

A close-up photograph of a hand in a red sleeve, with the index and middle fingers extended and the thumb tucked in, forming a fist. The hand is positioned behind the main text.

THE WORLD BELONGS TO US

Trade union
perspective on
a changing society


**FRANK
MOREELS**



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that as a trade
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Foreword

W WHY SO ACTIVE IN OTHER COUNTRIES?

In many of the conversations I have as a trade union leader, I am often asked why I am so active on an international level, within the international trade union network. Why do I think it is so important to invest in European and international transport federations? Why do I maintain so many contacts with unions in other countries? And hence why do I spend so much time abroad?

People ask me that because they face problems on a daily basis in the workplace right here in Belgium. Their problems. And these problems are issues that they have, for example, in order to work safely, to make ends meet financially every month or to keep up with the hellish pace of work – coupled with the high degree of flexibility in their jobs they have to contend with today. They want the support of their union in doing so. And they will get it, at least they will from our union, the Belgian Transport Union BTB, which I chair.

FRANK MOREELS

° 17/01/1961. Belgium.

President Belgische Transportbond (BTB-ABVV).

President European Transport Workers' Federation

(ETF). Vice-President International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF).

My answer to the question? Because many problems facing working men and women can only be solved through international trade union commitment and international trade union action. I truly believe that as a trade union you have no choice but to be active internationally.

Truck and bus drivers know that truckers' driving and rest times can only be modified by changing the rules on a European basis.

And seafarers know that their status and working conditions are largely determined at an international level. Because the Maritime Labour Convention defines the situation of sailors worldwide.

Dockworkers will no doubt realise that decisions taken about the port terminal where they work are often made in Singapore or Denmark. And while Antwerp may be Europe's second-largest port, the same Europe is also being used and abused to call the status of Antwerp dockers into question.

Handlers at the airport, meanwhile, were shocked to find out that Swissport International has ceased operations in Zaventem because of a decision taken in Zurich.

**TRADE UNION WORK IS BY DEFINITION
'INTERNATIONAL'**

That's why I want to put a number of things in perspective through this book. To convince working people – and especially union members. To get them excited about what is being decided in Europe (the European Union) or in Geneva (the International Labour Organisation) or anywhere else in the world. So that they can understand that decisions taken about them are often made on the other side of the world. To explain to them that a cooperation project with – say – Kenyan trade unions, can be a good investment. To motivate them to look beyond the borders of their own company – and beyond national borders, too. And, if necessary, to take action and to get behind the decisions taken elsewhere. In the end, it's all about us: our work circumstances, our employment conditions, our safety, our pay.

Here in Belgium, working people have never been given – and still don't get – anything for free. We have always had to fight for better pay and working conditions. We have had to campaign for paid leave and fight for a safe workplace. Today, what may be a given for us is still not a reality in many places around the world. And even internationally, we will not be able to achieve any improvement to our situation simply by asking nicely.

If unions want to improve the lot of the 'ordinary' man and woman; if we want to fight inequality and if we want better distribution of wealth, we cannot afford to sit on our lazy backsides. We will have to put pressure on political leaders, multinational companies, international bodies and so on.

It's a difficult and uncomfortable task – and one that requires a lot of time and energy. But it is necessary if we are to succeed. In that sense, there

is no alternative. In fact the only way to do it is our way!

I'm also seeing other unions downsizing their international engagement. They're becoming less active or reduce their financial contribution to the international umbrella organisations they are part of. There can be two reasons for this. Either these international union structures are less relevant to the unions themselves, in which case those umbrella organisations should do some serious research into why that is happening and make adjustments where necessary. Or national or sector-specific unions have fewer people and resources. That, too, should make us think. Because if national unions become weakened, the impact we can have internationally also weakens.

Just as the world is becoming more global, just as the economy is becoming more international, and just as multinational companies are weighing in increasingly on political decisions as well, unions do not have the luxury of dropping the ball internationally.

I am well aware that many of the examples I give in this book come from my own Belgian and European trade union practice. After all, that is my living environment. Nevertheless, I have tried to look beyond the borders of Europe. And while Europe is covered extensively in this work, any trade union militant, anywhere in the world, will recognise a great deal of what it contains. Because that's just what the union movement is all about:

'In the end, it's all about us: our work circumstances, our employment conditions, our safety, our pay.'

what happens in Brussels also happens in Montreal, Rio de Janeiro, Abidjan, Singapore and so on.

This book is based on my own experiences and union practices and I take full responsibility for it. But I am also glad that friends, colleagues, union comrades and others have wanted to state their views on what I have written. A number of guest writers have also been kind enough to give their views and comments on one of the chapters in this book. This makes me happy, because it enriches what I have written myself.

**YOU CAN'T START A FIRE
WITHOUT A SPARK**

European elections are coming up in June 2024. And our global trade union federation, the International Transport Workers' Federation,

*'Just as the world is becoming more global
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the ball internationally.'*

will have its own congress in October 2024. These are two good reasons to put forward a few ideas, analyse one or two of them in depth and also make some proposals – thereby making my contribution to the upcoming debates. Perhaps it will motivate young people to make their own contributions. Bruce Springsteen sings: You can't start a fire without a spark. Change doesn't just happen. Someone has to start it. So let us be the spark that fans the flame of change.

Frank Moreels
27 November 2023



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1. Global challenges



As working people, we face enormous challenges ahead. In many cases, we are already facing them today. If we want to avoid penalising working people, then we must be ready with answers.

CLIMATE TRANSITION

The biggest challenge facing us worldwide is global warming. This is not something hovering in the distant future. We are already noticing the effects in our daily lives. Think of the droughts and crop failures in Australia or Africa. The widespread forest fires in Canada, the United States, Spain and Greece. And the harrowing impact of floods in Italy, Libya, Germany, the Czech Republic and the Dutch and Belgian Meuse region, as well as the Alps. Already many people worldwide are fleeing climate change. With a rapidly rising global population, migration will do nothing but grow.

Climate change is already prompting many companies, governments and individuals to accelerate investments in the electrification of their production methods and transport modes. And this has a direct, immediate impact for everyone working in the transport industry.

AUTOMATION, DIGITALISATION AND THE RACE TO THE BOTTOM

Electrification often goes hand in hand with accelerated automation, digitalisation and the meteoric development of artificial intelligence – and so on. All this combined is currently revolutionising our economy. I can imagine that

truckers and taxi drivers are very worried when they see self-driving vehicles being developed. In fact some of them here and there are already operational.

Tech companies have also set a race to the bottom in motion worldwide. By ‘outsourcing’ physical labour, they are playing off logistics service providers who, in turn, are competing increasingly fiercely with each other. Everything has to get cheaper and cheaper – and this is at the expense of working people. ‘Techploitation’ is placing pressure on public services. Wages are dropping, often as the result of using cheap labour. And social dumping, ‘legal’ or otherwise, is commonplace all over the world.

POPULISM AND THE FAR RIGHT

Alienation and a sense of unease are taking hold of people. Fear of insecurity is a major socioeconomic consequence. Especially for those in the lowest wage categories. And growing anti-politics leads to more populism and leaning to the far right. Populism and the far-right pose a real threat in this regard. Because even our own supporters are not deaf to far right and populist slogans that are spread by *the Pied Pipers of Hamelin*, who try to seduce working people with a false narrative of hatred, division and exclusion.

‘Everything has to get cheaper and cheaper – and this is at the expense of working people.’

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If we don't want history to repeat itself, trade unions will have to do more than step up their fight against populism and the far right!

These are just some of the social phenomena we will need to get our teeth into.

What follows is a summary of the main challenges we face as unions in the coming years. Some of these challenges will be on our radar for several more years to come. Others will already have a defining resolution in 2024. For instance, I am thinking of the European elections, the outcome of which will be crucial for the future of Europe

'Whether we like it or not, we are all global citizens now. And, for the record, I feel like a citizen of the world.'

and for working people across the continent. And elsewhere in the world, too – because Europe is not an island. Whether we like it or not, we are all global citizens now. And, for the record, I feel like a citizen of the world.





To be heard we need to stand up. We need to organise across local and international workplaces and supply chains.

TONY SHELDON



The transport industry is characterised by low profit margins, high levels of competition, few barriers to entry, and high turnover rates.

Local and regional transport markets play an integral role in global supply chains, whether it's passenger transport, cargo freight transport, or even the fuel required to run the industry and the broader economy.

While in theory this provides transport workers with greater leverage in industrial negotiations, it can also expose them to the consequences of corporate decisions made in boardrooms on the other side of the world from where their local, or even national, unions operate.

To be heard, we need to stand up. We need to organise across local and international workplaces and supply chains.

We have to align local action with international campaigns and to effectively hold decision makers to account where they seek to silence and ignore local worker voices.

TONY SHELDON

°26/08/1961. Australia.

Senator for the Australian Labor Party. President of the Australian Senate Education and Employment Committee. Former national secretary of the Transport Workers Union of Australia (TWU) and former president of the road transport section of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF)

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2. Digitalisation, automation and artificial intelligence



THE IMPACT ON OUR WORK

TIn recent years, the transport sector has undergone a significant transformation as a result of rapid advances in digitalisation, automation and artificial intelligence (AI). These advances will only accelerate in the coming years and the impact will be even greater than it is now.

Not fewer, but different jobs

Until recently, we thought that automation and digitalisation would be *job eaters*. But it is not machines or technological developments that pose a threat to employment. No: it is the business models behind them. That's what this is really about.

Many studies make predictions about jobs disappearing. The drivers of heavy goods vehicles is one such frequently quoted occupation. But not according to Arjen van Halem, former business manager at STZ consultancy & research. At a round table conference organised by the Belgian Transport Union in 2018, he said: "A number of major agencies have calculated that millions of jobs will be lost. But if you look at the details more closely, you will see that it is not such a big deal at all. Because every occupation is made up of multiple tasks. For instance, a truck driver does much more than just drive a truck. He (or she) also has to ensure security, load and unload goods and check papers. A machine cannot take over all those tasks at the same time. If you watch videos on the Internet, you often see the image of a self-driving truck and a driver sitting relaxed reading the newspaper. But that is a complete

misrepresentation. A truck driver will be more akin to an aircraft pilot in the future. His plane will take off and land automatically, but the pilot at the controls will still be very highly trained in order to intervene when necessary. That's exactly how things will also evolve in the goods transport industry." Van Halem has now been proven right. Five years later, there has not been a mass breakthrough of self-driving trucks.

Experts tell us that jobs will disappear, but jobs will also be created: A McKinsey report predicted back in December 2017 that by 2030, 75 to 375 million workers – some 3 to 14 per cent of the global workforce – would have to switch occupations due to the disruptive impact of digitalisation and automation.

That report also revealed that even then, more than 50 per cent of existing professional occupations were technologically eligible for digitalisation or automation.

According to the World Economic Forum, around 85 million jobs will be lost by 2025 whereas 97 million jobs will be created. That's a net gain of 12 million jobs. The 2020 report states that half

'It is not machines or technological developments that pose a threat to employment. No: it is the business models behind them.'

of workers will need to retrain by 2025 to keep up with technological advances.

Demand for new skills

But what about worker protection? Self-driving trucks and buses, remotely operated straddle carriers, digital orders, artificial intelligence, OCR recognition of containers and so on. In any event, all of these will thoroughly shake up our economic activity.

From a trade union perspective, that transformation certainly brings additional challenges with it. Our job is to protect the rights and welfare of workers. Technological transition should not mean sidelining employees. In itself, we embrace a great deal of technological innovation: after all, much of the technology used in cars, trucks, ships and aircraft contributes greatly to enhanced road safety and working comfort.

I am myself particularly concerned about the impact that all this will have on the content of jobs and the sorts of jobs that we will end up doing. It will undoubtedly be the case that higher qualifications will be required of people currently working in the transport sector if they want to continue working in the industry in the future.

Role of the unions

In a context where technological developments are accelerating, we will therefore have to focus on training, career guidance, health, privacy and the right to disconnection – i.e. the right not to be disturbed once the working day is over.

People leaving school today who are able to do something now will not be able to do the same thing in 20 years' time if they want to stay working. We need to make sure that the right training is there and that people use it properly.

Retraining and upskilling programmes must be enforced from employers so that workers are able to keep up with developments. That way, workers become and remain equipped with the necessary skills that will enable them to adjust to changes in the labour market. Yet of course, it should only be proper that this retraining of workers takes place during working hours and that employers pay for it.

Furthermore, we need to commit to ongoing career support and guidance, as this will be the basis for identifying the type of training required. And, when screening for current skills, we also need to consider the skills that will be required in the future. The way each business is organised should also be screened on an ongoing basis to create a match between developments there and the way occupations are evolving so that they can be built into a training plan.

Other things we need to address as a union include fair pay, health and safety, reasonable working hours, privacy and the right to disconnect. Technological innovation must not be allowed to be an excuse for compromise in this area. This should include paying due attention to the welfare of workers, in addition to the obvious focus on employment itself. And there must be no technological progress if that progress means social decline.

We – the unions – must take care of our people. Because if we don't take care of them, no one else will.

'Technological transition should not mean sidelining employees.'

But this will not happen by itself. Trade unions will have to change and adapt their approaches, strategies and structures to the challenges created by technology. And developing new organisational models to reach new types of workers is also essential.

ORGANISING PLATFORM WORKERS

Digital platforms are popping up all over the world. They call themselves digital service providers and they provide a link between people seeking a service and others wanting to provide that service. There's Uber in the taxi sector, Amazon in logistics, Deliveroo and Just Eat Takeaway in meal delivery. All of these are turning our industries upside down.

Bogus self-employment

It may seem like a good thing, but actually it's not. Because these are people who work to earn a living, but they are not actually employed by those platforms. The business model of those platform companies is based on bogus self-employment. They make people work for those companies, but they don't take any responsibility for them: certainly not in terms of an employment contract, or social security or insurance.

According to Wikipedia, Uber employed 32,800 staff worldwide at the end of 2022, but the company itself denies actually being an employer in many cases. Uber doesn't feel that their drivers or couriers are actually employees of the company. The way they see it, they are partners, not members of staff. This means they do not have the rights and obligations that employees of the company would have. Above all, that means they lack the rights that employed workers have.

Uber – and many other platform companies with them – operate a perverse business model.

'I am myself particularly concerned about the impact that all this will have on the content of jobs.'

It's a model where the burdens are passed on to employees and the benefits flow mainly to the company.

As a union, we have a mission on two fronts. First and foremost, we oppose the platform economy business model itself and the accompanying misclassification of workers in these emerging industries. Second, we unite and strengthen those platform workers – they're employees of the companies they work for, in our view – by organising them. We take their interests, needs and problems seriously and fight to achieve a better working and living situation for them.

Because that is what trade unions have been doing since their inception: standing up for those in need of protection, help and assistance. And translating those needs collectively to force improvements for everyone in the same situation to benefit from.

At the present time, there are 28 million employees operating in the platform industry in the EU. By 2025, there will be 43 million of them. So many workers who have no voice will no doubt realise for themselves that they need to organise. And they will do so in various places around the world. And when they do, unions must be ready to support them.

BRINGING ORDER TO THE BOOMING LOGISTICS SECTOR

In early 2020, the global Covid pandemic broke out and gripped the world for more than two years. The Covid crisis and the measures taken by the various governments clearly caused an

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explosion in the logistics sector. Millions of people were required to work from home and found themselves confined to their homes by lockdowns. They lived, worked and spent their leisure time at home. Many people placed their orders online. They ordered basic products, as well as many other items that would previously have been in the leisure section. Consumers were pushed out of the shops and hunched in front of their computer screens, ready to shop.

This not only created exponential growth in e-commerce generally, but also generated equally large growth in the logistics sector. Consumers developed new habits, as well as new expectations. If they ordered something online today, they expected it to be delivered to their home tomorrow, at the latest.

Each morning I see as many as fifteen delivery vans driving in and out of my street. Business is booming for companies such as Amazon, PostNL,

DPD and GLS. And the online ordering habit has continued long after the lockdowns were over.

7.5 million dollars per hour

E-commerce and gig platforms such as Uber and Deliveroo saw their turnover increase by 50 per cent between 2019 and 2020. Other companies, like PostNL, GLS, DPD and other package deliverers also did well. Unfortunately, it wasn't just these companies' business figures that went up sharply. The number of complaints from workers about poor working conditions and exploitation by their employers also spiked.

Large multinationals, such as Amazon, developed an aggressive overall strategy. They reorganised and restructured to the tune of big money. In the third quarter of 2021, Amazon generated a turnover of 110.8 billion dollars. That was 15 per cent more than in the same period of the previous year.

Amazon is the world's largest e-commerce company and its presence is also creeping up stealthily on Belgium. Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, sees his own personal wealth grow by 7.5 million dollars... every hour. A Belgian trucker would have to work for more than 450,000 hours (that equates to 206 years!) to achieve the same thing. In the meantime, as Bezos stuffs the money in his pockets to organise little trips into space for the rich and famous, Amazon workers barely make a minimum wage.



Chain of exploitation

In Belgium, apart from bpost (which is still the biggest player by far), we mainly have PostNL, GLS and DPD. The business model of these home parcel delivery firms is based on bogus self-employment and they work with so-called independent subcontracting couriers.

These are bogus self-employed workers, because they work for one client only. Often, these so-called self-employed workers employ their own subcontractors. By doing so, a chain of low pay, hyper-flexibility, stress, overwork and other bad things is created – in short: exploitation. And the lower down the chain you go, the worse the working conditions become.

In 2019, the British film director Ken Loach shone the spotlight on the package delivery sector in the United Kingdom in his film *Sorry We Missed You*. In his masterful style, Loach exposed the glaring abuses in the British small package economy. On 16th February 2020, I had the opportunity to debate this with Sonja Teugels and Karlien Erregat, representatives of the employer federations, Voka and Unizo, respectively. They condemned the abuses as shown in the film, while at the same time claiming that they rarely occur in Belgium.

Their views were either very naive, or there was ill will involved. Because two years later, in 2022, a scandal broke out in my own country, Belgium, when it emerged that parcel company PostNL was flouting pretty much all of the rules and laws. The company's CEO in Belgium, Rudy Van Rillaer, and his operations manager were even detained and jailed for a while.

Those abuses in the logistics sector have previously been described in the black book published by our union BTB in 2021. In that particular black book, several workers testified.

“The workload is huge. 200 stops per day is more usually the rule than the exception. The rules are very simple. Either you obey and do everything that’s asked of you. Or you can leave. Just about every rule relating to pay and working conditions is completely ignored. The subcontractors and PostNL get away with it all. Because 99 per cent of the drivers are foreign and don’t speak enough Dutch to know what their rights are. For these people, it’s a question of choice: simply get to work without complaining, or there’s no work and no income. It doesn’t take long to make the right choice.”

Husain: He started working as a parcel delivery driver for a subcontractor of PostNL and went on to become the depot manager.

“On a normal day, I did between 180 and 200 stops. But that number kept growing constantly until it reached 250 and 300 stops per day. There was even one day when I made 410 stops. We were paid for eight hours a day, but worked between ten and twelve hours to make sure all of the packages were delivered. There wasn’t usually time to take a break. If, due to circumstances, not all parcels could be delivered, a complaint from GLS automatically followed to the subcontractor we worked for, who in turn sought redress from us. If that happened several times, we had to return our keys and we were shown the door and told not to come back. Whatever happened, it was always the driver’s fault. External circumstances were never taken into consideration.”

Mohammed worked for GLS from 2019 to 2021.

An informal ETF survey of European trade unions conducted in summer 2023 has shown that the problems facing logistics workers are the same across Europe. Subcontracting and outsourcing are the rule of the game in the sector. Often, temporary workers are used, who have non-permanent contracts, or bogus self-employed workers. This makes it difficult for staff to organise into a union. Digitalisation and the use of artificial intelligence mean there is also a lack of transparency. In many cases, the sector is run by aggressive managers who don't shy away from intimidation. And often there's a lack of personal/individual protective equipment.

Anti-union

A final reflection on the logistics sector and the challenge facing the trade unions there. In 2022, in the United States, Amazon spent 14.2 million dollars on anti-union consultants. What does it mean for a company that spends so much money to keep the unions out? Does it not indicate that just those very employees have every interest in having unions working for them within their company?

ROBOTS WILL HAVE TO PAY!

It's a bit of sloganeering, perhaps, but it is necessary. Among other things, public services and social security are funded today by taxing labour. In itself, there's nothing wrong with that. But if human work is taken over by machines, is it not reasonable to demand **a fair slice of the revenue created by automation and digitalisation?**

After all, robots don't buy goods, don't pay taxes and therefore don't contribute to general welfare. Today, the (European) social model is built on the fact that you tax and then reuse some of the surplus value on labour to pay for things like social security.

That surplus value on labour will always increase thanks to automation. It will not only be produced by workers, but increasingly by machines or by software and everything around it. And if that's the case, I don't see why you can't design a model to value machines, robots, computers, software programs, etc.

Instead of taxing only labour, you might as well tax (some of) the profit generated by automation. This will eventually be necessary to keep our social model intact or to flesh it out more where it doesn't exist (yet).

LEGISLATION, TRANSPARENCY AND ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS

Collective Labour Agreements must have the ability to provide an answer to the changing and digital context that surrounds us. Issues such as algorithmic application management, remote working, employee privacy and their data protection should all be subject to negotiation. These are areas that deserve clear agreements so that employees are adequately protected from the potentially hazardous effects of technology.

One of the problems experienced by platform workers, for example, is the lack of transparency about how the algorithms that control them are operated. Pricing is not at all clear, for instance. Uber drivers in turn lose their licence or are simply deleted from the application and can only guess why.

'Robots don't buy goods, don't pay taxes and therefore don't contribute to general welfare.'

Moreover, with the integration of artificial intelligence and automation, ethical considerations also need to be taken into account. We have to stress the importance of transparency and accountability in the development and deployment of these technologies. There needs to be clarity for the use of AI algorithms so that we can **guarantee fairness, prevent discrimination and protect the privacy of employees.**

The management of platform companies will also have to learn to talk with the people who carry out work for them. It's called social dialogue. And it can only be achieved with the involvement of the unions. Because if there is one thing we cannot do, it is to assume the good intentions of these platform companies. Monitoring is an absolute necessity.

Not so very long ago, I was sitting at the kitchen table at home, talking about travel. About whether we would ever go on a trip to Greece again, because remember last time... An ordinary weekday conversation at an ordinary weekday location. And as I grabbed my smartphone to check my messages for the umpteenth time – the umpteenth time too many – I happened to receive some advertisements about ... travel to Crete. I am really not making this up! I couldn't!

When that happens, shouldn't we urgently call for ethical frameworks that take into account the social impact of these technologies and ensure that they are consistent with workers' and consumers' rights, as well as in line with our societal values?

