

**Forum:** Human Rights Council

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## **TOPIC 3: The question of the erosion of workers' rights**

### **I. Introduction to the Topic**

The erosion of workers' rights is a relevant issue that affects workers all around the world. Workers have rights that provide them protection from discrimination, violence and health issues. These rights are sometimes violated or eroded in many countries. Workers could be facing discrimination from their employers, fellow employees and even their clients. Instances like these could occur because people might not understand that workers are humans just like them. This violates human rights and could lead to violent situations. Workers could also be working in an environment that isn't safe for them. This could lead to injuries and medical problems and sometimes even lead to death. Unsafe working environments/conditions happen when the employees require employers to work overtime, equipment isn't managed properly, poor lighting conditions, excessive workload, etc.. Trade unions are membership organizations that have workers as members to help protect and advance the interests of the workers. Workers join trade unions because they believe that they can make a change within their workplace. Trade union membership faced a strong decline after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, although it had already been facing a decline before the pandemic. Some of the countries that have the highest trade union membership rate are Iceland, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Norway, Finland and Cuba. The unionization of trade unions is very important because without them, we see more erosion of workers' rights. Workers have rights to unionize and create trade unions but when the employers try to prevent this from happening, their rights are ignored. This is called union busting. Some union busting strategies that are incorporated by employers include hiring a union-busting consultant, getting some employers to vote against unionization and sending letters to the worker and their family. Union busting is illegal and has a strong impact on the erosion of workers' rights. Countries would have to work together to create a solution and make sure that workers get fair and right treatment.

### **II. Definition of Key Terms & Concepts**

#### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Erosion:** The gradual destruction or diminution of something.

**Rights:** A moral or legal entitlement to have or obtain something or to act in a certain way.

**Employment:** The condition of having paid work.

**Employer:** A person or organization that employs people.

**Worker:** A person who does a specific type of work or who works in a specific way.

**Tax:** A compulsory contribution to state revenue, levied by the government on workers' income and business profits, or added to the cost of some goods, services, and transactions.

**Labour:** Work, especially hard physical work.

**Salary:** A fixed regular payment, typically paid on a monthly or biweekly basis but often expressed as an annual sum, made by an employer to an employee.

**Overtime:** Time in addition to what is normal, as time worked beyond one's scheduled working hours.

**Work Stoppage:** A refusal to work organized by a body of employees as a form of protest, typically in an attempt to gain a concession or concessions from their employer.

**Right-to-work law:** A law that gives employees the decision to choose whether to join a trade union or not.

**Trade union:** A membership organization that consists of members of workers to help protect and advance the interests of the workers.

**Bargaining unit:** A set of employees who share common interests in their terms and conditions of employment and are represented by a trade union to bargain over terms and conditions of employment.

**Collective bargaining:** The act of negotiating employment conditions that occurs between the bargaining unit and the employers.

**Ratification:** A formal agreement of a newly-negotiated agreement by a vote of the employees in the bargaining unit.

**Scab:** A worker who continues to work or who accepts employment, while workers are on strike.

**Annuity:** An investment plan that provides a worker income for a specified period of time.

### III. Key Stakeholders

#### Key stakeholder 1: International Labour Organization (ILO)

The International Labour Organization was created in 1919 and it contains governments, employers and workers from 187 different member states. ILO was created to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes that promote decent work.

#### Key stakeholder 2: International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)

The main goal of the ITUC is to promote and defend workers' rights and interests. The ITUC works to achieve this through international cooperation between trade unions, global campaigning and advocacy. It is governed by congresses, General Council and Executive Bureau, which go for four years. ITUC also works closely with Global Union Federations and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD. ITUC works closely with the International Labour Organization as well.

#### Key stakeholder 3: European Union (EU)

The European Union is partly an intergovernmental organization and partly a supranational organization. The EU contains 27 European countries as member states. It contains about 447,000,000 million people. The purpose of the EU is to bring peace to the countries and between them. Also, the EU's goal is to help solve problems in the member states and promote the well-being of the citizens. On the question of labour laws, the EU is working on achieving high employment and strong social protection.

### IV. Key Issues including Background Information

**Key Issue 1:** During COVID-19, the economy survived a strong blow. Especially workers who were producing clothes. As the economy upended, garment workers suffered a strong blow because many clothing brands decided not to buy clothes that were already produced by the garment workers. Since these garment workers were living in underdeveloped countries they were producing these clothes with all the money they have.

