

Global Union Outlook

2023

Around the world

EXPENSIVE TRAVEL AND ACTIVITIES

19%

of workers in the EU cannot afford to go on a week's vacation.

PARIS AGREEMENT TARGET

1.5°

At COP27 it was decided to establish a work program for just transition.

EUROPEAN TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

50

More than 90 national trade union organizations are celebrating their 50th anniversary at a congress.



PHOTO: KELLY SIKKEMA

Workers all over the world have common interests.

Theme: **Global trade unionism**

We are stronger together

Employees in all countries have common interests. If we allow those in power to set workers against workers and **violate our right** to organize, it could happen in our country too. This is why we must work together, across national borders. [Page 2](#)

AROUND THE WORLD

This is the first issue of an annual overview of the world from a trade union perspective.

PRESIDENT OF LO



PHOTO: ILOAKIM SCHWARTZ

Susanna Gideonsson:
"Trade union and political work give results."

[Page 2](#)

SPEAKING OF RIGHTS

5 FIGURES OF CONCERN

[Page 7](#)

BETTER IN THE WEST



PHOTO: MATS ERICSON

The US trade union movement has been strengthened since Joe Biden became president. Democrats in Congress have also strengthened legislation in a union-friendly direction.

[Page 11](#)

No chain is stronger than its weakest link

The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) celebrates its 125th anniversary this year. If those who formed LO on that day in August 1898 could have travelled in a time machine to 2023 they would probably have perceived our world as **pure science fiction**. But there are also things they would recognise. Because even today people are worn down by bad work environments, forced into inhuman working conditions and denied the right to organise.

In essence, the trade union struggle is still about the same things. The difference is that the arena has become bigger. Today it comprises the whole world. It is increasingly obvious that employees in Sweden have interests in common with employees in the EU but also in Brazil, South Korea and Niger. Indeed, with all workers in the world. This is why the international work of LO and LO affiliated unions is so important. If we allow those in power to set workers against workers and weaken one country's trade unions, then in the future the same thing can happen to us. No chain is stronger than its weakest link.

It's easy to feel dejected when you look around the world in 2023. At the same time, we know that trade union and political work achieve results. As our report shows, there are also bright spots.

In the United States, the number of trade union members has increased for the first time in many years. In Qatar, the Swedish and international building sector trade unions have forced improvements for migrant workers. In Brazil, former trade union leader Lula da Silva defeated right-wing nationalism and became president. In South Korea, following trade union protests, the government was forced to withdraw a proposal to extend working hours. Last year, the International Labour Organisation of the United Nations (ILO) adopted a binding convention on everyone's right to a good work environment. None of these changes have taken place automatically. They are the result of patient trade union and political work.

In *Global Union Outlook*, we want to give you an overview of the world in 2023 from a trade union perspective. We hope that it will be useful to those of you who are interested in international issues. Hopefully it can be part of our joint work to change the world for the better.

Susanna Gideonsson
Susanna Gideonsson

President of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO)

Global economy



The energy crisis resulting from the sanctions against Russia has repercussions for the **entire world economy**, with high commodity prices and high inflation.



PHOTO: DOCUMENTICA

High costs and low consumption risk increasing unemployment.

In summer 2022, gas and electricity costs in Europe were 38 per cent higher than a year earlier. After a protracted period of significant price increases for households, high interest rates, tight monetary policy and fiscal measures that to varying degrees have managed to dampen downward pressures on the economy and employment, the situation today seems somewhat brighter.

The reopening of China after the pandemic and the fall in food and energy prices are having a positive effect. In Asia, economic recovery is now taking place, but for Western economies, the turnaround is not yet as certain. In its June 2023 forecast, the OECD, the International Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, projects global growth that will continue to be hampered by the war, after falling by more than one percentage point in 2022 compared to the previous year, before the outbreak of the war.¹

Weak growth in the EU

Swedish exports are particularly dependent on developments in the other Nordic countries, the UK and the EU. Both the European Commission and the OECD estimate that growth will be very weak in these markets in 2023 and better but modest in 2024, which is a picture shared by the LO economists in their spring 2023 forecast.²

The European Commission's outlook for the EU area from spring 2023 can be summarised as the outcome has not been as bad as initially feared. The economy is expected to grow by one per cent this year and 1.7 per cent in 2024. Inflation rates are partly dampened by falling energy prices and, according to the Commission's forecast, inflation will increase by 6.7 per cent in 2023, and 3.1 per cent in 2024.³

Ahead of the summer break in 2023, the European Trade Union Confederation drew attention to statistics on sharply increasing prices for package travel, recreation and cultural activities, meaning that around 19.5 per cent of workers in the EU cannot afford to go away on a week's holiday. Estonia, France, Bulgaria, Sweden and the Czech Republic are the countries affected by the highest increases in the cost of a package trip, with increases between 18 per cent and 31 per cent compared to 2017.

