

Organising migrant workers: For trade union democracy and fairer societies for all

“Trade union power lies in unity, and there can be no unity without inclusion. When we organise workers in the most precarious situations, we organise for all. The future of democratic unionism depends on making migrant rights a central priority - not a side issue”.

The future of union power is inclusive

Migrant workers are indispensable to the global economy. From domestic and care work to construction, agriculture, manufacturing, transport and hospitality, they perform essential work that keeps societies functioning. And yet, too often, they are denied the rights, protections, and recognition extended to other workers. They are treated not as equal contributors to the workforce, but as disposable, exploitable and invisible.

This is a crisis not of migration but of exploitation.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), there are over 167 million migrant workers, or about five per cent of the global labour force. These workers are heavily concentrated in sectors that are undervalued and under-regulated, and they face multiple layers of vulnerability: legal insecurity, discrimination, employer-tied visas, language barriers, and, for many women migrants, gender-based violence and isolation.

The structural conditions that exclude migrant workers from labour rights are the same conditions that allow precarious work and union-busting to flourish.

Trade unions must confront these structural barriers simultaneously at national, regional and global levels. For such a transnational issue as migration, it is crucial to advocate within multilateral forums and engage global institutions to push for rights-based migration policies and programmes that place workers and their fundamental rights at the centre.

For trade unions, this is a defining issue

The freedom to join and form unions, enshrined in ILO Conventions 87 and 98, is a fundamental human right, and a foundation of democracy. When migrant workers are denied this right, it weakens not only their own position but also the collective power of all workers. As unions, we must organise where the need is greatest. That means reaching those in

the most precarious positions who have been pushed to the margins by policy and power.

This is not charity - it is strategy.

The rights of migrant workers are not separate from the struggle for labour rights. Their exclusion drives down wages, fractures solidarity and undermines bargaining power. Their inclusion lifts up standards, strengthens movements, and deepens workplace democracy.

In short, organising migrant workers is central to the future of democratic trade unionism.

Why the right to organise of migrant workers matters for all

Some of us treat migrant workers as an exceptional category; workers whose rights are somehow conditional or secondary. This logic must be rejected. Migrant workers are workers, full stop. And the protection of their rights is a shared interest across the labour movement.

Union organising offers migrant workers an essential pathway to safety, dignity and equality. Through unions, they gain access to legal support, know-your-rights education, and the collective strength to challenge abuses such as wage theft, unsafe conditions, harassment and unfair dismissal. In many cases, unions are the only institutions actively defending migrant workers' rights in hostile environments.

Importantly, the union space offers more than protection; it enables migrants to become visible and respected members of their communities and workplaces. By engaging in union activity, migrants access not just rights, but representation. They go from being spoken about to speaking for themselves.

For the wider workforce

Excluding migrant workers from organising structures weakens protections for everyone. Employers exploit these exclusions to bypass collective agreements, suppress wages and shift entire sectors into informality. This triggers a “race to the bottom” that degrades working conditions across the board.

Inclusive unionism disrupts this logic.

It builds bridges between workers of different backgrounds, languages and legal statuses. It affirms a simple truth: division is a tool of exploitation, and unity is the foundation of power.

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For employers

While some employers perceive unionisation among migrant workers as a threat, the evidence suggests otherwise. Organised workplaces are more stable, more productive and have lower rates of staff turnover. When workers - including migrants - feel protected and respected, morale improves, retention increases, and disputes are more likely to be resolved through dialogue rather than disruption.

Supporting migrant workers' right to organise is also an important part of responsible business conduct. It reduces reputational risk, ensures legal compliance and strengthens ethical supply chains.

In short, it is good business.

Responsible employers must move beyond passive compliance to active support. This means respecting union access, advocating for legislation and policies that enables migrant workers to join and form unions, and rejecting exploitative practices in their own operations and supply chains.

For society

Finally, ensuring the rights of migrant workers supports broader goals of social cohesion and inclusive development. When migrants are pushed into informal work and denied access to unions, it fuels exploitation and division. But when they are included as full participants in labour markets and civic life they contribute to stronger social protection systems, more equitable economies and more vibrant democracies.

