



International
Labour
Organization

A new social contract: achieving social justice in an era of accelerating change



Executive summary

International Journal of Labour Research

Volume 12, Issues 1-2 (2023)

The *International Journal of Labour Research* (IJLR) is the flagship publication of the Bureau for Workers' Activities of the ILO. A multidisciplinary journal, the IJLR is a vehicle for dissemination of international research on labour, economic and sustainable development policies. Its target readership includes workers' organizations, practitioners, researchers, labour ministries and academics in all disciplines of relevance to ILO constituents in the world of work – industrial relations, sociology, law, economics and political science. The IJLR is published in English, French and Spanish, each issue focusing on a unique theme.

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Bureau for Workers' Activities

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Executive summary



Introduction

For several centuries, the issue of the social contract has been at the centre of debates on the relationship between the State and its citizens. Starting from the hypothesis that, by nature, “homo homini lupus” (“man is wolf to man”), several authors including Hobbes, Grotius, Locke and Rousseau have proposed the idea of a sovereign State to which individuals delegate their power and freedoms in order to avoid chaos.

However, these social contracts are lagging behind fast-paced changes of the modern world linked to globalization, demography, new technologies and digital transformation, the challenge of climate change and the growth of inequalities and extreme poverty throughout the world. The succession of multiple crises – in particular the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical, financial, food and energy crises, and the pressure of climate change – has demonstrated the urgency of a new social contract to regulate the rights and duties between States and citizens more effectively.

As the largest membership-based organizations in the world and a crucial constituent of the International Labour Organization (ILO), workers’ organizations have always fought against inequalities and advocated for peace, upholding human and labour rights and dignity for all. Thus, in the quest for a new social contract that is human-centred, workers’ organizations play a central role in adapting and designing a renewed social contract and determining what it should look like to address the challenges faced by workers across the globe.

This 2023 edition of the International Journal of Labour Research (IJLR), entitled *A new social contract: achieving social justice in an era of accelerating change*, aims to stimulate reflection on what a new social contract might entail and more specifically the role of workers’ organizations in engaging in the design and establishment of a new social contract within the multilateral system and at national level. Thus, the focus of this issue is both on what such a new social contract may entail and on what to do in terms of its implementation. These questions are raised and discussed from an analytical point of view with the aim of contributing to the ensuing debate on the new social contract.

To this end, the first section introduces the notion of a social contract and explains its urgency from the world-of-work perspective (section A). The second section explores two examples of inequalities through the challenge of access to social protection and the implementation of the just-transition policy (section B). The third section exposes two growing sectors where a new social contract would be the centrepiece of the achievement of decent work and social justice: the agricultural sector, where millions of workers struggle for their food and livelihoods; and the digital economy, where workers are ignored in terms of social protection and decent working conditions (section C).

A. Why a new social contract and what are the implications for the world of work?

Reflections on the new social contract

Michelle Bachelet

Former President of Chile and former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

- ▶ The planet and society are undergoing a series of transformations that have a direct effect on how humankind relates to its surroundings. At the environmental level, the effects of climate change are putting habitats and ecosystems under pressure. At the societal level, the increase in conflict globally has set millions of people adrift, with minimal prospects for the future and the complete violation of their fundamental human rights. The current predominant economic model has generated complex issues of inequalities that, in recent years, have widened the gaps in access to means of subsistence, forcing millions of people worldwide to leave their countries and live in poverty or extreme poverty, with limited opportunities to improve their living conditions.
- ▶ The global effort to promote real change in this situation is represented by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the system of international instruments of the United Nations and other organizations for the promotion and protection of rights.
- ▶ On the labour front, technological development has profoundly changed the industrial relations model and generated new opportunities and significant challenges for millions of workers. Automation processes and changes in modes of production in general have created new perspectives on the future of work. In his report “Our Common Agenda”, the United Nations Secretary-General has called for “a new social contract anchored in human rights, better management of critical global commons, and global public goods that deliver equitably and sustainably for all”.
- ▶ A new social contract devised in the context of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, such as the overarching development framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, must be based on the strengthening of social dialogue and on the pursuit and attainment of better labour conditions for workers, based on respect for human rights. A reform of labour governance systems is required to ensure that these systems can respond effectively to the new and varied priorities and needs in a context of rapid transformation. The new social contract must preserve the fundamental values that have given, and continue to give, life to modern democracy; it calls for an integrated vision of labour that incorporates a rights-based approach and global solidarity. The conditions must be created for the most vulnerable persons to gain access to labour markets and modes of production that are respectful of the environment in its various dimensions.