Most forecasters indicate that the situation in the future is difficult to assess. In large parts of the world, politicians and central banks face a balance between fighting inflation and limiting negative effects on living standards, employment and economic growth. High costs and low consumption also risk leading economies into stagflation, i.e. low growth and high unemployment, while inflation is high. The Trade Union Advisory Committee, TUAC, the trade union advisory body to the OECD, warns of overly tight policies, as the problems are largely due to bottlenecks in value chains

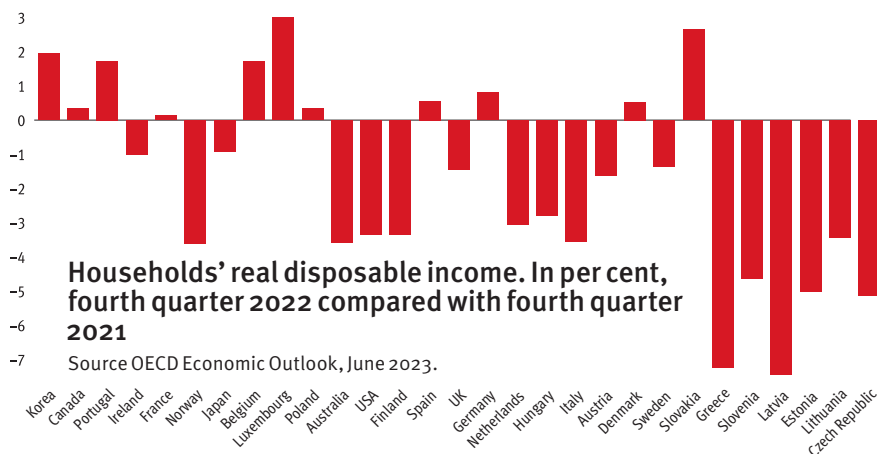
¹ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/d14d49eb-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/d14d49eb-en#section-d1e196-4b65d9cf4f>

² For a more detailed analysis and figures, please refer to Ekonomiska Utsikter ("Economic Outlook"): Dags för en stark och träffsäker politik. Swedish Trade Union Confederation, 2023.

³ https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-forecast-and-surveys/economic-forecasts/spring-2023-economic-forecast-improved-outlook-amid-persistent-challenges_en#executive-summary

Real wages, in per cent, fourth quarter 2022 compared with fourth quarter 2021

Source: OECD Economic Outlook, June 2023.



Households' real disposable income. In per cent, fourth quarter 2022 compared with fourth quarter 2021

Source OECD Economic Outlook, June 2023.

and changes in consumption patterns, which do not respond to monetary policy.⁴

Lack of social dialogue and absence of strong social partners are some of the reasons why the share of wages in the economy has been falling for decades, a trend that existed even before the pandemic. In addition, corporate profits are now breaking records, while real wages are falling and consumers' purchasing power is declining. This means that trade unions are pushing for wage increases and for increased investment in transition. In the OECD, employment is at a record high, just over 70 per cent and labour shortages exist in several countries and sectors, not least due to the transition driven by AI and green technology. In the EU, employment is expected to benefit from the retention of labour by employers due to skills shortages and the acceleration of demand, particularly in the services sector. According to the European Commission's forecast, unemployment will remain around 6 per cent this year and next year, which is historically low for the EU.

Sanctions against Russia

Russia is the world's third largest oil producer and second largest gas producer. Before the war, revenues from oil exports accounted for 36 per cent of government finances. Despite the sanctions imposed by the rest of the world, Russia has continued to generate substantial revenue from fossil fuel exports, benefiting from a high market value. However, the West has phased out imports of Russian fuel and set a price cap on oil which, together with trade restrictions, should have increasingly noticeable consequences for the Russian economy. Counterbalancing

this are mainly China and India, which continue to benefit Russian oil exports.

Lack of reliable statistics makes it difficult to calculate the impact of sanctions on Russia's GDP growth. Swedish SITE, however, predicts a bleak future for the Russian economy.⁵ According to Yale University, more than 1,000 companies have left Russia since the beginning of the war and foreign direct investment has fallen back to the same level as 30 years ago.⁶ However, far from all of them have ceased trading with the country. The explanations are administrative difficulties in closing down and future plans to re-establish business, but also a continued desire to make money in the huge Russian market.

The UK economy is being challenged by high inflation, limited fiscal space and rising unemployment. The British Trades Union Congress, TUC, has warned that an overly restrictive policy is holding back employment and hampering growth. High interest rates and therefore expensive mortgages, high food and energy prices, the decade-long deterioration in wage growth and, in addition, a right-wing government that puts workers at a disadvantage, have led to extensive and protracted strikes.

In France, the announcement of a raised retirement age from 62 to 64 has been met by massive demonstrations and a united trade union movement. The largest trade union organisation, the CFDT, believes that the government is exaggerating the financing needs of future pension payments and that a raised age requirement puts people working

from an early age at a disadvantage. In addition, the French government has reduced taxes for the richest, reduced corporate taxation and reduced social security contributions.

Slowdown in the United States

In 2023, the US economy is expected to slow down and then turn upwards again next year. Lingering effects from pandemic incentive measures will help mitigate negative effects on GDP growth, but also the result of the government's huge investments in climate and environmental technology will be important in the long term. In the time that remains for the Biden administration and the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives, conditions exist for important future investments. Inflation is slowly receding, but credit tightening due to banks' unease is an uncertainty factor and the Federal Reserve is expected to continue its restrictive monetary policy in the autumn of 2023. In May 2023, the unemployment rate was low, 3.7 per cent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In China, the economy is growing, albeit at a lower rate than before. The security situation remains a concern. Not only because of relations with Russia, but also because the Chinese regime persists in its "One China" policy, i.e. that Taiwan should belong to China. Any Chinese trade blockade of Taiwan, possibly followed by an international response with economic measures against China, would hit the entire world economy hard. Both nations are world-leading producers of semiconductors, a crucial component in the global manufacturing industry. Such a development would also affect Sweden. China is Sweden's eighth largest trading partner and more than 100 Swedish companies operate in Taiwan. ●

5 <https://freepolicybriefs.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/fpb20221031.pdf>

6 <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/economy-and-ecology/a-reality-check-on-divestment-from-russia-6531/>

4 <https://tuac.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/TUAC-reflections-on-the-state-of-the-economy.pdf>

Just climate transition

At the UN Climate Summit in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt, in 2022 (COP27), **governments decided** to establish a just transition work programme.

