



International  
Labour  
Organization

# ▶ A Global Trend Analysis on the Role of Trade Unions in Times of COVID-19

A Summary of Key Findings



**Executive summary**

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**The world of work is being profoundly affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Governments have launched fiscal stimulus programmes** of an unprecedented scale with a view to supporting income and jobs as well as preventing an outright collapse of the economy.

**Effective social dialogue** and cooperation between governments, employers' organizations and workers' organizations have proven indispensable to designing and implementing appropriate strategies and policies to address the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis and to building inclusive societies.

**The Global Trend Analysis on the Role of Trade Unions in Times of COVID-19** first reveals the most affected categories of workers, workers in the most vulnerable situations and the sectors most hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, as seen by trade unions. It then provides a summary of trade unions' responses to the COVID-19 crisis and the progress made through tripartite or bipartite social dialogue or via bilateral interactions with governments in 133 countries, including one territory, during the period spanning March to August 2020. The document goes on to reveal whether trade unions agreed with the economic and social measures implemented by their governments, and whether workers and trade unions' rights were violated. Lastly, it provides guidance on how trade unions can reinforce resilience and help to build a "better normal".

**The findings of the Global Trend Analysis** are based on regional trend analyses of trade unions' responses to COVID-19. They reflect the information provided by national trade unions to ACTRAV Specialists in ILO field Offices, information available in the ILO COVID-19 Information Hub as well as information from other sources such as national and international trade union organizations.

### The Most Affected Workers, Workers in the Most Vulnerable Situations and the Most Affected Sectors in the View of Trade Unions

**Health and frontline workers** are the categories of workers most affected by the COVID-19 crisis worldwide. They have risked their lives for others despite reported PPE shortages. Similarly, **informal economy**

**workers** as well as **self-employed and casual workers** have been disproportionately hit due to the lack of protection and of income replacement or savings, the precariousness of their employment relationship and their exclusion from support measures. Lastly, **MSMEs** have experienced sharp decreases in demand and revenue if not the total discontinuation of their activity.

**Women, young people, migrant workers, refugees and people with disabilities** are the workers in the most vulnerable situations due primarily to the informal and precarious nature of the work performed, poor working conditions, exposure to violence and marginalization, and the lack of protection or support by public services.

**Tourism, road and maritime transportation** as well as **aviation and construction, commerce and hospitality**, and the **entertainment and manufacturing sectors** are the sectors hardest hit by the COVID-19 outbreak. Companies operating in these sectors experienced a temporary suspension of operations or stoppage of economic activities, restrictions in movement and border closures, serious risk of bankruptcy, and severe downturns with negative consequences on employment, the provision of services and the availability of raw materials.

### Trade Unions' Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis

**Workers as active players in social dialogue:** 108 out of 133 countries, or 81 per cent, used social dialogue in response to the pandemic to achieve a consensus on targeted measures to protect workers and enterprises. At least **one form of social dialogue**, either tripartite, bipartite or both, was used in 100 per cent of the Arab State countries, in 88 per cent of the Asian countries followed by 84 per cent of the countries in Europe and Central Asia, in 77 per cent of the African countries, and in 76 per cent of the countries in the Americas.

**Tripartite dialogue** between governments, trade unions and employers' organizations took place in 79 out of the 133 countries (59 per cent). When trade unions participated in policy discussions, the most frequent subjects of negotiation were social protection and employment measures as well as commitments towards collaborative industrial relations, and fiscal and occupational safety and health (OSH) measures.

***Bipartite dialogue between employers and trade unions*** was reported in 82 out of the 133 countries (62 per cent). Employers and workers often expressed similar concerns over the adequacy of the measures adopted and the lack of necessary supplies on the market (e.g. PPE). In some cases, they submitted joint statements, proposals or requests to governments. They also implemented enhanced OSH measures or provided additional benefits to specific categories of workers. In some cases, they signed MoUs or CBAs committing to preventing collective dismissals and to strengthening employment guarantees.

***Bilateral interactions between governments and trade unions*** took place in 46 out of 133 countries and one territory (34 per cent). The topics negotiated included amendments to existing legislation in light of the COVID-19 crisis, retrenchment benefits and unemployment benefits for workers who lost their jobs, income support to self-employed workers and persons in need, additional benefits for health care workers, and necessary safety and health measures for workers.

