



**THE UNI EUROPA CONFERENCE
FOR UPHOLDING AND
STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY
REPORT**

Brussels/Online
31 May 2022



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 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.

INTRODUCTION



Peter Hellberg
President of UNI Europa

Peter Hellberg opened the Conference on Upholding and Strengthening Democracy.

The opening speeches were delivered by Oliver Roethig, Regional Secretary of UNI Europa, and Pilar Rato, 1st Vice President of UNI Europa.

While the intention had been to hold this conference at an earlier time, the Covid-19 pandemic rendered it impossible. The opening remarks emphasised that attacks on democracy, including through trade unions, collective bargaining, take place not only in countries known for their brutal anti-union practices, but all over Europe.

UNI global
union
europa



FORWARD
THROUGH COLLECTIVE
BARGAINING

**UPHOLDING &
STRENGTHENING
DEMOCRACY**



Oliver Roethig
Regional Secretary of UNI Europa

Oliver Roethig provided a notable example from Finland: Seven years ago, the Finnish government and employers decided to stop negotiating a country-wide collective agreement for pay. So, even in a country with one of the highest trade union membership levels in the world, attacks on workers' rights are a real threat. In addition, trade union members in Belgium and Spain have been sentenced to prison for striking; in Ireland, we see state prosecutions against trade unions solely because they managed to organise collective bargaining for self-employed workers. The repression is severe, with measures such as asset confiscation. In Italy, fascist mobs targeted the workers by ransacking the CGIL union headquarters in Rome. These examples clearly represent a direct violation of democratic rights, workers' rights and human rights.

The overall conclusion is that democracy, trade unions, collective bargaining, and other liberties and freedoms won by the labour movement cannot be taken for granted and must be actively defended. Furthermore, trade unions can and should take action to send a clear message to the public that democracy is not limited to voting once every four or five years in a national election.

Better understanding of collective bargaining is required – sectoral collective bargaining serves the public interest. It is not just about unions fighting for it:

“DEMOCRACY AT WORK AND DEMOCRACY IN SOCIETY ARE TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN” – OLIVER ROETHIG, REGIONAL SECRETARY OF UNI EUROPA.

Collective bargaining is essential as a healthy foundation for all countries, which should be supported in society in its entirety, including all its official institutions and civil organisations. Not only in terms of job and income security, but also as an antidote to populism that has recently emerged and is gaining traction globally.

Maintaining democracy, trade unionism, and collective bargaining should be interpreted as combating racism and discrimination, whether directed at migrants and refugees, the LGBTQI+ community or in the form of anti-feminism.



Pilar Rato

1st Vice President of UNI Europa

Pilar Rato began her speech by stating that trade unions need to send a message of solidarity, explaining that UNI Europa and the labour movement in general must express solidarity with all Ukrainian citizens, workers, and trade unions. Pursuing peace and democracy is a fundamental value of the labour movement, as well as a necessary condition for ensuring security, social justice, and human and labour rights.

The recent political framework in Europe leads to a troubling conclusion: movements, parties, or groups of the extreme right have been spreading populist ideas throughout Europe. Their leaders utter speeches full of hatred and enormous aggression, promising solutions to problems without providing arguments, appealing to a rancid, intolerant nationalism that threatens democratic co-existence and has no future.

Immigration, LGTBIQ+ rights, feminism, gender violence, and diversity as a value have all broadened the extreme right's objectives, so it is not surprising that they have targeted the labour movement. The attack on CGIL in Rome served as a catalyst for raising awareness and mobilising the European trade union movement. Pilar also stated that the right-wing wants to weaken the workforce's position through labour-rights cuts.

“AS UNIONS, WE FOSTER A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE. WE DEFEND DIVERSITY AND PARTICIPATION” — PILAR RATO, 1ST VICE PRESIDENT OF UNI EUROPA

The trade union movement has an important responsibility to uphold its traditions. These include opposing fascism. Trade unionism is above all internationalist, it is not limited by borders or flags in the fight for working men and women's rights. Trade unionism is fearless.