The intention is to discuss concrete ways to achieve the Paris Agreement's goal of keeping global warming below two degrees, with a target of 1.5 degrees. The decision has strong support from the ITUC and the rest of the international trade union movement, which has long been pushing for a just transition. The precise design of the just transition work programme is expected to be adopted at the meeting in Dubai in autumn 2023.

The international trade union movement has long stressed that a just transition must be based on social dialogue with the social partners, an adequate social safety net, gender equality and employment policies that create jobs with good working conditions and skills development opportunities. In addition, fundamental rights for workers are required under ILO conventions. A just transition also requires guarantees of gender and intergenerational equality, ethnic

justice as well as respect for the rights of indigenous peoples and migrants.

Climate change was also raised at the ILO International Labour Conference in summer 2023. Among other things, the discussions led to a resolution requiring the ILO to intensify its work on just transition.

In its resolution, the ILO states that Member States should pay particular attention to respecting, promoting and realising freedom of association and collective bargaining, as these rights are essential for the social dialogue between social partners and with governments that is necessary for a just transition. ●

Democracy under pressure

The **democratic progress** made in the world over the past 35 years **has been wiped out**, according to the research institute V-dem at the University of Gothenburg.

Today, **72 percent** of the world's population lives under various forms of authoritarian regime, which is a decline to the 1986 level. For the first time in over two decades, the world has more authoritarian regimes than democracies. The Democratic Institute IDEA has a similar picture: half of the democratic regimes in the world are in decline today, according to their latest report.²

The global balance of power between democracies and authoritarian states is also changing. The latter now account for 46 per cent of the world's GDP. In 1998, trade between democracies accounted for 74 per cent of world trade. Today, the figure is 47 per cent. The non-democratic states are becoming increasingly powerful economically, and their numbers are growing. Trade dependency can, of course, be used to exert political pressure.

Popular support for democracy

There is a strong link between attacks on democracy and attacks on trade union rights. The latest annual report from the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the Global Rights Index, shows how employees' right to join or form a trade union has developed.³

Do the developments of recent decades mean that people's support for democracy has weakened? No, not according to American political scientist Larry Bartels. In his book *Democracy Erodes from the Top*, he argues that it is the elite of society that are the driving force in this development, not citizens. Public support for democracy has not diminished. ●



PHOTO: MALU LAKER

Around the world, around the clock, trade union fighters are acting for democracy and human rights.

1 <https://www.democracywithoutborders.org/se/z6678/v-dem-rapport-global-demokrati-har-sjunkit-till-1986-ars-niva/>
2 <https://www.idea.int/gsod/>

3 <https://www.ituc-csi.org/2023-global-rights-index-en?lang=en>

Unequal labour market

The global outlook for labour markets deteriorated sharply in 2022.¹ As wages fail to keep pace with inflation, more and more people **end up in poverty**. In 2022, 214 million workers lived in extreme poverty, which is defined as earning less than USD 1.90 per day.²

¹ https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/WCMS_865332/lang--en/index.htm

² World Employment and Social Outlook 2023, ILO



PHOTO: LARS FORSTEDT

208 million out of work.

Labour market prospects are very unequal, not only between but also within countries. Gender gaps exist in all areas and young people are particularly affected. Moreover, those in employment often lack social protection and fundamental rights at work. Many work in the ‘informal sector’, i.e. the sector where there are no formal employment relationships, such as street hawking, handicrafts, domestic services, barter and agriculture for self-catering. Globally, around two billion people worked in the informal sector in 2022.

To measure the number of people who would like a job but do not have one, the ILO uses the term “job gap”. In 2023 this is estimated to be 453 million people, or 11.7 per cent. The job gap is particularly large for women, 14.5 per cent, as against 9.8 per cent for men.

In 2022, the labour force participation rate was 47.4 per cent for women and 72.3 per cent for men. Young people’s unemployment rate is three times higher than for adults. More than one in five young people is neither in education nor in employment. In the OECD, however, the employment rate is at a record high.

However, global employment is projected to increase by one per cent in 2023, but this is a slowdown from 2.3 per cent in 2022. Global unemployment is expected to

increase by about three million, to 208 million. This corresponds to an unemployment rate of 5.8 per cent.

However, the trend varies greatly between regions. In Africa and the Arab world, as well as in Asia and the Pacific, employment is expected to increase. In North America there will be no employment gains and unemployment will accelerate. Europe and Central Asia are particularly affected by the economic impact of the war in Ukraine and employment is therefore expected to decline there.

The current global economic slowdown is likely to force more workers to accept poorly paid jobs of lower quality, lacking job security and social protection.

Two million people die at work

Work-related diseases and injuries cause nearly two million deaths every year, according to the ILO. The latest figure is from 2016. The ILO points out that the deaths are not just a tragedy for those affected and their loved ones. They also burden health systems, reduce productivity and can have a catastrophic impact on household incomes. The ILO stresses that almost all of these deaths could have been prevented, through joint responsibility from both states and employers.