Why a new social contract is urgent?

Luc Triangle

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This article summarizes key aspects of the new social contract adopted by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) 5th World Congress in Melbourne, Australia, in November 2022. The world needs the new social contract to replace the failing, inequitable and unsustainable economic model of today.

At its 5th World Congress, the ITUC adopted a policy and action statement that provides for action on three intersecting global challenges: climate change, public health and technology. It further defines six key workers' demands on which the new social contract is based: jobs, rights, wages, social protection, equality and inclusion.

Key implications for trade union policy and action

- ▶ **Jobs:** Governments must engage with unions through social dialogue to develop national jobs plans for climate-friendly jobs with just transition, and to monitor and ensure their implementation. There should be a particular focus on public-sector-led investment in health and care and on infrastructure that contributes both to net-zero carbon and to climate resilience. Other priorities are formalization of informal jobs, effective deployment of technology to support job creation; investment in lifelong learning, and multilateral cooperation and debt relief measures to enable countries to invest in job creation.
- ▶ **Rights:** A strong and authoritative ILO, ensuring that international labour standards are ratified and respected, is central to the realization of workers' rights and thus the new social contract. Along with this, the new social contract is built on organizing for occupational health and safety; ensuring organizing and bargaining rights for all workers and protection from discrimination and forced and child labour; working to ensure corporate supply chain accountability, including a new ILO convention to address standards and governance gaps in global supply chains; reversing the trend towards "platform work"; universal application of the protections contained in the ILO Centenary Declaration; ensuring finalization of a strong United Nations treaty on business and human rights; and ensuring that competition and related laws and regulations break up concentrated corporate power in technology-mediated and other sectors.
- ▶ **Wages:** Governments must fulfil their obligation to promote collective bargaining; ensure a living minimum wage for all workers, without exemptions; stop the imposition of exploitative sub-minimum wage rates and illegitimate unpaid internships for younger workers; support organizing, bargaining and research where unions need it; and end the use of disguised employment relationships and the abusive use of precarious employment arrangements.

- ▶ **Social protection:** In a number of countries, demographic changes with an ageing population and workforce are placing pressure on pension systems, while youth unemployment is a growing problem, even in countries where the population is ageing. The new social contract affirms the right to social protection for all, including a global social protection fund for the least wealthy countries; social dialogue for union involvement in the oversight of social protection systems; tax reforms, proper taxation of corporate profits and other measures to ensure adequate resources for social protection; and debt relief and action by the international financial institutions to create the fiscal space necessary for less wealthy countries to establish universal social protection systems.
- ▶ **Equality:** Trade union membership and collective bargaining are powerful means to address the gender pay gap and other forms of discrimination against women, including occupational segregation. Trade union solidarity and collective organization and action are crucial in the fight against racism, xenophobia, social exclusion and discrimination in all its forms. Unions are front-line defenders against extremism, including the extreme right wing, which is making inroads in every region. The equality agenda of the new social contract requires: campaigning, negotiation and advocacy for a gender transformation of the world of work; fighting against the rise of the extreme right and against intolerance and social and economic exclusion; specific actions to promote relevant ILO Conventions; increasing the proportion of union leadership positions held by women to 50 per cent by 2026; ensuring investment in the care economy in all countries and proper recognition of the value of care work; and fighting for the rights of migrant workers and refugees.
- ▶ **Inclusion:** The policies of the international financial institutions and the World Trade Organization (WTO) need fundamental reform to put development and workers' rights at the centre. Development aid flows are insufficient; the rules for tax are designed for the benefit of corporations and the wealthy; state capacity is damaged by economic restructuring imposed by conditional access to capital; and wealth is being drained from even the least wealthy countries through debt repayments and the extraction of value by multinational enterprises. The contours of colonialism still form the basis of a global system that is fundamentally flawed – unequal and unsustainable. The ITUC Melbourne Congress called for a broad series of actions for inclusion, among them: a fundamental reform of the global economic system, including the Bretton Woods institutions and the WTO, to enable development and inclusion for all; defending multilateralism, with the ILO at the centre; campaigning for the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 8 which enshrines decent work; advocating for international policies that support technology transfer, sustainable investment in less wealthy countries and industry policy that emphasizes health, care and infrastructure; building the case for economic measures other than GDP; supporting a minimum of 0.7 per cent of gross national income for development aid; and ending intellectual property barriers to development and to access to vaccines, treatments and tests for disease.

