

Towards a renewed social contract: Advancing social justice and a Human- centred agenda beyond 2030

Executive summary



Introduction

Geopolitical turmoil, digitalization and new technologies, high inflation, and natural disasters resulting from climate change are collectively amplifying existing inequalities and inadequacies in achieving decent work and social justice within and between countries. Inequalities and poverty are on the rise. Gender disparities persist. According to the ILO estimates, billions of people around the world continue to face challenges brought about by high rates of informality, worsening levels of child labour and forced labour, inadequate social protection, and violations of labour rights. These realities have exposed the fragility of prevailing economic and social models.

At the same time, multilateralism is confronted with a critical juncture. The risk of a fragmented multilateral response is becoming increasingly apparent. However, the crises have exposed the intricate interlinkages and dependencies of economies and societies around the world, underscoring the imperative for concerted actions at all levels. It is evident that there are considerable challenges and opportunities that pertain to all facets of society, and to a greater extent for the world of work. The shifting multilateral dynamics and regional integration processes present both challenges and opportunities for the advancement of social justice and decent work agendas. Despite the pressures from more challenging environment Workers' organizations, remain indispensable actors of change in forging inclusive, democratic, and human-centred futures of work. Considering these challenges, the role of workers' organizations has become increasingly salient. It is incumbent upon these institutions to assume a more proactive leadership role in their ongoing efforts to achieve social justice through the promotion of decent work.

This 2025 edition of the International Journal of Labour Research represents a progression on the previous edition and offers a prospective outlook. The Journal explores how we can shape a new social contract—a foundation for a human-centred world beyond 2030. It aims to equip trade unions as key drivers of change in implementing the 2025 Doha Political Declaration. The edition comprises six critical contributions which, despite their diversity in scope, converge on a shared concern: namely, the manner in which workers' organizations position themselves as pivotal actors in shaping global agendas in the post-2025 and post-2030 eras.

Collectively, the contributions contained in this Journal offer insights into the lessons learned since the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, along with strategic insights and practical tools for action. They reflect a shared commitment to shaping a fairer future—and a belief that trade unions are not merely participants in this process, but essential architects of a people-centred world beyond 2030.

Reclaiming multilateralism for social justice beyond 2030

The present contribution situates the role of labour within a contested multilateral order that it is increasingly fragmented by geopolitical rivalries. It positions workers' organisations as central actors in the shaping of a renewed social contract and revitalised multilateralism. The argument is made that the reestablishment of a renewed multilateralism is imperative if social justice is to be maintained as a global priority (Triangle, 2025).

The contribution poses series of questions concerning strategy: how can a multilateralism be renewed and strengthened to deliver social justice in the face of geopolitical tensions, inequality, and climate change? To establish the necessary foundations for the discussions, it is imperative to consider the concrete commitments that governments must make at the Second World Summit for Social Development to ensure decent jobs, social protection, living wages, and equality for all workers. The question that needs to be answered is how the pillars of democracy, accountable governance, and the active participation of trade unions can be safeguarded to ensure a just and sustainable global future.

The article sets out a series of six core labour demands that, it is asserted, must underpin a new social contract. These demands are as follows: the creation of decent and climate-friendly jobs through a just transition; trade union rights for all workers; living wages; universal protection; equality; and inclusion. It calls on the Second World Summit for Social Development to affirm the centrality of international labour standards, human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to adopt a transformative agenda for equality - strengthening rights, ensuring equal opportunities and confronting all forms of discrimination, alongside a renewed commitment to democracy, rule of law and accountable governance. By placing workers' rights and social justice at the heart of global agendas, trade unions are seen as guardians of democracy, equality, and accountability, and as indispensable partners in achieving sustainable development beyond 2030.

Warnings from three decades ago: the Second World Summit for Social Development and the ILO

This article revisits the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, highlighting the dangers of unfulfilled commitments and selective implementation (Tapiola, 2025). The contribution set out to explore four broad questions. Firstly, it examines how the ILO has historically sought to integrate labour issues into broader economic, industrial, and monetary policies, and what lessons can be drawn for today's global challenges. The role of trade unions and tripartite cooperation in shaping the outcomes of the 1995 Copenhagen Summit, and the implications of these lessons for preparations for the Second World Summit for Social Development in 2025 are the subject of this article. In what manner might workers' organizations guarantee that the global pledges of the

present moment do not become the aspirations of tomorrow that are consigned to oblivion? In addition, it is imperative to explore the capacity of workers' organizations facilitated by the ILO, to address the prevailing issues of contemporary times including polarization, the erosion of institutional trust, and the pressures stemming from globalization, technological advancement, and inequality.