Compared to the turn of the century, the

number of work-related deaths had fallen by 14 per cent, which according to the ILO is due to improvements in health and safety at workplaces. At the same time, the ILO points out that the figures are likely to be higher today, partly due to the impact of the pandemic.³

FACT COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT

Countries with the highest collective bargaining coverage in the OECD (per cent)⁴

Italy	100.0
France	98.0
Austria	98.0
Belgium	96.0
Iceland	90.0
Finland	88.8
Sweden	88.0
Denmark	82.0
Spain	80.1
Netherlands	75.6

³ International comparison of deaths at work: <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/safety-and-health-at-work/>

⁴ See the full list here: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=CBC>

Trade union rights



The right to organise in a trade union is enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. But reality is **far from the beautiful words**.

ITUC's Global Rights Index shows how trade union rights are being curtailed worldwide

77 per cent of countries surveyed by the Global Rights Index prevent people from joining a trade union.

87 per cent restrict the right to strike.

79 per cent restrict the right to collective bargaining.

Trade unionists were arrested or imprisoned last year in **69 countries**.

In **44 countries**, trade unionists were subjected to violence.

FACT RISK COUNTRIES

The 10 most dangerous countries for trade unionists¹

- Bangladesh
- Belarus
- Ecuador
- Egypt
- Eswatini
- Guatemala
- Myanmar
- Tunisia
- The Philippines
- Turkey

FACT DEGREE OF ORGANIZATION

Trade union density in the OECD²

Australia	13.7
Belgium	49.1
Chile	16.6
Colombia	9.5
Costa Rica	20.5
Denmark	67.0
Estonia	6.0
Finland	58.8
France	10.8
Greece	23.1
Ireland	26.2
Iceland	92.2
Israel	25.0
Italy	32.5
Japan	16.8
Canada	27.2
Latvia	11.6
Lithuania	7.4
Luxembourg	28.2
Mexico	12.4
Netherlands	15.4
Norway	50.4
New Zealand	17.7
Poland	13.4
Portugal	15.3
Switzerland	14.4
Slovakia	11.3
Slovenia	23.8
Spain	12.5
United Kingdom	23.5
Sweden	65.2
South Korea	11.6
Czech Republic	11.4
Turkey	9.9
Germany	16.3
Hungary	8.3
USA	10.3
Austria	26.3

PHOTO: KARL CALLWOOD



In more and more cases, employees are denied the right to organize for better working conditions.

¹ There are countries that are not covered by the Global Rights Index. These are states that do not allow independent trade unions even formally, such as North Korea, or countries where the social system has collapsed due to wars, such as in Syria and Sudan.

² <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TUD>



In global focus

Europe

In Eastern Europe, the level of democracy according to V-dem has gradually declined, for example in Hungary and Poland. According to the European Parliament, Hungary is no longer considered a democracy. At the same time, democratic progress has been made in Armenia, Georgia and Kosovo. Progress has also been made in Moldova, North Macedonia and Slovenia, notably through popular mobilisation against corruption.

The right to collective bargaining has been limited in several countries, including North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. In Belarus and Kazakhstan independent trade unions continue to be suppressed.

In the UK, the government wants to restrict the right to strike in areas such as healthcare, education and rescue services. The British TUC believes that the proposal violates ILO principles and the EU-UK agreement on a level playing field.

In France, President Macron and his government have been making changes for several years that together have created resistance: dismantling labour legislation, removal of workplace representatives in larger companies, limited rights for the unemployed and most recently the controversial pension reform. The European Trade Union Institute ETUI ranks France as one of the worst EU countries in terms of quality of work.¹

Increased repression in Belarus

Since Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko cheated himself into power in the August 2020 presidential election, the government has consistently increased repression, including against free trade unions. Trade union leaders and other

opposition leaders have been given long prison sentences. In the summer of 2022, the regime-controlled Supreme Court decided to dissolve the trade union central organisation BKDP and a large number of other independent trade union organisations. In December 2022, BKDP President Aliaksandr Yarashuk was sentenced to four years in prison for “disrupting public order”.

In Russia, there are no longer any independent trade unions. After LO and several other countries’ trade union central organisations called for the Russian Trade Union Confederation, FNPR, to be excluded from the ITUC because of its support for the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the FNPR left the ITUC.

According to the Ukrainian trade union movement, since the beginning of the war about ten million people have been forced to flee the country, many of them trade union members. Therefore, in addition to the usual trade union work, Ukraine’s trade unions are heavily engaged in humanitarian work. This is done, among other things, with the support of LO and its affiliated unions through the Palme Centre.² At the same time, Ukraine’s trade unions are looking ahead and want to play a role in

post-war reconstruction. In recent years, however, the Ukrainian government and parliament have tabled legislative proposals that could make trade union work more difficult, which has led the European Trade Union Confederation to express its concern.³

Weak Swedish Presidency of the European Union

The Swedish Presidency of the European Union, which ended on the last day of June, left no deep traces from a trade union perspective. It has been difficult to get the Government to pursue issues concerning protection of the collective bargaining model. However, Sweden, as the only EU country, has intervened on Denmark’s side to declare the EU minimum wage directive invalid. No decision is likely until the summer of 2024.

During the Swedish Presidency, there was also an agreement on conditions governing platform work, i.e. work and services organised through online platforms. In addition, Sweden sought to resume negotiations on how to better coordinate Member States’ social security systems. This involves, for example, being able to bring family benefits or unemployment benefits across borders. The negotiations did not reach any results but will continue under the Spanish Presidency.

The EU’s migration deal and the Fit for 55 climate package are among the most highlighted during the half-year. However, none of these agreements are particularly associated with the Swedish Presidency. Both have been negotiated and prepared for a long time.

At the meeting in June of EPSCO, the EU Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council, the Council Recommendation on social dialogue was adopted, which the LO worked actively to influence.

