

UNI in the Middle East & North Africa



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Union rights a key issue

Winning trade union rights in the MENA region was identified as a key issue in a recent meeting of global unions - including UNI global union - in Amman.

"We still have a long way to go to win union rights across this region," said UNI Development's Raul Requena.

In many MENA countries freedom of association (into unions and political parties) is banned or restricted. Where there are union rights, migrant workers - who often outnumber home country workers - may be excluded.

"We need to build democracy, extend union rights and help grow existing unions," says Acting UNI-Africa Secretary Zakari Koudougou. "We need to get governments to sign up to international conventions on labour rights and occupational health and safety."

Unions in the region face new issues of privatisation and the arrival of multinationals and export processing zones as well as the impact of the continuing Israeli-Palestinian tragedy.

"As workers we always face daunting challenges," said Mazen Ma'aytah from the Jordanian union centre GFTU. "The private sector is the master of political and economic decisions - we have to strengthen unions to achieve social justice."

Organising is a huge challenge in the MENA region. In Egypt for example out of a workforce of 24 million there are three million union members.

UNI's global agreements with multinationals can help smooth the way to dialogue and recruitment. Union alliances - regional and global - can help unions tackle common problems.

'We have to strengthen trade unions to achieve social justice'

UNI-Africa conference in Tunisia - see page 8



UNI General Secretary Philip Jennings with Nasreddine Sassi - UNI's new man in Tunisia

Growing UNI presence in the MENA region

The new UNI office in Tunisia is part of the build up of UNI global union's presence in the MENA region.

An Arabic website run from Tunisia is in the planning stage along with a regular Arabic version of UNIBulletin that gives a monthly snapshot of global activities.

Four seminars in four months have brought together unions from graphical, finance and broadcasting and other global unions to look at ways to grow union visibility and cooperation in the region.

"A clear message is that many unions in the region operate without a regional or a global dimension," said Nasreddine Sassi, from UNI Tunisia office. "We need to connect unions across the region and with unions around the world. We have to find new methods of negotiating, campaigning and communicating."

A four-year UNI project to look at migration, decent work and union visibility is launching in Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, Senegal and Tunisia.

It's being financed by ISCOD Spain with the assistance of affiliates UGT and CC.OO and will cover workers in finance, graphical, IBITS, post and logistics and telecom.

UNI has 34 affiliates in ten of the 19 MENA countries covering finance, graphical, media and entertainment (MEI), post and logistics, telecom, commerce, social security and professional and managerial workers.





Growing union visibility in the Middle East and North Africa

Raising the visibility of trade unions in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) is a key objective for global union federations.

GUFs - including UNI global union - are building a growing presence and are working closely with the FES foundation, Germany.

UNI took a significant step in 2007 with the opening of an office in Tunis with a MENA coordinator - Nasreddine Sassi.

At the annual meeting between global unions and FES - held in Amman last September - building stronger and more visible unions were key priorities in helping to strengthen collective bargaining and win improvements in pay and conditions.

The meeting spotlighted continuing work on gender issues, involving more women and young people in unions and tackling union rights for the large number of migrant workers in the region - often legally excluded from joining unions.

Greater research and mapping of industrial relations in the MENA region were also discussed.

"We still have a long way to go to win trade union rights across this region," said UNI Assistant General Secretary Raul Requena in Amman.

"We have to do much more in basic trade union education to help unions in their dealings with the multinationals - the region is a major target for the multinationals.

"And if we are to build stable democracies we have to bring decent work to young people in countries where their unemployment currently ranges from 37-73 per cent."

Roland Schneider from the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD briefed the meeting on the OECD Guidelines for the behaviour of multinationals that can be a tool for unions in dealing with foreign companies that break the rules.

Many unions in the region are still unaware of the revised Guidelines with its system of National Contact Points (usually in government ministries) to resolve complaints.

It's a very current issue with multinationals from Africa and elsewhere moving into the MENA region - particularly in finance, commerce and telecommunications. Several governments in the region are privatising a range of public enterprises.

Time for a group photo during the annual meeting between the Global Union Federations and FES Germany - held in Amman, Jordan



Familiar faces moving into the region





More real agreements are needed



Tripartite collective bargaining in Tunisia (Graphical)

Without collective bargaining there is no trade union activity, Amman-based Bilal Milkawi from the International Transport Workers Federation told Graphical unions.

He called for professionalism in researching and preparing claims to often better resourced employers and highlighted the rising living costs facing workers.

