2024: THE YEAR TO REGAIN PEACE AND DEMOCRACY

PEACE AND DEMOCRACY

While two major wars have left many dead and casted a dark shadow over our future, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has set 2024 as the year to regain peace and democracy.

One of the theories on the effects of democracy that has been attracting public attention after the Cold War is the international politics theory called “democratic peace”. This theory maintains that democratic states do not go to war with each other.

In my own way, I interpret the relationship between democracy and peace as follows:

- The majority of people oppose participating in wars, except in cases of self-defence. While they recognise the need to allocate a certain amount of national budget to the military, they rather prefer to invest more in decent work, adequate social protection, and quality social services.
- In democracies, leaders and their governments must have accountability and transparency to ensure that the demands of the people are reflected in their policies. People are guaranteed the freedom to scrutinise and criticise the policies and the sovereignty to change the government if they are not satisfied with it.
- Therefore, states where democracy functions effectively do not go to war.
BACKSLIDING DEMOCRACY

However, democracy is now backsliding. 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 their circumstances and voices are not reflected in politics.

Populism has arisen from this disillusionment. It implies that leaders embody the people; however, in reality, populists 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. Dictators say that for the sake the majority of people and the states, they will take resolute action against a minority who seek to overthrow the country’s political power or endanger public security. But there can be no democracy that denies collective rights and individual liberties.

In this crucial time when democracies are backsliding, we need to negotiate a new social contract that strengthens government accountability and transparency, and to ensure that policies are developed and implemented in accordance with the six demands of people: jobs, rights, wages, social protection, equality and inclusion.

ORGANISING FOR A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT

In order to change economic, social and political 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. As part of the trade union actions to this end, the 5th Regional Conference of the ITUC-Asia Pacific sought to reinforce building workers’ power and making social waves.
BUILDING WORKERS’ POWER

By joining and organising unions, workers can be agents of change and collectively become the leading force that advances a new social contract. 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 to advance the workers’ agenda in various fronts, majority of the workers do not benefit from the collective bargaining of trade unions.

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, including in highly informal and precarious work. 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 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, which will not only foster diversity and equality within trade unions but also enhance the unions’ organisational sustainability.

MAKING SOCIAL WAVES

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, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and digital technology, are affecting not only the workers but also other sectors of the society. Thus, trade unions must advocate for social justice for different stakeholders of society and become the core of a broader countervailing power.

Such stakeholders include: farmers exploited by land laws that favour landowners; freelance artists who did not receive any protection during the pandemic; 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; and others. Furthermore, to promote local, beneficial employment, trade unions could form coalitions with local governments, employers’ associations, educational institutions and banks.

The ITUC-Asia Pacific will pursue our commitment to achieving a peaceful, democratic, secure and stable world where people are free from the threats of armed conflict, terrorism and other forms of violence.

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