

6TH UNI GLOBAL UNION
WORLD CONGRESS 2023



UNI
global
union

**RISING
TOGETHER**

PHILADELPHIA

BUILDING UNION POWER FOR ALL

#UNIRisingTogether



BUILDING UNION POWER FOR ALL

INTRODUCTION

UNI's mission is to build power and lift standards for working people through strong unions and effective collective bargaining. We can only achieve democracy at the workplace and beyond when workers shift the balance of power. It is indisputable that collective bargaining not only raises standards for all workers, but it also plays an important role to advance social and economic justice and to reduce inequalities of all kinds.

Despite the decline in bargaining coverage in recent decades, there are signs which give hope that we may be at a turning point. Therefore, we must seize this opportunity to rise together and build union power for all.

THE TRENDS IN UNION POWER

Classic measures of union power reflect its steady decline within advanced economies beginning in the 1980s, alongside the shift towards neoliberal economics.

Density (or the percentage of workers in unions) has dropped by half between 1980 and 2020 within the [OECD countries](#), from 32 per cent to 16 per cent. [Density data](#) from the International Labour Organization (ILO), which covers 86 countries, shows great variation between countries, with overall density slightly higher for women. Total trade union membership has grown, but by only 3.6 per cent over the past ten years.

There has also been a decline in the percentage of workers covered by a collective bargaining agreement, in many ways a more important measure. The number of workers covered by collective bargaining has fallen within the OECD countries from 37 per cent in 2000 to 32 per cent in 2020, which is similar to the average coverage for the 98 countries studied by the ILO.

The more gradual decline of coverage is a testament to the staying power of the sectoral bargaining systems which remain in place in several OECD countries. In countries where worksite or enterprise bargaining is the norm, the [ILO's report](#) shows that the average coverage is about 15.8 per cent, in contrast with about 72 per cent coverage in a multiemployer setting.

The drop in union strength was not by accident and is not a reflection of waning interest in unions. It was triggered by a massive and coordinated attack on both unions and collective bargaining through measures designed to dilute sectoral bargaining, reduce employment regulation and promote active union busting under the guise of free speech. Global trade disadvantaged countries with regulations to protect workers, spurring a race to the bottom in the supply chain which continues today.

More recently, the erosion of the employment relationship in the context of the gig and short-term economy has been another assault on the right to organize, and the dispersion of workers through remote work adds yet another challenge. Finally, the right to strike is under threat in more countries than ever before.

Yet, even in the face of persistent attacks, there are signs of growing support for trade unions around the world. In the U.S., [public support for unions today is at its highest level since 1965](#), with 71 per cent of Americans expressing approval for labour unions. Polling also suggests [nearly half of workers would join a union today](#) if they were able to. These levels of support are especially high amongst young workers and members of Generation Z, whose support for unions extends across class and ideological divides and even exceeds support among older generations at their age.



This union moment is not limited to the United States. Although precise data is not available, workers have increasingly been in motion in every continent. In Europe, there have been record numbers of workers involved in strikes in both France and the UK. In France, Germany and the UK, unions report an uptick in the numbers of workers joining unions. In Nepal, union density has inched up by 10 per cent in recent years. In Chile and Colombia, interest in unions has grown following progressive movement activity and election victories. In Turkey, union density rose from 8 per cent in 2013 to 13 per cent in 2021 (mainly focused on contractors in the public sector). In some cases, workers have shown that they are fed up and ready to act collectively, with or without the support of an established union. For example, thousands of mostly non-union workers staged a total of 108 strikes in Turkey in 2022.

These are only a few examples. Density and bargaining coverage remain extremely low among workers in private services and the growth in informality takes these metrics in the wrong direction. Indeed, there are many mountains left to climb. But those who say that unions are dinosaurs not fit for the modern era are on the wrong side of history.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING MAKES A REAL DIFFERENCE

There are good reasons for support for unions among all working people.

It was clear during the pandemic that organized workers in trade unions were far better off than others. Whether it was safety on the job, access to protective equipment or economic support during a shutdown, unions were the voice to defend and advance workers' interests. Those without a union were left to fend for themselves.

Setting aside the pandemic, there is a clear and measurable benefit in union membership. In the U.S., workers represented by labour unions earn 10.2 per cent higher wages than their non-union peers, have better benefits and collectively raise wages industry-wide, according to a report

released by [U.S. House and Senate committees](#) in 2022. In 2021, members of trade unions in the United Kingdom earned on average 4.8 per cent more than the average worker and in Australia trade union members earn on average 26 per cent more than non-members.

