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# LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION WITHIN THE GLOBAL TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

Dr. Mira Fey, think ahead

think  
ahead



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to those individuals working tirelessly to make all global trade union federations more inclusive, including for LGBTQIA+ people. Thank you for the time and effort you dedicated to participating in this study. We hope this report will be a useful resource.

In solidarity,

Mira Fey

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### LGBTQIA+ Inclusion within the Global Trade Union Movement

Report, Geneva, March 2024

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## Abbreviations

BWI	Building and Wood Worker's International
C190	ILO Convention No. 190
CGU	Council of Global Unions
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EI	Education International
ExCom	Executive Committee
FNV	Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging
GAF	Global Framework Agreement
GUF	Global Union Federation
IDAHOBIT	International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia
IFJ	International Federation of Journalists
ILGA	International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
ILO	International Labour Organization
ITF	International Transport Workers' Federation
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
IUF	International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Association
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, and other sexual and gender minorities
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSI	Public Services International
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
SOGIESC	Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics
TUAC	Trade Union Advisory Committee

## Glossary of essential terminology

### LGBTQIA+

The acronym refers to a range of different sexual orientations and gender identities, including lesbian (L), gay (G), bisexual (B), trans\* (T), intersex (I), asexual (A), queer or questioning (Q), and more (+).

### SOGIESC

The acronym refers to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics. It does not only include LGBTQIA+ people, but also heterosexual, cis people. All humans have a sexual orientation and a gender identity which are expressed in some way, and sex characteristics.

### Sexual orientation

A person's *sexual orientation* refers to who they are attracted to romantically, emotionally, and physically. Everyone has a sexual orientation. This might be *heterosexual*, meaning a person is attracted to people of the opposite gender, *homosexual*, meaning a person is attracted to people of the same gender, *bisexual*, meaning a person is attracted to people of the opposite and the same gender and potentially non-binary people, or *asexual*, meaning a person does not experience sexual attraction.

An asexual person might still be emotionally and romantically interested in another person without being sexually attracted to them. There are a range of other ways in which people define their sexual orientation, including *pansexual* which is similar to *bisexual*, but generally understood as the attraction to a person regardless of their gender, and *demisexual*, a person who might only experience sexual attraction after having

established an emotional connection to someone else.

A person's sexual orientation might not necessarily be linked to their sexual habits, experience, or relationship status. For instance, a bisexual person might be married to a person of the opposite gender and only have sex with that one person; this does not make them heterosexual, although it might look like that from the outside. Moreover, in a country in which homosexuality is criminalized, a person might be afraid of engaging in romantic and/or sexual relations with a person of the same gender. This does not make them heterosexual.<sup>1</sup>

### Gender identity and expression

A person's *gender identity* is that one person's internal sense of whether they are a man, a woman, or a nonbinary person. Everyone has a gender identity.

Someone's gender identity is not linked to their sex characteristics but can differ from these or align with them. A person's gender identity is invisible to outsiders and should not be assumed by looking at the way someone dresses.

Someone's clothes, hairstyle, make-up, mannerisms, and other external signals are considered as someone's *gender expression*; the way in which a person chooses to express their gender. This might be in line with their gender identity or not. For instance, a person might choose to conceal their gender identity to protect themselves from stigma and discrimination from their surroundings, but also from legal prosecution in countries that do not

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<sup>1</sup> You can access more information here:  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/sexual-orientation>

guarantee rights to sexual and gender minorities.

### Sex characteristics

A person's *sex characteristics* are their external and internal genitalia, including the penis and testes, and the vagina and ovaries. Additionally, secondary sexual characteristics, emerging during puberty, include breasts, pubic hair, facial hair, and voice changes.

A person's sex characteristics are used as indicator to assign their gender at birth but might not necessarily be in accordance with that person's gender identity and expression later in life. A person might also present ambiguous sex characteristics, either visible or not, and is thus understood as an *intersex* person.<sup>2</sup>

### Cis

A *cis* person is someone whose gender identity and expression as well as sexual characteristics are in line with the gender assigned at birth. This person is not trans\*. We consider it essential to use the adjective "cis" to indicate people who are not trans\* to move away from normative understandings that being trans\*, nonbinary, and/or gender non-conforming is a non-standard or deviant gender identity and expression.

Instead, by using "cis person", we can specify that this person benefitted from a certain privilege by growing up and being raised in their gender identity and expression. This does not mean that they did not suffer from other structural forms of oppression such as sexism, misogyny, or hegemonic masculinity, racism, xenophobia, and classism.

### Trans\*

A *trans\** person is someone whose gender identity is different to the gender the person was assigned at birth – this could be a trans woman, a trans man, a nonbinary person, and other people who identify differently.

Here, we use the \* to encompass the spectrum of trans experiences, including those trans people whose gender expression is in line with societal expectations as well as those who are not conforming to these expectations and whose gender expression might be considered outside of societal norms and standards. It is important to use trans\*/nonbinary as adjectives, not as nouns – someone is a trans\* person, not just simply "a trans" or "transgender" – this is commonly perceived as derogatory.

### Nonbinary

A *nonbinary* person does not fall into the binary gender categories of "men" and "women" but expands this understanding and is situated somewhere along the spectrum of gendered identities and expressions.

### Gender-diverse

*Gender-diverse* is used as an umbrella term to refer to people whose gender identity and/or expression does not correspond to what is perceived as the gender norm – this includes trans\*, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people.

### Heteropatriarchy

We use the term heteropatriarchy here to refer to socio-political structures guiding power relations and hierarchies in society.

Accordingly, predominantly cisgender, heterosexual men are placed in positions of power and therefore have authority over other

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<sup>2</sup> Read more about intersex people here: <https://interactadvocates.org> and here:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity/intersex-people>

cisgender men, women, and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions. Here, this term is useful because it emphasises that discrimination against cis women and LGBTQIA+ people overall stems from the same sexist social principle. This concept is important to better understand obstacles to inclusion within GUFs and the global workers' movement.

## Executive Summary

This report set out to examine the state of LGBTQIA+ inclusion within global union federations and the labour movement overall. Inclusion is understood as the integration of queer workers within unions in a meaningful and visible way and as the representation of their specific needs and demands as integral parts of collective bargaining agreements and other key union activities. After reading the results, you should have a better idea about why LGBTQIA+ inclusion matters and what strategies might be successful, why the LGBTI working group is a crucial instrument to achieve inclusion across all GUFs, and which internal and external obstacles those engaged in LGBTQIA+ inclusion are confronted with. We tried to give those people in charge of LGBTQIA+ inclusion within GUFs the floor as much as possible in the different chapters. For those short on time, we summarise key results and main takeaways below.

### LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the global trade union movement

In 2023, eight GUFs and the ITUC were actively engaged in LGBTQIA+ inclusion and represented within the CGU LGBTI working group. Some GUFs representing more female-dominated sectors have long worked towards becoming more welcoming for queer workers through targeted campaigns, networks, and explicit strategies. Conversely, other GUFs have only just started the process, for instance by adopting non-discrimination resolutions that include sexual orientation and gender identity as grounds for discrimination, joining the LGBTI working group, and participating in joint campaigns for IDAHOBIT.

It is important to stress that the LGBTI working group is a vital resource and a crucial tool for all GUFs to collaborate, exchange knowledge and best practices, and develop joint campaigns that

increase pressure on individual GUFs and their affiliates. Moreover, while this is an ongoing process, educational material can also be developed by the working group and disseminated within the different GUFs and their affiliates to show joint commitment and save time.

### Internal and external challenges

To date, LGBTQIA+ inclusion efforts are stifled from within GUFs, but also by outside forces. Internally, two of the biggest challenges are widespread knowledge gaps and the absence of related trainings, both for those actively furthering inclusion efforts as well as for their colleagues and the members of affiliates. Often, those engaged in inclusion work oversee developing trainings and educational material without necessarily having been taught how to go about this when looking at LGBTQIA+ issues.

Moreover, inclusion work is still seen as secondary to “bread and butter issues” by many and thus receives inadequate financial, temporal, and staff resources. Only sometimes are those in charge of LGBTQIA+ inclusion a regular member of ExComs or other key decision-making bodies within GUFs. This makes mainstreaming LGBTQIA+ workers’ rights as part of core union activities difficult, especially for those representatives who manage multiple diverse portfolios simultaneously and never seem to have enough time for any of them.

Externally, a key obstacle is the ongoing anti-rights backlash and related political opposition to LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Key activities are made difficult when affiliates choose not to participate in workshops run by inclusion officers because they promote LGBTQIA+ inclusion, or when affiliates in countries with anti-LGBTQIA+ policies are closely linked to governments. In international fora, including explicit mentions of



LGBTQIA workers' rights in international conventions or treaties is made impossible by states denying their existence and blocking any such reference. This can only be countered by a unified front presenting joint messages with explicit examples of successful LGBTQIA+ inclusion efforts from around the world.

