

Let's go for fair transport globally

FRANK MOREELS

President European Transport Workers' Federation

President Belgian Transport Union

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The world is changing

In recent years, workers all over the world have been confronted with neo liberalism, which is an organised assault on the welfare state. It is a global attack, inspired by extreme capitalism and the corporate greed of the few, on the back of the many. As a result, all our affiliates are facing the same challenges: deregulation, privatisation, a race to the bottom on wages and working conditions, with the low-cost model being imposed throughout all our industries. It is not only the workers who are seeing their rights and welfare dismantled. Neo liberalism also sets out to dismantle trade unions and union rights.

Yet the capitalist organisation of our economy takes us from one crisis to the next. The financial crisis in 2008, which was the worst since the Second World War, had a major impact with banks and financial companies going bankrupt.

Governments had to save the economy by taking over the debts, but without any collectivising.

The covid pandemic also challenged the system by causing lockdown after lockdown, with major consequences for the economy and, above all, for our workers. Transport workers were not able to work from home, but kept and continue to keep the world moving. Health and safety became a major concern for trade unions and needs to remain high on our agenda. Many workers were laid off during the crisis or left the sector, never to return .

This was followed by the Ukraine war crisis, which caused running inflation worldwide, with prices hitting the roof, but without workers' salaries doing the same.

In many countries, labour parties have lost touch with trade unionism. Some of them were seduced by "the third way", promoted by Tony Blair. They failed to question the unfairness of the system fundamentally and only tried to finetune it.

Combined with these fundamental crises affecting the system, neo liberalism demonstrates that the contradiction between workers and capital is not history, whatever some may want us to believe. Let us challenge the TINA fatalism, pretending that here is no alternative to privatisation and deregulation.

ITF (International Transport Workers' Federation) should be at the forefront when it comes to fighting back because there is an alternative: ours!

Colonialism – which previously served to organise the exploitation of half of the globe for the profit of the elite in the rich North - has been replaced by global exploitation. Amongst other things, this globalisation causes destabilisation and uncertainty for the working population in the global north and south. The transformation of the world into a village, together with huge migration due to war, climate change and unfair distribution of wealth across the world, creates intolerant reflexes in the population in the global North and frustration in the global South.

The growing influence of far right politics and populism goes hand in hand with this globalisation. For many years, all over the globe, populism and far right parties have been becoming more and more influential. With their false narratives about protecting their “own populations”, they actually aim to break down workers' rights, stimulate racism and exclusion... Whereas the far right was marginal in the second half of the 20th century, the extreme right wing and fascist parties are now back on the scene.

In many places, the far right has become part of the government or even taken over power. Trump became president and contested the democratic result, after losing the elections after the first term, with his supporters attacking the House of Representatives. In Brazil, Bolsonaroism has been defeated by Lula but is preparing a comeback, while Meloni is the prime minister of Italy and Orban is the prime minister of Hungary...

Some want us to believe that refugees and immigrants are causing the crises facing us in the global North. But we know that no one leaves his or her country just “for fun”.

Refugees flee in order to escape wars, famine and poverty... We not only have to be extremely vigilant and strict when it comes to racism and exclusion.

ITF must also take real steps to stop the influence of the extreme right, by focussing on educating workers and campaigns based on important symbols,

such as wearing the red triangle (the symbol of political and trade union concentration camp prisoners can be used to open up discussions) or pushing for the 8th May (victory day of democracy over Nazism) to be adopted as an official holiday as a campaign objective.

Democracy itself is under pressure all over the world. Authoritarian regimes, autocrats and dictators are in power in more and more countries. Authoritarian leaders in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe are neglecting democracy. The right to organise, the right to opt for industrial action, the right to demonstrate and the right to bargain are in danger. Women's rights are flagrantly attacked in many countries, such as Iran and Afghanistan.