¹ <https://www.etui.org/about-etui/news/inequality-and-working-conditions-the-exhaustion-of-labour>

² Read more in LO’s report “Trade Union solidarity with Ukraine: https://www.lo.se/english/news/trade_union_solidarity_with_ukraine

³ <https://etuc.org/en/document/trade-union-statement-eu-ukraine-summit-3-february>



The Russian war of aggression has disastrous consequences.

Among other things, LO has stressed that it is the social partners that are the main players in social dialogue and that the possibility of also departing from EU rules through collective agreements should be clarified.

Spain takes over

The EU Council of Ministers has agreed on a general approach on proposals for the Single Market Emergency Instrument. Together with many other trade unions, LO has demanded that a strike should never be regarded as an unlawful obstacle to free movement.

Important issues where discussions have started in the European Parliament are limit values for lead and diisocyanates, a resolution on job creation and a resolution on promoting and adapting vocational training. The issues that will be addressed in the European Parliament in the autumn include working conditions for firefighters and a roadmap towards a social Europe.

In July, Spain took over the Presidency

of the European Union. In its priorities, the country's Social Democratic government highlighted the social perspective. Whether these priorities become a reality remains to be seen in the light of the unclear parliamentary situation following the Spanish election in July. At the end of the year, the Presidency will be taken over by Belgium and subsequently, on 1 July 2024, by Hungary. That a state which, according to the European Parliament, cannot be classified as democratic should lead the EU's work immediately after the elections to the European Parliament is already raising some concerns.

The European Trade Union Confederation's 50th anniversary

At the end of May, the European Trade Union Confederation held its congress in Berlin. More than 90 national trade union organisations are now members of ETUC, which celebrated its 50th anniversary at the Congress. Esther Lynch, Ireland, was re-

lected as General Secretary. Claes-Mikael Ståhl from LO was elected as one of two Deputy General Secretaries. Wolfgang Katzian from Austria was elected as President.

The Congress agreed, among other things, on continued cooperation for better working conditions and strengthened democracy. Among the issues that, according to the Congress resolutions, will be given the highest priority in the coming mandate period are the promotion of collective bargaining and social dialogue.

The Congress also debated the issue of supranational decisions in the EU. Some wanted to see more supranational decisions, for example on European minimum wages, while others want instead to emphasise national decision-making authority and national collective agreements. LO, TCO (Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees) and Saco (Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations) belong to the latter group, together with Denmark and others, but were in a clear minority. ●

Latin America

According to the World Inequality Report, Latin America is the most unequal region in the world. Since the pandemic, inequality has increased even more. The region was long dominated by military dictatorships. However, after a wave of democratisation in the 1980s, the vast majority of Latin Americans, 83 per cent, now live in democracies. The remaining non-democratic states include Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

Brazil's 2022 presidential election led to the replacement of right-wing nationalist President Bolsonaro by the Workers' Party's Lula da Silva, which has raised hopes of a policy of greater equality and strengthened trade union rights. However, Lula lacks a parliamentary majority. In Bolivia, hope of strengthening democracy has increased after the 2020 presidential election and the broad acceptance of left-wing candidate Luis Arce's election victory.

In Ecuador, attacks on free trade unions continue. In 2022, the government brutally cracked down on mass protests for democ-

racy and collective rights. During a national strike announced in May 2022, five people were killed by the police and several strikers were arrested.

In Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, Peru and Guatemala, trade unionists were also exposed to violence, threats and persecution last year. Hugo Eduardo Gamero Gonzalez was shot dead in Puerto Barrios, Izabal, Guatemala. He was the secretary of the trade union of the national port company.

However, the fact that the Social Democrat Bernardo Arévalo won Guatemala's presidential election on 20 August has

raised hopes of change among trade unionists.

In Venezuela, trade union leader Gabriel Blanco, along with five other trade union representatives, was sentenced in August to sixteen years in prison. LO, together with Olof Palmes International Center, has protested against the verdict.⁴

Hope in Haiti

Haiti is the poorest country in Latin America. The economy is dominated by a few wealthy families. Unemployment is sky high. Armed criminal gangs are estimated to control around 60 per cent of the capital Port-au-Prince. A key recruitment basis for gangs is poverty and the absence of prospects for young people. The trade union movement is small but nevertheless one of the few remaining forces that are considered to be able to mobilise people. Now Haiti's trade unions are working with other parts of civil society in a transition project to hold democratic elections and rebuild Haiti with social justice at its core. ●

4 https://www.lo.se/english/letter_of_protest_to_ambassador_of_venezuela

Middle East and North Africa

The MENA region, the Middle East and North Africa, is the world's least peaceful and most authoritarian region. According to the ITUC Global Rights Index, the region is also the world's worst region for those engaged in trade unionism.

98 per cent of the population in MENA live in states that the V-dem Democracy Report classifies as non-democratic. The remaining two percent live in Israel, whose democratic stability is questionable, both through the long-standing occupation of Palestine and the attacks launched by Israel's new right-wing government against the Israeli rule of law.

Continued occupation of Palestine

In Palestine, illegal settlements in the West Bank continue to grow and the Israeli blockade keeps Gaza on the brink of social collapse. According to the ILO, over two million,

almost 40 per cent, of Palestinians are in need of humanitarian aid. The Palestinian economy and the labour market are becoming increasingly dependent on Israel. A total of 192,700 Palestinian workers work in Israel and the settlements, a third more than a year earlier. A further 40,000 or so people work in Israel without papers, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

There have been no elections in Palestine since 2007. The West Bank is governed by Fatah, a sister organisation of the Swedish Social Democrats. Gaza is a dictatorship under Islamist Hamas. In the West Bank, corruption is widespread and civil society, including trade unions, has been given less space. For several years, however, there has been a discussion between the authorities, employers and trade unions about strengthening labour law.

