March forward in solidarity:
Advancing a new social contract for a just and inclusive future of work in Asia and the Pacific

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FOREWORD

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) – Asia Pacific was founded on 4 September 2007 in Bangalore, India, following the inauguration of the ITUC in 2006, with the vision of providing more effective representation, greater visibility and stronger influence for working people in the global economy.

Since the 4th ITUC-Asia Pacific Regional Conference in October 2019 in Tokyo, we have been experiencing an increasing sense of uncertainty and insecurity. Multiple threats from recent global trends, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and digital technology as well as the decline of democracy, have become more prominent and have posed unprecedented challenges to workers and their trade unions.

It is in this context that the ITUC-Asia Pacific presents in this paper its policy and action agenda to align our strategic direction in the next four years. This paper comprises two parts: the introduction and the presentation of the areas of action. The Introduction discusses such threats and their implications on workers and trade unions. In response to these challenges, it asserts our vision for the future of work we want and prescribes a new social contract grounded on six key workers’ demands: jobs, rights, wages, social protection, equality, and inclusion. In line with these demands, the Areas of Action outlines the 18 specific policy areas that we will prioritise in the next four years and proposes our corresponding actions to effectively advance a new social contract.

The ITUC-Asia Pacific is a community of trade unions in Asia and the Pacific, rather than a confederation or a superior body of national trade union centres. Thus, the 5th ITUC-Asia Pacific Regional Conference provides an opportunity for the member organisations to develop a stronger sense of ownership of the organisation, reaffirm solidarity among trade union movements in the region and all over the world, and decide the course of the organisation for the next four years. For these reasons, this paper does not present the Regional Conference with a solution but argues that trade unions still have much to achieve, and that the ITUC-Asia Pacific as a whole still has the potential to accomplish a great deal.

The raison d’être of the international trade union movement is to make the impossible possible through unity, solidarity and collective representation. Although, indeed, not all can be realised, what one worker or one union alone cannot accomplish can be attained by connecting them with others around the region and across the world. International solidarity forms part of the heritage of trade union movements. This 5th Regional Conference has the clear responsibility to further forge and reinforce trade union solidarity and pass it on to the next generation.

22 November 2023

Shoya Yoshida
General Secretary
INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, our daily lives and work are influenced by global challenges, such as natural disasters, epidemics, famine, conflict, violence, discrimination, poverty and inequality. No matter how huge the challenges, trade unions in Asia and the Pacific have been ceaselessly working to overcome them with whatever strength or means they have. This Introduction analyses recent global trends and their implications for workers, describes how to realise the future of work we want according to six key workers’ demands, and proposes trade union potential on how to achieve them.

Threats from recent global trends

1. The COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic not only took away millions of lives and created a global health emergency; it also drove economies to an unprecedented crisis and pushed millions of people back to poverty and joblessness. In a short period of time, the development progress that had been achieved in the past decade was reversed.

Immediately after the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic, the world of work was ravaged almost instantly. Lockdown measures to contain the spread of the virus halted economic activities, triggering the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression and breeding massive joblessness in the region.

We have witnessed the fragility of economies that overly depend on export-oriented production rather than on addressing local needs and boosting domestic consumption. The pandemic drastically reduced the demand for products that are distributed through global supply chains, which caused many production lines to be shut down and millions of workers, mainly in developing nations, to lose their jobs.

Domestically, workers in various sectors got displaced from their jobs and livelihoods when lockdowns were imposed. Where jobs survived, working hours were substantially reduced, therefore slashing the incomes of affected workers. Among the hardest hit by the impacts of the pandemic are vulnerable workers, including women, youth, migrant workers, and workers in the informal economy. Often without guaranteed social protection, they are not primed to withstand unprecedented economic shocks, especially for an extended period of uncertainty.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic made the working conditions in Asia and the Pacific more precarious than ever as it brought about graver threats to workers’ health and safety and workers’ rights. Workers who served in the frontlines were subjected to health risks without adequate personal protective equipment, additional benefits (e.g., hazard pay, paid leaves, etc.), or the right to refuse work.

Meanwhile, as workers were reeling from the impacts of the pandemic on their jobs and health, some governments in the region used the pandemic to justify the suspension of labour laws as well as the introduction of regressive neoliberal policies that eroded previously won labour and human rights. Also, in the guise of pandemic response, they enforced policies and measures that crack down on different forms of dissent and effectively curtail people’s civil and political rights, including the right to peacefully assemble and protest.

Years of ill-guided austerity measures, coupled with the privatisation of public services, have undermined countries’ capacity to adequately tackle the pandemic. Severely under-resourced public health care systems collapsed at the height of the pandemic, resulting in high rates of COVID-19 mortality and transmission. Moreover, social protection systems in the region were
proven deficient in providing safety nets to the most vulnerable, while education systems were met with challenges in devising alternative modes of teaching-learning that are accessible to all students and educators.

While governments implemented policies that could mitigate the impacts of the pandemic, such responses were unable to reach the people who needed them the most. To fill the gap in government actions, trade unions in the region have been instrumental in helping their members and other workers. Through campaigns and lobbying with their respective governments as well as bargaining with employers, trade unions were able to push for policies and programmes that support workers in alleviating the impacts of the pandemic, such as the payment of wages/compensation during the suspension of business operations; direct provision of personal protective equipment, food and basic amenities; introduction of paid pandemic leaves; and recognition of COVID-19 as an occupational disease, among others.

While the world looks past the long-term effects of COVID-19 and the lack of effective public supports, we must apply the lessons learned in the years of the pandemic to prevent and address the negative impacts of infectious diseases in the future.

2. Climate change

The *Sixth Assessment Report* of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published in August 2021 concluded: "It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred."\(^1\) Earlier in 2013, the *Fifth Assessment Report* claimed that "it is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming."\(^2\)

During the Anthropocene,\(^3\) humans have been mainly causing climate change through the unprecedented burning of fossil fuels, coupled with the pervasive and unsustainable extraction of natural resources. As a result of the warming of the earth and the changing climate, we have been witnessing and experiencing various natural phenomena that humans cannot control, such as super typhoons, hurricanes, massive flooding and wildfires.

Many countries in Asia and the Pacific are vulnerable to climate change impacts and are already experiencing extreme weather events, even if the global temperature has not reached 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial levels. Breaching the global warming threshold of 1.5 degrees will result in multiple and compound climate risks, making a large population in the region more vulnerable to poverty.

It is important to highlight that the poor and the developing countries contribute the least to global warming, but they disproportionately bear the brunt of the adverse and devastating impacts of climate change. Meanwhile, the wealthy, huge corporations and developed countries contribute the most to greenhouse gas emissions, and they should have the greater

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3. "Anthropocene" is a term proposed to refer to the era in which human economic activities have become central drivers of planetary change, particularly after the industrial revolution in the late 18\(^{th}\) and early 19\(^{th}\) centuries.
responsibility not only to take urgent climate actions but also to support vulnerable countries in adapting to climate change impacts.

Climate change is an issue that cannot be postponed any further. If we do not take united action now, the damage on the planet and the impacts on the people can be irreversible.

Unfortunately, the current development approaches strongly prioritise economic growth over environmental sustainability and equitable human development. This paradigm has not only induced the exploitation of natural resources and destruction of the planet in the name of profit but also intensified poverty and inequality. It is therefore imperative to seek a new vision different from capitalist-driven economic growth – one that puts the people and the planet at the centre of development.

The COVID-19 pandemic must serve as a warning that the business-as-usual approach to development could lead to a global catastrophe. It revealed that the lack of preparedness and resilience to extreme shocks has a high cost to the economy and can drastically reverse past development gains. Climate change impacts can displace workers from their jobs and communities, leading to massive unemployment and climate migration. Moreover, they also have serious human rights implications, threatening people’s rights to life, food, health, water and sanitation, housing and others; and the impacts cause disproportionate burden on vulnerable groups, especially women and children.

Addressing the climate crisis, like recovering from the pandemic, requires integrated and transformative policies that are geared towards building socially and environmentally just economies. However, the path towards building socially and environmentally just economies has roadblocks and challenges. For instance, green economic restructuring and industrial transformation can result in the displacement of workers, wiping out of jobs and reorganisation of work, while social protection systems in the region remain underdeveloped and unresponsive to the vulnerabilities caused or exacerbated by climate change, such as in the context of transitioning to a low-carbon economy or adapting to climate change impacts.

Indeed, climate change is a threat to the people and the planet; yet, it also presents an opportunity to advance transformative changes to our economic systems. In this regard, trade unions have been fighting for a Just Transition to ensure that workers are not left behind in the process of transitioning to a low-carbon economy. A Just Transition is an opportunity to create millions of decent and climate-friendly jobs and to reinvigorate social dialogue with trade unions at the table, with a voice in planning for a resilient, sustainable and inclusive future.

3. Digital technology

Digital technology has become an integral part of people’s lives. It has transformed the way we do things – often, towards increased efficiency, such as when we communicate or acquire information. In general, technological innovations can be a tool to promote inclusion by bridging the gap between the haves and the have-nots. They have the potential to improve people’s lives by creating jobs, providing opportunities for skills development, facilitating the human dimension of quality service provision, and ensuring human security.

However, digital technology has also posed new threats to human rights and security, such as data fraud, cyberattacks, and violation of privacy. Social media, for instance, have amplified such risks as they are utilised as platforms for disinformation and misinformation, hate speech, and other forms of crimes that target the vulnerable, including women, gender-diverse persons, children and the elderly. In some countries, digital technology has been used to manipulate public opinions in support of political campaigns and positions. While some governments seek to address these threats through regulations, such mechanisms sometimes constitute serious restrictions on individual liberties.
Digital technology has also contributed to the fragmentation of work, breakdown of employment relationships, and increasing insecurity of workers. For instance, digital labour platforms have further fuelled the growth of the informal labour force. Since their inception, these platforms have claimed that they provide a digital solution that connects “independent contractors” to the demand for ride-hailing, food delivery, cleaning, and other personal or professional services via an application in return for a commission. Presenting themselves as online services rather than as employers has enabled digital platforms to evade employers’ responsibilities and save on labour costs.

Platform workers are minutely controlled by artificial intelligence-based algorithms which substantially shape their working conditions, influencing their working hours, as well as task allocation, performance evaluation and pay. Due to the lack of legislation applicable to this new type of employment in most countries in the region, the workers are often classified as self-employed and excluded from the scope of labour law and social protection. Based on this categorisation, platform workers face decent work challenges as they are deprived of guaranteed access to fundamental rights at work, such as freedom of association and collective bargaining, occupational health and safety (including maximum working hours), job security and others.

As the platform economy continues to expand, the need to properly regulate digital platforms is more urgent than ever. Platform workers must be recognised as workers who are entitled to the same workers’ rights and standards that other employees enjoy.

4. Backsliding democracies

A growing number of people are now disillusioned with democracy because of its failure to uphold people’s sovereignty. As societies become more fragmented and divided with increasing inequality and uncertainty, many people feel that they are not genuinely represented and that their circumstances and voices are not reflected in politics.

Populism has arisen from this disillusionment with democracy. It implies that leaders embody the people; however, in reality, populist leaders tend to discriminate and fuel attacks against opposition voices who are, more often than not, from minority groups and marginalised sectors of the society, including human and workers’ rights defenders.

At the same time, dictatorship remains a threat to democracy. We have witnessed how the military junta in Myanmar forcibly seized political power through a violent coup d’état. As of this writing, human rights violations in Myanmar continue unabated. Extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, tortures, burning of villages, and airstrikes were carried out to suppress those who resisted the junta. Moreover, under the autocratic rule, labour organisations were declared illegal and unionists were under attack.

