

Position Paper 2025/163

## Action Plan: Protecting our Democracy against Far-Right Ideas and Values!

The European Parliament results were yet another wake-up call to the very worrying rise of the Far Right across Europe. Earlier, far-right parties have recently managed to enter governments with the connivance or the complicity of some mainstream political parties. In other countries, like Sweden, far-right parties are enabling governments to run. Meanwhile, in the Member States where the Far Right is not (yet) in government, they are among the top three parties in the countries, like in France, Spain, Germany, Romania, Portugal, Bulgaria and the UK. No country has escaped this global trend accelerated by the austerity imposed after the 2008-2009 financial crisis established by the IMF, ECB and the European Commission and supported and implemented by the neo-liberal governments. The attacks on good quality jobs, essential public services, and ever-growing inequalities have left unprecedented marks on people across Europe. These political decisions have helped the Far Right to [triple](#) its votes over the past decades in European and national elections.

It is these policies and the failure to take account of the workers and our demands that allow the far-right parties to pose as the ‘friends of working people’. History shows this because once in power, they attack trade unions and workers’ rights, supporting traditional conservatives in putting their anti-union agenda in place (like recently in [Finland](#)). The Far Right’s recipe is similar everywhere: cracking down on democratic institutions and rights, starting with the right to strike and collective bargaining, alongside media freedom and impartial judiciary. Hungary remains the playbook model for an authoritarian shift and should serve as a worrying example of the potential outcome of a far-right majority. Moreover, far-right parties are also increasingly threatening democracy at work, like the German AfD’s attempt to set up yellow unions and enter works councils.

We should not be afraid of taking a clear stance against these political and economic choices and to expose the ravages that they bring for workers. On the contrary, we need to be in fear of losing our rights once the Far Right comes to power. We need to address the economic considerations of workers (citizens who vote) who feel left behind by mainstream parties, and join forces and win them back to our cause and demands. At the same time, we must clearly publicise our demands, unite the workers to obtain political solutions that tackle the current challenges, i.e. investments, cohesion and solidarity, and oppose all those who go against workers (governments, employers, political movements). Democratic parties and trade unions must not compromise with the Far Right and its toxic recipes based on hate and division.

With this Action Plan, we are ringing the alarm bell and urging all our members to step up their work against the social injustice, hatred, division among workers, xenophobia and racism embodied in the ideas and values of the Far Right. The danger of inaction is greater than ever, as far-right parties are increasing their seats after each election. We must act now before it is too late and inaction destroys our democracy!

## The real face of the Far Right – why it is the enemy of workers

The long list of arguments showing why the Far Right has always been the foe of trade unions dates back to the last century. A recent TUC [report](#) explains how trade unions have always been at the forefront of the struggle against the Far Right and its attempts to divide workers using narratives of hate and blame. Our core trade union values of unity, equality and solidarity are the basis of our counter-narrative, with international solidarity between workers having the potential to lead once again to wins.

But we do not need to go too far back in history to see why the Far Right is not our friend. In Italy, the new far-right government proposed a new security decree law which introduces prison sentences for the blockages of roads or railways. This harshens the previous law which only foresaw fines between 1,000 – 4,000 euro for those obstructing free movement. Italian unions see this law as a threat to trade union work and an attack against the right to demonstrate.

But these attacks against democratic rights and processes are not the first alarm bells that rang in Italy. In 2021, the headquarters of CGIL was brutally attacked by far-right groups, leading to an immediate [solidarity response](#) from the national and international trade union movement and to the launch of the International Network of Antifascist Trade Unions, coordinated by CGIL, which brings together unions from across the globe, including industriAll Europe, in an effort to share experiences and best practices in mobilising against the Far Right. Over the past three years, numerous CGIL, CISL and UIL offices have been subjected to vandalism for political reasons, and all of them are working against far-right values. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated example. Across Europe, trade unionists are becoming the targets of the Far Right, with our Finnish colleagues becoming the victims of an online defamation campaign in which they are personally targeted.

In Finland, a country with 60% union density and a strong industrial relations system, the Far Right's rise to power helped put in place anti-union reforms that have long been on the agenda of conservative parties. Despite massive protests and strikes over the past months, the government pursued its plans to limit trade union rights and social security cuts, that have been on the political programmes of the Confederation of industries (EK), the association of Finnish business owners (Suomen Yrittäjät, SY) and the Chamber of Commerce. All these organizations are lead by either a Conservative (Kokoomus) party member or Center (Keskusta) party activist. Despite the Far Right's focus on immigration and austerity, in less than one year, the government pushed new laws that limit the right to strike, promote decentralised bargaining, give access for non-unionised workers to negotiate collective agreements and threaten to weaken protection against dismissals. This shows that the Far Right supports the traditional conservatives in their anti-union agenda, not losing much time to put in place laws that weaken democracy and hard-won trade union rights, as soon as it comes to power.