“We need more real agreements and to take part in real collective bargaining,” said Jaafar Khalil Ebrahim, from GFBTU Bahrain - one of UNI’s newest affiliates.

His federation runs training courses in bargaining for its unions.

A series of seminars organised jointly by UNI global union and FES foundation Germany looked at collective bargaining strategies and objectives.

The realities of bargaining vary across the MENA region with a growing private sector and a need to build union organisation in those companies.



In Tunisia for example there is a tripartite system of collective bargaining that determines three-year contracts.

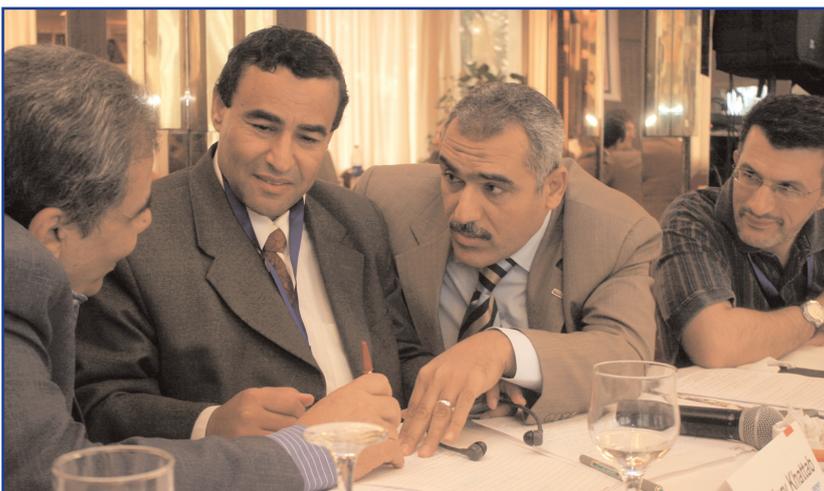
The Tunisian economy has been going through a gradual privatisation of state enterprises and is experiencing increasing numbers of joint ventures with foreign companies (many from France, the Arab world and southern Africa).

The triennial process begins with discussions between union centre UGTT and the government and is then followed by collective bargaining in the sectors.

A key issue in the negotiations that began in 2008 is pay, following increases in food prices and inflation generally running at 4.2%.

Ensuring that agreements are applied in enterprises is an on-going process once an agreement is signed.

Above: protesting working hours in a street demonstration in Tunis
Below: role-playing negotiations during the Cairo seminar for broadcast unions



In the course of preparing this UNIreport Noel Howell paid a short visit to the Graphical negotiations in Tunis - which, like in other sectors, are tripartite with union and employer teams chaired and conciliated by a Ministry of Labour official.

“UNI supports dialogue, which is important not just in dealing with the issues of today but also in preparing for the challenges of tomorrow,” said Noel.



Lively discussion during a workshop session at the Cairo seminar for broadcast unions

Strengthening union networks in the MENA region

Unions in the finance, graphical and media and entertainment sectors in the MENA region have agreed to step up their cooperation and to build effective union networks.

Organising new members is a priority along with calls to unions in the region to involve more women and young people in their work and to reach out to migrant workers.

A network of graphical and packaging trade unions across North Africa and the Gulf was launched out of a workshop held in Amman, Jordan in August.

The workshop - organised by UNI Graphical and FES foundation Germany - looked at union strategies to support organising in multinationals, build collective bargaining and step up work to improve occupational health and safety.

In November in Cairo MENA broadcasting unions identified organising workers in new, privately owned commercial television as a key priority - along with equal opportunities.

They looked at ways to increase cooperation and strengthen collective bargaining and discussed the threat to jobs from new technology.

The Cairo seminar was also a UNI-FES event in cooperation with the General Union of Press Printing and Information, Egypt.

More than 20 trade unionists attended the Cairo seminar - from Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan and Egypt.

Finance unions had a similar, successful seminar in Tunis.

It's all part of UNI global union's growing work in Arab countries with the establishment of a Tunis office with Nasreddine Sassi.

UNI Graphical global union also has a coordinator for the sector in the region - Mongi Abderrahim of FGPS Tunisia.

"We are building a network that respects differences," said UNI Graphical's Adriana Rosenzvaig. "We need a strong organisation that will come from the commitment of unions at a national level."

Graphical unions from Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco and Tunisia endorsed plans for the network and for a regular questionnaire to brief unions on developments across the region.

Working groups looked at ways to develop the network and build union organising initiatives.