Research shows that migrants contribute significantly to national tax and social protection systems, often without receiving full benefits. Including them formally strengthens public finances and enlarges the base for shared risk.

It is an investment in future resilience.

The barriers: Why are migrant workers underrepresented in unions?

Despite their growing role in the global economy, migrant workers remain underrepresented in the trade union movement. In one study covering 14 European countries, the unionisation rate among migrant workers was approximately 1.3 times lower than among non-migrants¹. However, another European study found that migrant workers report more positive attitudes towards trade unions and greater confidence in them than their non-migrant peers². The gap, then, is not about trust, it is about access.

Legal exclusion

In many countries, laws block certain categories of migrant workers from joining or forming trade unions. Even where legal rights exist on paper, migrants are often excluded from leadership roles or denied the right to bargain collectively. These

exclusions are especially common for undocumented workers, those on short-term visas, and those in domestic work, agriculture and export processing zones.

National migration policies frequently compound these issues. Employer-tied visas, such as the kafala system common in the countries of the Persian Gulf, create structural dependencies that deter workers from organising.

Fear of retaliation, detention, or deportation is widespread - and not unfounded.

For unions, challenging these legal exclusions must be a top priority. This includes campaigning to end employer-linked visa systems, demanding legal reform to guarantee universal organising rights, and ensuring that all workers, regardless of status, can participate fully in union life.

Practical and structural obstacles

Practical challenges are often just as significant as legal ones. Migrant workers are frequently employed in isolated or informal environments, such as private homes, rural farms, or offshore facilities, where union access is limited or non-existent. Irregular schedules, long hours and employer restrictions make it difficult for them to attend union meetings or connect with organisers.

Communication is another major barrier. Language differences, lack of culturally relevant information and low awareness of rights all create disconnection between unions and migrant communities. In many cases, trade unions themselves lack the capacity, staff, or resources to sustain targeted migrant organising.

According to a 2022 ITUC survey of 52 trade union centres, the most commonly cited barriers to organising migrant workers were:

- Legislative restrictions.
- Lack of awareness among migrants.
- Fear of retaliation.
- Language barriers.
- Physical inaccessibility.
- Limited union resources.

These are not abstract challenges, they are lived realities and to overcome them we require deliberate strategies.

Discrimination and exclusion within unions

Unions must also confront the reality that discrimination and exclusion can exist within the movement. Migrant workers - especially women, racialised migrants and those with irregular status - may not see themselves reflected in union leadership or priorities. This can reinforce feelings of alienation and discourage engagement.

To reverse this, unions must make inclusion visible. This means adapting statutes, opening leadership positions to migrant members, and embedding migrant organising into mainstream strategies.

Inclusion of migrant workers is not a side issue or a project.

How unions are organising migrant workers

Despite the many challenges, the ITUC report *Building Power and Democracy at Work with Migrant Workers* shows how trade unions around the world are developing powerful, creative strategies to organise and empower migrant workers³.

Legal recognition for a migrant-led union

In 2025, the Seoul-Gyeonggi Migrants Trade Union (MTU) celebrated 20 years of organising, in partnership with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). Formed in the face of state repression and mass deportations, the MTU was initially denied recognition on the grounds that undocumented workers had no right to organise.

After a prolonged legal battle, including a 380-day sit-in, in 2015 the Korean Supreme Court ruled that all workers, regardless of status, are entitled to freedom of association. This landmark decision paved the way for the MTU to grow and deepen its work with the KCTU, including:

- Multilingual education campaigns.
- Organising in micro-enterprises and industrial zones.
- Leadership development within migrant communities.

The MTU's experience shows the transformative power of migrant-led unionism and the importance of legal recognition in enabling organising to thrive.

Inclusive governance through structural change

The Confederación Autónoma de Trabajadores del Perú (CATP) has taken significant steps to institutionalise migrant inclusion by creating a National Secretariat for Migrant Workers. This formal body leads efforts to address legal barriers, build union capacity and influence policy.

