MOBILISING FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE
Soaring costs of food and fuels are pushing people to the brink all over the world, compelling them to take to the streets. On top of the continuing impacts of the pandemic, Russia’s war on Ukraine has played a major role, driving up the prices of oil, gas and staples like wheat and cooking oil, major exports of both Russia and Ukraine. As a consequence, over 12,500 protests were documented in 2022, across 148 countries at all levels of economic development.

Protesters typically blamed governments and called on them to protect them from the impacts of cost of living hikes. In numerous contexts, economic anger heightened longstanding grievances over unemployment, low pay and exploitative labour practices, economic inequality and ever-growing elite wealth, corruption, poor governance and the denial of civil and political rights. For many already struggling to get by, frustrated by the absence of economic opportunities and forced to live with minimal social safety nets and poor public services, rising prices were the tipping point.

Alongside street protests, in many places people took collective action in the forms of strikes and unionisation campaigns to demand wage increases and labour rights. Time and again governments proved largely unable to assuage the anger, in many cases opting instead for violent repression.

A year of economic strife leaves governments and big businesses facing renewed questioning. It’s clear the current global economic system based on low business regulation and elite wealth creation isn’t working for most people. The latest crisis should provoke renewed inquiry into whose interests economic arrangements serve and how economic power can be redistributed, globally and within nations.

PROTESTS AROUND THE WORLD

Very often, amid generalised anger at rising prices, government actions that appeared tone-deaf or threatened to further worsen the situation were the spark that fanned protest flames. These events suggested that governments were out of touch or didn’t care.

That was the case in Indonesia, where protests were sparked by a fuel subsidy cut in September. The decision came with no consultation, inadequate provision for those worst off and no investment in alternatives. Thousands protested, with students to the fore, bringing heavy-handed security force responses.

Around the world fuel subsidies need to be phased out to reduce climate harm – but the transition must be just and not throw people into jeopardy. There was little indication of such thinking in Indonesia. The government has since passed a regressive new criminal code giving it even stronger powers to repress protests.

Often protests triggered by economic strife won concessions but these fell short of the bigger changes demanded. Protests in Panama in July triggered by rising prices tapped into years of anger at successive governments over corruption, economic inequality and poor public services, belying the country’s reputation as an economic success. Weeks of protest led by teachers’ groups...
The immediate issues were the catalyst that caused social discontent with the structural problems to boil over. This led to protests on issues such as health, education, poverty and food insecurity."

EILEEN NG FÁBREGA
Panamanian Chamber of Social Development

In Ghana worsening economic conditions gave rise to a new protest group, Arise Ghana. Like Indonesia and Panama, the country’s international reputation is one of relative socio-political stability and success. But with inflation at 37 per cent and a third of people under 30 unemployed, many lived on the edge even before the government introduced new taxes, including a levy on electronic money transfers. The levy caused protests in June and rising food costs sparked further protests in November. June’s protests brought reports of multiple injuries in clashes between police and protesters, with police using rubber bullets, teargas and water cannon.

SRI LANKA IN MELTDOWN

Economic crisis was on the cards in Sri Lanka anyway, and people knew where the blame lay. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had systematically restricted dissent and eliminated checks on his power, which allowed him to make increasingly high-handed economic decisions, including an array of debt-funded infrastructure projects. A ban on chemical fertilisers suddenly introduced in 2021 caused a food crisis in 2022. Normal life ground to a halt, with lengthy power cuts and people going without meals. Inflation hit record levels and the currency collapsed. Little wonder so many took to the streets in months of protest that brought together a movement united across the country’s normal lines of division.

These protests, largely led by young people and students, represent a political awakening of various groups of our nation. Many women, older people, LGBTQI+ people, lawyers, religious clergy, artists and well-known people have been part of the protests. They have enriched the spirit of defiance, resistance, courage and creativity unleashed by youth, on an unprecedented scale."

