

6TH UNI GLOBAL UNION  
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**RISING  
TOGETHER**

PHILADELPHIA



# RISING TOGETHER FOR PEACE, DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

**#UNIRisingTogether**



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## INTRODUCTION

The [Doomsday clock](#) is a representation of the likelihood of human made global catastrophe. In January 2023, it was moved to just ninety seconds to midnight, the closest to midnight the clock has been since it was established in 1947. The panel of international scientists behind this symbol of potential catastrophe has warned that humanity's continued existence is at greater risk than ever before.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought war once again to Europe and significantly raised nuclear tensions around the world. Yet it is just one conflict out of many, and millions of people, on every continent, are living in fear. Over [110 armed conflicts](#) are currently estimated to be ongoing. Some of these conflicts make the headlines, others do not. Some of them started recently, while others have lasted for more than 50 years, yet all have a devastating impact on workers and their communities.

Despite the progress made in many areas, respect for human rights remains fragile and authoritarian governments and leaders are seeking to undermine what should be the fundamental rights of all. Human Rights Watch's [2023 World Report](#) shines a light on human rights abuses around the world, but also gives hope by highlighting progress underway.

At UNI's 5th World Congress, we were faced with Trump in the White House, Lula in prison in Brazil and Colombia still gripped by the effects of 40 years of civil war and right-wing governments. At UNI's 6th World Congress, the Biden Presidency is the most pro-worker in generations, those that stormed the Capitol seeking to overturn the election result are being held to account, Lula is once again President of Brazil giving hope to millions after the darkness of the Bolsonaro regime, and Colombia has its first ever left-wing government under President Petro.

It should not be overlooked that trade unions played key roles in all three of these success stories. The trade union movement is a driving force for peace and respect of human rights, and it reinforces the principle that labour and trade union rights are fundamental to a wider respect for human rights in society. They are foundational rights.

The struggle for peace, democracy and human rights is not an isolated one but is a central principle in many of the priority areas of work of UNI and its affiliates. The trade union demand for climate justice is not just important for workers but increasingly the impact of climate change is a driving factor in conflict and forced migration. As trade unions we have led the fight for the fundamental human rights of equality in all its forms, and that fight continues in the struggle for racial justice, respect for LGBTQI+ rights and real gender equality. And without social justice, decent work, and a reimagined economy that delivers for all, the inherent instability faced by millions will continue to threaten peace democracy and human rights.

We work with and support the peace movement, human rights defenders, equality campaigners and those supporting refugees, migrant workers, people seeking asylum and the most vulnerable. UNI and its affiliates are part of a global movement determined to ensure that in every part of the globe, workers and their communities enjoy the benefits of peace, democracy and human rights.



## DEMOCRACY UNDER ATTACK

The 2022 [Global State of Democracy Report](#) showed that democracy is under threat in many parts of the world. The total number of democracies is stagnating, and half of the existing democracies are in retreat. Among non-democracies 50 per cent are becoming significantly more authoritarian and over the past six years the number of countries moving towards authoritarianism is more than double the number moving towards democracy. According to the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) only “8% of the world’s population reside in a “full democracy”, compared with 8.9% in 2015, before the US was demoted from a ‘full democracy’ to a ‘flawed democracy’ in 2016. More than one-third of the world’s population live under authoritarian rule (36.9%), with a large share of them being in China and Russia.”

Countries which we have previously celebrated for their moves towards democracy have taken significant steps backward. Following the coup of 2021, the people of Myanmar are once again suffering under the rule of the military junta, and in Tunisia the President has consolidated power to an unprecedented extent, arrested leading trade unionists and banned the solidarity visits of international trade unions.

The threats to democracy and the reasons for the regression in many of these global indices are myriad. Yet it is undoubtedly the case that the continuing rise in disinformation through social media, as well as the spread of conspiracy theories, is having an impact in many parts of the world. In almost identical scenarios, we saw in the space of just two years attempts to overthrow the democratic will of the people in the [USA](#) and [Brazil](#).

In both cases extreme right-wing supporters of Trump and Bolsonaro, fueled by extremist commentators, used violence to try to subvert democracy. Both are examples of the global trend of election denial and the undermining of democratic institutions, such as a free and impartial media, that we have seen too often in recent years.

While the defeats of Trump and Bolsonaro were celebrated, we cannot become complacent about the ongoing threat of the far right and those with fascist sympathies. The threat of far right and fascist organizations has been on the rise, with groups using violence and hate speech to promote their extremist agendas. UNI Global Union signed the [Manifesto of the International Network of Antifascist Trade Unions](#). The manifesto commits to promoting social justice, defending human rights and strengthening democracy through collective action, and was initiated by the CGIL (Italy) following the fascist attacks on its headquarters in Rome.