## Best practice and next steps

To tackle widespread knowledge gaps, trainings and material explaining basic terminology as well as concrete, practical steps towards the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ workers and their specific needs have been successful strategies and need to be rolled out more broadly. Moreover, through holding workshops on LGBTQIA+ topics overall or on specific related issues, affiliates were able to attract and connect with queer workers. Collecting these successful trainings and materials prepared by individual affiliates and disseminating these across GUFs is an important step.

Through collaborating with LGBTQIA+ CSOs, unions can ensure expertise when trying to identify the most pressing issues for queer workers, while simultaneously providing LGBTQIA+ organisations with helpful tools and strategies linked to collective bargaining and workers' rights. Open exchange and dialogue between unionists and queer activists can teach both sides about common struggles and key similarities while diminishing differences. This is particularly important when faced with political opposition to LGBTQIA+ inclusion from within the union.

Furthermore, a key success strategy to furthering LGBTQIA+ inclusion efforts has been to frame

content in categories that affiliates are already familiar with, for instance as part of a health and safety dialogue, as a non-negotiable issue within a human-rights framework, or as a more general part of solidarity. Targeting more susceptible audiences such as women or youth is vital to convince those workers more likely to be allies. Here, the work with youth is of particular importance, both because young workers are more likely to be supportive or be part of the queer community, and because LGBTQIA+ rights are one key concern for younger people. Through addressing an issue young workers care about, GUFs and their affiliates can demonstrate their relevance and inclusive spirit.

## Main takeaways

Overall, GUFs and their affiliates need to be inclusive of LGBTQIA+ workers and their specific needs and demands to remain true to traditional union values such as solidarity and compassion. It is their responsibility to consider injuries to LGBTQIA+ workers and their rights as injuries to all workers. GUFs can exert influence in international fora such as the ILO as well as in negotiations with governments and governmental bodies.

Amidst a global anti-rights backlash, it is necessary to embrace queer workers and their rights as a key concern and to include their issues as essential parts of collective bargaining agreements and advocacy campaigns. LGBTQIA+ workers cannot be left behind anymore. *To fight anti-democratic and anti-union voices, including all workers is essential. We are stronger together.*

## Introduction

This report presents the case for the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, queer, intersex, asexual (LGBTQIA+) <sup>3</sup> workers' rights as an integral part of the global struggle for workers' rights. To do so, we look at the effort global union federations (GUFs) engage in to become more inclusive in their work, both within their respective federations and within the Council of Global Unions (CGU) <sup>4</sup> LGBTI working group. GUFs represent workers from around the world at the highest level of international politics and policy, be it within United Nations (UN) processes, in negotiations with multinational corporations, and during labour disputes at regional and local levels. To ensure all workers are represented, including LGBTQIA+ workers, from the highest levels to affiliated unions, it is essential for GUFs to actively engage in LGBTQIA+ inclusion efforts.

We understand LGBTQIA+ inclusion within GUFs as a combination of

- (a) *moving towards the elimination of excluding factors encountered by workers with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or sex characteristics (SOGIESC) within unions,*
- (b) *integrating the specific workplace needs and demands of these workers into strategic objectives and activities of GUFs and their affiliates,<sup>5</sup> and*
- (c) *considering LGBTQIA+ workers' rights as workers' rights.*

After reading the results, you should have a more comprehensive idea of why LGBTQIA+ inclusion

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<sup>3</sup> In this report, the acronym LGBTQIA+ is used, except when organisations use a different variation of the acronym, such as the LGBTI working group. Sometimes, the word queer is used as an umbrella term for people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Not everyone who falls under this category self-identifies as queer. For more definitions, please refer to the glossary on [page 2](#).

is important and how it might be achieved in practice, but also which obstacles hinder its realisation. If in doubt about terminology, consult the glossary on [page 4](#).

## Rationale and key questions

Globally, discrimination and harassment of sexual and gender minorities at the workplace remain all too common. Many employers are still not equipped to provide adequate parental support for queer families or satisfactory health care coverage for trans\* workers. LGBTQIA+ people are at an increased risk of being fired and/or not being hired at all when they are open about who they are and who they love. Less than half of the world's governments protect against employment discrimination on the grounds of SOGIESC.<sup>i</sup> Additionally, microaggressions occur on a daily basis, such as addressing someone with the wrong pronouns, through not providing safe spaces for queer people to talk about their partners, to the absence of gender-neutral facilities which disregards toilet dignity, a key component of a decent workplace.<sup>ii</sup> Meanwhile, the fight for LGBTQIA+ workers' rights remains a dangerous struggle as homosexuality is criminalised in 62 countries,<sup>iii</sup> and the freedom to peaceful assembly and association is not guaranteed for LGBTQIA+ people in 57 countries.<sup>iv</sup>

Faced with this blatant discrimination of LGBTQIA+ workers by governments and

<sup>4</sup> The Council of Global Unions (CGU) is a partnership between the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), nine GUFs (BWI; EI; IFJ; IAEA; IndustriALL Global Union; ITF; IUF; PSI; UNI Global Union), and the Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC) to the OECD. Not all GUFs are part of the LGBTI working group; to our knowledge, IAEA are not currently represented themselves.

<sup>5</sup> Local, national, and regional unions are also understood as "affiliates" of GUFs.

employers alike, global trade unions have a responsibility to fight for these workers as part of the global struggle for workers' rights. This is even more urgent because of the increased dangers workers with diverse SOGIESC are confronted with when trying to defend their rights without the backing of strong partners such as unions.

To date, multiple affiliates from different regions and some GUFs have included demands for LGBTQIA+ workers in their advocacy. Many others are still not fully equating LGBTQIA+ workers' rights with workers' rights overall. Until 2018, when the first meeting of a group of representatives from GUFs and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) took place, global coordination across different GUFs on LGBTQIA+ issues was non-existent.<sup>v</sup> After this first meeting, the CGU LGBTI working group slowly came into being, at the time funded by the Dutch national union federation *Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV)*. Partially stalled by the COVID pandemic, it has become increasingly more operational since an in-person strategic meeting in Amsterdam in December 2022 where more than 30 representatives of eight different GUFs, of the ITUC and of some national affiliates came together to discuss common challenges, best practices, and future collaborations.<sup>vi</sup>

This report takes the recent work of the CGU LGBTI working group as the starting point to explore the following key questions:

1. *How did LGBTQIA+ inclusion become part of the work undertaken by GUFs?*
2. *What strategies do GUFs use to integrate LGBTQIA+ workers and their demands into their work?*

3. *Which responses do GUFs have to the recent increased hatred and violence against LGBTQIA+ rights globally?*

## Methodology

To answer the three key questions, data was collected through document-based research and semi-structured interviews. The interview participants were representatives of the LGBTI working group, responsible for including LGBTQIA+ issues in their respective GUFs. After gathering background documents on current inclusion efforts, the current working group lead was contacted and interviewed in July 2023. Through this interview, we obtained contact details of the remaining members of the working group. 15 individuals working at 10 different entities<sup>6</sup> and the previous working group lead were contacted by email.

In total, 10 interviews with 12 individuals were conducted from July to October 2023. One person did not respond despite having been contacted multiple times. 8 interviews were carried out using MS Teams and 2 as in-person interviews in Geneva, Switzerland. 4 of the 12 participants self-identified as gay, bisexual, or queer, 7 specified that they were allies, 1 did not disclose their sexual orientation. None of the participants self-identified as gender-diverse.<sup>7</sup>

All interviews were recorded with the participants' informed consent. The interviews lasted an average time of 70 minutes. The transcriptions and relevant documents were coded in the textual analysis software MAXQDA.<sup>vii</sup> An inductive, iterative process known as qualitative content analysis was applied to code the interviews along key themes and sub-categories.<sup>viii</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), eight GUFs (BWI; EI; IFJ; IndustriALL; ITF; IUF; PSI; UNI Global Union), and ILGA.

<sup>7</sup> To preserve the participants' anonymity, no more information about their respective roles is included here.

## Outline

The report starts by reviewing inclusion within the global union movement. LGBTQIA+ inclusion within the workers' movement has only recently become the focus of academic publications, so these remain sparse. More information is available about the slow progress leading to the inclusion of women workers, and valuable insights can be drawn from this

process. After this review, the results are presented following key themes: the current progress regarding LGBTQIA+ inclusion, shared challenges experienced by different participants, and best practices and next steps. The report concludes with an overview of the key results and main take-aways of this study.