Trade unions must continue to strengthen democracy by encouraging and promoting a democratic culture and an inclusive society, in order to counter the extreme right's narrative, which only feeds the tension and fear. Trade unions must promote democratic culture, the history of the labour movement, and its values.

SESSION 1:

HOW CAN TRADE UNIONS TACKLE AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE FAR RIGHT AT THE POLITICAL LEVEL

This session looked at how the attacks on workers' rights by authoritarianism and extreme far right forces have impacted workers and the trade unions as their representatives. The session also addressed how trade unions can counter this and continue to improve the work of the EU as a community for peace, democracy and fundamental human and labour rights in the interest of services workers.

Jolien Dohet

Political Secretary
of SETCa Liège-Huy Waremme (Belgium)

The situation in the north, the Flemish part of Belgium, is more dangerous and complicated due to the popularity of right-wing populist forces. There is a far right party that promotes Flemish nationalism in mainstream political discourse.

SETCa-FGTB are undertaking actions in response to this situation. They have had fruitful collaborations with NGOs, mobilising the membership to attend anti-fascist events. They have also made internal structural changes to make it clear that anyone who aligns themselves with far right organisations, such as becoming their candidates for elections, will be expelled from the union.

Training and educational activities in raising awareness of the problem and developing sensitivity among members of the SETCa-FGBT and other organisations is crucial. This type of education helps members understand not only the political substance of those dangerous ideas, but also certain deceptions, such as the use of neutral-sounding words or phrases to disguise fascistic ideas.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1.** Present the initiatives in an interesting manner, for example: the anti-fascist red triangle of action or something similar.
- 2.** Educate politically at all levels within the labour movement.
- 3.** Mobilise and fight for real improvement of the socio-economic conditions which will be felt by the working people, for example raise wages.

Maria Grazia Gabrielli

General Secretary of FILCAMS CGIL (Italy)

The fascist attack on CGIL's headquarters in Rome on 09 October 2021 may be symbolic, but it is far from being the only political violence that the Labour movement and CGIL have faced in recent years. This aggression on CGIL and on the right of association is one of a long series of continuous incursions against our trade union sites across the country. There is a clear political clash here, namely that unions are the fundamental enemy of the right-wing fascist forces.

Trade unions should engage with the political forces out there and especially with the left in its various facets. It has had a hard time representing the issues of the labour world.

The only correct response on the part of the labour movement should be to build active resistance that includes and mobilises first and foremost young workers who should also be educated in the spirit of respect, diversity, and solidarity in answer to the question of what we could give to young people to help them face today's difficulties is memory, we need to make sure that the new generation know what happened, what preceded them. The scope of action should not be limited to what the unions will do and how they will organise the resistance but should be extrapolated as an offer to the entire society. Such a project would have to revolve around the labour movement, as well as the postulate of collective bargaining and the principle of inclusion. She stated that implementing this aspirational approach is the only way to overcome austerity and address the growing economic inequalities that cause rage and frustration in society. This fuels nationalists and fascists.

We have to do this in and outside workplaces. We must build a project based on change, hinged on work emancipation built around freedom and social justice. A project that is centred on labour, with a clear political message and that unions should support and strengthen the Left.

We are firmly convinced that we have to take grounds off the far right, and this is a cultural fight. Also, we have to be able to offer alternatives. We need to put jobs at the centre of our projects and values. This is the only way to regain the trust of those who are now enticed by the far right. We must carry solutions that carry everyone beyond the grasp of precariousness.

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

David Mum

Member of the Federal Executive Board
of GPA (Austria)

The rise of the populist right-wing has been occurring in Austria since the 1990s, and now the far right occupies roughly 20% of the political arena in this country. The populist policies are clear, and they are clearly anti-union. In addition, many centrist parties have shifted to the right in recent years. This resulted in a number of attacks on the labour movement, such as a major cut in the Arbeiterkammer system and there have been issues with collective bargaining and workers' councils. There are clearly fewer works councils, and youth councils have vanished. Aside from that, the role of unions in social security architecture was weakened, and the maximum working time was increased, despite the GPA mobilising over 120,000 people in opposition.