RUKI FERNANDO
Human rights activist, Sri Lanka

Protest pressure told when President Rajapaksa resigned in July. But instead of what people demanded – a new constitution with proper checks and balances to hold political leaders accountable – all they got was a new president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, drawn from the old regime and continuing its draconian ways. He imposed a state of emergency and gave security forces additional powers to suppress protest and arrest dissenters. The result was a violent crackdown characterised by numerous detentions and torture as people continued to demand a fresh start.

SRI LANKA: CHANGE FALLS SHORT OF PROTEST DEMANDS
The impacts of the war in Ukraine, close to home across Europe, gave rise to protests as winter approached. In November, tens of thousands took to the streets in Albania in protest at the high cost of living on top of deep government corruption.

Challenges were particularly acute in Moldova, a country heavily reliant on cheap Russian gas and Soviet-era electricity infrastructure across the border in Ukraine. This left it vulnerable to Russia’s decision to slash gas supplies and its air strikes on Ukraine’s power grid.

In 2021 Moldovans angered Russia by electing a pro-European government, kicking out corrupt pro-Russian politicians. The new government has accused Russia of waging ‘hybrid warfare’. When thousands protested in September, many called for friendlier relations with Russia to ease the economic pressure. Rallies were organised by the main opposition pro-Russian party, led by an exiled convicted fraudster seeking to capitalise on deep public worry about soaring inflation and interest rates. In February 2023 the government quit, blaming a crisis caused by Russia’s aggression.

Similar issues were at play in the Czech Republic, where a protest of around 70,000 came in September as a result of the convergence of far-right and far-left parties. As in Moldova, protesters demanded the resignation of the pro-Europe prime minister and a shift in policy towards neutrality, ending sanctions against Russia and reaching a new agreement on gas supplies. Some protesters carried banners with anti-European Union and anti-NATO messages.
This was far from the only protest focusing on NATO, which became politically more prominent as Finland and Sweden moved towards joining the alliance. Ahead of the NATO summit held in Spain in June, over 2,000 people mobilised against what they called ‘NATO’s war against Russia’, with some waving Soviet flags.

All these instances pointed to the potential for economic anger to be co-opted by regressive forces. There may be more of this to come, not least if people see vital social spending slashed while military budgets grow. But in the main, anti-NATO protests have been sparse, and the anti-NATO content of economic protests has been systematically inflated by Russia’s disinformation machinery. Disinformation tried, for example, to make out that a Belgian trade union march on the cost of living was an anti-NATO protest.

VIOLENT RESPONSES

As the rising cost of living drove protests even in heavily repressed countries where they rarely take place, state violence was often the default response. This was particularly the case when protests made demands for deeper political and social change. Many governments slurred protesters as foreign agents bent on unrest, choosing to deny the domestic reality of economic strife.

Deadly violence in Iran was deployed not only against the movement for women’s rights but also in response to protests triggered by food subsidy cuts and the collapse of a building in May. As protesters pointed to the deeper issues of mismanagement and corruption, the government, as in Kazakhstan, vilified them as agents of foreign powers, enabling lethal repression.

In Kazakhstan, rare protests erupted in January when the government suddenly withdrew transport fuel subsidies. Mobilisation continued, focused on corruption, poverty and inequality, even after the government reintroduced price caps. Refusing to countenance change, the government declared protests to be acts of foreign-instigated terrorism and used lethal force against them, aided by Russian troops. Over 200 people were reported killed and many more were detained and ill-treated. Nobody has been held accountable.

Violence came on both sides during protests sparked by high inflation in Sierra Leone in August. Multiple civilians and police officers were killed in protest violence, with security forces reportedly using live ammunition. Again, rather than acknowledge their legitimate concerns, the government repeatedly vilified protesters and characterised protests as acts of terrorism.

The response raised concerns about how police are trained to handle protests. The police have not sat down with interest groups to see how future protests can be organised. There are legitimate fears that given Sierra Leone’s recent history of violence, high youth unemployment and economic hardship, protests can easily get out of control and become very difficult to handle."