### Representation and inclusion matter(s) in GUFs

Global union federations are a sum of their affiliates, the different local, national, and regional unions spread across the globe and made up by individual workers. The coordination of hundreds of different affiliates with many thousands of members is accomplished by an executive committee (ExCom) comprised of long-term union leaders, representatives of the different regions and sectors, and bodies such as the GUF-wide congress and different thematic or sectoral committees. Decisions regarding overall strategy and statutes are taken by majority vote during the congress meetings held every few years, but prepared in-between by committees, the ExCom, or as resolutions submitted by affiliates. **Representation and inclusion of all workers, as diverse as they come, in these different decision-making bodies is crucial to ensure that they participate equitably.**

Over the years, GUFs have become more inclusive of workers from the Global South and of women workers, although white (male) union leaders are still over-represented in the different executive committees as a look on their websites reveals. In November 2023, the ITUC and five of the eight GUFs are led by a female president or general secretary: Education International (EI),

International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Public Services International (PSI), UNI Global Union, and the food, farm, hotels, and more global union IUF.<sup>8</sup> The three GUFs representing traditionally male-dominated sectors – Building and Wood Workers’ International (BWI), IndustriALL, and the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) – only recently adopted quotas to ensure a certain percentage of female leaders, and none of them currently have a female president or general secretary.<sup>9</sup>

However, when it comes to thematic representation, all GUFs include women workers’ rights as part of their campaigns and advocacy work. Their websites highlight persisting gender pay gaps and other inequalities linked to gender,<sup>10</sup> workplace harassment related violence,<sup>11</sup> and the need to respect the right to combine work and family responsibilities.<sup>12</sup> Often, a women’s committee deals with these issues and brings them to the attention of the congress and other decision-making bodies. Today, all GUFs have such a formalised structure, but this has not always been the case.

Regarding other disadvantaged groups, GUFs differ in their efforts to further their rights and inclusion. Some GUFs focus on equality more generally and strive to end various forms of discrimination faced by workers, such as discrimination based on “gender, age, ethnicity, religion, disability, immigration status, and sexual orientation”.<sup>13</sup> It is unclear whether there are

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<sup>8</sup> In 2023, these are Susan Hopgood as President for [EI](#) (since 2011), Dominique Pradalié as President for [IFJ](#) (since 2022), Britta Lejon as President of [PSI](#) since October 2023 (Rosa Pavanelli was replaced by Daniel Bertossa as General Secretary after serving in this role since 2012 during the 2023 Congress), Christy Hoffman as General Secretary for [UNI Global](#) (since 2018), and Sue Longley as General Secretary for [IUF](#) (since 2017). The [ITUC](#) is led by Luc Triangle as General Secretary (since 2023) and Akiko Gono as President (since 2022).

<sup>9</sup> These three GUFs are led by Albert Yuson (General Secretary of [BWI](#) since 2013), Atle Høie (General Secretary of [IndustriALL](#) since 2021), and Stephen

Cotton (General Secretary of [ITF](#) since 2014). The presidents of these three GUFs were also all men.

<sup>10</sup> Statements made by [PSI](#), [ITUC](#), and [EI](#).

<sup>11</sup> For instance, compare statements by [ITF](#), [UNI Global](#), and [IndustriALL](#).

<sup>12</sup> Here, this statement by [IUF comes to mind](#).

<sup>13</sup> This list is from the focus area “Equality” of the [ITF](#). The [ITUC](#) and [UNI Global](#) also have similar foci on their websites.

specific committees dedicated to equality in those GUFs. When it comes to youth, all GUFs now also shed light on the specific vulnerabilities and needs of younger workers, largely also through youth officers, committees, or informal networks.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, migrant workers and their experiences are taken into account by the majority of GUFs, at least through the websites.<sup>15</sup> Workers with disability are only mentioned by one GUF as part of their efforts.<sup>16</sup> When it comes to LGBTQIA+ workers, the focus of this report, three GUFs specifically mention and dedicate a part of their website to their experiences and issues.<sup>17</sup> There are people responsible for queer inclusion in most GUFs now, albeit rarely as dedicated LGBTQIA+ officers. In most cases, this is one of many tasks one or more people are responsible for, or it is even done on the side outside of formal working hours, as discussed below.

## Beyond the cisgender, heterosexual male worker

Overall, trade unions, while nominally advocating for progress and rights of all workers, have long reproduced the same heteropatriarchal structures that guide societies around the globe.<sup>18</sup> In many cases, male union leaders assumed that a key goal for management is to reduce costs. As a result, they organised workers around issues such as job-security, working conditions, and wages,<sup>ix</sup> without considering that these aspects affect workers differently

depending on their gender, race, migration status, sexual orientation, religion, and other characteristics. This created obstacles for unions to become more inclusive and account for the increased diversity of their members such as women, people of colour, and LGBTQIA+ people.<sup>x</sup> Issues that disproportionately affect these workers have not been at the centre of advocacy and collective bargaining process but were left on the side lines.

When considering the longwinded road to the inclusion of women workers within unions, important insights for overall inclusion processes emerge. In the UK, women had been part of the blue-collar workforce since industrialisation, for instance as textile workers where they outnumbered men in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xi</sup> At the time, “male leaders of the labour movement were open and supported [women’s active involvement]”<sup>xii</sup> and negotiated the salary based on the work and not on the worker’s gender.<sup>xiii</sup> Unfortunately, this had changed drastically by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when none of the workers’ organisation in the UK included women’s rights into their campaigns.<sup>xiv</sup> A key reason for the turn away from women workers’ rights were the strengthened Victorian morals which had relegated women to a secondary position in the family, combined with the appearance of the concept of the male breadwinner – both “straight-jackets which women are still trying to shake off”.<sup>xv</sup> As a colonial power, the UK imposed its strict morals in its colonies. These perceptions still represent obstacles to women’s participation

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<sup>14</sup> These efforts are, on the one hand, internal inclusion efforts to reduce access and participation barriers to young workers part-taking in union activities (for instance by the [ITUC](#) and [IndustriALL](#)), also because young workers are seen as the future of trade unions (highlighted here by [IUF](#)). On the other hand, GUFs engage in advocacy campaigns against increased precarisation and unemployment, also linked to the climate crisis and events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (as highlighted by the [ITF](#) and [UNIGlobal](#)). [PSI](#) combines these two aspects.

<sup>15</sup> Here, GUFs such as [BWI](#) and the [ITUC](#) refer to the relevant international conventions on migration, include the needs of migrant workers into publications ([IUF](#), for

instance), lead campaigns against exploitation and xenophobia (the efforts by [PSI](#) are worth noting here), and for the inclusion of migrants and refugees everywhere ([EI](#) is engaging in campaigns on this issue).

<sup>16</sup> [PSI](#) is leading the way to disability inclusion, stressing that “fighting inequality and injustice and protecting the most vulnerable is a key part of trade union action”.

<sup>17</sup> These three GUFs are [EI](#), [IUF](#), and [PSI](#). As will be discussed below, GUFs and trade unions more generally representing more female-dominated sectors have led inclusion efforts for quite some time.

<sup>18</sup> If you are unfamiliar with the concept heteropatriarchy, please refer to the Glossary of essential terminology for a definition.

in local unions,<sup>xvi</sup> as well as to the realisation of the rights of LGBTQIA+ people.<sup>xvii</sup>

**A closer look reveals the biggest obstacles to women workers' meaningful participation in unions, particularly as part of union leadership.**

According to women workers participating in a range of studies across time and different regions, these have consistently been time constraints due to a double burden of work and domestic responsibilities,<sup>xviii</sup> traditional union processes favouring male workers, and an overall masculine union culture, making women feel inferior and discouraging them from leadership roles.<sup>xix</sup> While important progress has been made, many of these structural barriers remain today, such as the lack of childcare provisions, inconvenient times or locations of meetings, and traditional masculine debate and participation styles.<sup>xx</sup> When considering how to make GUFs more inclusive for queer workers, changing the overall culture is crucial, as many of these workers are equally discouraged by the traditional masculine, heterosexual values and ideals.

**It is important to note that women have played instrumental roles in collective organising – despite the reluctant integration of women workers into union advocacy and in leadership roles.** Women across time and within different countries described participating in labour strikes as a welcome departure from traditional gender roles.<sup>xxi</sup> Women held male workers accountable and punished strike breakers,<sup>xxii</sup> were able to organise communities that have traditionally been viewed as difficult to bring together by union leaders,<sup>xxiii</sup> and played an important role for the outcome of strikes.<sup>xxiv</sup> Unfortunately, these contributions did not directly translate into a welcoming of women workers into union leadership.