Daron Acemoglu is an economist affiliated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He researches the economic implications and dangers of introducing artificial intelligence and he believes in technological progress, although not at any cost.

He warns us that without a clear regulatory framework, technology will increase inequality. You don't even have to be or become a technophobe to see that regulation is urgently required.

And that regulation, he says, should not be left to the industry itself, nor delayed for geopolitical reasons. He refers to the battle between economic superpowers hiding behind the fact that competition benefits from unilateral regulation: "We cannot do that, otherwise China will get ahead." Meanwhile, China itself has also put plans to introduce regulations on hold for the same reason.

We must actively participate in discussions about the future of work and not leave it to techies or politicians. We must put pressure on policymakers, employers and other stakeholders to shape a future that promotes fair work, social justice and shared prosperity.

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

Access to technology is crucial for participating actively in social life and the economy. If you want to be informed today, you need access to technology. In fact, access to a great many services is becoming almost impossible for people still living analogue lives. Yet a third of the world's population does not have access to the Internet! Also, many people do not feel at home with digital media and lack the technical skills to use them.

In Belgium, 20 per cent of the population lives in poverty or social exclusion – or risks falling into it. 28 per cent of Belgians don't have the required knowledge to use the Internet securely. This means that poverty and a lack of access to the Internet and social media, etc. go hand in hand. Disadvantaged people have less access to

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increasingly digitalised (public) services, whether it's health services, banks or digital municipal services.

Older people, for example, often fall by the wayside. They may lack computer skills and often don't even have a computer or a smartphone. Consequently, they cannot create an electronic identity and hence miss out on connecting to many digital services.

Architect-urbanist Thomas Ermacora has serious concerns about this. Concerns about countries lacking the capabilities and resources to use artificial intelligence, concerns about the concentration of power of AI development. 80 per cent of research, engineering and product development for artificial intelligence is in the hands of a dozen companies, he says.

He's even concerned about the personality of the people who run the big tech companies (Amazon, Meta, Google, etc.). He believes that their personalities – some call them narcissistic, others talk about egoism – create a toxic dynamic in the technology landscape. This was illustrated clearly in August 2023, when Elon Musk supported a message from the Flemish far-right fascist party Vlaams Belang on his new forum X, formerly Twitter.

'Poverty and a lack of access to the Internet and social media, etc. go hand in hand.'

'The only way to rein back the power of Musk and his consorts is to challenge his monopoly.'

CHECKING THE POWER OF THE TECH GIANTS

Canadian users of Facebook and Instagram were told suddenly in August 2023 that they would no longer see news reports on their timeline. That was the result of the Online News Act passing in Canada. This piece of legislation obliges companies such as Meta (which encompasses Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp) to pay copyright fees to the news media.

Meta does not agree with the new law and so simply took out all news reports from its platforms. There had already been talk about this in Australia in 2021, where the government voted for similar legislation. The law was subsequently adjusted... under pressure from several of the tech giants. It illustrates the power and attitude of these behemoths who bstride technology: anyone who votes for laws the media giants don't like will take a pasting. That's a big fat middle finger from the tech giants to the political world.

It becomes even more excessive when you come to realise that SpaceX, Elon Musk's company, can decide the course of a war. Such as the war in Ukraine. With his company Starlink's 4,500 satellites suspended high in the atmosphere, Musk acquired a dominant position in the field of Internet via satellite.

At the touch of a button on his Starlink system, Elon Musk could complicate Ukrainian attacks on Crimea. That's according to research from The New York Times. It's very frightening to think that something so radical is possible. We are talking here about one filthy-rich person who can decide the course of a war. Whatever you think of the war in Ukraine, it's a sobering thought.

That businessmen – who are only out for profit – can have such an impact should be enough to

shake every democrat awake. When you add to that the fickle and maverick nature of Musk's character and psychology, we must urgently demand that governments intervene and establish more controls – or else develop their own initiatives that allow for democratic control over such systems. The only way to rein back the power of Musk and his consorts is to challenge his monopoly. Which is why the EU has developed the IRIS² satellite communication network.

I also advocate greater control and transparency over data management and processing by companies and governments. Personal data remains the property of the people themselves: that should be the starting point. The European Union took the first step in this direction with the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation. But that's just the beginning. There also needs to be greater visibility into the ways in which data is processed. Just think of the benefits affair in the Netherlands in which 25,000 people were wrongly suspected of fraud due to incorrect assumptions made by the data management program.



Artificial intelligence is a powerful tool, but now we need to set the right objectives.

MONICA DE CONINCK

A

As a new information technology, AI has the potential to ultimately improve our standard of living, just as the post-industrial revolution did with the introduction of automation.

Thanks to increased productivity, we may have achieved a higher gross domestic product, which has brought greater prosperity, but this has not necessarily improved everyone's wellbeing.

Artificial intelligence, as semi-autonomous software, can solve problems, but how can we prevent it from having a negative impact on the lives of many people? In short, will artificial intelligence be used for the benefit of a society with a high level of social capital and mutual trust, or will it be used solely to increase shareholder profits?

50 years ago, automation eliminated many jobs that were based mainly on a person's physical strength or their ability to do manual work in manufacturing. This meant that the lower middle class and manual workers had to look for other jobs or else they ended up unemployed or taking early retirement. It also demonstrates that the application of more advanced technologies does not necessarily improve everyone's standard of living.

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AI, as a broad set of technological tools, gives managers the opportunity to work at a lower cost and above all to save on middle management labour costs. AI therefore solves the problem of managers. However, its social cost is high: higher unemployment and greater inequality are likely to emerge. The middle class – people with their trades and skills – is in danger of disappearing.

This will fundamentally change the socio-economic system.

There will be greater pressure to guarantee everyone, as a consumer, a basic income from general resources based on a tax system. But big business and its shareholders will make maximum use of artificial intelligence tools to avoid making a fair contribution to the “basic income” system.

The development of AI is currently in the hands of the ten richest companies worldwide, so that an increasingly exclusive de facto elite dominates global economic and related social dynamics.

An increasingly exclusive elite can decide on the purposes and applications of AI and will therefore influence the lives of a large group of people.

If the aim of AI is to increase productivity, and if only shareholders are going to reap the benefits, this means that technological advances are being misused.

Of course, no one is opposed to new, more advanced technologies, but at the end of the

day, it's about promoting economic justice and creating a better life for everyone. Technological development is closely linked to the capitalist economic system and is associated with “progress” and advancement. Public money, in the form of tax breaks or subsidies, even stimulates this process: the pharmaceutical sector in Belgium is a case in point. But what is progress in a globalised world facing enormous ecological challenges? Who has the capacity and power to make decisions in this area? How should we organise ourselves in terms of democratic participation processes?

IS AI ABOUT FOLLOWING THE INSTRUCTIONS OF AN ALGORITHM?

AI is not a neutral technology, because it is fuelled by certain knowledge, certain systems of thought and certain underlying values and emotions. In short, it is based on a particular vision of the world in which algorithms are created. These algorithms can perform creative tasks and propose potential decisions, but they will always be part of a predetermined worldview.

A company's board of directors could, for example, ask the AI system the following interesting question: Should we prioritise short-term productivity gains or long-term job/existence security? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the different scenarios for the players involved?

The challenge therefore remains to ask essential questions and to be aware of the worldview and interests that will dictate the answers.

**THE
WORLD
BELONGS
TO
US**

3. The worldwide race to the bottom



THINGS ALWAYS HAVE TO KEEP GETTING CHEAPER

In shipping

In 2021, Troy Pearson (43) and Charley Cragg (25) died on the job while towing a pontoon for the mining company Rio Tinto in Canada. The sea was too rough, the wind too icy and their tug too small for the conditions. Yet despite all that, their employer still sent them out. Troy and Charley's deaths are a tragedy, but not an isolated case.

Crew members on tugs worldwide are being asked to work longer hours for less pay. Some will not be paid overtime. Rest periods are not being respected. Work accidents and near-misses are increasingly common. The nautical knowledge of crew members is ignored. Stress. Fatigue. Indeed, in the tug industry, the pressure on prices is enormous. Everything has to be cheaper and faster.

How does that come about? The tug industry is under severe pressure from unfair competition. Shipping companies form alliances, stand strong and can impose unreasonable rates on towage companies. That results in unsafe and unsustainable working conditions. Tug services are increasingly unable to survive the pressures of lower rates and competition in ports. In Europe, for example, the number of major players has fallen from ten to barely three in less than a decade, and two of them are owned by shipping giants. There's a clear race to the bottom underway in the tugboat industry. And not just there.

In aviation

Now let's take a look at the aviation sector... During the Covid crisis, Australian airline Qantas illegally outsourced 1,700 ground handling jobs. They pretended this was a necessary cost-saving measure, but the unions knew it was also motivated by the fact that outsourced workers could not take industrial action against the company. Comrades of the TWU (the Australian transport union) disputed the issue in court. At the same time, Qantas has not hired any cabin crew directly since 2008, but has instead continued to use 14 recruitment agencies. On 23rd September 2023, our colleagues at TWU achieved a thunderous victory, with the Australian Supreme Court ruling the 1,700 redundancies illegal. Campaigning pays off!

Another example: Avia Solutions Group from Lithuania. This company has a number of brands, including SmartLynx or KlasJet, in its portfolio. In 2021, the Belgian Football Association found it necessary to swap their regular airline (Brussels Airways, which does follow Belgian collective agreements) for KlasJet. Avia hires its crew through an employment agency in the United Arab Emirates, but its aircraft are based in many European countries. The ETF filed a complaint with the European Labour Agency against the firm's questionable practices.

And then there's the case of P&O, which on 17th March 2022, unceremoniously laid off 786 seamen via video message, while at the same time simultaneously replacing crew members with cheaper workers from low-wage countries?

In transport and logistics

It was in 2007 that Stefano Gebbia, a Belgian Transport Union militant, spoke at a national meeting with other union delegates. He told the story of Supertransport, the company where he worked as a driver. The company supplied the Carrefour retail chain. He described how management used Hungarian drivers and raised concerns about those drivers' low wages, longer working hours and worse conditions. He also warned that the practice threatened the employment of Belgian drivers. Just how prophetic the words he was speaking were to be he did not realise at the time.

Supply chains and transport operations, and therefore the people who work in them, are under severe pressure today from the race to the bottom organised by multinational companies. I call them 'economic employers': companies that don't employ their drivers directly, although they are the main client.

Using drivers from Eastern Europe and low-wage countries in Western Europe is a well-known practice. Unions have been denouncing social dumping practices in road transport for years. The only reason behind these practices is to save on wages. And in doing so, all potential means are used: setting up PO box companies, using bogus self-employed workers, flouting (European) laws and ignoring national collective labour agreements. But we are equally well aware that more and more companies are organising social dumping in inland navigation, for example by employing sailors from Eastern Europe. The river cruise industry also takes full advantage of these practices. Dubious temporary employment agencies are often used to employ Filipino drivers or river cruise staff who work for wages well under the pay scales. These people sometimes stay on board the ships for

months on end, without being able to return home. That doesn't quite smell like forced labour yet, but it's beginning to create something of a stink.

And it goes without saying that social dumping is a real plague in other sectors, too, such as the meat-processing industry and the construction sector. Large-scale institutionalised systems are being set up in many activities where cheap labour is used illegally.

Due diligence directive

It is paramount that these employers are made aware of their responsibilities. They cannot afford to outsource work to subcontractors and yet still pretend that they have no responsibility for what goes on in the transport chain. It's all about due diligence, which is an extremely important concept. The European Parliament already reached preliminary agreement on the proposal for a European due diligence directive in June. Hopefully, the directive will be in place by the end of 2023.

We should also point out that European integration as a political project is by no means finished. Countries such as Malta and Cyprus and semi-free states such as Madeira enjoy all sorts of European exemptions that rogue crewing agencies

'These people sometimes stay on board the ships for months on end, without being able to return home. That doesn't quite smell like forced labour yet, but it's beginning to create something of a stink.'

eagerly exploit. For example, compulsory social security membership does not apply to workers from Madeira. European seamen sailing under that flag therefore do not accrue social rights. And in Cyprus, although compulsory membership of social security exists for EU residents, in practice this does not happen. And the departments that employ them admit as much. Article four of the European Convention on Human Rights, however, explicitly prohibits any form of forced labour. A European pillar of social rights should define more clearly what exactly it covers. And despite numerous European meetings on the subject, I feel there has been far too much procrastination for far too long.

Outside Europe, too

What is called social dumping in Europe, by the way, is by no means a European phenomenon. The Americans talk about misclassification. And that appears to be a problem that manifests itself as clearly in the trucking industry in the US as in Europe. Only there, it is US drivers who are being pushed out of the market by the use of bogus self-employed drivers, mostly from Latin America.

Domingo Avalos, one of these drivers, testified in an article in the LA Times as follows: *“Most of us come from Mexico or Central America. We are not used to being entitled to use protective equipment in the workplace and most of us do not speak English well. The companies take advantage of this and treat us as second-class workers.”*

Drivers work an average of 11 hours a day, six days a week, and are paid at a piece rate per load, regardless of how long it takes to deliver the cargo. Domingo himself did not see too many problems with his status as a bogus self-employed person, until one day he suffered a workplace accident and needed medical attention. The hospital bill soon

‘It is paramount that these employers are made aware of their responsibilities. It’s all about due diligence, which is an extremely important concept.’

ran up to more than \$2,000. But his employer, XPO, was only willing to reimburse these medical expenses after Domingo brought in a lawyer to handle his case.

Victims: the workers themselves and social security

There’s a clear race to the bottom going on in the road haulage industry. This form of social dumping mainly creates losers:

The initial victims are the individual drivers who come from the low-wage countries in question. They work for cut-price wages, put in (too) long working days, do not get enough rest and are often simply exploited!

The second category of victims are the workers in the country where these foreign workers are employed. They risk losing their job because they are too expensive. And their pay and working conditions come under pressure. Why should employers still pay the wages provided for in national collective agreements when they can get workers who are much cheaper?

Finally, it’s the social security systems and tax systems that suffer. Because no or insufficient contributions or taxes are paid on (illegal) labour organised in the black or grey circuit. With dire consequences for the national exchequer. The same problem presents itself for social security, which is underfunded and under pressure from social dumping. Not to mention safety for other road users.

THE WORLD BELONGS TO US

Anyone who thinks that this is fantasy on the part of the unions needs to take their blinders off for a moment. Here are some concrete facts to consider:

In February 2013, it became known that Latvia's Dinotrans was using Filipino drivers en masse. A Dutch haulage company, Martin Wismans, also worked with Filipino drivers. Thanks to the Dutch trade union FNV, strong action was taken at the time and the drivers were protected as victims of human trafficking. Transport Wismans lost its transport licence.



In Padborg, Denmark, five years ago – in 2018 – Danish trade union 3F discovered a camp where Filipino drivers were staying at the weekend. The drivers worked for Danish haulier Kurt Beier, through its Polish subsidiary. The pay and working conditions of those drivers were totally degrading. They earned 2 euros an hour and had to live in a stable that a respectable farmer would not let his animals stay in.

The manager of several Belgian transport companies was sentenced in absentia to one year's effective imprisonment for human trafficking and social dumping by the Bruges correctional court in May 2022. He allowed foreign drivers to bivouac in degrading conditions in a car park in Zeebrugge.



In 2018, he had previously been sentenced to eight months in prison by the Ghent Court of Appeal for similar offences. A number of checks carried out between 2015 and 2018 showed that the owner was using PO box companies in Poland and Bulgaria, according to the labour audit office. However, all the activities conducted by the transport companies took place in Belgium. This construction allowed the accused to circumvent Belgian minimum wages and social contributions. A French official report also allegedly showed that the accused used violence against an employee of the company.

In April 2023, 70 drivers from Polish haulage companies LUK MAZ, AGMAZ and IMPERIA LOGISTYKA – all belonging to the same manager – stopped work. They did so because they had not been paid for more than a month. To draw attention to their plight, they parked their trucks in a car park in Gräfenhausen, Germany, on the A5 near Weiterstadt. It was a historic action that exploited drivers from eastern Europe should lay down their tools for more than a week because they were thoroughly fed up with years of exploitation.

The fact that they were dealing with an employer who did not shy away from employing harsh means became evident when he tried to intimidate the striking drivers with a private militia. Driving around in armoured vehicles and dressed in full combat gear, their job was to threaten the truck drivers and, if necessary, use force to take their trucks away. Fortunately, the police were on hand and managed to settle the conflict in which 19 people were arrested, including the owner of the Polish transport company.

The drivers were driving on behalf of major companies such as IKEA, Volkswagen, DHL, LKW

'I call for a clear European penalty code to be implemented for failure to pay proper wages, as well as for well-defined rules around sleeping arrangements for staff.'

Walter, sender Technologies and CH Robinson. Which shows once again that multinational companies have an overwhelming responsibility when it comes to exploitation in the transport chain. These economic players hold the key to stopping this exploitation and social dumping. In their race to the bottom of ever cheaper transport, using exploitation and other criminal activities are the only way for them to meet that price that is far too low. This urgently needs to stop.

The summer of 2023 saw a second strike action in Gräfenhausen: more than 120 drivers from AGMAZ, LUK MAZ and IMPERIA LOGISTYKA stopped work for six weeks. It will not be the last strike.

European mobility package and European Employment Authority

After pressure from the trade unions, a European mobility package has been laid down. This means that the excesses of social dumping should, in theory, be better combated. Unfortunately, we can see that these European rules have still not all been transposed into national legislation and that there is far too little enforcement.

It was also through trade union action that former European Commissioner Marianne Thyssen came to set up a European Labour Authority. And although this body is far from being a true social inspectorate as we trade unionists would have preferred, it could become a tool that will help get a grip on social dumping through more and better controls.

I also call for a clear European penalty code to be implemented for failure to pay proper wages, as well as for well-defined rules around sleeping arrangements for staff.

IT IS NOT ONLY IN THE TRANSPORT SECTOR THAT THINGS ARE GOING WRONG

The story of the three Bangladeshis Nasir Uddin, Roman Joy and Afrose Khan was published in Belgian magazine Knack on 5 October 2022. All three were thirty-somethings who had families to support in Dhaka and Brahmanbaria in Bangladesh.

They were qualified welders who sought and found work abroad through Raj Bhar, a kind of employment agency. They wanted to earn money to give their children a better life. After lengthy wanderings – during which they were not paid and lived in squalid conditions – the three ended up in Belgium, via Budapest and Porto.

The chemical company Borealis was building in the port of Antwerp. They hired the Italian construction group IREM-Ponticelli to handle the project. Through a tangle of subcontractors, foreign workers were deployed on that construction site.

But the Belgian inspectorate services were tipped off about what was going wrong there and took action. Fortunately!

The story of Nasir, Roman and Afrose was one of exploitation, modern slavery and even pure human trafficking. And it isn't just me talking about trafficking, it's the judicial authorities in Belgium. 45 Filipino, 30 Bengali and 70 Turkish workers were provisionally recognised by the court as victims of human trafficking. Some Ukrainian workers were also involved.

They were all severely underpaid and certainly did not receive the wages agreed, barely half in fact. They were paid 6.90 euros an hour, just over half the legal minimum wage in Belgium, and much less than what should be paid according to the collective labour agreement in the construction sector. They were housed in appalling conditions and had to work extremely long shifts. Working days of 11.5 hours were the norm.

Borealis, though the client and main contractor, denied any involvement in or responsibility for the offences. When the case hit the press, they terminated the contract with their subcontractor, IREM-Ponticelli, which itself also pretended not to notice. They eagerly shifted responsibility for what was going wrong on to their subcontractors. Legal proceedings are now under way in Belgium, which are likely to take a very long time before final responsibilities are established. But it does illustrate that principals must be made accountable within the entire supply chain.

MAKING PRINCIPALS ACCOUNTABLE

A cool T-shirt for 2 euros. A new pair of trousers for just 10 euros. How can these prices be possible? Because somewhere in Bangladesh or anywhere else in the world, hundreds of workers – often women and sometimes even children – are employed in the most appalling conditions in sweatshops. The tragedy in Rana Plaza ten years ago is still fresh in our minds.

Rana Plaza

On 24th April 2013, an eight-storey building collapsed in Bangladesh: Rana Plaza. The collapse of the textile factory killed 1,134 people out of 5,000 workers and injured about 2,500 people. The collapse of the building is considered the deadliest disaster ever in a textile factory and the deadliest building disaster in modern history.



The cause of the disaster was mainly due to questionable business practices and inattention and corruption by management with the aim of maximising profits.

The Rana Plaza factories produced for Benetton, Le Bon Marché, Cato Fashions, The Children's Place, El Corte Inglés, Joe Fresh, Mango, Matalan, Primark and Walmart, among others. The only tangible effect for workers since the disaster has been Bangladesh's 'Accord on Fire and Building Safety', an agreement on fire and building safety. Under the neutral supervision of the International Labour Organisation, some 200 fashion brands, Bengali trade unions and Global Unions have signed the agreement. That agreement expired in 2021 and will be succeeded by the RMG Sustainability Council, a body concerned solely with building safety. It is something, but it does not address a much bigger problem: the exploitation of mostly working women.

In the meantime, a decade has passed since Rana Plaza, and many have simply moved on with their lives. Unjustly, too, because the British human rights organisation Business & Human

Rights Resource Centre tracked 156 abuses in 124 factories in Myanmar's textile sector between February 2022 and February 2023. The year before, they examined only 56 complaints. The litany of issues goes on. Their findings: underpayment of wages, unilateral reduction of wages, theft of wages, unfair dismissal and forced overtime. The factories in question mainly worked for H&M and for Inditex (including Zara). Those clothing brands therefore decided to stop their operations in Myanmar after other clothing brands did the same. So no, it is not over, it is not better.

Foxconn

The situation was also dire at Foxconn, a Taiwanese company that is Apple's main supplier and which manufactures in China. During the Covid pandemic, the company, which has 200,000 employees operated in a closed loop system for months. The company was sealed off from the outside world to prevent internal Covid outbreaks. When infections did occur, employees who tested positive were quarantined without adequate food and without medical care.



Due diligence: towards a fair supply chain

It's time to look at who organises the exploitation itself. Which means that principals, too, should come under the microscope! Only if the main clients themselves pay a decent price for the services provided can social dumping be stopped.

It is the principal clients who urgently need to pay better rates. Including in the transport sector. As long as they continue to evade their responsibility by continuing to push down rates, only criminal haulage companies that exploit drivers and flout all the rules will be able to keep doing the jobs. It's high time Europe took a different approach.

Due diligence must become a permanent practice in business and economic affairs. Multinational

companies that outsource work must take responsibility for the (mis)conduct of their subcontractors. Is it unreasonable to demand due diligence from the main clients at the top of the tree? Is it excessive to ask large multinationals to clean up their supply chain? To take responsibility for what happens there, even if they outsource their logistics and transportation operations? No, it is not!