War is another threat not only to democracy but also to global peace and human security. With Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, there is a growing debate whether the military should be further strengthened. Some argue that in order to deter war, it is necessary to maintain an appropriate level of military power, which necessitates public financing. However, is it something that should be done amid the dwindling fiscal space for social spending and other more pressing economic and social challenges?

Most leaders prefer to surround themselves with opinions that validate their beliefs and ignore opposing views. For them, a working democracy that welcomes people’s voices is a threat to their tight grip on political power. Thus, leaders and their governments continue to shut down trade unions, which are crucial vanguards of democracy. Trade unions, however, are not
giving up despite the shrinking democratic space, increasing human and workers’ rights abuses, and constant crackdown against unionists.

Throughout their history, trade unions have been relentlessly fighting for dignity in the workplace and for social justice for all. We should not compromise the democracy that we have defended over centuries and must continue to hold governments accountable for their violations of human and workers’ rights in accordance with international rules.

We must also promote people’s inclusion in policymaking processes. To advance people’s interests, it is necessary to ensure multi-layered representation, including through dialogue, and maximise other channels, beyond elections, to amplify people’s voices. Dialogues grounded on people’s meaningful participation are needed to decide the course of nations.

**Six demands for a new social contract**

While it is primarily governments that implement policies, a well-functioning democracy must include workers’ voices in all policymaking processes – from design and implementation to monitoring and evaluation. Workers must not passively accept or follow the policies determined by governments; rather, they must actively participate in policymaking, especially on issues that directly affect their work and lives.

In the face of the threats from recent global trends, we have witnessed how governments and the prevailing systems are not adequately built to overcome multiple crises. If we want to make a difference to the current rules, we need to negotiate a new social contract between governments and the people, including workers, trade unions and businesses, a new social contract that places the people and the work they do at the centre of development. Towards this goal, societies must be built on democratic participation, genuine representation, and respect for human rights to allow all stakeholders to effectively play a role in building a just and inclusive future of work.

We call for a new social contract to be founded on six demands: jobs, rights, wages, social protection, equality, and inclusion.

1. Jobs

We want a future of work where all are able to participate in society and are empowered to break out of poverty and challenge the intersecting roots of their oppression and marginalisation. In order to realise such a future, we must ensure that opportunities for decent work – based on the four pillars of productive and freely chosen employment, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue – are created and expanded to the maximum extent possible.

All policies, including the macroeconomic, growth, financial, industrial, tax, fiscal, social protection and labour market ones, must aim at growing a real economy that produces high value-added goods and services based on decent work for all. In this regard, social dialogue and solidarity are key to rebalancing economic, social and environmental objectives. Governments must then institutionalise dialogue mechanisms that facilitate meaningful participation of trade unions and employers in policymaking, including other stakeholders such as the communities where businesses operate.

In the face of the evolving world of work, the skills required in the future will be different from the conventional ones. It is necessary to: (1) enhance active labour market policies, such as employment services, vocational training and lifelong learning; (2) adopt gender-equitable policies, including promoting work-life balance and strengthening the care economy, to
facilitate the participation of women and other potential entrants to the labour market; and (3) create an inclusive and safe working environment free from violence and harassment so that older persons, persons with disabilities, and other highly excluded groups of people are able to participate in the job market without prejudice, threats or discrimination. Growth must be achieved by taking a high-road approach based on decent and quality work and breaking away from the low-road strategy of relying on precarious employment with low wages, insecurity and exploitative working conditions.

Governments must increase investments in care, health, education and other public services. These sectors have a huge potential to create community-based, human-intensive and stable jobs where demands are not affected by the economic situation or pressure from the overseas market. Moreover, not only are these sectors predictable in the long run, but they are also key in building resilient societies. Cuts in public spending on quality services have undermined countries’ capacity to adequately tackle disasters and upheavals. In times of economic crisis, governments must maintain systematic and timely public spending as they can stimulate a certain level of domestic consumption and employment.

A just transition from the informal to the formal economy has assumed an added urgency in the COVID-19 pandemic, as informal workers, who comprise the majority of the region’s working population, have been found to be the most vulnerable and the most heavily affected. Lacking formal employment contracts and clear employment relationships, informal workers, from the self-employed to those in the newly emerging digital platforms, are not protected by legislation and social security systems, nor eligible to join trade unions and to bargain collectively.

In the light of the climate emergency, the creation of green and climate-friendly jobs with Just Transition can be a new engine of sustainable growth in both developed and developing economies while contributing to poverty eradication and social inclusion. With the involvement of trade unions, governments must develop and implement Just Transition plans and policies to address decent work creation, poverty eradication and environmental sustainability in a coherent, integrated manner. Social dialogue must be at the core of Just Transition as it is “an integral part of the institutional framework for policy-making and implementation at all levels.”

2. Rights

We want a future of work where workers’ rights take primacy over corporate greed and profit. A just future of work is one where fundamental rights and principles at work are protected and guaranteed for all workers, without exclusion, and where international labour standards are implemented.

In democracies, it is the people who hold sovereign power over leaders, legislators and governments. All are born with inalienable rights that empower them to pursue lives of dignity. Every government must protect basic human rights, such as freedom of speech and religion, the entitlement to equal protection under the law, and the right to organise and fully participate in political, economic and cultural life. All governments are, with a few exceptions, committed to this responsibility through a number of international treaties and covenants on human rights, including the international labour standards of the International Labour Organization (ILO). However, despite such commitments, the national implementation remains sorely lacking.

The ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work commits governments and social partners to guarantee: (1) respect for fundamental rights at work, (2) an adequate minimum

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living wage, (3) maximum limits on working hours, and (4) safety and health at work. These rights should be respected and applied to any group of workers, including informal workers, domestic workers, migrant workers and platform workers.

Trade unions are advocates and enablers of rights at and beyond work. In a stable political climate where trade unions are free to organise their activities, the rights to be free from forced labour and child labour, to enjoy equal opportunity and treatment in employment, to work in a safe and healthy environment, and to be paid a decent living wage, among others, will be respected, allowing workers to enjoy dignified work and life. Unfortunately, in many countries in Asia and the Pacific, trade union repression and workers’ rights violations are unbridled and alarming, cementing the position of the region as the second worst for workers in the world.

Therefore, we continue to give the highest priority to realising fundamental rights at work, most importantly freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining through the promotion of the ratification and application of the ILO’s Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87) and Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98). The ratification of these two relevant ILO Conventions in Asia and the Pacific is much lower than in Africa, the Americas and Europe. Where these conventions are ratified, meanwhile, the suppression of trade union activities remains rampant due to governments’ poor implementation of national laws and employers’ non-compliance with the labour standards.

Governments have the duty to protect while employers have the responsibility to respect workers’ rights. However, many governments, especially those with autocratic tendencies, are the main violators of workers’ rights, particularly the rights to organise, collectively bargain and strike. They also fail in their responsibility to hold businesses accountable for their human and workers’ rights abuses, including in the supply chains and in the platform economy. Meanwhile, powerful corporations exert their influence on governments to write the rules in their favour, while employers evade their obligations under labour laws by increasing labour flexibilisation and disguising employment relationships.

Governments must ratify and effectively implement the international labour conventions and strengthen labour inspections to ensure effective compliance of businesses with labour standards. They must prohibit precarious work arrangements that deny workers their rights and decent working conditions. They must also recognise the crucial role of unions in safeguarding workers’ rights and driving social and economic progress. This development means full protection of the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining, including putting a stop to the attacks against trade union leaders and organisers who exercise their rights.

3. Wages

We want a future of work where workers’ contribution to the society and the economy is fully recognised and rightfully compensated and where minimum living wages enable workers to meet their needs and live a life of dignity.

Over the past 10 years prior to the pandemic, economies in Asia and the Pacific grew steadily. However, the share of labour income was declining, indicating that the gains of economic growth remain concentrated in the hands of the capital. This is unsurprising as many employers attempt to maximise short-term profits by cutting labour expenses. But it should be

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noted that the decline in labour income share has widened the inequality between capital and labour and has stagnated the economy.

The invaluable contribution of wages to the society and the economy must be recognised. Wages feed not only the workers and their families but also their countries' economic growth. When wages remain stagnant, consumption is not stimulated, tax revenues fall, and gross domestic product (GDP) shrinks. Thus, governments must shift from the current market-driven to an income-led growth model, based on pro-labour distributional and redistributional policies, accompanied by legislative and structural measures that are aimed at building strong and effective labour market institutions. Income-led growth will not simply increase wages but will also ensure the fair distribution of wealth, increase productivity, and boost the growth of businesses as well as the economy as a whole.

Moreover, there should be a legally binding minimum living wage at a sufficient and realistic level as a floor of income. Contrary to the assumption that higher wages weaken corporate competitiveness and increase unemployment, many studies argue that higher wages ensure a quality workforce, increase productivity and national competitiveness, boost domestic demands, enhance social cohesion, and support sustainable and inclusive growth. Governments should establish a machinery based on social dialogue to determine minimum living wages above the national poverty line and based on the socially acceptable basic needs of workers and their families to live with dignity, in reference to economic and industrial conditions.

To push for decent and living wages for workers, trade unions and collective bargaining are imperative. Collective bargaining is the most effective way to determine the adequate level of pay; it allows employers and trade unions to negotiate wages and other working conditions based on a common understanding of labour standards, the conditions of the national economy, labour market and households, and the performance of their companies. To maximise the benefits of collective bargaining between social partners, governments must adopt and effectively implement legal frameworks in compliance with the ILO fundamental Conventions, especially freedom of association and collective bargaining. These efforts will create a stable political climate for social partners, including trade unions as co-equal partners, to operate and collaborate in the spirit of social dialogue towards resilient, sustainable and inclusive growth.

4. **Social protection**

We want a future of work where all workers, irrespective of employment arrangements, enjoy guaranteed social protection that could safeguard them from life-cycle contingencies and build their resilience to economic, social and climate vulnerabilities.

The recent multiple crises have exposed that millions of people are unprepared to withstand economic, climate-induced and health-related shocks. The lack of social protection during times of catastrophe has not only weakened their resilience but also further exacerbated the existing inequalities, poverty and, in turn, social unrest. The COVID-19 pandemic makes a strong case for governments to develop and maintain universal and comprehensive social protection measures including floors, such as social assistance and social insurance that

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6 A minimum living wage is a statutorily guaranteed sum of payment for work performed or services without any abatement by individual or collective bargaining as a minimum floor of wages. The level, determined by bipartite or tripartite mechanisms, should be sufficient for socially acceptable essential needs to enable workers and their families to live with dignity and to participate as active citizens in society. Economic and industrial conditions as well as social conditions can be referred to in setting the level but it must be above the national poverty line.
covers health care, old age, unemployment, sickness, occupational diseases and accidents, childcare and maternity, and even climate-induced disasters, among other aspects.

In designing a social protection system, governments must achieve twin goals. On the one hand, it must be aimed at securing a life of dignity for every person, without any discrimination, whenever they face risks throughout their life cycle; on the other hand, it must help people transition from welfare to work. Towards these goals, governments should establish rights-based social protection programmes in accordance with the ILO’s Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102) and Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202). Social protection must be designed to incentivise being engaged in productive work while preventing or reducing poverty among the unemployed.

Unfortunately, the participation in social insurance programmes in the region is often limited by the type of employment contract, the number of hours worked, and the size of the enterprise. The scope should be expanded as much as possible. Governments must work together with social partners towards the universal coverage of social insurance in addition to social assistance.

Expanding fiscal space is of vital importance to sustainably realising universal and comprehensive social protection. There are many ways to create or expand fiscal space. The most sustainable way is through taxation, which also serves as an effective mechanism for redistributing income and reducing inequality. However, many low- and middle-income countries heavily rely on social assistance financed by poor tax systems. In addition, with no or underdeveloped contributory mechanisms for social insurances, most workers cannot enjoy the protection. Also, persistently under-resourced as well as outdated active labour market policies cannot accommodate just transition from current challenges towards the sustainable and inclusive future we want.