The world of work and the new social contract

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For decades, many countries had a special kind of social contract, which was established in the 1940s and 1950s after the Second World War. It followed the principle that governments delivered social and economic benefits to citizens, whereby citizens contributed to the common good – whether economically, socially or culturally – on the assumption that the State would ensure a minimum standard of living, provision of essential social services and infrastructure and the protection of their basic rights.

Employment has been a major structural element of the social contract, shaping the rights and responsibilities of workers and employers, labour and capital, and strongly influencing the distribution of resources and power in a society.

The twenty-first-century world of work has undergone profound changes, and tensions have heightened within the existing social contract, presenting both opportunities and challenges for shaping a new contract. The United Nations, the World Bank and other international institutions have called for a reinvigoration of the social contract – a call echoed by trade union organizations (ITUC) and employers (IOE) alike. The ILO Director-General, Gilbert Houngbo, has also called for a new social contract to promote social justice.

The urgency of such a new social contract is even more accentuated when we look at the world of work, and more broadly, the global socio-economic context, characterized by a persistent and pervasive joblessness and insecurity. In 2022, the global jobs gap stood at 473 million in 2022, which includes 205 million unemployed people and 268 million people who have an unmet need for employment but do not qualify as unemployed. Many of the people who have jobs face increasingly insecure employment conditions, as in 2022, about 2 billion workers worldwide worked in informal jobs, which made up 60 per cent of all employment.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of working poverty is rising. Many workers, particularly salaried employees, are excluded from the scope of wage laws and policies, which makes them incapable of guaranteeing a sufficiently decent level of remuneration.

The phenomenon of working poverty is compounded by the cost-of-living crisis and low labour productivity.

Yet, social protection coverage is still inadequate: only about 47 per cent of people worldwide are covered effectively by at least one social protection benefit, meaning that more than 4 billion people still lack any social protection in the current global socio-economic context.

All this contributes to the high levels of inequality the world has reached. While income inequalities between countries have fallen over the past two decades, thanks in particular to the economic progress made in many emerging countries, global income inequalities remain at a very high level. These growing inequalities and the deteriorating socio-economic context in many regions, in which basic needs such as food, water and access to education, training and employment are not being met, have reinforced a deterioration of social cohesion and peace, shown by the increase in global conflicts and attacks on democracy in many parts of the world.

Other factors that are influencing decent work within the current socio-economic context include climate and technological changes. Adjusting to these new realities will require major adaptation initiatives, including significant infrastructure investment. Yet these adaptation measures also present opportunities for job creation, particularly in some of the poorest areas of the world, and including Africa. At the same time, technological change, pertaining especially to new digital devices and tools such as artificial intelligence, has yet to live up to earlier optimistic projections about its potential to increase productivity growth and alleviate much of the drudgery of work, but such innovations are needed to address some upcoming labour shortages resulting from demographic shifts.

Key implications for trade union policy and action

- ▶ Employment insecurity and the socio-economic uncertainty it generates undermine the relationship between workers, employers and the State, with consequences for people's trust in public institutions.
- ▶ The new social contract must be underscored by a vision which sees the reduction of inequalities at the heart of both economic and social progress. It must be based on the ILO fundamental principles and rights at work.
- ▶ The new social contract should ensure that coordinated and coherent public policies, (including pro-employment macroeconomic, sectoral, industrial, skills, employment and social protection policies), create decent jobs for all.
- ▶ The new social contract should set out to make public policymaking responsive to the needs of all workers and the community and recognize more completely the whole spectrum of work relationships and their value.

- ▶ The new social contract should ensure that wage-setting mechanisms promote living wages and ensure adequate benefits, working conditions and coherent national policies on occupational safety and health.
- ▶ Workers' organizations should be recognized for the purpose of collective bargaining. Systems should be put in place for regular consultations between workers and enterprises, remediation of abuses of internationally recognized human rights and settlement of industrial disputes.
- ▶ Governments should establish universal social protection systems, adapted to developments in the world of work, that are resilient, effective, inclusive, adequate and sustainable over the long term.