GUFs, as well as national union leadership, have been partially aware of this divide between the successful participation of women during strikes and their absence in unions, especially as part of the leadership. **Faced with declining membership overall, unions had to develop strategies and**

**make structural and organisational changes to remain relevant.** As a result, the representation of women workers slowly improved: women's committees and women's departments and/or equality officers have been created, regular women's conferences organised, and quotas or other forms of rules adopted to reserve seats on executive bodies and ensure some form of proportional representation. Moreover, some unions also made additional changes to encourage women workers' participation, for instance by addressing child-care needs and by developing material in gender-neutral language. Finally, education campaigns have been crucial, aimed at teaching women workers the skills needed to become part of union leadership, while also sensitising both female and male workers to accept women in leadership roles.<sup>xxv</sup> The presence of women in the current executive committees of the majority of GUFs and the integration of traditionally "feminine" issues within GUFs' advocacy campaigns shows that these measures have been somewhat successful – although gender pay gaps and sexist discrimination and harassment at work remain at least partially. To date, very few of these success strategies have been applied to improve the representation of LGBTQIA+ workers as the next chapters show. However, those measures represent important lessons learnt for future inclusion processes. As one interview participant stressed:

*"It's the internal work that a union has to do to be an inclusive organisation. Unions have – within their living memory as an organisation – gone through a similar process regarding women. In many unions, there was pressure from female members for better representation, for better access to leadership and better education, so that's part of a road map. I think it's looking at that experience and how can we learn from that".*

## Queer workers and labour unions

Like women, LGBTQIA+ workers have long supported union campaigns for better employment conditions without being represented equitably as part of union leadership. **The presence of LGBTQIA+ people during strikes changed attitudes: their solidarity allowed for a dialogue and mutual learning process between more conservative, heterosexual, predominantly male blue-collar workers, and queer strike supporters.**<sup>xxvi</sup> In the UK, the alliance formed during the 1984-85 miners' strike between the queer group Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was instrumental in pushing the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and the Labour Party to adopt inclusive policy positions.<sup>xxvii</sup> Moreover, as early as 1976, discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation was included by a public service union in the UK, with other following suit quickly.<sup>19</sup> Overall, UK unions in the 1980s and 1990s were well ahead of public opinion with regards to LGBTQIA+ inclusion and helped change it.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Unfortunately, in other contexts, despite similar moments of solidarity during strikes, the politicisation of gender and sexual identities and the relatively conservative nature of some unionised workers slowed down the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ workers within unions.<sup>xxix</sup> In the US, the labour and queer movements have long functioned along different paths: while the labour movement focused on economic aspects and improving material conditions, the queer liberation movement has been centred around civil equality and the freedom of sexual and gendered self-determination. As some researchers highlight, queer workers benefit from collective bargaining agreements, but SOGIESC issues do not traditionally motivate unions.<sup>xxx</sup>

With generational changes and an increased openness to LGBTQIA+ people in the new workforce, this is slowly changing, while young queer workers are also becoming more **perceptive of their rights.**<sup>xxxi</sup> For instance, *Pride at Work*, a US-based nonprofit organisation founded in 1994, fights to integrate queer workers into the labour movement, educate unions about LGBTQIA+ issues to foster support, and inform the queer community of how to understand and support workers' rights.<sup>xxxii</sup>

At the international level, the 1998 International Conference on Trade Unions, Homosexuality and Work was the first time for international delegates from trade unions and trade union confederations, as well as from queer organisations to come together. 170 participants from more than 30 countries attended. *The closing statement* recognised "the struggle for the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender workers as being part of the wider struggle for workers' rights", and asked trade unions and trade union federations to address discrimination on the grounds of SOGIESC at work. From 1998, it was still a long way to go until this was implemented at a global level. The overall process can be traced [on this website](#).

## Lessons and takeaways for today

Making trade unions more inclusive and less heteropatriarchal was a slow process. While all GUFs today highlight the importance of considering women workers' experiences, along with migrant and youth workers, only some GUFs vocally support LGBTQIA+ workers (and workers with disability). While all these disadvantaged groups have always been part of the labour force of every country, their voices and needs have long been side-lined within the workers' movement and as part of trade union campaigns

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<sup>19</sup> Refer to [this blog post](#) and [this UNISON magazine](#) article for an overview of UNISON's history on LGBTQIA+ inclusion.



and strategies. To achieve a more inclusive union environment, unions need to adapt working modalities to accommodate those with additional responsibilities, create working groups, committees, and roles such as LGBTQIA+ or inclusion officers, and accept the importance of integrating additional demands outside of traditional, heteropatriarchal topics as part of campaigns and bargaining agreements. The following chapters review this process regarding current LGBTQIA+ inclusion efforts, obstacles, and next steps.

### The road to including queer workers

The different GUFs and the ITUC joined the road toward LGBTQIA+ inclusion through different paths – some have worked on including queer workers for decades, others started this process as recently as 2022. Sometimes, queer members pushed for it, in other cases, women workers, for instance through the women’s committee, brought the issue to the agenda, and in some GUFs, the process was started through resolutions and motions put forward by key affiliates. This section highlights three key aspects that contributed to considering LGBTQIA+ workers’ rights as part of GUF advocacy and strategy: the influence of women workers, the submission of LGBTQIA+ related resolutions and motions to different fora, and supportive leadership.

First, regardless of who brought LGBTQIA+ issue to the agenda, women workers have been instrumental and represent important allies and supporters. GUFs that started working on LGBTQIA+ issues decades ago have a high proportion of female members and represent traditionally feminised professions, for instance in the service industry, the care sector, teaching, and public service. Professions of these different sectors have long been comparatively low paid and included diverse workers such as women, people of colour, migrant workers, and queer people. According to previous research, the national unions representing these workers had an interest in becoming more inclusive earlier on which facilitated the open representation of queer workers.<sup>xxxiii</sup> One participant stressed:

*“Not surprisingly, unions that are more on the services side are a bit further ahead because we all have queer members who are visible [...] At our [last] congress, we had a majority of the delegates who were women for the first time, but it has been a*

*decades-long push to actually achieve gender parity.”*

Often, greater diversity among the workforce makes realising the inclusion of diverse groups of marginalised workers easier – from local to national, regional, and global unions. In some of the GUFs representing male-dominated sectors, women have been pushing for the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ workers’ issues, be it through the women’s committee or as employees of the GUF headquarter office. Experiencing different forms of oppression and discrimination, be it sexism, misogyny, but also racism, xenophobia, islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, or a combination of these makes it easier to empathise with and support others who experience discrimination and exclusion. As highlighted throughout the next chapters, building coalitions and mutual support and solidarity are successful strategies that continue to be crucial for all inclusion work today.

Second, submitting LGBTQIA+ related resolutions and motions to regional, sectoral, and thematic committee conferences as well as to congresses has proven to be a highly effective path to agenda-setting. Even when the executive committee has not yet started prioritising LGBTQIA+ inclusion, resolutions and motions submitted by even a handful of affiliates demanding the non-discrimination of LGBTQIA+ workers represent an excellent start. One participant describes the discussion of the first resolution on LGBTQIA+ workers during the last congress as “a landmark moment” and adds:

*“It was the first time that this group of workers and their issues have been made visible in a very explicit way to the entire global union. For those of us who are LGBT among the staff, it was clearly a moment of celebration.”*

Through these resolutions, the queer workers become visible, and their inclusion into the strategic programme becomes traceable and part

of the items to be reported on in regular intervals. This creates pressure to start working towards the meaningful participation and representation of LGBTQIA+ workers and their issues. For several GUFs, key LGBTQIA+ resolutions laid the foundation of their inclusion work,<sup>20</sup> and additional motions or resolutions aimed at sector-specific aspects remain important means of raising attention to discrimination on the grounds of SOGIESC.

Third, **supportive GUF leadership is instrumental**. In some GUFs, support for LGBTQIA+ rights dates to early congresses, while it took other GUF leadership a lot longer to back those demands. For some GUFs that have been implementing queer inclusion measures for several decades, participants highlighted that this would not have been possible without the explicit support of their leadership. In one GUF that more recently started approaching the topic, the general secretary hesitated at first due to prevailing conservative attitudes and cultural values in parts of the GUF. In another GUF that initially did not prioritise LGBTQIA+ workers, leadership recently expressed the need to do so to not fall behind all other GUFs. Accordingly, it had become an embarrassment to be an organisation representing millions of workers globally without specifically addressing workers with diverse SOGIESC. These examples highlight that today, most GUF leadership publicly supports LGBTQIA+ workers, at least through making public statements. Participants, however, also pointed out the need to move beyond vocal support, for instance by adopting a dedicated budget for inclusion measures which would enable them to realise meaningful change.

## Current LGBTQIA+ inclusion efforts

Given the stark discrepancies regarding the time spent engaging with queer workers and their issues across the different GUFs, it is not surprising that the measures and strategies in place for increasing LGBTQIA+ inclusion also vary widely. Overall, the efforts include:

- (a) *GUF-wide advocacy measures such as public statements and articles on their websites,*
- (b) *tools to connect and exchange such as informal networks, conferences, and caucuses, and a dedicated inter-GUF forum,*
- (c) *strategies to learn more about the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ workers through surveys and other studies,*
- (d) *educational actions such as roundtables, presentations, workshops, and trainings,*
- (e) *internal activities to mainstream LGBTQIA+ issues as part of general inclusion measures, for instance through language and terminology adaptations,*
- (f) *the integration of LGBTQIA+ workers' demands in collective bargaining processes and as part of global framework agreements, and*
- (g) *political advocacy and lobbying measures such as participating in international fora such as at the International Labour Organization (ILO) Conference.*

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<sup>20</sup> For instance, PSI was the first GUF to recognise employment discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. [Resolution N° 27](#) was adopted at the PSI world congress in Helsinki in 1993 after years of lobbying by several affiliates. EI followed suit in 1998 with its resolution on [Protection of the Rights of Lesbian](#)

[and Gay Education Personnel](#). BWI was the latest GUF to formalise its commitment to promoting the rights of LGBTQIA+ workers in 2022 when the so-called [Rainbow resolution](#) was adopted.