In full cooperation with social partners, governments must reform their tax systems by broadening the tax base in a progressive manner so that a wider range of people can fairly share the responsibility of ensuring the sustainability of social protection floors. To finance social protection in low-income countries, we advocate for the establishment of a global fund for social protection. Such a fund is affordable, whether the funding comes from official development assistance or from other sources, including billionaires’ or wealth tax and a minimum corporate tax on multinational companies. Improving the global governance on taxation to tackle tax avoidance, tax evasion and illicit financial flows can also effectively enhance resource mobilisation that can finance social protection. These measures will not only provide resources for social protection but will also contribute to reducing global inequality.

5. Equality

The future of work we want is one without discrimination, harassment, or violence, regardless of gender, class or caste, race, age, disability or indigenous status, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics, or employment status. We want work that includes everybody, where all people can enjoy genuine peace, both social and personal, and fairly benefit from economic growth and share in prosperity.

Promoting equality for all entails challenging and dismantling the systems of oppression at all levels and amplifying the voices of women, youth, other marginalised and vulnerable workers, and equity-seeking groups. First and foremost, it is paramount to eliminate gender-based violence and harassment to achieve a gender-equal world of work. Meanwhile, to support women’s full participation in the economy, it is vital to build a solid care economy that promotes the equitable sharing of unpaid care responsibilities, while increasing public investments in care services – health, education, child and aged care, and other social care services. Gender-based occupational segregation across sectors and job categories must also be tackled by
improving women’s access to sectors and jobs where they are under-represented, for example in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM). Moreover, education, re-education, vocational training, re-training and lifelong learning must be guaranteed for all, without distinction, to facilitate the employment of jobseekers as well as those who have been discouraged to be active in the labour market due to skills mismatches.

The principles of equal pay for work of equal value and anti-discrimination must be upheld to ensure decent wages for all, without distinction. Governments must work together with social partners to ensure that all employers, regardless of company size, pay salaries in accordance with these principles. They must also develop measures to identify and address gender wage gaps (e.g., pay transparency tools, employer pay gap reporting, equal pay audit, and gender-neutral job classifications) as well as to provide remedies for workers who were discriminated and unfairly treated.

The universal application of social protection programmes must be guaranteed to all, without distinction, in legislation and in practice. As majority of women are excluded from social protection, governments must ensure equitable access to gender-responsive social protection systems and programmes that take into account not only the contingencies throughout the life cycle but also the diversity of women’s experiences.

6. Inclusion

We want a future of work where trade unions and workers are represented and included in policymaking processes that affect their lives. We want a future where peace and democracy thrive, where systemic barriers to people’s access to rights and justice are eliminated, and where everyone benefits from economic growth.

Our highly unequal societies have enabled social exclusion to perpetuate, generally affecting marginalised and disadvantaged groups in the society. Social exclusion has become more pronounced during the pandemic; we have witnessed how the marginalised and the disadvantaged have been systematically excluded from testing and treatment, vaccination, social assistance and government subsidies, digitalisation and education, among others. Moreover, wars and conflicts have exacerbated social exclusion and continue to imperil human lives and security. The ongoing threat of nuclear war and arms race diverts public resources from social services that could have been strengthened for the benefit of the working people.

All individuals have inherent human rights that entitle them to be treated equally under the law and to participate in public debate about the society they live in. They must have equal access to opportunities and public services, such as health care and education, that allow them to enjoy decent work and lives. When these rights are not protected or are actively denied by governments, people will be left behind and excluded from society and are likely to fall into poverty.

Social exclusion is largely a result of the disadvantaged groups’ lack of representation and voice in policymaking spaces that affect their social, economic and political life. Hence, it is not only the policy measures towards building a just and inclusive society that should be grounded on inclusion but also the mechanisms by which they are designed, decided and implemented.

Social dialogue is one way to include the voice of the workers in shaping policies at the workplace and nationally and globally. Past crises have shown that social dialogue can be an effective mechanism to formulate and implement recovery measures that are responsive to the needs of the workers as well as the employers. However, labour governance in some countries in the region is moribund, making it difficult for social dialogue to effectively work. It
is therefore essential to reform labour governance to promote and institutionalise social
dialogue at all levels and in all issues that directly affect workers’ lives.

At the global level, the governance model must be reshaped to ensure inclusion in tackling
global problems. Currently, global governance mechanisms tend to be dominated by powerful
developed countries that are influenced by big corporations. In this regard, multilateralism
must make development work for the planet and the people, especially the marginalised and
the disadvantaged. It must be geared towards ensuring that the benefits of the globalised
economy are fairly distributed, income inequality is reduced, and global challenges, such as
the pandemic, climate emergency and digitalisation, are collectively addressed under the
principles of genuine international cooperation.

Multilateralism must move away from policies that support a model of economic growth that
exacerbates inequalities and uneven development. To truly realise recovery and resilience, it
must involve social partners to counteract the power imbalance in global governance and
centre its actions towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Organising for a new social contract

Economic, social and political rules have been designed under the influence of large
companies, major financial businesses and institutional investors. In order to change the rules
to benefit the vast majority of people, including all workers and their families, and to uphold
social justice for all, we must rebuild a countervailing force to gain stronger bargaining power
in the negotiation for a new social contract.

1. Building workers’ power

Our vision is to build a trade union movement with a strong bargaining power to negotiate for
a new social contract towards realising a just and inclusive future of work in Asia and the
Pacific.

The threats from the recent global trends have not been formidable enough to tame the ever-
growing power and influence of the wealthy and the huge corporations. For instance, during
the pandemic, we have witnessed how billionaires and huge corporations continue to amass
wealth and profits while the working population suffers from the impacts of the multiple crises.
Their power and influence allow them to exert immense pressure on governments and
multilateral institutions to write the rules in their favour.

Building workers’ power and strengthening the trade union movement are key to challenging
the mounting influence of the wealthy and the corporations. By joining and organising unions,
workers can be agents of change and collectively become the leading force that advances a
new social contract grounded on jobs, rights, wages, social protection, equality, and inclusion.
It is worth highlighting that despite the constant attacks against workers and trade unions,
there are notable cases in the region where trade union solidarity and collective action have
been able to rewrite the rules and address the concerns of the working people.

However, countries in Asia and the Pacific have recorded low trade union density rate of 10
per cent or lower. Despite the trade unions’ huge potential then to advance the workers’
agenda in various fronts, majority of the workers do not benefit from the collective bargaining
of trade unions. It is therefore imperative for trade unions to expand their membership by
organising the unorganised – to extend the benefits of unionism to a greater number of
workers and to reinforce the trade unions’ bargaining power.
We all know that organising is not an easy task as it requires innovations and renewal of strategies to adapt to the changing environment that has become more restrictive to organising. Despite the shrinking democratic space for organising, trade unions must confront this challenge and be well prepared to reach those who are traditionally difficult to organise, with all possible means available to them, including continuous efforts and effective allocation of resources. This endeavour entails organising workers in highly informal and precarious work, including migrant, domestic and platform workers, which can be laborious and time-consuming compared to organising workers in one production line. If these unorganised workers become part of trade unions, not only will they have a better advantage in negotiating with their employers for better wages and working conditions; but their inclusion in trade unions can also strengthen the power of the labour movement and further amplify its collective demands for the working people.

Building workers’ power also necessitates strengthening trade unions’ structures and processes by upholding their democracy and independence from capital and political parties so that they genuinely represent the voices and interests of the grassroots workers. Relatedly, trade unions must ensure the participation of women, youth and other groups that have not been counted in the leadership and general activities of trade unions. Promoting youth and women’s leadership and participation will not only foster diversity and equality within trade unions but also enhance the unions’ organisational sustainability.

2. Making social dialogue work

An essential element in achieving a new social contract is rebuilding trust among social partners, which can partly be realised through meaningful and constructive social dialogue. Social dialogue can be an effective mechanism for resolving economic and social issues and for democratically shaping policies by rebalancing differing concerns of and building consensus among social partners.

However, some employers still believe that trade unions only cause negative impacts on their businesses. They try to interfere with the elections to certify unions as the bargaining representatives, take retaliatory measures against workers who are trying to form a union, and force other workers to vote to decertify the union. They also prevent the unions of their workers from joining industrial unions and national centres for fear of strengthening their bargaining power.

To make social dialogue work, governments must create an enabling environment, based on full compliance with ILO Conventions 87 and 98, that allows trade unions to operate freely without the fear of reprisal. Meanwhile, employers must commit to good faith behaviour in engaging in social dialogue with trade unions, including in collective bargaining. In a stable political climate where trade unions are recognised as co-equal partners, mutual trust and cooperation among government, employers and trade unions can be rebuilt and constructive industrial relations practices can be promoted.

It is worth noting that some enterprises have been shifting to a certain extent from the shareholder theory or the Friedman doctrine,7 which holds that the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits and to maximise returns to shareholders, to the stakeholder theory that argues “Companies must benefit all of their stakeholders, including employees, customers, and the communities in which they operate.”8

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Constructive industrial relations are not merely a mechanism between management and trade unions. They may also be beneficial to consumers, as well as subcontractors and their workers. Moreover, collective bargaining in the public sector and social services with central or local governments can represent the interests of students, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, and all other constituents of society. Working conditions in these sectors are directly linked to the quality of services, and thus autonomous and constructive industrial relations in these sectors play a crucial role in achieving the twin goals of quality social services and fiscal sustainability.

Trade unions must maximise this paradigm shift to raise the profile of social dialogue as a problem-solving mechanism that creates mutually acceptable and beneficial solutions, which are responsive to the needs of employers and workers. During the pandemic, we have witnessed cases where trade unions and employers successfully utilised social dialogue to design and implement emergency responses and recovery solutions that protect business sustainability and workers’ job security when both were threatened by the crisis.

3. Making social waves

In order to realise a new social contract, the overwhelming majority of people must regain their influence on the rules of the economy and politics. To do so, people who are not receiving the fair share of the wealth that they have created must align their political and economic interests to form a new countervailing power. Trade unions must go beyond traditional trade unionism and harness the potential to collaborate with various stakeholders in society that place utmost value on decent work.

Going beyond traditional trade unionism makes sense in the current context. The threats from the recent global trends are affecting not only the workers but also other sectors of the society. Thus, as the main advocates for social justice for all, trade unions must not only focus on the needs of their members but also broaden their collective actions to advance the interest of the wider working population, who is at the same time consumer and taxpayer, as well as other marginalised sectors.

Besides, addressing the threats would require coherent sets of policy responses that go beyond labour market policies. Hence, to advance pro-people policy measures, concerted efforts from trade unions, along with other movements and like-minded organisations, are imperative. Cross-border solidarity is also important, considering the global nature of these threats as well as the highly globalised nature of our economies. Building coalitions can increase our collective power that could counteract the influence of the dominant structures and institutions that perpetuate inequalities.

In countries where regressive laws that equally affect workers and other sectors were introduced, trade unions were able to successfully mobilise not only a strong constituency among workers but also a strong support from other sectors. Such was the case in India when workers, along with other sections of the society, organised a series of nationwide protests against the government’s anti-worker and anti-people policies. As a result, in December 2021, the government was forced to repeal the farm laws, spelling a major victory for protecting farmers from the further deterioration of their conditions.

Meanwhile, because of the sweeping effects of the Omnibus Law in Indonesia (which includes the Job Creation Law), undermining workers’ rights and environmental protection to prioritise attracting foreign direct investments, the widespread trade union-led protests across the country were broadly supported by farmers, academics, students, and other like-minded individuals and organisations. Because of public pressure and persistent lobbying, the court
ordered the government in November 2021 to amend the unconstitutional provisions of the Job Creation Law within two years.