Nasreddine Sassi, UNI Tunis, with UNI Development's Raul Requena



Finalising the workshop flipchart during the Graphical seminar in Amman

Mediterranean initiative targets French banks

A Mediterranean alliance in the finance industry aims to strengthen union rights and collective bargaining in French-based banks in Tunisia.

Tunis-based finance union FGBEF is working with French bank union federations with the aim of signing an agreement with French banks operating in the country.

As well as union rights and collective bargaining in multinational banks based in Tunisia, it's hoped to build capacities and bridges between finance unions in the Mediterranean and the Middle East and North Africa region.

"This is an important step for Mediterranean cooperation," said Abdelhamidi Jellali, FGBEF General Secretary and UNI-Africa Vice President.

"UNI provides the network for unions to work effectively across borders and we plan to strengthen that work in the MENA region."

The FGBEF has 13,000 members out of the 17,000 workers in the sector in Tunisia. Problems facing the union include privatisation, mergers and a lack of respect for union laws from some employers.

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"Privatisation is a master that all countries suffer from - it's a particular problem in Arab and developing countries because there are no agreed rules for globalisation," said Yasin Al Faresi of GFKTU Kuwait.

Mohamed Alzubi of Jordanian print union GFJTU reported on a campaign to modernise Jordanian labour law. "We're preparing unions for migrant workers and we are entering the multinationals."

UNI MEI President Heinrich Bleicher-Nagelsmann promised the Cairo seminar consideration of further initiatives with broadcast unions in the MENA region.

"This has been a very good start working together and it has given us a clearer picture of the needs of each of the eight countries," Heinrich told the closing Cairo session.

Seminar members visited the studios to meet colleagues in Egyptian TV-Radio and Nile TV (which broadcasts overseas via satellite in English, French and Hebrew). 36,000 staff work at the central Cairo studios.

Governments in the region were urged to ratify international conventions on labour rights and occupational health and safety.

Seminar participants called for more training - and re-training to create new jobs and ensure job security in a period of rapid technological change.

Unions were urged to be involved in managing change. "We have to be at the heart of this process to deal with the negative impact of these new technologies," session chair Omar Ahmed from the Sudan told the Cairo seminar.

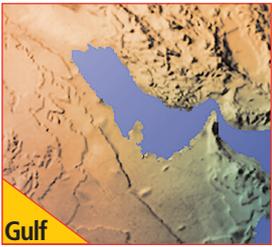
Unions were also urged to step up their work on health and safety to help protect members. From GTUPPI Egypt's Ahmed Abd Elhamid came a call for specialised medical services and more training - "the more training we have, the safer our work places will be".

"Health and safety is a key issue for unions to take up. You can have all the laws in place but if you don't have a union looking at conditions, nothing will happen," said Adriana.

More seminars are planned for the region.



Abdelhamidi Jellali



Pressure on governments in Bahrain and in the Emirates

Campaigning for rights in the Gulf



Bargaining role-play at GFBTU offices in Bahrain



UNI's Noel Howell with the GFBTU's Ebrahim Rahman, Abdulla Mohammed Hussain, Salman Jaffar Al Mahfoodh and Ebrahim Hamad Abdulla



UNI MEI's Jim Wilson and Heinrich Bleicher-Nagelsmann with Yasin Alfaresi and Soud Alenezi from Kuwait, during a joint UNI MEI-FES seminar in Cairo

Unions in Bahrain have won new backing from the International Labour Organisation in their campaign to end the government's ban on public service workers forming their own unions - a restriction that hits groups like Post Office employees.

"All public service employees (with the exception of the armed forces and police) should be able to establish organisations of their own choosing to further and defend their interests," said the ILO's Freedom of Association Committee.

The ILO has also urged the government to compensate Najjeyah Abdel Ghaffar, who is one of the top leaders of the Bahrain postal union that the government brands as an "illegal and unlawful entity". She was suspended without pay several times for her union activities.

"One of the fundamental principles of freedom of association is that workers should enjoy adequate protection against all acts of anti-union discrimination in respect of their employment such as dismissal, demotion, transfer or other prejudicial measures," said the ILO Committee.

Getting Bahrain to sign up to ILO Convention 87 (freedom of association) is a key union target.

Bahrain allowed unions to emerge from worker committees in a 2002 Labour Code after decades of suppression in a country where the first Gulf union (petrol workers) was formed in 1938.

The General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions - was founded in 2004 and now has 76 affiliated unions. It became a UNI affiliate last November after a decision of the UNI World Executive.

