



ITUC FOR DEMOCRACY

POLITICAL BRIEF FOR TRADE UNIONISTS



FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION
DEMOCRACY

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FOREWORD



In a world where the very survival of democracy is under threat, the role of trade unions in safeguarding and advancing democratic values has never been more critical. This political brief, therefore, serves as a call to action for trade unionists and supporters of democracy worldwide.

The question of democracy's relevance to trade unions is not merely rhetorical; it is the foundation of our movement's principles and mission. For too long, workers across the globe have suffered the consequences of policies that erode their rights, diminish their quality of life and threaten the fabric of our societies. From the devastating impacts of neoliberal policies to the existential threats posed by climate change and technological disruption, the challenges we face are both varied and interconnected.

Yet, amidst these challenges, trade unions stand as a beacon of hope and action. Our history is rich with examples of resilience and solidarity, of battles fought and won in the name of justice, equality and democracy. It is this legacy that we must draw upon as we confront the pressing issues of our time.

This political brief outlines not only the threats to democracy but also the pathways to resistance and change. At its core is our call for a New Social Contract — a vision for a world where the economy serves humanity, rights are protected and the planet is preserved for future generations. This vision is rooted in the principles of solidarity, justice and, most importantly, democratic engagement.

As trade unions, we are uniquely positioned to lead the fight for democracy. Our structures promote collective deliberation and action, empowering workers to advocate for their rights and interests. We demonstrate the power of collective action and the importance of standing united in the face of adversity.

We need to engage in the fight for democracy on all fronts — in our workplaces, across our nations and on the global stage. Together, we can build a world that reflects our values and aspirations.

Let us stand together for democracy and a New Social Contract, for a future where the dignity of work and the rights of working people are central. It is through our collective effort that we can secure a just, equitable and democratic world for all.

In solidarity!

Jordania Ureña Lora
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WHAT DOES DEMOCRACY HAVE TO DO WITH TRADE UNIONS?

This question demands a considered response from us, the 200m workers who comprise the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). It requires that we go beyond simply referring to ‘democracy’ as a cherished value or using ‘democratic’ to describe ourselves. It is a question that millions of workers, whose families are unfed or unsheltered, who breathe unclean air and drink polluted water and who have no assurance of safety in their workplaces, are asking themselves at this moment in history.



“WHAT IS DEMOCRACY DOING FOR US?”

In countries long heralded as beacons of prosperity and democracy, workers’ quality of life and working conditions have deteriorated as we endure the divestment, deregulation, and social disorganisation brought about by neoliberalism. In countries emerging from

colonialism, occupation, or dictatorship, we see bright futures stolen away by austerity policies imposed from outside or implemented by corrupt actors from within.

As the crises in public health, climate change, and technological change accelerate and as geopolitical disputes erupt into violence,

workers hunger for an explanation of the world that reflects their lived experience. More importantly, workers continue to search for a way to gain control over our own lives.

Historically, such moments have led to the overthrow of old oppressive orders and the introduction of new forms of more dignified government and social organisation. Trade unions have often been at the centre of these struggles. We have organised, we have assessed the threats and opportunities encountered, and we have fought for a new world together. We have demanded more from employers and the state; more pay and protection, more time to ourselves, justice and restitution. We have also fought for more deliberation, inclusion and participation, an all-embracing and collective approach to governing our civic and work lives. In other words, we have fought **for democracy**. Our driving purpose was a commitment to the idea that together we would find the answers and take control of our collective future.

Democracy: the process of collectively establishing and holding ourselves accountable for values, rights and principles conceived for the common good of people and planet, is as radical a proposition today as when it was first envisioned. Right now, it is an unfinished project that faces unprecedented threats. Most importantly, it is a workers' project; whatever democracy exists in the world today exists because we struggled for it and we won it.

Unions are forges for democracy. Millions 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. Generations of trade unionists have fought and died, been tried and executed to advance democratic rights. Today, hundreds of trade unionists sit in jail, under house arrest or on trial as they continue to defend it.

In its founding constitution, the ITUC – the largest organisation of trade unions in the world – committed itself “**to act for the protection of democracy everywhere**, so that the conditions for the full exercise of all human rights, universal, indivisible and inalienable, may be enjoyed by all.”

