

LGBTI trade unionists unite against global backlash at ILGA pre-conference

For the first time in 25 years, the ILGA World Conference returned to Africa, with a powerful pre-conference organized by the Council of Global Unions (CGU) LGBTI coordinating committee. Over 150 trade unionists, activists, and allies from across the globe gathered to discuss the growing global anti-LGBTI backlash and strategize on how to amplify support for LGBTI workers, communities, and people worldwide.



This event, a landmark moment in global trade union history, with 120 unions from the CGU represented and critical voices from both the global north and south engaging in meaningful dialogue. Hosted in Cape Town, South Africa, the Trade Union Pre-Conference served as a platform for LGBTI trade unionists to reflect on their ongoing struggles and victories, while strategizing on how to further protect and promote the rights of LGBTI workers globally.

The program was developed by LGBTI trade unionists within the CGU and guided by South African unions, ILGA-affiliated members, and the CGU LGBTI coordinating committee. The conference agenda highlighted the importance of solidarity, focusing on the urgent need to combat violence and harassment against LGBTI workers through the implementation of International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 190. The event also featured key moments of joy, including moving songs, dance, and testimonials from the South African liberation struggle, a reminder of power collective action.

In the spirit of solidarity, the CGU LGBTI coordinating committee provided financial support through SASK, enabling 16 LGBTI trade unionists from the global south to attend a two-day workshop before the official conference. This workshop focused on ending violence and harassment in the workplace and included 30 participants from across Southern Africa.

Voices of leadership and solidarity

Opening remarks set the tone for a transformative event. Chair Zingiswa Losi, president of the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) underscored the importance of unions pushing for the ratification and implementation of ILO C190, stressing that *“unions must push for LGBTI rights to be mainstreamed into the demands we make in collective bargaining.”*

Sue Longley, general secretary of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) addressed the CGU's ongoing work with over 207 million workers worldwide to build stronger and more inclusive global trade union movements. Longley pointed out the escalation of laws limiting LGBTI freedoms and stressed the broader struggle for human rights, calling on unions to stand firm in their solidarity against these anti-LGBTI forces.

“Unions are the forefront for all workers, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation. We all have a right to dignity and a safe workplace,” said Mugwena Maluleke, Education International president and general secretary of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU).

South Africa's deputy minister for women, youth, and persons with disabilities, Steve Letsike, spoke powerfully about the history of LGBTI rights in the country, noting that South Africa's progressive constitution would not have come to fruition without the support of trade unions. *“We must appreciate our motherland and the wealth of indigenous knowledge,”* said Letsike. *“Unions cannot exist without LGBTI persons. We must see the power of allyship.”*

Ymania Brown, co secretary general of ILGA World, praised the trade union movement for its long-standing commitment to human rights, remarking that *“the house of ILGA World was built on the back of the trade union movement. You are human rights activists.”*

Panels on global struggles and regional challenges

The pre-conference featured three in-depth panels discussing the global anti-LGBTI backlash, the fight for LGBTI rights and equality in the global south, and tools for creating a workplace free from discrimination.

Graeme Reid, the UN independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), highlighted the connection between legal reform and cultural acceptance, emphasizing the impact of anti-LGBTI hate groups in the global south. He also proposed the use of the Alien Tort Statute in the United States to combat these influences.

Jordania Ureña Lora from International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) focused on the need for unions to unite against growing right-wing opposition within the trade union space, while Kim Vance-Mubanga (Egale, Canada) discussed the importance of mass mobilisation and financial support for the LGBTI movement.

Maddy Northam from Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), Australia, brought attention to the younger generation's growing interest in unions through LGBTI activism, citing the success of the CPSU in engaging young people by championing LGBTI rights.

The second panel focused on the specific challenges facing LGBTI workers in the global south, with speakers like Mbali Sabela (COSATU) sharing the significant strides made in South Africa in LGBTI visibility and activism.

Tools for advocacy and collective action

The final panel at the pre-conference explored the tools trade unions can use to advance LGBTI rights in the workplace. Michele Kessler, Chair of United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) OUTreach in the United States, emphasized the importance of respecting pronouns, while Michael Craig from UNISON UK shared practical strategies for engaging trans workers, despite facing significant resistance within unions.

Building on global solidarity

The pre-conference concluded with reflections on the importance of ongoing struggle. Gina McKay from the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) emphasized that “*workers empower unions, workers empower movements.*” While Kimalee Phillip from the Canadian Labour Congress reminded participants of the critical importance of global solidarity, including with Palestinian workers fighting for peace.

Marvellous Tawomhera from the Zimbabwe Catering and Hotel Workers Union (ZCHWU) delivered a call to action, stating: “*Unions save lives. LGBTI workers must take up space in their unions and workplaces.*” Darienne Flemington from UNISON UK (photo) wrapped up the event, encouraging participants to continue to advocate and act with courage.



Next steps

The conference concluded with a vibrant celebration of culture and unity, as South African unions led the group in song and dance, embodying the spirit of resistance and solidarity.

The CGU LGBTI coordinating committee, alongside ILGA, will continue to fight for LGBTI rights in the workplace, drawing strength from the collective power of trade unions and their allies. The voices of LGBTI workers, amplified by this pre-conference, will continue to echo throughout the ILGA World Conference and beyond, strengthening the global movement for equality and justice.

(text from the website PSI)