There is another reason to bring justice to the transport chain: decent wages and working conditions are in the interest of all of us. The International Transport Workers' Federation talks about fair wages. A truck driver who has to keep working more and more hours for a pittance is a danger to road safety. For himself and for others.

*Is it unreasonable to demand due diligence from the economic employers?
No, it is not!*

Urgent action required against modern slavery

The fact that there is still a lot of work to do goes without saying! The International Labour Organisation points out that the global phenomenon of modern slavery has increased in recent years. Specific groups are particularly vulnerable: women, children, migrants without papers, refugees and so on. It's all about forced labour, sham marriages, commercial sexual exploitation and other horror stories. Another statistic: 12 per cent of those in forced labour are children.

Since the pandemic, we have faced staff shortages in almost all transport sectors. But in fact, it is not a shortage of staff, but a shortage of good jobs. This is the threat facing the sector – but it is also an opportunity for workers and their unions. It gives us a chance to negotiate attractive working conditions and good wages. Transport can never be free. It comes with a price tag. Especially if our goal is to achieve fair transport with secure prices, decent wages and good and safe working conditions. It is also time to convince employers in our sector that good working conditions and decent wages go hand in hand with finding and retaining motivated staff.





Small businesses are also being squeezed out by the competition, until all social links disappear and the only people left to turn to are the expensive law firms of the remaining giants.

JOHN CROMBEZ

W **WHY HAS THE RACE TO THE BOTTOM BECOME SO GENERALISED?**

A hundred years ago, during the 1920s, discontent reigned as a minority grew rich while the majority earned too little. The result was a chaotic society that culminated in the stock market crash of 1929. The world's self-proclaimed developed economies were then hit by famine and death. It was only in the wake of this disaster that a determination to change the system was born among the world's political leaders. Laws were enacted to limit the concentration of the market and power, and the accumulation of capital in the hands of a minority. And above all: wealth has been redistributed. Employee contributions were introduced to insure the population against hardship, illness or disability. Wage costs rose, but a margin was created so that workers could build themselves up. Social security is only about eighty years old.

At the current time, we are constantly being told that labour costs are bad for the economy. However, if we look at what happened to the economy after the rise in labour costs (redistribution of resources, protection of workers and limiting the power and might of capital), we see that the following 30 years were marked by the highest economic productivity in the world. This period also shows that productivity in Western

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economies has never been as high as it was when union membership was at its highest. Faced with such a situation, one might think that a new model has been found that benefits workers, the self-employed and entrepreneurs, a model that would therefore be sustainable. All the more so as entrepreneurs and workers have developed the model together.

But this is not the case. Whereas in the 19th century, only 2 per cent of the population could vote and owned capital, this 2 per cent of large shareholders took action to stem the advance of the people. They adopted a new form of discourse and trained new people to speak on their behalf. Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and company created a new model that would promote globalisation, generate prosperity, cut costs and ensure that workers would move forward along with the world economy. The trickle-down theory. They succeeded: the accumulation of capital and property was abandoned, the government stepped aside and deregulated, and even the social democrats followed the third way. The system has been successfully implemented and has meant that the share of the economy captured by the richest 20 per cent in the United States, for example, has never been as high as it is today.

But what a paradox. Shareholders have abandoned the model with the highest economic productivity, because too much of the economic benefit ended up in the hands of too large a proportion of the population. To a large extent, they even did it to counter entrepreneurship. At the time, wages and working conditions were the only things that were ‘trickling down’. After its creation, the European Union accelerated this race to the bottom by opening up the European labour market in an unregulated way. And it went even further. With CETA, shareholders wanted, when a government regulated for the benefit of the economy, to be able to demand sums from the profits they could not make because of government regulation.

And so it continues. This race to the bottom involves popularising shares so that many people feel concerned when it comes to shareholders. Attempts at globalisation and deregulation continue. The cuts to the extended social model continue. And in many sectors, such as transport, construction and others, this literally means not only that workers are losing out, but that even the smallest companies are being squeezed out by competition. And then it’s the turn of the slightly larger companies. Until all social links disappear and the only people left to turn to are the expensive law firms of the remaining giants. It’s time to establish new rules of redistribution to protect workers and entrepreneurs, and perhaps the latter should write them again together.



Trade unions must network with each other, across sectors.

CHRISTINE BEHLE

Trade unions must be there for their members and for the people. The shop stewards in the workplace and the trade union members in the works councils have their ears to the ground and take care of the very concrete, daily concerns. They ensure that the provisions of the collective agreements, the legal regulations, and health and safety provisions are applied and enforced.

Trade unions must network with each other, across sectors and nationally like the Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft (ver.di) in the Deutschen Gewerkschaftsbundes (DGB), but also within a sector or on the European and international level. Because often the concrete regulations on working conditions are not decided on a national level but on the European and international level. Business strategies, especially of large, often internationally active companies, have long since ceased to be orientated to just one country.

There are numerous examples worldwide of semi-legal and even criminal machinations in the transport sector, but this is also in other sectors. How wages are pushed below the collectively agreed or legal level through bogus

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self-employment and a lack of clear regulations in employment contracts, often combined with overlong, undeclared working hours and dubious reimbursements for alleged expenses and vehicle damages.

Like the Belgian Transport Union, ver.di fights for better regulations and the enforcement of these regulations at all levels. For example, in the transport sector:

- on the international level in the ITF flag of convenience campaign in maritime shipping;
- on the European level for an ambitious EU directive on supply chains (which will hopefully improve the German legal regulations) and for an ambitious mobility package with important regulations on driving and rest times, tachographs, posting, cabotage, and professional licensing in the field of truck and bus transport;
- on the national level, for example, on the collective agreement on local transport (TV-N), where we are currently preparing for a new round of collective bargaining, together with the climate movement.

This book rubs salt in the wound: demanding that regulations have to be enforced politically – on a company, enterprise, and national level, but especially in the transport sector, also on the European and international level. This is often Sisyphean work, but it is necessary. It is important to constantly monitor the numerous unfair business strategies and to put a stop to them. The strikes of truck drivers from Eastern Europe at the Gräfenhausen motorway service station in Germany, which Frank mentions, were decisively supported by active ver.di participation through the Fair Mobility DGB network, and thus achieved a first victory in which outstanding wages were paid. This shows that the principals of global supply chains play a decisive role as key decision-making points.

Let's step up the joint fight within the ETF and ITF. Together we can stop the race to the bottom and enter a race for the best conditions.



Introducing more investment in social inspection services, plus a limitation on the subcontracting chain and joint and several liability of the main contractor are three legitimate demands.

GIANNI DE VLAMINCK

A Almost twenty years ago, during the first wave of job postings, tens of thousands of regular jobs were lost in the Belgian construction sector. This forced the Belgian social partners to take measures in terms of the social fund in the sector, but also measures to control postings and above all to try to combat abuses.

Although, during the first waves of postings, the administrative obligations were still guaranteed by the employers concerned, we soon came to notice the emergence of other phenomena on our worksites. There were more and more (bogus) self-employed workers, as well as cases of social dumping and situations that have outright revealed criminal connections.

When a primary school under construction in the Nieuw-Zuid district of Antwerp collapsed in June 2021, the entire trade union movement in the Belgian construction sector was reminded of the reality of the situation. Several people lost their lives in the incident, including some of Portuguese or Ukrainian origin, and some workers were left permanently disabled. Identifying the victims literally took two days. Hundreds of contractors were working on the site, many of them as subcontractors. Most of them didn't even know what had happened, but they had

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signed a contract giving them a share in the company they were working for.

That's how we came to understand that the Posted Workers Directive was gradually becoming a measure used by crooked people to organise social dumping on construction sites in Belgium and throughout Western Europe with the sole aim of making a quick buck and without any concern for the health and safety of workers.

Gradually, we also found ourselves seeing more and more third-country nationals on our building sites. People from outside the European Union who, through a Member State, were being given work and residence permits to work in EU countries. The number of posted workers fell again, while the number of workers who were victims of social dumping continued to rise.

Introducing more investment in social inspection services, plus a limitation on the subcontracting chain and joint and several liability of the main contractor are three legitimate demands of the FGTB Construction. Without sufficient progress in these three areas, we will not be able to put an end to the abuses suffered by workers in our sectors.

It was something of a sad awakening when, on the second day of my summer holiday in 2022, the press asked me what I thought about the Borealis affair. In our view, it was never the EU's aim that workers from, say, the Philippines or Bangladesh, should be working in Belgium for less than half the legal minimum wage. One of the victims later said that she had also worked in the construction sector in Qatar. She said she was treated better, housed better and paid better there. There is no more blatant example than this to bring a trade unionist back down to earth in Belgium, a country with a unionisation rate of almost 95 per cent in the construction sector.

The solution to this problem will either be European or international, or it will not be at all. Capital, like labour, no longer stops at the borders of a country, a union or a continent. The trade union movement will have to respond to this development at an international level. Retreating to one's own country or federation will no longer provide solutions.

The action we have taken with the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW) and the Building and Woodworkers' International (BWI) are unknown to many of our activists, let alone our members. We need to talk more about what we do and, of course, we also need to do what we say. I would like to mention here the example of the BWI Sports Campaign. Can an international tournament still be organised in the future without massive violations of workers' rights? The BWI and our own Centrale Générale-FGTB federation are putting their finger on the problem, but after Qatar was chosen to host the football World Cup, we shouted for years... albeit into the void. FIFA didn't want to see us, Qatar told us that everything was fine and the media didn't wake up to what was happening until about two years before the start of the competition. The same goes for the Paris Olympics and, soon, the Football World Cup in the United States, Mexico and Canada (2026), etc.

This book highlights the problems and challenges, but also proposes solutions and clearly describes what is at stake for national and international trade unionism. In the context of our international activities, time and time again we see that workers' rights are usually, if not always, the last thing on investors' minds. So, if trade unions and trade unionists are no longer concerned about the fate of millions of workers, who else will be? We have identified the challenges, now we have to meet them together.

**THE
WORLD
BELONGS
TO
US**

4.

**We have to save
the earth**





GLOBAL WARMING CANNOT BE DENIED

It was the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg who first rang the alarm bells in 2018. She went on strike – as a schoolgirl – and took up position at the Swedish parliament. She did so to draw attention to climate issues, demanding that politicians finally implement the decisions made by the Paris climate summit. Her action was followed worldwide, including in Belgium. Schoolchildren went on strike and demonstrated, confronting politicians with their unwillingness or inability to take action on the climate. At the very least these young people succeeded in pushing the issue higher up the political agenda.

Water emergency and flood

Two years ago, a tidal wave washed through the Belgian regions around Liège and Verviers. What started as heavy rainfall turned into a water bomb and Wallonia and part of Limburg faced severe flooding that caused enormous human suffering and material damage. There were also floods with similar impact in Germany and Austria. Since then, these extreme weather events have become a recurring phenomenon. In 2023, Libya, Italy, Spain, the Balkans, Scandinavia, Australia and Canada all faced massive flooding. By the time the ink of this book dries, many more countries and regions will have been added to this list.

There have also been more forest fires in recent years. Southern Europe is simultaneously plagued by heatwaves as well as flooding. This should

be a wake-up call for us all: the effects of global warming are a global problem. In the summer of 2023, temperatures up to 45°C were recorded in Spain and tourists had to be evacuated from Rhodes because authorities could not control the forest fires.

The rest of the world is also suffering because of global warming. The huge bush fires in Australia in 2020 and the severe fires in California in 2022 are etched on our minds. There was also a terrible fire disaster in Hawaii in August 2023.

The fact that sea levels are slowly but steadily rising and that ice at the polar ice caps is melting is contradicted only by hard-nosed climate deniers. Islands and coastal communities are already feeling the direct effects of climate change. In addition to rising sea levels, many islands and archipelagos are being plagued by extreme weather conditions. Such as Tuvalu in the central Pacific. Sea level rises there could make the island uninhabitable within the next 50 years.

Head in the sand or action?

We can of course, spurred on by figures like Donald Trump, bury our heads in the sand and deny that these undeniable natural phenomena are happening. Or we can refuse to admit that it is because of human behaviour that we are dealing with the warming of our planet. That would be an enormous folly. A better, or in fact the only, alternative is to face the harsh reality head-on and try to do something about it. More and more people are gradually becoming convinced

of the latter course of action. All of these climate problems do not stop at the borders of one country or continent, and therefore need to be tackled on an international scale.

The UN climate panel issued another clear warning in March 2023. We can still avert a true climate disaster, but it will be all hands on deck to make it happen. It will require a revolution. If we pull out all the stops between now and 2030, we can still straighten out a lot of the issues, but it will require the mobilisation of all possible resources and without the slightest hesitation. It's not just me saying that, but United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has also said the same thing. In July 2023, Guterres stated that we are no longer in a period of global warming, but have entered an era of global boiling. The earth is not warming, but boiling.

Numerous factors cause the problems: polluting industry, industrialised agricultural practices and others. And we have to admit it, the transport economy is also part of the problem. But it is also part of the solution.

TRANSPORT IS PART OF THE PROBLEM...

Of all the sectors involved, the transport sector in Belgium is the one that produces the most greenhouse gases. It is also one of the few sectors whose emissions have increased over the past 30 years.

Road transport – This increase is largely due to road transport, which accounted for 98.1 per cent of total land transport emissions in 2019. Inland waterway navigation accounted for only 1.6 per cent of emissions and rail transport for 0.3 per cent. A modal shift clearly remains a priority.

Shipping – Amsterdam city council recently decided to ban cruise ships. Every year, around 100 such ships dock at the cruise terminal at Amsterdam Central. By the way, when I was in Australia in 2022, I saw the same kind of floating hotels moored in Sydney. There was a broad majority of opinion in favour of that decision in Amsterdam city council. One study has found that just one of these huge jumbo cruise ships emits as much nitrogen as 31,000 trucks making a round trip on Amsterdam's ring road. Venice also took measures against cruise ships two years ago and saw its CO₂ emissions reduce by 80 per cent.

Air transport – According to Greenpeace, flying is the form of mobility that causes most harm to the climate. The official emissions figures circulating about aviation ('barely 2 per cent of total emissions') are misleading, they say. First of all, the effects on the climate caused by flying are broader than just CO₂ emissions. There are also emissions of nitrogen oxide (NO_x) to consider. These non-CO₂ effects are twice as bad as the impact that CO₂ has on global warming alone. Commercial aviation accounted for 5.5 per cent of all man-made global warming in 2018. At the same time, aviation is one of the fastest-growing causes of CO₂ emissions.

A report recently published by Greenpeace shows that low-cost airlines such as Ryanair and Wizz Air are not only big polluters, but they are also champions of the anti-social. Consumers may have become accustomed to cheap city trips over the past decade, but the race to the bottom comes at a price here, too. And not just for the climate. Working conditions in the aviation sector have

*'The earth is not warming,
but boiling'*



also deteriorated in recent years, due to the rise of low-cost carriers such as Ryanair. And so once again we end up with social dumping.

We are well aware of the anti-unions attitude of Ryanair CEO, Michael O’Leary. As recently as 2012, he said that “hell had to freeze over” before he would recognise unions. Meanwhile, under pressure from industrial action, he has since been forced to recognise unions in a number of countries and make agreements with them.

All this is against his will, that much is clear. Yet he is still taking a kicking and during summer 2023, Ryanair pilots in Belgium went on strike. Despite intimidation from management and the use of every possible anti-union practice, pilots had the courage to stand up for their rights and stopped work for several days.

Hans Elsen of the ACV Pulse union explained why the pilots went on strike during the summer season: “The pilots disagree with the cancellation of a collective labour agreement regulating working and rest times. They are also demanding wage restoration, after giving up 20 per cent of their pay during the pandemic.”

During the ETF Congress in Budapest in 2022, the ETF was still campaigning against Wizz Air’s anti-union practices.

Low-cost airlines use every loophole in the book to be as competitive as they can be and to keep prices as low as possible. This obviously affects the workers themselves, who are the first victims of these practices.



The same low-cost companies are also trying to ban their workers from joining a union. This is illegal, of course, but there is still plenty of pressure on workers not to join up.

In addition, many aviation workers, especially in Eastern Europe, are self-employed and therefore have limited social protection. Yet these same airlines often receive significant direct or indirect local or regional subsidies. Even in Belgium, for example, Ryanair is treated with velvet gloves.

Although aviation is ‘only’ responsible for about 4 per cent of the European Union’s total greenhouse gas emissions, according to European Parliament figures from 2021, CO₂ emissions in the sector are growing steadily. Greenhouse gas emissions from international aviation and shipping have increased

rapidly over the past three decades, due to an increase in both trade and passenger numbers.

International shipping generates 3 per cent of global CO₂ emissions and accounts for 90 per cent of all freight transport.

... AND PART OF THE SOLUTION

Thanks to the Green Deal – a project from European Commissioner Frans Timmermans – Europe is getting serious about cutting CO₂ emissions. Although the deal was delivered in a watered-down version, initiatives are nonetheless being taken.

From sustainable fuels in shipping...

Ships from 5,000 tons upwards will be covered by the European Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS). From 2024, 40 per cent of CO₂ emissions must be

'Transport workers should not have to pay the price for the climate crisis!'

paid for, from 2025 70 per cent and from 2026 100 per cent.

Ships therefore need to use less and cleaner fuel in the short term. Emissions can already be reduced immediately by taking technical measures, according to research firm CE Delft. There are some ships being fitted now with auxiliary sails that are capable of using the wind in addition to their engine. CO₂ emissions can also be saved by sailing more slowly and using less polluting oil. Eventually, shipping will have to switch to sustainable fuels.

Meanwhile, the world's largest container shipping line, the Danish company Maersk, has ordered 25 ships that can run on methanol. Methanol is 'green' if it is made from the hydrogen produced by renewable electricity. The ships are hybrid and so can still run on fuel oil and diesel as well.

... to affordable public transport

Affordable, efficient and sufficient public transport with sustainable means of transport is one of the solutions to cities that are clogged by traffic jams caused by people who have to use individual means of transport to get to work. Buses are perfectly capable of running on electricity or hydrogen. And one bus alone can carry more than 50 passengers. So, if applied across the board, that could keep many hundreds of cars off the road. Clearly, we should not only fight for public transport in the interest of the workers in these sectors we represent, but also if we want greater sustainability.

Action on climate: not at the expense of transport workers!

The challenge facing unions in general, and transport unions in particular, is who will foot the

bill for the solutions worked out to meet climate challenges. Transport workers should not have to pay the price for the climate crisis!

Who will cough up the money needed to invest in sustainability? The ordinary man and woman in the street? Or will the polluters be collared and those who make (excessive) profits from their lucrative economic activities without incorporating sustainability? Will the bill be passed on to the taxpayer or to the shareholder?

It goes without saying that money will be needed to combat climate change. This will only be possible by levying taxes: not on labour, but on assets and financial transactions. And what about working people who will lose their jobs due to the winding down of highly polluting industries?

If the transport sector is part of the problem, it also means that we can be part of the solution. For example through accelerated innovation.

We need to encourage and motivate employers to invest in sustainability, as well as in electric trucks and the use of hydrogen as fuel. After all, we're talking about the future of the industry we work in. Continuing to rely on old fossil fuels is not forward-looking. Innovation is needed if our industry is to survive.

It is clear that the climate challenge is just one of the problems facing us. The fact that transport plays an important role as a cause is equally clear. Nevertheless, that should not necessarily lead us to be pessimistic. Because however big and all-encompassing the issue may be, there are just as many opportunities out there waiting to be taken.



We must guarantee the transport workers that we are all ready for the next years of transition, development, and change.

JAN VILLADSEN

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THE GREEN TRANSITION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL BALANCE GO HAND IN HAND.

As a Danish union leader and a human being, it makes me proud when global Danish companies are the frontrunners in the green transition, creating hope for rapid leaps towards a sustainable world.

When Danish windmills from Vestas are raised in the USA and Australia. When Orsted and Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners are investing billions of Danish krone in windmill farms and distribution of green power. And when the global Danish giant Maersk is restructuring its global fleet with 25 new vessels able to sail on green methanol. These are all good and visual signs of changes in business models globally.

But unfortunately, not everything is sustainable under the surface. Unfortunately, I and other Danish trade union leaders cannot just relax, be proud, and wait for Danish investments to contribute to global green transition.

Maersk, Vestas, and Orsted have all signed good collective bargaining agreements for their workers in Denmark, as well as global codes of conduct. But that is not always the same as good and sustainable behaviour globally. This

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Member of the Management Committee and Executive Board of the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF).

must be changed. And it can only be changed by international cooperation and international union work.

That's the reason why I, my union, and the ITF have been facilitating a series of meetings between American and Australian unions to solve a lot of unexpected labour disputes about CBAs and agreements for transport workers. And this is the reason why the ITF and its affiliated unions still have a ton of work to do keeping an eye on Maersk's fleet, ports globally, and how the seafarers and workers are treated.

Green transition and green promises sound good when presented by global companies. But words are not enough, as green goals and results do not alone create sustainable business models and fair and decent behaviour towards workers.

The UN has created 17 binding Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Even though the focus is often on the green transition, we shouldn't forget the importance of education, health, social protection, and employment in that transition. Because, ultimately, all these goals are connected.

Green transition cannot stand alone. The world needs transition and restructuring of the economy to become sustainable. It is equally important that all people are ensured a proper education and the training they need. It is equally important that we can all have a decent life and job. Everybody should be guaranteed a decent future.

That is why we need unions and global union work in the transitions to come. We must act as active and constructive partners to ensure fairness and sustainable goals. For the climate and for people. For workers. For the environment as well as for the social balance. The goals are binding for all of us.

This is why the UN goal number 17, active partnerships, is particularly important. Green and sustainable transition demands active involvement, equal partnerships, and balanced compromises from all of us. And as unions we must be ready and stand behind a clear promise:

The transport workers guarantee that we are all ready for the next years of transition, development, and change. All we ask in return, is to be heard and invited to join the work and cooperations needed to handle the global and national climate business and transport policies.

Climate change must not get out of hand. Transport workers are one of the guarantees that this will not happen – when we are actively involved in the dialogue to create a new and fair deal for all.

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5. For Europe





EUROPE TODAY

The European Union we know today is the result of a long process of gradual unification. The purpose here is not to describe the history of this unification.

But we can say with good reason that the EU officially started with six countries who founded the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. In 1958, that community became known as the European Economic Community (EEC). In 1993, the name was changed again to the European Union.

Meanwhile, the European Union has grown into a union of 27 member states, covering an area of more than 4 million square kilometres and with a population of 447.7 million people. The impact Europe has had on our daily lives, our work, our leisure time, etc. should definitely not be underestimated.

European impact on transport

In discussions with union members in the transport sector, I can say that about 85 per cent of regulations in the industry are determined at European level. It may be even higher.

The driving and rest period rules that determine how long a professional driver may drive at one stretch before having to rest.