These are only a few examples of the potential of trade unions to appeal to the broader society and gain their support. We must once again be convinced that each of us, if united, has the power to make big waves in society and turn the tide of current rules. This 5th ITUC-Asia Pacific Regional Conference gives us the opportunity to build an inclusive movement to reinforce our call for a new social contract. Solidarity is the way forward. Let us march forward in solidarity to usher in the future of work we want.
AREAS OF ACTION

The history of the trade union movement since its inception has been one of achieving social justice for all. Trade unions have never ceased in their efforts to unite the voices of individual workers. Even when they meet difficulties, their demands slowly resonate with the society, causing governments and corporations to take action. The Areas of Action elaborates the six demands and the future course of trade unions raised in the Introduction across 18 policy areas, with lists of specific proposals for actions during the Conference period from 2023 to 2027.

Jobs

1. Employment policy

Working poverty in Asia and the Pacific increased for the first time in 2020 after trending downwards for decades. The COVID-19 pandemic has reversed the decades-long record of strong economic growth in the region. Unemployment surged in 2020, adding nearly 25 million people (a 26 per cent increase).\(^9\) The increase in adult unemployment was sharp, at 32 per cent, while the number of young people joining unemployment was much less pronounced than adults as most of the young labour market entrants remain inactive. In 2022, the unemployment rate in the region stood at 5.2 per cent.

Most countries in the region are also characterised by inadequate social protection that do not provide any unemployment insurance. Spending on social protection in the region has averaged 7.5 per cent of gross domestic product, with half of the countries spending 2.6 per cent or less. These figures imply that large parts of the population cannot afford to be unemployed and, in the case of job loss, they need to take on the next best job available for them instead. Typically, these are jobs in the informal labour market, characterised by low and volatile labour incomes, lack of social protection and lack of access to social dialogue.

In the absence of effective institutionalised support including social protection, the number of workers living in extreme or moderate poverty increased by 8.3 million, reaching 303 million in 2020 or 16.7 per cent of total employment. The unemployment rate of young people aged between 15 and 24 years in the region is estimated to have reached 14.9 per cent in 2022, which is the same as the global average.

The developing economies in the region have made very little progress in increasing the share of jobs that are not vulnerable. A new ILO report shows that nearly two-thirds (65.5 per cent) of the region’s total employment in 2022 was in informal employment,\(^10\) where most lack social protection, rights at work and decent working conditions.

As more than half of the 2 billion informal workers including the self-employed, domestic workers, platform economy workers, migrant workers and other workers of the world are in Asia and the Pacific, countries in the region must urgently adopt measures that promote the formalisation of the workers in the informal economy in accordance with ILO Recommendation 204 (2015). Recovery plans must be centred on the creation of climate-friendly jobs with Just

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Transition and employment in critical areas, such as care, education and sustainable infrastructure.

The ILO Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122) stresses the importance of an active policy designed to promote full, productive and freely chosen employment. Active labour market policies, such as training, reskilling and upskilling, are crucial to job creation and economic reconstruction.

In order to rectify the current trend of high unemployment, surge in informal and precarious work, and lack of rule of employment adjustment, trade unions should urge governments to support employment protection, through coordinated action by strong tripartism, by: financing green investment, green jobs and other quality employment generation programmes; promoting an inclusive, efficient and fair labour market prioritising the integration of young women and men into the labour force; and establishing employment targets and indicators with relevant analysis and recommendation.

Social dialogue and consensus-building among workers, employers and governments are needed to reach policy and action-oriented recommendations in relation to emerging topics of special importance.

Proposed actions:
- Urge governments to develop national employment plans and policies aimed at decent job creation
- Launch campaign and advocacy initiatives for the greater allocation of resources for employment facilitation and active labour market policies
- Campaign for full employment to be a core policy objective for all governments in accordance with Convention No. 122, and for international financial and other institutions to give priority support to job creation, particularly for women and young people

2. Just Transition

Asia and the Pacific is one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change. In the recent years, we have witnessed extreme weather events in different countries in the region that destroyed workers’ lives, jobs and livelihoods, disproportionately affecting the poor and marginalised segments of the society who contribute less to global warming.

Yet, the region is also home to the world’s largest consumers and producers of coal and fossil fuels, which are the main sources of greenhouse gas emissions. The demand for coal in emerging and developing economies in the region is projected to increase to drive economic growth. Despite the continued expansion of these industries, however, energy poverty remains rampant in communities of the working poor.

The climate emergency has long been declared, yet governments have not taken swift and decisive action to combat climate change and to transition to a low-carbon economy. They continue to embrace neoliberal policies that promote and support fossil fuel subsidies, excessive extraction and commodification of natural resources, privatisation and corporatisation of energy and public services, and false solutions to climate change. At the same time, governments’ existing greening initiatives do not carefully consider their social implications on workers, such as on jobs and rights.

Over the years, unions have advanced the Just Transition agenda to ensure that workers are not left behind during the process of transitioning to a low-carbon economy. However, most nationally determined contributions (NDCs) in the region remain silent about Just Transitions. Just Transition plans and policies barely exist in the region and in some cases where they do,
they are primarily focused on green transition without clear reference to the social dimensions of transition. With the growing popularity of Just Transition, greening initiatives are increasingly being branded as Just Transition despite the lack of social dialogue and involvement of unions.

Tackling the climate crisis requires an economic transformation that decouples economic growth from the exploitation of the people and the planet. Trade unions call for a Just Transition where workers’ rights are protected and workers’ voices are included in the process of transitioning to a low-carbon economy. Just Transition can facilitate achieving climate ambition by creating decent and climate-friendly jobs across all sectors, including but not limited to renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, infrastructure, transport and tourism. It can also renew and rebuild the resilience of communities through adaptation programmes that can generate decent jobs in the communities and in the informal economy. It also ensures that workers in high-emitting sectors under the threat of being phased out are protected with adequate social protection, retraining and reskilling.

Thus, governments must integrate Just Transition in national policies and raise their climate ambition without compromising the social dimensions of their climate actions. Governments must promote and engage in social dialogue at all stages of policymaking because there is no Just Transition without social dialogue. Social dialogue mechanisms must be created and formalised in all ministries, including in the formulation and implementation of NDCs. Governments must invest public funds in Just Transition, particularly in creating decent and climate-friendly jobs, and stop using public funds to subsidise fossil fuel companies.

Meanwhile, trade unions must remain the leading voice on Just Transition, preventing the corporate capture of the concept in policy discourses. Considering the urgency of tackling the climate emergency, trade unions must include Just Transition at the top of their agenda, promote Just Transition policies at all levels (including at the workplaces), and reinforce existing Just Transition advocacy with strong public campaigns. Trade unions must also unite with the other movements to collectively advance policies that promote social and climate justice.

Proposed actions:

- Continue lobbying and advocacy for Just Transition at the national, regional and international levels, including for the formulation of national employment plans that ensure the creation of decent and climate-friendly jobs
- Initiate strong public campaigns and mobilisations for Just Transition with the active involvement of women and youth to raise awareness and further popularise the concept in the region
- Engage in bipartite social dialogue and collective bargaining with employers to adopt climate-friendly policies in the workplace
- Organise workers in climate change-affected sectors and assist them to adapt to the impacts of climate change and Just Transition
- Develop and strengthen all the dimensions of Just Transition in our advocacy work, including decent work creation, workers’ rights, social protection, climate finance, and loss and damage
- Campaign to urge developed countries to fulfil their pledges and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change obligations to provide climate finance, including for loss and damage
- Advocate and campaign for the allocation of climate finance for the creation of decent and climate-friendly jobs
3. Care economy

Unpaid care work remains the main barrier preventing women from getting into, remaining and progressing in the labour market, with serious and lifelong negative consequences to their well-being, health, skills development and education, while also increasing their vulnerability to violence. The invisibility and unrecognisable nature of women’s unpaid (care) work further contributes to their informalisation and casualisation. The pandemic has magnified this reality, including in the region. Even before the pandemic, women and girls in Asia and the Pacific spend an average of 4 hours and 20 minutes daily doing unpaid care and domestic work, almost three times the time spent by men.12 Remote and other hybrid models of work arrangements, while they generally come with some benefits, have dramatically disrupted the work-life boundaries of women, leading to overwork, burnout and decreased mental health. Lockdowns, social distancing measures, mobility restrictions and school closures have further increased women’s unpaid work, reduced their working hours, or pushed them to exit the labour market altogether to care for home-schooling children, and sick or elderly household members.

Care workers, including those in the informal economy and domestic workers, have been the backbone of the pandemic response as frontline workers. All the while, their care work – both paid and unpaid – remains unrecognised, undervalued and unprotected. It is important to highlight that women’s unpaid care and domestic work add value to the economy, and while they differ across economies in the region, the total unpaid work is significant. Care work is crucial to societies and the economy, yet they are often unaccounted for in decision-making and neglected in labour market analyses.

Advancing gender parity in care requires a holistic approach of policy interventions that address the broader and long-term impact of unpaid care and break the patterns that reinforce care inequalities. For women’s economic and social justice to be a reality in Asia and the Pacific, unions call for transformative and gender-responsive policies that respond to the rising demand for care and address the caring experiences and needs of working families throughout the life cycle.

Governments, employers and other relevant institutions should invest in building a robust care economy through adequate investments in public services, including health and care services, and adopting family-friendly policies that can enable women’s effective labour force participation while promoting a more equitable sharing of family and other care responsibilities and flexible working arrangements on a gender-neutral basis. These efforts should be undertaken alongside government reforms to ensure that care is readily available to all people, and that public policies and measures are in place to recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work, and reward and represent paid care work by promoting decent work for care workers.13

Governments must ensure that policies and responses are shaped by the diversity of the lived realities and experiences of those who bear the heaviest burdens of care including women, racialised and indigenous communities, workers with disabilities, and other marginalised

groups of workers, and invest resources into collecting and analysing sex-disaggregated data to inform policymaking and evaluate the impact of interventions.

Fundamentally, attitudes about the division of care work need to shift. At the centre of this shift must be governments leading an integrated and continuous public awareness campaign challenging social norms and stereotypes that undervalue care work and perpetuate unequal gender distribution of care responsibilities.

Investing in care is a priority for and at the heart of the trade union movement’s demands for job creation, formalisation of care workers in the informal economy, and valuing care work’s contributions to sustainable economic growth and functioning of a healthy society as part of a new social contract grounded in equality, equity and inclusion. Trade unions will continue to urge governments and employers to take proactive and bold actions in building a solid care economy, secure decent work for care workers, and improve the representation in unions of the most vulnerable workers, such as the domestic workers.

The ITUC-Asia Pacific will continue supporting affiliates in designing and implementing targeted strategies and campaigns for decent work for care workers, organising, protection of care workers across the migration cycle, and the ratification of relevant ILO instruments, and in challenging gender norms and stereotypes around paid work and unpaid care work.

Proposed actions:

- Increase and amplify calls for comprehensive, robust and gender-responsive care and social protection systems based on the ILO’s 5R Framework for Decent Care Work
- Lobby and advocate for greater investments and resource allocation in quality public health, care and education services
- Continue to advocate for the adoption of gender-responsive public policies and active labour market measures to address entrenched socio-economic inequalities in care by valuing, equally sharing, and supporting workers with diverse caring and family responsibilities
- Advance a stronger role for and equitable representation of women in social dialogue institutions at all levels and in collective bargaining, including through quotas, and the inclusion of equality clauses in collective bargaining agreements
- Promote the formalisation of informal care workers and place a high priority on organising care workers within the trade union agenda and operational plans and practices
- Advance the equal treatment, rights and well-being of women and all workers in different forms of remote work arrangements, including through collective bargaining agreements

4. Informal economy and home-based workers

According to the ILO, all economic activities by workers and economic units that are – in law or in practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements are considered part of the informal economy. A growing informal economy is a major challenge for the rights of workers and decent working conditions, as this sector is largely characterised by precarious working conditions.

