

# GLOBAL RISKS

Peace, democracy and rights are being increasingly threatened in the context of a failing global economy. Conditions in many countries have deteriorated since the ITUC Berlin Congress, and the impact of unemployment, poverty and economic insecurity as drivers of conflict are becoming ever more apparent. Historic levels of unemployment, inequality and poverty are providing fertile ground for recruitment to lawless gangs and fundamentalist causes. Attacks on freedom of association and social dialogue, the closing of democratic space in many countries, the devastating effects of the Ebola virus and the worst refugee crisis since World War II are major contributors to escalation of global risks.

Nationalist and sectarian sentiment is spreading, with extremism and intolerance moving to centre-stage in many national political environments.

Armed conflicts of varying intensity are taking place in some 40 countries, and the number of armed groups continues to increase. Conflicts have intensified across the MENA region with the rise of jihadi groups such as Islamic State, insurgency and instability in North Africa, and a state of permanent tension between Israel and Palestine as the Israeli government blocks any progress towards peace and a just settlement. The situation on the border of Russia and Ukraine risks spiraling into a new Cold War, with little or no sign that negotiations will resolve the crisis in the near future. In Asia-Pacific, geopolitical tensions are on the rise, and insurgencies continue in several countries. Internal conflict and/or jihadist insurgency are prominent in several African countries, and violent organised crime, in some cases complicit with government, is costing thousands of lives in some countries in Latin America. In virtually all these cases, women and children are disproportionately affected, including through enslavement and human trafficking.

In some cases where peace has been brokered and democracy advanced, they are now at risk. Threats and physical attacks against the UGTT in Tunisia are aimed at undermining its central and historic role in putting the country on a new course, while the peace agreement in Northern Ireland is at risk from a retreat into sectarianism fuelled by drastic cuts to vital public expenditure.

New drivers of war are also emerging, with the vast wealth of Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular being deployed to fight proxy wars in Syria and Iraq and support insurgency elsewhere. There are now some 40 armed groups in Iraq and 60 in Syria, of varying strength and shifting allegiance. Millions of people have been displaced in the region, and the ITUC, ITF and the ETUC will report on a joint mission to Turkey as one of the latest frontiers for hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing conflict.

The capacity of United Nations peacekeeping is being overwhelmed, and the timidity of the UN combined with disengagement of many countries from its role in protecting peace and security are leaving many millions of people without vital protection or hope that peace will prevail.

A key factor in the increase in armed conflict is the continuing roll-back of the role of government, as private corporations and the finance sector take increasing control over decision-making at the expense of democracy. They have succeeded in holding back reform of the global financial system, in finding compliant governments to provide tax shelters and in imposing a model of international trade which ensures that when the interests of business

collide with the public interest, business increasingly wins. The ITUC Global Poll shows that 78 per cent of people now believe that their national economy only serves the wealthy, while 84 per cent believe that citizens do not have enough influence over economic decision-making. The dominant model of international trade is expanding supply chains that are impoverishing workers and driving a continued shift from wages to profits and debases democratic decision-making by subjecting governments to unaccountable private ISDS procedures. This is in stark contrast to the desirable model of trade that increases interdependence, shares wealth and reduces potential for conflict. Governments, increasingly beholden to corporate interests, too often lack the courage to act to mitigate and reverse global risks. The true role of government, to regulate and deliver services in the interests of the people and find solutions to national and global challenges, must be restored.

Nevertheless, popular demand for freedom of speech and democratic rights, where these are absent or under threat, remains strong. The people of Hong Kong, backed by the HKCTU, are showing their determination to achieve democracy and examples of popular organising for rights, often with unions at the centre, are flourishing in every part of the world.

Recent history shows that governments can work together to address issues of global concern. After six years of complex negotiation on a range of contentious issues, the UN Arms Trade Treaty will enter into force just one week after this General Council meeting. 122 countries have signed and 54 have already ratified this treaty which, while not perfect, seeks at long last to ensure greater transparency and some regulation of the international arms trade. Governments are still able to rise to the challenge, but often only do so when public pressure leaves them no alternative.

Long-familiar risks to global security, and newly emerging dangers, will test the weakened role of governments and global institutions to the limit.

The threat of further nuclear proliferation and the nightmare scenario of a nuclear button being pushed in North Korea is a constant fear for people in the region and around the globe. Maintaining the world's deadly nuclear arsenals costs around \$100bn per year – money that could be redirected to vital human needs like much of the \$1.7 trillion annual military expenditure worldwide. The arms industry continues to make huge profits, with more than 100 companies with military sales of over \$700 million per year, not including China, and the largest selling tens of billions of dollars' worth of armaments each year.

The impending devastation of unmitigated climate change poses a real and present danger, as climate catastrophes continue to multiply and competition for land, potable water and other vital resources intensifies with rising sea levels.

Escalation of cyber-conflict is another area of significant emerging risk. Already, governments and their proxies have been deploying cyber technology against other governments in a range of current conflicts, and in many cases against popular movements for democracy and rights. Beyond these cases is the spectre of full-scale cyber warfare, which is now integrated into military planning in many countries. This involves disruption and disablement of critical infrastructure with the potential to wreak untold damage on civilian populations. Many observers consider that it is a matter of when, not if, such destructive technology is unleashed.

Global risks are multiplying, and the international system today does not have the answers. Nor do many countries have the resilience to deal with these risks when they become reality. The Ebola epidemic is a stark example of the effects of decades of failure of development policy and governance. Despite urgent warnings from MSF and others, the slow response of the international community will have cost thousands of lives by the time the epidemic is brought under control.

Against this background, the unifying role of the trade union movement, its democratic credentials and its commitment to democracy and peace, are more crucial than ever before. Campaigning for trade union rights and

against attacks on social dialogue is an act of democracy and peace in itself. Advocacy for full employment and decent work is an essential element to guarantee social justice and stability and to remove inequality and economic deprivation as principal drivers of conflict. Social dialogue to underpin the transition to a low-carbon economy is a further example of the crucial role of unions in tackling global crises which, if left unattended, threaten the very fabric of societies.

The trade union movement must also meet the challenges of the changing nature of the world of work. With the dominance of corporate interests over government policy, advances in technology, both in terms of technical applications as well as the huge growth in access to technology, risk being used to deepen inequality and insecurity. This is not however inevitable, and the union movement must be ready to shape the future of work in a way that benefits people rather than the simply corporate bottom line. Reinvestment in full employment and decent work, and implementing the ILO Social Justice Declaration, must be at the heart of this effort.

## **Recommendations:**

### **The General Council:**

- Reaffirms the ITUC's commitment to global nuclear disarmament, and its campaign action for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It calls on all affiliates and Regional Organisations to promote the petition to be presented to the UN at the 2015 NPT Review Conference;
- Calls on all Governments to support the WHO to deploy resources to manage and resolve the Ebola epidemic and other global health challenges;
- Commits the ITUC to facilitating multi-country forums on emerging risks in 2015 beginning in Belarus, to raise our collective voice for freedom of association and democracy, with a global summit to take place in 2016;
- Endorses the coordination in 2015 of a major report, with inputs from affiliates, Regional Organisations and others that assesses global risks against the strength of both freedom of association and other democratic rights; and
- Confirms that the ITUC supports the ILO's Centenary initiative of the Future of Work and will invest in consultation with affiliates and GUFs in 2015 with a view to making a proposal for strategic Intervention in the deliberations of the ILO in the lead-up to 2019.