The position is that workers' organizations are indispensable actors in sustaining social justice and democratic cohesion within the multilateral system. It is asserted that in the run up to the Doha Summit, the primary challenge confronting trade unions is to re-establish their role as conduits of trust in societies characterised by inequality and polarisation. The capacity of workers' organization to engage with employers and governments in binding agreements is posited as a critical safeguard for people-centred development and the survival of the ILO model.

Renewing the social contract in Africa: Pro-employment macroeconomic and sectoral policies for decent work and inclusive development

It is evident that macroeconomic policies are not neutral; by prioritising stabilisation over employment, they have contributed to the erosion of the social contract and the persistence of widespread informality and inequality in Africa. This contribution argues for the necessity of a reorientation of fiscal, monetary, and sectoral frameworks to serve the explicit objectives of decent work and inclusive development. It raises important questions: How can workers' organizations promote the mainstreaming of employment and social protection into national budgets? The question that arises from this is how policy coherence across macroeconomic, industrial, and labour market policies might be strengthened to support structural transformation. The following question must be posed and answered: in that manner might inclusive governance and social dialogue serve to establish macroeconomic management as a foundation for renewal of the social contract?

Leveraging the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) for the formalisation of informal cross-border trade

The phenomenon of regional integration is not impartial; it has the capacity to either perpetuate or dismantle exclusionary structures and can instead serve to foster inclusive practices. This contribution considers the potential of the AfCFTA to serve as formalization vehicle for Africa's extensive informal cross-border trade, which is dominated by women and small-scale traders (Asafu-Adjaye, 2025). The following questions are of particular significance: The present article seeks to explore the manner which livelihood assets and vulnerabilities influence the experiences of informal cross-border traders (ICBT) in Africa, with a particular focus on women. It explores the opportunities offered by AfCFTA, especially the Protocol on Women and Youths in Trade, in terms of formalization and

empowerment of ICBT actors. In what manner might trade unions exert influence over the governance of AfCFTA with a view to ensuring inclusive trade, and the advancement of the rights and interests of informal cross-border traders? It is imperative to ascertain the necessary safeguards that must be implemented in order to prevent AfCFTA from serving to reinforce the inequalities that are already in existence. The contribution indicates the significance of workers organisations' role in acting as catalysts for the transformation of ICBT from a survivalist activity into a recognised, protected, and sustainable component of Africa's trade integration.

Towards a new social contract: How workers' organizations can revitalise social justice and democracy

This contribution explores three fundamental questions: firstly, how can workers' organisations adapt and maintain relevance in the face of economic, technological, and labour market transformations—such as digitisation, Artificial intelligence (AI), and the growth of platform work—that increasingly individualise employment relations and erode solidarity? In the context of mounting autocratic tendencies, deepening inequality, and government and employers frequently seeking to marginalise trade unions from socio-economic governance, what strategies can workers' organizations deploy to revitalise democracy and social justice? In what ways can workers' organizations be the cornerstone of a new social contract, particularly in contexts dominated by informal employment? The paper explores how workers' organisations can combine traditional collective bargaining with innovative services, advocacy, and inclusive organising to provide solutions to this question (Cortebecq, 2025).

The contribution positions workers' organizations as indispensable actors in safeguarding democracy, advancing social justice, and anchoring a renewed social contract. Far from being relics of an industrial past, workers' organizations are seen as vital institutions capable of defending workers' rights, shaping socio-economic policy, and countering the erosion of democratic governance. Their role is defined as extending beyond collective bargaining to encompass service provision, expertise-building, media engagement, and organizing in both formal and informal economies.