Authoritarian leaders around the world have sought to consolidate power at the expense of the rights and freedoms of ordinary people. Often, we see attacks on trade union rights and trade unions themselves as part of a wider attack on democracy. In [South Korea](#), intelligence officers raided the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and the Korean Health and Medical Workers’ Union’s (KHMU) offices, a shameful attack on the country’s labour movement and an affront to basic democratic principles. In [Zimbabwe](#), the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, ZCTU, was branded a terrorist organization. Scores of trade unionists, activists and opposition members were arrested, abducted and mistreated by security forces as the government attempted to crush protests against its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, the dire state of the economy and widespread corruption. The [Hong Kong](#) Confederation of Trade Unions was forced to disband after the HKCTU and its member organizations faced unprecedented attacks, intimidation and allegations of offences under a repressive national security law enacted in July 2020, part of a wider dismantling of civil society since the law came into force.

The 2022 edition of the [ITUC Global Rights Index](#) showed that key measures of abuse of workers’ rights have reached record highs. Eswatini and Guatemala were new entries in the ten worst countries for workers. There was brutal repression of pro-democracy protests and a systematic ban on demonstrations and strikes in Eswatini and endemic anti-union violence, together with impunity for the perpetrators of violence, set back progress in Guatemala.



Unions are strongholds of democracy. When working people come together to have a collective say over the decisions that shape their working lives, that is democracy at work. Our fundamental rights of freedom of association and freedom of speech are also the building blocks of democracy. The struggle for democracy continues and UNI and its affiliates remain part of that struggle.

## DISARMAMENT

Global instability leads many to fear we could be entering a new arms race. Russia and China have seen significant increases to military budgets in recent years and total military expenditure exceeded 2 trillion US dollars for the first time in 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic and at a time of huge global inequality. NATO members continue to strive to spend 2 per cent of GDP on military expenditure, while almost all fail to meet the UN agreed target of 0.7 per cent of GDP to development assistance.

Oxfam estimates that it would cost just US\$37billion per year to deal with extreme and chronic hunger, just 1.85 per cent of total military expenditure in 2021, and the UN Secretary General has calculated that just over half of current military expenditure would be enough to provide 6.6 billion people with essential healthcare, and a basic level of income security to 726.5 million children aged 0-5, 133.6 million new mothers, 192.2 million persons with severe disabilities and 497 million older persons.

There is an urgent need for a rebalancing of our priorities, to shift spending from ever more effective ways to destroy the planet, to the social development that is urgently needed by billions of people. This means a diversification and disinvestment from defence spending through a transition that will protect the skills, employment and pay levels of the millions of trade union members employed in defence industries.

Forty years after the original Olaf Palme Commission developed the concept of Common Security, the global trade union movement participated in a new initiative to develop the concepts of Common Security 2022 for our shared future. At successive congresses UNI Global Union and its affiliates have made strong calls for nuclear disarmament and limitations on conventional weapons, and this report shows how vital this is. However, we have seen the effective breakdown of the New START nuclear arms treaty and continued efforts by countries to acquire or expand their nuclear arsenals. A nuclear war can never be won and there is an urgent need to reinstate arms control treaties and make significant progress on nuclear arms reductions, with the aim for the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction.

Just as artificial intelligence is fundamentally changing many other areas of life, not least in the workplace, the rise of autonomous weapons systems is a new and growing danger. There is increasing use of the term “digital dehumanization” to describe way in which humans are reduced to data, which is then used to make decisions and/or take actions that negatively affect their lives, an issue UNI is already leading on in the world of work. Human Rights Watch is the coordinator of the global campaign “Stop Killer Robots”, and is working for a new international treaty to regulate these technologies and ensure that life and death decisions are not delegated to machines. *“Without someone – some human being – to hold accountable for an atrocity, it is pretty much impossible to achieve any justice. A massacre of civilians in a conflict zone would be presented as a design problem rather than a war crime.”*



## CONCLUSION

Millions of people around the world continue to live in situations of war and conflict. Global instability, rapidly increasing military spending and attacks on free speech are pushing us towards a doomsday scenario. Fundamental human rights are under attack and democracy is weakening. Yet progress continues to be made with the trade union movement central to the positive changes we have seen in countries such as Brazil and Colombia.

The fight for peace, democracy and human rights is at the heart of the struggle for economic justice, racial justice, and gender equality. Trade union action is fundamental as we strive for a peaceful shared future with common security for all, and UNI Global Union and our affiliates will continue to play a leading role in this fight for a better future.



## ESWATINI

Eswatini continues to suffer under the last absolute monarchy in Africa. Pro-democracy protests in the Southern African country have been ongoing since May 2021, with trade unions and other civil society groups calling for democratic elections. Throughout these protests, it is estimated that 72 protestors have been killed by police and government forces. Hundreds have been injured, while some remain missing. Some activists have gone into hiding and others have fled into exile.

Eswatini's trade unions continue to experience violent repression at the hands of the authorities with restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, violent attacks on workers and harassment and arrest a daily reality. On 21 January 2023, [Thulani Maseko](#), a human and trade union rights lawyer and political activist, was murdered in a killing condemned by the global trade union movement.

UNI Global Union and its affiliates joined the [Global Day of Action in March 2023](#) to demand an end to the culture of impunity and a stop to human and trade union rights violations. Despite the violence of the authorities, the trade unions of Eswatini continue to lead the struggle for democracy.

