



# How to run a Trade Union

TRADE UNION HANDBOOK

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Editor and author of the handbook

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**The Olof Palme International Center** is the Swedish labor movement's cooperative body for international issues. The overall aim of the Palme Center is a world of peaceful societies founded on the ideals of democracy and the equal value of all human beings.

Through our development projects, we seek to empower people to change their societies and thereby their own lives in joint action. Women, young people and grassroots activists are our main target groups. Our member organizations' extensive international network enables cooperation with partners around the world who share our democratic values.

Through counseling, education and methodology

development, the Palme Center supports its partner organizations, ranging from small-scale popular movement projects to large mobilization campaigns. Many dedicated members of local and regional organizations in both Sweden and our partner countries work together to strengthen democracy and human rights. Planning and execution are jointly conducted, and responsibility is shared to achieve the best possible results.

**The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO)** is the central organization with fourteen affiliates that organize workers in the private and public sectors.

# Foreword

## **Why do we need trade unions, and what does it mean to be a trade union member?**

The right to work and the right to form and join a union are human rights enshrined in the Declaration for Human Rights of the United Nations (UN) in 1948.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) holds that labor can never be a commodity. We are human beings and should be treated as such, also in the workplace. We have the right to a fair and equitable salary and to the greatest possible security and safety at work. The International Trade Union Confederation is devoted to building workers power and believes the best way to be strong is to organize, organize and organize.

The basis of the trade union is solidarity. When we form a union we give each other a mutual promise. We promise we will never work on less favorable terms or at a lower salary than we have agreed. Together we are strong. Together we can make demands and make the employer listen to us. And the more members we have, the greater is our opportunity to improve our conditions through collective bargaining and influence the workplace and society as a whole.

We must always be as efficient as possible in our trade union work. While we organize new members, we must give support to existing members. No one should feel excluded on the basis of sex, age, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability.

Our trade union solidarity has no borders or limits, it is truly worldwide. Today, political and trade-union arenas are more comprehensive and interlinked than ever before.

*How to run a trade union* is for all of you who want to organize a union at your workplace or those who are already organized and want to learn more about the practical ways to get the most out of trade union activities. It provides practical information for everyday activities and describes democratic trade union ideology, labor rights and the need for global cooperation.

### **Wanja Lundby-Wedin**

Chairperson of the Olof Palme International Center

### **Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson**

President of the Swedish Trade Union Federation (LO) and  
Deputy President of the International Trade Union Confederation

# “Do not mourn, organize!”

## 1

**The Swedish-American trade unionist** and singer Joe Hill (1879–1915) is associated with the famous last words, Do not mourn, organize! These words still live on a hundred years later.

To recruit more members to the union is to build for the future. If we are many—and representative—we are strong, and that gives us more opportunities at the negotiating table. It gives us legitimacy toward employers and in community work. We can accumulate more resources to see to member interests, and we operate effectively when more workers are members and pay dues.

Unions give us power in the workplace. Forming a union means standing together and acting collectively to bring about change. The union is therefore the best means for us to get a larger share of the value of what we produce.

Forming a union means we are ready to sit down with the employer at the bargaining table and negotiate an agreement that improves our working conditions.

When starting a local union at a workplace, it is a good idea to begin by taking on a minor issue that can succeed with the employer. It may be a matter of great importance to workers and cost

the employer little. The important thing is to win a victory, so those who are reluctant to join can see a local union as a valuable tool for improving the situation at the workplace.

### How we organize ourselves

At the core of our organization are active members and leaders who listen. Activities should be based on member needs. There should be opportunities for training and other support.

Decisions should be made as closely as possible to the members. Our organization must be democratic, open and transparent, with informed decision-making and opportunities for members to demand accountability from their leaders.

But it is not enough that the union statutes are followed and our activities conducted in a formally correct manner. The way we work together must also be characterized by respect, transparency and a democratic disposition. We must cooperate in a way that welcomes all opinions and gives every member the opportunity to influence.

Our organization must not get caught up in a bureaucratic and rigid form that increases the

distance between union representatives and members. Bureaucratic rigidity contributes to mistrust, lack of confidence and even reduced membership. In turn, it leads to less power at the bargaining table and less influence in public political life. This applies to local, regional, national and international levels. Simply put, we union members and elected officials should practice what we preach.

The foundation of our organization is the unit at or near the workplace. These *branch* or *workplace* units are based where members work or live. Unit operations are usually managed by unit members.

The board and other elected bodies represent the members and help to solve everyday problems at the workplace, such as the work itself and relationships with managers and others. Board members must often perform their tasks while doing their regular jobs.

At the regional or national level there are different ways to organize trade union work. A national union may organize everyone in an industry, such as miners, or be constructed differently to cover more professions. The national federations often form a central trade-union organization representing all affiliated workers in the country. International cooperation is organized geographically and globally.

## Keeping together

To strengthen the position of trade unions, it is important to achieve the broadest possible consensus. We should avoid fighting over the same members.

In some cases it may be easier to enroll members who are already in another union than to seek out those who are not members anywhere—but then, not much is won. It is better to divide the members than to fight over them. If you cannot gather everybody in one organization, it is important to work together as closely as possible. It gives us a better platform to put pressure on the employer and therefore benefits all members.

**Trade union organization** varies according to tradition, culture and law. However, to simplify, we can distinguish three different principles:

**An industrial union** represents the majority of workers in a workplace, and all should belong to that union.

**A general federation** is composed of all workers irrespective of employer, industry or skill.

**A craft union** is composed of workers of a specific craft or skill.

Regardless of organization, a prerequisite for successful trade-union work is to have orderly, rational and reliable management procedures. We need to develop the best possible practices for managing our activities, recruiting new members and educating ourselves and other active and potential members.

We should use modern communications technology when possible, including establishing an electronic network, creating membership records and databases. Online communication facilitates the dissemination of information and collection of dues; it strengthens internal financial systems and creates greater transparency in union activities.

Our ability to organize new members also determines how representative we are. We should, as a professional organization, reflect the workplace and the community in terms of gender, age and ethnicity.

A major challenge for us is to organize workers in the informal economy, as they often work under difficult conditions. We can play a very important role by including them at work and in society.

## Being close to the members

Personal relations with individual members are often easier to maintain in small workplaces than in large ones. Union representatives in small



workplaces may have more opportunities to be close and more easily accessible to members. Of course, this also depends on the resources and conditions of the workplace.

Can union representatives leave their jobs to help members who have problems? Do union representatives have the possibility to work part time or even full time for the union? If so, will they be too far away from their members or stuck in offices or negotiations?

Good contact and quick reactions are important when members for one reason or another want to leave the union. If we delay too long to contact them to discuss the matter, they may feel the union does not care.

A general rule is that workers are best organized by members of the same group. Young people are best at talking to young people, and women are more likely to get women to join. That means we must have both young people and women on our boards and in key positions.

The core of union organizing is to ensure safety and good conditions at work. But in some cases we can also negotiate insurance and other benefits linked to the job and members' private lives. We may be able to offer courses and other personal-development training that equip us on the job and in trade union activities. The extent of such further education depends on resources.

Not everyone takes union membership as a matter of course. Therefore, we must also be able to answer the question, What's in it for me? We need to talk about the rights and benefits that are included in membership. When we spell out what the membership fee provides, we strengthen members' willingness to pay their dues.

## In a hostile environment

Our efforts to organize and recruit members do not take place in a conflict-free environment. How governments and employers view unions is crucial.

In some cases, the union's greatest problem is apathy and disinterest among workers. Else-

where, the threats come from security forces and murderous criminal groups. It goes without saying that union strategies must differ depending on the environment in which they operate.

Although membership in a union is a human right, it is not seen as one in all countries. Unions are prohibited or harassed in many ways all over the world. Union activists are imprisoned and murdered simply because of their demands for justice and a better life for working people.

Employers use all means available to prevent employees from organizing. Union busting is a known strategy worldwide; workers are threatened with being fired if they organize.

In such situations, the union movement has to create tools to assess the risks and conflicts and consider the best way to act to protect members.

## Beware of fake unions

A yellow union is a union organization that is governed or controlled by the employer or the government in order to prevent strikes or counter the influence of workers on wages and other production conditions.