All GUFs now publish statements for occasions such as the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT). For some GUFs that only recently started the process toward LGBTQIA+ inclusion, these statements are the only practical steps they currently take, for others, these statements are only part of a much larger picture. Some GUFs are collecting positive examples of affiliates actively working towards LGBTQIA+ inclusion to encourage other affiliates to follow suit. These might be shared as part of advocacy campaigns or during presentations and trainings.

A few GUFs have established informal networks connecting LGBTQIA+ members and allies across the organisation, while formal structures similar to women's committees are still largely absent.<sup>21</sup> These networks take on different forms; some include only those GUF employees tasked with LGBTQIA+ inclusion, others extend across their affiliates and include any individual queer and allied member interested in joining the network. Other GUFs do not yet have any network and have little knowledge about their LGBTQIA+ members, their demands, and how to approach these, but plan to address these knowledge gaps soon. A couple of GUFs hold LGBTQIA+ conferences, pre-congress meetings or caucuses as a place of exchange for queer members and to discuss the situation faced by their affiliates. Additionally, the shared EI/PSI LGBTI forum was established in 2003 and has taken place every four years since the first forum in 2004.<sup>xxxiv</sup> It provides an important platform of discussion, exchange, and increased visibility for LGBTQIA+ members of both GUFs.

Some GUFs conduct surveys to learn more about their LGBTQIA+ members, the issues they face at the workplace, and the demands they have.

One GUF regularly carries out surveys before their congress linked to different discrimination experiences by marginalised groups, including LGBTQIA+ people. These surveys allow for an overview of both urgent challenges and long-term trends. Another GUF conducted two dedicated LGBTQIA+ surveys in 2021 detailing attitudes, experiences, and demands of queer workers. A third GUF is currently carrying out a study on the experiences of affiliates and their members in a specific sector linked to best practices regarding LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

Several GUFs are engaged in organising educational actions linked to LGBTQIA+ workers. These might take on the form of presentations on specific issues targeting the internal LGBTQIA+ network, or roundtables bringing together queer union members from different affiliates to inform a broad range of participants of shared challenges and success strategies to overcome these. This also includes training GUF employees and affiliates in LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Importantly, several participants pointed out that they are still in the process of learning more about LGBTQIA+ issues themselves, especially those who are allies working within women's, gender, or equality departments. Some queer participants expressed hesitation to representing all workers with diverse SOGIESC while being cis themselves, but also acknowledged that there might not always be another option:

*"For example, I'll have cis straight colleagues coming and asking me about trans issues, about what opposition is on trans issues or certain other things, and on the one hand I feel like I'm in no way qualified to speak on this topic because I'm not trans. On the other hand, if I'm put in that position and I'm not providing these*

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<sup>21</sup> The 2023 PSI Congress adopted an amendment to their plan of action which institutes the establishment of "a global LGBTQIA+ coordinating committee [...] meeting at least once every six months and including regional coordinators elected from among the members of the regional coordinating committees, as well as an observer to the PSI Global Executive Board". The influence of the coordinating committee remains to be

seen. At the point of the drafting of this report, the amendment had only just been adopted. Moreover, UNI Global launched a LGBTI+ network in 2020 to share best practices, support collective bargaining strategies, and include relevant language in global agreements to fight discrimination in the workplace. This network is less formal than the future PSI committee, however.

*answers, then... There's gonna be no representation or visibility at all. So, it's a bit of a bit of a balancing act."*

Some GUFs are **mainstreaming LGBTQIA+ issues as part of general inclusive strategies aimed at improving representation and participation of different underrepresented and disadvantaged groups** such as workers of colour, youth, migrant, and women workers, along with LGBTQIA+ workers. For example, this is accomplished by ensuring that documents use inclusive language and mention SOGIESC explicitly as grounds for discrimination. **To date, there are no quotas or otherwise assured representation of LGBTQIA+ workers within governing bodies, and no plans to adopt similar measures.** While they have been successful in increasing the proportion of women workers as part of GUF leadership, it is questionable whether similar strategies would be operationalizable for queer workers. Based on the legally, politically, and socio-culturally hostile situation faced by LGBTQIA+ people in many countries, it is unfortunately not risk-free to be a vocal queer union leader everywhere, so quotas might bring more harm than good in some cases.

In terms of more traditional union activities, **some GUFs also engage in including LGBTQIA+ workers' demands in collective bargaining processes or as part of Global Framework Agreements.** Unfortunately, this has proven challenging; for instance, pushing for health care support for all workers, including the specific needs of trans\* workers, has not been an easy road in Northern America where universal healthcare does not exist and employers typically pay for workers' healthcare. Moreover, in other cases, while global companies trying to appeal to richer queers in the Global North might be more willing to consider certain aspects linked to LGBTQIA+ workers' rights, they fail to improve the working conditions and standards in low-income regions with little protection in place. As a result, agreements with these multinational corporations might stall on both fronts.

**Political advocacy and lobbying for greater inclusion, for instance at the ILO Conference or during negotiations for international agreements such as the ILO Convention No. 190 (C190), play an important role for some GUFs and the ITUC.** Some GUFs have become members of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), participate in their World Congress, and work closely with them on a range of issues. Others collaborate with UN agencies engaged in the same sector and develop programmes together to reduce stigma towards LGBTQIA+ people. In addition to political advocacy and lobbying at international fora, some participants also stress that GUFs can leverage political influence on national governments or regional organisations such as the European Union (EU) regarding LGBTQIA+ legislation. To date, this possibility is not used to its full potential yet.

**ILO C190** was adopted in June 2019 and came into force in June 2021. In November 2023, it had been **ratified by 36 countries**. It is the first international treaty aimed at ending discrimination, violence, and harassment at work. Several GUF and ITUC representatives took part in the negotiations before its adoption, which proved difficult regarding the inclusion of specific language regarding discrimination on the grounds of SOGIESC. According to some participants, the first drafts included explicit language regarding a range of disadvantaged groups such as pregnant women, indigenous people, and LGBTQIA+ workers, but **the final convention** only mentions "vulnerable groups" more broadly. This change was due to long, heated discussions between different members of international organisations, civil society actors, and state representatives, some of which were unwilling to adopt an ILO convention explicitly mentioning LGBTQIA+ workers.

## The role of the LGBTI working group

While restrictions linked to the COVID pandemic prevented initial in-person activities of the LGBTI working group, some milestones have been achieved such as the establishment of the [LGBTI Solidarity Charter](#) and the publication of regular joint statements, for instance for IDAHOBIT. The working group has become more operational since a recent meeting in Amsterdam in December 2022, where representatives of all GUFs and the ITUC as well as of some national affiliates came together. The Amsterdam meeting is perceived as a major step by all participants. As part of the meeting, they were able to share experiences, shared challenges, and best practices, while also learning more about the practical issues queer members from national affiliates struggle within their respective unions.

During the interviews, all participants highlighted the importance of the LGBTI working group. While the diverse GUFs are at quite different steps on the road to LGBTQIA+ inclusion, being part of a cross-sectoral working group bringing together all GUFs and the ITUC on queer issues was seen as highly beneficial by everyone. **The working group serves as a platform for international collaboration, allowing various GUFs to come together, share experiences, and learn from each other's strategies and policies related to LGBT+ workers.** This environment promotes solidarity and creates opportunities for joint initiatives.

Those representatives from GUFs who more recently started working on including queer issues and workers as part of their strategic activities underlined **the capacity-building function of the group.** Through the working group, they find out about best practices and successful strategies, but also engage in an exchange about shared challenges and how to overcome these. Additionally, some of the capacity-building and training resources prepared by more experienced GUFs or their affiliates have been shared across

the working group to benefit all members and their respective GUFs and affiliates. Soon, this will include a guide on how to use C190 for LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Representatives who are allies described the working group as a space to learn more about different identities linked to diverse SOGIESC, about terminologies, and about the experiences of queer workers and unionists.

Another important aspect for those participants who more recently started addressing LGBTQIA+ inclusion was **the increased level of professionalism brought to their work through the collaboration with more experienced queer inclusion advocates.** As participants underlined, LGBTQIA+ issues are often treated in an emotional way and focus on identities, which is not the case in the working group due to the long-term experiences and expertise of some of its members. As one participant outlined, listening to “colleagues from other GUFs who have developed more work [has also been] an inspiration for how we can also develop more concrete work on LGBT+ workers.”