Lebanon, where people have long mobilised against dysfunctional governance, corruption and a failing economy that leaves many struggling to secure the basics, also saw instances of violence against protesters. In one case, army personnel and riot police assaulted university professors during a sit-in protest. Things have got so bad in Lebanon that many people stormed banks to steal their own deposits: they were driven to such desperate acts by strict capital controls, despite which political and economic elites have smuggled fortunes out of the country. Further mobilisation for systemic change, including the replacement of the political class, is guaranteed, even in the face of violent repression.
Lebanese depositors are desperate because their savings have been frozen, so they cannot withdraw them from banks. The way they are being mistreated is outrageous. If a depositor simply complains loudly, bank staff call the police on them.

**LEBANON: PEOPLE TAKE ON THE BANKS**

**ALAA KHORCHID**
Depositors’ Outcry Association, Lebanon

**LEBANON: PEOPLE TAKE ON THE BANKS**

**WORKERS ORGANISING**

In a dire economic context, workers in many countries took collective action to demand pay increases and better work conditions. Time and again, strikes were a key means by which unionised workers sought to improve their bargaining power. Among the many taking action were workers in crucial sectors such as education, healthcare and energy.

In October, striking French oil workers blocked refineries, leading to widespread fuel shortages. They targeted oil giants Exxon and TotalEnergies, like all such corporations beneficiaries of gargantuan profits due to the Ukraine crisis, paying shareholders huge dividends while their workers struggled with high prices. Similar demands were made by Norway’s striking offshore oil workers in July.

In September, a one-day national strike in Uruguay saw over a million people mobilise against wage cuts and neoliberal policies. Tens of thousands took part in a similar one-day strike in Greece in November. In Italy, neoliberal deregulation was a focus: taxi drivers went on strike in July over plans to liberalise the sector to allow aggressive new companies such as Uber into the market.

Nigeria was home to an eight-month strike by university lecturers that ended with the government making some concessions but leaving key demands unresolved. Worried by the loss of almost a year of education, even when they saw lecturers’ demands as legitimate, students started a movement calling on the two sides to come together and politicians to prioritise the right to education ahead of Nigeria’s February 2023 election.

Both the federal government and the union at some point made us feel like our education doesn’t matter. Every time teachers go on strike, we become passive spectators, just waiting on them to decide when to end it. We had to remind them that we matter too, and that it is our education and future that is at stake.”

**BENEDICTA CHISOM**
Student and campaigner, Nigeria

**LEBANON: PEOPLE TAKE ON THE BANKS**

**NIGERIA: STUDENTS HOPE TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL**

**A REPRESSIVE RESPONSE**

Because labour disputes challenged economic power, states often tried to suppress them. A lengthy dispute in Zimbabwe centred on declining teacher’s pay, something that has caused many to quit state education. When a national teachers’ strike started in February, the government’s response was to suspend over 135,000 teachers without pay.

It was the turn of Zimbabwe’s nurses to strike in June over poor salaries and work conditions. But in January 2023, as a further strike was planned, the government passed a law banning essential health workers from striking for more than three days.

The UK made a similar move, reacting to widespread strikes by announcing a proposed law to force workers in several sectors to observe minimum service levels.

When Hungary’s teachers went on strike in January, the far-right government flexed its sweeping pandemic laws to bring it to an end. In September five teachers were sacked for staging acts of civil disobedience.

It was a similar story in Togo when teachers went on strike in March. The government declared the strike illegal and sacked 137 teachers. Further sackings followed another strike in April. Three trade union leaders were arrested following a student protest to demand the return of dismissed teachers. The government also introduced further union restrictions in the labour code.

In Vanuatu the authorities denied permission for a teachers’ strike in early 2022 and said anyone taking part would be disciplined.

In Cambodia, a once-strong trade union movement
has been systematically suppressed by the authoritarian government. During the pandemic, over 1,300 NagaWorld casino company workers were laid off. A strike that began in late 2021 to demand reinstatements was declared illegal in early 2022. Striking workers were detained and charged, with eight held for two months in pretrial detention. Workers were also assaulted and sexually harassed.

