

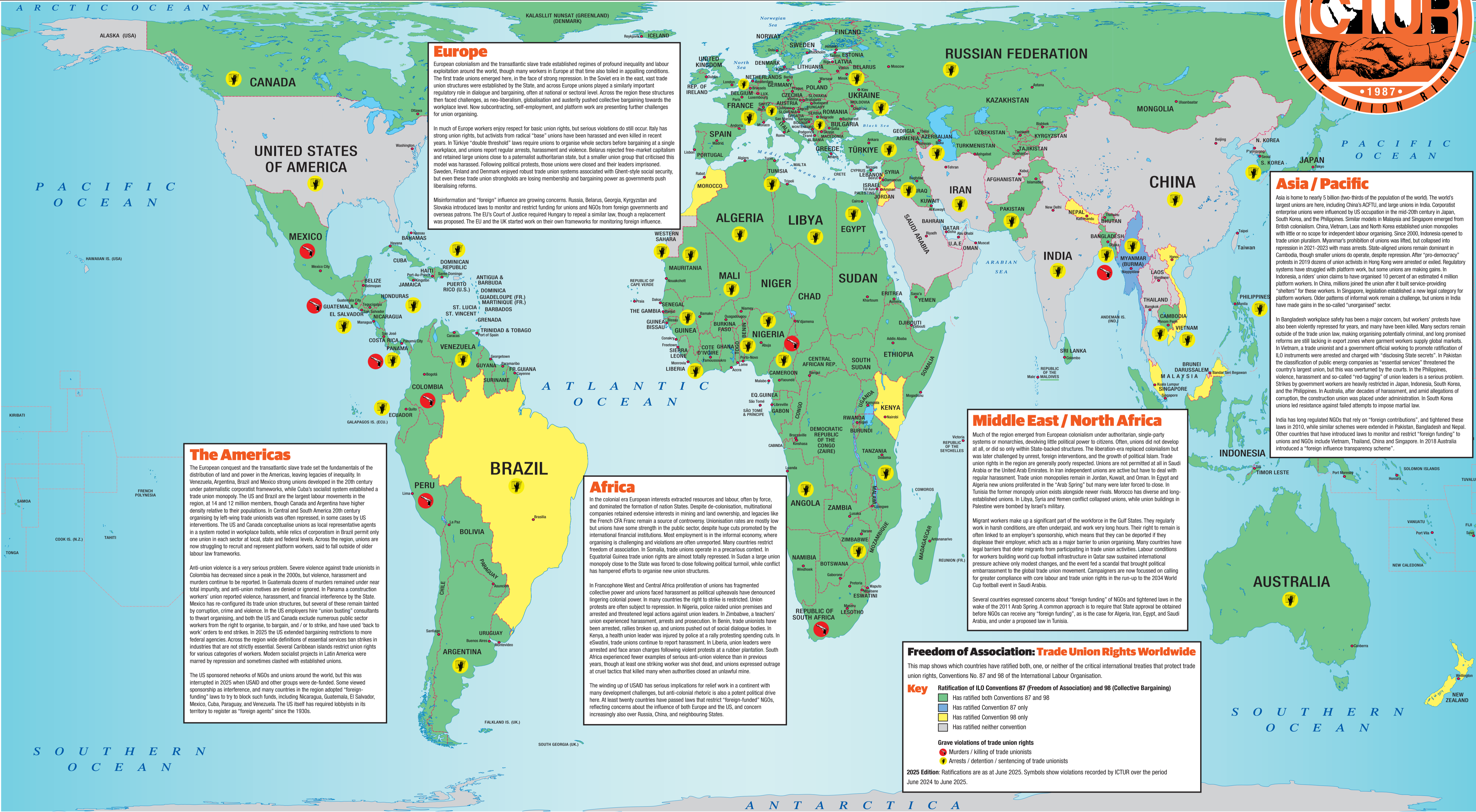
Freedom of Association: Trade Union Rights Worldwide

2025 edition

by the International Centre for Trade Union Rights



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Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining
The fundamental right of workers to organise is under global threat. From Colombia to Central Africa, from North America to New Zealand, from the Philippines to Saudi Arabia, anti-union laws undermine the right to organise. But unions rights are not only under legal threat. In Africa and Latin America, and elsewhere, trade unionists face assassination, assault, kidnapping and detention. Much violence is state-sponsored and carried out by employers. Sometimes it is carried out by the military or law enforcement agencies, sometimes by secret or special forces, or by employers' own security forces with state approval. Trade union rights are vital for workers facing the global power of employers. With economic integration, uncontrolled capital flows and new technology, labour everywhere depends on its right to organise. This map identifies the levels of ratification of the core freedom of association conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and highlights some of the most serious violations of these rights that occur worldwide.

What is freedom of association?
Freedom of association is the fundamental principle of the ILO. It means the right of workers and employers to freely form or join organisations that promote and defend their interests at work, without interference from one another or the State. The right to organise applies to all workers and employers, including persons in the 'informal sector', (i.e. - generally those not working under contracts of employment). This right should be guaranteed by the State, regardless of occupation, sex, colour, race, creed, nationality or political opinion.

What is collective bargaining?
Collective bargaining is a voluntary process through which employers (or their organisations), and trade unions (or in their absence, workers' representatives) discuss and negotiate their relations and interaction at the workplace, such as pay and other terms and conditions of work. This process of bargaining aims to reach mutually acceptable collective agreements. Important conditions for effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining are that workers' organisations are independent and not under the control of employers, or employers' organisations - and that the process of collective bargaining can proceed without undue interference by the authorities.

Foreign-funding of NGOs and unions
The right to support from foreign sources is protected for NGOs and trade unions as an aspect of freedom of association, including by the ILO and UN. Despite this, there is a growing perception that such funds are a vehicle for political interference, and many States now monitor and restrict such funding. Cuts to USAID and other institutions in 2025 will impact support for trade union and NGO projects around the world.

Why are these rights called fundamental?
Both freedom of association and effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining are fundamental human rights at work, enshrined in the ILO Constitution since 1919. Freedom of association is closely linked with freedom of expression, the media, assembly and universal suffrage. These rights underpin democratic representation and governance.

Report trade union rights violations

In order to carry out our role of monitoring, reporting, and responding to trade union rights worldwide, ICTUR needs the help of workers, unions, and their allies. You can help by sending details of trade union rights violations to ICTUR - from union-busting and the sacking of trade union activists, the introduction of laws that restrict trade union rights, to the most serious human rights violations, including arrests, imprisonment and killings.

You can report violations by contacting ICTUR on ictur@ictur.org.

ICTUR responds to reported violations by investigating the case, contacting the governments or employers concerned, and reporting cases internationally in our journal and on our website. In some situations, ICTUR can also report cases to the international human rights agencies

International Union Rights journal has been in publication for more than 30 years and has won a readership of trade unionists, lawyers and academics around the world.
Available from: www.ictur.org/IUR.htm

Trade Unions of the World, is the leading international reference book mapping and explaining the history of trade unions and labour struggles in 220 countries and territories worldwide. The book outlines political histories along with information about labour law and trade union rights, as well as setting out a directory style listing of trade unions, federations, and national centres..
Available from: www.ictur.org