**Key Issue 2:** Over 80% of workers in the garment industry are women and these women face a lot of gender-based violence and discrimination. Factory managers sometimes fire women who are pregnant and sometimes force them to take pregnancy tests before hiring them. These female workers are also often denied rights to maternity leave, child care and time to breastfeed. Workers also face sexual

harassment and abuse from managers especially female workers. This is especially true to workers who have no other choice but to work in a specific place due to constraints such as money problems.

**Key Issue 3:** The problem of forced labor is a key issue when it comes to workers' rights. Workers have the right to choose to work but forced labor forces the people to work even if they don't want to. An example of this could be seen in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Uyghur region). The Chinese government has one million Uyghur and Muslim people detained in this region and they are being forced to produce goods to be sold.

## V. Timeline of Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

### Timeline of Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

Date	Description of event
c. 1170 BC	The first recorded strike was in ancient Egypt. Workers who were building the necropolis of King Ramses III were involved in many work stoppages to complain about insufficient rations.
1733-1913	The industrial revolution was a long term revolution that happened for 180 years. It was a revolution that changed the agrarian and handicraft economy to an economy that was being run by industries and machines. The industrial revolution increased the opportunity for employment because wages at factories were higher than workers were making through agriculture.
1811-1816	There were rebels called Luddites who rioted for the destruction of a textile machinery that was displacing them. These Luddites were English handicraftsmen. This movement began in Nottingham but spread throughout England. The terminology "Luddite" is now being used broadly to signify people who are opposed to technological change.
1830	The swing riots were an uprising against agricultural mechanization and harsh working conditions. The swing riots were orchestrated by agricultural workers in southern and eastern England.

- 1848 The communist manifesto was written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. This book was written in Brussels to argue that capitalism will self-destruct and be replaced by socialism and communism. This is important because the communism written in the book refers to marxism which is how any profits generated by a worker shouldn't go to the business owner.
- 1865 The 13th amendment officially abolished slavery. Former US president Abraham Lincoln proposed the 13th amendment to the government. Consequently, the 14th amendment gave rights to citizenship to formerly enslaved people.
- 1886 The Haymarket Affair was a violent confrontation between the workers and the police. The industrial workers were on a strike and protesting about their rights and the riots started to happen after someone threw a bomb at the police.
- 1892 The Homestead strike occurred for about a week between 1892 June 30th to 1892 July 6th. It was a violent riot between the Carnegie Steel Company and the workers.
- 1906 The Cananea strike happened in Cananea, Mexico and was declared by miners who were employed by Colonel William Greene. They were dissatisfied with the wages and salaries. Colonel William Greene pleaded to the former president of Mexico, Porfirio Diaz, to help him get the miners working again. As a result, American troops from Arizona came to Mexico and killed 10 miners.
- 1916 The Icelandic Confederation of Labor is a trade union in center in Iceland and it was founded in 1916. Iceland is the country with the highest rate of trade union membership in the world. The Icelandic Confederation of Labor has 104,500 members which is approximately half of the Icelandic workforce.
- 1919 The International Labor Organization (ILO) was founded in 1919. It was created as part of the Treaty of Versailles which ended world war 1. The ILO is important in protecting workers' rights all around the world.
- 1929 - 1939 The Great Depression was when the economy collapsed and ruined many lives. It started with the stock market crashing in October 1929. Many companies had to lay off workers. This caused 24.9% of the work force or 12,830,000 people to be unemployed.