Standing up for labour rights brought significant risks in Bangladesh too. In February, when several garment workers were fired, people protested by blocking a road. Police responded with batons and sound grenades, injuring at least 20 people.

In other countries the weapon of choice was vilification: El Salvador’s labour minister accused people taking part in International Labour Day marches in May of supporting criminal gangs.

LABOUR RIGHTS: KEY VICTORIES

In 2022, a landmark moment came in Uzbekistan: its cotton industry was declared free from systemic child labour and forced labour. At one point an estimated two million children and half a million adults were forced to process the country’s annual harvest.

This was a major achievement for civil society campaigning, which included advocacy to urge companies not to use Uzbek cotton until forced and child labour were eliminated. The next step will be to stop forced labour in neighbouring Turkmenistan.

Other victories came in India, where a two-year dispute ended in February with Shahi Exports, India’s largest garment company, agreeing to pay around US$4 million in unpaid wages. This major high-street supplier faced international campaigning over its refusal to pay annual cost of living increases.

In April, the Dindigul Agreement was struck: a major clothing company, Eastman Exports, agreed to eliminate workplace gender-based violence and harassment, following talks with unions, campaigning groups and the high street chain it supplies, H&M.

This is a historic labour rights win for around 5,000 mostly female Dalit workers, who are placed at the bottom of India’s caste system. This agreement is the first of its kind in India, the only one to cover spinning mills and the first to include explicit protections against caste-based discrimination, a problem that intensified during the pandemic.

CIVIL SOCIETY CAMPAIGNING ACHIEVES FORCED LABOUR VICTORY IN UZBEKISTAN

We have remained convinced of the importance of centring our campaigning around the demands of affected workers and civil society and the need to be guided by independent monitoring and reporting. And we have learned that advocacy for labour and human rights is a marathon, not a sprint.

ALLISON GILL
Global Labour Justice – International Labour Rights Forum

TAKING ON THE BIG BRANDS

Stakes were raised at the biggest employers. Amazon workers, now a 1.6 million global workforce, continued to defy a barrage of the company’s intensive anti-unionisation tactics to take collective action and seek union recognition. April saw a breakthrough in New York with the first-ever successful union recognition vote by Amazon warehouse workers. The year also saw several strikes over pay and workplace conditions. Workers went on strike in seven locations across Germany in May. A warehouse in the UK saw walkout protests in August over a derisory pay offer. On one of the company’s biggest sale days in November, warehouse workers in over 40 countries protested and held strikes.

It’s a similar story at Starbucks, with a burgeoning of union recognition at hundreds of US branches, in the teeth of the company’s opposition. In November workers at over a hundred stores went on strike for better pay and work conditions.

At both Amazon and Starbucks, multiple people claim they’ve been fired on flimsy pretexts in retaliation for organising, and Starbucks is alleged to have singled out unionised outlets for closure. Starbucks was found to have violated labour laws by refusing to recognise a union following a vote at a Seattle store, while in November, a court ordered Amazon to read out a public notice at its unionised New York warehouse assuring workers it will ‘cease and desist’ from retaliation.

Workers in other companies, including in UK and US Apple stores, have also started to unionise. The experience of working under the pandemic made
many people question old assumptions about what employers can demand and what a healthy work-life balance is. Big companies shouldn’t expect to have it all their own way anymore.

“We are hopeful that the grassroots efforts driven by workers who are tired of their exploitative and unjust working conditions have set in motion a push towards transformative change for improved conditions for hourly wage workers to include dignity and respect in the workplace.”

— Theresa Haas
Workers United, USA

In the global north, progress continued towards balancing relationships with work through civil society advocacy for a four-day workweek. In 2022, the biggest-ever test of the concept, a six-month four-day workweek trial involving 70 companies, took place in the UK. Many companies that took part decided to make the switch permanent. Most found productivity had either increased or stayed the same.

“The disruption to societal and workplace norms by the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the potential for very different models of work, for both workers and employers, and reinforced the need to rethink old, established patterns.”

— Hazel Gavigan
4 Day Week Global

Photo by Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

STARBUCKS WORKERS: PARTNERS IN SHARED SUCCESS?