The tachograph that checks whether the driver is complying with the rules.

The cabotage regulations that determine how long a truck driver is allowed to drive around a European country before being required to return home.

The rules on crewing levels for inland navigation soon to be set at European level.

And we shouldn't forget the negative role played twice by Europe when it came up with the 'ports package'. Those proposals sought to undermine the relatively protected status of dockers in many European countries.

All this is and will be decided on a European level. Often after very lengthy discussions and often after compromises are made between different interests. These things are always the outcome of a complex procedure whenever the European Parliament, Council of the European Union and the European Commission have their fingers in the pie.

And you can think what you like about that. You can be critical about it (I criticise it quite a lot myself), but the fact is the European Union exists and has a huge impact on the lives of the citizens in its member states. This means that as a trade union militant you are obliged to engage with it. Especially if you want to defend the interests of the people you represent. And that's what we want, isn't it?

If we do not engage with Europe, at least Europe will engage with us. And probably not in the way we would like it to.

For or against?

As trade unionists, do we still dare to say that we support the European project? How many politicians, let alone trade unionists, are still willing to say that they support the European Union? That they are convinced that cooperation across national borders can bring progress for all European citizens? Do we still dare to explain to the young generation that the construction of Europe has ensured more than 75 years of peace in Europe? Remember the time when we needed four different currencies when travelling by truck from Belgium to Portugal: the Belgian and French francs, the Spanish peseta and the Portuguese escudo? And who wasn't irritated beyond all reason by the endless paperwork and sometimes long waits at the borders?

The opposite is considered to be the case today. If you ask the average docker in Antwerp what he or she thinks of Europe, you will quickly get a very negative story about various attacks on the status of the Belgian docker. And about how European regulations are used to undermine a good statute.

You will get the same answer from a trucker, too, who sees his or her job tarnished by the social dumping rampant in Europe. A trucker who first saw Eastern European colleagues flood the market, followed by workers from countries outside the Union: Uzbeks, Belarusians, Ukrainians and even Filipinos. All paid too little, all exploited, all involved in the race to the bottom taking place in the transport industry.

And we know very well that Brexit was not only promoted on the right in Britain. We can hardly call Nigel Farage a progressive. But a lot of working people, including trade unionists, also actively campaigned for Britain's exit from the European Union.

Whether they are still convinced of that choice today is another question. The fact is that part of the left in Britain – including the Labour Party – also actively or at least passively supported Brexit. And, let's face it, even Jeremy Corbyn, leader of Labour at the time of Brexit, was not exactly clear on the matter.

However, the idea of setting up a European structure was in principle a leftist and progressive story. Italian socialist Spinelli wrote a blueprint of what Europe could look like when he was imprisoned on the island of Ventotene. We're talking about the 1930s, when the fascist Benito Mussolini was in power in Italy. Legend has it that Spinelli wrote down his blueprint for Europe on cigarette papers, which were smuggled out of prison in the bra of the woman he married later.

Internationalist

I myself am an internationalist. I feel nothing for nationalism or being locked into the national idea of a country or a region.

It was François Janssens, a former president of the FGTB, the socialist trade union federation in Belgium, who introduced me to the powerful message of French socialist Jean Jaurès. On the eve of World War I, Jaurès wanted to prevent the war. But he was assassinated by Raoul Villain, a French nationalist who wanted war with Germany. That cowardly murder – he was shot through the head from behind – shows just how strong Jaurès'

message was. He was active in the socialist, international movement. Jaurès knew that wars are not the wars of working people, but are decided by powerful groups that enrich the military-industrial complex.

Besides, war and nationalism go hand in hand. Moreover, in the region where I was born, Flanders, nationalism goes hand in hand with the right. Usually with the authoritarian right.

The N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie), which has been co-ruling at various levels in that same Flanders for 20 years, defends a socio-economic programme that can be called right-wing liberal. And the even more extreme Vlaams Belang pretends to stand up for ordinary men and women, but in practice relies on a programme that wants to keep minimum wages low, defends wage moderation and opposes lgbtq+ rights.

By the way, the right and certainly the far right are riding the wave of the anti-European sentiments held by a large part of the population.

For the populist right, it is common to propose a narrative that opposes the so-called elite, the establishment. Brussels, the capital of the European Union, is a favourite target for this.

Journalist and Europe expert Caroline de Gruyter stated in an interview with De Morgen newspaper: “Before Brexit and before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, there were plenty of EU exit scenarios doing the rounds. Until they saw the havoc wreaked by Brexit and how by Ukraine superpowers are crashing into each other over our heads. They then realised that one country alone is weak. Which is why all of the member states are strengthening their European convictions

‘The impact Europe has had on our daily lives, our work, our leisure time, etc. should definitely not be underestimated.’

and countries like Finland (with the radical-right Finnish party in government) are joining NATO. So the far right has moved away from the old exit discourse. Now they want to take to the European stage and change Europe from within. That is their new strategy. It may not be that easy, because they still remain nationalistic and are still at odds with each other a lot. But on limiting socio-cultural freedoms, such as gay rights and press freedom, you can already see them all punching the air.”

If we want to respond to the populist anti-European discourse of the far right, we must have the courage to make clear choices and the courage to go against that simplistic and unrealistic discourse. Then we must dare to defend Europe. Not the current Europe: the Europe of privatisation and liberalisation. But a social Europe. Without a social Europe there can be no Europe.

A DIFFERENT EUROPE

But we mustn’t be naive. The Europe we know today does not correspond at all to the project envisaged by Altiero Spinelli and his comrades.

Let’s be honest: Europe is primarily an economic construct. With the free movement of goods, people and services as its sacred cow. Europe today is a market, where it is good to do business, where it is good to make (a lot of) money as a private company.

Everyone also knows how callously Europe dealt with the Greeks during and after the 2008 financial crisis. Greece had teetered over the edge

into bankruptcy, and spurred on by Germany, it was dealt with harshly by Europe. The Greeks had to make major cuts. It may already seem forgotten today, but healthcare in Greece collapsed at the time and pensions were cut dramatically. The sale of public Greek infrastructure was one of the conditions for the emergency loans Greece received to avoid bankruptcy. Piraeus port was sold, with China's Cosco holding a majority 67 per cent stake. Thessaloniki is also under private ownership. The operation of 14 airports was transferred to the operator of Frankfurt Airport and passenger rail transport is now in the hands of Italy's Trenitalia.

Budget discipline is one of the cornerstones of the European structure. Any country where the warning lights come on receives comments immediately. Budget rules are binding, discipline is ironclad. It often forces member states to cut corners. And when that happens, it's public services and social security that carry the burden. Also, these strict rules do not exist in the social sphere. If any agreements are made in the social sphere, they are not binding. Such as the European pillar of social rights.

This makes it very difficult to explain to someone working in the freight department of the French railway company SNCF that Europe is a positive and hopeful project. That same rail worker sees how SNCF has been forced to sell off and privatise its freight department, under pressure from European regulations. Surely with dire consequences for staff.

We've already mentioned the trucker facing social dumping ("all Europe's fault") or the dockworker having to fight against various port package proposals that tried to break down the protection of dockworkers. Often working people feel

powerless in the face of the all-consuming monster called Europe. That's entirely understandable: decision-making procedures at a European level are complex and an ordinary person can't find their way around them. However, it is possible to have an impact on the decision-making process in Europe.

TAKING ACTION IN EUROPE PAYS OFF!

The trade union actions waged against the various port packages in Europe are a good example of how dockers have resisted the European Union's disastrous plans to strip away the strong status of dockworkers in many European countries.

Twice Europe has come up with a package of measures to 'regulate' the ports sector. Or rather disrupt it. These were the Port Packages 1 and 2: two attempts to force member states to phase out the protected status of dockworkers in Europe. One of the painful issues here was self-handling. This means that the ship's crew would be able to load and unload ships themselves. Even a child knows that stevedoring is a difficult and dangerous job. Which is why dockers are well trained and taught how to load and unload a ship safely. Only a well-trained dockworker is able to carry out that type of work properly. Despite the strict rules involved and weeks of training, the European Commission still wanted to get rid of them.

On two occasions, proposals were tabled to undermine the status of dockworkers. But on both occasions these attempts were stopped. Not because the dockers asked the European Commission nicely to withdraw their proposals, but because European dockworkers took action: lobbying politicians, seeking support from sympathetic MEPs, taking to the streets and demonstrating – right up to Brussels and Strasbourg. The dockers' opposition to the

disastrous deregulation proposals is a great example for the labour movement in action – and one that should encourage us to believe in our own strength. If we really want something, we can achieve it!

But the European mobility package is also a great example of the influence we as transport workers can have if we want to. It is a package of measures put on the table by the European Commission to curb social dumping. The Commission’s findings made good sense, but the so-called solutions were an unmitigated disaster.

The European transport union ETF managed to tweak these disastrous proposals into an

‘The democratic content of quite a few member states is deteriorating and that threatens to spill over to the European Parliament.’

acceptable compromise. We certainly didn’t get everything we wanted. But we made our contributions to the discussions in Parliament, the Council and the Commission. How many times did we stand with our flags and banners in front of the European Parliament buildings in Brussels and Strasbourg? How many meetings, contacts and hearings did we attend with our persuasive documents and the harrowing testimonies of drivers? We were heard. Again, not by asking



nicely, but by demonstrating that we have power. The power of the street, the power of voters, consumers and working people, etc.

THE 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

From the fringes to the mainstream

There has been a breakthrough of far-right, populist and nationalist political parties in a number of European countries. Viktor Orbán in Hungary, which is itself a European Union member country, is constantly stirring up unrest within the same Union.

In several European countries we now face authoritarian governments, such as in Hungary. In Italy, a neo-fascist party is in power in the person of Meloni. In Spain, at least in the regional elections, there was a breakthrough by the far-right Vox Party and the conservative Partido Popular did not hesitate to join forces with them to form regional parliaments. In Spain's early parliamentary elections in July 2023, Partido Popular won quite a few seats, becoming the largest party. But fortunately, they did not gain enough seats to form a majority together with the far-right Vox. The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party even gained seats after being in government. A new Italian scenario was temporarily (?) blocked. In Finland, True Finns are part of the government.

The list is gradually getting very long. What started out as a fringe phenomenon is quietly becoming a real force. It is worth taking a look back at the political climate before World War II. Back then, too, the Italian fascists were a fringe phenomenon. Communists and socialists were ubiquitous in the Po Valley. Yet Mussolini (an ex-socialist, by the way) managed to sweep away the progressives in a fairly short time and use coercion and seduction to win the workers to his

cause. Let it be a lesson. The democratic content of quite a few member states is deteriorating and that threatens to spill over to the European Parliament.

Left-wing forces mobilising

We will have to mobilise all the left and progressive forces in 2024 to make the voice of the ordinary person in the street heard in the European Parliament and to give a political voice to the frustrated sighs of those who still work.

The two traditional power blocs, the Progressive Alliance group of Socialists and Democrats and the EPP Christian Democrats, risk losing their joint majority in parliament. This means it is becoming more difficult to reach compromises between the two groups. Moreover, we see the EPP including more and more populist and outright radical-right parties among its number. Moreover, the role of the EPP and its members is crucial. Will this European group make agreements with the far right to secure its dominant position in the European Parliament? That possibility exists and it is downright worrying. After all, recent history teaches us that when the moderate right adopts the views of the far right, the same far right radicalises still further. A derailment on the (far) right is therefore certainly on the cards.

The EPP's current group leader Manfred Weber is already steering his group to the right today. The role the EPP played in the recent climate debate is worrying. Hopefully, not all Christian Democratic parties will be dragged into the right-wing derailment and there will be a backlash from moderate Christian Democrats if it comes to that. US Republicans derailed by the Tea Party movement in that way.

Caroline de Gruyter, a Dutch journalist who mainly writes about European political developments, gives the example of the CSU in Bavaria in *De Morgen* when the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) was also growing there: “The conservative Christian Democrats saw their votes dwindle and then went far-right in an attempt to win back voters. But in doing so, they did not succeed at all. They just lost more voters. Current Bavarian culture minister Markus Blume put an end to that in mid-2020 by going against the AfD. He then said something I will never forget. When a newspaper asked him why he turned the wheel yet further, he replied: ‘Du kannst ein Stinktier nicht überstinken!’ You can’t out-stink a skunk! That much had become apparent from practice. Every time the CSU moved to the right and adopted their discourse, the AfD jumped further to the right anyway. And before you knew it, you had made the whole far-right ideology mainstream.”

‘We need good arguments, a fighting spirit and strong conviction. Fortunately, trade unions have rarely lacked these qualities.’

The more right-wing the member states become, the more right-wing the European Commission and the Council of the European Union will be. The European structure needs refurbishment. Let us work for a democratic Europe with a directly elected parliament with much more power than at present.

Incidentally, this is confirmed by Theo Francken of the Flemish nationalist party N-VA on social media: “What is true is that I strongly hope for a large centre-right majority in the European Council and the European Parliament after 2024. Only then will Europe become resilient again. Only that way can we stop things such as illegal mass-migration. It never works with the left. The past (and the present) demonstrate that.”

Progressives across the whole of Europe: be warned.





The battle is always worth fighting – and it is never lost before it begins.

HENDRIK VOS

R Recently, I bought a mappa mundi at a flea market. On the maps we were shown at school, Europe looked big and was at the centre of the world. A mappa mundi is more faithful to reality. Compared with other regions of the world, Europe is small and fragmented: a patchwork of mainly small countries.

Today, and for quite some time now, the challenges we face no longer stop at borders: climate change, migration, pandemics, terrorism, social exploitation, tax evasion, etc. A common approach is needed to tackle this problem. European countries are too small and insignificant to act alone. **The nationalist call to exercise as many powers as possible at the level of nations or their regions is tantamount to capitulation:** it is impossible to provide answers to the most important issues of our time by spreading ourselves too thinly. In reality, this would give free rein to powers that could play off one state against another. Large companies will not hesitate to take advantage of this to threaten to relocate where the rules are the most flexible and where they can make the most profit without being disturbed and without having to worry too much about social agreements.

Some left-leaning British voters were perhaps led to believe that Brexit would lead to greater

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prosperity or higher social standards. Today, they have come to realise just how naive they were: prosperity has fallen, and when there is less cake to go round, it is mainly social programmes that have to make do with a smaller slice. Nor are workers better protected; quite the contrary. The British are trying to improve their lost competitiveness by working at lower cost and by adhering to as few rules as possible. This does not improve the situation of workers, and an extension of social rights is not really on the agenda. A left-wing government wouldn't change anything either. The architects of the Brexit, led by Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, had obviously prepared their parachutes and have been living in luxury ever since thanks to their income from other sources.

The best guarantee of better social standards is to enter into agreements at a higher level – i.e. at European level. If each country set its own rules on, for example, driving and rest times, they would always insist on less stringent agreements, arguing that other countries are more lax: in other words, it's a race to the bottom.

Europe is definitely a market without barriers, but it is not the Wild West, with no rules or agreements. Companies operating in the single market must comply with all kinds of environmental, social and consumer protection laws. It is almost impossible to impose the same level of legislation at national level, as the British are now also finding out.

It's hard to find anywhere else in the world where the level of protection is higher than in the European Union: whether it's toy safety, food safety, the use of pesticides or climate standards, European regulations are almost always stricter than in the rest of the world. Of course, this doesn't necessarily mean that these regulations all carry enough weight.

Even in the social field, Europe is generally stricter than elsewhere, offering more rights to workers. However, the regulations do not go as far as trade unions would like. In social terms, Europe has made slower progress than in other areas. This is mainly due to the fact that a number of Member States have hindered progress in recent decades. A number of countries wanted the right to relax standards independently in order to be more attractive “on the market”. This also applies to taxation – and to an even greater extent.

The good news is that social organisations, including the trade unions, are now well aware of these dynamics and are united in advocating a common approach based on higher and stricter standards and better social protection.

European politics is not predestined to veer to the right. Policies must be constantly reviewed and a majority must be reached for each regulation, both among the governments of the Member States and within the European Parliament. If proposals that may have harmful social consequences are circulating, there is the possibility of opposing them, as well as putting up resistance and pushing policy in a different direction. The reverse is also true, and at least as important: the trade unions themselves can also make proposals and therefore have an impact, by convincing people, by building a base, by encouraging MEPs to support them and by getting Member State governments to join them, etc. This is by no means an easy task: in many Member States, majorities lean to the right because many citizens have also voted that way – that's how a democracy works. But the battle is always worth fighting and is never lost before it begins. We need good arguments, a fighting spirit and strong conviction. Fortunately, trade unions have rarely lacked these qualities.

**THE
WORLD
BELONGS
TO
US**

6.

Europe in the world



INTERRELATED, BUT NOT EQUAL

There are now eight billion of us on this planet of ours. Eight billion individuals, each with their own background, experiences and hopes for the future: a common future. Together we form a 'we', interconnected. That 'we' faces colossal social and climate challenges.

The picture may be pretty to look at, but the reality behind it is not always so pretty either. Not everyone gets an equal start in life.

Great differences remain. Access to healthcare, a dignified life, decent work, good education and so on is largely determined by place of residence, ethnicity, social class, gender, etc. The distances can be too great.

MIGRATION: THREAT, CHALLENGE OR OPPORTUNITY?

Europe, the Americas, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, etc. There are major migratory movements all over the world. Sometimes on a drop-by-drop basis, often massive.

Migration, by the way, is nothing new; it is something that has always existed. We all know how the great famine in Europe gave rise to mass migration to the US and Australia. Among other things, the failed potato harvests in Ireland in the mid-19th century ensured that a close-knit Irish community exists across the oceans to this very day. In fact, a 2000 census found that some 34 million Americans have Irish ancestry.

Rarely do people leave their country for pleasure. Migration is the result of wars, poverty, famine and hopelessness.

My wife works as a volunteer in a Ghent-based organisation offering material assistance to refugees who ended up in Belgium: A heart for refugees. The stories she comes home with are often very confrontational and even heartbreaking. Almost all of the women she comes into contact with have fled terrible situations.

Often those refugees also testify about the danger on the escape route. Some try to cross from Africa to Europe by boats on the Mediterranean. The trouble is, the crossing is very dangerous. Since 2014, nearly 30,000 migrants have died or gone missing in the Mediterranean. I have visited Africa several times myself and have witnessed first-hand the poverty and hopelessness of many. So I understand why many Africans try to make the journey to Europe.

Recently, we drove past a slum with our trade union colleagues in Côte d'Ivoire. When we talked to our union comrades about the abject poverty that almost jumped out at us from that neighbourhood, their comment was: "Whoever ends up in the slums never gets out. This is the end of the line and you will never get out of it!"

The response of most 'rich' countries is to close the borders. They make it as difficult as possible for refugees trying to enter. Walls are being built along borders all over the world. Everyone remembers

the main campaign theme in the election of Donald Trump: “We will build a wall along the Mexican border and the Mexicans will pay for it!” he shouted out to his fans. Hungary’s Victor Orbán also started building a 175-kilometre wall on his country’s borders back in 2015. And everyone knows the pushbacks from the Australian coast guard.

It is a distorted reaction by countries that have relative prosperity and that want to protect it, to reserve it for their ‘own people’. The reasoning behind this is clear: we cannot handle mass migration, so we shield our prosperity from the fortune-seekers who try to come here.

Of course, we cannot and should not be blind to the real problems that mass migration brings to the countries where those migrants end up. There are differences in language, culture, lifestyles and religion that cause tensions, misunderstandings and sometimes conflicts.

Extreme-right political parties and populists play on the fears of the indigenous population, fanning them and translating them into ‘hatred and envy’.

More budgets for development and cooperation

It is up to us to break away from the simplism and provide alternative approaches. As a union, we can work out cooperation projects with fellow unions in countries that are struggling. Though that will only be a proverbial drop in the ocean. More is needed.

After World War II, a shattered Western Europe was rebuilt through a Marshall Plan. The motivations behind that plan can be debated at length. What is certain is that it was a massive investment plan designed to help the affected

countries rebuild their economies and create wealth again. Taking that approach is imperative.

For example, if the causes of economic exploitation and underdevelopment in countries of Africa are not eliminated, Africans will continue to flee from famine and hopelessness. If we do not find peace in the many wars plaguing the planet, people will continue to seek their fortune in other countries where they think they will fare better.

The strange thing is that the very same parties that want to close the borders also want to cut the development and cooperation budgets. It is a fundamental choice that so-called developed countries will have to make. If we want to preserve our prosperity, we will also have to share it. If our model of living together is to survive, we will have to ‘export’ it. Not with big words, but with practical actions. The 0.7 per cent of gross national product put forward as a target for development and cooperation in Belgium will be grossly insufficient.

But we are going backwards rather than forwards. “In 2021, Belgian official development assistance amounted to 0.43 per cent of gross national product. To achieve the sustainable development target by 2030, that figure needs to rise to 0.7 per cent. That target will not be achieved if we continue with the trend since 2000. Official development assistance is therefore evolving unfavourably.” This much is stated on the Belgian government’s official site.

Migration as an opportunity

And what about if we used migration as an asset? Because the population in the West is ageing at a rapid pace. Without migration, our pensions will become unaffordable, our economy will continue to build labour shortages and our model will

automatically be put under pressure, if we don't allow people to come in from the outside.

This means it will be important for us to work on the undeniable problems that go hand in hand. In August 2023, the employer organisation Voka launched a call for help: Belgian companies have a labour shortage and they think they can find it in India and Mexico.

Isn't it time, then, to think deeply about migration, and how best to integrate the newcomers as they arrive? As has happened with previous waves of migration: "We can do it!" Investing in education and training is one of the means of achieving that aim. And that is not only a political challenge: it is also a responsibility for employers. It's called: investing in the future!

a. China as a new global player

China became an economic powerhouse over the space of 40 years. Today, it is a global economic player. China's economy has also become a market economy. A state-led market economy. China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001, after which Chinese exports again grew very rapidly after previous growth spurts.

Although doomsday reports have been launched lately about the state of China's economy, it is and remains the world's second-largest economy. According to economist Houze Song of the Paulson Institute in Chicago, China's growth rate will reach 4 per cent by 2023, higher than in wealthy OECD countries. But it is true that growth in China has been below expectations lately. The fact that China no longer publishes figures on its rapidly growing youth unemployment is no doubt a sign of things to come. At the same time, the political system remains a very centrally led communism, with the Communist Party keeping

'Extreme-right political parties and populists play on the fears of the indigenous population, fanning them and translating them into 'hatred and envy'.'

tight control. The Belt and Road Initiative, the expansion of new Silk Roads, is an example of this. This is the programme through which China is investing in foreign rail and land links to China: the Silk Road projects. Also in Africa and Asia. Wherever you go in Africa, China is highly active. Both in Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire, where the Belgian transport union has projects, China's presence is evident. In Kenya, the port of Mombasa now has a new container terminal, thanks to Chinese support, and the very expensive, railway line between Mombasa and Nairobi was rebuilt with Chinese money. The port at Mombasa becomes the collateral when Kenya can no longer repay the loan. It is a strategy that fits into the Belt and Road Initiative: gaining possession of port infrastructure. China is clearly looking in Africa for raw materials, ore, etc. and these infrastructure works, or acquiring existing infrastructure, play an important role in this.