Working closely with Organización de Conductores Profesionales y Autónomos (OSCPA) - a union led by migrant transport workers in the platform economy - the CATP connects legal empowerment with structural reform. Together, they:

- Organise rights education and awareness raising activities.
- Provide legal support in particular for informal workers.
- Advocate for structural reforms, participating in national dialogues on migration and employment.

The CATP shows how unions can embed migrant inclusion into their governance and strategy as a core commitment, not just as a campaign.

Bringing the union to the migrant workers

Through its Sindacato di Strada (Union on the Road) initiative, the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL) is bringing union organising directly to migrant workers in informal and precarious sectors, especially agriculture, logistics and domestic work.

Using mobile units, CGIL organisers visit farms, job sites and informal settlements, providing:

- Multilingual legal support.
- Information about contracts and workers' rights.
- On-the-spot membership services.

As of 2024, migrants made up 18 percent of CGIL's nearly 3 million members. This success shows that when unions make themselves accessible, literally and linguistically, they can reach the workers most in need of protection.

A new union for informal workers

In Ghana, where most migrant workers operate in informal employment, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) has created the Union of Informal Workers Associations (UNIWA) to provide representation and services to unregistered workers.

Key initiatives include:

- Capacity-building workshops for migrant-led associations.
- Outreach using the Migrant Recruitment Advisor.
- Sector-specific training supported by the ILO.
- Support for West African migrants through regional partnerships.

By recognising the reality of informality, TUC Ghana is helping redefine unionism for a changing labour market.

Union support across borders

The Central Organisation of Trade Unions - Kenya (COTU-K) supports both migrant workers in Kenya and Kenyan workers abroad. Its Migrant Resource Centre in Nairobi provides pre-departure training, legal aid, psychosocial support and a space for policy engagement.

COTU-K has also:

- Formed migrant worker networks in high-migration counties.
- Established partnerships with trade unions in Lebanon and Kuwait.
- Engaged in cross-border organising to protect Kenyan domestic workers.

Research shows that migrants contribute significantly to national tax and social protection systems

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This approach reflects the global nature of migrant labour and the importance of transnational union solidarity.

A transnational feminist organising model

Unions of Filipino domestic workers came together in 2022 to form PIN@Y Care Workers Transnational. Supported by the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) and the Philippines national trade union centre (SENTRO), the group demonstrates a new model of digital, cross-border, feminist unionism.

Through mobile apps, WhatsApp groups and transnational assemblies, migrant domestic workers, often isolated and legally excluded, organise across borders to:

- Share legal information and advocacy tools.
- Campaign for wage justice, rest days and recruitment reform.
- Influence migration policy in both origin and destination countries.

The IDWF and PIN@Y prove that even in the most repressive contexts, workers can build collective power through digital platforms, mutual aid and solidarity.

Conclusion: A call to action for greater democracy at work

Migrant workers are not passive recipients of support, they are active agents of change.

Around the world, they are organising, leading and transforming unions from the ground up. But they cannot do it alone. The broader trade union movement must meet them with commitment, resources and structural change.

We must challenge discriminatory laws. We must advocate within multilateral forums and global institutions to push for tangible commitments enabling migrant workers to unionise and collectively demand their rights. We must open leadership to all. We must invest in outreach and education. We must recognise that the struggle for migrant workers' rights is the struggle for democracy at work.

Trade union power lies in unity, and there can be no unity without inclusion. When we organise workers in the most precarious situations, we organise for all. The future of democratic unionism depends on making migrant rights a central priority - not a side issue.

This is the task before us. Organising migrant workers is not a choice, but a necessity. It is how we build stronger unions, fairer economies and more just societies.

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The challenge for trade unionists and their political allies will be to help build something that offers more: a solution that goes beyond flags, and beyond slogans, and that sets out a realistic and workable response. A first step should probably be significant investment in claims processing facilities, so that the country can deal rapidly and effectively with what is now a considerable backlog of unprocessed asylum claims. In addition to this, all actions taken should respect international human rights law frameworks, and should strive to be humane, responsible, and compassionate.

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