More than 68 per cent of the employed population in Asia and the Pacific is in the informal economy.14 Despite playing a major role in the countries’ economies, a large informal sector is associated with low productivity, reduced tax revenues, poor governance, excessive regulations, poverty and income inequality. The COVID-19 crisis has also exposed and exacerbated many pre-existing inequities and injustices faced by informal workers and their

families. The pandemic and the associated government restrictions (i.e., lockdowns and physical distancing measures) have had a disproportionately negative impact on informal workers and their livelihood activities.

Traditionally, the trade union role has been limited to the formal segment of the economy, where either workers were protected under various laws and employment acts, or the work terms and benefits were negotiated by the union. The mainstream unions usually steer away from the issues of informal sector workers due to varied reasons, ranging from not knowing how or where to start organising them, to not diluting the primary focus of the union, i.e., safeguarding the workers who are members. However, with the changing economic realities, trade unions now realise the importance of the informal economy and are trying to begin organising workers in this sector.

A four-pronged approach could help the trade unions in making strategic inroads in organising the workers in the informal sector and safeguarding their interests. These four interventions are: (1) identifying the key segments of the informal sector, (2) preparing a road map for intervention and identifying economic resources, (3) lobbying for larger umbrella legislations, and (4) identifying the right ground-level organisation structure.

ILO Recommendation No. 204 (2015) supports the formalisation of the informal economy by promoting the economic inclusion of workers, recognising the fundamental rights of workers, and fostering an entrepreneurial spirit as well as contributing to decent work, social dialogue and civic participation. It applies to all workers and economic units — including enterprises, entrepreneurs and households — in the informal economy, as informal work may be found in all economic sectors and in both the public and private spheres. Governments must introduce policy measures that facilitate the transition of informal workers to the formal economy within the principles and framework set by ILO Recommendation No. 204.

Workers and employers’ organisations can play an important and active role in supporting the transition to formality. Trade unions have seen some good examples where unions have put their efforts into organising the workers in the informal economy.

Despite the challenges brought about by the pandemic, trade unions along with other stakeholders continuously make the effort to mitigate the plight of workers in the informal economy. They were able to demand governments to provide essential goods and services, economic stimulus packages, and income and food support to compensate for the loss or reduction of the economic activity of informal workers.

Proposed actions:
- Campaign and advocate with governments and other stakeholders for the transition from the informal to the formal economy
- Lobby for the formulation of national laws in line with ILO Recommendation No. 204
- Promote the agenda of the social and solidarity economy in generating decent work, productive employment and improved living standards for all
- Raise awareness on the conditions of informal migrant workers
- Create awareness about the health and safety issues of workers in the informal economy

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5. Digitalisation and the digital economy

Digitalisation has had a profound impact on workers across various industries, transforming the way they work and altering the traditional employment landscape. While the use of technology has undoubtedly brought numerous benefits, including increased efficiency and productivity, it has also raised concerns about job displacement, the erosion of traditional job security, and a growing digital divide.

One of the most significant impacts of digitalisation on workers has been the automation of tasks. In many industries, automated systems and software have replaced human workers, leading to job displacement and job insecurity. While some jobs have been entirely eliminated, others have been significantly altered, requiring new skill sets and retraining. Moreover, the use of technology has allowed many companies to outsource work to low-cost countries, causing further job displacement and a race to the bottom in terms of wages and working conditions.

Digitalisation has also given rise to the gig economy. Digital platforms have enabled workers to earn money on a flexible schedule, but they have also eroded traditional job security and workers’ rights, including freedom of association and collective bargaining. They have normalised independent contracting arrangements that do not recognise gig workers as employees. Gig workers often lack access to social protection, maximum working hours, and occupational health and safety, leaving them vulnerable to economic shocks and crises.

Moreover, the use of digital technology has blurred the boundaries between work and personal life. With the advent of email and instant messaging, workers are expected to be available around the clock, leading to burnout and decreased job satisfaction. This condition has worse implications on the work-life balance of women who also carry the heavy burden of unpaid care work. Moreover, the use of surveillance technology, such as GPS tracking and monitoring software, has led to increased monitoring and control of workers, eroding trust and creating a culture of distrust.

The digital divide between workers with access to technology and those without has widened. Workers in rural areas and developing countries often lack access to high-speed internet and the necessary equipment to perform their jobs effectively. This divide creates a barrier to entry and limits opportunities for those who are already at a disadvantage.

Governments must regulate the digital platform labour market to end the rise of independent contracting arrangements, ensure that workers are entitled to the fundamental rights and principles at work, including freedom of association and collective bargaining, and address the precarious working conditions. Governments and employers, in social dialogue with trade unions, must develop just transition frameworks to anticipate and tackle the impacts of automation on employment, skills development, social protection and labour standards.

Governments must also implement regulations governing technology, data, and deployment of algorithms that are employment and worker friendly and to ensure privacy and people’s control over and ownership of their own data. They must also invest in improving the digital infrastructure to bridge the digital divide and to ensure that the working people have access to affordable and efficient internet connectivity and technology.

Trade unions must continue to organise workers affected by digitalisation so that they can effectively mobilise and advance their interest amid the growing power of the digital companies. They can use their collective power to advocate for policies that protect the rights of platform workers, such as minimum wage laws, health and safety regulations, and protections against discrimination.
Proposed actions:
- Campaign and advocate for laws and regulations that clarify the employment relationships in digital platforms and ensure the protection of the fundamental rights of platform workers, including freedom of association and collective bargaining
- Campaign for new international labour standards in the platform economy
- Strengthen the capacity of affiliates to anticipate and manage transitions related to digital technologies

Rights

6. Freedom of association and collective bargaining

Workers’ rights in Asia and the Pacific continue to rank poorly, with the region marked by the use of extreme police brutality to suppress strike actions, although the right to strike is essential to guarantee workers’ freedom of association. In countries such as Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, striking workers were met with violence and some were even killed. In Hong Kong, the National Security Law enacted in 2020 has led to the arrest of hundreds of activists and the forced liquidation of over 100 trade unions and civil society organisations. The South Korean union was also raided by the police and spy agency on suspicion of violating national security laws. Meanwhile, atrocious human rights abuses persist in Myanmar, and in the Philippines, trade unionists and workers fear violent attacks and arbitrary arrests. The Uyghurs in China are also facing persecution and mass detention, with some being coerced into forced labour in the garment industry. Those belonging to these persecuted communities are being denied their civil liberties, deprived of a collective voice, and arbitrarily detained.

Some governments have also used the pandemic as a pretext to entrench their power to clamp down on rights. The response to the global pandemic has been further undermined by leaders who have ruthlessly exploited the crisis and weaponised COVID-19 to launch fresh attacks on human and trade union rights.

Compliance with freedom of association and collective bargaining remains limited as can be considered from the trends in the ratification of the ILO fundamental Conventions. Such ratifications are low overall, while progress towards the application of the fundamental principles and rights at work remain slow. Difficulties in the exercise of the right to freedom of association are further reflected in the low trade union density in some developing Asian countries, ranging from 2 to 10 per cent on average.

Workers’ fundamental rights are defined by the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87), Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98), Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105), Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100), Discrimination, Employment and Occupation Convention, 1958 (No. 111), Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155), and Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187). These ILO Conventions make explicit the obligation of all governments to respect the principles they embody and to defend them within the multilateral organisations. It is the responsibility of each state to protect the rights of its citizens and its workers at the national and regional levels and within international institutions, including through the ratification of the fundamental Conventions and their effective implementation.

Promoting and defending fundamental human and workers’ rights is and must remain a priority for the ITUC-Asia Pacific. Ensuring their full, universal respect and enforceability is necessary to guarantee the human rights of all workers.
The ITUC-Asia Pacific will defend trade unionists whenever their fundamental rights are violated. It also takes action against other workers’ rights violations, and other violations of human rights, especially where these affect working people. Together with its affiliates, the ITUC-Asia Pacific carries out campaigns to defend and protect human and trade rights in the region, as guaranteed by the ILO Conventions.

**Proposed Actions:**

- Campaign to oppose cases of violation of workers’ fundamental rights and mobilise solidarity to strengthen such efforts
- Mobilise support for affiliates where democracy is under attack and where workers’ rights are undermined or people are repressed
- Build the capacity of national trade unions to negotiate rights-based reforms with their governments
- Fully utilise the ILO’s international labour standards and its supervisory mechanisms
- Develop educational materials for young people to learn their rights before entering the labour market

7. Child labour

The Sustainable Development Goals Target 8.7 challenges the world to eradicate child labour, forced labour and modern slavery by 2025, but it is a huge question whether such target will be achieved. The report *Child Labour: Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward* noted that 9 million additional children are at risk of being pushed into child labour by the end of 2022 as a result of the pandemic.\(^\text{16}\)

A just and inclusive society is not possible when children are deprived of their childhood, their potential and their dignity by engaging them in hazardous jobs. In addition, child labour practice has a direct negative impact on the labour market. Young workers find it difficult to find employment when children are readily accessible to work at low wages, which leads to a vicious cycle of unemployment and child labour practices. Millions of children around the world are forced to work which robs them of having a happy childhood, education, and a good future. Child labour remains to be a serious challenge to the happiness of children.

The report mentioned also revealed that 160 million children were engaged in child labour at the beginning of 2020, out of which 63 million were girls and 97 million were boys. It means that out of every 10 children, one is engaged in child labour. The worst part is that 79 million children were in hazardous work that directly endangers their health, safety, and moral development. In Asia and the Pacific, the estimated number of children engaged in child labour is 48.7 million, the second highest after the Africa region.

Recently, Bangladesh has ratified the ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), which was one of the long-standing demands of trade unions in Bangladesh. Although a large number of countries have ratified the ILO Conventions on child labour (i.e., Convention No. 138 and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 [No. 182]), at 173 ratifications (including 30 countries in Asia and the Pacific), the implementation part is still far from satisfactory as evidenced by the existence of the scourge of child labour in worrying numbers.

The Fifth Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labour held in Durban from 15 to 20 May 2022, concluded with a resolution known as the “Durban Call to Action”, commits stakeholders to accelerating efforts to eliminate child labour by promoting decent work,

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protecting survivors, universalising access to education and social protection, and increasing multi-stakeholder cooperation and financing. The ITUC and ITUC-AP welcomed the conclusion and called on governments to double their efforts to eliminate child labour.

Governments must shift from commitment to action and inspire legislative and practical actions to eliminate child labour. As poverty is one of the structural causes of child labour, a new social contract will certainly contribute to achieving Target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals – ending all forms of child labour by 2025.

**Proposed Actions:**
- Campaign for the ratification and implementation of ILO Conventions No. 138 and No. 182
- Accelerate multi-stakeholder efforts in line with the Durban Call to Action to prevent and eliminate child labour with priority given to the worst forms of child labour by making decent work a reality for adults and youth above the minimum age for work
- Advocate for children’s right to education and for universal access to free compulsory, quality, equitable and inclusive education and training

8. **Occupational health and safety**

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) is a fundamental human and workers’ right. A safe and healthy working environment free from occupational injuries and diseases is an integral part of decent work to ensure inclusive and sustainable development with resilience, as experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated. The 110th International Labour Conference in 2022 adopted the Resolution on the inclusion of a safe and healthy working environment in the ILO’s framework of fundamental principles and rights at work. Now, the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155) and the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187) are among the ILO fundamental Conventions. With this development, all 187 ILO member countries have the obligation to promote OHS as stipulated in both Conventions, particularly to develop a coherent national OHS policy through a tripartite consultation and discussion.

Without an adequate and effective national OHS policy, as of 2021, estimated 2.91 million people around the globe were killed by work-related diseases and injuries, without COVID-19 deaths. The South-East Asia region was responsible for more than one-third of the total deaths with the highest fatality rate. Furthermore, an OHS policy with a sufficient public health and safety infrastructure could have prevented the extent of the COVID-19 crisis that has resulted in almost 7 million deaths.