Yellow unions are prohibited by Article 2 of United Nations ILO Convention No. 98 (see more about the ILO in chapter 10). Using a fake union, an employer can control the other party in "negotiations" over collective agreements, for example.

## DISCUSSION

**What kinds of problems do we face on our jobs?**

**What are the obstacles to organizing?**

- Fear of retaliation from the employer
- Lack of education and knowledge about the union
- Feelings of hopelessness: doubt that things can really change



# The Democratic Meeting

## 2

**Being involved in a union** is about meeting and working with people: addressing their problems, being responsive to questions and requests and creating and maintaining a good relationship between elected representatives and members.

Many meetings are personal and informal. But for trade union activities to function democratically and effectively, there must also be structure and order. When decisions are reached and people elected, it must be correctly done. This requires established statutes, regulations and democratic meeting formats that give everyone a chance to be heard.

For those of you who are about to form a union or have little experience in organizing a membership meeting, here's some advice. There may even be some tips for those of you who have been around a while.

First, some advice about the informal elements

of a union meeting. They can be just as important and crucial for the union's democratic culture as the formal ones.

### **Consider all members**

A decision reached by more than half of the participants at a meeting is formally democratic, but it is also important for those who lose a vote to be heard and treated with respect for their opinions.

All proposals submitted must be addressed. Make a point of everyone trying to consider each other. This increases the support for democracy as a form of work. We understand it best if we try to agree on a decision.

One tip is, before the meeting formally opens, to get the word out to all who are called. Then they can tell you what they think is important to discuss and how they view the meeting and the

union's work. Such discussion often occurs after the meeting is over, and then it can be too late, so it's better to put it first, at least if there are not too many participants.

## Give everyone a chance to take a stand

Respect for each member means making it possible for everyone to attend a meeting. It is important that the meeting's time and place enable as many people as possible to come.

Similarly, it is important that everyone gets information about the issues to be discussed and decisions to be reached at the meeting, so everyone has time to get acquainted with them and form their opinions.

In addition to these are the formal rules that make a meeting democratic. Here are some of the most important ones.

## Meeting rules

Union statutes should regulate when a summons to a meeting is to be sent out, and that applies especially to the annual general meeting (AGM), which is the highest decision-making meeting of the local organization. At the AGM, a special chairperson who is not a member of the board is appointed to ensure that the agreed agenda is followed, the opportunity to speak is fairly distributed at the issues and discussions, and voting is implemented correctly. At other meetings, the elected chairperson usually manages these tasks.

At all meetings there should be a secretary who writes the minutes, recording the issues that were raised and what decisions were reached. The minutes also report one or more dissenting opinions (reported disagreement) against the decision. The minutes are properly scrutinized and approved by especially selected persons. If there are many participants at the meeting, it is good to have a designated specific vote counter who counts how many people voted on the various proposals.

It is important that everyone get the opportu-

nity to speak. Meetings should allow enough time to deal with the important issues that must be addressed. But they should also end on time, before participants get tired and want to go home. Afterward, members will have time to reflect on a nice get-together and having agreed on something important.

## Board of representatives

If the meeting is to elect a new board or board members, it is important that a nominating committee prepare the elections. It's important to assemble a board that reflects the membership, especially when it comes to sex, age and ethnic background. But, of course, is also crucial to have a board with members who support the union because they share values of human equality.

We strive to elect board members with a wide range of knowledge, who complement each other and, most important, who can work well together.

Even members who do not have assignments must have the opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty. The more members participating in union activities, the stronger the union. All members should be given the opportunity to participate in campaigns and public protests, to engage in local or regional trade-union work and to participate in trade magazines and websites.

For the union to develop and innovate, the leadership and people in positions of trust must change to involve more people in taking responsibility. If we choose the same people year after year, the organization risks becoming stagnant. And we must be aware of the tendencies toward power abuse, nepotism and corruption that all organizations might encounter.

## Statutes

The statutes of an association can be compared with the rulebook for a team sport: Both give instructions on how the "game" should be played.

The statutes establish the association's highest governing body. Depending on the organization,

this may be the governing body of the annual general meeting or a congress.

For democracy to function fully in an association, all members should be familiar with the rules of the association. One cannot demand that all members know the contents of all the paragraphs in detail. They should know the association's purpose and goals, methods and procedures and member rights and obligations.

## Announcing the meetings in good time

Everyone should get ample opportunity to take a stand, and therefore adequate information, time to think and the opportunity to exchange ideas with others if needed. Everyone should have received notice of the meeting in good time and been informed about when and where the meeting will be held. The time and place of the meeting should be selected so that as many members as possible will be able to attend. Ideally, everyone should know in advance the questions to be addressed (the agenda, or the list of issues to be considered at a meeting). Then everyone will have a good chance of being at the meeting when the issues they consider most important are raised.

## The decision

Our decisions should be contributed to and supported by as many people as possible. It should feel like everyone is trying to take each other into account. This increases the support for democracy as a concept and way of working. Ideally, of course, we want a decision that can be agreed to by everyone.

However, in the end, we must reach a decision and take action; otherwise, people lose faith and respect for democracy. We have to strike a reasonable balance between openness and efficiency.

Everyone should be able to make suggestions. Whoever comes up with a proposal must feel the others take it seriously. All proposals should be

addressed. If there is not complete agreement on a decision, then all proposals for discussion and exchange of ideas should be presented so everyone can choose between them. The meaning of each proposal must be clear to everyone. If the proposal I like best cannot get enough support and is voted down, I'll still be able to choose from the other proposals—if there is more than one.

“One person, one vote” is a rule that must be applied fully in democratic decision-making. It is important to have procedures that guarantee this in the meetings. Polls must be managed carefully so that everyone can be confident that the result is true and accurate and nothing has gone wrong. Therefore, it is enough that a single participant requests it for a vote or ballot to be conducted.

## The annual general meeting (AGM)

The annual general meeting is very important. Members examine how the board has handled its duties during the past year and decide who should be on the board for the next term.

Normally, according to the statutes, the following points must always be taken up at the annual general meeting:

- The reports of the board and the auditors for the previous year.
- Whether the board may be discharged from liability for the previous year.
- Election of representatives and auditors for the coming year and alternates (substitutes) for these.
- Election of the nomination committee that will prepare the elections of the association in the coming year and at the next annual general meeting. The nomination committee prepares proposals for suitable candidates in these elections.

## Sample agenda at the annual general meeting

1. Opening, adoption of the agenda
2. Determination of the voting list
3. Question whether the Annual General Meeting has been properly advertised (That is, if the notice of the meeting has been sent out in the right way and at the right time. These things are often regulated in the statutes.)
4. Election of officers for the Annual General Meeting
  - a) a Chairman who will lead the AGM
  - b) a Secretary to write the Minutes of the meeting
  - c) two persons to verify the Minutes
  - d) two tellers to count the votes
5. The Board's statement of work, including financial report
6. The Auditors' report
7. Adoption of the financial report (income statement and balance sheet)
8. Discharge of the Board
9. Proposals by Board members and members (motions)
10. Election of Board members and their substitutes
11. Election of Auditors and their substitutes
12. Other **elections** (committees of the association, representatives of organs or subdivisions, and nominating committee for the coming year)
13. Any other business
14. Closure of the Annual General Meeting

## Examples of Agenda for Board meetings

1. Opening, adoption of agenda
2. Election of members to approve the minutes
3. Applications for membership and expulsion
4. Cashier's reports
5. Received reports
6. Proposals for acquisitions
7. Report on activities since the last meeting
8. Upcoming activities
9. Educational activities
10. Any other business (not notified in advance)
11. Closure of the meeting

### DISCUSSION

**What will allow as many people as possible—especially women and young people—to be able and willing to participate in union meetings?**

**Are you satisfied with how democracy works in your union? If not, what can be done better?**

# Gaining Confidence

## 3

**Being a union representative** is to represent your working colleagues. It is a responsible task, often rewarding and interesting.

Confidence in the union must be firmly established so members feel there is the possibility of change by acting together. When facing problems, it is important to include members before, during and after negotiations with employers.

Our results must convince employers that we have the support of our members when we bring demands to the table.

When we are easily accessible and inspire confidence at the workplace, it is naturally easier to recruit more members. We must explain the union's goals and objectives to workers, be responsive to different views and deal with problems and questions. Our actions may more than anything demonstrate the need to belong to a union.