The time to take decisive action for democracy has arrived. The world is being reordered, and the global trade union movement must ensure that it is workers who set the foundation stones for democracy to prevail.

THE URGENT NEED FOR ACTION

Democracy is under attack worldwide. We face a rising tide of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes which neither respect limits on their power nor protect the freedom 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. There is murderous repression in Myanmar and Iran, and there is a liquidation of trade unions in Hong Kong and Belarus. Elsewhere, we see the rampant destabilisation of political processes in once-established democracies where oligarchs now wield increasing power and extremists use traditional media and modern media platforms to spread far-right political narratives and disinformation.



Public confidence in democracy and in institutions is in steep decline, particularly among young people. According to a 2023 survey, 82 per cent of people say they prefer to live in democracies, but among those aged 18-35, that number drops to 57 per cent, with 42 per cent saying they are supportive of military rule.¹

It is no coincidence that this 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.

¹ Open Society Foundations (2023). *Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?*

A 2023 report by the V-Dem Institute identified Norway, where trade union density is 49 per cent and collective agreement coverage is 72.5 per cent, as the world's most deliberative and egalitarian democracy.² 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.”³ **More than 60 per cent of the world's adult workforce toils under informal labour arrangements** and is denied access to social protection and the right to organise a union.⁴

These disturbing trends are closely connected to the growing attacks on workers' rights clearly shown in the ITUC Global Rights Index over the past decade. In 2023, 87 per cent of countries violated the right to strike while 79 per cent violated the right to collective bargaining.⁵ These attacks and the concurrent 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.

Instead of delivering stronger economies to support a more inclusive social state, capitalism's austerity policies, which have privatised profits and socialised costs, have instead resurrected nationalism, populism, xenophobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia, climate denial and new forms of fascism. A study of more than 200 elections in European countries found that **austerity policy has “lead to a significant increase in extreme parties' vote share**, lower voter turnout, and a rise in political fragmentation.”⁶ When democratic governance is abused and betrays an electorate's trust by embracing unpopular policies which fail to deliver a better life for workers and hope for their children, workers

inevitably search for alternatives that promise to address their needs. Populists capture this to win elections and, once elected, go on to dismantle the core elements of democracy.

From right-wing electoral victories in Argentina and the Netherlands to nationalist resurgences in the United Kingdom and India, coups d'état from South America to Africa, and vicious attacks on trade unionists from Nigeria to the Philippines, **no continent remains untouched by this rise in anti-democratic forces.**

Regional and geopolitical blocs are replacing multilateralism, with increased political and economic tensions. Armed conflicts and, in some cases, all-out war, are taking place in every region, and the threat of weapons of mass destruction is increasing. More than 70 countries are on the brink of collapsing under the weight of a debt crisis foreseen yet neglected for years.⁷ 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, particularly digital, poses enormous social, economic and political risks.

The only way that these trends can be addressed, sustainably, is through a truly democratic movement that crosses borders and sectors, ages and genders, races and religions and that has the power, presence, and accountability to change institutions in every village, country, and global institution. **We are that movement. It is time that trade unionists take up and are supported in our role as the foremost practitioners and defenders of and fighters for democracy.**

Fortunately, we do not have to fight alone. The 2022 ITUC Global Poll showed that that 69 per



² V-Dem Institute (2023). *Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization*.

³ Schnabel, Claus (2020). *Union Membership and Collective Bargaining: Trends and Determinants*. IZA DP No. 13465.

⁴ International Labour Organisation (2018). *Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical picture*.

⁵ International Trade Union Confederation (2023). *Global Rights Index*.

⁶ Gabriel, Ricardo Duque and Klein, Mathias and Pessoa, Ana Sofia (2022). *The Political Costs of Austerity*.

⁷ Fischer, A.M. and Storm, S. (2023). *The Return of Debt Crisis in Developing Countries: Shifting or Maintaining Dominant Development Paradigms?* *Dev Change*, 54: 954-993.

cent of people believe the economic system favours the wealthy, and 67 per cent say unions should play an important role in solving these problems.⁸ The Poll also underlined public demand for government action on issues that are closely aligned with trade union demands.