## MYANMAR

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military overthrew the country's newly elected government, interrupting Myanmar's journey towards democracy after decades of military rule.

The coup was widely resisted by the people of Myanmar, who formed a peaceful Civil Disobedience Movement. The response from the junta was brutal, with mass arrests and killings. The brutal suppression of non-violent protest led to the creation of armed groups, and Myanmar is now in a state of civil war.

The regime has banned most unions in Myanmar. Many union activists are in detention, others have been killed or are in hiding. It is impossible to exercise freedom of association. The [Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar](#) (CTUM) are leading

figures in the democracy movement and play an important role in the National Unity Government (NUG) that has been created in opposition to the Junta and to represent the democratic interests of Myanmar's population.

UNI has joined the call for the NUG be recognized by the UN, ILO and other international institutions as the legitimate voice of the people of Myanmar, and is supporting efforts to economically isolate the regime. This has included calling on [banks to divest](#) from shareholdings in companies linked to the military junta and for garment and textile brands to pull manufacturing operations from Myanmar.

## PHILIPPINES

The [ITUC Global Rights Index](#) of 2022 listed the Philippines as one of the ten worst countries in the world for workers' rights. Workers and their representatives in the Philippines remain particularly vulnerable to violent attacks, intimidation and arbitrary arrests. Trade unionists have been maliciously 'red tagged' (linked to communist and or terrorist organizations) by the Philippine authorities, and many remain under immediate threat of the police and the army, which conduct targeted raids against them.

Over 50 trade unionists have been killed since 2016, with the latest shocking death being that of [Alex Dolorosa](#), an organizer for UNI affiliate BIEN in the Philippines. A special ILO tripartite mission in early 2023 called for the establishment of a presidential commission to investigate extra-judicial killings of workers and ensure freedom of association.

Despite the dangers, trade unions in the Philippines continue to work to organize workers and build unity within the trade union movement. This includes releasing a 15 point [labour agenda](#) in December 2022 which outlines the most important issues for workers in the Philippines, including addressing the precariousness of work and promoting the full recognition of freedom of association and a national minimum wage towards a living wage.



## UKRAINE

In 2014 Russia annexed Crimea and since that point there has been ongoing conflict between Russian-supported separatists and Ukrainian government forces in the Donbas, despite the negotiation of the Minsk agreements in 2014/15 which called for a ceasefire.

In February 2022 Russia launched a full-scale illegal invasion of Ukraine. Since then, thousands of civilians have died, been injured and forced to flee for their safety, and the conflict has heightened global tensions to levels not seen for many years.

The global trade union movement responded by [condemning](#) the invasion, demanding the immediate withdrawal of Russian forces and calling for peace. A number of unions have actively supported the engagement of their Governments in support of Ukraine and many UNI affiliates came together to provide solidarity to Ukraine's trade unions and workers. This has included delivering humanitarian assistance and providing advice and support to refugees.

UNI launched the [Unions Help Refugees](#) (UHR) programme in Poland to support Ukrainian workers to fight for their rights in the Polish labour market. Set up in March 2022 by UNI's COZZ Organising Centre in Warsaw, the team has been able to help workers win compensation for injuries and unpaid wages, fight unfair dismissals, secure written contracts as well as help refugees find a place to live, legalize their stay and receive the benefits they are entitled to.

As well as putting refugees in touch with Polish trade unions, UHR has conducted online and in-person organizing training for trade unionists still working in Ukraine. This has included supporting leaders and activists in [Be Like Nina](#) – a grass-roots mobilization of healthcare workers which began before the war and has since grown into a labour movement and trade union.

## PALESTINE AND ISRAEL

UNI's Cape Town Congress in 2014 passed the resolution that still sets the framework for UNI's activities in Palestine and Israel. That resolution denounced the occupation of Palestine and called for action to end economic support for the illegal settlements as an impediment to peace and the two-state solution. UNI has continued to act to implement this resolution, including working with Norges bank on their divestment from certain companies due to their activities in the illegal settlements.

In February 2020 the UN published a database of companies operating illegally in Israeli settlements, a crucial step in facilitating action to hold companies to account that, directly and indirectly, have enabled, facilitated and profited from the construction and growth of the illegal settlements. UNI has joined calls from across the trade union movement and civil society for this database to be updated.

Tension and violence have increased across the region and 2022 was the deadliest in the West Bank area of the occupied Palestinian territory since the United Nations started systematically documenting fatalities in 2005. Near 150 Palestinians were killed in the occupied West Bank by Israeli forces, including 33 children. At least two Palestinians were killed by settlers. Ten Israelis, including five settlers, one settlement guard and four Israeli forces were killed by Palestinians in the occupied West Bank.

The election of the most right-wing government in Israel's history has contributed to rising tensions and fears over an increasingly hardline approach by the Israeli Government towards Palestinians. The policies of the government have also triggered widespread protest within Israel against moves that would significantly weaken the independence of the judiciary and attack workers' rights.





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