Yet, sometimes it can be unrewarding. There are limits to what an elected official and the union can do. However skilled a negotiator we might

be, our counterpart, the employer, may refuse to give in. A negotiator is rarely completely satisfied, they say, but compromises can be a step forward.

### Dialogue with members

It is important that we continually inform our members and other employees of our work and progress, for example by improving safety, successfully negotiating or giving employees opportunities to develop their skills.

This may include general information about what we are doing. For example, "During the past month, we helped five members with workplace safety issues and negotiated better overtime rules."

One way to highlight the benefits of the union is to give members an opportunity to evaluate our efforts at the workplace. This can be done in personal conversation. But it might be more useful to systematically collect the impressions members

have of their contact with the union, such as in a simple questionnaire.

A questionnaire is a clear way to show members their opportunities to express whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with the performance of the union in the workplace. It is also an excellent basis for absorbing criticism and making improvements.

## Members of the board

*Elected officials* are members of the board or other bodies that have the members' confidence to lead union work at different levels, that is, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. The local board, as discussed here, consists of a number of people who are each assigned a specific task. Some are just members of the board without special responsibilities.

As outlined in the previous chapter, the board is elected by the annual general meeting. It is practical to have overlapping mandates, so the entire board is not elected at the same time. This will make for more continuity in the work.

The *chairperson*, or equivalent representing the union, leads the work on the board and is often the one who negotiates or heads negotiations with the employer. If the representation or undertakings are extensive, a vice chairperson can be chosen who can assist the chairperson and take over certain tasks.

Other officers include the *treasurer*, who keeps track of the finances, and a *secretary* to write the minutes of the board meetings. Other board members may have special assignments as needed. When substitutes are selected for members who cannot attend a meeting, they have the right to vote.

At the annual general meeting, *auditors* should also be elected. They examine whether the finances have been handled properly and that minutes of meetings were taken during the fiscal year.

The budget and financial situation are not only issues for the board and auditors. Members need transparency in the operations and financial

management, not least with respect to their willingness to pay union dues.

A person with responsibility for health and safety issues can be appointed in different ways, but ensuring that the workplace is as safe as possible is one of the main tasks of the union. No one should be afraid to articulate grievances. A safe workplace should be free from discrimination. In many cases the union also works to combat the spread of HIV and AIDS, and to defend the rights of those already infected and their families.

## To negotiate for our members

Union representatives at all levels deal with a wide range of issues—not only wages but working hours, time off for illness, pensions, discrimination prevention in recruitment, promotion and training, health and safety, training and empowerment.

The collective agreement negotiated by the union and employer and employee representatives guarantees certain fundamental rights at work. The *collective agreement* is an agreement between the workers as a collective—the union members—and the employer. Collective agreements can be signed by an individual employer or group of employers in the same industry.

Union trustees represent the members in the workplace. Local conditions and member demands are the natural basis for union work. The representatives must be aware of the laws and agreements governing trade union work, together with the fundamental values that the union represents.

The legal effect of collective agreements varies among countries.

An ongoing dialogue with the members is very important for local trade-union work. To provide members with information about what is happening in the workplace is one of the main tasks of the union. The union-elected representative is the link between employers and members.

The workload for those who are elected is

important to remember. There are often many demands because of what there is to do. We may need to ask ourselves if we cannot spread the tasks and responsibilities among more people. We should also remember to adapt tasks, appointments and other arrangements to fit as many people as possible, both women and men.

## To campaign

To bring about change and to gain support for our demands requires both patience and a well thought-out strategy. How we go about it of course depends on the conditions at the workplace or in the community and if there is an outreach campaign.

To create awareness and understanding is often a long process. Therefore, it may be wise to have both short-term and long-term goals. The goal is to get as many people as possible to participate given their personal commitment and interests.

Risk assessments are important when faced with a serious conflict, which puts cohesion and stamina to the test. The strike—refusing to work—is our ultimate weapon when it comes to conflicts in the workplace, but the price may be high.

Conversely, there are many examples of successful strikes, boycotts and other actions. Without the demonstrated courage of union activists and members throughout history—and today—we would never have achieved the success we have.

## DISCUSSION

**How might elected representatives inform members of trade union activities?**

**Is it important that the board represents the members in terms of gender and age?**



# Learning to Grow

## 4

**One of our main tasks is to train** both the union-elected officials and individual members. The aim of this training is to give them the skills and confidence to grow as human beings and contribute to the development of trade union activities. Members who have participated in a training program are more willing to take on union tasks than others.

Basic knowledge must be provided about the role of unions and union tasks. We need to know how to handle positions of trust, such as being chairperson, be responsible for finances, write meeting minutes, analyze and deal with the situations and conflicts that can arise at the workplace and participate in discussions and give speeches.

We need to raise awareness of the rights we have as workers and how we can act against the employer in various conflict situations. Society needs to be informed about trade union values. We must continually improve our knowledge of

how businesses work and our understanding of financial accounting.

All such training activities need not be conducted at the local level; they may be the responsibility of the regional or national trade union organization. It is important to encourage and enable members to take advantage of these opportunities.

Training should adapt to resources and participant needs and wishes. It may be in the form of a workshop or seminar, a residential course, short courses or conferences, summer school or self-study on the Internet.

### **The study circle**

The study circle is a practical and democratic form of joint training. It is easy to organize and can meet at home or another suitable location. The study circle is therefore appropriate for union

members who want to familiarize themselves with the issues of the job, the union organization or policy-making.

A study circle meets regularly to study and discuss. It typically consists of six to twelve people. The group is just the right size for participants to have their say and the time to learn at their own pace and on their own merits. Someone who wants to learn at a fast pace can do it in the same group as someone who wants to go a little slower.

Those who choose study circles do so out of their own interest and free will. The participants

decide on the content and working methods in the study circle, and then jointly seek new knowledge, skills and insights. The study circle leader has expertise in the topic and guides the discussions, making sure that everyone has a say and that all the experiences and personalities of all participants are respected.

Consider whether training and studies are planned to be genuinely available to everyone. Can everyone participate on the basis of gender, availability, disability, ethnicity, religion or other beliefs?

## **DISCUSSION**

**Are there opportunities for education and training in your union?**

**Which topics would you like to learn more about?**

# Communication: The Tools in Our Hands

## 5

**To achieve good communication** in a union, we can distinguish between two different kinds of communication: internal and external. Let's begin with the internal.

The members of a trade union have, of course, the right to know what their organization does, how the various conflicts and situations are handled and about the decisions of board members and others.

The unionists must feel that membership is beneficial. Therefore, we need the best possible information on union policy and what is happening in the various negotiating bodies (works councils, safety committees, etc.). We want information to flow both ways. Thus, information, requirements and opinions from members must

also reach union representatives. Traditional ways of informing workers and union members of activities include putting up posters and notices of meetings and handing out leaflets.

### Social media

Information technology provides a faster and perhaps more effective way to both reach and create a dialogue with members. Even small local trade unions can create internal and open networks, using Facebook and Twitter.

It is relatively simple to create a website or a local version of the union's website, enabling the spread of newsletters and similar current information. Members can contribute articles and

photos and participate in polls and advocacy.

With an online network, we can contact a large circle of members, supporters and friends and spread the union message. It's an easy and inexpensive way to both create awareness and attract new members.

Not least, it is important that we use the network and applications that are available for mobile phones, as it is generally more common for people to have a phone than a computer, and the phone is almost always accessible. All associations, unions and others, also want to extend their reach, as it is often part of their mission to shape public opinion and convince others that what association members are fighting for is right and fair. Here is where the external information comes into the picture, although it is not always possible to draw a clear line between what is internal and external.

## Blogs and videos

As a trade union, it is our task to promote trade union awareness and commitment in the workplace. Previously, we have emphasized how important it is that the union be visible in the workplace, in particular, by having a personal presence.

Blogs and simple newspapers or news websites are useful tools in the trade union struggle. For instance, a blog may address relationships in a company or group, such as a multinational corporation. The blog then provides a cross-border base for employees in different countries to share their experiences, raise awareness, and thus coordinate their union policies. It becomes a kind of early warning system for trade unions worldwide.

For many people, the blog is an obvious campaign tool. Interactive blogs invite readers to contribute content. The rruc Youth blog is a place where young workers share their experiences. Many unions also use microblogs to spread news and information.