The discussions touched upon the 'cordon sanitaire' (no platforming/ deplatforming) strategy which was questioned, especially from the point of view of its effectiveness because many right-wing parties that were (and still are) considered moderately right-wing are now frivolously borrowing from the platforms of the far- right and programmatic documents. To which the role of the media was raised as being crucial to its success. Also, the challenge was addressed; that fight against fascism and right-wing authoritarianism cannot be truly successful unless general material and economic conditions improve. Different pathways of progress were mentioned for instance, widespread mobilisation is the only way forward, and she described how CGIL collaborated with various progressive organisations and civil society to protest far right violence. Also, deplatforming the far right and refusing to recognise them as a legitimate political force, as well as refusing to engage with them in any way was mentioned as a force.

“Defending free speech and encouraging unions to be more active on social media is important.”

SESSION 2:

FIGHTING AGAINST THE FAR RIGHT AT THE EU LEVEL

This session addressed the pan-European approach of the European Trade Union Confederation alongside its affiliates of national confederations. Esther Lynch, Deputy General Secretary of the ETUC, presented the joint European trade union fight directed at the European political leadership.

Esther Lynch

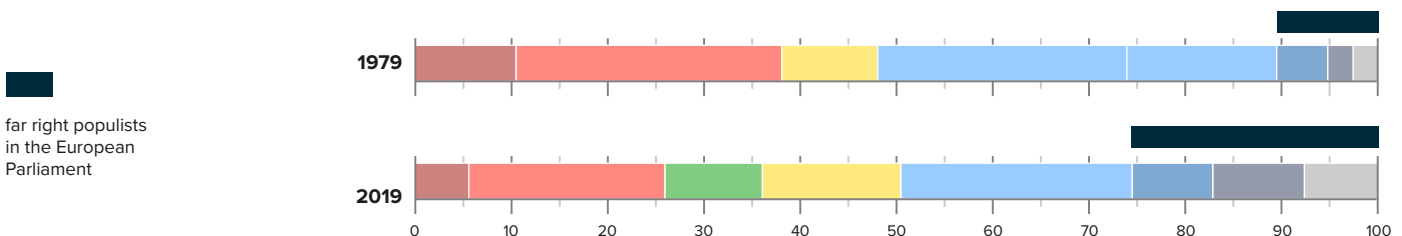
Deputy General Secretary of ETUC

Fighting the far right is a long-standing tradition of the labour movement and unions must adhere to this tradition and mobilise now. In the “ETUC Roadmap – Building the Trade Union response to the rise of the far right”, several key strategic points are made, including increasing unions’ industrial power to combat the far right in the workplace and rebuilding unions’ capacity for political education. As a result of this deficit, significant numbers of workers are politically and ideologically confused, falling for the deceptive far right messages.

There is precedent for unions and employers cooperating on issues relating to battling hatred and its political manifestation in the form of extreme right-wing organisations. It makes sense to form such coalitions.

Even on a macro scale, the far right’s political and institutional presence is becoming increasingly dangerous. One look at the European Parliament’s contemporary ‘political architecture’ leaves one speechless. Esther outlined how roughly one-third of MEPs are directly or indirectly linked to the far right. And, when viewed graphically, it is easy to see how the Left has shrunk while the far right has grown over the years.

Figure 1: The rise in the parties holding far right and populists in the European Parliament can strongly be seen between 1979 and 2019



Esther Lynch

Deputy General Secretary of ETUC

Debating Europe's and the European Union's future is necessary. If Europe is to have a future, social issues and social solidarity must be part of its fundamentals. Trade unions should also ensure that the fight against fascism is recognised as a fundamental right of the EU, putting pressure on the EU's institutions to support such struggles, which are also carried out by trade unions.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1.** Unions could do a great job preparing for the European Parliament elections in 2024 and help out confronting the forces who stand against democracy and could also strengthen the legitimacy of those elections. Such interventions would be most effective in the beginning of the campaigns, when manifestos are drafted.
- 2.** Unions could have a cross-European campaign which would focus mainly on the question of confronting the far right.
- 3.** Unions should press for a broad discussion on the future of Europe where certain basic political values like democracy would be upheld and also matters like social progress would be included.