***Targeted actions of trade unions for their members / workers*** included setting up emergency funds, awareness-raising campaigns, training programmes and labour market matching services, legal advice, distribution of food parcels and PPE, and in some instances the recognition of COVID-19 as an employment injury.

***Unionization*** by workers' organizations has been severely affected by lockdowns and restrictive measures. As a result, while some trade unions decided to discontinue the collection of membership dues, others saw the crisis as an opportunity to raise awareness and reach out to informal economy workers, and launched successful membership campaigns. Still others developed innovative ways to organize and reach out to members, or organized humanitarian actions in order to remain relevant.

***Agreement with government COVID-19 responses:*** Trade unions generally welcomed governments' COVID-19 responses and demonstrated support in ensuring workers' compliance. However, in many instances, dissatisfaction has been expressed with the implementation of social dialogue mechanisms, the lack of trade unions' participation in decision-making processes and the lack of clarity with regard to the measures adopted. Some trade unions criticized their governments for having failed to provide adequate protection to all, including workers who are normally excluded due to their employment status.

***Violations of workers and trade unions' rights*** were reported by several trade unions across the regions.

Most violations were reported in the Arab States (67 per cent of the countries) and in Asia and Pacific (35 per cent of the countries), followed by Europe and Central Asia (29 per cent of the countries), Africa (21 per cent of the countries), and the Americas (20 per cent of the countries). Violations mainly concerned International Labour Standards, non-compliance with labour regulations with regard to layoffs, working hours and the payment of wages, and disregard of OSH regulations.

***Trade unions' recommendations to governments and employers:*** Requests from trade unions to governments for immediate action included universal health care, extended sickness, unemployment and family benefits, cash transfers, job and income security, financial support to enterprises, compliance with OSH regulations, the provision of in-kind benefits and the recognition of COVID-19 as an employment injury. Medium/long-term recommendations included strengthening social dialogue, extending social protection coverage, making long-term investments in social and welfare services and forgiving external debts.

## Conclusions

***Trade unions should regard the crisis as a wake-up call for contributing to building forward better and advancing labour and social agendas.*** To achieve these objectives, they need to be recognized, participate in policy-making, and negotiate collective agreements promoting fundamental rights, adequate minimum wages as well as maximum working hours, health and social protection benefits for all, and safety and health at work.


***Building forward better requires global-scale responses based on effective social dialogue*** and sound industrial relations. Trade unions need to ensure that the temporary measures adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are a stepping-stone toward a sound recovery focusing on a medium to longer-term perspective in line with the priorities identified in the ILO's policy framework for responding to the COVID-19 crisis.

***Trade unions' agenda for resilience and empowerment in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and recovery should aim to:*** build political will, contribute to strengthening social dialogue mechanisms, build knowledge and capacity, increase representative capacity, continue to promote workers' priorities, provide new services, expand partnerships, engage with the UN processes on sustainable development, share information and learn from previous crises.

## ▶ Who are affected by the COVID-19 Crisis?

Most affected categories of workers	▶ <b>Healthcare workers</b> 	▶ <b>Informal economy workers</b> 	▶ <b>Migrants workers</b> 
	▶ <b>Self-employed workers and casual workers</b> 	▶ <b>Micro, Small and Medium-Size Enterprises</b> 	

Workers in the most vulnerable situations	▶ <b>Women</b> 	 <b>70%</b> ▶ of health care and social care workers in 104 countries	 <b>70%</b> ▶ of informal economy workers in developing countries
	 ▶ Covid-19 quarantine measures have caused a spike in domestic violence levels with women as the main victims		

Workers in the most vulnerable situations	▶ <b>Young people</b> 	▶ <b>Persons with disabilities</b> 
	▶ Millions are not transitioning into decent work and risk social exclusion ▶ The pandemic destroys jobs and employment prospects as well as disrupts education and training	▶ They represent <b>15%</b> of the world's population and have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic ▶ They face marginalization in social, economic and health terms and public services are limited in their ability to reach them

