

Trade Unions Can and Must Help to Rebuild Democracy

2024 is historic in the story of global democracy. Around four billion people will vote in more than 40 countries. But in what state do we find democracy? The facts speak for themselves – if democracy was a hospital patient, it would need constant care. The global trade union movement, as the world's largest social movement, needs to stand up For Democracy.

Democracy and democratic values are under attack worldwide. Unregulated, neo-liberal globalisation has left billions of people behind and this breeds support for right-wing populists. This has fed a rising tide of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes which neither respect limits on their power nor protect the freedoms and rights of workers, minorities, civil society or trade unions. We face an increase in corporate capture, resulting in the dismantling of established trade union rights and civil liberties and an exacerbation of economic inequalities.

We see more and more the blatant destabilisation and dismantling of political processes in once-established democracies where extremists use traditional and modern media platforms to spread far-right political narratives and disinformation.

A decline of democracy

Democracy is contracting in every region of the world. According to the 2023 Global State of Democracy report from the Swedish International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, every year since 2018 more countries experienced net declines in democratic processes than net improvements. This includes places that had been thought to be healthy democracies.

These findings are reinforced by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index. It calculates that nearly 39.4 per cent of the world's population live under authoritarian rule, and while 45.5 percent reside in a democracy of some sort, only 7.8 percent of people, or fewer than one in ten, live in a "full democracy". It gave the world a total score of 5.22 in 2023, down from 5.29 in 2022, as war and conflict worsen existing, negative, anti-democratic trends.

It is no surprise then that public confidence in democracy and its institutions is in steep decline, particularly among young people. In a 2023 survey by the Open Society Foundation, 82 percent of people said they preferred living in democracies, but that figure dropped to 57 percent for those aged 18-35, with 42 percent supportive of military rule. A decline in democracy goes hand in hand with an increase in attacks on workers' and trade union rights.

This global, anti-democratic trend corresponds with global attacks on trade union membership. Where countries have high rates of trade union density and collective agreement coverage, wealth and power are distributed more equitably and citizens have more trust in democracy.

In 2023, the V-Dem Institute identified Norway, where trade union density is 49 percent and collective agreement coverage is 72.5 percent, as the world's most deliberative and egalitarian democracy. However, researchers have also found that "union density has declined throughout the developed world, and in most countries the union wage premium has fallen as well."

These disturbing anti-trade union, anti-democratic trends are demonstrated by growing attacks on workers' rights documented over ten years by the *ITUC Global Rights Index*. In 2023, violations of key measures reached new highs: 87 percent of countries violated the right to strike while 79 percent violated the right to collective bargaining. These attacks and the parallel rise in economic inequality and insecurity are principal drivers of public discontent, providing fertile ground for far-right groups to push narratives characterised by intolerance and hatred.

Neo-liberal capitalism and the rise of the far right

This rise of nationalism, populism, xenophobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia, climate denial and new forms of fascism have been further fed by capitalism's austerity policies. Instead of delivering stronger economies to support a more inclusive social state, profits have been privatised and costs socialised. The 2023 study *The Political Costs of Austerity* looked at 200 elections in Europe and found that austerity policies had led to "a significant increase in extreme parties' vote share, lower voter turnout, and a rise in political fragmentation."

This embrace of inequitable policies that fail to deliver a better life and hope for working people and their families amounts to a betrayal of the electorate's trust. History has shown us that workers inevitably search for alternatives that promise to address their needs. Populists exploit this to win elections and then dismantle the elements of democracy that handed them power.

No region of the world remains untouched by this rise in anti-democratic forces, from right-wing electoral victories in Argentina and the Netherlands to nationalist resurgences in the United Kingdom and India, from military coups in Myanmar and

Armed conflict is increasing, many countries face threats of economic collapse, the climate emergency is accelerating, and unregulated growth in technology poses enormous risks

Luc Triangle is General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) in Brussels



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Niger to murderous attacks on trade unionists in Colombia and the Philippines.

This is happening as we witness a convergence of global crisis. Armed conflict, war and the threat of weapons of mass destruction is increasing. The long-ignored debt crisis means that more than 70 countries are on the brink of economic collapse. The climate emergency is accelerating, costing lives and livelihoods, while corporate power and its political allies resist a just transition. The exponential and recklessly unregulated growth in technology poses enormous social, economic and political risks.

Stand up for democracy

The only way that these trends can be addressed, sustainably, is through a truly democratic movement. A movement that crosses borders and sectors, ages and genders, races and religions and has the power, presence and accountability to change the balance of power in every workplace, country and global institution. We are that movement. Trade unions are together the largest social movement in the world. It is time that we trade unionists took up our role as the foremost practitioners and defenders of, and fighters for, the democratic values we exercise every day.