Another of the Chinese government's project is Made in China 2025, the project by which China aims to become number one in the world in 'high-tech manufacturing'.

China is also investing massively in Europe. Cosco is a 24.9 per cent owner of the port terminals in Hamburg. In 2022, Cosco owned 357 terminals and 36 ports worldwide.

And what about Huawei? The United States has been investigating alleged spying by the technology company on behalf of the Chinese government for years. US companies are no longer allowed to

trade with Huawei. The Netherlands also launched an investigation.

According to Professor Bruno Merlevede of the University of Ghent, more than half of Chinese investment in Europe in the past decade has been by companies and investment funds linked to the Chinese government. It serves the larger goal of building China into a modern, advanced superpower whose position is not contested by others. Economy and politics are therefore often mixed together. This also gives the Chinese government indirect political power in Europe. Through the economic influence it generates in European member states and through trade relations that weigh on political decision-making. As China continues to build its economic position globally, those who thought China would move towards a more democratic political system through that economic integration have come back empty-handed.

To push on an already open door: human rights in China are worse than poor. The various crackdowns are not just on minority groups such as the Uighurs. Free trade unions also don't stand a chance within the current political framework in China.

It is enough to look at the militarist-run factories for iPhones belonging to Foxconn, a Taiwanese electronics manufacturer. Between 2010 and 2013, dozens of workers have committed suicide at Foxconn sites: a reaction to the hard work and daily humiliations by management. "Every day started with an unpaid meeting at twenty past seven; twenty minutes later my shift started and I worked overtime until twenty to eight in the evening," underage worker Tian Yu told an article in the Belgian daily De Standaard. "I got severe eye pain from all those hours spent tracing



scratches on glass screens and could only go to the toilet occasionally. When there was a problem with my contract, I was not paid and no one wanted to help me. I was desperate and could no longer think clearly." In the end, Yu jumped out of her dormitory on the fourth floor. She survived the suicide attempt.

If we do not want China to also export its 'social' politics and its vision of industrial relations, we will have to be critical. Certainly more critical than we are at the moment. Social clauses, social dialogue and the recognition of free trade unions should become an integral part of trade agreements.

b. Elections in the United States

Who would have ever dared to predict that on 6th January 2021, the US Capitol would be stormed? Who would have thought that the country that stands for the democratic idea would face an attempted coup d'état? Not a coup carried out by the army (which deliberately kept its distance that day), but by a crowd whipped up by the incumbent president who lost the election and who did not want to admit it.

Day after day, right through to the present day, details of how Donald Trump co-ordinated the putschists are still leaking out. In its final report, the US House committee left no doubt. In an 800-page report based on 1,200 interviews with eyewitnesses, the committee says Donald Trump's involvement is abundantly clear. Donald Trump, according to the members, is the main culprit and should therefore be prosecuted.

That the accused ex-president denies, disputes and ridicules the committee's work is telling. That a large proportion of his constituents do the same is a logical consequence. But that an equal share of the Republican party follows him is downright worrying.

The good news in 2020 was that the American people sent the incumbent president home via the ballot box, opting for a different policy. A policy embodied by the current US president. This has enormous significance both domestically and abroad. According to our union colleagues in the US, the Biden administration is the most union-friendly in a long time.

The United States, like Europe, will hold elections for a new president in 2024. The stakes are crucial. Either Trump returns to power, with all the disastrous consequences that that entails, or the Democrats remain in power and a more union-friendly line can be pursued.

Of course, the Biden administration is not a 'union administration'. Even under the current Democratic president, we see many labour disputes and US legislation remains not union-friendly. Just think of the hard fight the International Brotherhood of Teamsters had to wage with UPS over the renewal of their collective labour agreement. Or how laborious the formation of



a union was at Amazon. Moreover, in many (autonomous) states in the US, there are a lot of socially dangerous operations going on. For instance, in many states, things are made easier for young people to work. Whereas they might be better off in school.

c. Superpowers in competition

The fact that there is a cut-throat battle going on between the United States and China for both economic power and political dominance and influence is certain.

Furthermore, Washington wants revenge for China joining the World Trade Organisation WTO, which most US politicians now see as a 'historic mistake'. The US does not grant China an edge in the most profitable economic sectors. Whether we like it or not, that struggle affects us all, globally.



Cooperation and solidarity must be at the heart of the role we play in the world.

KATHLEEN VAN BREMPT

T **TO CHANGE THE WORLD, YOU HAVE TO START WITH YOURSELF**

China's economic supremacy, political instability in the Sahel, the rapid growth of the BRICS, Russia's attack on Ukraine, the declining power of the United States. Global politics are changing at a breathtaking pace. Climate change, drought, growing inequality and regional conflicts will further test these geopolitical relationships in the future.

What role does Europe want to play? To be a player or be played with? The European Union must give a clearer answer to this question. Europe must finally pursue a genuine foreign policy based on our fundamental values: peace, security, democracy, cooperation, the rule of law, human rights and sustainable development. All this also requires a healthy dose of realism. We represent a bloc of some 450 million people, out of a total world population of nearly 8 billion. So we must not presume to think that we can single-handedly reshape the world order. However, we must be active in steering it in the right direction. And in a more assertive way than we do today.

KATHLEEN VAN BREMPT

°18/11/1969. Belgium.

Member of the European Parliament for the Vooruit party. Coordinator of the Committee on International Trade for the Social Democratic Group in the European Parliament. Former Secretary of State for Work Organisation and Wellbeing at Work and Flemish Minister for Mobility, Social Economy and Equal Opportunities.

To change the world, you have to start with yourself. To strengthen our role in the world, we need to know with certainty what we want. We must also put those plans into practice. For Europe, this means taking the lead in the global fight against climate change. Not only with an ambitious climate programme, but also with a strong social programme. That's what we're doing by focusing on a sustainable economy with high-quality, well-protected jobs. That's why we need to invest in our education, social security and healthcare. We must do more to combat social dumping and the exploitation of workers. And we need to strengthen the position of trade unions across the European Union. We must wage a war on poverty with a European minimum income, promote fair taxation and step up the fight against tax evasion. And we must protect the foundations of our Union, our democracy, our rule of law and human rights from the attacks of the far right. Practise what you preach.

Based on this programme, Europe has the opportunity to create links with the rest of the world, rather than opt for dependence. We will never be as brutal a power as China or the United States. Nor can that be our ambition. Europe is not alone in seeking its place on a redesigned world stage, nor is it the only continent to realise that it needs to assert itself more strongly. This could be the common denominator of Europe's new political direction.

Cooperation and solidarity are central to this. Europe cannot be a straitjacket for its partner countries, but must be a positive force for peace, security and social progress. When we cooperate, we do so with respect for human rights and with a clear social agenda. By putting an end to forced labour and child labour, by taking action to achieve better working conditions for workers and by sharing our knowledge and technologies. And all the while respecting the environment and the climate. Our overriding ambition must be to work together to step up the fight against climate change on a global scale, and to give our partners the opportunity to create a sustainable economy now. And, above all, we must have respect for one other. An equitable partnership is one that benefits both partners and promotes human rights, peace and democracy throughout the world.

This is the role that the European Union must play in the world. Realistic, assertive and united. In this way, we will become less vulnerable and we will make a difference. In geopolitics and in the daily lives of millions of people. In Europe and beyond.

THE
WORLD
BELONGS
TO
US

7.
'TINA' sucks.
There is definitely
an alternative!



N

NEOLIBERALISM IS FAILING

Workers around the world have been confronted in recent years with all possible variations on the same theme: neoliberalism or the organised attack on the welfare state. It is a global attack inspired by extreme capitalism and greed. The greed of a few, at the expense of many. The likes are privatised, the burdens are socialised.

As a result, all of our members face the same challenges: deregulation, privatisation, a race to the bottom in terms of wages and working conditions, the low-cost model applied in all our sectors. It is not only workers who are seeing their rights and welfare dismantled. Neoliberalism is also bent on dismantling trade unions and union rights overall.



The capitalist organisation of our economy takes us from crisis to crisis. The 2008 financial crisis, the biggest since World War II, bankrupted banks and financial companies alike. Governments had to rescue the economy. Debts were taken over, without collectivisation. Banks were bailed out, without collectivising them. Profligacy and wild speculation led to a huge crisis and taxpayers' hard-earned pennies were used to straighten things out. In exchange for... nothing.

Then came the coronavirus pandemic. The system was put to the test worldwide. Lockdown after lockdown had to be imposed to contain the pandemic. With enormous consequences for the economy, as well as for our workers.

Transport workers were not able to work from home. It was them who kept the world moving then and who keep it moving still. Health and safety became a priority and must remain high on our agenda, including for unions.

We quickly forget now that we have extracted ourselves from the immediate stormy weather of the pandemic. Still, we should not forget how seamen were sometimes blocked on ships for months and could not go home because of the measures taken to combat Covid. We forget how platform and logistics workers – already highly vulnerable workers – were put under enormous pressure to stay at work, often exposing themselves to dangerous situations while doing their jobs. And we cannot forget how dockers and truckers had to keep working to ensure supplies

in shops and supermarkets, to keep supplying pharmacies and hospital.

Many workers lost their jobs during the crisis. The aviation sector and cruise industry came to a standstill. Not to mention the immense pressure placed on care staff. They deservedly got applause. But did all those hard workers receive the respect they deserved? Clearly not. It is the workers who paid the really high price of the Covid crisis.

And then came the war in Ukraine that caused runaway inflation worldwide, with prices soaring and workers' wages not keeping up. Of course, there were other factors involved, too. Speculation, for example, which sent grain prices soaring. Or the extraordinary margins that energy companies suddenly took.

WORKERS AGAIN AT THE CENTRE OF POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS

In many countries, worker parties lost ties with the trade union movement. Sometimes seduced by 'the third way' and Blairism. They no longer fundamentally question the unfairness of the system, but only try to 'refine' it. More than that, they themselves believe and spread the narrative that there is no alternative.

Neoliberalism combined with the fundamental crises of the system show that the opposition between workers and capital is not a matter of history, whatever some would have us believe. We need to combat TINA (There Is No Alternative) fatalism.

Again and again we hear the same story: things are bad, so we all need to make a concerted effort. Wages must be kept under control, cuts must be made, everyone must do their bit to get us out of the depression we have sunk into.



The question is: are things really that bad? Is it really hard for everyone? Or do a few have a lot, too much even? And others have little, far too little? And are there too many who have too little?

Tens of millions of people are hungry. According to the World Bank, 736 million people were living in extreme poverty in 2015, or about 10 per cent of the world's population.

At the same time, winners have emerged from these multiple crises. The very rich got dramatically richer and corporate profits reached record highs, causing an explosion in inequality.

According to Forbes, there were 2,755 dollar billionaires in 2021 – 660 more than the previous year. The ten richest people in the world had a combined \$1,500 billion in wealth at the end of 2021 – enough to build 6.6 million social housing units!

In early 2023, Oxfam again published its study on global inequality. It does so every year at the time when the economic and political elite gather in the Swiss mountain village of Davos for the World Economic Forum. Its report this year shows that

poverty has increased for the first time in 25 years. That should set off alarm bells worldwide!

The findings of the Oxfam report are rather shocking. Two-thirds of all wealth created since 2020 (\$42,000 billion) flowed to the richest 1 per cent in the world. In Belgium, the richest one per cent holds almost a quarter of the country's total wealth.

In 2022, the largest energy and food producers generated \$306 billion in excess profits. Of this, \$284 billion (84 per cent) was distributed to shareholders. Meanwhile, companies with mega-profits complain bitterly about how badly things

'To combat even greater economic and financial inequality, higher taxes on the super-rich are necessary.'

are going for them. However, the figures say otherwise. The wealth of the top ten entrepreneurs is huge and shocking at the same time.

Bernard Arnault of LVMH has assets of \$211 billion (yes, your eyes aren't deceiving you!), Elon Musk of Tesla has \$180 billion and Jeff Bezos of Amazon in turn accounts for \$114 billion. And the list of billionaires is pretty long. Taking a look round Google speaks volumes. They are definitely not struggling.



rice, flour and soya, makes \$80 profit a month. She pays a tax rate of 40 per cent.

TAX THE RICH!

In Belgium, 0.15 per cent tax is levied on equity portfolios worth more than 1 million euro. So that's 1,500 euro on every 1 million euro. An attempt to raise that amount to 0.3 per cent was shot down by the right-wing parties. Apparently those supposedly poor devils who have 1 million (!) euros in shares can't afford the higher tax rate.

To combat even greater economic and financial inequality, higher taxes on the super-rich are necessary. Oxfam puts it like this: "For every dollar of taxes collected in the world today, only 4 cents comes from taxes on wealth. An annual wealth tax of 5 per cent for millionaires and billionaires, could raise \$1,700 billion a year. That would be enough to help two billion people escape from poverty and finance a universal healthcare and social protection fund."

Income tax rates for the very rich should also go up. Since the 1980s, these rates have been systematically reduced! However, things were once different: in the post-World War II period, the highest incomes in the US were taxed at 90 per cent.

There is a need for an alternative discourse that puts the real problems of working people on the agenda.

Their purchasing power, for example. According to the Danish journalist Peter Rasmussen and photographer Søren Zeuth, 10 per cent of working Europeans live in poverty. They have work, but they are poor. They use the definition of the 'working poor' being that you earn less than 60 per cent of the median wage and work at least part-time. Of course, that means you're struggling to pay your bills and your rent. According to the European Commission, there are 22 million working people living in poverty within the European Union. 35 million people can't take a holiday and 3 million can't pay for heating. The Bertelsmann Stiftung has calculated that one in five Germans will be poor when they retire. Hardly surprising when you realise how many people work in the gig economy.

The list of issues that really need to be talked about is long: safe working conditions, lower workloads, high-performing public services that really work for the people – and so on. In doing so, we do not have the luxury of being indifferent to the right-wing narrative, which we must refute in no uncertain terms. Not 'yes, but...'. It must be a clear and unequivocal 'no'.



**One key element
in shaping our future
is hope.**

LIVIA SPERA

Neoliberalism and its policies are a political choice. A choice for unfettered capitalism. A capitalism that is given free rein to exploit places and people. It is a capitalism unleashed by political actors.

Today, we can clearly see the economic, social, environmental, and political consequences of that choice. Growing inequalities, dismantled healthcare and welfare systems, climate change, precarity, the return of working poor, growth of far-right sentiments, and political alienation of workers and citizens, just to mention a few.

The conclusion is a pervasive thought that “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world” than any alternative. Indeed, as humanity faces one of its greatest existential crises presented by climate change, the lacklustre response of international political actors serves only as a reminder of their fatalistic mantra: “there is no alternative”.

This status quo serves only as an opportunity to concentrate wealth and power into fewer and fewer hands while inequalities grow. Multinational corporations (MNCs) abuse complex corporate structures and subcontracting chains to circumvent human and labour laws, as well as social and environmental standards. This situation is compounded by increased monopolisation

LIVIA SPERA

°14/09/1977. Italy.

Since 2022, General Secretary of the European Transport Workers’ Federation (ETF). Former acting General Secretary of the ETF and political secretary of the ETF Dockers and Fisheries sections.

(which was accelerated in some cases by the Covid 19 pandemic). Transport work, as a result, is impoverished, as years of corporate policies (unleashed by political policies) have undermined wages, working conditions, and the desirability of transport jobs. The ongoing worker shortage in transport is nothing more than another crisis borne from neoliberal political choices.

Certainly, this is not the world we want to leave to the next generations.

And, I am sure, there is an alternative to this present. As trade unions, we have a crucial role to play in building a different future. I truly believe one key element in shaping our future is hope. Hope allows us to dare and be brave even when we face obstacles that look difficult to overcome. People and organisations that have hope are those who dare to fight against the status quo and build alternatives. Hope is exactly what neoliberalism has tried to kill, and lack of hope led to political alienation and inactivism.

All the small and big victories that trade unions have achieved, have been reached through the collective actions of workers that decided to engage because they hoped they could win. They know that nothing is written in stone, even when the chance to lose is high.

Whenever I participate in trade union actions, big or small, I can feel we are not just protesting but we are building hope. And this is even stronger when we are able to act collectively at the international level, uniting people that would otherwise be distant from each other. And when the problem is global, the answer needs to be global as well.

Against a backdrop of decreasing engagement in political parties, it is even more important for unions to contribute and build political participation, developing knowledgeable and active workers that understand and confront the existential threats of our societies through unity, solidarity, and action, starting from the workplace up to the highest political level.

For me, there are alternatives, and it is up to us to build those, today. It is probably our most important duty, and we are not ready to give up!

**THE
WORLD
BELONGS
TO
US**

8.

**Against hatred
and envy**





EXTREME RIGHT ON THE RISE

When the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) held its latest congress in Budapest, Orbán had convened the finest of the populist right for a conference in the same city two weeks before.

The CPAC (Conservative Political Action Conference) Hungary conference was held there on 19th and 20th May 2022. It was a conference where the far right of Europe and the United States came together for two days to discuss how to impose their agenda in both Europe and the United States.

The list of speakers included Mark Meadows, Donald Trump's former chief of staff, Tucker Carlson then of Fox News, and George Farmer of the far-right media platform Parler. But Viktor Orbán himself and some of his ministers also took the floor at that conference. In addition to politicians from Austria's far-right political party FPÖ, there was Italy's Lega, Spain's Vox and Tom Van Grieken from Belgium's Vlaams Belang.

That CPAC conference called Hungary "one of the driving forces of resistance to the woke revolution". "Conservatives in Europe and the United States must fight together to 'recapture' the institutions in Washington and Brussels," Viktor Orbán said at the conference. According to him, these institutions are in the hands of "progressive liberals, neo-Marxists stunned by the woke dream" and, an Orbán classic, "people

funded by George Soros". To sum up: forces that "destroy the Western way of life that you and we love so much", Orbán told the CPAC Hungary conference. A Hungarian talk show host present at the conference called Jewish people "stinking excrement" and Romani "animals".

The growing influence of far-right politics and populism goes hand in hand with globalisation. For many years, populism and far-right parties around the world have been gaining influence. With a false narrative of protecting their 'own people', they are in fact aiming to demolish workers' rights, promote racism and exclusion, etc. If the far-right was marginal in the latter part of the 20th century, far-right and fascist parties are now back with a vengeance.

In many places, the far-right plays a part in government or even takes power. Trump was President of the US and, after losing the election, he challenged the democratic result, with his supporters attacking the House of Representatives. Bolsonaro in Brazil was defeated by Lula but is preparing a comeback, Meloni in Italy is prime minister, Orbán in Hungary and so on.

Some people would have us believe that refugees and immigrants are the cause of the crises we face in the North. But we know that no one leaves their country just for fun.

Refugees flee wars, famine, poverty and more. We must not only be extremely vigilant and strict about racism and exclusion, but we also need

to take practical action to stop the influence of the extreme right by focusing more on worker education and by campaigning around key symbols such as wearing the red triangle (the symbol of political and trade union camp prisoners as a means of opening discussion), or promoting 8th May (the day of democracy's victory over Nazism) as an official public holiday.

Democracy is under pressure all over the world. Authoritarian regimes, autocrats, dictators and the like are in power in more and more countries. There are authoritarian leaders in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe who do everything they can to neglect democracy. The right to organise, the right to take industrial action, the right to demonstrate and the right to bargain are all at risk. Women's rights are flagrantly violated in many countries, such as Iran and Afghanistan.

THE EXTREME RIGHT IS OPPOSED TO THE UNIONS

It is 16th October 2021. I am standing in a packed Piazza San Giovanni in Rome, along with 100,000 protesters. "Mai più fascismo!", they chant in chorus. Maurizio Landini, the secretary-general of CGIL, one of the three organising unions, addresses the crowd. "We have not forgotten what happened in Italy, in Europe, before and during World War II. Because a country that forgets its past has a poor future!" In his long and inspiring speech, he argued for hope and perspective for young people, for more culture, for better jobs and a solid social safety net.

The trigger for the demonstration was an attack by Squadron Fascisti on 9th October 2021 on the CGIL's central headquarters. On the same day, a vaccination centre at a hospital was also attacked and in the days that followed, CGIL regional union offices were bombarded with Molotov

'A country that forgets its past has a poor future!'

cocktails, others were smeared with swastikas... The CGIL's website was also hacked in an attempt to sabotage the union's computers.

Anyone who has read Antonio Scutari's 'M' book series is bound to get déjà vu. The attacks are reminiscent of the fascist thugs who organised the physical hunt for the left in pre-fascist Italy.

It is a clear example of how the far-right is against trade unions. Extreme right-wing parties may talk about how social they are (albeit only for their 'own people'), but they are clear when it comes to trade unions: abolish! And if that cannot be done, then those unions must be made to suffer. By curtailing the right to strike, by hitting them financially, by prosecuting strike leaders and so on.

Meanwhile, Italy has lurched to the right. Giorgia Meloni, figurehead of a neofascist party is prime minister of Italy. Those who thought that all would be well, and that those neo-fascists would calm down once they were in government, are being contradicted by the facts.

And that the Meloni government is also pursuing anti-social policies is evidenced by the abolition of the citizen's income. A reddito di cittadinanza is a combination between unemployment benefit and the living wage, introduced by the previous government. Giorgia Meloni announced earlier that she would abolish that social benefit. It would only motivate the 'idlers' to do nothing... The fact that with the abolition of that living wage many families would be plunged back into poverty did not appear to be an issue.

Italian academic Antonio Scutari said in a newspaper interview: "History is not fixed in advance, it is the outcome of a struggle. The

same thing applies to democracy. Our generation inherited democracy from our parents and grandparents. We are lucky bastards. We feel that democracy is taken for granted, that it will always exist. Whereas, of course, it will not. It has to be constantly defended.”

In Belgium too, fascists have physically attacked the unions. On 1st May 2018, a right-wing shock troop entered my own confederation’s building and stole the union flag, which was flying at the building. Afterwards, they posted a film on social media in which they urinated on that flag, finally setting it on fire. The group was called Schild & Vrienden (Shield & Friends), led by Dries Van Langenhove. It began as a group of far-right students and young people. They organised training camps because (I quote) “youth needs to be in good physical shape”. But those camps were also places where lectures, supposedly educational training courses, etc. were organised. Members were in contact with each other through a WhatsApp group where racist and bigoted messages about dissenters were exchanged.