In countries where unions have been under relentless attack for decades, such as in the United States, public support for trade unions and strike action by workers are at 60-year highs.⁹

⁸ International Trade Union Confederation (2022). *ITUC Global Poll*.

⁹ Gallup (2022). *U.S. Approval of Labor Unions at Highest Point Since 1965*.

DEMOCRACY FOR A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT

When most of the world's democratic trade unions convened for the ITUC World Congress in November 2022, we agreed that "a New Social Contract is more urgent than ever before to put the economy in the service of humankind and save people and the planet from the threat of destruction."

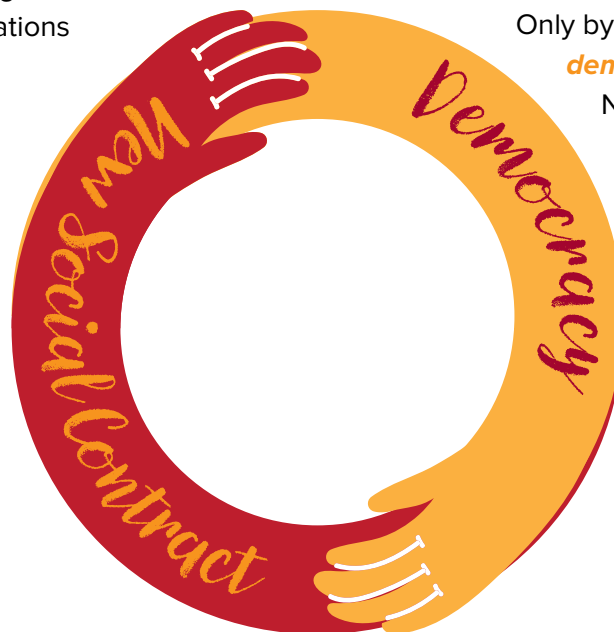


The New Social Contract is how we transition from today's broken social contract built on inequitable political and economic systems to one built on solidarity, justice, peace, freedom and democracy. In the wide-ranging and detailed statement we adopted, we called for a New Social Contract built on six demands: jobs, rights, wages, social protection, equality, and inclusion. These demands also address three "accelerating and converging global trends" impacting the global economy and societies: climate change, public health, and technological change.

As we survey the world just two years later, we find ourselves facing a scenario familiar to those generations of trade unionists who came before us. The progress we seek, indeed that we need to save our species and our planet, will only be won if the world's workers

exercise power. History shows us that workers' most effective and sustainable path to power is through democracy.

We have seen the fate of workers under the rule of juntas, oligarchs, and autocrats: disappearance, death, and social destruction. We choose democracy. Not a shallow democracy, in which the same policies prevail while the aspirations of the many are ignored, but a muscular, responsive democracy in which workers set the course in our communities, workplaces, countries, and international institutions together. We choose *real* democracy.



Only by winning this fight *for* *democracy* can we forge the New Social Contract that the world urgently needs. And it is through action for the New Social Contract that democracy can be sustained and rebuilt.

THREE ARENAS OF STRUGGLE: AT WORK, AT NATIONAL AND AT GLOBAL LEVEL



The good news is that this fight has already begun. Every day in their workplaces, whether in the mines of Indonesia and Bolivia, the markets of Senegal, or the private homes of Bahrain, workers are fighting for democracy. Through cooperation with social movements, trade unions are building independent, collective power to counteract the forces of division and strengthen the position of workers in society. Around the world, people are campaigning for what the United Nations defines as “essential elements of democracy,” including:

- 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.