Because democracy is a worker's project, it is time to make good on the promises made in the *ILO Declaration of Philadelphia* as we mark 80 years since its publication. It recognised that democratic rights for workers run parallel with the aim of delivering prosperity for everyone, as it sets out in its fundamental principles:

- a) Labour is not a commodity.
- b) Freedom of expression and of association are essential to sustained progress.
- c) Poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere.
- d) The war against want requires to be carried on with unrelenting vigour within each nation, and by continuous and concerted international effort in which the representatives of workers and employers, enjoying equal status with those of governments, join with them in free discussion and democratic decision with a view to the promotion of the common welfare.

Even then in 1944 it was known that basic, workplace democratic rights, such as freedom of association, are intrinsically linked to equality and social progress; a fact clearly reinforced by the *ITUC Global Rights Index* in the last decade.

The authors of the Declaration knew that democracy is not just about elections, it is about workplace rights, it is about respecting the democratic values that the United Nations Commission of Human Rights defined in 2002 as “essential elements of democracy”:

- Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- Freedom of association.
- Freedom of expression and opinion.
- Access to power and its exercise in accordance with the rule of law.
- The holding of periodic free and fair elections by universal suffrage and by secret ballot as the expression of the will of the people.
- A pluralistic system of political parties and organisations.
- The separation of powers.
- The independence of the judiciary.
- Transparency and accountability in public administration.
- Free, independent and pluralistic media.

The *ITUC For Democracy* campaign will defend these foundations of democracy in three critical arenas: at work, at the national level and globally. From respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, such as the right to strike, to the separation of powers that act as a necessary brake to governments pushing through legislation arbitrarily, and the importance of an independent judiciary.

Democracy starts for most people in the workplace as they speak their minds for the first time in their union. They learn how to protect one another. They experience the brilliance of collective deliberation and the power of collective action, but for too many people their workplace is where democracy is most lacking. Generations of trade unionists have fought and died, been tried and executed advancing democratic rights. Today, hundreds of trade unionists sit in jail, under house arrest or on trial as they continue to defend it. Through trade union membership democracy can be most effectively realised, enabling collective bargaining for just and equitable conditions.

For Democracy at work, trade unions assert our right to freedom of association, to organise unions and to strike. We demand collective bargaining and social dialogue, equal treatment for all workers, equal power in decisions that impact our health, safety, environment, and employment prospects, an

end to workplace violence and harassment, and democracy and representation in our union structures.

For *Democracy* at societal and national level, we assert the right to free speech and protest. We demand true gender equality, equitable and just tax systems where the wealthy contribute their fair share to fund the expansion of social protection, universal healthcare, education and quality public services. We demand a Just Transition that supports all workers to reskill when workplaces shift to zero-emission production to protect both people and the planet. We resist the hate-filled, far-right ideologies and the corporate capture of national policy making by big business and ruthless monetary institutions.

For *Democracy* at global level, we demand the reform of international economic structures to create inclusive systems that prioritise public welfare, human rights and labour standards over private profit. We demand the protection and advancement of representative democratic multilateralism, and progress toward the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We demand just global financial mechanisms that shift the costs of global progress to the richest countries, debt forgiveness for countries facing internal social and economic instability, and equitable global cooperation to achieve universal peace and common security.

A blueprint for a more equal world

At the heart of the *For Democracy* campaign is the call for a New Social Contract; a blueprint for

reimagining a more equal global economy in service of humanity. This contract centres workers' voices and is built on the pillars of jobs, rights, wages, social protection, equality and inclusion, to address the convergence of global crises. Only democratic engagement can deliver the New Social Contract through a participatory approach that allows workers to shape their futures collectively, and only a New Social Contract can ensure that democracy is sustainably rebuilt.

The *For Democracy* campaign is a clarion call to workers, trade unions and allies worldwide to rally for democratic change. It offers practical steps for engagement, from organising at the workplace to advocating for policy reforms at the national and international levels. The campaign seeks to galvanise support across borders, sectors and communities, reinforcing the message that democracy is not only a political ideal but a lived reality that working people are best equipped to define, defend and advance.

By asserting our fundamental rights, promoting equitable policies and challenging the dominance of corporate interests in these three key arenas, workers will be the drivers of change and the reinforcers of democracy.

By harnessing the collective power of the trade union movement, we can confront the multifaceted challenges of our time and advocate for a world where democracy thrives at every level of society. We can ensure that the progress envisaged by the authors of the ILO Declaration of Philadelphia in 1944 becomes a reality for more people in 2024 and beyond.

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