Following a TV report, the Belgian judiciary opened an investigation into violation of anti-racism laws. The group’s leaders spoke of an attack on freedom of expression. The leader of the group subsequently sat for the far-right Vlaams Belang in the Belgian parliament for some time. The group has still not been convicted of racism (which is a criminal offence in Belgium).

Meanwhile, a movement called the May 8th Coalition has been started in Belgium. That coalition is pushing for the recognition of May 8th as an official holiday. It is the day of the capitulation of Nazi Germany in 1945. Quite a few countries already commemorate that day. To send a clear political signal that there is no place

‘We should not have any complexes about daring to bend the public agenda to our will. Putting the issues that really matter on the agenda.’

for the far right, we must work to make 8th May a paid holiday everywhere in Europe. Symbols are more important than ever.

THE UNIONS MUST DARE TO DOT THE I’S

The success of far-right parties, including electorally, is only possible because part of our own constituency also feels attracted to the far-right discourse. It’s an erroneous discourse that seduces ‘ordinary people’.

The extreme right sets the agenda with a narrative that is simple and straightforward. Everything that goes wrong is the fault of foreigners. The immigration movement we face globally, with people fleeing war, poverty, impoverishment and hopelessness, creates an influx of newcomers into our society. And what is new, strange, or different often instils fear in people.

The far right feeds these fears by deliberately exaggerating. They speak of a tsunami of refugees, of an overrun of illegal migrants, of a tidal wave. In doing so, they stir up unrest and create an atmosphere of hatred and envy against foreigners.

The other day I read the story of Daniel Esteve, a former boxer operating in Barcelona. He stokes unrest in Barcelona neighbourhoods by threatening squatters and organising demonstrations against them. With his company, Desokupa, he organises evictions of squatters from empty buildings where they have taken up residence.

More recently, he has started interfering in local elections. He used public consternation after

the murder of a shopkeeper in Madrid to call for revenge against “the Algerians” who were allegedly behind the killing. Vox party leader Santiago Abascal spoke on Twitter about a perpetrator with a North African background.

The local police solved the case within 24 hours. It was not a ‘Mohammed’ who stabbed the woman to death, after all, but a Spanish ‘Jesús’, a criminal with drug problems. But for 24 hours, Vox and Desokupa kept fanning the false flames on Twitter and TikTok. Partly because of Daniel Esteve, the election campaign in Barcelona suddenly revolved around housing and security, and not around tourism and mobility which are two major challenges in the city. It is a great example of how the far right uses false narratives to bend the public agenda to its will.

‘The narrative marketed by right-wing populists is allowed to stand far too much without contradiction.’

Within the unions, we need to be clearer about what we are doing. We should not have any complexes about daring to bend the public agenda to our will. Putting the issues that really matter on the agenda.

Too easily we have allowed the discourse of the far-right to fester. More to the point, we have, in a sense, resigned ourselves to it. The narrative marketed by right-wing populists is allowed to stand far too much without contradiction.





As unions, we must fulfil our mission today – just as we were a bulwark against the far-right in the past.

MARTIN BURKERT

MARTIN BURKERT

°14/10/1964. Germany.

President of the German trade union EVG (Eisenbahn und Verkehrsgewerkschaft). Member of the Management Committee and Executive Board of the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF). Member of the Executive Board of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF).

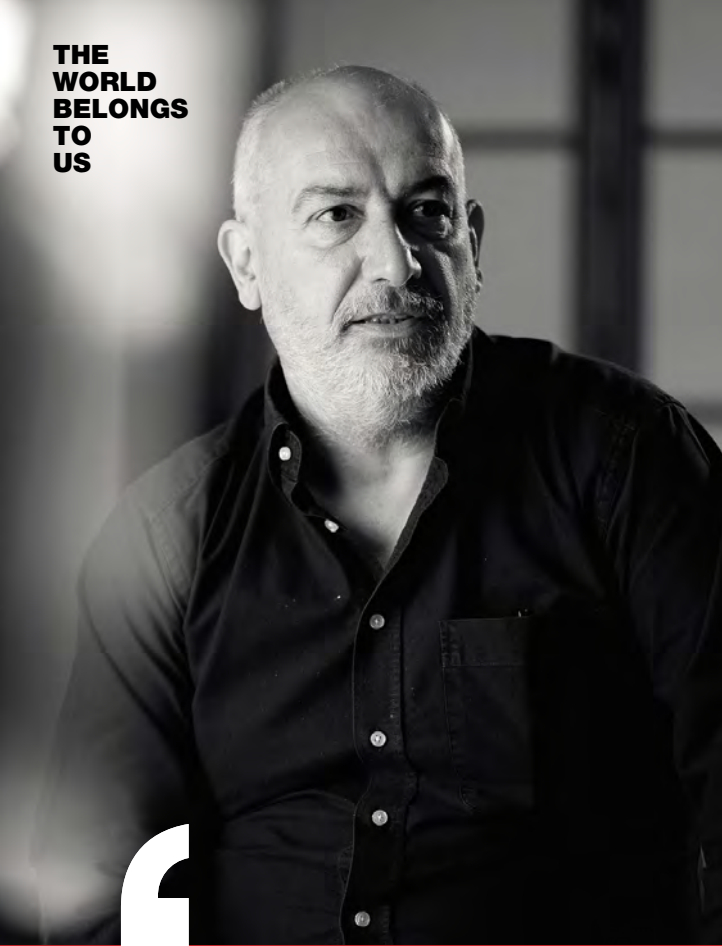
E **EVG TAKES A CLEAR STAND AGAINST THE RIGHT**

At a time when the growing influence of populism, nationalism and right-wing extremism in Europe is threatening democracy, we trade unions must also discuss this issue within our own ranks. Social inequalities, increasingly precarious working conditions and the dismantling of the social security system have left the population prey to uncertainty, dissatisfaction and fear of the future. Right-wing populists and extremists offer easy solutions to complex problems and think in terms of categories of “friends” and “enemies”. This paves the way for discrimination, exclusion and degradation.

Trade unionists in particular have a duty to act in a collegial and supportive manner and, as an important part of society, to speak out actively and openly every day against anti-democratic sentiments and right-wing extremism and populism. Anyone who is opposed to democracy, diversity and equal participation for all is also opposed to trade unions. Populist or right-wing extremist parties are directly or indirectly hostile to workers and/or trade unions.

As trade unions, we have a mission to fulfil today, just as we have done in the past by forming a bastion against the far right: after the Second World War, trade unions were in the front line in the fight against historic fascism and provided resistance against the far right.

As Germany's first trade union, my union, the EVG, took a clear stance in 2019: supporters of right-wing populist or extremist parties, such as the AfD, are not welcome in our trade union community. EVG takes a clear stand against the right.



It is up to the trade union movement in each country, individually and together, to stand in the way of the far right.

VINCENT SCHELTIEWS ORTIGOSA

Not since the end of the Second World War have far-right political parties and populist figures on the radical right enjoyed such electoral success. And this success has not been limited to votes and parliamentary seats. The centre and the conservative right have lowered the drawbridge to accommodate the far right. But this doesn't just mean that they have taken up the essence of its proposals and rhetoric, thereby further normalising them in society. It also means that, in order to come to power or remain in power, the right has no problem in joining forces with the far right. In addition to the declared illiberal regimes in Hungary and Poland, the far right, either by becoming a coalition partner or by offering crucial support, has de facto come to political power in EU Member States such as Sweden, Finland, Italy, etc. In Spain, too, the conservative right and the far right have joined forces. Although they have bitten the dust at federal level, they now share power in six autonomous regions and more than a hundred local authority areas. In the two countries on which the European axis has historically been built, France and Germany, the far right is riding high in the polls.

VINCENT SCHELTIEWS ORTIGOSA

°03/10/1962. Belgium.

Historian. Postdoctoral researcher and visiting professor at the University of Antwerp. Author of various works on nationalism and the extreme right.

The success of the far right on different continents is confirmed at a time when globalisation is having a direct and destructive impact on the world of working people. There has been banking crisis, the climate crisis, the pandemic, the energy crisis, wars, migratory flows and so on. These are global challenges that have a direct destabilising effect on our working, living and housing environments. They sow doubt, uncertainty, sometimes fear and frustration, anger and unease. The far right exploits these fears and exacerbates them. Regardless of the differences in their programmes or their historical roots, these parties essentially offer the same simplistic and misleading alternative solution to a bewildered world population. It's an alternative solution that may appeal both to the 'have-nots' struggling to make ends meet and to the better-off who, out of economic chauvinism and political selfishness, want to ward off the "misery of the world".

The far right's global alternative is based on two closely related ideas. Firstly, there is the idea of withdrawing into oneself, by creating hard borders and imposing strict delimitations. Fostering the illusion that you can cut yourself off from the big bad world. Secondly, there is a desire for internal homogenisation. Being different or coming from elsewhere, etc. is not tolerated in various ways. The population must be given a hierarchy: first "their own people", then transients who have fewer rights and occupy a position lower down the pecking order and, finally, undesirables who are stigmatised and dehumanised and must be expelled. This programme is called nativism and is a mixture of nationalism and racism.

It goes without saying that trade unions which defend the interests of all workers, which are the emanation of international solidarity, which are the best conquerors and defenders of social and democratic rights and freedoms, etc. are the declared enemies of the extreme right. Just as it did in the 1920s and 1930s, contemporary fascism in the 21st century will not hesitate, once it has enough power, to destroy the unions. It is up to the trade union movement in each country, individually and together, to block the road to the extreme right and wring its neck. By denormalising it again. By demystifying the social nativism of the far right, its lies and demagoguery in the workplace and in public spaces, through its own channels. By imposing and supporting a strong social policy that breaks with the neo-liberal logic. By proposing global alternative solutions and prospects for the working classes. This may be more difficult, because these alternatives are not based on lies, but on the real material interest of workers in once again allowing solidarity and comradeship to take precedence over hatred and jealousy.

THE
WORLD
BELONGS
TO
US

9.
**Free trade
unions are the
counterbalance**





MULTINATIONALS AND BIGDATA COMPANIES

HAVE A GLOBAL STRATEGY

The days when business decisions were made at a national level are far behind us. Large companies

such as Amazon, Meta, Uber, Lufthansa, Maersk, Keolis, DSV, DFDS, Swissport, Aviapartner, Ryanair, PSA, DP World and Hutchinson operate all over the world and often have a lot of political influence.

In fact, the political influence exercised by these companies should certainly not be underestimated. See the role Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter) play in the political debate, deciding what kind of coverage is or is not allowed on their platforms.

They decide whether or not Donald Trump can continue with his toxic political propaganda on Facebook and X. They set the algorithms – which are often not transparent – that determine which political content is featured on your social media. They weigh in overtly on the political agenda.

See also how Uber has managed to wipe out taxi regulations in several countries or have them rewritten to suit their requirements. This has also happened in Belgium: a number of decrees regulating the taxi industry were simply changed to allow Uber to enter the taxi market.

That's why the importance of international trade unionism cannot be overestimated. If 'they' have a global strategy, then 'we' must also have one.

Trade unions obviously need to be organised at company, sector-specific and national levels to best defend workers' rights. That is where their power base lies.

But if we are unable to develop common approaches and shared strategies, if we do not exchange experiences, share information and cooperate on an international level, then we are doomed to be on the losing side of history.

Stock market guru Warren Buffett once said, "Yes, there is a class war and we are winning". Our response should be: "No, we are fighting back!" The medals will be handed out on the finishing line – and we will go for gold!

ITUC MUST DO MORE AND BETTER!

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) must be an international organisation that is prepared to tackle the global challenges facing unions head-on. The organisation and its leadership must be dynamic, flexible, relevant, visionary and unifying. Moreover, the leadership must be without reproach. The negative consequences of the possible corruption in the Qatar matter should serve as a lesson, although the allegations have yet to be proven. In any event, we need to organise internal operations transparently at all levels and be free from influence.

Unions never got anything by asking nicely for it. On the contrary, we have got things done because we have fought for them. Therefore, in addition to our lobbying work, we need to place greater emphasis on campaigning. And do so with a highly appropriate strategy. Negotiate when possible, take action when necessary.

Taking a strategic approach means setting practical goals and establishing a clear roadmap for achieving them. In doing so, we must focus on multinational companies and we must do so together, across national borders.

STRENGTHENING TRIPARTITE ORGANISATIONS

ITUC must be the voice of workers in international institutions such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO). But it must also represent the voice of the workers in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), Group of Twenty (G20), etc. Nor should work with the United Nations be neglected. In this instance I am thinking about the workings of the Social Commission and the Human Rights Commission.

The relevance of the work done for members should be the main focus of an international organisation. If participation in tripartite organisations does not yield anything, it is a waste of time. We need to negotiate agreements and compromise, and bring those results back to our members. We cannot afford to merely stand on the sidelines and say no.

However, it is imperative to continue investing in the ILO. 2019 marked the 100th anniversary of that particular tripartite organisation. In fact it is the only tripartite consultative body within the United Nations, with governments, trade unions and employer organisations all represented there.

It aims to ‘pursue social justice and protection of workers everywhere’. Through the conventions it promulgates, the ILO imposes an international code on rights at work. It also monitors the enforcement of those international labour standards in the 187 member states.

Those international labour standards are often underestimated. And yes, they are also often violated. Yet the conventions concluded within the ILO are extremely useful. The ILO is actually a world parliament for labour issues. And if we are aware of the work there is to do there, then we must invest more in the negotiations that take place within the organisation. I know: it’s too slow, too laborious. But it exists. If we as a union do not use this forum, do not seize the opportunities that the ILO offers us, then we are really making a mistake.

The recent and important ILO Convention 190, by the way, is a good example of the usefulness of tripartite negotiations. These negotiations cost blood, sweat and, probably, many tears of disappointment because they progressed far too slowly.

But in the end, a convention to curb violence and harassment in the workplace finally emerged within the ILO in 2019.

This convention makes it easier for unions worldwide to enforce legislation in their countries. And trade unions worldwide can now petition their governments to ratify that convention.

And that too is only progressing slowly. Belgium took five years to ratify the convention and in June 2023, became the 30th country in the world to sign up to the convention, and the sixth in the European Union. I know, it’s all far too slow. But

*'Unions never got anything
by asking nicely for it.'*

the convention also gives ammunition to lawyers in my country to tackle workplace violence.

Tripartite consultation could also be strengthened within Europe, for example by better monitoring what happens within the European Economic and Social Committee. But can employer and employee organisations influence European politics? The Committee is a structured advisory body of the European Union. Its opinions may not be binding, but they still have an undeniable influence on decision-making in Europe.

So yes, we should spend time, money and resources to overhaul the tripartite consultation system and make it work better and faster. Too many attacks on social dialogue and tripartite bargaining have gone unanswered on our side. It is high time we found allies in the economic and political world so that we can redevelop collective negotiations and agreements and share the profits of capitalism. Billions of dollars in profits are finding their way to the wallets of the happy few.

NEGOTIATION WHERE POSSIBLE, ACTION WHERE NEEDED

Without power, we cannot hope for positive results at the negotiating table. The partners on the other side of the table need to know that the union is not a lobbying machine. They need to know that we have the numbers, that we have the power.

Talking alone will not lead us to great victories. Unions have never achieved results by asking for something nicely. Through history, we have changed the world by organising, mobilising, campaigning. Action is the engine of social progress.

ITUC, the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and all global trade union

federations must therefore be louder and have a greater presence on the frontline of the global confrontation with deregulation and liberalisation. We can do that by believing in the power we represent, by using that power to create awareness and influence policymakers, and by putting pressure on governments and politicians.

MEMBER ORGANISATIONS MUST REALLY ENGAGE WITH ITUC

The biggest mistake national unions can make today is to retreat to the national level. Unfortunately, that is often exactly what they do: they think they can solve it in their own country. That's a terrible mistake in a global world. Unfair competition, tax havens and delocalisation are a few examples of the problems we face on a global scale.

Trade unions must take responsibility for what needs to be done in ITUC. The ITUC team is David versus Goliath if they do not have the strong support of trade unions behind them. Member unions must be willing to get involved, by running campaigns at a national level and participating in ILO meetings.

We need campaigns at global level in which all member unions can participate. I myself am involved in a national transport union, a national confederation, and I am very active in the European as well as international transport workers' federation. Nevertheless, I must admit that I do not have sufficient knowledge of the campaigns that the ITUC is running at the moment. That is primarily my own responsibility. But at the same time, the ITUC must also ask itself why people are not aware of what it is doing. The people at ITUC need to think more about how

to spread their knowledge more evenly. I am sure there are very few trade unionists who are really aware of ITUC's campaigns. If our own people do not know what we are doing, how can we expect other stakeholders to know? Moreover, I am convinced that a global organisation like the ITF can play an important role in energising the ITUC. It is a strong international federation. With a solid financial backbone and strong structures. The leadership of the ITF must also use those strengths to bolster the ITUC.

Besides, global federations need to cooperate more. One federation alone cannot achieve what cooperating federations can achieve together. Today it sometimes seems that competition between federations is more important than what we can substantively achieve together. Moreover, international federations should be more involved in the functioning of the ITUC and have a structural say in the organisation. Now only the national confederations have real decision-making power. This should be corrected by including the voice of international sector federations.

A capitalist company is run on the basis of authority, whereas a union is a democracy. While this difference makes us what we are, it also means that global trade unionism is a complicated undertaking. We all want the same thing, but trade union traditions, cultures and experiences are very different worldwide.

We must deal with this diversity and work patiently to develop a common strategy. A democratic organisation in which all unions have a voice must remain the priority of our global union. This is not an easy task, but it will make unions stronger globally in the face of their political and economic counterparts.

Progress is impossible without change. So the new leadership must come up with fresh and innovative proposals to breathe new life into the organisations. The new leadership must give hope to workers and convince them to join the organisation.

THE EUROPEAN TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION MUST TAKE TO THE STREETS AGAIN!

13th December 2001. I'm standing on the stage at the end of a trade union demonstration, which ends at the Heysel in Brussels. I see masses of people marching, as far as the eye can see. The demonstration was organised on the initiative of the European Trade Union Confederation. I am one of the organisers of the demonstration on behalf of the FGTB. Together with my fellow organisers, I am euphoric.

One hundred thousand protesters marched from Emile Bockstael Square to King Baudouin Stadium. 41 unions from 20 European countries took part in the demonstration. And although the bulk of the participants were mobilised by Belgian trade unions, this is still a feat of European trade union power.

600 coaches filled with Belgian demonstrators arrived along with 350 buses from other European countries. Many demonstrators came from our neighbouring countries with sizeable French delegations on top of that. There were also activists from Poland, Croatia, Slovakia, Greece, Portugal, Italy and Austria.

The demonstration was organised to mark the Belgian presidency of the European Union. The huge turnout was a demonstration of trade union power. With that demonstration, we sent a strong message together: that Europe must be more than

a market, more than an economic project. It was a clear call to work for a social Europe.

The demonstration in 2021 was preceded by a European demonstration in Ghent on 19th October of the same year, under the theme: For Social Europe and Solidarity. And before that another on 21st September in Liège, under the theme: The euro arrives ... and employment!

No fewer than three (!) European demonstrations in four months to weigh in on Belgian presidency.

I did not remember exactly where I went with the FGTB everywhere during that period to participate in ETUC events. So I took a quick look at the ETUC website. And I have to say that the list is a long one. Porto (2000), Nice (2000), Barcelona (2002), Brussels (2003), Rome (2003), Brussels (2005), Strasbourg (2006), Ljubljana (2006) and so on. And I could go on like this for a while.

It was a time when the ETUC was effectively in mobilisation mode, attending just about



every major European summit to put its views forward. National unions took the lead, while their colleagues from other countries joined them in proportion to their mobilisation strength. They were all demonstrations that profiled the European trade union as a solidary and close-knit community and sent a powerful message to the political world. In my opinion, it is time to do so again.

European trade unionism is more than a lobbying tool to the corridors of European power. Of course it has to be done, of course we must defend our proposals to the European institutions. It goes without saying that we must back up our trade union wishes and demands with well-argued cases.

But all that has to be accompanied by a clear demonstration of union strength. And it may well be then that lobbying employers and their



organisations can free up more money for more lobbying: they have the money, but we have the numbers. They may have the big money, but there are many of us. Unions must reclaim their place, including on the streets.

But demonstrating or building power relationships obviously only makes sense if we can also cash in on those power relationships. By hammering out agreements, enforcing social dialogue and negotiating honourable compromises with employers and international bodies.

NO FUTURE WITHOUT INTERNATIONAL VISION

Achieving our goals is only possible if national trade unions are willing to organise internationally.

International trade union work should therefore be more than lobbying, carried out by technocrats in international secretariats. Trade union work is carried out by networks of national organisations, willing to free up resources and people to work internationally.

If transport unions want to keep making an impact, we cannot deal with our local businesses without seeing the overall picture. Multinationals use subcontractors who in turn use other subcontractors, for example for transport or storage. They may not employ the drivers directly, but they are the principals. It is they who organise tough competition and even a race to the bottom.

Trade unions must organise globally, create their own networks and engage with economic employers.

Developing strong trade unions in Eastern Europe is crucial in this regard. It is not just a question of solidarity on behalf of Western European trade

unions, but it is a question of their own strength and survival.

A great example of international cooperation that really works is the inspection network built by the ITF in the maritime sector.

When I was in Kenya on a previous occasion, the inspector of the International Transport Workers' Federation was called on to provide assistance to some Tanzanian sailors. These sailors had been arrested by the police for being in Kenya illegally. We joined Betty Makena, a small, fierce, African trade union activist. And we were confronted there with what we did not think possible.

The six sailors had embarked on a Taiwanese fishing vessel. These ships fish along African coasts and deliver their cargo to mega-sized factory ships, which immediately process and freeze the fish. The six Tanzanians had protested against their inhuman treatment, were dismissed and put off the ship. They had to transfer to a smaller ship from the same fleet, but as the vessel could not dock against its big brother, the sailors – along and their bags – were simply thrown overboard (one of the fishermen could not swim). Eventually they were picked up by the smaller ship and put ashore in Kenya. Obviously they didn't have a residence permit to be able to stay there.

The ITF stood up for those boys and they were lucky. We boarded the ship, questioned the captain, intervened with the shipping company through ITF headquarters, threatened media interest, intervened with the Kenyan government. In the end, we obtained the release of the sailors. They also received their back-pay and a ticket to return to Tanzania. There was a clause in their contract – I am not making it up – that said it was normal for African sailors to be bullied and

'Achieving our goals is only possible if national trade unions are willing to organise internationally.'

mistreated by the rest of the crew and that they should have realised this when they took the job. None of the six could read or write and they scribbled something that was supposed to pass for their names under that contract. In the meantime, I learnt that slave labour in fishing, especially in the Far East, is by no means the exception.