SESSION 3:

HOW CAN TRADE UNIONS ADDRESS MEMBERS WHO ARE ENTICED BY POPULIST OR HURTFUL SPEECH AND RHETORIC

This session looked at the increase in racism and xenophobia and “the anti-establishment” at the individual level in order to help better approach our members in a constructive way to build and maintain an active all-encompassing and tolerant work culture. Speakers shared approaches, tools and best practices on how to approach sometimes difficult and uncomfortable topics.

Lisa Pelling

Head of Arena Idé Think Tank
and co-author of the book
“The Swedish dissatisfaction” (Sweden)

Fascists’ actions are all about dividing people, trade unions do the opposite — uniting people for great causes on the basis of solidarity. Social discontent is growing and taking on new forms. This discontent is actively exploited by Sweden’s right-wing, which has been on the rise for many years. Their solution was to conduct a traditional door-to-door campaign, with campaigners directly engaging with people in areas where discontent was particularly strong. The information gathered by the campaigners boils down to dissatisfaction with the dissolution of the Swedish welfare state, cuts in public services, and marketisation of public general interest services like schools for example or the health-care sector). Post offices, banks, schools, parks, and cultural facilities have been closed, and institutions such as employment services and social authorities are no longer present in many places. In such circumstances, frustration grows naturally. The issue is that the right-wing translates those emotions into themes that are useful to them, such as anti-immigrant resentment. The xenophobic narratives suddenly gained strength and effectiveness.

Traditional left-wing politics are insufficient. The damage has been done, and the far right’s narratives are becoming increasingly popular. It is not enough to have a leftist government. A comprehensive media strategy is needed to counter these narratives and advance labour’s ideas.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1.** Below the surface, inequality and precariousness has increased: take people’s concerns seriously.
- 2.** Challenge the xenophobic narrative.
- 3.** Construct a new, progressive narrative. It starts by listening.

Danny Scott

Director of Jarrow Insights (UK)

Dismissing populism entirely is pointless because populist tactics can, whether we like it or not, be inspiring and mobilising. The problem arises when the right-wing exploits the anti-establishment instincts of the workers to carry out policies that are contrary to the interests of the working class.

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

“True democracy emerges from the bottom up rather than the top down. So, if we’re going to uphold and strengthen democracy, it’s our responsibility as leaders in various sections of the labour movement to serve grassroots members, not dictate to them,” he also added.

The counter narratives are effective when they are based on an understanding of why right-wing talking points are appealing to workers, and they must address the issues that workers care about. There are methods for identifying concrete and specific problems, such as observing the online discourse that workers are engaging in and defining specific problems and topics to be discussed. At all costs, moralising should be avoided.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1.** Trade unions need to listen to what workers are really saying.
- 2.** Trade unions need to implement real political education from grassroots all the way to leadership.

Sigrid van Eepoel

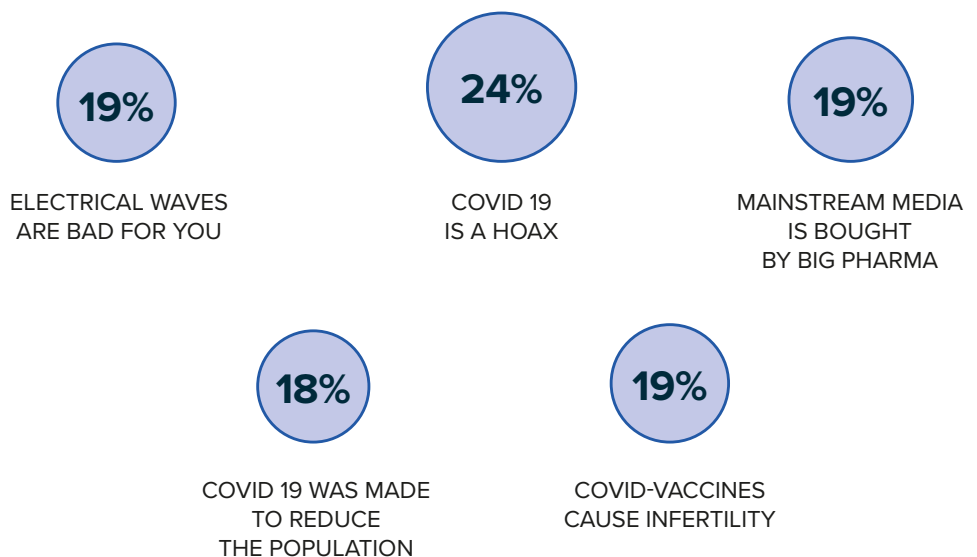
Founder of Democratic Dialogue (Belgium)