One of the most popular and powerful tools

for communicating important messages is the video, and many unions use videos successfully. Trade union videos are very suitable for fast and efficient movie clips, such as on YouTube.

Websites and social networks like Facebook have become common in union activities. Many unions are working with intranet systems to facilitate better internal communication. Some unions are creating their own niches in social networks, such as UnionBook, an advertising platform where several thousand union people gather to share ideas, opinions and information.

## What we want to say and to whom

Whatever the topic of our information, there are some questions that must be asked:

- What do we really want to say, and what is the meaning of our message?
- Who is the target audience for the message?
- What do we want the audience to do?
- Which channels should we use to reach our target audience?
- What is the right timing for our information?

These questions help us establish an information and communication plan. We can also reach our audiences indirectly through the mass media, for example. Getting the local newspaper to report on issues also reaches members.

## Weapons in the hands of opponents

In many countries, trade unions are subject to strong pressure from both governments and corporations, which entails great risks for workers, union members and elected officials. Therefore, it is important to be careful even when using social media.

Remember that what is available and open to our members and other interested unions is also

accessible to those with opposing intentions. Managers and others who want information on union policy or active members may find it just a mouse click away. Active union members can be traced back to the workplace and listed as potential troublemakers.

This implies a risk that hostile employers may block the employment of union organizers and perhaps their friends. Although the Internet provides new opportunities for union-organizing campaigns and strengthening unions at low cost

across borders, it also offers new opportunities for harassment and persecution, or union busting.

It is therefore important that union representatives and members learn how to protect their identities, correspondence and the private information that is generally available on the web. When a union offers an online service it is also important to provide information about maintaining security and the consequences of communicating private information online.

## **DISCUSSION**

**How can we disseminate information and communicate with our union members in the best way?**

**What methods are best in outreach campaign work?**

# Representing Everyone

## 6

**A true trade union** is based on the principle of human equality. If some are forced to work under worse conditions because of discrimination, it will eventually affect all.

Discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation is never acceptable. Trade union equality and diversity policies are important instruments in creating greater equality and raising awareness of discrimination against women and other groups.

The image of the union is important. Is the union just for middle-aged and older men? What does the board look like? Are there, for example, young people and women in important positions so that all members can identify with the union? Is the union associated only with major industries and corporations? Is the union relevant to the employee in a small company, in the public sector, in agriculture or in the corner shop?

### An equal organization

Equality between women and men is a matter of justice and democracy. Women who will be appointed to lead also become role models for others.

Traditional and conservative structures and norms—also in unions—are often a cause of inequality. Vigorous efforts are required to encour-

age more women to join unions and, for instance, institute quotas for boards.

**The main reasons women are not union members, according to surveys made by several international organizations, are that they:**

- **do not see how unions can help them (their questions and needs are not included on the trade union agenda)**
- **fear losing their jobs if they join the union**
- **are more likely than men to be in precarious employment (temporary jobs, etc.) and therefore difficult to reach and organize**
- **lack time, as primary responsibility for the family still falls to women (and lack of consideration for this from the union)**

Health, safety and freedom from violence are union issues, whether the problems are inside the workplace or outside. Domestic violence affects many women and also affects their work situation. Trade union support for both safe workplaces without discrimination and for women who are forced to experience violence in the home is important.

It is also important to be aware of how we want to be perceived by our members and the outside

world. An organization that works both internally and externally with equality is met with greater respect and attracts more people.

## Balancing work and family

Long, uncomfortable and unsafe working hours is a big problem for many workers and their families. This is especially true for women, who generally have greater caring responsibilities for children, aging parents or other relatives.

Achieving a balance between work and personal life is definitely a trade union issue. We can push for better conditions through collective bargaining. Unions can demand reasonable working hours and an end to the unspoken pressure to work overtime without pay.

## Violence and harassment

There is a growing awareness that workplace violence is not just an individual problem. It is a structural problem, rooted in broader social, economic, organizational and cultural factors. Lack of power and precariousness increases the risk that many women suffer from sexual harassment, assault, rape and HIV/AIDS.

Domestic violence is a workplace issue because it affects women's ability to do their jobs and be self-supporting. Both union and employer have a responsibility to intervene if women are insulted or attacked. Just by considering it as an issue worth negotiating in collective bargaining can improve the situation.

## Reaching young people, the future of the union

Young workers have good reasons to join a union. They have a higher rate of unemployment than others and more part-time and nonstandard contracts. Yet some of them hesitate. Young people are often less willing to engage in a long-term membership. Therefore it is a particular challenge to make the union more attractive to young workers and young people in general.

Young workers may have a variety of reasons for not joining a union. Lack of knowledge of

what unions do and how they work is one reason. Perhaps they simply have not been asked. It clearly requires, in many cases, both better personal service and better strategies for reaching and attracting young workers to the union. Above all, they should know they are important and necessary if there is to be change.

We need members of different ages and with different experiences in our trade union work. Therefore, we support young people, listen to them and give them the opportunity to try new activities and working methods.

Special promotions with a customized message aimed at young people in the workplace and at newly hired employees or adolescents are necessary, if not vital, to the union's survival.

Research shows, however, that the reasons why young people join a union do not differ from adults. Traditional reasons for joining also apply to the young.

One objective is for all young workers in the workplace to be properly informed about the union, if possible by other young people who are union members. We can create special youth networks and have more activities and elements that can attract young members. One union can spread examples of good and successful youth activities that other unions can use.

We may think that young people don't want to take up a post in the union. That is not at all certain. It may depend on who is asking. If we give more young members responsibility and trust, more of their peers will probably want to join.

## DISCUSSION

**Are men and woman equally valued in the workplace?**

**Do men and women have the same rights and freedoms? Is it possible for them to exercise these freedoms or are they merely formalities?**



# The Informal Economy: A Union Challenge

## 7

**For us working** in the trade union movement, the task of organizing workers in the informal economy and migrant workers is a major challenge.

We want to improve conditions for all workers and enable them to get as good and secure jobs as possible. We want to be able to conclude agreements that regulate wages and working conditions. We run campaigns aiming to persuade countries to enact legislation that protects workers from exploitation.

This applies regardless of whether the work is done in the formal or in the informal sector. For us, a worker is a worker and should have our support. It is a fundamental union principle. The task is difficult in the regulated, formal economy, but the problems are even greater in the growing informal sector.

The informal economy absorbs about half of the workforce worldwide.

The people in this sector are often not even recognized as workers by the government or employers. They do not have their conditions regulated

in contract with the employer and have no or only weak legal support.

Creating a union framework for the informal economy is a challenge in all parts of the world. Such a framework would enable people working in a precarious and informal economy to gain access to the unions that could represent, support and defend them.

Work in the informal economy is often described as atypical and different from what is considered normal, but in many countries it is actually the norm.

The informal economy is also an integral part of the globalized economy. Many transnational corporations are dependent on workers in the informal economy. This applies to parts of the production process, but also in particular service, maintenance and transportation sectors.

Migrant workers, women and other disadvantaged groups are often found in the most dangerous, dirty and poorly paid jobs, sometimes in pure slavery or forced labor. At least 21 million people

worldwide are victims of various forms of forced labor, according to the ILO. Young workers are particularly at risk. The ILO estimates that over 220 million young people live in extreme poverty while also working in the informal economy.

Sometimes the line between the formal and informal economy is not clear. The privatization of the public sector in many countries has led to more jobs being shifted from the formal to the informal economy.

Many people also commute between the formal and the informal economy. For example, short-term contracts are common in the construction industry; between contract periods, people work in the informal economy.

The informal economy has penetrated into new sectors. Employers who want to avoid having to comply with the agreements and laws that apply in the formal economy try to transfer the work to the informal sector.

Staffing practices such as use of temporary contracts continue to challenge the unions, because collective agreements can be more easily broken when factories and workplaces become more mobile. These forms of employment are also more difficult to handle for unions, and in many countries they mean increased risks for workers. In some countries it is even prohibited to organize workers with other than permanent employment.

These forms of employment are often outside of labor laws, and workers have no rights. A related issue is that of migrant workers who move between countries in search of an income and the opportunity of a better life. These individuals often lack representation and generally have much worse working conditions than local workers. It is a major organizational challenge for the trade unions to organize these people and defend their human rights.