The even bigger problem is that these laws can last, like Hungary's authoritarian slip shows. In 2010, Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ party came to power with a two-thirds majority which allowed it to unilaterally change the constitution. This gave Orbán control over the media, the judiciary system, and allowed him to lock his party into power, as he is currently serving his fourth term. For workers and their unions, Orbán's rule is a worst-case scenario. The 2011 strike legislation severely limited the right to strike either by excluding occupations from it or by imposing excessive conditionalities for a legal strike (an illegal one results in the

union leader being responsible for the financial damage of the company during the strike). The new labour code introduced in 2012 aimed at attracting foreign investment and resulted in: very flexible overtime, more fragile posting of workers, unfair dismissals, regulation which weakens the rights of trade unions at the level of enterprises, etc. Orbán's willingness to please employers and especially multinational companies was also proven by the so-called 'Slavery Act' of 2018, which introduced new working time legislation that allowed for 400 overtime hours annually.

Another national example of far-right fallacy comes from Germany where the AfD poses as a 'party of workers' while voting against legislation that improves working conditions. The DGB [exposed](#) the AfD as an 'enemy of workers', reporting how its members had voted against the increase of the minimum wage and the extension of the right to strike. Instead, AfD tried to propose legislation that limits collective bargaining (in the State Parliament of Baden-Württemberg). The party's anti-union approach is visible at every opportunity, DGB reporting that the AfD's real aim is to get rid of trade unions and collective bargaining in companies. IG Metall's and IGBCE's strategy against the AfD is based on political education for trade union members, campaigns against far-right narratives at the workplace and on social media (particularly targeting young people, with positive results), and a clear stance with employers against the Far Right. The AfD seems to be successful, especially among middle-aged male voters whose jobs are being threatened by the transformation of their industries as a result of political decisions. IG Metall and IGBCE are countering AfD's discourses by presenting progressive economic and social policy demands for secure, sustainable and quality jobs.

In Austria, the far right party FPÖ turned out to be the strongest party in the last parliamentary election in autumn 2024, and is now negotiating with the Conservative party to form a new government which they will lead. One of the first measures that the FPÖ announced is budget consolidation austerity measures, including cuts of subsidies for climate transition, pensions and social benefits. While presenting itself as a workers' party, the FPÖ is actually implementing the long-standing demands of business and employers and industrialists in Austria. Attacks against trade unions, the collective bargaining system and the rule of law in the country, are also expected.

The anti-worker and anti-union stance of the Far Right is visible also in the European Parliament, where MEPs from far-right groups have voted against or abstained, over and over again, in pro-worker pieces of legislation. A [study](#) by the European Economic and Social Committee shows the voting results. In addition, the votes of MEPs can be tracked here.<sup>1</sup> These examples leave little room for doubt regarding the Far Right. The difference between their rhetoric and actions is striking. While posing as the defenders of 'the people' and workers, far-right politicians lose no time in implementing laws that favour big business at the expense of workers and trade union rights. Here are the most striking examples:

- Social Climate Fund: Measures to support vulnerable households living in energy or transport poverty faced significant opposition from ID, with 63% of votes against; and ECR voting 22% against and 52% abstentions. Meanwhile, 100% of the Greens, S&D and EPP voted in favour of the legislation.
- Platform Work Directive: ID and ECR displayed the biggest opposition as well as a significant number of abstentions, with ID voting only 68% in favour and ECR only 65%. In comparison, the Greens and the Left voted 100% in favour, S&D 96%, and EPP 93%.
- Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive: 94% of ID MEPs voted against, as well as 93% of ECR. In comparison, 100% of the Greens and 98% of S&D voted in favour, while 88% of the Left, 79% of Renew and 36% of EPP voted in favour.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://howtheyvote.eu/>

- EU Pay Transparency: Only 4% of ECR MEPs voted in favour, while 100% of S&D and the Greens voted in favour. In addition, 90% of the Left, 73% of EPP and 85% of Renew voted in favour.