B. The new social contract as a remedy to reduce inequalities

Social protection as a key component of the new social contract: a leading role for trade unions

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The pandemic of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) brought enormous suffering and economic turmoil: death, long illness, business failure, job loss, recession and reversals of the poverty reduction achieved in recent years. The world is now experiencing the hottest temperatures on record, with accompanying storms, floods, droughts and fires. Both calamities are playing out in environments where the quality of life and work are on the decline: inequalities are increasing; non-standard forms of employment, including informal employment, platform work and temporary employment, are on the rise; and, in some regions, civil unrest and violence are disrupting life and work. Predictably, the most vulnerable members of society have been hit hardest, i.e. small businesses, workers with low skill levels, those in non-standard forms of employment, including platform work, those in informal employment, young people and people with disabilities. Women have been doubly disadvantaged by disproportionate job losses in service sectors coupled with an increased need for family caregiving.

These turbulent times have focused increased attention on a long-known, but unaddressed, shortcoming of public policy: while social protection is recognized as a basic human right by virtually all governments and international institutions, in reality most of the global population – more than 4 billion people – still have no coverage. That is, less than half of the world's population is covered by one or more cash benefits. With so many people left to fend for themselves through back-to-back crises, it is not surprising that distrust in governments and public institutions, already on the rise in most countries, is becoming more widespread.

Recognizing the dangers of these trends, leaders in many realms – government, business, civil society and workers’ organizations – are calling for a new social contract between governments and citizens. While these advocates differ somewhat on the protections the contract should provide, they are in full accord on one point: the need for a guarantee of basic social protection for everyone. Such a guarantee would provide both greater help in hard times and more equal sharing of future prosperity. The ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) offers a blueprint for making social protection the centrepiece of a new social contract.

This analysis takes a fresh look at Recommendation No. 202 in light of both the newly exposed weaknesses of existing social protection and recent government efforts to build social protection floors. It focuses in particular on design decisions for social protection floors that the Recommendation leaves to national discretion. While recognizing that there is no single path to expanding coverage, it points to the advantages of particular benefit designs and strategies. This is followed by a call for trade unions to assume leadership roles in expanding social protection, as envisioned in Recommendation No. 202. The paper identifies both the challenges of doing so and the substantial benefits to be gained.

Key implications for trade union policy and action

The current crises, brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, global warming and other unfavourable trends, provide unions with another opportunity to seek greater security for all, while affirming their relevance in addressing today’s problems. There are several potential axes of action that workers’ organizations can pursue.

- ▶ **Representing all workers and forming alliances:** Workers’ organizations structured around the traditional employer-employee relationship need to reorganize and form alliances with other organizations in order to engage with, and give voice to, non-members. Unions can develop innovative strategies and forms of support, e.g. advisory services, legal representation or accounting services, to attract, retain and represent all workers, including through partnerships with organizations of non-traditional workers.
- ▶ **Participating in the design and implementation of universal social protection as a key element of the new social contract:** Workers’ organizations are well placed to provide the understanding of target populations’ priorities, needs and financial capacity required to extend social protection successfully. They should engage actively in national debates on resource mobilization for financing non-contributory social protection schemes through, for example, progressive taxation policies. They can help to identify informal economy workers and workers in non-standard forms of employment who can be progressively included in social insurance, facilitate the registration of these workers and help them cope with reporting requirements.
- ▶ **Raising awareness among workers about their social protection rights and obligations:** Workers’ organizations have much to contribute to information

campaigns on new social protection laws and schemes, offering informational meetings and seminars and helping to disseminate promotional materials.

- ▶ **Participating in the governance and enforcement of social protection schemes:** The participation of workers' organizations in monitoring and evaluation is key in achieving transparency, accountability and worker confidence. It is particularly important that workers' representatives be involved in formulating the economic assumptions used in actuarial valuations of the scheme's future financial position. Only if workers' representatives understand these assumptions and accept them as reasonable can unions be expected to place confidence in actuarial findings.
- ▶ **Ensuring that commitments made at the international level are transformed into concrete policies and financial commitments at the country level:** By actively promoting the ratification, implementation and monitoring of ILO Conventions and Recommendations, particularly Convention No. 102, workers' organizations can help ensure that the government fulfils its social security promises to both current and future workers. Workers' organizations should actively contribute to the Global Accelerator for Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, especially the current debate on new international financing mechanisms, such as the establishment of a global social protection fund. United Nations processes on sustainable development offer workers' organizations additional space and impetus to engage in multilateral democratic decision-making.