## **Domestic employees finally recognized**

One of the world's most common occupations is doing domestic work in someone else's home.

Such household work is usually performed by the poorest and most vulnerable, especially women and migrants, often in difficult conditions. Housework has not been considered a real job, but is part of the informal economy, beyond laws or regulation and with a low rate of unionization.

In 2011, domestic workers worldwide gathered in the International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) and obtained a long overdue and historic victory with the adoption of ILO Convention 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers. The convention is important not only for the many millions of domestic workers but also for the whole labor movement, as it recognizes the economic and social value of domestic work and strongly reconfirms and reinforces important universal labor rights and principles.

The active participation of IDWN representatives throughout the whole ILO process is probably a key to its successful outcome, together with the support of many international organizations including the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Association (IUF) and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO).

After the convention was adopted, the IDWN had time to formalize its structures and become an international federation, the IDWF, in 2013. The IDWF was accepted as a special group of the IUF in 2014.

### **DISCUSSION**

**What do you know about the informal economy in your country?**

**How can we organize workers in the informal economy?**

**How can we reach migrant workers?**

# Cooperation Across Borders

## 8

**“We’ll have a responsibility** to speak for all of the workers, not only those who are organized. Workers are being shot in Cambodia for striking for a minimum wage. They get jailed in Indonesia, arrested in Hong Kong and risk their lives in some cases in the Philippines. So we said we can’t stand back from that!” says Sharon Burrow, General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).

Our union cohesion and solidarity must extend across borders and across continents if we are to truly create better conditions for all workers worldwide. This has become even more important now that globalization makes countries and economies intertwined. Globalization may have helped to reduce poverty, but progress also has its dark sides.

While capital can move freely, and the market has been given greater leeway, human and trade-union rights are often set aside. Millions of people are forced to migrate to other countries to work. And half of the world’s working population lives in countries that do not even guarantee the right to form unions.

Our reply is further struggle, increased organi-

zation and even stronger solidarity and international cooperation. New forms of communication and information give us better opportunities to act across borders. We campaign for the rights of workers, and that has an impact. Although the right to collective bargaining is under attack, we have continued to fight for justice and decent conditions for workers worldwide, and we have achieved many successful results.

In recent years, we have been able to negotiate several new cross-border contracts. Global union framework agreements, concluded between global trade unions and multinational companies, have become an important tool in our international strategy. They also have a direct effect on workplaces around the world.

In order to have real power, we must be strong and represent many. Therefore we need to organize more. Today (2015), less than 10 percent of world workers are unionized. But our support is much greater and more far-reaching than that.

The ITUC Global Poll (2014) shows that nearly two out of three respondents (63 percent) agree with the statement “workplaces that have a union representing workers provide better wages, con-

ditions and health and safety for workers.” More than three in four global respondents (76 percent) find it important that unions play an active role in society. Of global respondents who are younger than 25 years of age, 84 percent say an active role for the union is an important issue.

We have a large international network consisting of national unions and international partner organizations: global unions and the ITUC, with 176 million members in 325 different national federations.

## Global unions

National unions work together in global trade unions organized by trade sector. Global unions work together in an international trade-union organization committed to the ideals and principles of the trade union movement. They share a common determination to organize, to defend human rights and labor standards everywhere, and to promote the growth of trade unions for the benefit of all working men and women and their families.

## The ITUC

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) is the global voice of the world’s working people. The primary mission of the ITUC is the promotion and defense of worker rights and interests through the international cooperation of trade unions, global campaigning and advocacy in major global institutions.

Its main areas of activity include the following: trade union and human rights, economy, society and the workplace, equality and nondiscrimination and international solidarity.

The ITUC adheres to the principles of trade union democracy and independence. It is governed by four-yearly world congresses, a general council and an executive bureau.

The ITUC regional organizations are the Asia-Pacific regional organization (ITUC-AP), the African regional organization (ITUC-AF) and

the American regional organization (TUCA). It cooperates with the European Trade Union Confederation, including the pan-European regional council. The ITUC has close relations with global union federations and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC). It works closely with the International Labor Organization (ILO) and several other specialized UN agencies.

In Europe, the ETUC is the only central trade union at the European level recognized as a party in the EU. In the EU, European worker councils were established in 1994 to improve rights to access information and to consultation for employees of international companies.

## Global agreement

An important task for the global unions is to negotiate global agreements with companies in several countries. Global agreements on working conditions within the company are concluded between a multinational company and a global union. The emergence of such global agreements is a response to the globalization of the economy. To influence the terms of multinational companies, more is needed than the national collective agreement. Global agreements can provide support for workers in countries with weak labor law. They can also prevent social dumping.

There are agreements that cover all a company’s workplaces and employees in the world. The agreements regulate basic working conditions, such as union rights, wages, health and safety and the prohibition of child labor. Global agreements strengthen the international union structure; local unions are linked with national and global industry trade unions.

## International guidelines

Furthermore, the industrialized countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have established guidelines for multinational companies. These are based on the ILO core conventions on human and labor rights.

They are recommendations, but the goal of the unions is to make them legally binding.

The guidelines are intended to induce multinational companies to comply with international conventions, regardless of country location. In the guidelines, member states require that companies take more responsibility for protecting human rights.

## Codes of conduct

In addition, there are codes of conduct, adopted in recent years by several companies. Companies can show their responsibility as part of society with regard to social, ethical and environmental aspects through this corporate social responsibility (CSR).

The downside is that codes of conduct are voluntary and not legally binding. A global agreement is an agreement between two parties, while a code of conduct is a unilateral declaration.

Codes of conduct rarely promote union organization, which global agreements often do. Therefore, it is important to require that company codes include parts that entail consulting and discussing with the trade unions and are not seen as a substitute for engaging with trade unions.

## Global campaigns

Through appeals and collective industrial action, unions urge countries to ratify and implement the ILO conventions and to establish decent working conditions.

An example of this is the Decent Work, Decent Life campaign by local and global trade union movements to form public opinion for the ILO's Decent Work agenda. Decent Work is an ILO plan to make the core conventions a reality. The agenda has made employment and decent work key factors in reducing poverty in the world.

## DISCUSSION

**Is international trade-union cooperation important to you?**

**How can unions become a stronger force in the world?**

# The Union: A Political Force

## 9

**The trade union movement** is the world's largest social movement. We are also the world's strongest force for democracy. Unions have played and are playing a crucial role in social, economic and democratic progress in the world.

A trade union's aim is to raise wages and improve conditions for workers, but in the wake of stronger unions, democratization of countries often follows. In many dramatic upheavals in the world, unions have been an important driving force.

In South Africa, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was a leading force in the fight against apartheid. In South Korea, military rule fell when the union grew strong. In Poland, the trade union movement Solidarity strongly contributed to the fall of communism in Europe. In countries such as Belarus and Zimbabwe, the union today represents one of the most important forces in the political opposition. The list of examples could be much longer.

As a union our role is to protect and improve

worker conditions. We do this by union campaigns and collective bargaining. But we also need laws that protect our rights and interests. Therefore, we must also be active in politics. We need to influence governments and political parties and form opinions. How we choose to do this depends on our own trade union and political traditions.

In many countries unions cooperate with political parties that stand up for worker rights. The types of cooperation vary. Cooperation may be solid and even institutionalized, or soluble and temporary. In many cases unions also collaborate with think tanks, institutes and networks to gain as much political influence as possible.

In Sweden the largest trade union confederation, LO, and its affiliates have a close relationship with the Social Democratic Party. It's a partnership that has lasted since the late 1800s. The forms have changed, however, and adapted to today's modern society.

It is fundamental that the Social Democrats

share the same core values as unions. The partnership must be based on trust and respect for their respective roles. The union represents the interests of its members; the party has to take into account all citizens/the people.

“The two branches of the labor movement’s trees are inseparable. But they are not identical. They have different tasks and can therefore sometimes arrive at different understandings with regard to daily affairs. We each possess a clear identity.” —Olof Palme (1927–1986), former chairman of the Swedish Social Democratic Party and prime minister.

The cooperation between unions and politics is well established and organized. Supplying information on and discussing Social Democratic politics and ideology are part of LO and affiliate trade-union education. The unions often take an active role in election campaigns and in other political activities. The party receives financial support from LO and its affiliates.