We need to address trade union members who are enticed by populist or hurtful speech or rhetoric. Trade unionists must learn how to deal with colleagues who have sided with the right-wing, as well as how to persuade them while avoiding scandalising the situation or simply dropping the conversation. Danny Scott's points were reiterated; that discussions with such colleagues should begin not with moralising, but with attempting to identify the concrete and specific issue that they find the right-wing to be addressing in an appealing manner. Dialogue is important because opinions are formed on an individual and social level.

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

The participants took part in Mentimeter polls, which explored the likelihood of encountering a person with arguably controversial opinions (cf. figure 2). Furthermore, the poll also illuminated the need for tools to enable constructive dialogue as opposed to adding to the marginalisation (cf. figure 3).

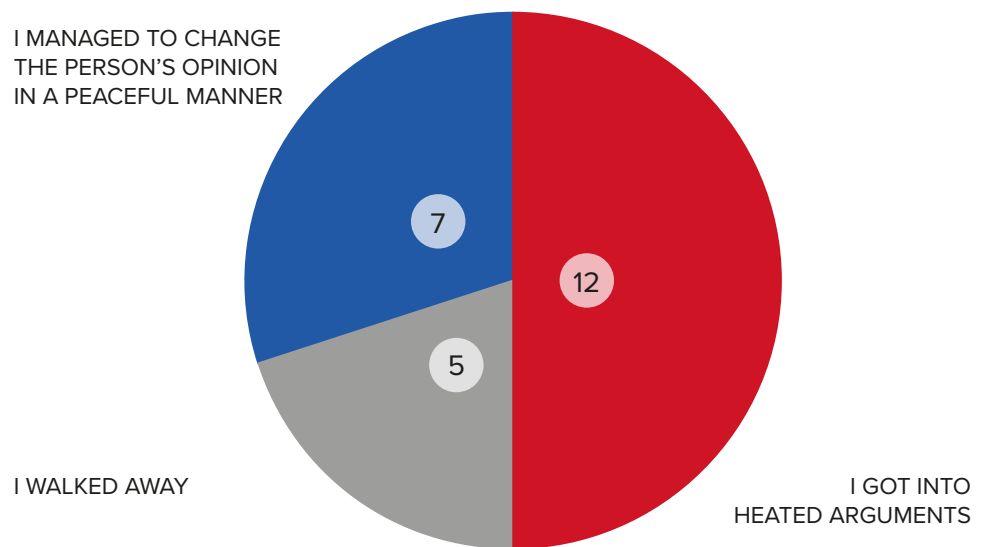
Figure 2: Participants' poll results to the question: Do you know someone who has said this?



Sigrid van Eepoel

Founder of Democratic Dialogue (Belgium)

Figure 3: Participants' poll results to the question: And how did you react to those statements you disagree with?



In order to address hate speech and other forms of pathological right-wing discourse, trade unions must strive to be the walking examples of what Sigrid van Eepoel called “healthy dialogue,” which includes attempting to analyse processes and phenomena that concern the member who have succumbed to right-wing propaganda alongside them. Where discriminatory arguments are made, they can be countered by referring to human rights. Populist discourses require counter-narratives.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Asking open questions to uncover the interlocutor's conviction,
2. Arguing ideas contrary to those of your interlocutor by emphasising that it is 'you' who thinks or observes something while focusing on human rights,
3. Temporising (things take time), and
4. Creating a new notion of 'we' where you and the interlocutor could speak and feel safe together, also safe from society's overwhelming polarisation.