Needless to say, nothing comes first than the lives of workers. It is time for us to realise the commitment to OHS by the 110th ILC to formulate national policies with strong regulatory frameworks based on a tripartite mechanism with adequate inspection, appropriate punishment and fair compensation for all workers to be protected. Towards this goal, the ratification of both Conventions as well as other related ILO Conventions should be a good start.

Stronger trade unionism makes for a safer and healthier workplace, as proved by many studies. For the implementation and enforcement of a national OHS policy, capacity building and representation of a trade union are also essential. OHS should be a top priority of the national trade union agenda. At the enterprise level, the inclusion of OHS provisions in collective

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agreements in line with a national policy is of vital importance, together with workers’ participation in designing, implementing and monitoring a company policy.

Mental health and well-being, as highlighted by workers’ experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, should also be emphasised in a national OHS policy. Meanwhile, at the enterprise level, a trade union can work together with an employer to identify work-related hazards for workers’ mental health.

Participation in OHS-related international discussions about dangerous substances, chemicals and wastes to ensure protection of the workers, the public and the planet should also be continued. A transition to implement international commitments, including the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions as well as the Strategic Approach and the sound management of chemicals and waste beyond 2020, should be just, with a clear industrial policy with a national employment plan and a social protection programme including active labour market policies.

Proposed actions:

- Campaign for the ratification and implementation of ILO Conventions No. 155 and No. 187
- Advocate for adequate labour inspection systems, with the inclusion of workers’ representatives at all levels
- Campaign for the ratification and implementation of other OHS and labour inspection-related ILO Conventions, including the Occupational Health Services Convention, 1985 (No. 161), Labour Inspection Convention, 1947 (No. 81) and Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention, 1969 (No. 129)
- Continue demanding governments to prioritise employment compensation bodies, related to workplace injuries, occupational diseases and ill-health, by providing them with better resources
- Promote the mental health and well-being of workers at all levels through social dialogue and collective bargaining
- Campaign for the recognition of COVID-19 and other emerging diseases as compensable occupational diseases, as well as for a regular review of the list of compensable occupational diseases through social dialogue
- Campaign and advocate for OHS and just transition for all workers with adequate protection in international discussions, including those involving international environmental agreements
- Build the capacity of trade unions to prioritise OHS in their agenda

9. Migrant and domestic workers

Despite the significant role of migrant workers in the economies of their home as well as destination countries, they often face undue hardship and abuse in the form of low wages, denial of freedom of association and collective bargaining, discrimination, racism and xenophobia. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the inequality faced by migrant workers and exacerbated their vulnerability. The enforcement of lockdowns and curfews, and the closure of workplaces in destination countries, followed by the global economic recession, have left many migrant workers without jobs and incomes.

Migrant workers pay exorbitant fees to go abroad for employment. For many of them, loss of income means returning to debt and poverty. Adding to their plight are the lack of employment opportunities back home and the lack of government support in reintegration and employment.

Though women constitute nearly half of the international migration, they experience more disadvantages and discrimination at all stages of the migration process. Majority of them leave
their home countries to work as domestic workers to pursue greener pastures overseas, but there they end up facing poor conditions, labour exploitation, violation of their human rights, and even gender-based violence.

There is no dearth of international instruments for the protection and promotion of migrant workers. The ILO Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97) focuses on the standards applicable to the recruitment of migrants for employment and their conditions of work, while the Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143) concerns bringing migration flows under control. This Convention deals with irregular migrants and also calls for sanctions against traffickers. It also reiterates the general obligation to respect the human rights of all migrant workers and calls for not only equal treatment but also equality of opportunity with regard to access to employment, trade union rights, cultural rights, and individual and collective freedoms to protect workers. Only one or two countries in Asia and the Pacific have ratified these two important conventions. Demonstrating the commitment of trade unions to include migrant workers, an intensified campaign for the ratification and application of the Conventions in the countries in the region is needed to improve the work and life conditions of migrant workers.

In 2018, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the Arab Trade Union Confederation, South Asian Regional Trade Union Council, ASEAN Trade Union Council, ITUC-Asia Pacific, ITUC-Africa and Trade Union Confederation of the Americas in the presence of the then ILO Director-General. It launched a campaign to further advance the provisions of ILO Conventions No. 97 and No. 143. The cooperation was also helpful in pushing legislation, amendments and model employment contract for migrant workers.

The ITUC-AP will continue its engagement with all the regional and sub-regional organisations to formulate the strategies and intensify its actions to secure the rights of migrant workers.

After the adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in 2018, the International Migration Review Forum took place to review its progress in 2022. The Forum observed that the COVID-19 pandemic has further deteriorated the condition of every nation in the implementation of the Global Compact for Migration. Thus, for its implementation, nations must increase their efforts to eliminate the adverse and structural drivers hindering sustainable livelihood, eliminate all forms of discrimination against migrant workers, eradicate all forms of violence and harassment against women workers, and respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of migrants and their children.

It is high time for the trade unions to consider migrant workers as their potential members, organise them, bring them into the trade union fold, and engage them in social dialogue processes.

Proposed actions:

- Promote migrant workers’ rights, including through the adoption of a global standard contract, organising, and OHS policies, in the countries of origin and countries of destination by establishing strong networks among the ITUC-AP affiliates in these countries.
- Create awareness among affiliates to examine the progress of the Global Compact for Migration and identify its gaps, difficulties and the next steps, at the national, regional and international levels, including through the International Migration Review Forum.
- Further advance the collaboration with migrant organisations and communities in organising migrant workers and defending their workers’ rights.
- Build on ongoing transnational organising efforts to bring more women migrant workers into the trade union movement.
- Campaign for the ratification of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) and Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190).
● Promote the collaboration of trade unions and ILO Offices in their countries to facilitate migrant workers’ integration in their respective workplaces and countries

10. Core labour standards in global supply chains and multinational enterprises

The spread of supply chains tied to multinational corporations has had a major impact on the realisation of decent work and has brought challenges to the union movement. A major problem for workers, even when there is substantive country legislation, is the lack of an adequate remedy for workers when their rights are violated.

The current business model of supply chains is highly flawed and characterised by low wages, insecure and precarious work, unsafe work, child labour and forced labour. Restrictions on unionisation, such as in export processing zones, are common in either law or practice, and government policies in many countries restrict freedom of association and effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining. Excessive working hours in companies or firms producing for global supply chains (GSCs) are also usual. However, the local supplying companies where the violations occur are unlikely to be held accountable because the administrative or judicial processes are too slow, weak or corrupt.

At the same time, parent companies are usually immune from legal accountability, as there is no cause of action or jurisdiction over them in either the host or the home country. Though some companies have made public commitments to ensure the payment of a living wage and investment in safe and secure workplaces, it is by no means the norm and, even then, such promises are not always kept. Meanwhile, corporate and multi-stakeholders’ social responsibility schemes have had little, if any, positive impact in guaranteeing workers’ rights and instead have deferred addressing the underlying structural issues.

The responsibility of multinational corporations for the acts of their subsidiaries or contractual suppliers in GSCs is governed by largely voluntary guidelines such as the ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy, the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and a vast array of corporate and multi-stakeholder codes of conduct. However, the voluntary framework has not been effective in ensuring that companies respect workers’ rights across supply chains.

The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights make it clear that, while policies and processes will necessarily have to vary in complexity depending on the size of the business enterprises, all companies are required to carry out human rights due diligence. A robust monitoring mechanism is necessary to ensure that the measures adopted by enterprises to discharge their human rights due diligence obligations are effective in preventing violations from occurring and are not merely cosmetic or formalistic. Therefore, meaningful stakeholder engagement is an important element for the entire due diligence process.

Governments must now take decisive legislative steps to regulate the behaviour of companies with regard to their entire operations and activities. Achieving decent work conditions in GSCs requires effective workplace governance. In addition to sound constructive industrial relations, labour inspectorates play a vital role in this governance to protect the workers’ safety and promote their welfare. The GSCs are not and cannot be sustainable unless they are based on the principles of decent work.

Proposed actions:
● Support the capacity of trade unions in supply chains corridors to monitor and demand human rights due diligence in host countries, including by building capacity and possible litigation
Advocate for a legally binding treaty on business and human rights, to mandate due diligence in supply chains in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, along with the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy and other global instruments for protecting workers’ rights.

Along with the ITUC, advance the development of international labour standards in supply chains through follow up work to the ILO supply chains and decent work gaps analysis.

Campaign for the incorporation of labour and environmental rights compliance in free trade agreements and trade privileges.

Campaign on how the respect of workers’ rights can contribute to the improvement of the economy, towards mainstreaming workers’ rights compliance in global supply chains.

Advocate to raise consumers’ awareness of workers’ rights in the global supply chains.

Continue policy dialogues with international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and Asian Development Bank, to ensure the respect of workers’ rights.

Continue the advocacy and campaign for a binding labour safeguard at the Asian Development Bank and for its implementation.

Wages

11. Wages and working hours

Despite the rapid regional economic growth, the wage level in many countries in the region is too low to afford daily necessities. Real wage growth has been lagging behind the economic expansion, with continued diminishing of the labour income share. Furthermore, income inequality has been persistently increasing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation with more income losses for workers, particularly among marginalised workers such as informal, women, youth and migrant workers and workers with disabilities. Inevitably, the pandemic has pushed millions of additional people into extreme poverty, 97 million more people around the world and 75 million more poor in developing Asia.

In order to ensure a sustained economic growth with a resilient recovery from the pandemic marked by higher income inequality and vulnerability in poverty, there should be a paradigm shift to support income-led growth, based on pro-labour distributional policies, accompanied by legislative and structural measures that are aimed at building strong and effective labour market institutions.

Many studies prove that high income inequality undermines sustainable economic growth. Indeed, to ensure sustainability in our economic, social and political domains, inclusiveness based on strengthening trade union power with collective bargaining is a prerequisite.

However, with poor observance of core labour standards in the region, it follows that collective bargaining, the best wage-setting mechanism, has the lowest coverage in developing Asia, at


around 1 to 2 per cent. Under this circumstance, the fundamental principle of “equal pay for work of equal value” remains too far from reality.

Minimum wages are an institution adopted widely. However, the level of minimum wages in almost all the countries in Asia and the Pacific is not sufficient at all for workers and their family members to live with dignity. Furthermore, there has been rampant non-compliance with minimum wage regulations with lenient punishment, and the most vulnerable groups of workers – informal, precarious and underemployed workers – have been excluded from the application of minimum wages.

Since the beneficiaries of minimum wages, in general, have a higher propensity to consume, any increase in minimum wages is likely to be used for private consumption, which the regional economy has greatly relied on.

In order to make minimum wages serve their purpose, a minimum wage-setting institution based on social dialogue should be guaranteed to ensure minimum (living) wages, a statutorily guaranteed sum of payment for work performed or services without any abatement by individual or collective bargaining as a minimum floor of wages. The level, determined by bipartite or tripartite mechanisms on a regular basis, should be sufficient for socially acceptable essential needs to enable workers and their families to live with dignity and to participate as active citizens in society. Economic and industrial conditions as well as social conditions can be referred to in setting the level, but it must be above the national poverty line.

With the increasing prevalence of non-standard forms of employment, strongly associated with poverty or low wages, many workers have been either vulnerable to long working hours or involuntarily have to accept precarious part-time work to maintain a certain level of consumption for their survival. According to the ILO, Asia and the Pacific has longer working hours compared with the other regions.20

Long working hours are associated with workers’ physical and mental health issues. They cause work-life imbalance, deteriorating the quality of the worker's life with more stress and anxiety, in turn impacting their work. Longer working hours thus lower productivity and undermine performance, which affect not only the workers but also the businesses.