For other participants, the group represents **a safe space** where they can discuss LGBTQIA+ related issues without having to start from scratch, as it is still the case with some of their GUF colleagues. Being able to address their shared struggles when trying to convince more traditional and conservative unionists of the importance of LGBTQIA+ inclusion is an important part of this. Through an open exchange with the other working group members, different participants have been able to feel less like they were working in isolation, but as part of a joint initiative.

Additionally, the working group was seen as **a powerful advocacy platform**, enabling GUFs to collectively address discriminatory practices and advocate for changes at the global level. Joint campaigns for IDAHOBIT and similar occasions are important tools for all GUFs, even more so for those who have only recently started the work on LGBTQIA+ inclusion and might not be aware yet of the specific needs of their queer members. For

instance, the most recent statement stressed the commitment of the different GUFs and the ITUC to ensuring that “LGBTQI+ workers have the same rights as all workers throughout the employment cycle”.<sup>xxxv</sup> **Joint statements and campaigns can also be used as leverage when trying to convince GUFs or their affiliates of LGBTQIA+ inclusion**, as one participant states:

*“The LGBTI working group is one of the most productive tools because it really leverages a bit of ‘well, here’s what the other GUFs are doing, so can we be a part of it or not?’, a bit of power saying it. It makes things very easy because there’s things presented on a plate of it. Like, ‘here’s this event, can we just invite members?’ It’s very helpful.”*

**Through being part of an intersectoral collaboration, the working group amplifies the collective voice of unions, particularly in**

**challenging political environments, thereby strengthening their impact and influence.** As one participant highlights, this is especially important in hostile environments as a way for unions to team up across sectors, which also helps them avoid intra-sectoral competition. Importantly, a united front on queer issues increases the power GUFs have in negotiations at international fora such as the ILO as well as for global framework agreements. Another participant confirms:

*It really makes a difference, because at the end of the day, trade unions all over, they share the values of solidarity. So, when there are many workers backing it, not only from your industry but from another field, it’s difficult to oppose it.”*

As a whole, the working group has been described as an essential tool for learning and exchange, but also as a communal space to overcome obstacles jointly.

## Challenges to LGBTQIA+ inclusion within GUFs

As the lead of the LGBTI working group underlines [in an article](#), “unions must fight for inclusion [...] for all – including comrades from the LGBT+ community... Despite considerable progress, there is still a long way to go”. The different GUF representatives who participated in this study reported several different challenges they encountered as part of their work on LGBTQIA+ inclusion. These include (a) their own and others’ knowledge gaps as well as missing information about queer members, (b) misaligned organisational priorities and institutional resistance, and (c) external challenges linked to political opposition and the global radical-right backlash.<sup>22</sup>

### Knowledge gaps and missing information

Most participants stated that **they had not received any formal training on LGBTQIA+ inclusion prior to adding this task to their portfolio**. Queer participants acquired their knowledge through their many years of activism. As one person highlighted, their roles as labour activist and as queer activist had been entangled and interconnected from the beginning of their work life. When asked whether official training had been provided for LGTBQIA+ inclusion work, another queer participant responded: **“I would say it's actually the other way around. I say we're the ones who are educating the organisation rather than the organisation educating us.”**

Most participants who labelled themselves as allies learned while in the role. Several of these

participants expressed continuous knowledge gaps regarding LGBTQIA+ terminology and on more practical aspects such as how to realise inclusion for queer workers overall, and within GUFs more specifically. Currently, they were trying to fill these gaps, albeit without much institutional support. Very few representatives had been able to participate in formal trainings and instead gained knowledge through workshops organised on different queer topics. As highlighted above, several participants also stressed the importance of the working group for their own capacity-building.

Some participants highlighted that their colleagues and members of affiliates are **missing important knowledge about terminologies, wordings, and practices linked to LGBTQIA+ inclusion**. Accordingly, several affiliates expressed difficulties to address the need for including queer workers and unionists in their work because they were not sure *how* to talk about diverse SOGIESC with their members, let alone how to find out whether members identified as queer without being perceived as offensive.

**When working in a global environment, translation challenges and cultural disparities easily create barriers in effectively communicating inclusive messages**. One participant stressed that sometimes, concepts do not translate easily across different linguistic and cultural contexts. *“Education and capacity programs are still very, very important to kind of try to demystify some of these terminologies that we're using.”* Overcoming these challenges requires not only effective translation but also a

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<sup>22</sup> In this report, we do not talk extensively about origins, extent, and actors involved in this ongoing social, political, and economic anti-rights and anti-gender movement. This has been done in other places and continues to be monitored by a range of researchers and think tanks alike. For those interested in reading more, we recommend the report submitted by the former IE SOGI, Victor Madrigal Borloz, on [“the law of exclusion”](#) for an insight into such anti-rights practices and policies, as well as resources compiled by the

[Global Philanthropy Project](#) regarding anti-rights strategies and funding strategies. The European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights also published [an insightful report](#) on the religious extremist funders against sexuality and reproductive health and rights in Europe. Additionally, [this short article](#) published by the Gunda Werner Institute, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, presents a good overview on the phenomenon in Europe.



deeper understanding of cultural nuances to ensure inclusivity in all regions and languages. Unfortunately, inadequate knowledge and understanding of LGBTQIA+ issues might lead to feelings of alienation and communication challenges across unionists. There is still a lot of confusion when it comes to LGBTQIA+ issues leading to misunderstandings, starting with the differences between sexual orientation and gender identity. Encouraging open dialogues and providing comprehensive training can bridge the gap and foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment. As one participant highlighted: “GUFs need to spend some time and resources in training up their own staff so that the issue is mainstreamed and well understood by all staff, including staff in the regions.” Comprehensive training and resources that can be adapted to diverse cultural contexts, including practical materials, are needed.

Several representatives feel still very much at the start of any LGBTQIA+ inclusion work and had **no or little knowledge about the proportion of queer members, let alone their everyday challenges at the workplace and demands for change**. To change this, a range of GUFs are conducting needs assessments to fill these knowledge gaps, some through surveys or interviews, others potentially through a future meeting planned to bring together many different affiliates to discuss their different experiences and the obstacles they face in their respective contexts.

Unfortunately, some participants had to **overcome additional hurdles when first starting their roles due to the absence of adequate hand-over procedures and employment gaps in between different people responsible for LGBTQIA+ inclusion**. As a result, participants who felt comfortable in their thematic knowledge were unaware of much of the inclusion work previously undertaken in their organisation and **had to rebuild networks and alliances or create new one**, both internally as well as with affiliates and other representatives of other GUFs. As one participant explained: “*Some of the challenges, right, if you do not have trust and you don't have a working relationship with people who are in*

*those affiliates, then you're not going to get very far.*” Accordingly, being new to an organisation without pre-existing ties meant writing emails without receiving any response, difficulties convincing affiliates to collaborate on local Pride events, and less leverage in strategic discussions. To circumvent this challenge, documentation and adequate hand-over procedures are needed, although these require additional time and effort that might not be at the disposal of already overstretched personnel, as the next section highlights.

## Misaligned priorities and resource shortages

The lack of the prioritisation of LGBTQIA+ inclusion was presented as a key challenge. **In many unions, inclusion is still seen as a feminised aspect, less important than traditional “bread and butter” issues**. The perceived dichotomy between labour concerns and equality issues downplays the importance of LGBTQIA+ and other inclusion efforts, for instance the work already undertaken by gender officers. For some unionists, inclusion and equality issues are still considered “kind of optional extras”. However, as one participant stated,

“if you don't have a LGBT lens, if you don't have a gender lens, if you don't have a race lens and so on, then you're not addressing those bread and butter issues properly. You can't talk about health and safety for all workers unless you're talking about health and safety as it applies specifically to, for example, trans workers or to workers with HIV, or other groups. We need to avoid that as another potential division because labour rights are LGBT rights.”

Striking a balance between promoting inclusion without alienating other groups poses a significant challenge, especially as limited resources, be it financial, temporal, and in terms of staff, compel GUFs to prioritise other matters perceived as more urgent over LGBTQIA+ initiatives. As one participant notes, the slow

progress might not necessarily come down to a lack of willingness:

*“I do think that most trade union leaders feel really under the gun and under-resourced and spread so thin. [LGBTQIA+ inclusion] is a top-down program. The GUFs are going to have to provide more resources. Expecting small affiliates or under-resourced regions to come up with people who, 1), know something about this, and 2), have the credibility to go out there and be persuasive to affiliates, it's a high bar! I do think the resource question is real.”*

It is important to note that the different GUFs vary significantly in staff size, both when it comes to the head office, but also regionally. While some consist of not more than a handful of employees, others are a lot more numerous. Adding LGBTQIA+ inclusion to the workload of small teams without providing additional resources does not necessarily mean that time for its realisation exists, as a participant points out: *“When you are a tiny team, we are all doing 1000 things, it's difficult to dedicate all the time that this subject actually deserves.”* Moreover, in some GUFs, there was not yet a person dedicated to take on this work. Employees partially conduct queer inclusion efforts on a voluntary basis without receiving compensation in terms of reduced working hours elsewhere or increased pay. As highlighted by a participant, it would be strongly desirable for the leadership to create a dedicated role to show recognition of the efforts undertaken by queer employees.