LO unions encourage and educate union members to become active in the Social Democratic Party. In this way, they can ensure that the views and requirements that emerge in the workplace are passed on to the political debate and decision-making. It is also common that politically engaged union members set up Social Democratic workplace associations.

Cooperation is also close at regional and local levels. It gives the Social Democrats a foothold in the workplace and the unions an influence in local politics that they might otherwise not have.

The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) and the Social Democratic Party also have a long history of collaboration in international affairs. Notable examples include campaigns against nuclear weapons and for disarmament, aid to colonial liberation, solidarity with Indochina, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and against military dictatorships in Latin America. They have also interacted to support the Polish Solidarity movement and others working against communist repression in Eastern Europe.

A concrete manifestation of this cooperation in

international solidarity work is that LO and the Social Democrats together established the Olof Palme International Center, the publisher of this book.

The trade union movement and the Social Democrats in Sweden cooperate with their Scandinavian counterparts in the organization SAMAK. This Scandinavian forum for trade-union political cooperation has existed for over a hundred years.

The reason that union-political cooperation in Sweden is described in some detail here is that many Swedish representatives often get questions about how this cooperation works in Sweden. Many are inspired by the historical success of the labor movement in Sweden and the strength it has today. Perhaps it may serve as an example to others, adapted of course to each country’s conditions and traditions.

There are many other interesting forms of cooperation between trade unions and political parties throughout the world. Here are some examples.

In Pakistan, unions face major challenges, such that over 70 percent of the workforce is in the informal sector. About forty trade union organizations have gathered in the trade-union umbrella organization of the Labour Education Foundation (LEF) that cooperates to obtain political influence.

“Working together with political parties is not only our strategy but our goal. We struggle to get more workers engaged in politics,” says LEF Secretary General Khalid Mahmood.

In South Africa, COSATU played a crucial role in the liberation struggle against apartheid and is now part of an alliance with the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party. Union density is relatively high at 30 percent. The trade union influence in politics has contributed to a number of labor laws that protect workers.

In the United States, trade unions play an important role both for the financing of the Democratic Party and in campaigning. In the last presidential elections more than two-thirds of unionized voters voted for Democrat Barack Obama for president.

In Brazil, the link between trade unions and the



Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) is very strong. The movements fought together against the former military dictatorship. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, president of Brazil 2003–2011, was previously active in the Metalworkers' Union.

In the Philippines, the Alliance of Progressive Labor (APL) calls its strategy 'social movement unionism', meaning it works through the union

as well as politically and socially. The initial goal of the alliance was to start a workers' party, but it chose instead to support the progressive Akbayan Citizens' Action Party. The APL and Akbayan are organizationally independent, and the party recruits individual members. A joint working committee manages cooperation issues and resolves conflicts.

## **DISCUSSION**

**What are the conditions for contact and potential cooperation between trade unions and political parties in your country?**

**What can we learn from trade union political cooperation in other countries?**

# Working with Human Rights

## 10

**The right to form and join** free and independent trade unions, draw up collective agreements and take industrial action is fundamental to all union activity. That human rights and basic protection at work has a strong position in international conventions is an important success for the trade union movement.

To make those solemn words about human equality and universal rights a reality, we need trade-union and political struggle, cohesion and solidarity, both locally and globally. Therefore, it is important to spread knowledge of our fundamental rights. To know and be able to demand those rights gives us strong arguments when we want to form or join a union.

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948. It took place in a world torn apart by two world wars and colonialism. It affirms all people's fundamental rights to liberty and equality.

Article 23 reads as follows:

*(1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions*

*of work and to protection against unemployment.*

*(2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.*

*(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.*

*(4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.*

## Human rights in the workplace

Thus, it is our human right to join a trade union. Human rights in the workplace are more specifically formulated by International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions. The ILO is a unique UN agency in that the social partners (employers and unions) have as important a role as member governments. All three parties have independent status and the right to vote and choose their representatives independently. This is called tripartism.

All conventions are important for worker rights

in the workplace. But the eight core conventions have a special status. They are binding on all countries that are members of the ILO and cover four areas: association and freedom of association, forced labor, discrimination and child labor. These are minimum standards for working conditions worldwide. In addition to these, the ILO has adopted a number of additional conventions and recommendations regarding decent conditions in the workplace. The ILO cannot impose any sanctions. Its working methods are dialogue, counseling, peer help and technical assistance.

## Core conventions

The eight core conventions cover collective bargaining, forced labor, child labor and discrimination.

### **Freedom to join a union, bargain collectively and take action. Codified in:**

- The Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize, Convention No. 87
- Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining, Convention No. 98

### **Abolition of forced labor. Codified in:**

- Forced Labor, Convention No. 29
- Abolition of Forced Labor, Convention No. 105

### **Abolition of labor by children before the end of compulsory school. Codified in:**

- Minimum Age, Convention No. 138
- Worst Forms of Child Labor, Convention No. 182

### **No discrimination at work. Codified in:**

- Equal Remuneration, Convention No. 100
- Discrimination (Employment and Occupation), Convention No. 111

## Extensive violations

The harsh reality is that these rights are denied to many people around the world. According to the ILO, two-thirds of all workers still lack basic protection of their human rights in the workplace.

Together with its affiliates, its regional organization, global union federations and nongovernmental organizations, the ITUC continually campaigns for the universal respect of trade union rights, as guaranteed by the conventions of the ILO.

The ITUC defends trade unionists whenever and wherever their fundamental human rights are violated as a result of their trade union activities. It takes action against other labor-rights and human-rights violations, especially when they affect working people.

The ITUC publishes annual reports describing the scale of human rights violations occurring in the workplace.

## DISCUSSION

**What does the concept of workers' human rights under the UN and ILO mean to you?**

**What can we all do to spread the knowledge of these rights?**

# Interviews

## Why we need to organize

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary

– **Trade unions are the largest** democratic force on earth! We must use and build our power. But the challenge is to organize, everywhere, says Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).

She is optimistic about the future of trade unions, but of course aware of the challenges. Unions must become stronger to defend workers' rights around the world.

She was reelected at the World Congress 2014. At the conclusion of the congress, unions committed to:

- Organize over 27 million new members over the next four years to build worker power;
- End modern-day slavery beginning with Qatar;
- Support a minimum wage on which workers can live with dignity, and end the cycle of poverty wages in supply chains of global corporations; and
- Demand an ambitious climate deal at the Paris Climate Summit.

– We have the mandate to drive change. And we are determined to build a new internationalism that is much more activist, says the Australian-born former teacher.

– I come from a background of union people. My great-great-grandfather was part of the first strikes that started the union movement in Australia. Stories of workers and the struggle for a better life were part of my childhood.

She joined the union on her first day as a teacher in rural New South Wales.

– It never occurred to me not to join the union. I was a teacher for a decade, and my union asked me at one point to do some organizing, and I said yes, and the rest is history, she says.

**Sharan Burrow started** full-time union work in 1986 and moved to the leadership of her state branch and then head of the national teachers' union. In 2006 she was elected to the ITUC as president and in 2010 as General Secretary.

She is the first woman in the post.

– It seems crazy, doesn't it? Talk about the twenty-first century!

The ITUC represents 176 million members. It's impressive, but still only 7 percent of the global workforce.

– There is just not enough power in that, says Sharan Burrow. We have set a target of 200 million at the next congress.

– My first role in a union was as an organizer, and I believe firmly that, unless you have the workers as active members, the trade unions have nothing. The unions don't have a voice or a role if it is not the voice of the workers.

### **What is her advice to the trade union organizers of today?**

– For me the days of being at a workplace signing up workers is over, although I like to be in workplaces. I am never happier than when I am talking with workers, she says with a smile.

– The organizers are the most important people in the union movement. The organizers are the strength at the core of the union operation. Sometimes we forget that, without their work, none of the union's advocacy is possible.

– We have a very clear framework of operation. If we have a global ambition—and it might be to formalize the work of domestic workers—then we don't even begin to think about the planning process unless there are unions, our members, who want to be engaged in that. So we have a very clear sign-in to the process: Do you want to be engaged in this campaign? And even then we say to them that

there is no meaning in signing up if they are not prepared to organize the members for whom the global goal is significant.