1944	The Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees is one of the largest trade unions in Sweden and it was founded in 1944. It incorporates unions like Swedish Metal Workers' Union, Swedish Electricians' Union and the Swedish Municipality Workers' Union. This trade union is important because Nordic countries like Sweden have the highest trade union membership in the world.
1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a document drafted by state representatives in the UN. It was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris. Some articles in the document addressed many human rights issues related to labor such as the right to work, discrimination in the workplace, right to form and join trade unions.
1966	The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) was a treaty developed by the United Nations General Assembly. The purpose of this treaty was to ensure the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights. This included the rights to fair and just conditions of work.
2006	The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) was founded on November 1st 2006. It is the biggest trade union in the world and has three main regional organizations: the ITUC regional organization for Asia and Pacific, the trade union confederation of the Americas and ITUC regional organization for Africa.
2007 - 2008	Global financial crisis was a crisis that was related to the stock market. It began with cheap credit and negligent lending standards that fueled a housing bubble. It cost many people their houses, jobs and life savings.
2009	Former US president Barack Obama signs the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act was a bill that addressed discrimination in the workplace. It addressed wage discrimination due to sex, race, age and disability.
2012	A report from the ITUC revealed that Saudi Arabia had banned trade unions, collective bargaining and work stoppage. The report has also revealed that the rates of child labor, discrimination and forced labor was very high.
2018	The yellow vest movement happened because French president Emmanuel Macron introduced a green tax on fuel. Workers were not happy about this and decided to protest about it.

## VI. Possible Challenges & Solutions

**Key Issue 1:** The issue of garment workers having their orders cancelled due to COVID-19 is an unfair issue that specifically targets low-income garment workers. Justice needs to be brought to the brands that catalyzed retroactive order cancellation and caused garment workers to lose money. A way to prevent this from happening again should also be addressed and also a plan should be formulated that would help with these situations when a similar event like COVID-19 happens again.

**Key Issue 2:** The issue of gender-based violence and discrimination in the workplace is very serious. This is because most female workers that are facing gender-based violence and discrimination have no choice but to continue working. Resolutions should work towards helping these workers get out of dangerous and discriminatory workplaces and also should work towards punishment of people who attempt gender-based violence.

**Key Issue 3:** The issue of forced labor would need to be addressed very seriously. This is because forced labor reflects slavery which was abolished many years ago. Although it reflects slavery, forced labor is still happening around the world. The aforementioned example of the issue in the Uyghur region would need to be addressed in the resolution after discussing with the delegate of China. Many other countries should be researched on forced labor because many other governments have also dabbled in forced labor.

## **VII. Recommendations for Resolution Writing including Research**

Delegates should research their country's stance on the question of the erosion of workers' rights. Delegates should look into trade unionization rates and their countries laws on trade unions as they will play a huge part in writing a resolution. There are some countries that specifically ban trade unions like Saudi Arabia. Delegates are recommended to look at their country's laws and any key events that happened within their country that relate to this issue. These key events could be issues that are specifically happening in their country regarding workers' rights like China's issue with the Uyghur region or it could be events where the country's government is working towards fixing the erosion of workers' rights. Delegates are also encouraged to seek out countries with similar perspectives as theirs as it will help them write their resolutions. Delegates should also research other countries that have high trade union membership rates and figure out how those countries' trade unions are working towards resolving the issue of erosion of workers' rights.

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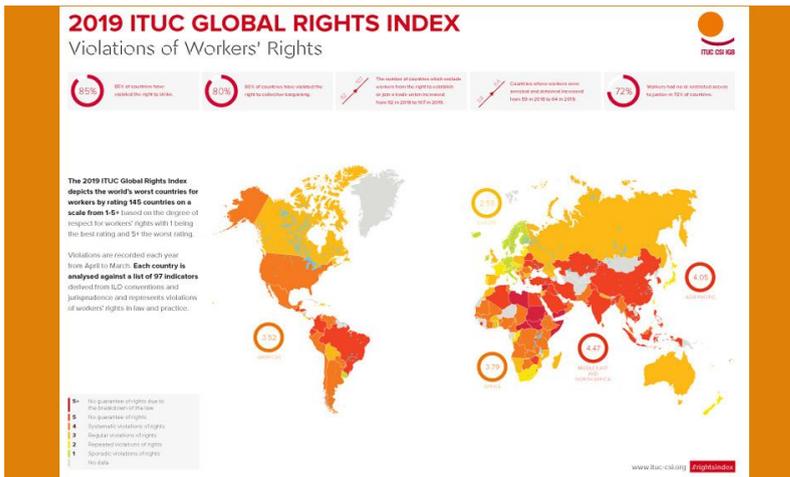
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## IX: Additional Resources



<https://prospect.org/notebook/alt-labor/>



<https://www.globalrightsindex.org/en/2022>



<https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2019/05/06/the-state-of-global-trade-union-membership-infographic/?sh=39f491742b6e>