Christian Smalls, head of the Amazon Labor Union, takes part in a pro-union protest. New York, USA, 5 September 2022.
When it comes to questions of corporate responsibility, much attention focused on big tech brands.

None was in the spotlight more than Twitter following billionaire Elon Musk’s takeover. His maverick approach proved bad financial news: in January 2023 it was reported that revenue had dropped by 40 per cent as over 500 advertisers had paused their spend. Musk’s self-professed free speech absolutism has seen hate speech and disinformation soar, with once-banned far-right figures allowed to return. Musk himself shared a far-right conspiracy theory.

Moderation systems have been dismantled, many staff laid off, including the entire human rights team, and Twitter’s Trust and Safety Council, a key advisory group drawn from civil society, was dissolved. But Musk’s free speech commitment evidently had limits: in December some journalists who’d reported on Musk and Twitter found their accounts temporarily suspended.

There’s a tech crunch underway: major companies have laid off over 70,000 staff in the last year. That means less moderation and more opportunities for disinformation and hate speech to thrive. But it’s about more than axing jobs: disinformation flourishes because controversy is good for business. Conflict keeps people engaged. Algorithms are designed to feed people endless streams of increasingly extreme content that reinforces pre-existing beliefs.

There’s a dissonance between the important role played in public discourse and political debate by platforms like Twitter and the ability of corporate owners like Musk to set and rewrite the rules. A more informed debate is needed about how online expression can be protected while hate speech and disinformation can be guarded against.

Spotify, dominant player in audio streaming, was also the centre of controversy in 2022. One of its most lucrative podcasts, the Joe Rogan Experience, was accused of repeatedly sharing COVID-19 disinformation. When some artists threatened to pull their work from the platform, the company took steps to clarify what constitutes disinformation. But the issue raised the question of how responsible online platforms are or can be for the content they share when it has harmful impacts. Market-dominant companies like Spotify have a special responsibility to act with care.

Once again the year has made clear that big businesses need to be held to account and can’t be left to regulate themselves. Many of the rights violations civil society works to challenge result from unaccountable private sector actions and are enabled by the sway big business holds over political decision-makers. This is why civil society has long sought to develop an international treaty to hold large corporations to fundamental human rights standards.

The process to develop a treaty began in 2014 and its eighth negotiating session was held in October 2022. The process is open-ended, but since every day without a treaty is another day of impunity, civil society is pushing for states to meet a deadline of 2025.

The current draft shows civil society’s influence, including by acknowledging the rights of excluded groups such as women, Indigenous people and children. But many in civil society are concerned about recent attempts to weaken the text and are pushing for clear rules, including on the mechanisms by which businesses will be held to account, offenders will be penalised and victims of violations will be heard.

The uneven pattern of state buy-in and participation poses a major challenge. Consistently, global south states have broadly backed a strong treaty and global north states – among them states that claim to make human rights central to their foreign policy – have voted against or pushed for a weaker agreement with low compliance standards. Latin American states have also been a major obstacle. The treaty process requires a bolder vision of what a transnational treaty can be.
American states are participating heavily but African states are little involved.

Despite impressive civil society coalition-building and advocacy, limited scope for influence is also a challenge. But this treaty is too important to be left to states and businesses. Civil society’s continued engagement — bringing forward the voices of those most affected by rights violations, such as women, Indigenous peoples and other excluded groups — will be key if an ambitious treaty is to result.

"I would expect a pretty good text, which in some ways reflects the character of the process, which has included a very strong civil society and social movements. From my perspective, the process has been sustained not only by the commitment of states to negotiate, but also by the impetus of civil society and dialogue among all involved.”

FERNANDA HOPENHAYM
UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights

TAXATION IN THE SPOTLIGHT

There’s another area where international rules could make a difference. In November, African states succeeded in pushing through a UN General Assembly resolution to begin intergovernmental talks towards a tax convention. The UN currently has no role in setting global tax rules, with the space claimed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the network of 38 of the world’s richest economies. The OECD sets rules to the advantage of wealthy states rather than in the interest of the world as a whole.