### **So you really have to go from the ground up?**

– If you are not facilitating the narrative and practical work of organizing on the ground, then you have to question why you should bother having the unity of an international body. You can see the problem, but if you want to tackle it, and our members are not there, then there is no point.

### **Just a resolution at a congress won't do?**

– We need policy, of course, but just having words on a piece of a paper is not going to change the world.

– We have a responsibility to speak for all of the workers, not only those who are organized, she says.

– Workers are being shot in Cambodia for striking for a minimum wage. They get jailed in Indonesia, arrested in Hong Kong and risk their lives in some cases in the Philippines. So we said we can't stand back from that! We

want to elevate the impoverishment of workers in global supply chains to a global scandal.

**There has been a decline** in union density since the 1990s. The main reasons for this is, according to Sharan Burrow's analysis, the changing model of the global economy and the fact that

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My first role in a union was as an organizer, and I believe firmly that, unless you have the workers as active members, the trade unions have nothing.

only 60 percent of jobs are in the formal sector. These jobs are increasingly vulnerable, while the informal economy, where it is very difficult to organize the labor force, has grown significantly.

– Part of our challenge now is to formalize the informal economy. We are negotiating on a standard for the informal economy, which we will organize around just as we have with domestic workers. But if you go, for instance, to Mali, you are sitting around a table with people who have no role in the formal economy at all—mechanics, who, in our world, have auto shops and all sorts of formal structure. There they fight simply to get recognition, to operate a shop or on a piece of land, to not be afraid of being run off by the police every day. I remember the fisherwoman who said, I just want to know that I can sell my fish every day! The union helping them get a formal status as a business in the community was just as valuable to them.

**She believes that the big challenge** for the unions comes from the American corporate model, which is anti-union, with no role for fundamental rights and where collective bargaining is seen as a thorn in the side and a reduction of profits.

And this is a threat not only to unions but to the global economy. Growing inequality, the rising share of profits and the falling share of wages have affected demand in the global economy. These are fundamental issues for unions but also for their contribution to the global economy.

“  
The question is really how you transition our industries into new technologies so they survive.”

– The world seems to have forgotten that you don't build economies for their own sake; you build societies to serve the needs of the people.

She mentions the dominance of corporate power as a crucial issue.

– All our polling tells us that people understand overwhelmingly that in every country in the world the economy is working for the wealthy and not for working people in general.

– Our poll shows that 68 percent of the people around the world want corporate power tamed, and they want their governments to intervene to look at questions of redistribution, social protection, minimum wages, health, education and other social services.

– The first of our front lines is to tackle the dominant supply-chain model of trade, which is exploiting and impoverishing workers in developing countries, particularly in Asia. The second one is building on the ongoing Qatar campaign, which, to put it simply, is to eliminate slavery.

– If the trade union movement isn't building its power to eliminate slavery, then we are in fact ignoring the most exploited workers of the world and we are not simply prepared to do that, she states.

– And the third one is of course the challenge of climate change. We use the slogan, but it is much more than a slogan, There are no jobs on a dead planet.

**In that context, trade unions** have three ambitions. One is to mobilize for an agreement

at the UN meeting in Paris next year that will substantially reduce global warming. The second is to support union engagement in industrial transition in a dialogue with their industries. The third is a just transition with social protection and support for vulnerable communities and individuals and their families.

### **Is there fear among workers of losing their jobs?**

– Of course there is fear. Change brings fear. But there has always been transition in industry. The question is really how you transition our industries into new technologies so they survive.

– We have to talk about what is inevitable and support change instead of turning a blind eye.

### **How can the unions become more gender balanced and organize more women?**

– Progress for women has stalled. The participation of women in the workforce is going backward. The irony is that, if you had equal numbers of women and men in the workforce in, for example, South East Asia, you would increase the GDP by 24 percent!

– When the world is struggling to gain any percentage of growth, the participation of women is serious. You win both ways. We have been advocating in the OECD, the World Bank and so on that there are three priorities: One is dealing with distribution. The second is investment in the areas that will create jobs, the infrastructure. Equal to that is the care economy. If you focus on the participation of women, then you win both ways. You win the role of women in the economy, but you must also have the enabling services of child care, elder care and education.

### **What about young people? How do you make them interested in the unions?**

– I hear all the time that young people don't care about, want to join or be part of the unions. Well, I say, Have you asked them? Have you asked them about their concerns? I'm much more optimistic!

– We have done research that says people say

they've never been asked to join a union.

– When you start organizing from the basis of their concerns—What is it that is worrying you in your working life? How does it impact on your community, family and personal life? What can we do about it?—then you will find there is a collective responsibility, and people are already acting as unionists.

– It depends on the narrative. If you've got an active workplace and a community—as we showed in the Decisions for Life campaign, focused on young women making a contribution to achievements for themselves and others—then it is not seen as 'what's in it for me'.

– Often we get a little far away from the concerns of the people themselves. And of course we need to include young people. They need to see themselves in the structure just like women do.

– We have to start from where the workers are. What are their concerns and those of their families?

### **How does she view the union's role in LGBT issues?**

– Sure, unions must get involved. Our simple principle is a worker wherever they are in terms of color, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Workers have fundamental rights, and the union is there to defend those rights.

– An inclusive unionism excludes nobody! It's that simple. Sure, there are struggles between different cultures: But for the union, it's easy. You're a worker. You are one of us.

### **How would the world look without trade unions?**

– It would be terrible! Have a look at the world of dictatorships in the Gulf states or the anti-worker oppression of the American corporate model, and think what it would be if there were no unions whatsoever.

– This is not a world where there would be any social justice for people.

**Tommy Svensson**



# The role of the global unions

Ambet Yuson, General Secretary of the Building and Wood Workers International (BWI)

## When and how did you become involved in union work?

– For the past three decades, I have been actively involved in several national and international social movements. I am from the generation of the People Power/EDSA Revolution of 1986 that ended the Marcos dictatorship.

This further galvanized his belief in the power of solidarity and collective action.

– These experiences have since served as a very important foundation for my work with trade unions within and beyond national borders.

– My work with BWI began in 1997 when I was hired as the national project coordinator of the International Federation of Building and Wood Workers (IFBWW) Philippine project office. In 2000 I was responsible for Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) projects of the IFBWW Asia Pacific regional office. The following year I worked as education secretary at the Geneva headquarters of the IFBWW, one of the predecessor organizations of BWI. In 2009, I was elected General Secretary of BWI at the Second BWI World Congress held in Lille, France in 2009. I was reelected for another four-year term in 2013.

## What are the global unions' most important tasks?

– Today, in a globalized world,

there is an increasing need to develop a strong and dynamic trade-union movement that will increase worker power amid the challenges of a global economic crisis and a tremendous backlash from conservative governments pushing austerity measures that drastically affect the lives of workers throughout the world.

– In a globalized world, multinational companies move and operate freely across national boundaries without any real restrictions. Yet, in addressing multinational companies, trade unions are still fixated nationally rather than looking at international trade-union representation.

– We need to reverse this mind-set, so that national and local struggles are defined from a strong international basis. Trade unions need to strengthen their ties and utilize the resources of their own unions, national centers and global unions to build a global movement and face multinational companies in their operations and throughout supply-chain production. We need to begin to build the capacity of trade unions to reinforce the global labor movement's clout and enhance the capacity to operate across borders, while considering local interests.

– At BWI our motto is, Jobs for all. Justice for all. Unions

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One of BWI's major global campaigns is the Campaign for Decent Work in Sports Events, which focuses on international megasports events such as the World Cup.

make it possible. This is the basis of a powerful global trade-union movement.

### **How is BWI organized?**

– BWI groups together 326 trade unions representing 12 million members in over 130 countries. Our affiliates organize workers in the building, building materials, wood, forestry and allied sectors. Headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland. BWI regional offices and project offices are located in Panama, Malaysia, South Africa, India, Burkina Faso, Lebanon, Chile, Kenya, Russia, Peru, Brazil and Thailand.

### **How can you help your local trade unions?**

– BWI provides vital tools that are necessary for local unions to aggressively recruit and organize workers into trade unions. At the same time, BWI actively engages at the global and regional level with multinational companies, international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and regional development banks and forest certified bodies such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) to support local unions in their organizing campaigns.

