

6TH UNI GLOBAL UNION
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RISING TOGETHER FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY

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RISING TOGETHER FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY

INTRODUCTION

We are still emerging from one of the deadliest pandemics in generations. As of [February 2023](#), more than 750 million confirmed cases of Covid-19 had been reported worldwide, with over 6.8 million tragic deaths.

The pandemic brought with it a heightened attention to Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) as millions of workers continued to work on the frontlines facing daily risks. Trade unions played a critical role to advocate for and win protections and UNI sectors were able to bring together unions from across the globe to help unions quickly learn the best approaches. This action on OSH was invaluable for demonstrating the importance and benefits of trade union membership and likewise created new possibilities to organize around OSH issues.

Traditionally seen as the sphere of manufacturing unions, today OSH remains crucial for workers in UNI Global Union's sectors. This work includes limiting ergonomic risks, campaigning against third-party violence, harassment and abuse at work, and developing a trade union response to the increased prevalence of psychosocial risks resulting from digital transformation.

LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The pandemic showed that workers are undoubtedly better protected in a trade union-organized workplace. Covid-19 impacted all UNI sectors, and the response was immediate. UNI brought affiliates together to [build collective knowledge and expertise](#) to better protect workers during the health emergency and developed resources to help affiliates in a time of rapid change, including Covid-19 guidelines for [post & logistics workers](#), protocols for [professional athletes](#) and safety precautions for [commerce workers](#).

During this time of crisis, the world also recognized the vital contributions of [“essential workers”](#) - those on the frontlines of the pandemic. UNI affiliates fought to ensure they had access to adequate PPE, the right to sick leave when they fell ill, and the support they needed as they worked at the heart of the pandemic day after day.

While the Covid pandemic showed the strength and ability of UNI's affiliates to respond to the OSH challenges, it also laid bare the inequality endemic in global society. A [joint study](#) between UNI and the ITUC showed that 98 per cent of the world's workers were not getting the sick pay, wage replacement and social benefits they needed to withstand the impacts of Covid-19. UNI led the call for the recognition of Covid-19 as an occupational disease.

The development and delivery of Covid vaccines was the beginning of our path out of the pandemic and yet economically rich and powerful countries hoarded access to vaccines so that many in global south were left without. Our best chance of staying safe was to ensure a Covid-19 vaccine available to all for the global common good, but we saw pharmaceutical companies [protecting their monopolies](#) and putting up barriers to restrict production and drive-up prices. UNI Global Union



joined the [Peoples Vaccine Alliance](#), a coalition of over 100 organizations and networks demanding equitable access to medical technologies and vaccines that help to prevent and respond to Covid-19. The campaign now continues, including at the World Health Organization and World Trade Organization, to prevent the inequity we saw in the global response to Covid-19 reoccurring in future pandemics.

A DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION CREATING NEW RISKS

The pandemic accelerated the digital transformation that has impacted UNI sectors for many years. The way in which digitalization is changing the jobs and workplaces of workers across the services industries brings new OSH risks and new trade union responses to keeping workers safe.

There was a huge move towards remote working in a range of sectors during the pandemic. UNI and its affiliates have responded to the OSH challenges remote work brings, developing [principles and guidelines](#) that make clear there is no difference between remote work and other forms of work organization when it comes to the employer's responsibility for occupational health and safety.

The increasing use of new digital technologies by employers for monitoring, surveillance and in some cases the actual management of employees is bringing with it its own OSH risks. This includes the imposition of intrusive monitoring systems in the homes of workers. UNI's work in the Amazon Alliance has provided striking examples of the risks, highlighting the toll which [constant surveillance](#) takes on workers. Amazon's use of elaborate surveillance systems to monitor its employees at all levels of the company's operations, for example, cameras in warehouses, GPS-tracking driver apps and Ring doorbells, has led to over half of Amazon workers surveyed saying it has had a negative impact on their physical and mental health.