The ITF has 125 inspectors whose job it is to board ships to check the wages and working conditions of crew members. These inspectors work in more than 100 ports in 50 countries. In 2021, they conducted 7,265 inspections to help thousands of seafarers with wage claims and repatriation cases. And this was despite Covid 19 restrictions at the time, which prevented inspectors from boarding ships for much of the year.

Inspectors are trained to detect exploitation, overtime and even signs of forced labour and modern slavery. On many ships, inspectors have the right to examine wage bills and labour contracts and check recorded working and rest periods.

The ITF reported 85 cases of abandonment to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) last year, a historically high number. Abandonment amounts to the ship owner leaving the crew to their fate, with no support. In many of these cases, the crew left behind had been waiting for weeks or months for unpaid wages - like the seamen aboard the storm-hit MSC Lidia.

Jason Lam, an ITF inspector in Hong Kong, helped eight Burmese seafarers working on the MSC Lidia recover nearly \$30,000 in unpaid wages. And this after they ran aground in October 2021 as the result of a typhoon that almost shipwrecked them. The shipowner refused to pay the two months' wages he owed the seamen, abandoned them and ruled out any help to get them home. Lam campaigned for weeks on behalf of the sailors and it finally had an effect. On 2nd November 2021, the crew flew home with full pay in their pockets.



Strong trade unions are needed now more than ever to rebalance the power between boardrooms and the shop floor in Europe.

ESTHER LYNCH

W **HEN TRADE UNION
POWER DECLINES,
INEQUALITY RISES.**

Our message is loud and clear: an injury to one, is an injury to all. The entire trade union movement will always rally behind any worker or union attacked for exercising their fundamental right to strike.

The decision to strike is never taken easily. It is the last resort, when all attempts at dialogue fail it provides some rebalance of power.

When trade union power declines, inequality rises. That's what the evidence from around the world shows.

The growing assault on trade union rights is, therefore, of deep concern to everyone interested in reducing inequality.

Europe's rating in the Global Rights Index produced by the International Trade Union Confederation has plummeted over the last decade as a result of the now "regular" violations of union rights by employers and the state.

In France, Confédération Générale du Travail leader Sébastien Menesplier has been ordered to a police station in an act of authoritarian revenge for organising protests against the government's pension reforms.

ESTHER LYNCH

°24/02/1963. Ireland.

General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). Former Deputy General Secretary and Confederal Secretary of the ETUC.

Protests which were made necessary by the completely undemocratic way in which those reforms were pushed through, without any social dialogue with trade unions.

In Belgium, we've seen Delhaize bosses repeatedly call in the police to enforce their profit-at-all-costs franchise model rather than uphold the country's long tradition of social dialogue.

In the United Kingdom, the government has responded to calls for negotiations over pay by placing even more severe restrictions on what were already some of the most draconian anti-strike laws in Europe.

All of this comes at a time when Europe is facing a social justice emergency.

Working people are suffering a historic cost of living crisis caused by corporate greed. And the answer from politicians has been to hit workers again through wage restraint, even though the data proves inflation is being driven by excess profits.

The extra profits generated through price speculation are being stripped out of companies and handed to shareholders in record dividend payments rather than reinvested.

Strong trade unions are needed now more than ever to rebalance the power between boardrooms and the shop floor in Europe.

That's why we're taking action across Europe to win a fair deal for workers. Organising in workplaces, mobilising on the streets, and political campaigning.

And I'm determined that we will no longer have to fight with one hand tied behind our backs. We have already won an EU directive which promotes collective bargaining and now we're going to turn the tide on union busting completely by securing a ban on public money for companies that don't respect union rights, don't reinvest profits, and don't pay fair wages.

It is not acceptable that a company like Ryanair, which has widely refused to engage in collective bargaining and sacked or sanctioned striking workers, has received almost a billion euros in EU funding over the last decade.

Trade unions which are free to organise, negotiate, and strike are the counterbalance that Europe needs.

The next step is to make union busting, in all its forms, a crime.

**THE
WORLD
BELONGS
TO
US**



Workers, in strong unions, united across borders and sectors, speaking with one voice.

STEPHEN COTTON



ONLY THE COMBINED POWER OF THE DEMOCRATIC GLOBAL UNION MOVEMENT WILL INFLUENCE THOSE DECISIONS

Transport and the economy is global. Transport workers and their unions need to think and act globally to win power and change in their workplaces.

Free trade, climate change and new technology mean workers everywhere are increasingly exploited in the same way. Global capital, led by multinational corporations at the top of supply chains, continues to try and put workers against one another at a global scale. As businesses have sought cheaper ways to move people and goods, governments have ripped up labour safeguards to encourage and increase competition. This has eroded standards across the transport industry and makes global solidarity, action and power more important than ever.

Change doesn't happen by itself. Decent pay, limits to working hours, paid leave, safety, equal pay for work of equal value; positive workplace change has only been possible because workers organised themselves into unions and demanded it. In a globalised economy, decisions impacting on workers are taken regionally and globally - in either a multinational HQ or an inter-

STEPHEN COTTON

Great Britain.

General Secretary of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) since 2014.

Former acting general secretary and ITF maritime coordinator.

governmental regulator – often designed to escape organised labour and societal responsibility.

Maritime employers flag their ships abroad in countries of convenience. Airlines base their employees contracts in different countries to avoid labour laws. E-commerce shifts its profits to offshore havens to avoid paying tax. Trucking companies register their companies in other countries to avoid paying minimum wages. These are global issues impacting local workplaces and they cannot be solved by one union in one country. Only the combined power of the democratic global union movement will influence those decisions – workers, in strong unions, united across borders and sectors, speaking with one voice.

There is enough money in the global economy to pay workers a decent wage. Take shipping. In 2022 alone, the industry is estimated to have made more than \$200 billion in profit. Operating profit margins for some of the shipping giants were above 50% in the past two years – that is, more than 50 cents out of every dollar from customers stayed in a company as profit.

As unions, if we are united internationally, we can challenge industry. We can bring responsible employers and governments with us and isolate the bad actors. We can win consensus that minimum standards benefit everyone: workers, employers and wider society. The pandemic opened the eyes of many to the role transport workers play in the global economy. We can demonstrate that sustainable business models must be underpinned by strong regulation, which includes the effective enforcement of workers’ fundamental rights including freedom of association and collective bargaining.

The power to influence policy does not just come from workplaces, it also comes from solidarity with other workplaces. Transport workers can win change by combining with other workers, in manufacturing, in retail, in construction, in agriculture, in healthcare and education. By bringing national unions together within and across borders, as well as by working with global unions across these sectors and with the ITUC, we can exert more leverage over multinationals and governments and win better outcomes for our members.

The solidarity between workers in the global labour movement is unique. We support one another in dispute, in times of hardship and in times of crisis. We share values of peace, justice, respect and equality, and we are united in our aim to be the counterforce and build a better world.

**THE
WORLD
BELONGS
TO
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10. Women on board!





MORE WOMEN IN THE TRANSPORT SECTOR

Paola Tapia was Chile's first female transport minister. It illustrates the country's male dominance. In a newspaper interview, she says

that in 2013, one per cent of public transport drivers in Chile were women. Thanks to a special programme, that number could be boosted to seven per cent in a year's time. She highlights its benefits. First, in terms of safer driving: women have fewer accidents. Second, female drivers show more empathy with users. Third, they are associated with a more pleasant working atmosphere. Another advantage: for mothers with children, the job guarantees financial independence.

Meanwhile, Paola Tapia is active with Mujeres en Movimiento. This is a movement working to enable women to use public transport without intimidation, violence or harassment. "At this point, I must mention the significant number of cases of harassment and violence on public transport," she says. "We are campaigning to draw attention to this problem, which should never be ignored. We must also work with companies and drivers to develop clear guidelines for listening, reporting and following up. The worst thing that could happen would be if a victim of harassment dared to report the facts and the perpetrator avoided the corresponding punishment. Our legislation is strict enough, but the mechanisms to establish such behaviour must work. To take action, we need cameras on board of buses and

a suitable mechanism to allow drivers to report a problem quickly. We have also launched a programme to make bus stops safer and more accessible, with an alarm button in case of intimidation."

Her story is a clear example of how women in the transport sector are still in a vulnerable situation today. Both as public transport passengers, but also as staff members.

PULL DOWN THE MACHO WALL

A pre-pandemic survey of more than 3,000 women in the transport sector found that high levels of violence and harassment are among the barriers keeping women away from the transport sector. According to statistics, only 22 per cent of transport workers in Europe are women.

If we want to make the transport industry more female-friendly and ensure that more women come to work in it, we will first and foremost have to ensure that women can get to work and back home safely. Many jobs – not only in the transport industry – operate with night shifts or shift work.

An ETF survey of more than 1,000 female transport workers in Europe (2017) found that 63 per cent of them had been victims of an act of violence at least once, and 26 per cent of them did not report the problem because they thought harassment was part of the job, including travelling to and from work.



That is why ETF is campaigning – at the suggestion of UK trade union Unite – around Bring me home safely. To launch the campaign, the ETF collected stories from female transport workers from across Europe and revealed what it is like behind the scenes. What happens when their shift starts early? How do they get home after a long working day? Based on these testimonies, a practical programme of proposals was developed that would ensure women get to work and home safely.

One of the central demands here is ratification of ILO Convention 190.

If we want to open the doors of the transport industry to women, we will have to start by making decent sanitation facilities available in the sector. Decent sanitation and washing facilities are actually a human right. They are also essential for decent work in the global transport economy, essential for the health, safety and welfare of transport workers.

A toilet must be available, clean, private, safe and accessible to all transport workers, wherever they work. And this is far from being the case, even in so-called developed countries. And not even in my country.

It was in 2019 when a female bus driver, Else Martens, a member and militant of BTB, put the lack of facilities for female bus drivers on the agenda. At the last stop on her bus line, there were no toilets. If there are no toilets, men can pee against a tree. Women cannot. Women have different needs, for example when they menstruate. Moreover, the workload in Else's team was sometimes so heavy that they barely had time to go to the toilet anyway. BTB had to campaign for months to get toilets for all drivers.

Women transport workers around the world face this. Many transport companies do not even provide facilities for female employees, putting women at risk of violence and poor health. Which hampers their work in the transport sector. The lack of toilets forces workers to improvise, for example by using nappies and bottles, or holding it in. Sanitary facilities are a must if we want to encourage women to join the transport sectors.

'If we want to open the doors of the transport industry to women, we will have to start by making decent sanitation facilities available in the sector.'





Are we attracting enough women as union representatives? Women are better placed to represent women's needs in negotiations and set an example for other women in the workplace.

SARA TRIPODI

T **THE FIGHT FOR GENDER EQUALITY**

It is estimated that one in three women worldwide is a victim of physical or sexual violence. In the European Union, more than 30% of cases of sexual intimidation against women occur in the workplace. And many women are also victims of discrimination in the workplace: at the point of recruitment, in terms of pay and benefits, and in terms of career development opportunities. As a trade union, we have an important role to play in this area, both by making girls and women more resilient and by protecting them. At work and in everyday life.

Unfortunately, my home country of Italy is often at the centre of world news when it comes to violence against women. Take, for example, the wave of sex crimes in Rome a few years ago, or the Italian judge who decided to acquit a concierge because the assault on the under-age victim lasted “only” 10 seconds. As a union representative, I have also had to deal with violence against women on several occasions, not to mention the discriminatory remarks that female train attendants have to put up with from passengers or the sexist jokes made by male colleagues.

SARA TRIPODI

°08/08/1979. Italy.

General Secretary of FILT-CGIL for the province of Monza and Brianza. Chairwoman of the ETF Women's Committee. International Department of FILT-CGIL Nazionale. Member of the Executive Committee of the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF).

What can we do about it? First of all, more legal instruments are needed to protect victims. Since 2019, there has been an ILO treaty banning violence and bullying at work. However, by mid-2023, only seven Member States had ratified it. And there is currently no specific European legislation to combat violence against women. On 8th March 2022, the European Commission nevertheless proposed a directive to combat violence against women and domestic violence. But there is still no final wording of the legislation. As a trade union, we must also work to ensure that these proposals are put into practice.

Within the ETF's Committee for Women, we have developed several toolkits designed to prevent violence in the workplace, as well as a guide dealing with violence against women and the bullying of women in the workplace. We need to distribute this material so that employers and workers have powerful tools with which to take action.

Secondly, we need to make our own transport sector more attractive to women. It's not enough simply to recruit women; we need to redouble our efforts to keep them in the industry. There are a number of things that can make a difference: a better work-life balance, separate toilets, appropriate uniforms, etc. We need to look not only at companies, but also at our own trade union organisations. Are women sufficiently represented in management positions? Are we attracting enough women as union representatives? Obviously, women are better placed to represent women's needs in negotiations and set an example for other women in the workplace.

I'd like to conclude with a quote from an extraordinary man, Kofi Annan: "Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a prerequisite for tackling challenges such as reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and establishing good governance."

**THE
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11. Young people are the present



Y **OUNG PEOPLE ARE NOT THE FUTURE OF THE UNIONS – THEY ARE THE PRESENT**
“Young people no longer find their way to the union,” people sometimes say.

It used to be an obvious thing for a young girl or lad going to work to join the union at the same time. A bit like Bruce Springsteen sings in *The River*: “*For my nineteenth birthday, I got a union card and a wedding coat.*”

That natural reflex may be going backwards. The question is whether young people are not finding their way to the union or whether the union is missing the connection with young people.

In my union, 10,955 members are under the age of 35. That’s 20 per cent of our membership. So no problem in terms of connecting young people. But getting them active in the union is harder. Maybe that’s not because of the young people, but because of us?



However, since 2017, the port of Antwerp has had a thriving youth work force. The young dockworkers meet regularly. It is an introduction to the union, a relaxed run-up to discuss political issues, workplace problems and the challenges of the port. The group consists of around 30 young men and women and the initiative was emulated in the other seaports.

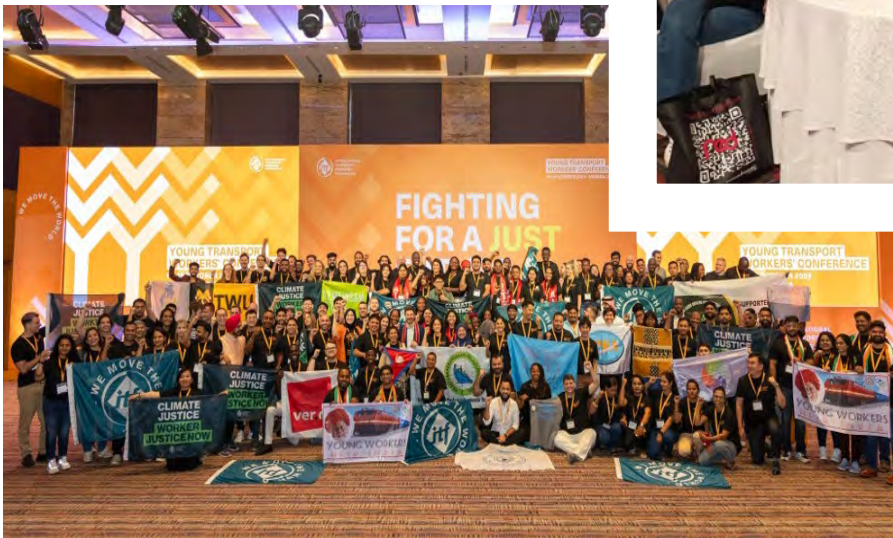
Those young people, by the way, did not limit themselves to purely union work. They organised collections for needy children and lent a hand in a care centre. So they are also very active socially.

Getting youth work out of the ground is not always easy in the union. Young dockers involved in setting up the Youth Movement of Antwerp Dockers said this in the Belgian newspaper, *Gazet van Antwerpen*: “The older board members distrusted ‘such a gang of young monkeys’, but we took it very seriously. And now that view has completely changed,” says Abdel. “We are a

‘Young workers frequently work on temporary contracts or as agency workers.

They often have non-permanent jobs in companies without union representation.’

bridge between the older and younger generation. The older ones are happy that young people want to take the helm later on,” as Glenn Mannien (31) puts it. Hannelore Hannes is 26 and a dockworker in Antwerp. She talks about how young dockworkers can make the difference. “The younger dockers are more tolerant towards women than the older ones.”



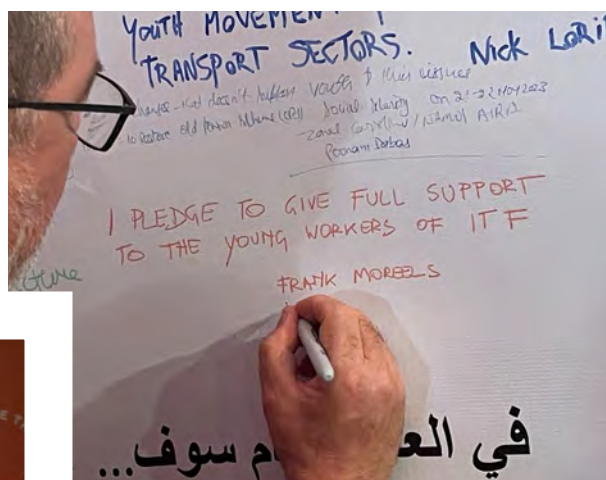
The group started in 2017. Since then, four of these young people have moved on and become union delegates at the port. It is a great illustration of how organising young people in the union is perfectly feasible and how it is also a good investment in the long term.

What undoubtedly also plays a part in making young workers reluctant to become involved in the union is the unstable situation in which they often have to work. Young workers frequently work on temporary contracts or as agency workers. They often have non-permanent jobs in companies without union representation. They work in the platform economy and logistics sector, which we know are usually jobs where there is little stability.

That should motivate us to tackle the situation as a union. And to fight for proper, fully-fledged work for young people. They don't deserve to have to sit on the sidelines for years until they are offered the types of job they deserve. Young people have a right to stable, full-time jobs.

'I know how hard it is for young people in the labour market. At the same time, I know how older unionists sometimes do not pay attention to the problems of young people.'

I myself was youth leader of the ABVV trade union confederation in Belgium 40 years ago. I coordinated the union's youth work for several years. So I know how hard it is for young people in the labour market. At the same time, I know how older unionists sometimes do not pay attention to the problems of young people. To those young people I say very clearly: don't give up!





It is imperative that we do not let this generation of promising activists slip through our fingers

MERYEM HALOUANI

Young people are at the same time the future and the present. This perspective is crucial to the continued success of the trade union movement worldwide.

Youth participation used to be taken for granted. However, we now live in a time when new dynamics and challenges are emerging. It is essential to ask whether young people's lack of interest in trade unions is due to their disinterest, or whether trade unions themselves need to evolve to meet the changing needs of this generation.

There are enough examples demonstrating that the involvement of young people can be successfully encouraged when trade unions adapt their approaches to meet the specific concerns and aspirations of this age group. The young dockworkers who have become shop stewards offer convincing proof that investing in young people is an effective way of renewing and revitalising the trade union movement.

However, it is crucial to recognise that young workers often face precarious employment,

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° 17/01/1985. Morocco.

Member of the Executive Board of the Fédération Nationale des Travailleurs des Rails. Member of the National Bureau of the Union Marocaine du Travail (UMT). Member of the external relations unit of the Union Marocaine du Travail (UMT). Representative of railway workers within the Union Progressiste des Femmes du Maroc (UPFM).

Member of the Executive Board of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF). Chair of the ITF Women's Committee in the Arab World.

instability and a lack of trade union representation. Frank's text raises an essential challenge for trade unions: to fight for stable, full-time jobs for young people. It is a call to action that every trade union should take to heart.

My personal experience as a young trade unionist, a member of the Executive Board of the UMT National Federation of Railway Workers in Morocco, Chair of the Arab World Women's Committee elected in February 2023, Arab Women's Representative on the ITF Executive Board since 2018 and former Chair of the ITF Arab World Youth Committee in 2015, has enabled me to enjoy enriching experiences alongside young workers from different backgrounds, whether Arab or not, who share the same vision and objectives: defending the rights of young workers and encouraging them to become more involved in the trade union movement. I have also been confronted with the realities of today's labour market, and it is clear that trade unions play an essential role in protecting the rights and interests of young workers.

The older generations of the trade union movement need to pay particular attention to the specific issues facing young people. The inclusion of women in traditionally male sectors and the right to a healthy environment, including access to toilets for male and female transport workers, are crucial issues that require particular attention.

I have worked hand in hand with older generations in solidarity campaigns to make the voice of young workers heard around the world. For example, the campaign in support of Palestinian workers is a practical example of this collaboration.

I would also like to salute the inspiring experience of my union, the UMT, which has always considered young workers as an essential force since its creation in 1957. The young people within the UMT have provided an invaluable pool of talent and skills, helping to ensure the continuity of the trade union struggle while remaining true to fundamental values and principles. Some of these young people are now influential leaders occupying key positions in various fields, such as politics, diplomacy, public administration, the arts and intellectual life.

In 2018, I had the immense honour of being elected as the first female representative of the Arab world on the ITF Executive Board, when I was just 31 years old. This achievement gave me both great pride and a deep sense of responsibility. In October 2021, my commitment to workers found a new expression when I was elected to represent their interests as a parliamentary councillor in the 2nd chamber of the Moroccan parliament.

In conclusion, this chapter is an emphatic reminder of the fundamental importance of involving young people in trade unions, and a strong call to action. It is imperative that we do not let this generation of promising activists slip through our fingers. It's a clarion call to persevere, adapt and act, and I feel very proud to have been invited to contribute to this vital conversation.

**THE
WORLD
BELONGS
TO
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12. Union rights under pressure



'The proportion of countries violating the right to strike increased from 63 per cent in 2014 to 90 per cent in 2023.'

TRADE UNION MILITANTS PROSECUTED

TIn many countries, free and independent trade unions are simply banned. Just think of China, where unions are controlled by the regime and where free trade unions don't stand a chance.

Authoritarian regimes often openly persecute trade union militants. Around the world, the right to strike is being questioned, the right to take action is being pushed back, employers are trying to extract repressive legislation from governments to make striking and other actions more difficult.

And that action can go pretty far! In February 2023, Esther Lynch, General Secretary of ETUC, was expelled from Tunisia for addressing a rally organised by the UGTT – the local trade union – to protest against the failing policies of President Kais Saied. A wave of anti-union actions by the authorities followed, as well as the detention of Anis Kaabi, Secretary General of one of the branches of UGTT.

President Saied ordered Lynch's expulsion because of a speech he said indicated blatant interference in the country's internal affairs. In March 2023, the government banned the entry of trade unionists from at least six countries who wanted to come to Tunisia to show solidarity with the ITUC-affiliated UGTT at a weekend rally.

FOR TEN YEARS, ITUC (THE GLOBAL TRADE UNION UMBRELLA ORGANISATION) HAS PUBLISHED A SAD REPORT

While visiting a strike picket at DHL Express in Turkey in March 2018 with MEP Kathleen Van Brempt, I spoke to a militant from our sister trade union Tümtis about his small son. Like many of his comrades, he himself had been in prison for trade union activities.