The resolution was, predictably, strongly opposed by many global north states; the US government tried and failed to water it down. But it had the support of many in civil society who have been urging change for years.

Campaigners are calling for much greater accountability in the usually opaque tax affairs of transnational companies, which result in an estimated US$483 billion a year lost in potential tax revenues. They want an agreement on a global common minimum corporate tax threshold to stop the race to the bottom where states compete to attract businesses by offering the lowest rates of tax, starving public coffers of revenue that could be used to meet public needs. This is something the OECD has failed to make progress on. The resolution could open the door to the development of a UN tax body. Civil society will keep engaging to try to make it happen.

A BROKEN SYSTEM

The cost of living crisis is just the latest manifestation of an economic system that doesn’t work for most people. It’s a system that benefits a few but impoverishes multitudes, that throws up periodic economic crises of its own making and seems incapable of helping humanity navigate crises such as the pandemic and the impacts of conflicts such as Russia’s war.

During the pandemic, states in the global north intervened on a massive scale to protect industries and save jobs. But large companies still do everything they can to avoid paying adequate wages and taxes, in both the global north and the global south. Some profited hugely from the pandemic – not just medical and pharmaceutical companies, but other such as home delivery services, many of which rely on a model of low wages and minimal labour rights.

Russia’s war has been just yet another opportunity for the fossil fuel giants, any number of which have banked record profits. At a time when fossil fuel companies should be repurposing or closing down, they’re booming, and much of their loot is being handed over to the already wealthy, accompanied by greenwashing but no serious transition away from fossil fuels. Even windfall taxes on excessive profits have been controversial and applied only patchily. Meanwhile millions have faced daily misery due to unaffordable prices, forced to make horrendous choices between eating and heating. Those that face the worst burden are the people already most denied power, such as women, young people and minorities.

It’s a little wonder many are now making the connection between the great scourges of unfair economies and worsening climate change. It’s increasingly clear that wealthy elites are disproportionately causing greenhouse gas emissions. An economic system that can’t seem to work without emissions and extraction is broken. But at the same time, struggling people necessarily protest when programmes such
as fuel subsidies are withdrawn. Alternatives are needed where the polluter rather than the poorest people pay, and where transitions meet the test of both economic and social justice.

Fossil fuel companies aren’t the only ones booming. Oxfam research published in January 2023 showed that during these times of crisis upon crisis, the richest just kept getting richer. Every crisis is just another opportunity, because systems are structured to work for the wealthy. But as this becomes ever more blatant, economic inequality is undermining political legitimacy.

People see their politicians rubbing shoulders with super-wealthy elites at events like the World Economic Forum. They’re sometimes drawn directly from that elite, with the same wealth and reluctance to pay tax, or at the very least, are anxious to placate the super-rich. It’s little wonder people are turfing out incumbents at election after election and some are listening to the siren voices of populists who promise change.

Even some very wealthy people have recognised the system is broken and in January 2023 made a call to pay more tax. More taxation for those who can afford it, including emergency taxes on wealth, would be a start. But many will keep questioning a system that enabled a tiny minority to get so rich in the first place while leaving many struggling to secure the basics. Civil society must urgently engage with these questions, and make sure that legitimate anger isn’t harnessed by regressive forces.

Civil society should critique the structural flaws in the current global economic model that benefits a few while leaving many vulnerable to crisis. Areas for advocacy could include progressive taxation, such as windfall and wealth taxes, social protection floors, universal basic incomes, union recognition and more effective business regulation.

With global military expenditures slated to rise, including in response to current conflicts and global power battles, new campaigns are needed to ensure that increased military spending doesn’t divert public funds from the social policies needed to protect the most excluded and vulnerable groups.

Civil society engagement with decision makers on climate policies should focus on ensuring a just transition that meets the test of both economic and social justice. Civil society efforts should focus on ensuring that moves to cleaner modes of energy production and consumption enable the creation of high-quality jobs and are accompanied by efforts to safeguard people from economic shocks.