But restrictions are not confined to forming unions in the public sector - Bahrain unions have a new campaign to challenge restrictions on the right to strike in sectors of the private economy.

"We are witnessing a new surge against liberties and behind the (Bahrain) real estate boom there is poverty," said the Federation's Abdulla Mohammed Hussain who is also a member of the workers' team on the ILO Governing Body.

The emergence of unions in the Gulf region means that UNI now has affiliates in Kuwait and Bahrain and has contacts with unions in Oman.

The United Arab Emirates however has rejected international calls to legalise unions, collective bargaining and political parties.

It is under scrutiny by the UN Human Rights Council with proposals from Geneva to broaden human rights in the UAE, including allowing unions open to migrant workers - who outnumber domestic workers there by about five to one.



Nada Choueiri and Galila Osman try out presenters chairs during a visit to the Egyptian Broadcasting studios in Cairo

Making equal opportunities a strategic MENA objective

Equal opportunities are a big issue for workers in the MENA region - both at work and in the operations of their unions.

"We have to promote gender balance," says Acting Regional Secretary Zakari Koudougou. "UNI-Africa has development projects aimed at women to help them build their own agenda for equal opportunities."

Full participation for women in broadcasting was demanded by those attending a UNI-FES seminar for broadcast unions in Cairo.

"As trade unionists we need to organise more women and we need more women leaders if we are to organise these workers," UNI's Jim Wilson told the seminar.

Equal opportunities is a particular problem in private broadcast companies, warned Galila Osman from Egypt who helped chair a keynote session in which there were calls to make equal opportunities a strategic objective in the region.

The conclusions called for "equal opportunities between men and women and invites media women to take part actively in their unions".

UNI sectors are growing in the MENA region as multinationals arrive in finance, commerce and telecommunications - offering new jobs for women.

"The region is in a process of change from public to private and it's the job of UNI and its unions to ensure the rights of workers - women as well as men," says Nasreddine Sassi, UNI Tunis.

Unions are being urged to reach out to women workers and involve those members in the full range of union activities.

"We need to convince people of new approaches, based on discussions."

Women technicians at work in the Cairo studios



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Tunisia, May '09: UNI-Africa conference

UNI-Africa facing up to its future

Building strong unions through organising is a key theme to UNI-Africa's second regional conference, which is being held in Hammamet, Tunisia on 11-13 May.

Multinationals increasingly visible on the continent will be among prime organising targets - helped by the growing number of agreements signed by UNI global union with global companies to establish dialogue and to ensure union rights.

Small unions are being encouraged to merge and continuing development support is being offered to build stronger, democratic unions and promote gender balance.

"UNI-Africa belongs to the UNI global family and promotes the interest of affiliates through building strong unions, decent jobs, justice, equality, democracy and peace," says Zakari Koudougou, who is Acting UNI-Africa Secretary. "Union strength relies on internal democracy, communication and transparency."

The theme of the Hammamet conference is "UNI-Africa facing up to its future" - a programme that includes promoting gender balance, boosting the visibility of UNI-Africa, lobbying hard to ensure Millennium Development Goals are met and playing its part in the response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

"There have been significant changes since our last conference in Johannesburg in 2003 with signs of increasing economic growth," says Zakari. "There has been some debt relief and some progress on good governance. But this has not always been translated into job creation - and conflicts still afflict the lives of millions of African citizens."

UNI-Africa is pressing for recognition by regional organisations like the Africa Union. "We want to build alliances with civil society organisations to help lobby on issues like HIV/AIDS, debt relief and financial management," says Zakari.



uni africa

Hammamet
11-13 May

Growing multinational presence

The last five years has seen a big growth in the number of Western - and South African - multinationals across Africa. It's part of a significant shift from public to private sector in African economies.

UNI-Africa's response is to build union networks in these companies - and link up with unions in UNI's global alliances.

Global agreements have already been established with companies like France Telecom and Nampak, there's a regional agreement in Barclays Bank and union alliances include Vodafone and MTN.

Only last December UNI signed a global agreement with G4S who employ 570,000 workers around the globe - two thirds of them in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and South America.

"Unions are no longer alone when dealing with a multinational - global agreements ensure dialogue and union rights and there are other unions in the region and globally who have a common cause," says Nasreddine Sassi, UNI Tunis.



Conference Centre,
Hammamet (above)

Sea Gate - entrance to
the Tunis souk (left)

Hotel Royal,
Hammamet (below)



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