union during an economic downturn is a continuous, punishing learning process, and we must possess the courage to admit exactly what went wrong in our last national industrial action if we ever expect to win the next one. That is exactly why we have called this 2024 Special Delegates Conference—to bring absolute openness and unvarnished transparency to the floor, rather than keeping these tough conversations confined to behind-the-scenes committee boardrooms.

We have heard legitimate calls today from regional branches for a thorough, clinical, branch-by-branch audit of the March-May national strike, and I entirely concur with that direction. We need to dissect the data from every single county and ask ourselves the uncomfortable question: Where exactly did our front lines fracture? Let us confront the hard, painful truth together. When we initiated that strike, we started at a critically slow pace, mobilizing barely forty percent of our total collective capability across the republic. We kept pushing, we kept pounding the pavement, and we kept mobilizing, but the structural cracks in our solidarity became impossible to hide by Day 30.

That was the exact moment our doctors missed their first month's wages. That is when the immediate, crushing reality of bank mortgages, commercial loans, and family school fees set in. Because we as a union had not structurally prepared our general membership to withstand financial warfare, economic desperation took over. In multiple counties, our own doctors quietly started slipping back into referral facilities just to sign the daily attendance sheets, checking boxes to show their physical presence to county auditors so they wouldn't lose their livelihoods.

"My personal experience as your Secretary General, dating back to the regional struggles in Laikipia and Kirinyaga, has taught me one fundamental lesson that we must all internalize today: Our true strength as a union does not reside in the corridors of justice."

But we cannot merely blame financial pressure; we must also address the deep, internal betrayals of solidarity that weakened our bargaining unit. We must remember that only three weeks into that grueling strike, the entire Nyanza branch leadership broke ranks and went back to work. We saw

specific regional officials actively using their platforms to mobilize members *not* to participate in the collective action.

At major national referral hubs like Kenyatta National Hospital and Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital, senior consultants chose to remain at the bedside, keeping vital hospital departments completely functional while the junior doctors, registrars, and medical officers—who earn a mere fraction of their pay—were out on the streets fighting for the survival of the profession. We saw contract doctors across eleven counties, operating under highly fragile two- and three-month temporary terms, forced to continue rendering services out of pure survival fear. It was only around Day 45 that counties like Wajir, Mandera, and Garissa managed to fully join us on the front lines to bolster our numbers. This fragmentation broke our momentum.

Back when I served as a branch secretary navigating the local strikes, the state routinely slapped us with court orders within forty-eight hours to declare our actions illegal. We chose to defy those orders because we knew the courts could never actively mandate promotions or voluntarily restore our negotiated Collective Bargaining Agreement. We stood strong, but the very day the Governor issued a public threat of mass dismissal, sixty percent of our doctors panicked and streamed back into the wards in Nyahururu. The remaining ones who stood their ground were unceremoniously sacked the following morning.

It ultimately took years of grueling, dirty political intervention, not legal filings, to get those doctors reinstated. We must stop deceiving ourselves that a sympathetic judge will save this union. The moment our ranks become fragmented, the moment our members secretly stream back to work, we surrender all our leverage. If you are forced to crawl to the employer's table to *beg* for a return-to-work formula just to protect your people from legal lockout, you have lost your power. And if you surrender your power today, you will never have the institutional fortitude to call a strike ever again.

We have spent countless hours inside the executive offices at Harambee House and the Ministry of Health. We have sat in those boardrooms for eight hours at a time, skipping meals, sometimes intentionally bringing raw interns into the room so they can witness the sheer bad faith of the state apparatus. And do you know what we discovered? We are dealing with inherently dishonest people. Boardroom negotiations, when detached from street leverage, are completely dead. The state will not give us our basic salary arrears, and they will never honor medical internships out of the goodness of their hearts or respect for public health policy.

Look around us at the wider landscape of this country. There are dozens of professional guilds—medical associations, pharmaceutical societies, dental boards, civil society coalitions, and religious organizations. Which one of them has courageously stood up in the national media to say "No" to the modern-day slavery and unconstitutional salary reductions being forced onto our medical interns? Not a single one.

Only KMPDU has stood firmly in the gap to declare that we will not accept the systematic bastardization of the 2017 CBA that we rightfully fought for, bled for, and won in court. Some members say the return-to-work formula we signed in May is a useless piece of paper. Let me tell you clearly: that document was adopted as a formal order of the court, but it will never be implemented

through the good will of the Ministry. Your national leadership cannot force their hand alone. But if every single doctor, every pharmacist, and every dentist in this country stands up as one unyielding, impenetrable wall, we will force their hand by necessity.

This fight is not just about the interns; let no consultant or medical officer lose sight of that. If you allow the state to target the small fish today, if you allow them to slash an intern's monthly salary to an insulting forty thousand shillings, what moral authority will you have tomorrow to bargain for higher wages, research grants, or non-practicing allowances as a consultant? If the baseline of the medical profession collapses, the entire wage structure collapses right along with it.

This is not a workplace dispute; it is a battle for our collective historic survival. Before we chart the exact dates, timelines, and legal notices for our next move, we must build a tactical strategy that actively corrects our past failures. We must finalize the national strike fund to insulate our most economically vulnerable comrades. We must systematically dismantle the compliance-deficit zones within our own branches. We must speak with one single, terrifying voice that demands respect.

The government of Kenya has proven time and again that they do not listen to the language of court injunctions, and they do not care about the language of intellectual boardroom presentations. They only listen to one language: the language spoken loudly from the streets.

Are you ready to defend the sacred dignity of this profession? Are you ready to stand shoulder-to-shoulder until we win our respect back?

Dr. Davji Bhimji Atallah

Secretary General, KMPDU

VIVA KMPDU! VIVA!