When he was released and was tucking his little son in at night, he talked to the little boy about what he wanted to be when he grew up. The little boy replied that he wanted to become a superhero to ensure that his daddy would never have to go to jail again for taking care of other people. At such a moment, you know how tough trade unionists worldwide have it.

On 30th June 2023, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) published the 2023 edition of its index of workers' rights around the world. That report is downright worrying. 149 countries are analysed and weighted annually by the ITUC about their respect for workers' rights.

The proportion of countries violating the right to strike increased from 63 per cent in 2014 to 90 per cent in 2023.

By 2023, strikes were severely restricted or even banned in 130 of the 149 countries analysed. In those countries, governments actively suppress collective action. Often in brutal ways. Workers



who went on strike were criminally prosecuted or lost their jobs.

In 44 countries, workers and their union representatives were victims of violence. Along with the deployment of police or security forces, who often use excessive force. The percentage of countries arresting and detaining workers rose from 25 per cent in 2014 to 46 per cent in 2023.

In the same year, trade unionists were murdered in eight countries: Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Swaziland, Guatemala, Peru and Sierra Leone. Ecuador and Tunisia joined the sad list of the 10 worst countries for workers. They join Bangladesh, Belarus, Egypt, Swaziland, Guatemala, Myanmar, the Philippines and Turkey.

But trade union rights are also coming under increasing pressure in democratic states.

In my country, Belgium, the president of my confederation – along with 16 union militants – was convicted of malicious obstruction of traffic. A number of union militants from the socialist trade union ABVV had organised a filter blockade during the general strike in 2015. They and the president of the ABVV were prosecuted and sentenced for this action to suspended prison terms ranging from 15 days to one month, as well as fines.

Sometime before, the president of the ABVV of the Antwerp region was also convicted for the same reason: for organising a strike picket at the port of Antwerp during a strike action.

Not surprisingly, Belgium remains in the category of countries facing regular rights violations in this ITUC index. Belgium is explicitly listed for violations of the right to strike.

*'Trade union rights
are also coming under increasing pressure
in democratic states.'*

But it is not only trade union rights that are under threat. Freedom of the press, so typical of a true democracy, is also in question. The French philosopher Voltaire once said, “Even if I disagree with your opinion, I will always continue to fight for your right to be able to express it.” This is why our modern democracies have provided for free speech and freedom of the press.

When we see how – mainly on the populist right – the press is intimidated, and openly taunted, we know where we stand. Donald Trump does not hesitate to lash out heavily at press people who dare to contradict him during media conferences. Critical journalists who dare to ask critical questions are dismissed by far-right populists as purveyors of fake news.

The atmosphere thus created opens the door for the next step. In places where authoritarian, right-wing regimes are in power, journalists are simply

persecuted. Authoritarian regimes increasingly cracking down on free media are the biggest threats to press freedom in the world, along with disinformation and propaganda.

Today, seven out of ten countries in the world have poor press freedom. So says the annual World Press Freedom Index. That index measures the extent to which journalists are free to report independent news without risk to their own safety. Only three in ten countries score sufficiently well in that area.

In 2022, 86 journalists worldwide were killed simply for doing their jobs!





**When democracy falters,
trade union rights
become threatened.**

LUC TRIANGLE

A

All over the world, we are seeing trade union rights coming under threat.

Why? Because, as trade unions, we represent the largest social movement in the world and are therefore also the principal guardians of democracy. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has 200 million members in 340 organisations and 167 countries (or occupied territories such as Palestine). We defend democracy, human and workers' rights, equality, protection of the most vulnerable, freedom of expression, the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, peace and much more. It's a world within our reach – provided we make the right choices.

However, what we are seeing today, and what Frank describes, is that extremists, fascists, nationalists and populists are using the fear and uncertainty of many working people to push their extremist agenda. Fear and uncertainty arise from unbridled globalisation and the fact that workers see their rights and earned wages systematically attacked by the generalised race to the bottom.

LUC TRIANGLE

°03/10/1961. Belgium.

Belgium. General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Former General Secretary of the IndustriAll European Trade Union and the European Trade Union Federation for Textiles, Clothing and Leather (ETUF-TCL). Launched his trade union career with the Belgian trade union CSC-ACV.

The lines between autocracy and democracy are blurring. When dialogue between authorities and citizens fails, when states flirt with autocracy to pass unpopular laws, when governments mobilise the police and army to suppress legitimate opposition, democracy is put at risk and citizens and workers suffer the consequences. Trade union rights are in retreat because, as trade unions, we have a vision that is diametrically opposed to the populists and extremists. In fact, there is a direct link between the health of democracy and trade union rights.

The ITUC is also able to demonstrate this. Every year, we publish our Worldwide Rights Index. This is an in-depth survey of trade union rights in 149 countries. Since the introduction of the index in 2013, we have seen a systematic regression in the right of workers to organise in trade unions, as well as the right to collective bargaining, the right to strike, the right to register trade unions, the right to freedom of expression and the right to demonstrate, etc. Every year, many trade union activists are attacked in their homes or during demonstrations.

We must reverse this trend. Defending trade union rights is tantamount to defending democracy. Political representatives who claim to be democrats (including in Belgium) are not democrats if, at the

same time, they approve of the legal actions we have seen against trade union activists in Belgium (Liège, Antwerp, etc.).

I'm writing this just after talking to trade union activists from the textile sector in Bangladesh, who were asking for help after two of their colleagues were murdered by hit squads. In Honduras, four trade union activists were killed at the end of June 2023.

Is trade union solidarity necessary at international level? The ITUC index showed that the situation in Europe is deteriorating rapidly, whether in the United Kingdom, France, Turkey, Poland, North Macedonia or Hungary. This is no coincidence: these are the countries where politicians add their "own signature" to the concept of democracy.

As trade unions, we have an absolute duty to support each other. An attack on us anywhere, is an attack on us everywhere, as they say in English. More than ever, we need to join forces. Amazon workers in the union-hostile states of the American South are showing us the way. They are fighting for union recognition, just like the workers at Starbucks, Tesla and many other companies around the world. Their struggle is our struggle too. For trade union rights, for democracy.

**THE
WORLD
BELONGS
TO
US**

**13.
Everyone belongs
to the world and
the world belongs
to everyone!**



D **DOWN AMONG THE SACKS OF SALT IN ABIDJAN**

It is Wednesday 19th July 2023 when I visit the port of Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire with some colleagues.

We stop by a crew of dockers who briefly interrupt their work to talk to us. They're transferring bags of salt and preparing the load for transport. Among the crew of about ten people, not a single worker is wearing safety shoes. Most work in flip-flops. A few just work barefoot.

The bags tear or leak. So the work is done with a low salt level. One of the men talks to us, he is barefoot. His feet look badly battered from the salt attacking them. "Look at me," he says when we ask what are their main complaints and their most pressing needs.

He's working in a torn T-shirt, dirty ripped trousers. He is the only one in the team wearing gloves. Of the type my wife and I use to work in the garden. Absolutely unsuitable for the heavy and dirty work these men do.

Then a long list of complaints follows. Being sick means not working and therefore no income. Health insurance? Non-existent. Safety equipment: not provided. If they want it then they have to provide it themselves. Unfortunately, they don't have the money for safety, as wages are extremely low. Every day is uncertain whether they will have work or not. When there are many ships to be unloaded and loaded, they can work. Sometimes there is no work at all or not enough for everyone.

Then again, there is no income. Subsistence security? Non-existent.

Our team is affected when we say goodbye to the men. But at the same time, it motivates us to support the dockworkers' unions. Because there is still a lot of work to be done to ensure these people are able to earn a dignified living.

As a European union, it is imperative to have an eye for the global picture. That much is clear by now. And that global picture does not look so good. Working together in international trade union structures, looking for common strategies, identifying which multinational companies should and can be targeted first and foremost. Strategy is important.

Just as important is making that strategy come to fruition through bilateral cooperation. I am the sponsor of two projects for which my union has made a practical commitment. One project in Kenya and one in Côte d'Ivoire.

These are projects we invest in as a Belgian trade union, because we believe we have to put our money where our mouth is. Of course, as a Belgian trade union with just over fifty thousand members, you can't perform miracles, let alone financially support all starting trade unions in the global South.

On the other hand, it is too easy to make grand analyses without also taking action. In this sense, the slogan is right: solidarity is not just a word, it is an attitude, a behaviour.

We have therefore set up - in collaboration with the ITF - two projects to support African trade unions from our sectors.

And let's be honest: our partners in Africa do not need paternalistic partners from Europe. Yet they could do with our help. At the same time we can learn quite a lot from them. It is a partnership among equals.

BOUND FOR SOLIDARITY

“If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together.” It was Musa Haku who imparted this African wisdom to me during one of our talks in Kenya. It has always been an inspiring quote for me. It's something we Western Europeans also know, but sometimes forget.

Our adventure in Kenya started in 2015. At the request of the ITF, we started a cooperation project with the Dock Workers Union (DWU) and the truckers' union, the Kenyan Long Distance Truck Drivers Union (KLDTDU).



It was not always smooth sailing, but we are proud of what we achieved together with them. With funding from my union and sponsored by the Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation in Belgium, we have done useful work.

Our comrades in Kenya set up study circles for transport workers, organised empowerment for women union militants, ran membership recruitment campaigns and strengthened social dialogue wherever possible. In doing so, they drew on the expertise that the PANAF programme has been developing in Africa for more than 30 years. This programme is the oldest and largest cooperation programme to do with workforce education in Africa.

A lot of prominent trade union militants started their trade union careers in those study circles. I am very proud of the fact that the confederation of which my union is a member is also one of the partners of the PANAF programme.



*‘As a European union,
it is imperative to have
an eye for the global picture.’*

They were also able to see the advantages and disadvantages of the Belgian approach thanks to a study visit in Belgium. Plus they picked up what they thought they could use in their own union work. We are proud of this project and we firmly believe that it is a useful one. For our partners, but also for ourselves.

After each study visit, I return to Belgium with recharged batteries, with new ideas, with inspiration and, above all, with new motivation and conviction. After all, cooperation is a two-way street.

Romano is one of the unionists we work with in Kenya. He looks like a stocky battering ram. Together with his comrades from the KLDTDU, he is trying to organise the international truckers into a union. This is a very difficult task in his country. Many employers do not want to know about unions and therefore do everything they can to keep union representation out of the workplace.



The union secretariat in Mombasa is located at a transport hub. I had the opportunity to visit that place in early May 2023 and talk to a delegation from the local union. There were 15 of us crammed together in a room of no more than four metres by five. I was allowed to sit on a chair with about five colleagues; the others had to stay standing for our meeting for lack of chairs. There was a second office in the tiny building, where there was a computer. The only luxury in the meeting room was a small TV screen where the union projected educational videos to remind truckers of their rights and obligations. Every time I meet Romano and his comrades I am terribly impressed. Here is trade union pioneering work. Building a truckers' union with virtually no financial resources. You simply have to get on with it.

Our cooperation project in Kenya has since been extended for another period and will continue until 2026.



The aim of this project is for workers to become better organised and so join the union. This is so that they can assert their rights through social consultation and improve working conditions sustainably. This is often very difficult, because many companies would rather see the union go than come, just like with us in Belgium.

Other objectives of this project are to involve more women in union work at all levels and to raise awareness among workers about the risks of HIV. This is often accompanied on the ground by a general narrative about greater safety at work.

Detailed reports keep us regularly updated on progress made.

KLDTDU Mombasa, which organises truckers, currently has 2,000 members who pay their union dues. Recruitment among truckers is difficult given the mobile nature of the profession. For this reason, the union has moved its office to a busy road where there is heavy truck traffic so that it can be easily accessible to their members.

They are currently pushing for defensive driving courses and driver safety in general. Most accidents involving truck drivers happen mainly at night on unlit roads. Also across national borders, truck drivers were often victims of violence. The union is trying to make drivers more aware of dangers on the road and is also working with the unions of neighbouring countries to increase driver safety. Which is why, at border crossings, they now also work with local KLDTDU representatives. Distributing information to drivers, they do so mainly through the aforementioned study circles, which work around concrete work situations to find solutions to problems.

The port workers' union, DWU, currently already has 5,000 members, so they are well on their way to strengthening their autonomy. They also have 120 militants at the port of Mombasa to keep their members informed. They are making real progress in their union operation. So it was with great pride that they announced that they have fully digitised their membership management and that soon their website will go online.

Only internal communication still needs some tweaking. What they are doing and how they are doing it: that information needs to flow even more to their representatives and their members.

The DWU has been having tough times as the government attempts to privatise the port at Mombasa. They are fighting the good fight, keeping in mind that possible privatisation could lead to loss of members and hence loss of income.

But that does not stop them from enthusiastically continuing their programme with the intention of involving even more women and young people in their operation.

STRENGTHENING THE DOCKWORKER AND TRUCKER UNIONS IN ABIDJAN

Once again, at the ITF's request, we are engaged in a project in Côte d'Ivoire. Same approach. Our partners are unions active in the port and trucking industry. The fact that we are dealing with unions here in the French-speaking part of Africa makes them obvious partners. French is one of the main languages in our country too. We are still at the beginning of this collaboration, which runs until 2027. But here again, we are confident and convinced of the usefulness of what we are doing.

The project was actually supposed to start as early as 2020, but was temporarily put on hold as the

*'Solidarity is not just a word,
it is an attitude, a behaviour.'*

situation was quite explosive in Côte d'Ivoire after the elections in October that year. After that, everything was again put on hold due to the Covid pandemic. Meanwhile, a number of necessary changes have been made and the five-year project finally started in 2022.

The focus of the project is on five unions operating at the port of Abidjan.

There are two unions of port workers and three unions of truckers.

The strategic objective of this project is broadly similar to the project in Kenya – i.e. to strengthen the trade union clout of port workers and truck drivers in order to strengthen and promote decent work for workers in both sectors.

The project objectives are clearly defined. Strengthening trade unions in terms of leadership, organising, negotiating and campaigning. Increasing the participation of women and youth in trade union activities and in leadership



structures is also on the agenda. Strengthening and promoting decent work by improving both working and living conditions (through social dialogue to improve trade union rights, job creation and social protection) is, of course, the first priority. Improving cooperation, solidarity and unity between truck drivers and dock workers can only enhance the strength of both groups.

The goal to be achieved at the end of the project is also clear: to have a properly functioning Women's and Youth Committee in place. A completed course of study circles on various topics such as negotiation, leadership qualities, campaigning, membership recruitment, communication and decent work.

THE POWER OF BILATERAL COOPERATION

Our bilateral cooperation with other unions is not limited to Africa.

We recently signed a cooperative agreement with the Korean union KPTU-Trucksol. We also have a common goal in mind: the defence and improvement of truck drivers' wages, conditions and rights, road safety for the travelling public and the sustainability of the road transport sector in our respective countries and worldwide.

The political, economic and social context and industrial relations in which our two unions operate are very different. Yet we also face similar challenges due to deregulation of the

road transport market, concentration of power among companies at the top of road transport supply chains (economic employers) and extensive subcontracting, creating a situation of unfair competition for road transport workers that is dangerous and unsustainable.

In this context, truck drivers in both our countries face competition from drivers with worse working conditions, lower wages, more job insecurity and more pressure to engage in unsafe practices on the road. These pressures threaten the wellbeing of drivers and their families and make the roads dangerous for all.

Both our unions believe the solution to these problems lies in:

- ensuring that economic employers pay a fair and safe price for transport that covers all social costs and that they take responsibility for upholding fair and safe labour standards in their supply chains,
- organising and building solidarity among workers in road transport supply chains.

In other words, safe tariffs and greater accountability of economic employers are the answer to how to create a fair, safe and sustainable road transport sector. The positive experience with South Korea's system of secure tariffs between 2020 and 2022 and the experience with similar systems in other parts of the world confirm that.



This world belongs to everyone with open hearts and a firm commitment to justice.

MOHAMMED DAUDA SAFIYANU & BAYLA SOW



The International Transport Workers' Federation is a global trade union federation known for fighting for both workers' and human rights since its founding in 1896.

As trade unionists, we embrace the idea that “Everyone belongs to this world and the world belongs to everyone” with open hearts and a firm commitment to justice. Our mission goes beyond the workplace; it extends to the broader community and society at large. We recognize that workers' rights are human rights and that our solidarity transcends borders. By championing global solidarity, addressing inequality, and advocating for the well-being of all, we strive to create a world where everyone truly belongs and shares in the world's abundance.

Mohammed Dauda Safiyanu & Bayla Sow

MOHAMMED DAUDA SAFIYANU

°20/12/1969. Nigeria.

Regional Secretary of the International Transport Workers' Federation Africa (ITF Africa).

BAYLA SOW

°10/07/1962. Senegal.

Deputy Regional Secretary of the European Transport Workers' Federation Africa (ITF Africa).



Nor is international solidarity a question of charity. It is simply a question of common sense.

CAROLINE GENNEZ

It's 18th April 2023. I'm here by videoconference with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), based in New York. We are expressing our support for the Global Employment and Social Protection Accelerator for Just Transitions. The aim of this initiative is to obtain various forms of financing in order to put in place social protection for 4 billion people and create 400 million green and decent jobs.

This is an absolute necessity. Around 720 million workers earn less than 2.15 dollars a day. 4.1 billion people cannot count on any form of social protection.

On a global level, we face a choice: either we retreat behind high walls and hope that the problems will resolve themselves, or we recognise the many global challenges and take action. Some argue that we are powerless in the face of all these challenges. Or that trying to find solutions is like throwing money down the drain.

Fortunately, many of us, like the trade unions, still understand that the world doesn't work like that. Events that affect the rest of the world, such as a new virus from a daily market, a latent conflict that escalates, or a forest that disappears,

CAROLINE GENNEZ

° 21/08/1975. Belgium.

Minister for Development Cooperation and Urban Policy. Responsible for international solidarity and humanitarian aid policy and improving life, housing and employment in major cities. Former senator, member of parliament and Flemish member of parliament for the Flemish Socialist Party.

all have a direct impact on our daily lives. Instead of looking in the other direction, we choose to face the world with our eyes wide open and solve problems together.

I believe that one of our priorities is to build on the foundations of a strong welfare state through international solidarity. This is what we are doing in practical terms in our partner countries through healthcare, education and decent work.

Belgian development cooperation aims for inclusive, equitable and sustainable economic growth, giving priority to local entrepreneurship, the social economy and the ILO's decent work agenda.

Quality education for boys and girls is the best way to move a society forward. Knowledge empowers young people around the world and makes them healthier. It also enables them to find better jobs, which benefits not only their families, but their communities in general.

When extremists are in power, the welfare state retreats. Girls' and women's rights are the first to be threatened. And when girls and women are oppressed, society as a whole is impoverished. The Taliban regime of terror in Afghanistan is the most painful example of this.

In the face of these extremes, we need to establish a counterweight. According to the International Trade Union Confederation's (ITUC) World Rights Index 2022, the number of countries restricting freedom of expression and assembly has risen by 41%. The acquisition of political and social rights benefits local populations throughout the world. This is another priority for Belgian development cooperation. We created the Civic Space Fund to support civil society in our partner countries. The aim is to help social organisations or human rights defenders in regions where civil society is oppressed.

Solidarity is not a question of choice in which we must either invest in our own society or help people in precarious situations in the rest of the world. Nor is international solidarity a question of charity. It's simply a question of common sense. By helping people around the world, we are helping ourselves. When we invest in international solidarity, we are investing in our shared future.

THE
WORLD
BELONGS
TO
US



Think globally,
act locally.

MARLEEN TEMMERMAN

A At a time when the global trend is increasingly tending towards “putting your own people first”, when solidarity is a word that is barely ever heard and one that even provokes negative reactions, it is important to pause for a moment.

The section headed “everyone belongs to the world and the world belongs to everyone” touched me in particular, also because I can testify, from my position in the front row, to the importance of international trade union cooperation for workers’ representative organisations in Kenya. Kenya is a magnificent country in East Africa. I first set foot there in 1985 and since then, it has become a bit like my second home. It is a country where the gap between rich and poor is still huge, although it has narrowed, not least because the middle class has grown, thanks to the many efforts made by the government and international cooperation.

MARLEEN TEMMERMAN

°24/03/1953. Belgium.

First Belgian woman professor of gynaecology. Head of the Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics at the University and the Aga Khan Development Network. Executive position within the Aga Khan East African Network for Women’s Health and Research. Former chairwoman of the Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, chairwoman of the sp.a group in the Senate and head of the department for reproductive health and research at the World Health Organisation.

Thanks to better access to education and employment, including for girls and women, many things have improved, but there is still a long way to go, especially in rural areas and poor urban neighbourhoods. Social security is in its infancy. A person who loses their job has no income, because the minimum income that we are familiar with unfortunately does not exist for most Africans. Nor do they benefit from health insurance or pensions, which leaves many people in difficulty, particularly the most vulnerable in society. This plight was underlined during the Covid pandemic: following the lockdowns and worldwide travel ban, tourism, a major source of income for this magnificent country with its immense nature reserves and beaches, collapsed. Many people have lost their jobs, leading to an increase in poverty, with all its consequences, particularly for women and girls.

Inequality remains a major problem throughout the world, not only between poor and rich countries, but also within the same region or country. Some indicators, such as maternal mortality, teenage pregnancies and sexual and gender-based violence, are once again heading in the wrong direction, jeopardising the rights of women and girls in particular. At the UN International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994, almost every country in the world endorsed the concept of “reproductive rights”, or the right of women and girls to decide when and with whom they want to become pregnant and how many children they want. Next year, we’ll be taking stock of the 30 years of struggle that have passed. There have been some successes, but even more setbacks due to religious fanaticism and the conservative and misogynistic forces present in society.

With the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015), we succeeded for the first time in history in reducing maternal mortality by 40% worldwide, but **a woman still dies every two minutes somewhere in the world as a result of pregnancy or childbirth**, mainly in low-income countries, but also in vulnerable sections of the population in the rich countries of the West. At present, we are once again seeing a rise because other priorities are on the agenda and because the women’s rights programme is being neglected or even abandoned in many countries.

No country in the world can solve this problem alone. The only way forward is through a global social struggle for equality, diversity, women’s rights and health for all. Solidarity is all the more important in a globalised world where we are all, rich or poor, confronted with the consequences of climate change, which is mainly caused by rich countries, but which has the greatest impact on the victims in poor countries.

International trade union action is vitally important. Let’s move forward together, ensuring that more women are in senior positions, that there is greater equality and solidarity, and that the world is a better place for all.

To conclude, here is a lovely African proverb: *“It takes two to make a child, and a village to raise a child. Let’s all be part of the global village!”*

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Sources

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NB: if a source is missing or has been inadvertently omitted, please let us know so that we can make the necessary amendments.



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