SESSION 4:

HOW CAN TRADE UNIONS ENCOURAGE DIVERSITY AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AT THE WORKPLACE AND WITHIN THEMSELVES

The best workplace democracy is where it reflects its workers, this also means that our trade union representativeness within the company and within the trade union structures themselves should be better at representing different sexes, ages, races, ethnicities, nationalities, disabilities, sexual orientations, gender identities/expressions, religions, and political opinions. This session touched upon practical tools that can help our affiliates to build upon their approaches in encouraging the diversity and equal opportunities of their own organisations alongside approaching workplaces in a targeted way.

Mick Coppin

Regional Organiser of GMB (UK)

The GMB story is a story of how organising can beat “Fire and Rehire”. It was about organising in the context of industrial disputes. The examples also encouraged diversity and equal opportunities at work and within themselves.

The case revolved around a laundry and cleaning services facility that worked for the national health system (NHS) and employed migrant workers, the majority of whom were of Indian and Pakistani descent. Many were about to be fired and rehired under much worse conditions. Using the five suggestions listed below, the GMB union transformed this workplace into a model of equality through well-organised and successful worker struggles.

The campaign faced great difficulties in communications, not only did a large part of the workers not speak English, but there were also religious and cultures divides between the workers. In addition, Covid-19 lock down had also created great complexities for reaching people. By recruiting members and offering the help and guidance of trade union organisers, they recruited themselves for their own goals. The language and cultural barriers were successfully overcome. Consequently, the involvement of workers with the understanding for the linguistic and cultural setting turned suspicion and skepticism into trust and engagement.

Mick Coppin

Regional Organiser of GMB (UK)

“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, we are unbreakable. Through collectivism we win!”

Despite the campaign’s challenges, including cultural, linguistic, organisational, and other problems caused by the pandemic, it was successful and involved an array of partners such as representatives from local communities, politicians, and the media. GMB recruited approximately 90% of the workforce at this laundry and identified natural leaders within this diverse and multicultural community. Eventually, the employer’s reputation, as well as their contracts with the NHS, were jeopardised. UNI Europa and Ben Egan, Director of Organising, were thanked greatly for assistance in organising international assistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To ask yourself:

- 1.** Define what is the problem, and is it solvable?
- 2.** Find out if there is going to be a campaign?
- 3.** See if it is possible for unions to organise and recruit on this basis?
- 4.** Specify the platforms for communication?
- 5.** Do planning and mapping.

Claude Lambrecht

National Secretary of CNE (Belgium)

Emphasis must be made on the importance of gender issues in industries where women outnumber men. Parity during elections and including such mechanisms in trade union statutes is crucial. Cyclical discussions on all forms of workplace and societal discrimination should be encouraged. Trade union participation in campaigns such as those in support of abortion rights, as well as for increased collaboration between trade unions and NGOs and participation in their campaigns, e.g., strike on the 8th of March, campaigns like Companies Without Racism, etc.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1.** Statutory quotas and parity within trade unions structures,
- 2.** Invest in anti-discrimination training,
- 3.** Expel members of unions who hold far right views,
- 4.** Form coalitions with progressive partners, including civil society,
- 5.** Include gender equality and non-discrimination in the union project and in the statutes,
- 6.** Practicing systematic gender analysis,
- 7.** Develop a practice of continuing education/training and communicate on these issues,
- 8.** Carry out actions as a trade union, and also work together with other associations in coalitions.

Veerle Verleyen

Deputy Secretary General
of ACV Puls (Belgium)

The rise of the far right is extremely worrying. Verleyen explained that if the far right, Vlaams Belang, wins in Belgium in the 2024 elections we can expect the dismantling of social laws, of the social security and workers' rights, alongside systematic attacks against the trade unions. Not just the far right, but also traditional political parties are going in this direction. For instance, following the 2019 elections, many of the measures included in the anti-social and anti-union Flemish government declaration were also originally included in the 70 points of the far right. The core of our trade union work is to unite and organise workers which is at the opposite end of their 'divide to reign' strategy. The CGIL attacks have prompted us all to reflect on our past of collaboration but also of resistance. In Flanders, we give too much of a platform to the far right.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1.** A lifelong/continuous internal training of political education for activists and staff that links trade union demands to broader demands
- 2.** Extensive public awareness campaign, for instance 'Dare To React' ("osez réagir" / "durf te reageren").
- 3.** Networking and collaboration across different struggle movements
- 4.** Practice what you preach: we want to be more inclusive as a workplace
- 5.** Political work and media cordon sanitaire/deplatformisation
- 6.** Trade union struggle and social consultation
- 7.** European and global trade union collaboration, e.g. as evidenced by the ETUC Roadmap to combat the far right and the UNI recommendations.