While digital transformation brings with it new physical risks for workers, it is the impact of psychosocial risks that is seen most widely across the services industries. Often these issues, including stress and mental health problems, are treated as individual issues whereas evidence is ever clearer that the impact of work organization, including digital technology, is a key factor. Therefore, trade unions are increasingly demanding a collective response to the problem.

The digital transformation has created new industries with new risks, such as content moderation for social media, where workers have been exposed to horrific images of sexual abuse and violence without adequate oversight and support from employers, leading to significant psychosocial impacts.

VIOLENCE, HARASSMENT AND ABUSE AT WORK

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the third-party violence, harassment and abuse faced by so many workers in the service industries. UNI work in the commerce sector revealed a "[pandemic of violence](#)" as incidents experienced by frontline retail workers skyrocketed during the health crisis and remain high.

Workers in [care](#), finance and call centres are all speaking out about the threats they face, and trade unions are taking action to deal with this serious OSH risk. Through dedicated campaigns and tireless work, UNI affiliates are pushing for better legislation and protection for workers - and they are achieving remarkable progress. They are showing the union difference through organizing, collective action and collective bargaining.

Ending the global scourge of violence, harassment and abuse in all sectors has been a longstanding campaign of the global trade union movement. In a major victory, the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted [Convention 190](#) on Violence and Harassment in June 2019. The convention, along with the associated Recommendation 206, has so far been ratified by 31 countries (June 2023). The binding treaty defines and sets international



standards to end violence and harassment, particularly gender-based violence, in the world of work. Trade unions are working to break the vicious circle of violence that impacts women both at home and at work and, whether ratified or not, C190 is an important tool in that struggle.

There is also a broader recognition of the importance of a gender perspective in OSH. A gender-neutral approach to health and safety in the past has meant that very often the specific challenges to women's health in the workplace have been neglected. On International Women's Day 2023 UNI Global Union launched [a practical guide](#) to OSH with a gender perspective.

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS

The ILO Declaration on the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work was adopted in 1998 to protect and advance key worker rights, protected through core labour conventions such as the right to freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. Every member of the ILO is required to respect and promote these fundamental rights, even those which have not ratified the conventions in question.

[In June 2022](#), the International Labour Conference finally took the decision to add the right to a safe and healthy work environment to its list of fundamental principles, which will give a new impetus to OSH activities as all ILO Member States.

This should lead to an increased focus on OSH issues across global standards. For example, there will be implications for international trade agreements and other treaties which reference fundamental worker rights. It will impact UNI's work with multinational companies. Several global agreements, not least the recent [Teleperformance agreement](#), already include OSH within them. As respect for the ILO fundamental rights are a foundation for global agreements, the new right to a safe and healthy work environment may open new opportunities for UNI affiliates to develop global action on OSH risks.

ORGANIZING AROUND HEALTH AND SAFETY

The Covid-19 pandemic and the increasing recognition of psychosocial risks has led to new opportunities for organizing around health and safety across UNI sectors.

Our report '[Safer jobs and stronger unions – Building worker power through health and safety](#)' demonstrates our affiliates' successful strategies to strengthen unions and support organizing around OSH in the commerce and care sectors. This included emphasizing OSH in collective bargaining with employers, turning OSH committees into organizing catalysts and defining mental health issues as equal in value to physical health. In the Media, Entertainment & Arts sector, successful campaigns have focused on [ending the long hours culture](#) in the industries and the associated health risks. In response to the rise of remote work, trade unions are now including demands to protect the health and safety of remote workers in collective bargaining.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of the past few years have once again brought health and safety issues to the fore and, in some ways, reenergized trade union action on OSH. Trade unions are responding to the risks posed by digital transformation and workers are saying enough is enough when it comes to violence, harassment and abuse. A safe and healthy workplace is a fundamental right, and it is UNI and its affiliates who are delivering on this right for workers around the world.





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