



# THE UNI Europa CONFERENCE FOR UPHOLDING AND STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organiser: **UNI Europa**

Date: **31 May 2022**

Location: **Brussels, Belgium / Hybrid (Zoom)**

Participants: **94 individuals from 22 countries participated  
online and in person**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The conference brought together actors of the trade union movement who work on upholding and strengthening democracy. It set out to exchange and identify how UNI Europa and its affiliates could further contribute to strengthening democracy in response to increasing authoritarian tendencies across Europe, xenophobia, populism and attacks on several groups of people, including women, migrants and LGBTQI+ people. Trade unions are key pillars in the facilitation of democracy by strengthening the interests of working people. Collective bargaining is hence an essential vehicle in giving people a voice. However, across Europe, aggressive attacks are being launched to dismantle collective bargaining as well as on trade unions' role in society. These constitute attacks on democracy as a whole.

- There was a positive and constructive exchange between affiliates on their experiences with attacks on democracy in their countries as well as their achievements for the labour movement, especially in promoting diversity and equal opportunities.
- Two key points that emerged were the growing frustration amongst workers over the diminishing returns for their work in the form of shrinking wage share and cuts in welfare, and the need for listening to workers' grievances.
- Also at the European level, Esther Lynch provided an outline of the historical trend towards more far right within the European Parliament and stressed the need for a joint European action.
- In the conference section that added inspiration from of external among others from Lisa Pelling and her research for her book on 'the Swedish dissatisfaction' which gave a clear perspective of the frustrations felt by ordinary people caused by marketisation, liberalisation, and austerity. Danny Scott from Jarrow Insights shared the communications techniques used by the far right as well as ideas on how trade unions can better reach and communicate with their members. Sigrid van Eepoel from Democratic Dialogue shared concrete exercises that can be used by trade unions to approach their members who may be enticed by populist jargon.

The conference started out with a macro-level view addressing political challenges at national and European level, followed by a solution-oriented session by external experts, including a practical session. Lastly, the conference ended with affiliates' good practices in promoting diversity and equal opportunities both at the workplace and within their own structures.

For more information, see article:

<https://www.uni-europa.org/news/upholding-and-strengthening-democracy/>

# CONCLUSIONS OF THE CONFERENCE



## LEARNING:

Training is needed to better observe diversity in the workplace, communicate trade union ideas, and confront the digital far right. Trade unions could further prioritise responsiveness and social media presence. Training in discourse techniques is also needed to deal with “shocking” opinions and avoid scandalising/confronting right-wing populist workers.

## PARTNERSHIPS:

There is an opportunity to form strong coalitions with progressive NGOs, media, local communities, and politicians to organise and campaign together. People’s frustration, anger, powerlessness, and apathy are real. Continuous action is required, and here mobilisation is key; workers acting collectively and building community give themselves power and control.

## POLITICS:

Trade unions must not lose sight of which political parties create real, positive change for working people. Trade unions should support parties that oppose the far right. Furthermore, trade unions must lead by example internally to ensure better balance in representativeness by setting goals and methods to achieve this.

## BALANCE:

We must strike a balance between de-platforming and fighting back against populist, far right, and xenophobic forces, on the one hand, and avoiding ostracising, marginalising, and polarising members who express concerning views, on the other.

*“This is an endless battle, but we have to remember that trade unions have always been and will always be essential to democracy”*

**Peter Hellberg**  
President of UNI Europa

*“Democracy at work and democracy in society are two sides of the same coin”*

**Oliver Roethig**  
Regional Secretary of UNI Europa.

*“As unions, we foster a democratic culture. We defend diversity and participation”*

**Pilar Rato**  
1st Vice President of UNI Europa

*“Opinions are not static – All opinions are formed through some kind of interaction, and dialogue can greatly influence them.”*

**Sigrid van Eepoel**  
Founder of Democratic Dialogue

*Natural leaders are always there. Once they are on board, the job is done. Alone we are like a single stick, we are breakable. Banded together like a bunch of sticks, we are unbreakable. Through collectivism we win!*

**Pilar Rato**  
1st Vice President of UNI Europa

*Inequality dissolves democracy. We must use the political opportunity to revert the changes that drive inequality.*

**José María Martínez**  
General Secretary of CCOO Servicios, Spain

*“Social progress has only been achieved through collective action.”*

**Veerle Verleyen**  
Deputy General Secretary of ACV Puls

*“The labour movement can become a beacon of hope for the general public.”*

**Maria Grazia Gabrielli**,  
General Secretary of FILCAMS CGIL

*“We are building a united strategy to leverage our power to tackle the far right from the workplace to the European Parliament”*

**Esther Lynch**,  
Deputy General Secretary of ETUC

*“It is not enough for us to be benevolent advocates for values that we presume are the right things for them [the workers]”*

**Danny Scott**,  
Director of Jarrow Insights

*We must remain vigilant to the creep of anti-feminist and anti-equality attitudes and consistently put forward arguments that address them.*

**Claude Lambrechts**,  
National Secretary of CNE