All over the world, human rights are being challenged. Journalists and trade unionists are intimidated and sometimes even imprisoned. The ITUC (International Trade Union Confederation) recently published its “Global Rights Index”, which sheds light on the practices of governments and businesses. 149 countries were monitored and evaluated in terms of whether they respect trade unions rights: 90% of these countries violated the right to strike, while 80% violated the right to collective bargaining and trade unionists were killed in 8 countries! The number of countries where authorities prevented trade union registration increased from 59% of countries in 2019 to 73% of countries in 2023! Workers were exposed to violence in 44 countries in 2023. The number of countries where workers were arrested and detained increased from 25% in 2014 to 46% in 2023.

The right to strike, the right to organise trade union action and freedom of press are human rights! And it is our responsibility to defend these human rights. If “they” touch one of us, “they” attack us all.

More intensive campaigning about imprisoned and persecuted trade unionists should be our priority.

And yes, we have to stand strong against wars between people, against starvation and against world poverty.

The transport industry is changing

Globalisation has reshaped our transport industry and given it a crucial role in the economic process. Without the vital role played by transport in the supply chain, global trade would fall to pieces.

Shipping, air transport, road transport and ports are crucial for global trade, as are logistics, warehousing, etc. This also means that we have power. We could cause the whole network to collapse if we wanted.

If transport unions still want to have an impact, we cannot deal with our "local" companies without looking at the global picture. This picture is made up of economic employers, order givers and other players, which are like spiders in the middle of an immense web. They control entire supply chains, shipping, dock terminals, impacting logistics, warehousing, etc. while organising tough competition and even a race to the bottom.

Trade unions have to organise themselves globally, create their own networks and challenge the economic employers.

Is it unreasonable to ask for due diligence from order givers? Would it be too much to ask big multinational companies to clean up their supply chains and take responsibility for what happens there, even if they outsource their logistics and transport operations? No, it is not!

ITF unions have the necessary leverage to organise logistics. We have strong unions in aviation, ports and other places. We can and must use this strength to organise the entire supply chain. And we can do this better than other global federations.

After the pandemic, we have been faced with shortage of staff in nearly all transport sectors. But it is not really about a staff shortages but a lack of good jobs. This poses a threat to the industry but is also an opportunity for workers and their unions. It gives us the opportunity to negotiate attractive working conditions and good wages. Transport can never be free, but comes at a price, and most certainly if we are aiming for fair transport with fixed rates, fair wages and working conditions.

It is also time to convince the employers within our industry that good working conditions and decent wages are crucial when it comes to finding and retaining motivated workers.

Automation and digitalisation have a major impact on our industry, and not only by automating work processes by means of robotisation and smart systems, such as artificial intelligence.

The platform economy, based on digital processes, is fully revolutionising major parts of our industries, like Uber in the taxi world or Deliveroo in the delivery industry. New players like Amazon are taking a major share of all logistic activities. Trade unions have no choice but to deal with these developments. We have to carry on fighting against the misclassification of workers in these emerging industries. 28 million workers are currently employed in the platform industry in the EU. In 2025, there will be 43 million of them. For this reason, the trade unions must organise the platform workers.

Only fools could deny the existence of global warming and climate change. We all know that the earth is getting warmer with all the (negative) consequences, including extreme heat, forest fires, floods, shortage of drinking water and large-scale famines. And, let's face it, the transport economy is part of the problem. But it is also part of the solution.

Let us start by agreeing that climate problems do not stop at the borders of a country or continent. These problems will therefore have to be tackled on an international scale. And if the transport industry has to take responsibility for tackling the climate crisis, we cannot allow workers to pay the price.

We want the polluters to be called out. But let us also call on transport employers and governments to invest in greening the industry, sustainable innovation and infrastructure, as well as hydrogen motorisation, electrification, etc.

Affordable, efficient and adequate public transport based on sustainable transport methods is a possible solution for cities blocked by traffic jams caused by people having to use private transport when travelling to work. So we not only have to fight for public transport (rail, bus, metro, etc.) for the sake of workers in the sectors that we represent, but also if we want more sustainability.