## Why is the Far Right rising?

The key reasons for the rise of the Far Right over the past decades boil down to deindustrialisation, an increase in precarious work, wage stagnation, austerity and growing inequality that the mainstream political parties have not been able or willing to resolve.<sup>2</sup> These factors have led to a deterioration of social and economic security across Europe, coupled with growing feelings of grievances among workers. These circumstances also coincided with growing attacks against trade unions, collective bargaining and workers' rights, that continue today, and whose effects are highlighted in Figure 1 below.

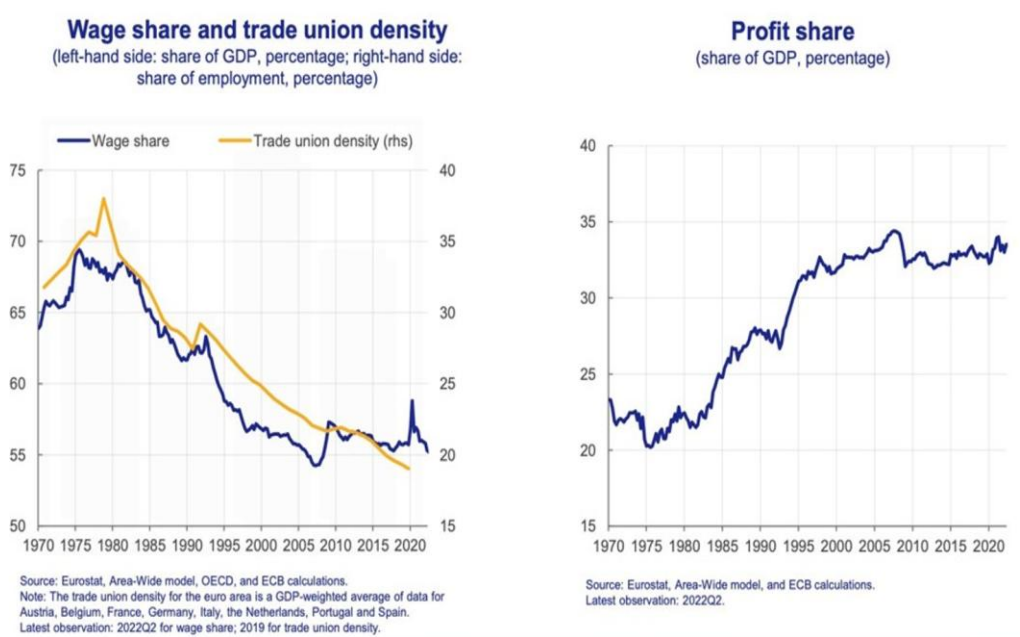


Figure 1. Comparison between wage share, trade union density and profit share. Based on Eurostat, OECD and ECB calculations. Provided by Trademark.

Economic insecurity and precariousness have also spread to the once-comfortable, middle-class households, which have seen their incomes stagnate, the cost of living increase and employment prospects become increasingly uncertain. University graduates are more likely to be saddled with debt, overqualified for the jobs they are doing, and unable to access the housing market, while their parents face greater financial risks – both as a result of borrowing to meet day-to-day costs and growing pressures on retirement income security. The financial crisis of 2008 and onslaught of austerity served to exacerbate these trends, compounding the fear, anger and disaffection that had been building over decades.

<sup>2</sup> The complete analysis highlighted in this part of the Action Plan is based extensively on the TUC's [report](#) by Dr Stiofán Ó Nualláin and Dr Seán Byers of Trademark Belfast.

In the absence of plausible alternatives to rising inequality, and the lack of a successful strategy to oppose austerity, the Far Right has been able to advance its own critiques and solutions. It has been successful in promoting the idea that greater social equality for immigrants and other marginalised groups is the cause of people's deprived economic conditions. Programmes advocating immigration restrictions, restricting welfare benefits to 'native' inhabitants and cultural conservatism hold appeal because they have the appearance of a collective response, articulated through the lens of the nation-state. In this way, the Far Right has sought to lay claim to notions of community while offering plausible-sounding solutions to economic and political challenges.

Growing economic insecurity, increasing inequality and alienation from 'politics as usual' have fuelled widespread disaffection and anti-establishment sentiments. Attacks on trade unions and the absence of a perceived alternative to austerity, or effective action to tackle inequality, have helped the Far Right present its solutions as a more plausible-sounding alternative. It is, therefore, essential that we develop our own trade union narrative that offers solutions, without falling into the trap of co-opting dangerous ideas.