Pilar Rato

1st Vice President of UNI Europa

Trade unions should think more about this topic by addressing the predicament of the LGBTQI+ community and posed the question of what action the trade unions are taking in response to it. Today, there are still statistics that show the reality in the work environment; many of the respondents point out that they hide their sexual orientation or gender identity in the workplace. Collective bargaining is an essential tool to include rights not yet achieved. Let us aim to achieve an inclusive work environment that allows LGTBIQI+ people to express themselves as they are and feel, without fear of suffering situations of discrimination or harassment in the workplace. Pilar underlined that it is essential to provide workers with training, to cultivate language habits that are inclusive and respectful, and to raise awareness among workers about the importance of diversity.

During the course of the conversation, the topic of confronting the far right was brought up. While some pointed out that the far right has powerful allies like the Catholic church, others mentioned how various structures within different organisations are working to confront the far right discourse.

Pilar specifically stated that gay couples are only permitted to adopt children in a few European Union countries and that marriage equality is not recognised in all countries. She posed the question of what the trade unions are doing in the remaining countries to address this issue. According to her observations, while trade unions in some countries do participate actively in various campaigns of LGBTQI+ and are aware that respect for diversity must be present in working conditions including positive actions and clauses in collective bargaining that facilitate the life and personal and professional development of people of the LGBTQI+ collective without renouncing their identity. In other countries, trade unions are more passive in this regard. Nevertheless, these issues are among the main priorities of the labour movement, and it should be addressed in a manner that is consistent across the board.

Above all else, there is a pressing need to train and sensitise union leaders, so that they know the reality of the LGBTQI+ collective and can respond to their demands and prevent and identify discriminatory or offensive attitudes. This training should reach this training reaches all the grassroots members of their organisations, educating everyone in the values of tolerance and respect for diversity enriches us. If we want to be a reference and attract more people, these steps are absolutely necessary.

“Of course you have to educate and train people, but always taking into account diversity.”

SESSION 5:

A POSITIVE STORY — THE SPANISH LABOUR REFORM

This last session ended on a positive note on how the Spanish affiliates fought a successful battle to repeal the central aspects of the 2012 labour reform introduced by the Spanish populist party that caused immense devaluation of labour rights and of wages. José María Martínez, General Secretary of CC.OO, Federación de Servicios de Comisiones Obreras, Spain, shared his view of the pathways to change and how the ordinary working person is now better placed.

José María Martínez

Secretary General, CC.OO Servicios (Spain)

The Spanish context reflects crisis and so-called anti-crisis measures. Several labour reforms have been pushed over the last years, the goal of which was to reduce costs and make it easier to fire employees. Furthermore, company-level agreements could now regulate working hours in a much more unfavourable manner from the perspective of the workers, e.g. adding more working hours. Wages have been stagnant for a long time and the minimum wage has effectively been frozen for years. State repression is severe, and many labour activists and trade union leaders have been imprisoned in Spain due to very specific interpretations of the penal code.

Things began to change slightly after a leftist government was installed in Spain and social dialogue was reinstated. As a result, more than 14 agreements on how to deal with the Covid-19 crisis were reached: Layoffs were partially prohibited, and programmes were launched to prevent company bankruptcies. A new labour reform was implemented, which eliminated the most harmful effects of the actions of the past reforms. This resulted in greater equality and egalitarianism, which is critical for maintaining democracy because “equality is the soul of democracy.”

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

CONCLUSION

Peter Hellberg
President of UNI Europa

This Conference on Upholding and Strengthening Democracy has demonstrated the significance of trade unions in the preservation of democracy in our societies and the combating of far right tendencies. It has also demonstrated that leaders of trade unions should not forget that the threat of fascism is looming in Europe and cannot be ignored.