Towards a European socio-ecological contract

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As environmental inequalities become embedded in social ones, we are living through a historic moment of synthesis in which environmental policies become social policies and vice versa. Inequalities in the context of the climate–environmental–social nexus are multidimensional and intertwined. The paradigm change in our economic model that is needed to put human activity back within planetary boundaries requires a reparation of entrenched existing inequalities, while it must also be ensured that the transition to net zero does not create new inequalities on top of the old ones. While the concept of just transitions is promising for delivering on this objective, real-world implementation varies in its scope and scale, and existing policies are not much more than patchwork. The post-war welfare state also fails to address the new challenges. This is why we need a socio-ecological contract with a key role for the State (as guarantor) and an active role for trade unions, civil society and employers.

By strengthening an egalitarian and ecological public sphere that protects workers' rights and the rights of nature, just transitions can contribute to a new socio-ecological contract for both people and planet, guaranteeing full access to social rights and a viable future for all. On the other hand, as the concept of just transition has shown its limits in

terms of both scope and scale, it needs the support of a renewed welfare state backed by a new socio-ecological contract. This new contract should redefine both how humans interact with nature and how humans interact with humans.

A new socio-ecological contract could help to bring about more equitable prosperity within planetary boundaries and should be based on key principles, including stakeholder capitalism, skill development, economic security and a transition to net zero. It should also involve business, to ensure that it does not shift into corporate welfare and increase inequalities, but instead creates value for us all.

Among existing inequalities, the following need to be addressed urgently: persistent income polarization and wage stagnation, work fragility with informal work and precarious work contracts, the challenge of affordable housing, access to affordable healthcare and education, persistent gender and race gaps, growing regional disparities and vulnerability to climate change and environmental hazards. For the transition to a zero-carbon economy, differential labour-market effects (job transitions, skills development), distributional effects of climate policies (energy and transport poverty) and accessibility and affordability of low-carbon technologies should be addressed. Without proper social and labour-market policies, all pre-existing inequalities are being amplified during the transition.

What we need is an economic model based on sustainable growth that respects planetary boundaries and is powered by a socio-ecological contract: a social contract that allocates societal risks fairly (including risks arising from the green transition), by spreading them away from workers and giving a fair share of progress to all, and a contract that, in unison with the economic model, provides affordable and effective social protection and reduces inequalities, poverty and social exclusion.

Key implications for trade union policy and action

There is a need for a new economic model based on sustainable growth that respects planetary boundaries and is powered by a socio-ecological contract that works for all, provides affordable and effective social protection and reduces inequalities, poverty and social exclusion. Policies should:

- ▶ help the creation of climate-friendly quality jobs;
- ▶ provide a just-transition policy framework that facilitates labour-market transitions and green skills development, corrects the digressive effects of climate policies for vulnerable groups and makes low-carbon technologies affordable and accessible for all;
- ▶ guarantee equal rights for all workers, regardless of their employment arrangements;
- ▶ provide universal social protection, with the perspective of universal basic services;
- ▶ eliminate all discrimination due to race, age, gender or other factors;
- ▶ achieve fair taxation for both individuals and corporations at national and international level.

The main actors involved are multilateral institutions (e.g. the European Union, the United Nations and international financial institutions), States, employers, trade unions and civil society.

The State has a pivotal role in setting up a truly comprehensive and holistic policy framework where climate, economic (fiscal, taxation), industrial, labour-market and social policies build up a coherent system.

- ▶ Policy instruments also need to have a proper balance of soft-law and hard-law elements, and not in the way that often happens currently, where economic policies tend to be based on hard law while social policies are based on soft law.
- ▶ Policy tools need to have a delicate balance of regulation, market mechanisms, taxation and standard-setting. This policy mix should be backed by a socio-ecological contract, as outlined above.
- ▶ Setting up, monitoring and implementing of such a contract needs a proper social dialogue and civil society involvement.
- ▶ All participating actors need to develop new strategies and new capacities and be open to cooperation and alliances.
- ▶ Businesses need to accept that, besides the profit motive and pursuing shareholder value, they need to serve the whole of society.

Trade unions should become agents of change, actively promoting just-transition policies and managing plant-level restructuring across the value chain in a proactive way. They also need to develop new strategies to enter and organize in newly emerging sectors and activities, such as the green and digital economies. Trade unions should also look beyond their members in the spirit of social movement unionism and look for alliances with civil society organizations.