In countries with sectoral or multi-employer bargaining, the biggest impact is evidenced in the level of inequality in society and the reduction in poverty, as the floor is lifted for all. In a 2019 report called [Negotiating our Way Up](#), the OECD concluded:

“The results show that co-ordinated collective bargaining systems are associated with higher employment, lower unemployment, a better integration of vulnerable groups and less wage inequality than fully decentralised systems.”

Bargaining also contributes to narrowing the gender pay gap. Over half of the collective agreements reviewed by an ILO study (Social Dialogue Report 2022: Collective bargaining for an inclusive, sustainable and resilient recovery) reflect a joint commitment by employers and trade unions to address gender inequality by ensuring equal pay for work of equal value, providing for parental and family leave, and addressing gender-based violence at work.

UNIONS AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING ARE A SOCIAL GOOD

A growth in support for unions and collective bargaining is not confined to the general public. Many economists and political institutions, even those traditionally hostile to trade unions, are also now acknowledging their important role.

In 2019, the [OECD Jobs strategy](#) stated: “.. (C)ollective bargaining and workers' voice are unique instruments to reach balanced and tailored solutions” By 2022, the [OECD](#) had moved further toward unions, stating “(s)trengthening collective bargaining is key to ensuring a fair distribution of the inflation shock between workers and employers. In the longer term, a stronger voice for workers and more robust competition between employers would ensure a re-balancing of bargaining power.”



The European Union recognized the importance of expanding collective bargaining coverage in the recent minimum wage directive, which calls for collective bargaining to be promoted and strengthened. Where less than 80 per cent of workers are covered by collective bargaining member states must establish an action plan to increase this percentage. UNI-Europa's campaign on public procurement, demanding that no public money should go to a company without collective bargaining, continues to gain support across the political spectrum.

UNI'S ROLE

The challenge for UNI and our affiliates must be to help convert this growing support for unions and collective bargaining into real membership growth. We can't miss this opportunity to facilitate and give oxygen to these efforts.

As always, membership growth comes in addition to the defence and expansion of existing collective bargaining, and this presents a real resource challenge for many unions. As density and coverage shrink, it becomes harder to make the gains that workers want and harder still to find the resources for new organizing. And yet it is imperative to do so if we do not want this opportunity to pass us by.

UNI has identified several key areas where we believe that our investment of resources and collective power can make a difference.

Since the Liverpool Congress in 2018, UNI has supported over 140 organizing campaigns involving more than 70 different employers in over 80 different countries. We support campaigns through resources, capacity development, mentoring and monitoring, and, sometimes, through pressure on the global parent company.

In the area of capacity development, UNI and its regions run trainings for organizers, lead organizers, activists and union officials, as well as organizing forums to share best practices. The Covid pandemic led us to develop online training courses, which allowed us to scale up our trainings. Over the last five years, over 7,500 workers and union leaders have participated in either online or in person UNI training courses. We now have four organizing centres, which enable UNI to carry out the work on a bigger scale and more efficiently. All are making a real difference to the countries in which they are located.

UNI is also a repository of best practices. UNI's Digital Organizing Forum, first launched in 2018, became a critical mechanism for building awareness across UNI in the best methods for using virtual tools in the entire organizing cycle - from initial contact, to identifying organic leaders, to committee forming and even to begin bargaining using only digital tools.

Our work with multinational companies and ability to bring affiliates together to develop global organizing strategies is crucial in supporting trade union growth. This includes our many global alliances, and our work to sign global agreements which embed protection for the right to organize. It also includes our campaign for organizing rights and fairness at Amazon - a company which poses a significant risk to many UNI sectors. Building power for workers in Amazon is a crucial campaign and is symbolic of the wider struggle to build power for workers across the economy.

We choose companies which are strategically important in our industries and sectors. As the digital transformation of our economies continues to gather pace, we will continue to focus on new and changing jobs, along with sectors of the economy which have been previously unorganized, such as the video games industry, ecommerce and long-term care.

All of these efforts are described in more detail in the Organizing Report.



CONCLUSION

Collective bargaining remains the most important tool for dealing with the many challenges facing working people across the planet. From the climate emergency and the need for a green transformation of our economies, to artificial intelligence, algorithmic management, and the digital transformation, all good outcomes involve a seat at the table for workers and solutions negotiated through bargaining and social dialogue.

UNI has an important role to play because together we can provide concrete support to trade union organizing through expertise, capacity and international solidarity in order to expand collective bargaining coverage. We must seize the moment of a growing recognition that unions are a social good and necessary for a healthy democracy and redouble our efforts to ensure that this moment is not a blip but a turning point.





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