It is essential that the importance of trade unions defending their positions and preventing the far right from stealing and misrepresenting them as their own is not forgotten. In addition to that, he went over the issues that were brought up during the conference and provided a summary of possible solutions, focusing on the following factors:

- To listen, even to shocking opinions, and ask questions,
- To keep developing new strategies in response to the growing far right populism,
- To fight for equality on all fronts,
- To step up political education,
- And not to be distanced from our *raison d'être* or be dismayed.

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

Additionally, the President of UNI Europa echoed several of the points that were made by the previous speakers. In particular, he made a reference to the intervention that had been made by Pilar Rato, the 1st Vice President of UNI Europa, in which she discussed the “ghost of fascism” and how it should never be ignored or underestimated. He also emphasised the problem of the normalisation of far right tendencies, as the extremist agenda appears to be increasingly welcome on the platforms of parties that are considered to be moderately right-wing. He said this in light of the fact that the far right agenda appears to be increasingly accepted. He also criticised the ‘populists’ and their deceptive tactics and pointed out that unions should seek partnerships in their fight against the far right.

Peter Hellberg

President of UNI Europa

“The populists are deceiving you when they say they speak for the masses; they only speak for themselves and pretend they speak for the masses.”

In addition, the President of UNI Europa elaborated that one of the deceitful strategies employed by those on the far right is that they “kidnap our opinions” and positions and then present them as their own, doing so in order to make an appeal to the working people and garner their support, which is sometimes successful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The conference reached the following recommendations:

1. Forward through Collective Bargaining:

The voice of the workers must always be heard. That is the *raison d'être* of the European trade union movement. We must strive to combat fascism by intensifying the industrial struggle, particularly those aspects that promote greater equality, such as collective bargaining. The work and responsibility of trade unions to give a voice to everyone through collective bargaining is pivotal and must never be forgotten. Collective bargaining is democracy at work and democracy at work is democracy in society – they are two sides of the same coin.

2. Listening:

Union officials must be extra open to hearing members' problems and begin engaging in dialogue without immediately shutting out workers who may express right-wing talking points. The goal must always be to understand the issues that workers who are falling prey to right-wing populism are facing and be able to address them by relentlessly demonstrating that trade unions have better solutions to offer than right-wing populists.

3. Learning:

It is necessary to increase training not only on how to better observe diversity in the workplace, but also on how to better communicate trade union ideas and confront the dominant far right's influence in the digital sphere. As part of this, trade unions could prioritise their reactivity and social media presence. Training in discourse techniques is also required to deal with "shocking" opinions and avoiding scandalising or confronting workers who have been influenced by right-wing populist propaganda.

4. Partnerships:

there is an opportunity to form strong coalitions with progressive NGOs, media, local communities. The populists are deceiving you when they say they speak for the masses; they only speak for themselves and pretend they speak for the masses. Politicians organise and campaign together in bringing across a stronger message of progressiveness and presence in people's lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Mobilisation:

The frustration, anger, powerlessness or apathy experienced by people is a very real feeling. This is what is driving workers away from the left and progressive solutions, this is what creates an opening for xenophobia, discrimination, anti-feminism, far right and fascism, despite this not offering any solution. This is why continuous action is required. Mobilisation is key, workers acting collectively and building community gives agency to workers to build power and take control.

6. Politics:

Trade unions must not lose sight of which political parties create real, impactful, and positive change for working people. It must be avoided that trade unionists entering politics go into political parties that adhere to populist and xenophobic rhetoric. Trade unions should support the parties that confront the far right on a political level.

7. Internally:

It is necessary to lead by example not least in order to ensure better equality and balance of representativeness. We must all set goals and methods to achieve this.

8. Balance:

We must take measures to ensure the right balance between de-platforming and fighting back when reacting to populist, far right and xenophobic forces on the one hand while avoiding ostracising, marginalising, and polarising the members who express concerning views.



Organiser: UNI Europa

Date: 31 May 2022

Location: Brussels, Belgium / Hybrid (Zoom)

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