The ILO and its constituents, in particular workers' organizations, are the ones best placed to engage in the design and establishment of a new socio-ecological contract within the multilateral system and at national level. The Global Coalition for Social Justice initiated at the 2023 International Labour Conference is a good starting point for this socio-ecological contract.

C. A new social contract to protect vulnerable groups

A new social contract: achieving social justice in an era of accelerating change in the agricultural sector

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Sustainable Development Goal 2 aims to end global hunger and promote sustainable agriculture. To be sustainable, agriculture must address the local challenges brought

about by changing consumer demand, rising populations, demographics and a shifting environment, including lower allocations in the national budget. Smart farming is predicted to solve the problem in food security by digitalizing to save production costs; however, by switching to the full use of technology it is displacing labour, as evidenced by several country studies. A new social contract would change the scenario to deal with the violation of workers' rights and the lack of support from governments for sustainable smart farming. The new social contract must be one which acknowledges the gaps between traditional and modern farming and integrates employment, social protection and sustainable development.

Climate-smart agriculture uses a range of internet of things (IoT) products, smart irrigation and smart greenhouses. Among the technologies used are, first, machine learning, which predicts changes in climate, soil and water parameters, carbon content and the spread of diseases and pests. Second are smart farming sensors, which help farmers monitor the smallest changes in the environment and the field using real-time data; third are the drones and satellites which use cameras to help growers create regularly updated maps to monitor remotely without needing to go to the field in person, and, fourth, the IoT, which gives farmers the opportunity to combine all the tools and solutions into one system.

The lack of internet access and poor connections have been cited as major challenges by users, along with resistance by ageing farmers and the lack of interoperability of modern machines, including maintenance of drones. Challenges in the use of the IoT include the lack of policies for its integration in farming, as well as the issues of privacy and security of data.

Key implications for trade union policy and action

- ▶ The new social contract must free people from the fear of insecurity, lack of trust and a shrinking policy space. Governments must manage the large gap between changes in the world of work and enabling policies. The new social contract must integrate employment, sustainable development and social protection, based on equal rights and opportunities for all.
- ▶ The new social contract should focus on financial support for farmers in the form of loans, subsidies or guarantees and farmers' loans from private lending institutions and on policies to entice young people to remain in agriculture. Governments can help farmers to find markets for their climate-smart products.
- ▶ The social contract should contribute to solving the wider disparity in job status and address the impact of climate change and COVID-19, taking a deliberate stand on inclusion, equity and diversity.
- ▶ The deliverables pledged by political leaders must take the form of state protection, participation, taking responsibility for failure, eradicating tensions and lessening the impact of inequalities, poverty and exclusion. The new social contract must address violations by politicians who exploit projects intended for smart farming and redirect the funds for their own benefit.

- ▶ Trade unions should work to safeguard the rights of workers to self-organization, ensure safety at work, promote equality, guarantee equal pay for women and men, challenge racism and ensure social protection for vulnerable workers, starting with the proposed global fund for social protection.
- ▶ Trade unions should play an active role in organizing peasants and rural working women into cooperatives for delivery of agricultural inputs, for the marketing of produce and for rural industrialization to create jobs in rural areas.
- ▶ Trade unions should play a role in fixing the statutory minimum wage and efforts to meet the demands of people in rural areas, including basic needs like potable water supplies, electricity, primary health care, education and social services.
- ▶ Trade union federations should launch educational campaigns among peasant organizations and mobilize rural people to achieve self-sufficiency in food.
- ▶ The trade union movement must cooperate with environmental organizations to make industrial development ecologically more viable and should actively involve populations in solving environmental problems nationally and globally.
- ▶ The ILO should make efforts to increase cooperation between employers and workers, to address societal challenges that disrupt work on a massive scale, and work towards policies that bring solutions to inequalities and break social contracts in the absence of corrective measures.
- ▶ The ILO should recognize the impact of technological advances that affect jobs and seek a powerful solution, through tripartite consultations, to ensure that the transition of workers from traditional jobs to those in the new world of work is well managed.
- ▶ The ILO should work towards policies where, without formal or informal discrimination, workers are accorded equal rights to self-organization, with the same privilege of forming or joining a workers' organization for collective representation. The same attention must be given to informal employment and work under non-standard contracts.
- ▶ The ILO must consider a policy mandating governments to acknowledge not only the formal sector, but also the vulnerable workers in the informal economy, giving them platforms to voice their concerns. This must include the gig economy, which is currently considered as vulnerable and without social protection.
- ▶ Businesses should form a new contract with the workforce and stay true to their commitment to the workers, especially the trade unions.
- ▶ Workers should increase their productivity for a more harmonized employee-employer relationship, where innovation and productivity are the main goals.