– BWI mobilizes international support and solidarity for local unions in their organizing campaigns and in their struggles for political democracy and against trade union repression by governments and employers.

– BWI ensures representation for local unions to negotiate collective bargaining agreements to ensure decent work, safe and healthy working conditions, a living wage and the essential social-safety net.

### **What are your most important issues and campaigns?**

– BWI members strongly believe that the future of the global trade-union movement is dependent upon our ability to organize, organize and

organize. It is only by organizing workers into trade unions that we will be able to increase trade union clout and power to effectively push and negotiate for changes with employers, governments and international bodies. There are a number of issues and campaigns that BWI is working on and the following are just a few.

#### ***Global organizing campaigns rooted in local militancy***

– BWI has launched several global organizing campaigns targeting multinational companies such as IKEA and infrastructure projects in Panama, Uganda and Serbia. These campaigns have been successful through the local militant organizing efforts of our affiliates.

#### ***No merger without worker rights***

– Earlier this year two cement giants, Lafarge and Holcim, announced a merger that would undoubtedly impact the international cement sector and the workers in the industry. BWI, along with IndustriALL Global Union, called for the companies to be more transparent in the merger process. BWI and IndustriALL launched a global campaign to ensure that worker rights are respected in the merger process.

#### ***No World Cup without worker rights***

– One of BWI's major global campaigns is the Campaign for Decent Work in Sports Events, which focuses on international megasports events such as the World Cup. Through this campaign, BWI affiliates in South Africa recruited over 35,000 workers, and in Brazil close to 60,000 workers joined the trade union. Now, BWI is pushing forward the campaign in Russia and Qatar, the two countries that will respectively host the 2018 World Cup and the 2022 World Cup.

– BWI is demanding governments of both host countries, FIFA and construction companies to ensure decent work for the construction workers who are responsible for building the stadiums,

infrastructure projects and other facilities related to the World Cup. In both countries, the majority of the work force is made up of migrant workers. In Qatar, 99 percent of construction workers are migrant workers who have no rights under a feudal kafala and exit-visa system. Unless workers, including migrant workers, are guaranteed fundamental labor rights, there can be no World Cup.

***BWI CONNECT—Defending the rights of migrant workers***

– Although migration is not a new phenomenon in the BWI sectors, with globalization there has been a dramatic increase of workers migrating for decent work. Migrant workers have contributed tremendously to the political, economic and social development of many countries; however, they are often exploited by employers and recruiting agencies, excluded from the legal framework of social safety nets and face severe racism. Through BWI CONNECT, BWI works with its affiliates to develop and implement organizing campaigns targeting migrant workers and ensuring rights-based policies for migrant workers at the national, regional and global level.

***Sustainable construction, sustainable forestry and sustainable jobs***

– Climate change affects us all, not least all workers. There are no jobs on a dead planet. Deforestation is the second largest source of carbon in the atmosphere. That is why BWI lobbies for sustainable forestry management by participating in the FSC and other forestry certification schemes.

***Ensuring safe workplaces***

– In construction at least 108 000 workers are killed on site every year. That figure represents 30

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**The construction industry has a deservedly notorious reputation as being dirty, difficult and dangerous.**

percent of all fatal injuries. One person dies every five minutes because of bad and illegal working conditions. The construction industry has a deservedly notorious reputation as being dirty, difficult and dangerous. Tropical loggers stand a one-in-ten risk of being killed over a working lifetime. Sawmills are increasingly subcontracted and hazardous, while woodworking continues to rely on the workers' skills to avoid injuries rather than on any prevention measures.

***Stop child labor***

– Children are our future and yet, in many countries, instead of being in the classrooms to enrich their minds, they are working. For example, in the low-paid and hazardous brick-kiln industry, one of the most important building-materials industries in South Asia, a large proportion of the workers are children.

– The BWI Child Labor Project specifically targets this sector in India and Nepal. The campaign has not only pulled more than 10,000 children from work and brought them into the educational fold but has also been instrumental in creating mass awareness and safeguarding worker rights.

***Promoting gender equality***

– Women workers are often in precarious forms of work and paid less than their male counterparts with very little social benefits. They also face employment discrimination and sexual harassment. BWI works to increase the number of women in our sectors who are organized in trade unions. We promote equal pay for equal value and advocate against gender discrimination and gender-based violence.

**Tommy Svensson**

# The world needs union political cooperation

Jens Orback, General Secretary of the Olof Palme International Center

– **The greatest challenge today** is the economic and social division in the world. One way to combat it is through more cooperation between trade unions and political parties, says Jens Orback, General Secretary of the Olof Palme International Center.

He believes it is natural for unions to engage in political struggle. Political reform provides security for union members, which also significantly strengthens the trade union in the workplace.

– It is much easier to go out on strike if you know your children can go to school and your parents have care even if you lose your job.

**He stresses that** the conditions for a trade union movement to cooperate with political parties vary considerably between countries. Collaboration should not only be national but local and global.

– It is fundamental to share the

same values and an ideological conviction regarding equal rights, justice, and people's opportunities to grow and improve their lives.

The confidence of the parties in each other is important for cooperation. After working for an extended time together, the results become clear to both parties.

The political party can deliver reforms that strengthen worker rights and conditions. Unions can be a popular force that contribute to and facilitate political support, for example, in elections.

– However, one must respect those roles, says Jens Orback. The union seeks to protect its members; the political party has multiple interests to represent.

– But if the political party fails to deliver or becomes autocratic while in office, it should not expect the union to mobilize its members in future elections. You only get what you give.

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It is much easier to go out on strike if you know your children can go to school and your parents have care even if you lose your job.

**But if there is no party to collaborate with?**

– Then the trade union movement may have to start a party, as it did successfully in Sweden over a hundred years ago and in the Philippines twenty years ago.

**Jens Orback has** the (whole) world as his field of work. He believes the trade union movement has progressed further than the political system in its attempts to achieve international cooperation in the face of today's global challenges.

– For the unions the problems of globalization are concrete and present. They can sense them, he says. They see what happens when capital moves freely, wages are dumped, working conditions worsenes and production located where it is cheapest and at the expense of working conditions.

– People both want to and are forced to move across national borders. Therefore, we must

have global political contracts and agreements so that the transition can be made under decent conditions.

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The union seeks to protect its members; the political party has multiple interests to represent.”

**He cites the work** on the New Global Deal conducted by the Progressive Alliance initiated in part by Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven. It is an example of a contract between labor and capital on a global scale that is designed to assure workers' human rights and the right to form and maintain a union organization.

– It resembles the consensus politics that characterizes the Scandinavian model, says Jens Orback. It may not suit everyone right now, but on the other hand, it has shown good, sustainable results.

**Tommy Svensson**

# Links and References

## **International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)**

[www.ituc-csi.org](http://www.ituc-csi.org)

## **Global unions**

[www.global-unions.org](http://www.global-unions.org)

## **Progressive alliance**

<http://progressive-alliance.info/en/>

## **Global union federations**

### **Building and Wood Workers International (BWI)**

[www.bwint.org](http://www.bwint.org)

### **Education International (EI)**

[www.ei-ie.org](http://www.ei-ie.org)

### **International Arts and Entertainment Alliance (IAEA)**

[www.iaea-globalunion.org](http://www.iaea-globalunion.org)

### **International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)**

[www.ifj.org](http://www.ifj.org)

### **Industrialall**

[www.industrialall-union.org](http://www.industrialall-union.org)

### **International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF)**

[www.itfglobal.org](http://www.itfglobal.org)

## **International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)**

[www.ituc-csi.org](http://www.ituc-csi.org)

## **International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF)**

[www.iuf.org](http://www.iuf.org)

## **Public Services International (PSI)**

[www.world-psi.org](http://www.world-psi.org)

## **Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC)**

[www.tuac.org](http://www.tuac.org)

## **UNI Global Union (UNI)**

[www.uniglobalunion.org](http://www.uniglobalunion.org)

## **Olof Palme International Center**

[www.palmecenter.se](http://www.palmecenter.se)

## **LO-TCO Secretariat of International Trade Union Development Cooperation**

[www.lotcobistand.org](http://www.lotcobistand.org)

## **Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO**

[www.lo.se](http://www.lo.se)

## **Swedish Workers' Educational Association**

[www.abf.se](http://www.abf.se)

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