Israel's occupation also complicates trade union work. Trade unionists from Gaza and the West Bank cannot meet because of Israel's blockade. The high unemployment resulting from the occupation makes organisation difficult. The Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, PGFTU, is also not

allowed to organise workers in occupied East Jerusalem, in the settlements or in Israel.⁵

The policy of the new Israeli right-wing government also targets the Israeli trade union movement, including through legislative proposals restricting the right to strike. The attacks on the judicial system also pose a threat to the trade union movement, as courts have several times found in favour of trade union rights. The Israeli central trade union organisation Histadrut, together with other civil society organisations, has conducted extensive protests against the policies of the right-wing government.

The dramatic developments in October 2023, such as the Hamas terrorist attack and the war in Gaza, have of course further exacerbated the situation.⁶

Democratic spring became autumn

In 2011, the "Democratic Spring" began. Dictatorships fell in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen. The hope for democratic development grew. However, in the

5 Read more in LO's report "Trade Union solidarity with Palestine: https://www.lo.se/english/news/trade_union_solidarity_with_palestine

6 https://www.lo.se/english/news/lo_condemns_hamas_terror_against_israeli_civilians

North America

The United States and Canada are among the richest countries in the world. However, there are large differences within these countries. Particularly in the United States, class divisions have increased in recent decades.

Canada has a relatively strong labour movement, at least compared to the United States. In May the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) held its Convention in Montreal. Among other things, the Convention adopted an action plan calling for stronger workers' rights, a better work environment and improved public healthcare. The Social Democratic Party NDP is close to the CLC and has an organised cooperation with the liberal government.

In the United States, political polarisation has continued and intensified ahead of next year's presidential election. As in many other countries, the populist right has made

inroads into the working class. In the 2016 presidential election, Trump received a majority of the white workers' voters. Four years later, Biden received 56 per cent of the votes from trade union households.

Increased support for trade unions in the USA

The number of trade union members in the USA increased by 273,000 last year, but trade union density declined slightly, after a slight increase in 2020. It now stands at 10.3 per cent. One reason is that trade union organisation has not been able to keep up with the rapid increase in the number of employees.

years that followed, the trend reversed. Old authoritarian regimes were replaced by new ones. Wars and conflicts flared.

One of the countries that was democratised in 2011 was Tunisia. In 2015, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, which included the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), along with the employers. They were awarded the prize for their work to defend and strengthen democracy. Since then, Tunisia's democratic process has failed. Last year, several of the leading figures in the UGTT were arrested along with other opposition leaders for "insurrection against the state". In January this year, the secretary-general of the Tunisian transport union Anis Kaabi was arrested in connection with a strike. In February 2023, the General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation Esther Lynch was forced out of the country for speaking at a demonstration organised by the UGTT, including as a protest against the imprisonment of Anis Kaabi.

In the Gulf states, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, the regimes maintained their power during the Arab Spring. Political repression

and violations of trade union rights continue. In recent years, the inhumane working conditions of countries' many migrant workers have received great attention, not least in the run-up to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Already ten years ago, the Swedish building sector trade unions, the Building Workers' Union, the Painters' Union and the Electricians' Union, called on Qatar to discontinue the Kafala system, in practice a system of slave labour. Together with the Building and Woodworkers' International (BWI), the building sector trade unions succeeded in bringing about small but significant changes. However, the Gulf states still lack basic trade union rights.

Continued struggle in Iran

In Algeria, the government is preparing a law that severely restricts trade union rights. Egypt still lacks fundamental freedoms and rights at workplaces. Strikes are suppressed, strikers dismissed and trade unionists imprisoned. In conflict zones such as Libya, Syria and Yemen all legislation protecting the rights and freedoms of employees has broken down;

In Iran, free trade unions have long been an important part of resistance to Islamist

At the same time, the American public's attitude towards trade unions has become more positive than before. Support is now the highest since 1965. Under US law, employees must vote on whether a trade union may be formed in the workplace. Many employers put heavy pressure on their employees before such polls, often with the help of private firms specialising in anti-union campaigns, called union busting. Despite this, almost 50 per cent more such polls were organised in 2022. In 72 per cent of them, employees voted in favour of union organisation, compared with 61 per cent the year before.

The trade union movement in the USA has also received clearer political support since Joe Biden became president. The Democrats in Congress have also strengthened legislation in a trade union-friendly direction. The USA's central trade union organisation AFL-CIO has expressed clear support for Joe Biden ahead of the presidential election next year. ●



PHOTO: BENJAMIN RASCOE

Israel's occupation complicates trade union work.

repression. Last year alone, 100,000 workers went on strike, including in the important oil and petrochemical industries. However, the regime has made it more difficult to be involved with trade unions outside the yellow, "Islamic" workers' organisations that the regime has formed. The free trade unions face severe repression and several trade union elected representatives are in prison.⁷ ●

⁷ Read more in LO's report Woman, life, freedom – and trade unions: [https://www.lo.se/home/lo/res.nsf/vRes/lo_in_english_1366027842542_woman_life_freedom_and_trade_unions.pdf/\\$File/Woman_life_freedom_and_trade_unions.pdf](https://www.lo.se/home/lo/res.nsf/vRes/lo_in_english_1366027842542_woman_life_freedom_and_trade_unions.pdf/$File/Woman_life_freedom_and_trade_unions.pdf)

Asia and the Pacific region

Asia is the fastest growing economic region in the world. China makes up almost half of the continent's economy. At the same time, Asia is the second poorest continent after Africa. The contrasts are very great between different countries. The Pacific area is dominated by developed democracies such as Australia and New Zealand, both with a relatively strong independent trade union movement.