A new social contract for the social media platforms: prioritizing rights and working conditions for content creators and moderators

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Technological advancement and social transformation have led to the emergence of digital labour platforms, which offer employment opportunities but also raise concerns about working conditions and lack of fundamental rights for workers. Social media moderators undertake the demanding task of filtering society's content, exposing themselves to psychologically taxing and emotionally distressing material, all while receiving low wages. Conversely, social media content creators operate in high-pressure settings, frequently contending with issues such as hate speech, cyberbullying and discrimination, while striving to produce entertaining and informative content.

Any effort to assert any form of labour rights or even raise complaints has resulted in workers being red-listed and ultimately losing their jobs, and to being blacklisted if they ever want to work with another company in the industry. YouTubers in Germany have formed an association called FairTube, affiliated with the German trade union federation IG-Metall, which enables content moderators to join IG-Metall as self-employed persons with an independent membership.

A new social contract must recognize the immense value of workers' contributions and ensures fair compensation for their efforts. This means acknowledging their role in generating revenue for digital platforms and involving them in revenue-sharing models that reflect their input. This can foster a more equitable digital environment that benefits both the platforms and their content creators and moderators.

It is essential to prioritize the well-being of workers in the new social contract. Their demanding tasks can lead to high stress levels, online harassment and mental health issues. Adequate support mechanisms, such as support networks, counselling services and clear guidelines for dealing with harmful content, should be established. An inclusive digital environment should also be fostered to ensure diversity and inclusivity. Platforms should actively seek out and amplify voices from marginalized communities.

Sustainability should be promoted by adopting eco-friendly practices and promoting responsible content consumption. By valuing and protecting workers' rights in the digital world, we can ensure that workers work without fear of exploitation or neglect. Ultimately, this will lead to a more vibrant, diverse and thriving digital ecosystem that benefits everyone involved. A new social contract must incorporate a decent work agenda for workers in the digital economy beyond their employment relationship.

Key implications for trade union policy and action

- ▶ **ILO standards:** The ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) provides a comprehensive framework for prevention, protection and remedies against the challenges faced by social media content creators and moderators, including isolation, high workload, exposure to disturbing content and lack of job security.
- ▶ **Government oversight:** Governments can safeguard social media content moderators' and creators' mental and physical health by establishing policies to promote their well-being and mandating platforms to provide adequate resources for this purpose.
- ▶ **Trade union advocacy:** Trade unions can negotiate with companies, ensuring the implementation of robust wellness programmes and support structures, and lobby for policy and legal frameworks to protect and advance fundamental rights and freedoms at work.
- ▶ **Corporate responsibility:** Companies should establish personalized resilience plans for social media content moderators, providing access to resources like newsletters, webinars and personalized consultations with mental health specialists trained in identifying indicators of distress, as well as gym memberships, yoga, meditation sessions and tailored fitness initiatives that prioritize holistic wellness. Social engagement initiatives, team celebrations, community-oriented activities and sports leagues collectively foster an environment of support within the workplace. Extracurricular endeavours such as book clubs and personal finance workshops enhance moderators' holistic well-being.
- ▶ **Stakeholder contributions:** Mental health advocates and non-governmental organizations can provide supplementary resources, tailored training and targeted support mechanisms that can address the unique challenges encountered by moderators and creators.

A new social contract: achieving social justice in an era of accelerating change

Volume 12, Issues 1-2 (2023)

Reflections on the new social contract

Michelle Bachelet

Why a new social contract is urgent?

Luc Triangle

The world of work and the new social contract

Mohammed Mwamadzingo, Grayson Koyi, Michael Watt and Khalid Maman Waziri

Social protection as a key component of the new social contract: a leading role for trade unions

Elaine Fultz and Ursula Kulke

Towards a European socio-ecological contract

Béla Galgóczi

A new social contract: achieving social justice in an era of accelerating change in the agricultural sector

Leda Celis

A new social contract for the social media platforms: prioritizing rights and working conditions for content creators and moderators

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