In regard to these issues on working hours, the ILO recommends expanding time sovereignty based on “measures that create working-time autonomy that meets the needs of both workers and enterprises”.21 The measures should include equal treatment for all types of workers, strong legal instruments with effective inspectorate to regulate long working hours, and social supports including a social protection measure to help workers in underemployment or part-time to move to formal and secure jobs.

For decent wages and working hours for all workers, the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work clearly stipulates the need to strengthen “the institutions of work to ensure adequate protection of all workers” including an adequate minimum wage and maximum limits on working time.

Proposed actions:
- Campaign for minimum living wages for all workers, as a wage floor established through statutory tripartite or bipartite mechanisms, in reference to the ILO Centenary

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Declaration, the Declaration of Philadelphia and the Minimum Wage Fixing Convention, 1970 (No. 131)

- In close cooperation with the ITUC, continue to support affiliates in securing fair and better wages, including minimum living wages as a wage floor, by strengthening their negotiation capacity based on more substantial data
- Continue the campaign to close any pay gap, including the gender pay gap, and end the segmentation of vulnerable and marginalised workers into low-paid jobs
- Continue to campaign against long working hours as well as underemployment with insufficient working hours by advancing decent job creation
- Initiate an advocacy campaign for adequate and strong labour inspectorates on wages and working hours, in particular, with strict and fair punishment against violations

Social Protection

12. Social protection and taxation

Social protection is a fundamental human right. It is also a necessity for social justice and peace as well as sustainable and inclusive development as it reduces poverty and income inequality. Furthermore, social protection is vital for economic resilience, particularly in times of crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted not only this importance of social protection but also the huge deficits in its provision; as of 2020, 55.9 per cent of the people in Asia and the Pacific are not covered by any social protection benefit.\(^{22}\) Many low- and middle-income countries in the region relying heavily on tax-financed social assistance have not developed universal and comprehensive social protection including social protection floors in line with the ILO Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102) and Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202).

More burdens were placed on governments that had less than adequate universal social protection during the pandemic. As of July 2022, 422 response measures to COVID-19 in 40 countries in the region have been introduced, mostly new programmes or benefits or adjustments of existing programmes, financed mainly by taxes (non-contributory source). However, the provision has been unequal, which has resulted in unequal and imbalanced recovery from the pandemic.

There has been a serious social protection gap, further exacerbated by labour market deficits, with the growing prevalence of vulnerability, informality and precarity in employment being likely excluded from contributory-based social insurances and active labour market policies. A human-centred recovery with decent work is only possible by expanding the social protection coverage for all workers, together with formalisation of the informal economy through registration, taxation and representation.

Social protection is also vital for a Just Transition and fair transformation. The Asia and the Pacific is the most vulnerable region to climate change and has undergone industrial transformation with technological advancement. The COVID-19 pandemic has also changed the world of work with significant impacts on the pattern of consumption and production. Therefore, adequate social protection with universal provision should be developed to ensure that these changes work for all.

Towards universal social protection, including social protection floors, it is important to ensure a fiscal space\textsuperscript{23} to finance it, which is a great challenge to many governments in the region, especially low and low-middle income countries. In this regard, the ILO proposes eight options to increase the fiscal space for social protection: (1) reallocating public expenditure, (2) increasing tax revenue, (3) expanding social security contributions, (4) reducing debt/debt service, (5) curtailing illicit financial flows, (6) increasing aid, (7) tapping into fiscal reserves, and (8) adopting a more accommodative macroeconomic framework.\textsuperscript{24}

In this regard, workers and trade unions, as a taxpayers as well as current or potential contributors to contributory schemes of social protection, should take a leading role in facilitating social dialogue to increase fiscal space for universal social protection for all. Progressive tax reforms can contribute to expanding the fiscal space not only at the national but also at the global level. For instance, an increased international cooperation on taxation can mobilise enormous resources for a Global Social Protection Fund, which can address the financing gaps in developing countries with limited fiscal space. Such international cooperation for taxation entails adoption of a global minimum corporate tax rate, unitary taxation, and concrete measures to stop tax avoidance and illicit financial flows.

Spending for social protection is not a cost but an investment. According to an ITUC study, investing just 1 per cent of gross domestic product in social protection would bring a positive return to the economy overall, stimulating growth with more jobs, generating more tax revenue, decreasing poverty, and increasing women’s participation in economic activities.

Last but not least, social solidarity between classes and generations should be promoted, as it is through social solidarity that social protection for all can be realised.

Proposed Actions

- Continue to campaign for adequate social protection for all, including social protection floors, in line with ILO Conventions No. 102 and No. 202
- Accelerate the advocacy campaign for fair and progressive tax systems
- In close cooperation with the ITUC, campaign for a Global Social Protection Fund for the least wealthy countries, and for other international tax measures such as financial transaction taxes, wealth taxes and other measures to stop speculation and tax avoidance as well as base erosion and profit shifting
- Continue the policy dialogue with international financial institutions for their support to establish social protection for all, including contributory-based social insurance programmes as well as active labour market policies for all workers, in their member states, by ensuring sufficient and sustainable fiscal space through debt relief and technical assistances for fair and progressive tax systems, among other ways
- Support the affiliates in raising their capacity on social protection and taxation, including by publishing relevant guidelines

**Equality**

13. Equality for all

\textsuperscript{23} “Fiscal space” can be defined as “room in a government’s budget that allows it to provide resources for a desired purpose without jeopardising the sustainability of its financial position or the stability of the economy” (Peter Heller, "Back to Basics -- Fiscal Space: What It Is and How to Get It", *Finance and Development*, June 2005, [https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2005/06/basics.htm](https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2005/06/basics.htm)).

Despite some progress, gender equality in the region is far from achieved. The current rate of progress suggests that it will take 168 years, or six generations, to close the gender gap in East Asia and the Pacific. Amid this reality, the hard-won gains of women’s rights are at risk of further deterioration due to patriarchal systems, discrimination and injustice.

Deep-seated barriers to women’s rights persist, preventing them from advancing and progressing in their careers, and relegating them to lower-paid, largely unprotected informal work and housekeeping and caregiving roles. Moreover, their participation in leadership and decision-making processes in governments, political bodies and the private sector remain limited, even when they are now better educated – a situation that has changed very little through the years.

Work cultures that judge women’s achievements and capabilities against outdated values, practices and societal constructs compound these disparities. And in the shadows are the pervasive, including technology-facilitated, gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) that plagues more than one in five workers globally and the dangers of dealing with the extraordinary pressure of unpaid care work. All these take a heavy toll on and jeopardise women’s safety, health and well-being, directly impacting their productivity.

These challenges are exacerbated for workers, minorities, and other under-represented groups with multiple and intersecting identities and experiences of discrimination, such as LGBTQIA+ persons, racialised and indigenous communities, people with disabilities, older persons, among others.

Building back better for women cannot remain business as usual given the magnitude of gender inequalities facing the region. Countering the backlash and resistance to equality will not be achieved without addressing the systemic inequities such as the unequal distribution of unpaid care responsibilities; pay disparities; limited access to decent work, education and training opportunities; and lingering discrimination, sexism and GBVH.

Governments must develop policies protecting women’s rights and promoting inclusive work cultures to close gender gaps, including those to prevent GBVH, discrimination and inequality affecting women and those who do not fit into the heteronormative gender roles.

Employers and governments must take meaningful action to address wage transparency, occupational segregation, access to training for future job opportunities, work-life balance and affordable care services. Efforts should diversify the workforce rather than simply increase the number of women in the workplace. This goal will require investing in future-proof skills to transition to climate-friendly jobs and challenging the unequal gender division of unpaid care work.

We urgently need more women decision-makers and leaders to create inclusive and gender-transformative policies. Towards this end, governments should ensure women’s representation and leadership across all levels, sectors and settings of society.

The gender agenda of unions for the future is clear. It includes:

- moving relevant institutions to realign laws, policies and structures to fit a more gender-equal future;

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● holding governments, employers and other relevant institutions to account for their broader social and gender impact;
● keeping workplaces, women and all workers safe and protected from GBVH and discrimination;
● overcoming persistent gender-based barriers to health, education and economic justice for all workers; and
● diversifying the trade union membership and fostering a new generation of women leaders that will take the movement to greater heights.

The ITUC-AP and affiliates have significantly contributed to advancing the organisation’s broader gender equality agenda and see the potential for further progress. The ITUC-AP will continue to assist affiliates in carrying out targeted campaigns, measures and efforts in tackling gender inequalities and preventing violations of women’s rights in law and practice, including through collective bargaining and other social dialogue mechanisms.

Proposed Actions

● Strengthen targeted measures and resources for organising women and improving and sustaining diverse and equitable participation, representation and leadership pathways for women and gender-diverse workers in trade unions and elsewhere at all levels, including through mentoring programmes and the adoption of quotas and targets
● Amplify ongoing efforts to increase intersectionality, diversity, and inclusion of all gender-diverse workers, including LGBTQIA+ persons, indigenous peoples, and their lived and diverse experiences in unions’ policies, programming, services, strategies, and operations
● Build the capacity of unions to conduct periodic participatory gender audits to support evidence-based recommendations and action plans for gender mainstreaming
● Initiate a pay equity campaign towards the elimination of legal, policy and cultural barriers that allow gender and other inequalities, including wage gaps and gendered segregation of work, to persist in the labour market
● Advance the ratification and effective implementation of relevant international labour standards, such as the Home Work Convention, 1996 (No. 177), Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) and Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), and public and workplace policies that promote women’s health and safety, and prevent and address all forms of discrimination, harassment and gender-based violence in the world of work

14. Youth

In Asia and the Pacific, there are more than 750 million young women and men aged 15 to 24 years, making up about 19 per cent of the total population in the region and over 60 per cent of the world’s youth.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, young people have seen their income, work, education, training and work-based learning, mental health and well-being severely affected by the socio-economic consequences of the crisis. Even before the pandemic, young people’s work was already characterised by insecurity, low wages, inadequate or no access to social protection, and no access to a trade union. Coupled with the devastating impacts of climate change, the young people’s future looks uncertain unless urgent and bold action is taken.

The ITUC and ITUC-AP believe that young people can help rebuild a new social contract and work to prevent the exclusion of their generation to ensure that no one is left behind. In the past few years, youth members actively organised and participated in a youth climate protest, demanding better government policies regarding climate issues. Moreover, they have also demanded governments to implement urgent climate actions, including adaptation and
mitigation measures as well as green skills development, green jobs creation and Just Transition in all tripartite and bipartite negotiations with governments and employers. They are also holding training and awareness programmes for youth on climate change and Just Transition.

Many unions are strengthening their youth committees to make sure that young workers will get their proper representations in their respective unions. These efforts also respond to the current high demand for organising youth workers in the digital and platform economy.

Young people agree that “system change is necessary”. Young workers have aligned the demands for a new social contract to their realities, as follows:

- **creation of climate-friendly jobs**: good practices on youth employment; creation of climate-friendly jobs with Just Transition; job-creating industrial transformation to achieve net-zero carbon emissions, along with jobs in health, education and other quality public services;
- **workers’ rights**: rights for young workers, regardless of their employment arrangements, to fulfil the promise of the ILO Centenary Declaration with its labour protection floor including rights, maximum working hours, minimum living wages, and health and safety at work;
- **social protection**: securing social protection for all workers, including young and informal economy workers, and establishing a Global Social Protection Fund;
- **equality**: good practices in promoting more youth in the trade union mainstream including their election to union governing bodies; support to youth activities, awareness-raising activities and organising; and
- **inclusion**: dismantling the intersecting systems of oppression that exclude people based on gender, race, class, nationality, citizenship, disability, age, sexual orientation (LGBTIQ) or gender identity.