Furthermore, as highlighted by some participants, **it makes a difference where the person in charge of LGBTQIA+ inclusion is situated**. Some participants worked as overall equality officers or gender and inclusion leads, while others were responsible for campaigns and communications. Some reported directly to GUF leadership and took part in executive committee meetings, while others were not included on a regular basis. To disseminate and mainstream LGBTQIA+ issues as part of overall GUF activities and strategy, a campaigns and

communications lead might potentially be better suited, as the person can decide which advocacy campaigns and publications to focus on.

**Adding LGBTQIA+ inclusion as another aspect for gender officers to focus on often increases their workload without compensation.** This was a key concern for participants who stressed that **queer issues are not just women's issues**. Instead, work on LGBTQIA+ issues should take place cross-sectoral throughout the whole organisation, just as queer workers can also be found across distinct roles and sectors. While cisgender, heterosexual women workers have been important allies, adding LGBTQIA+ inclusion to the portfolio of a gender officer might only increase the perception of inclusion issues as feminised topics, less important than more traditional bread and butter trade union topics. For some of the participants responsible for equality and inclusion who are managing multiple portfolios of which LGBTQIA+ is just one, this division also significantly delays network-development, capacity-building, and the implementation of queer inclusion strategies.

## Political opposition and radical-right backlash

GUFs are playing a key role in advocating for advancements of the labour rights of workers around the world. This includes organising and bargaining collectively along value and supply chains, as well as through Global Framework Agreements (GFAs) which determine rules of conduct for transnational companies.<sup>xxxvi</sup> At the same time, GUFs also represent many affiliates who have long followed a social democratic understanding of labour rights, asking for progressive reforms. As such, GUFs are also important actors in combating populism and extremism, for instance the current wave of extreme-right political opposition to all things progressive, including migrants, women, and queer people's rights. Only a unified front defending their rights in solidarity and through collective action will be successful.<sup>xxxvii</sup> A key

challenge described by most participants was political opposition to their inclusion work, especially as part of the current radical-right backlash against LGBTQIA+ rights. These views are expressed by governments in GFAs or as part of tripartite negotiations at the ILO and through countries' laws and regulations, and they are shared by individual affiliates or workers, thereby hindering LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Some participants described **the influence of hostile national legislation and political opposition to LGBTQIA+ inclusion in certain regions as important challenges**, especially across many countries within Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Eastern Europe, and, in part, also East Asia. For instance, when trying to collect testimonials from queer members for an IDAHOBIT advocacy campaign, one participant was unable to identify any volunteer from SSA or MENA despite guaranteeing anonymity.

LGBTQIA+ inclusion work is directly impacted by the rise of anti-LGBTQIA+ perspectives globally, including the Global North, from affiliates and their members. As one participant described:

*"The amount of backlash has been substantial. It comes in different ways. For example, some trade unions have boycotted activities precisely because of our work with LGBTIQ issues."*

Additionally, it is worth noting that in countries across SSA and MENA, national unions might be intricately connected to governing parties and align with or are reluctant to challenge their anti-LGBTQIA+ views. According to a participant, **"unions are part and parcel of the society in which they operate, so they are also influenced by the social, cultural, and religious views on LGBT issues"**. This makes any step towards the inclusion of queer workers exceedingly difficult in hostile environments. For GUF representatives, it can be hard to push their affiliates towards greater openness without concrete evidence of discrimination, violence, or harassment.

According to several participants, **to avoid resistance and opposition, as well as accusations of spreading Western values unfit for the local context, successful examples of LGBTQIA+**

**inclusion from other Global South contexts are needed.** Some mentioned that they might otherwise be confronted with spreading neo-colonialism. Here, knowledge about the needs and challenges of their queer members from different regions, but also examples of successful LGBTQIA+ inclusion initiatives from different regions are especially important to counteract such accusations from the start. For those GUFs who are just beginning the work, this can be especially challenging.

Some more experienced participants had a more holistic perspective on anti-LGBTQIA+ actors and their actions and global backlash compared to those just starting out. As one participant pointed out:

*"There is a bunch of good work that has been done, but the context overall is not neutral. It is in flux and the direction it's going is not trending positively. Whatever the work is that we're doing, we need to figure out how to meet the challenges of an ever-changing moment. This is an ever-growing difficulty that I'm not sure is broadly understood."*

Especially for representatives who have not previously engaged with queer issues, the global context might not be clear, but it still impedes their work. As a participant put it, "this is a tough moment to get started", especially when combined with the resource limitations discussed above. Accordingly,

*"when the trade union movement caught a wave, that's one thing. When it's swimming upstream, that's another. If we are truly entering a period of significant anti-LGBT backlash, then the resources we had for trying to ride the momentum will be 100% inadequate"*.

As highlighted by participants and researchers alike, legal setbacks and the removal of human rights linked to sexuality and gender is underway in many countries across the globe and often directly correlated with increasing hate crimes and violence targeting vulnerable groups such as LGBTQIA+ people.<sup>xxxviii</sup> GUFs as progressive

actors fighting for social change and the protection of all workers, including the most vulnerable, have a responsibility to dedicate adequate resources to the fight against discrimination and violence. As one participant stressed:

*“The trade union movement, with a commitment to anti-discrimination, we do have to be leading on this, you know? And when we're not, it really is an abdication of responsibility.”*

Unfortunately, as discussed above, GUF representatives already struggle with resource shortages and misaligned priorities, so an increased commitment by leadership and affiliates alike is essential to continue LGBTQIA+ inclusion efforts amidst the global backlash and anti-rights movement. In the remaining chapter, we explore best practices and next steps outlined by participants in their inclusion efforts, also through counteracting anti-rights and anti-LGBTQIA+ actors and actions.

The final chapter discusses best practices and next steps outlined by participants, including successful strategies for increased LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Due to the early state of the inclusion work in some GUFs, a combined discussion is favoured here instead of differentiating between tested best practices and proposed next steps, especially because in many cases, next steps are based on previous experiences of either applying the same strategies to different topics, or of other organisations testing them on LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

Some beneficial aspects discussed earlier play a vital role in creating favourable conditions for the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ workers within GUFs. However, these are more structural and might be harder to influence for individual GUF employees or members of their affiliates, for instance the role of women workers, greater diversity among members, and supportive leadership. When asked about best practices and next steps, participants also mentioned the following strategies which are easier to implement:

- (a) engaging in knowledge dissemination, education and training measures, including the development of materials,
- (b) applying specific types of framing when talking about LGBTQIA+ workers and their rights and choosing one's audience selectively,
- (c) creating networks and building coalitions with queer activists or other civil society organisations,
- (d) working towards modernising unions to remain relevant and resume responsibility.

## Knowledge dissemination, inclusive education, and training

Working towards increasing knowledge of basic terminologies and the most urgent demands by queer workers, while also shifting towards a deeper understanding of how to best engage with LGBTQIA+ workers in all their diversity is key for all GUFs. This may start by developing accessible guides to LGBTQIA+ terminology:

*"The first manual that we launched was very easy reading. It started from scratch, from zero to understand each of the abbreviations and explained them in a very easy way. You cannot imagine the gratitude of people when they received this."*

Those union leaders and members not yet familiar with the reasons for the importance of including queer workers can best be introduced to LGBTQIA+ inclusion through starting with basic information and trainings. Some information can be found in the [guide to LGBTI+](#) by UNI Global. Additionally, an older guide including [good practices and strategies to include LGBTQIA+ rights as part of union activities](#) was published by EI and PSI in 2007. Focused on the UK specifically, UNISON also has resources on integrating and defending the rights of LGBTQIA+ workers as part of a union, for instance [this factsheet](#) from 2015 or [regularly updated information](#) through their website. As part of the collaborative activities within the LGBTI working group, GUFs published [a document](#) combining a glossary of important terms with some success strategies as well as positive examples from different countries.

While establishing baseline knowledge of terminology used and the most pressing challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ workers is essential to start any meaningful inclusion work, the efforts cannot stop here. **Implementing**

comprehensive LGBTQIA+ competency training for staff as well as for union leaders and members is needed to create a more inclusive and supportive environment within the union. Some of the affiliates of different GUFs in countries around the world have successfully conducted similar trainings, for instance trainings for journalists on how to best report on gender-diverse people to stop perpetuating the same stereotypes or for teachers to better support LGBTQIA+ students. Sometimes, these trainings can be an opportunity for queer workers to learn that unions are LGBTQIA+-inclusive and motivate them to join. According to some participants, this had been the case – they were approached by people participating in the trainings afterwards who had not been aware of the welcoming environment unions can be for LGBTQIA+ people.