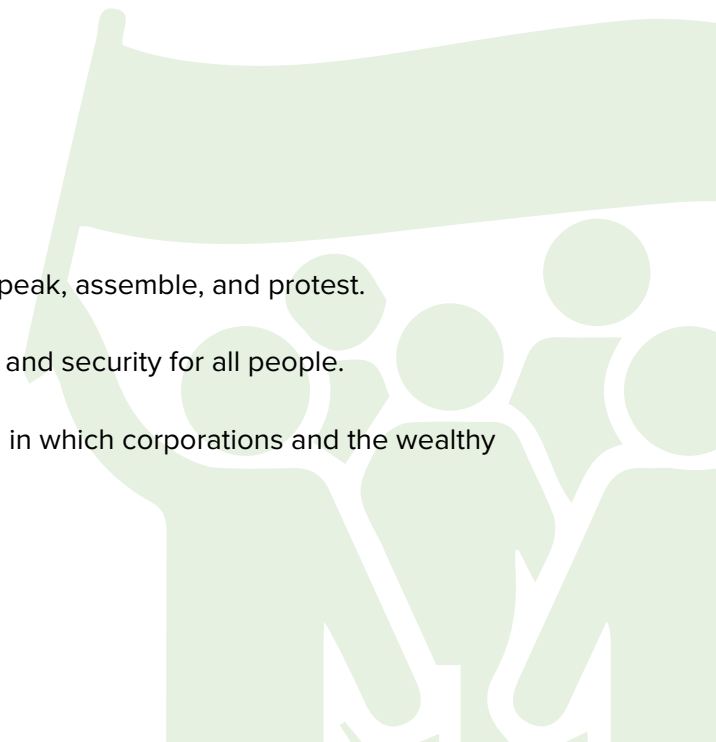
The long-term success of these struggles depends on trade union success in **three key arenas where democracy is most threatened today**. That is why we will campaign:

A. FOR DEMOCRACY AT WORK, BY:

- Asserting our fundamental right to freedom of association and to organise unions.
- Asserting our fundamental right to strike.
- Demanding collective bargaining and social dialogue.
- Acting in solidarity with all workers, regardless of status, classification, or sector.
- Demanding equal compensation and treatment for workers of all races, colours, sexes, religions, political opinions, national extractions, social origins, abilities and disabilities, ages, sexual orientations, health statuses, family roles.
- Demanding equal power in decisions that impact our health, safety, environment, and employment prospects, including during industrial and ecological transition.
- Demanding an end to violence and harassment in the world of work.
- Practicing our commitment to democracy and equal representation within our own union structures.

B. FOR DEMOCRACY IN SOCIETIES AND AT NATIONAL LEVEL, BY:

- Asserting our fundamental right to freely speak, assemble, and protest.
- Demanding states equitably ensure safety and security for all people.
- Demanding equitable and just tax systems in which corporations and the wealthy contribute their fair share to our societies.
- Promoting gender quality.



- Breaking the stranglehold that multinational corporations, investor and business lobby groups, and detached monetary institutions maintain over national policymaking.
- Protecting and expanding quality public services accessible to all people.
- Demanding a just transition that protects our planet and all our people.
- Resisting the rising tide of far-right ideologies, nationalism, militarism, and racial supremacy.
- Asserting our fundamental rights to free movement and self-determination.
- Demanding equal access to and expansion of social protection and universal health and education for all who live in our societies.

C. FOR DEMOCRACY AT GLOBAL LEVEL, BY:

- Demanding comprehensive reform of international economic structures to pave the way for more democratic and inclusive decision-making processes that prioritise public welfare and international human rights and labour standards over private profit.
- Protecting and advancing democratic multilateralism so that our institutions reflect the will of workers in every country.
- Accelerating progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals and beyond.
- Devising and advancing adoption of a just fiscal architecture and new financial instruments that shift the costs of global progress to those who can most afford it rather than those who suffer most today.






By binding our efforts in these three arenas under one unified campaign, we establish a clear relationship between every organiser and advocate at every level of social and trade

union activity. Along with our allies in social, environmental, and democracy movements at home and around the world, we will leave no stone unturned in the fight for democracy.



JOIN THE TRADE UNION CAMPAIGN FOR DEMOCRACY

EVERYONE HAS A ROLE IN THIS CAMPAIGN:

-  Visit ituc-csi.org/fordemocracy to support global and national actions happening this month.
-  ITUC affiliates and allied organisations: submit your upcoming democracy campaign actions to the ITUC at goa@ituc-csi.org.
-  Put democracy into practice by organising a trade union where you work. [Find your sectoral union here.](#)
-  Support trade union demands in your country. [Find your trade union national centre here.](#)
-  Tell your government to support the demands of the trade union campaign *for democracy*. Find your government's [UN representatives](#) and [ILO delegates](#).



FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION
DEMOCRACY

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