In the Asia-Pacific area as a whole, according to V-Dem, democracy has regressed, for example in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand. Central Asia is dominated by authoritarian regimes such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. More than a fifth of the population is in more democratically controlled countries such as Georgia and Armenia.

Four countries have been democra-

ty has regressed, for example since 2012: Fiji, Malaysia, Nepal and Sri Lanka. In the Maldives, democracy returned after the free parliamentary elections in 2019. Japan has a long-standing democracy with a well-developed trade union movement. Akiko Gono from the Trade Union Confederation RENGO, was elected President of ITUC in November 2022.

Regime-controlled union in China

In China, the only trade union organisation allowed is the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), which is strongly allied with the ruling Communist Party.

All attempts to form free trade unions are crushed. However, dissatisfaction with poor working conditions has led to a large number of unauthorised strikes and other workers' protests over the years. Since the ACFTU is not considered an independent trade union organisation, membership of ITUC is also not relevant. However, the international trade union movement has divided views on how to relate to the ACFTU. The background is that more and more employees in other countries are affected by developments in China through increased investments and business start-ups.

Last spring, ITUC endorsed the new report by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that highlighted

Africa

Despite its vast natural resources, Africa is still the world's poorest continent. During the pandemic, some 30 million Africans were forced into extreme poverty and, according to the ILO, although growth has started to increase again, it will take a long time to get back to the situation before 2020.

Africa currently has one billion inhabitants, most of whom are young. Less than 10 per cent of the working age population is estimated to be in full-time employment. The majority of male and female workers are illiterate and underpaid;

Only 21 per cent of Africa's population live in democracies, such as South Africa, Kenya and Ghana. However, according to V-Dem, several countries have made democratic progress over the last ten years: Madagascar, Malawi, the Seychelles, Sierra Leone and Gambia.

Zimbabwe's authorities continue to persecute and arrest trade unionists.

In January of this year, the Zimbabwean government presented a legislative propos-

al that severely restricts freedom of assembly and freedom of organisation, including at work.

Increased repression in Eswatini

In Eswatini, formerly Swaziland, trade union meetings and protests were banned in 2021. In December 2022, Sticks Nkambule, Secretary General of the Transport, Communication and Allied Workers Union, was forced into exile after his home village was attacked and his family harassed. A few weeks later, Mbongwa Dlamini, president of the Swaziland National Association of Teachers, was also forced to flee the country after his union called for a strike.

Since 2020, there have been coups in the Sahel region, the area of semi-arid land stretching across Africa just below the Sahara Desert. In 2020, Mali's government fell. In 2021, the same happened in Sudan, Chad and Guinea. Last year, a coup d'état took place in Burkina Faso. In Niger, the elected president was deposed in July this year by a military coup. The fact that Niger exports uranium, an important resource for nuclear reactors, makes the country's development geopolitically particularly important. However, further developments in Niger still remain unclear.

Democratic success in Kenya

The 2022 presidential election in Kenya is seen as a democratic success. William

Ruto was elected President, whose election promises were to fight unemployment and tackle climate change.

Zambia, according to V-Dem, is an example of how authoritarian development can be stopped. Former President Edgar Lungu imposed a series of restrictions on human rights and freedoms. Eventually, a united opposition could organise a pro-democratic mobilisation that resulted in a return to democratic rule.

Sierra Leone is one of the countries where trade unionists were murdered last year. However, according to the Global Rights Index, there has been some progress in legislation on trade union rights. Also in Sierra Leone, the government has put forward a proposal to strengthen women's rights at work.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), has been called "the Saudi Arabia of the electric vehicle age" because of the world's largest cobalt resources, crucial for the lithium-ion batteries that power electric vehicles. However, it is impossible to guarantee that the cobalt is being purchased with respect for human and trade union rights or that child labour does not occur. LO and the rest of the international trade union movement are trying to enable trade unions in the Congo to follow up and control the situation where they have members. However, such controls are subject to high risks as strong financial interests are challenged. ●

China's non-compliance with its obligations under international law. The report also addressed the systematic discrimination and use of forced labour targeting Muslim and other ethnic minorities in China.

In 1997, China took over power in the former British colony of Hong Kong. Since then, the democratic space has been gradually restricted. Developments culminated in the adoption of new security laws in 2020. The leaders of Hong Kong's free trade union movement, HKCTU, have now been imprisoned or forced into exile. Some are trying to continue the trade union work in exile. Among other things, they have built up the HKLabour Rights Monitor, based in the UK. One group that remains in Hong Kong is the editorial board of the China Labour Bulletin, which reports on strikes and workers' protests in China. In Hong Kong there is also a yellow trade union controlled by Beijing, the HKFTU.

Free Trade Unions in Taiwan

Taiwan is now a democracy with independent trade union organisations. Trade unions in Taiwan have a high level of membership, functioning internal democracy and conduct collective bargaining with their counterparts.

In India, the right-wing, Hindu-nationalist ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has continued to suppress rights and freedoms. The Indian government's new labour laws restrict employees' right to go on strike, to form trade unions and to negotiate collectively.

Thailand has been authoritarian since the military took power in 2014. The situation for trade union and other human rights has deteriorated considerably since the military coup. In the latest election the centre-left party Move Forward became the largest party. However, they have not been allowed to sit in the government because parliament is still dominated by forces governed by the military.