**Proposed actions:**

- Continue the efforts in organising and bringing the youth into the trade union fold
- Secure the commitment of affiliates to integrating women and youth in the trade union structures and activities
- Create quotas for youth in the trade union structures at various levels, for example, 30 per cent
- Strengthen young people’s recruitment, organisation and representation in union leadership roles and positions at various levels
- Engage in continuing dialogues in identifying appropriate policies, training pathways and work options to assist the youth in transitioning from education to employment
- Facilitate cooperation between governments, educational institutions and the private sector with the involvement of trade unions to facilitate smooth transition from education to work
- Further strengthen sub-regional and national ITUC-AP youth structures to promote a “youth charter” at every level
- Develop union leaders among the youth through extensive training and workshop programmes
- Organise young workers in the informal economy, including digital and platform workers

**Inclusion**

15. **Development policy and the SDGs**

After almost eight years since the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted, the world is still far from achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In fact,
according to the 2022 progress report on the SDGs by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the expected year for the achievement of the SDGs in the region is now 2065.\textsuperscript{27} The COVID-19 pandemic not only slowed down but rather reversed the progress made in the past decade on SDGs, especially on poverty eradication.

While the 2030 Agenda was crafted as a “plan of action for people, planet and prosperity”, its strong emphasis on the role of the private sector and the promotion of market-based solutions facilitated the corporate capture of development policies and marginalised the voices of the people, trade unions and civil society. Although trade unions are key actors in development, most of them have been excluded in the implementation of the SDGs in their respective countries. Hence, it is no surprise that millions of workers in the region are left behind in the development.

The pandemic exposed the urgent need for a renewed multilateralism grounded on inclusion and international solidarity that is capable of delivering the SDGs and confronting future global challenges. During the pandemic, we have seen how multilateralism failed to address the different challenges it triggered, such as vaccine inequities and the debt crisis.

Governments must therefore reinforce the role of social dialogue, founded on the guaranteed rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining, as a key means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda and in strategies to build recovery and resilience from the multiple crises. Meanwhile, trade unions must claim their right to sit at the table with the UN Resident Coordinators and take on active roles towards ensuring stronger policy coherence within the multilateral system.

We need a new model of global governance to address the current imbalance of power, the corporate capture of development, and the uneven distribution of wealth at the international level – a truly inclusive multilateral system where social partners are on board and have a say.

**Proposed actions:**

- Initiate sustained advocacy at the national, regional and international development processes, including the implementation of the SDGs and the development, implementation and monitoring of UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks
- Actively participate in the global campaign to promote the acceleration of the implementation of the SDGs, especially SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth)
- Build the capacity of unions to engage directly in social dialogue with the UN Resident Coordinators, governments and other stakeholders to influence and take action on SDGs implementation at different levels

16. Peace and democracy

After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it may clearly be assumed that the trend of increasing military spending will accelerate further. Russia must stop the invasion of Ukraine territory and the war must end. Moreover, Vladimir Putin’s threat to use nuclear weapons has made nuclear war a reality and is likely to accelerate the nuclear powers’ development of smaller, easier-to-use nuclear weapons. While it remains a top priority for the international community to make steady progress towards a nuclear weapons-free world, the number of nuclear warheads may even begin to increase for the first time since the Cold War.


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At the same time that tensions surrounding armed conflict escalate, democracies are backsliding in the region. In Hong Kong, due to the immense pressure of the crackdown imposed by the authorities, our fellow trade unions took the decision to disband. Meanwhile, the people of Myanmar have been continuously overwhelmed by the military through barbaric attacks as they were poised to welcome a democratic government. In Afghanistan, the Taliban once again imposed restrictions on people and snuffed out an emerging democratic society.

Democracy is required for sustainable peace. It encourages and promotes peaceful interaction among states, as democracies are unlikely to engage in armed conflict with other identified democracies.²⁸ We need to reinvigorate democracy so as to create a peaceful, secure and inclusive society and restore sovereignty to the people, ensuring that political and economic systems are designed in favour of ordinary people, not large, wealthy corporations.

At the national level, trade unions must rebuild a countervailing force to gain a stronger bargaining power in the negotiation of a new social contract, in order to change the current system to benefit the vast majority of people. To this end, they have to continue their traditional efforts in organising more workers into trade unions, strengthening their representativeness of a cross-section of society. At the same time, trade unions must go beyond traditional unionism and must have the potential to work with various stakeholders in society who place the greatest emphasis on decent work.

Such stakeholders include: freelance artists, writers and journalists who have not received any protection during the pandemic; university graduates who have been involuntarily engaged in precarious employment; subcontracted micro, small and medium enterprises, suffering from the major companies’ abuse of their dominant bargaining positions; franchisees who have to accept the one-sided conditions of the franchisers; and others. Furthermore, to promote local, beneficial employment, trade unions could form coalitions with local governments, employers’ associations, educational institutions and banks.

At the international level, we have to adopt a decisive position against the violation of human and trade union rights. Democracy should be a universal value, and the respect of collective rights and individual liberties, including freedom of thought, expression and assembly, is a universal, indivisible and inalienable prerequisite for democracy. However, we contend with the reality that in many cases these rights are violated to protect the interests of the majority or the stability of the state.

Therefore, we have to continue to effectively participate in the mechanisms of the international community to examine the non-observance of human and trade union rights, including the supervisory mechanisms of the ILO, with the aim that the governments in question reaffirm their responsibility to protect the rights of their people and improve the application of the international rules in their countries. We must also link violations to sanctions imposed by bilateral or multilateral trade and investment agreements, withdraw the preferential treatment of the Generalised System of Preferences, and suspend the assistance of international financial institutions.

The ITUC-AP will pursue our commitments in achieving a peaceful, democratic, secure and stable world where people are free from the threat of armed conflict, terrorism and other forms of violence and occupation. We condemn terrorism in all its forms and policies violating individual and collective human rights under the pretext of fighting terrorism. Together with the ITUC, the ITUC-AP will continue to promote peace, disarmament, democracy and rights everywhere.

Proposed actions:

- Develop campaign for the international regulation of the production and trading of arms and towards making all countries signatories to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT)
- Develop and promote new unionism to work with various stakeholders at the national and regional levels towards a peaceful and democratic society
- Rebuild multilateralism by promoting international human and trade union rights at the United Nations Human Rights Council, ILO and other intergovernmental forums
- Promote social dialogue in UN reform
- Promote inter-generational dialogue on peace and democracy

17. Social dialogue

The collective representation of workers and employers, through social dialogue, is a public good that lies at the heart of democracy, and a social contract is best achieved through social dialogue.

Industrial relations are the most effective mechanism of social dialogue for trade unions and employers at the enterprise, industrial and national levels to reach a consensus on various issues, including wages, through collective bargaining. The ITUC-AP committed to promoting constructive industrial relations (CIRs) at its Third and Fourth Regional Conferences in 2015 and 2019, respectively. Based on full compliance with ILO Convention Nos. 87 and 98, CIRs provide both management and trade unions with a mechanism to coordinate their differing interests, by sharing from different standpoints their concerns relating to corporate performance, wages and other working conditions, as well as the economic outlook, labour market situation and other macro factors.

However, CIRs are difficult in a climate where the level of trust between the tripartite partners is low, where government attacks unions and workers’ rights, and where employers do not recognise the workers’ rights and only aim for profit. The structures and mechanisms for CIRs are either non-existent or non-functioning in some countries in the region, thus excluding workers from participating in decision-making processes.

In order to promote CIRs, trade unions must primarily continue their efforts in creating a stable political climate in compliance with the ILO Conventions, namely the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87) and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98), as well as the Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standards) Convention, 1976 (No. 144), by advocating the respect of workers’ rights to national governments through effective use of the ILO supervisory mechanisms, labour provisions in trade agreements and preferences, and labour safeguard policies of international financial institutions.

Trade unions can also optimise leverage through strategic partnerships with individual enterprises. While there are enterprises that maintain exploitative operations throughout their global supply chains, an increasing number of enterprises have become more willing to be held responsible and accountable regarding respect for human rights throughout their entire supply chains. It has been the case especially since the endorsement of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011, with enterprises cooperating with trade unions and concluding global framework agreements with trade unions and Global Union Federations (GUFs). We must further facilitate social dialogue with responsible businesses.

Proposed actions:
- Promote social dialogue and CIRs at the national level by effectively using the ILO supervisory mechanisms as well as its Decent Work Country Programmes and enhancing the capacity of national trade union centres
- Advocate the respect of workers’ rights at international financial institutions, including the Asian Development Bank, and in trade agreements and preferences
- Promote social dialogue between national trade union centres and private enterprises in cooperation with GUFs
- Develop campaign for the ratification/application of ILO Convention No. 144
- Engage in social dialogues with regional and sub-regional employers’ organisations

**Organising**

18. Organising

Trade unions throughout Asia and the Pacific are confronted by diverse challenges. These include declining density, diminished leverage under neoliberal labour market policies, coercive management practices, hostile governments, and a growing insecure workforce, among others. In the majority of the countries in the region, the unionisation rate is less than 10 per cent, and it is very rare to have a unionisation rate of more than 20 per cent. Trade union membership is lower for people in non-standard or precarious types of employment, such as temporary workers or workers in the informal or platform economy. Furthermore, legal restrictions and violations of trade union rights affect the trade unions’ ability to organise. Trade union membership is lower where there are violations of trade union rights.

Despite these difficulties, trade unions in the region continue their organising work to build workers’ power, consolidate the strength of democratic and independent trade unions, and develop innovative strategies for representing workers. Many unions have sought to engage with platform workers as part of their strategy in expanding their membership. The tools unions use vary and are largely dependent on the political climate in which they operate. In Indonesia and the Philippines, as examples, the unions have also focused their activity in the area of app-based transport by promoting workers’ rights for the drivers, fighting for the recognition of drivers as workers entitled to basic workers’ rights and regulations, and creating space for negotiations between driver representatives and platform transport companies towards better working conditions for drivers. The common strategic approach taken by unions include implementing a legal strategy to address workers’ misclassification claims, providing services to the platform workers, and lobbying on their behalf, and pushing for legal and regulatory reforms at the municipal and state levels in order to promote organising and bargaining rights.

There is no ready-made model or solution for how organising should be done. Organising strategies must be developed to suit the environment, needs and aspirations of the workers in the particular sector, area or enterprise where an organising campaign is to be launched. We promote a campaign approach that focuses on organising workers on the ground while using all possible leverage opportunities. The growth of the unionisation rate should also be reflected in the number of collective agreements and the workers they cover. In the case of global supply chains, it is increasingly important to plan and coordinate such campaigns internationally.

Building workers’ power through organising must become an integral part of all trade union work. Education is a key element in organising strategies, whether it is for unorganised workers participating in an organising campaign, establishing trade union structures in newly organised areas, or training professional and voluntary organisers/worker leaders. Education must facilitate action, and trade unions must strengthen the commitment of workers to trade unions and to collective actions.
The ITUC-AP has a critical role to play in taking the lead in regional issues and coordinating regional activities and supporting the affiliates in their actions, including encouraging cooperation between unions, supported by close coordination with GUFs and solidarity support organisations in concerted and joint actions.

**Proposed actions:**

- Support affiliates in undertaking capacity-building programmes on organising and campaign strategies to increase the membership and union density
- Launch targeted organising campaigns to bring into the trade unions domestic workers, migrant workers, and workers in the informal economy, non-standard forms of employment, and insecure work, particularly women and youth
- Together with the ITUC Global Organising Academy, build lead organisers’ skill and capacity in developing targeted strategic organising campaigns
- Continue to work for preventing the fragmentation of the trade union movement and encourage all initiatives for greater trade union unity
- Engage with non-ITUC organisations towards forging trade union solidarity and unity in Asia and the Pacific and internationally
- Continue to work closely with GUFs and trade union solidarity support organisations to ensure full respect of the fundamental workers' rights