Additionally, learning from affiliates and their success strategies in becoming more inclusive and representing LGBTQIA+ workers is a key point for all GUFs. One suggestion was to gather all the guidelines on LGBTQIA+ inclusion created by affiliates and upload these on the GUF website to be distributed among all affiliates. This was described as a powerful way to show all affiliates how next steps could look like and to learn from other affiliates. Collecting success stories, guidelines, and best practices provides all affiliates with practical examples of LGBTQIA+ inclusion they can follow. According to several participants, this will be useful to underline what the benefits are for workers themselves, other workers, and for the union. Sharing these successful stories and positive examples is also a way of showing that LGBTQIA+ inclusion does not have to be difficult and complex, and that it is important for unions around the world, not just in the Global North. It might even provide incentives for other affiliates to follow suit to not be left behind, as another participant stressed:

*"When a union does take an initiative or does something positive, we want to hear about it and make sure that's publicised, because I think that will also create some pressure on other affiliates to keep up."*

The dissemination of knowledge and successful examples of LGBTQIA+ inclusion are best practices to ensure that queer workers and their issues will become part and parcel of union activities.

## Framing and choosing one's audience

As a second crucial thematical area, several participants addressed the importance of being mindful of framing and choosing the right audience when undertaking LGBTQIA+ inclusion strategies. Accordingly, framing LGBTQIA+ workers' rights as part of a broader discussion on solidarity and broader inclusion, as part of a human rights-based approach, or within health and safety aspects has worked well in the past. Unions might be more responsive to frames they are familiar with and be more open to engage in a dialogue about, for example, what health and safety issues mean for their own LGBTQIA+ members. This can be achieved through focusing on sector-specific health issues, for instance the prevalence of HIV among mobile transportation workers, and integrating risks for LGBTQIA+ workers into campaigns, trainings, and other measures. Linking LGBTQIA+ workers' rights to traditional union issues can be a successful way to get unions to talk about LGBTQIA+ issues as a part of one of their key priorities. Another linkage that has been successful is to connect queer workers' experiences with non-negotiable issues. For some GUFs, this is a human rights lens, especially when engaging with affiliates in countries that might be actively part of the anti-rights backlash and opposition. As a participant shared,

*"approaching it from a human rights perspective is the way to do it. At the end of the day, all of us are workers. LGBT+ rights are worker rights and human rights, and both are a trade union matter and should be on the top of the trade union agenda. For us, there's no doubt about this."*

Connecting LGBTQIA+ workers' rights and key union values such as solidarity is another strategy applied by some GUFs. Only by including the most marginalised workers and their needs within "an injury to one is an injury to all" do unions stay true to their values, as one participant highlighted. Whether this is done through focusing on solidarity and LGBTQIA+ inclusion more broadly, attaching it to non-negotiable values such as human rights, or as part of a more specific focus such as a health and safety approach depends on the context and the counterparts. Each of these three framing strategies has proven successful, also regarding facing anti-LGBTQIA+ resistance and opposition.

Moreover, another aspect linked to the successful reception of LGBTQIA+ inclusion work within GUFs and their affiliates is **choosing the right audience**. Some participants highlighted that it might be more effective to focus inclusion-based trainings, workshops, and talks on more receptive audiences such as women and youth. This has proven successful in some GUFs where LGBTQIA+ issues are predominantly discussed in such fora. As outlined in the review chapter, traditionally, unions have maintained an outdated structure and hierarchy that was not conducive to inclusion, be it of women workers or of other more marginalised groups as part of the leadership. By addressing these groups specifically, they might be more open to queer inclusion from the start and join in the work.

## Building coalitions through dialogue

Building networks and coalitions with local and international LGBTQIA+ civil society organisations (CSOs) is another way toward including queer workers into GUFs and their affiliates. Through joint collaborations with LGBTQIA+ CSOs, both unions and the CSOs can leverage their expertise and experience to foster mutually beneficial relationships. The US-based organisation Pride at Work holds trainings that use "one-on-one" organising tactics, referring to a conversation that takes place

between a union member and a person the union organiser is trying to persuade. Linked to queer inclusion, this training aimed at convincing "either a straight worker to support an LGBT-related contract initiative or to persuade an LGBT person to support a worker-related policy".<sup>xxxix</sup> This can be a successful strategy and provide both interlocutors with new information. According to several participants, when organising an event on queer inclusion, inviting an expert from such a CSOs can be a way to diversify speakers and to connect members with the CSO. Moreover, this can also help to identify the challenges faced by queer workers in countries where affiliates might not yet be fully inclusive. Here, specialised CSOs are actors aware of the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people, including in the world of work. Conversely, queer activists also benefit from their relationship with unions through learning more about their workers' rights and successful strategies to collective bargaining. As a participant highlighted:

*"A coalition or a partnership is reciprocal, right? We're not just taking the expertise and knowledge from LGBT organisations, but we're also offering them something as well. We have a lot to offer including how to run an organisation, how to run a campaign, how to run an action like a strike. Some of these are skills that I think LGBT civil society organisations could very well benefit from."*

Through building coalitions between unions and queer activists, "social change that could also contribute to the reinvention of unions"<sup>xl</sup> can be achieved. Similarly, a participant highlighted the power of dialogue when building relations with GUF members or members of their affiliates who might not yet be in favour of LGBTQIA+ inclusion within the union:

*"Our goal isn't to convince someone not to be a Muslim or not to be a Christian. It's to understand that we have more in common than we don't, that we each have to respect each other's rights, and that diversity is an important value."*

Integrating both the LGBTQIA+ and the labour movement provides an opportunity to welcome those queers who are working-class into the

union and to confront the fact that “the working-class is full of queers, and many of these queer workers are also people of color”.<sup>xi</sup> For GUFs concerned about losing members, being LGBTQIA+ inclusive provides a great opportunity to welcome many more workers to become members of their affiliates.

## Modernise unions to stay relevant and resume responsibility!

Several participants highlighted the need to take GUFs and their affiliates into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and resume responsibility for the rights of all workers, including queer workers. **While inclusion is not a quick undertaking, it is a much needed one to keep up with changing attitudes and values of potential members, to stay relevant, and to show solidarity to those workers who are most vulnerable.** Leadership in GUFs and their affiliates is slowly changing, people are retiring, and younger people are coming in with innovative ideas who might be more open to embracing diversity and make inclusion efforts easier.

Through adaptations to the COVID-pandemic such as the increased use of video conferences, some people were able to join who had not been represented previously. Accordingly, in another joint working group uniting several GUFs, some trans workers have been present for the last one or two years. This has been an important change, because these workers are no longer only an abstract thought, but they have become visible and existent for everyone present. **Using technological solutions to allow queer workers to become visible and take up space in unions can be a good step to represent their rights as part of the global labour movement.** It takes less courage to speak up in a virtual meeting, potentially without turning one’s camera on, than in an in-person meeting in front of people who might be allies at best and anti-LGBTQIA+ opponents in the worst case. Additionally, when queer workers know that they are welcome to

contribute and feel visible, they are more likely to join unions as active members.

Several participants talked about declining membership and the need to appeal to a diverse range of workers who have not traditionally been welcomed in GUFs and their affiliates. Accordingly, especially the younger generation of workers care more about queer rights. Younger people are more open to LGBTQIA+ issues and more likely to identify as part of the queer community themselves. Educating and investing in young workers on different issues, including LGBTQIA+, helps pave the way for transformation in trade unions. As one participant highlighted:

*“If we invest in young workers now, we will have trade unions and trade union leaders that are better equipped in inclusion and diversity in 10 to 20 years.”*

We might expect GUFs and their affiliates to become more inclusive over time simply by changed attitudes of their younger members. As one participant underlined: **“If for no other reason than being and remaining relevant to the next generation of workers, we need to be fully behind [LGBTQIA+ inclusion].”**

Finally, part of the work undertaken by different GUFs is also to confront the global anti-LGBTQIA+ backlash headfirst. When engaging in queer inclusion work, being outspoken and consistent is incredibly important. **It is necessary to look truthfully at the difficult road ahead to find a way forward. With commitment and motivation, moving ahead is possible.** Previously, LGBTQIA+ CSOs were the actors who pushed for “recognition, acceptance, and respect”, now more and more unions are also focusing on including queer workers and making it a priority.

Fortunately, as explored throughout this report, attitudes towards the queer community are slowly changing, even in those GUFs who only started working on LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the past years. However, the global trade union movement still has a long way to go to be fully inclusive and welcoming for all workers, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender



identity and expression, and sex characteristics. We hope that some of the experiences and practices outlined in this report will be useful for this process.

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Movement: The Politics  
and Potential of LGBT-  
Labor Coalitions', 96.

<sup>xi</sup> Amanda Tattersall, *Power  
in Coalition: Strategies  
for Strong Unions and  
Social Change* (Cornell  
University Press, 2010),  
2,

<https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9780801476068/power-in-coalition/>.

<sup>xii</sup> Tiffe, 'Towards a Queerer  
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113–14.