Workers in the most vulnerable situations	▶ <b>Refugees</b> 	▶ <b>Tourism</b> 
	▶ Many of them reside in overcrowded camps where social distancing or quarantine are difficult	▶ Due to lockdown and containment measures and a potential loss of 850 million to 1.1 billion international tourists; many hotels, restaurants, tour operators, airlines and cruise ships have suspended their operations indefinitely ▶ 100 to 120 million jobs are at risk in the tourism sector

Most affected sectors	▶ <b>Transport</b> ▶ <b>Road sector:</b> Many countries around the world have placed restrictions on domestic transit and/or closed border crossings for road freight transport services. 	▶ <b>Maritime transportation:</b> Travel and ports' restrictions have severely affected maritime transport. 	▶ <b>Civil aviation:</b> According to the International Civil Aviation Organization, the sector experienced a 1.8 billion passenger decrease, or 69% between January and August 2020 with airline losses of between USD 340 and 380 billion. 
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## ▶ Which sectors are affected by the COVID-19 Crisis?

### ▶ Construction Sector



- ▶ Before COVID-19 struck, many construction workers were on short-term and project-based contracts. Many of those have faced reduced hours and layoffs, or lost their incomes almost immediately.
- ▶ The situation is critical for constructions workers in developing countries, where the sector is highly informal and where they are likely to lack of severance pay, unemployment and other social protection benefits.

### ▶ Others sectors hit by COVID-19 crisis are:

#### ▶ Commerce



#### ▶ Hospitality



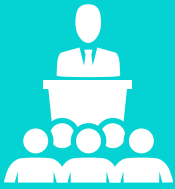
#### ▶ Entertainment



#### ▶ Manufacturing



## ▶ What is the trade unions' agenda for resilience and empowerment in the context of COVID-19 crisis and recovery?



- ▶ Build political will



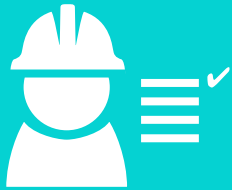
- ▶ Contribute to strengthening social dialogue mechanisms



- ▶ Build knowledge and capacity



- ▶ Increase representative capacity



- ▶ Continue to promote workers' priorities



- ▶ Provide new services



- ▶ Expand partnerships



- ▶ Engage with the UN processes on sustainable development



- ▶ Share information




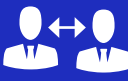











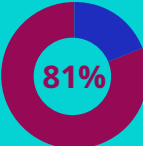
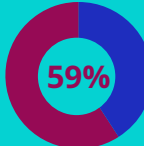
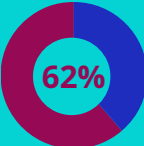
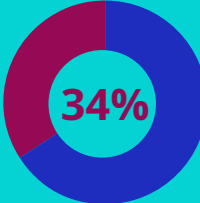
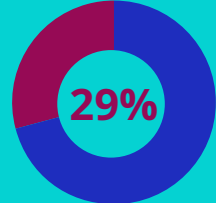
- ▶ Establish new alliances



- ▶ Learn from previous crises

► **Table 1:**

**At a glance: Trade unions participation in tripartite and bipartite social dialogue and bilateral interactions with Governments, as well as reported violations of trade unions'/workers' rights**

	 <b>Social Dialogue</b>			 <b>Bilateral Interactions</b>	 <b>Reported Violations</b>
	At least one form of social dialogue	 Tripartite Dialogue	 Bipartite Dialogue	 (between Governments and Trade Unions)	 (of Workers'/ Trade Unions' Rights)
 <p><b>Africa</b></p>	36/47 (77%)	28/47 (60%)	28/47 (60%)	12/47 (26%)	10/47 (21%)
 <p><b>Americas</b></p>	19/25 (76%)	15/25 (60%)	14/25 (56%)	9/25 (36%)	5/25 (20%)
 <p><b>Arab States</b></p>	6/6 (100%)	2/6 (33%)	6/6 (100%)	3/6 (50%)	4/6 (67%)
 <p><b>Asia and Pacific</b></p>	15/17 (88%)	10/17 (59%)	12/17 (70%)	7/17 (41%)	6/17 (35%)
 <p><b>Europe and Central Asia</b></p>	32/38 (84%)	24/38 (63%)	22/38 (58%)	15/38 (39%)	11/38 (29%)
 <p><b>World</b></p>	 81%	 59%	 62%	 34%	 29%

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