

Upholding Democracy Conference
31 May 2022

Speech Oliver Roethig

1 Attacks

Democracy, trade unions and collective bargaining is under attack

Is it a surprise that democracy, trade union membership and collective bargaining are all in decline?

Not really, because they are mutually reinforcing.

It is not only happening in Columbia or the Philippines

The attacks are happening here in Europe, in our home countries.

2 Finland

Do you remember 7 years ago the the Finnish government and employers decided to stop negotiating a country-wide collective agreement for pay.

In a country with one of the highest trade union membership in the world.

Yet, the attacks are not only political hurting ordinary workers in their every day life.

They are more direct!

Here in Belgium, but also in Spain, trade unionist were given suspended prison sentences simply because they exercised their right to strike.

In Ireland, unions were threatened with confiscation of their property if they did not renounce a collective agreement for self-employed workers.

And we see this at European level, too.

Some years ago, the European Commission failed in its proposal that air traffic controllers should not have the right to strike.

The reason: the European single market is supreme.

All these are direct, politic attacks on workers rights, on human rights.

On our right to have a say about our jobs and our lives.

3 Italy

The attacks don't stop there.

Last October, we saw a fascist mob ransacking the head office of CGIL in Rome.

I was proud to join our Italian colleagues in a big day of protest for democracy, workers rights and against fascism.

Let's remember fascism in Italy started with an attack on trade unions first.

Mussolini's fascists broke a strike and then marched on Rome starting 25 years of tyranny.

2 years earlier, in 1920, in my own country, trade unions defeated right-wing extremists, by the biggest general strike in Germany ever.

As you all know that worked for a while but did not stop Hitler a decade later.

What does this all tell us about democracy, trade unionism and collective bargaining?

We can't take them for granted,

We need to cherish them

We need take care of them, defend them every day.

4 Democracy

For us as trade unions, to make this happen, our tool is collective bargaining, the topic of our 5th UNI Europa Conference.

Forward through collective bargaining, is our motto and mission.

Let's be clear, it is not only about the workplace!

Democracy at work and democracy in society are the two sides of the same coin.

We have to make sure everybody knows this by heart.

Sectoral collective bargaining is a public good!

It is not only about us as trade unions fighting for it.

Everybody: governments, parliaments, EU institutions, employers, NGOs and society at large need to get behind it.

Let's all go out there - fight for a level playing field in collective bargaining – in our sectors, in each country and in Europe.

And let's counter all attempts of populists to say democracy doesn't work and that they are the real advocates of workers.

No, it is the workers' movement present here today.

It is the trade unions.

We are the collective voice of workers coming together to have a say!

Collective bargaining is the antidote to populism!

Collective bargaining is about working life allowing workers and their families to live in dignity!

5 Conference

Today's conference is about coming together to set out how we can do this as trade unionists united across Europe and beyond.

The 5th UNI Europa Conference adopted a resolution that is the base of our discussion today.

Our topic is about politics and collective bargaining.

Yet, upholding democracy, trade unionism and collective bargaining is as much about stopping racism and discrimination, whether we are talking about migrants and refugees, anti-feminism or the LGBTQI community.

Democracy, trade unionism and collective bargaining are indivisible.

Fascists, populists, racists divide.

We, trade unions, unit.

That is the reason why we fight, why we overcome.

I wish us all a successful and fruitful conference.