A strong ITF to tackle the new challenges

Ships sail around the world, trucks do not stop at national borders, planes fly around the globe and decisions about port terminals are made at global level. The transport industry is, by definition, international. For this reason, transport unions have to be international too. This underlines the need for a strong, efficient, structured and relevant ITF.

Governments and high-level leaders, including those in international trade unions, have to adapt to changing circumstances. The ITF also needs fresh, innovative ideas.

“Old-style leadership” is no longer effective or accepted nowadays.

The ITF has to engage actively in anti-racism, gender equality, mutual respect and inclusivity, at all levels within the organisation and most certainly in its leadership.

While the London headquarters are and remain crucial in achieving this aim, the regional branches, which are closely linked to the affiliates, should play a more crucial role in helping the ITF support its affiliates. The regions are the beating heart of the ITF, so more resources both financial and human should be invested in the regional branches. Involving the regional vice-presidents more in the day-to-day management of the ITF could help the regions have a greater impact.

Every project, meeting and statement issued by the ITF should pass the “relevance test”. Whatever we do must be relevant for the affiliates. And the affiliates know best when it comes to their expectations, demands and needs. The bottom-up rather than a top-down approach must be prioritised.

If we could prepare our meetings, agendas and any documents needing to be sent out further in advance of meetings, together with action plans with concrete and measurable objectives, this could help us make the organisation even more efficient.

Cross-sectoral projects need to be encouraged in the organisation. In the maritime sector, we have seen that seamen and dockers working together makes us stronger. This kind of cross-sectoral collaboration will make us stronger. For example, in order to organise the logistics sector even more effectively, we need to develop trade unions that work together beyond individual sector boundaries.

And if we take the maritime sector as an inspiration, what about “inspectorate systems” in other sectors, such as road transport? We do not want to copy/paste, ideas but allow them to inspire us to develop similar strategies in other sectors. After all, we all agree that the inspectorate is a successful system, which guarantees that we have an impact on the maritime sector.

Some say that young people are the future of the unions. I do not agree, as young workers are the present of the unions! A lot of young people are working in our changing industry. So they should have their place in our unions today.

Women represent half of the population, but our industry is definitely not open to female workers. Confronted with violence and harassment on the work floor, sexism and macho mentality and sanitary problems, women do not feel welcome in the transport industry or in our unions. We have to remove the obstacles that keep women away from our sector. And it will take more than just implementing Convention 190 of the ILO to open the door to women.

Inclusivity must be in the centre of our unionism! Minorities should not exist in our unions, as everybody should feel welcome and “at home”. Mutual respect and embracing diversity are a basic principle for international trade unionism.

And yes, we should be proud! Proud that we were able to organise concrete solidarity with the Ukrainian workers who are victims of a war. And proud that we were able to help our colleagues in Turkey and Syria when they were hit by disastrous earthquakes. This kind of direct support, whether financial or with goods, must remain central to our approach. It cannot be an option to have a narrative about solidarity and not be there when our brothers and sisters are suffering.

Together we are strong

The importance of trade union projects cannot be emphasised enough because these projects are based on solidarity. They serve the common purpose of strengthening trade union power all over the world. As mentioned above, we have strong trade unions in all the different sectors. Let us use this strength to work together and strengthen unions that are still gaining power. And, make no mistake about it, the 'established unions' can also learn a great deal from new organisations, from their enthusiasm, dedication and perseverance despite working with limited means.

We trade unionists always have our heads in the clouds. We dream of a better world for the workers that we represent!

But we also have both feet on the ground. We work day by day to achieve that dream. Step by step.

By negotiating when possible.

But by taking action when it is necessary!


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Frank Moreels



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 [linkedin.com/in/frank-moreels-01835a51](https://www.linkedin.com/in/frank-moreels-01835a51)