In South Korea, trade unions have long been opposed but are nevertheless a force to be reckoned with. One example is when, following demands from employers, the South Korean government recently proposed to increase the allowed weekly working time from 52 to 69 hours. The government was forced to back down, after opposition from the trade union movement, among others.

Workers' rights in Bangladesh continue to be severely limited. In the country's eight



Myanmar's trade unions participate in the struggle for democracy.

export processing zones, trade unions are banned. Even in the clothing sector, which is the country's largest industry, attempts at trade union organisation are hindered by using brutal methods. In the Philippines, trade unionists were also subjected to violent attacks, abductions and arbitrary arrests last year.

Turkey imprisons trade union leaders

Turkey is one of the world's worst countries for trade union rights. On 26 February this year the Deputy General Secretary of the Turkish Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions (DISK), Fahrettin Engin Erdoğan, was imprisoned along with over a hundred

other protesters at a demonstration in Istanbul.

Prior to the 2021 military coup, Myanmar had a vital trade union movement in which the Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM) played a central role. However, the military junta banned independent trade unions and imprisoned several of their leaders. After the coup, a national movement for civil disobedience was launched, including strikes. The military junta responded with increased violence. The international trade union movement, including LO, has long supported the free trade unions in Myanmar and the support continues. ●

What does LO want?

The accelerating pace of change in the world increases the need for action.

LO wants to:

- › Work to ensure that more states and companies respect international regulations on workers' trade union rights. More countries must ratify the ILO core conventions on human rights at work.
- › Influence Swedish companies to always respect trade union rights in their international operations.
- › Strengthen the international trade union movement and contribute to increasing the number of members of the world's trade unions.
- › Work to ensure that Sweden contributes to the UN's 2030 Agenda for Social, Economic and Environmentally Sustainable Development.
- › Work towards a sustainable and fair climate transition where the world's countries jointly share the costs.
- › Work towards trade on equal terms. Good social conditions must be required when drawing up trade agreements.
- › Work towards an equal distribution of power and profits that arise in the wake of globalisation.
- › Work to restore Sweden's previous target of 1 per cent of GNI to be used for development assistance.
- › Work to ensure that EU legislation respects the Swedish labour market model with collective bargaining solutions.
- › Promote fair competition in the EU's internal market and combat working life crime and social dumping.

Our international tools

A large part of LO's international work is conducted within the framework of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). ITUC has 333 member organisations that together represent 208 million wage earners worldwide. ITUC's regional organisations are ITUC-AP for Asia and the Pacific, ITUC-AF for Africa and TUCA for America. ITUC also has close relations with the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC), and the UN International Labour Organization (ILO). This autumn, ITUC will elect a new General Secretary. LO has nominated Luc Triangle, Belgium, for the post.

The European trade union organisations also cooperate in the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). ETUC has 93 member organisations in 41 countries. Within ETUC there are ten European trade union federations, of which several LO affiliated unions are members.

Another important part of the international solidarity of LO and its affiliated unions is trade union development assistance, our development cooperation with sister organisations all over the world. Please read more about this in our report *Trade union development assistance – real solidarity*.¹

¹ https://www.lo.se/english/documents/trade_union_development_assistance_solidarity_in_action

The latest from LO affiliated unions

LO's fourteen affiliated unions carry out extensive international work. Here you can read more about current international activities in the national unions.

f fastighets



H
R
F



Livs

LIVSMEDELS ARBETAREFÖRBUNDET



Pappers



BYGGNADS



FACKET FÖR SKOGS-, TRÄ-
OCH GRAFISK BRANSCH



IFMETALL



Musikerförbundet



seko



Elektrikerna



Handels



Kommunal.



MÅLARNA



FACT FEDERATIONS

LO's affiliates are also part of their respective global union federations, Global Union Federations, GUF:

- > **Building and Woodworkers International, BWI**
Members from LO: Building Workers' Union, Electricians' Union, Paperworkers' Union, Seko (Union for Service and Communication Employees), Painters' Union and GS (Swedish Union of Forestry, Wood and Graphical Workers).
- > **International Arts and Entertainment Alliance (IAEA)**
Member from LO: Musicians' Union.
- > **IndustriALL**
Members from LO: IF Metall, Electricians' and Paperworkers' Unions.
- > **International Transport Workers Federation, ITF**
Members from LO: Kommunal (Municipal Workers' Union), Seko and Transport Workers' Union.
- > **International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations, IUF**
Members from LO: Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union, Kommunal (Municipal Workers' Union) and the Food Workers' Union.
- > **Public Services International, PSI**
Members from LO: Kommunal (Municipal Workers' Union), Seko and Transport Workers' Union.
- > **UNI Global Union (UNI)**
Members from LO: Building Maintenance Workers' Union, GS, Commercial Employees' Union, Seko and Transport Workers' Union.

Global
Union
Outlook

**Around
the world**

This magazine can be ordered free of charge (shipping and handling fee added) from LO-distribution, SE-811 88 Sandviken, Sweden
E-mail: lo@strd.se <http://www.lo.se/distribution>

Global Union Outlook are published by the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO).
Project management and editorial: International Department. Editor: Mats Erikson.
Graphic design: LO. Production and printing: Bantorget Grafiska AB, Stockholm 2023.

The Swedish Trade Union Confederation
Telephone: 08-796 25 00. Postal address: LO, SE-105 53 Stockholm.
Visiting address: Barnhusgatan 18, Stockholm. E-mail: info@lo.se www.lo.se