In an era where democracy is perceived as vulnerable and employment is undergoing significant transformation due to technological advancement and globalisation, workers' organizations are portrayed not only as defenders of immediate worker interests but as custodians of inclusive societies and equitable economies. Their survival and revitalization, however, demand bold internal reforms, stronger connections with diverse and younger members, and proactive strategies to influence policy and public opinion. Without them, the envisioned new social contract risks remaining hollow.

Trade unions as “Actors for Change”: Monitoring, implementing and shaping the post-2025 Human-centred agenda

This final contribution suggests that trade unions should not merely receive policy frameworks but should also act as co-shapers of a post-2025 agenda that prioritises people over profits, (Mwamadzingo, 2025). The article interrogates three critical questions: To address the challenges and opportunities that lied ahead in the post-2025 era, it is essential that trade unions consider how they can redefine their role as agents of systemic change. To ascertain the reforms required at an institutional and organisational level to ensure the continued relevance and resilience of trade unions, further research is required. The following question is posed: how can trade unions effectively influence policy and partnerships at national and global levels?

The article explores how trade unions can extend beyond traditional collective bargaining processes to function as proactive architects in the realisation of social justice, democratic participation, and equitable development. The document identifies several priorities including the organisation of informal, platform and migrant workers; the modernisation of governance structures; the strengthening of unity and solidarity networks and embedding worker education and lifelong learning. The article highlights the significance of unions’ engagement with multilateral institutions (e.g., UN), their role in structured social dialogue, and coalition-building strategies that secure labour rights and shape sustainable development agendas. Ultimately, workers’ organizations are regarded as strategic partners in the construction of democracy, the promotion of equity, and the establishment of sustainable development on the condition that they demonstrate commitment to continuous renewal, inclusivity, and proactive engagement in governance.

Reflections and challenges for workers’ organizations

Across these contributions, several cross-cutting reflections emerge. They are not only conceptual but also pragmatic challenges that demand decisive action from workers’ organizations:

1. From Reaction to Proactivity: It is common occurrence that trade unions engage with global agendas only after the agenda has been established. Considering the prevailing circumstances, it is imperative for trade unions to exercise their influence from the outset, by formulating a human-centred alternative to the prevailing metrics of progress which are currently limited to GDP (ILO, 2019).

2. Seizing the Macroeconomic Terrain: Macroeconomic policy is regarded as the “commanding height” of development. In the absence of labour, fiscal austerity and jobless growth will continue to be a persistent feature. To achieve this objective, it is essential that trade unions develop the necessary technical expertise to conduct a

thorough examination of budgetary processes, engage in dialogue with central banks, and challenge international financial institutions on issues pertaining to employment and equity grounds (Ortiz & Cummins, 2019).

3. Re-Negotiating the Social Contract: Revitalising democracy requires re-embedding rights, participation, and redistribution at the core of governance. Workers' organizations cannot afford defensive postures; they must become propositional actors advancing a new social contract fit for digitalised, globalised economies (Standing, 2011).

4. Organising Beyond the Formal: The informal economy is no longer marginal—it is central, especially in Africa. Unless unions develop strategies that connect with workers in informal and insecure forms of work, they risk irrelevance. AfCFTA offers a decisive test: will labour use it to promote inclusion, or allow it to deepen exclusion? (Meagher, 2016).

5. Learning from History: The history of broken promises is long; the credibility of global pledges remains fragile. Labour must institutionalise monitoring and accountability mechanisms that prevent the recycling of unfulfilled commitments (Deacon, 2007).

6. Reclaiming Multilateralism: In an era of geopolitical fragmentation and corporate capture, labour must re-assert its role in global governance. This requires bold alliances across social movements, creative use of international labour standards, and a renewed commitment to solidarity that transcends borders (Munck, 2002).

Conclusion

This journal issue has been designed to function as both a mirror and a compass. This phenomenon is analogous to the multifaceted challenges confronting trade confronting trade unions encompassing from macroeconomic orthodoxy to informal cross-border trade, from unfulfilled social development pledges to contested multilateralism. At the same time, it provides a framework for delineating future directions. The reflections herein should not be regarded as mere observations; they are calls to action. It is submitted that workers' organisations find themselves at a decisive historical juncture. Their ability to seize the moment and act with boldness and imagination will determine their relevance—and the prospects for social justice—in the decades ahead.