Trade Unions in Transition

What Future for Trade Unions?

ILO Bureau for Workers’ Activities – ACTRAV
Rafael Peels, November 2020
Interview with Prof. Jelle Visser
Covid-19 crisis … … and the world of work

All workers worldwide are impacted by the Covid-19 crisis

• Loss in working-hours: 500 million full-time equivalent jobs …
• Global decline of 10.7% in labour income …

Exposing existing inequalities

• Frontline workers, workers in the informal economy…

Advancing social justice, promoting decent work
ILO and the Covid-19 crisis …

ILO Covid-19 policy guidance is structured around four pillars …

- Stimulating the economy and employment
- Supporting enterprises, jobs and income
- Protecting workers in the workplace
- Relying on social dialogue for solutions
Trade unions and the Covid-19 crisis …

• How does Covid-19 affect TUs’ capacities to be partners in the answer to COVID-19?
  • Rising unemployment
  • Sectors, employment relationship, wages, etc. under pressure

• TUs’ capacities to be the voice of all workers …
  • What about union membership and dues?

• People relying on trade unions for labour and social protection …
Message 1: Economic and societal changes affect the future of trade unions

Message 2: Trade union membership in the world is in decline

Message 3: Four scenarios to respond to these challenges

Message 4: Successful experiences of trade union revitalization

Message 5: It is time to act!
Economic and societal changes affect the future of trade unions …

- shift from manufacturing towards services …
- informalisation of the economy …
- just transition towards a green economy …
- gaps in labour legislation and application …
- technological change …

… determine the capacity of trade unions to organize and service workers
Trade union environment …

… affects trade union membership
Overall trend …

… trade union density is going down

Union density rates 2000-2016/17

- 2000
- 2008
- 2016/17

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Africa …

AFRICA
Trade Union Density

% of employees

2000 2008 2016

AFRICA
Southern Africa
West Africa
East Africa
North Africa
Asia …
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AMERICAS …

AMERICA
Trade Union Density

% of employees

2000 2008 2016

North America
Central America and Caribbean
South America

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Changing employment relationship …
… a threat to workers and workers’ organizations

Union density rates 2016/17
- employees
- total employment

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Four scenarios for the Future of Trade Unions …

• **Marginalization** - decreasing rates of unionization and aging unions

• **Dualization** - defending current positions and servicing members closest to them

• **Replacement** - a process of replacing trade unions by others

• **Revitalization** - innovating tactics and coalitions to strengthen trade unions as strong, relevant, democratic and representative actors
Successful experiences of trade union revitalization …

Trade unions organizing and servicing …

• … informal economy workers
• … gig workers
• … young workers
Successful experiences of trade union revitalization …

- Trade union cooperation …
- Internal governance …
- Inclusive and effective social dialogue …
It’s time to act …

ACTRAV supports trade unions …

• engaging in debate and transformative action on the future of trade unions
• collecting examples, drawing lessons
• disseminating, scaling up and replicating good practices

Even more urgent

in times of COVID-19