

ORGANISING FOR A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT

MAY DAY 2022

We are privileged to celebrate May Day 2022 with many of the workers in the region and all over the world. However, we must not forget that there are many who cannot celebrate peacefully today.

Stop the war, create decent jobs

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is continuing.

Our heartfelt condolences are with the victims of the war and their families. We pray that following this difficult situation, their lives and those of their loved ones will return to normal as soon as possible.

Léon Jouhaux, a French trade unionist who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1951, said in his Nobel lecture:

Not only does war kill workers, destroy homes and factories which took them centuries of effort to cultivate, but it also gives man an increasingly acute feeling of his hopelessness before the forces of violence, and consequently severely retards his progress toward an age of peace, justice and well-being.

The meaning of these words deeply resonates now more than 70 years ago. War does not benefit anyone, but only those that initiate it.

Everyone aspires for decent work, quality social services, and universal social protection. Imagine if only a small part of the budget used for armaments and military spending were rather used to introduce and implement social reforms. Many people would have lived a more prosperous life and a more just society could have been created – a society free from intimidation and violence, upholding peace and people-centred development.

Backsliding democracies in the region

Why do leaders fail to promote people-centred policies?

For many years, political power has been concentrated on the elites who are either heavily influenced by corporations and the wealthy or are part of the economic and financial sectors themselves. As a result, both the political and economic systems are designed in their favour. Globalisation not only failed to reinforce workers' competitiveness, but also weakened workers' influence in global and national decision-making.

Most leaders prefer to surround themselves with opinions that validate their beliefs and ignore opposing voices. For them, a working democracy that unites peoples' voices is a threat to their tight grip of political power. Thus, leaders and their governments continue to shut down trade unions, which are a crucial mouthpiece of democracy.

In Hong Kong, immensely pressured by the crackdown carried out by the authorities, our fellow trade unions took the decision to disband. Meanwhile, the people of Myanmar were continuously overwhelmed by the military with barbaric attacks as they were about to welcome a democratic government. In Afghanistan, the Taliban once again imposed restrictions on people and snuffed out an emerging democratic society. Many countries, such as India and Indonesia, have or are trying to introduce neoliberal policies that deprive workers of the rights they have secured over many decades.



Realise a new social contract

However, despite the crackdowns and the shrinking democratic space for organising, workers are not giving up. Trade unions, throughout their history, have been constantly fighting for dignity in the workplace and for social justice for all. They have been standing up for workers' rights, marching and demanding for a minimum living wage, a maximum limit on working hours, health and safety at work, freedom of association, and the right to collective bargaining.

Now is the time to negotiate a new social contract by placing the people and the work that they do at the centre of development. All stakeholders should take responsibility for building a just and equitable future of work and ensure greater investments in people's capabilities and in decent job creation.

For a long time, workers are not able to enjoy the fruits of their labour and the fair share of wealth that they created. In order to realise a new social contract, an overwhelming majority of the people must regain their influence to be able to rewrite the rules of capitalism and the rules of politics. Realising a new social contract requires building and consolidating workers' power to collectively advance their demands and challenge the prevailing neoliberal and undemocratic economic and political order.

In this regard, trade unions play a crucial role. They must go beyond traditional trade unionism and organise the workers that have not been counted in the union movement, including workers engaged in the platform economy, migrants, women, home-based workers, the youth, and many others in informal and precarious employment. They must listen to the voices in marginalised communities, including micro, small and medium enterprises, civil society organisations, as well as other groups that share the same vision and commitment to bring about people-centred transformation in our society.

Unity and solidarity are the way forward. Let us build solidarity and march forward unitedly towards changing the rules in favour of the people and the planet, and achieving a just, sustainable, and peaceful world.

SHOYA YOSHIDA
General Secretary
ITUC-Asia Pacific