The above-described socio-economic structural reasons are the basis for the rise of the Far Right, but their success would not be possible without centrist parties co-opting their ideas. Research [shows](#) that 'mainstreaming' has legitimised and normalised far-right parties and ideas. This is not only a result of the Far Right rebranding itself for electoral purposes but also traditional centrist parties embracing radical right-wing rhetoric and policies for reasons of political expediency. It is through this process that far-right parties have become acceptable government coalition partners or been able to influence government policy on questions such as immigration.

Other [research](#) also points to the mistakes of trade unions, centrist and centre-left parties co-opting policy agendas of far-right parties, which in most cases alienate a large proportion of their traditional progressive supporters. Democratic parties should focus on addressing economic grievances by reducing labour market insecurity, promoting economic growth and ensuring effective welfare protection. They should reclaim ownership of issues they are associated with, most notably equality.

The dangers of the breakdown of the 'cordon sanitaire' is greater than ever after the European elections. Trade unions should not compromise their values and enter into dangerous gambles which they can only lose. Instead, trade unions need to (re-)start training and awareness raising programmes for their members to explain the dangers of following the values and ideas of the Far Right. The Far-Right's ideas and values are successful at playing different groups of workers against each other, in particular the victims of policies driven by the governments of the mainstream parties (unemployment, precariousness, retirement, social security, lack of a future, democratic disappointment, etc.) or against other vulnerable groups. Here is where trade unions need to come in and unite them, not least by increasing our presence in companies, on the ground and where we are not dominant. We need to be on the offensive with a narrative based on what we are, and who we stand for. Above all we must have our own demands and preserve our independence of analysis, reflection, demands and mobilisation. Even if the majority of trade unions in Europe are independent of political parties and we must respect our neutrality, it is clear that the values of the Far Right are the opposite of those that we defend on a daily basis. Reminding and raising awareness among workers, but also employers, is needed, and not just in the run-up to national or European elections.

### **Why unions must step up their online organising**

The big success of far-right parties, and in particular their acceleration over the past decade, cannot be understood without taking into account the way the Far Right has won the internet. The Far Right has

understood very quickly the massive potential of social media as a propaganda and organising tool. It is also very quick to adopt increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI) to continuously improve and extend its online reach. Both social media and AI can be used for good or bad purposes. AI in particular can analyse huge amounts of data, as well as generate and spread content to a very wide audience. It also threatens to spread disinformation, fake news and deepfakes on levels never seen before. We should not underestimate the power of social media and AI, as well as their potential. As with many tools, a key consideration remains: who is using them and for what purpose?

The Far Right won the internet because it has understood that for many, and, especially for young people, there is no separate offline and online world. Trade unions continue to lag behind in their social media presence and strategy. It is crucial that they also complement their organising strategies with an online one. It is not about replacing the work on the ground in factories, but about complementing it with an online organising strategy. A good example of this is IG Metall in Germany: Understanding that TikTok is mostly used by young women in Germany, the union set up an account with a targeted campaign for this audience. The strategy works, with many joining the union.

Another [example](#) of a successful trade union organising campaign carried out extensively online is Starbucks Workers United in the US. The union strategically used social media to contact workers in Starbucks and ask if they wanted to join the union to improve their working conditions. Another example from the US is the successful organising campaign at Amazon which also relied heavily on online organising. We need to learn form these success stories in some of the most anti-union companies (Amazon is [reported](#) to have spent 4.3 million US dollars on consulting firms to fight union organising). But, as it currently stands, many trade unions are not online, but their members and future members are:

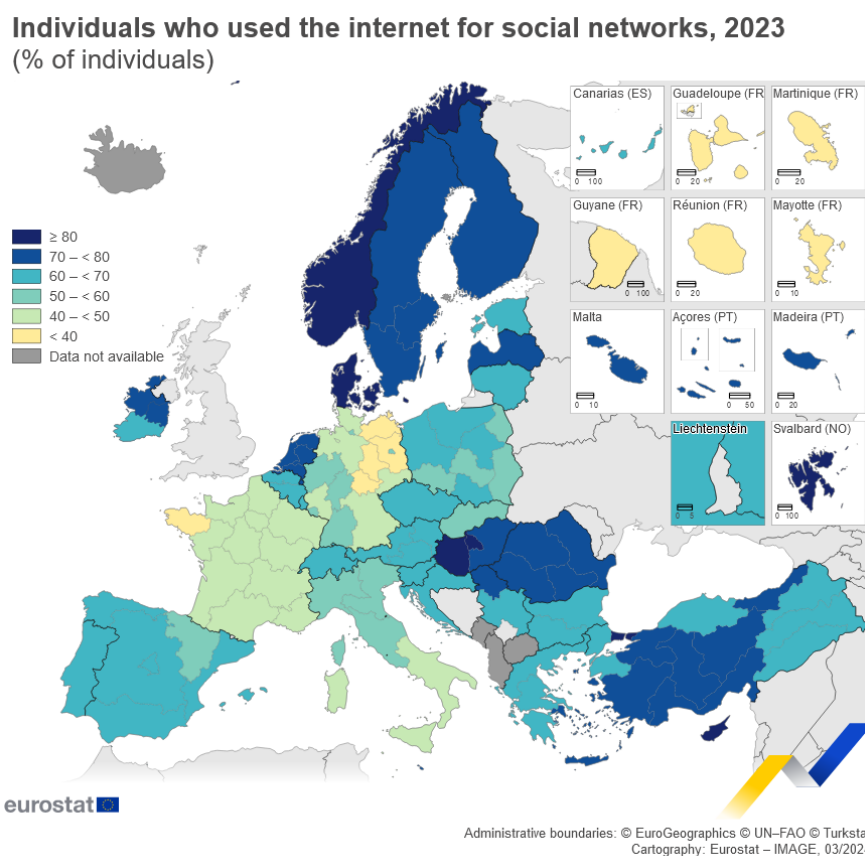


Figure 2. Individuals who used social media in 2023, [Eurostat](#)

Using social media effectively is more sophisticated than setting up an account and posting regularly. According to [research](#), the Far Right is using this space because evidence is growing that more people now get their news from social media than from traditional sources. Governments and political groups across the world sponsor online information campaigns led by bots, such as those used by Breitbart to promote Donald Trump. In Europe, we lack the type of progressive media that can match the capacity of the Far Right. Trade unions should consider their strategy to challenge far-right narratives and corporate power, and promote a vision of a different world.

The role of social media and ‘big tech’ companies in amplifying far-right narratives demands closer attention from trade unions, both to understand this phenomenon and to formulate an effective response, including lobbying for stronger regulation. We need to build upon the work that is mapping the influence of far-right narratives and networks online. By analysing key influencers, recurring narratives, geographic and demographic data, we can identify strategies designed to pull people away from the influence of the Far Right.

A good start would be to develop our trade union understanding of the new tools that are already used extensively by the Far Right and even by some employers. One example worth mentioning is social listening<sup>3</sup>. Like any tool, social listening can be used for good or bad purposes, and it is up to trade unions to understand how to use it to their advantage. This instrument could support trade unions in understanding what their members and potential members in a specific geographical area are thinking about the union and its actions. It could support targeted interventions when support for the union is decreasing, because it offers the necessary information to understand the grievances of people. British and German trade unions have started to experiment with these tools in two automotive companies and the results were a 30% increase in union membership and successful collective agreements with substantive pay rises.

It would be a tactical mistake to shy away from new instruments that could boost organising. As already mentioned, some employers are already using them. The most worrying example comes from Tesla which used workers’ surveillance for union-busting purposes. Tesla has been [reported](#) to have hired a consulting firm known for union-busting strategies. The company was using security cameras and other monitoring tools to track workers’ activities, including union-related discussion and meetings. Tesla has also been accused of monitoring workers’ social media activity, including private communication, for union-busting purposes. The scandal took place in the US, but given Tesla’s anti-union behaviour in [Sweden](#), it is not excluded that the company will go to great lengths to use similar strategies against trade unions in Europe also.

The 21st century is bringing new challenges to the trade union movement. With trade union density declining over the past decades, it is high time that we use all the instruments available to reverse this trend. Online organising must become part and parcel of our strategies if we want to grow the democratic values and ideas of the trade union movement.

In addition to increasing our presence in workplaces and on social media, trade unions need to raise awareness among workers to counteract the political propaganda narrative, its extreme methods directed at identifying the other as an enemy, and undermining the freedom and rights of expression. It is important that our members are supported in recognising fake news and getting information and data only from verified and reliable sources.

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<sup>3</sup> Social listening is a tool that allows organisations to better understand people’s opinions by analysing information that they share publicly on their social media channels. By using this tool, unions can, for example, understand what the members of a specific town or region think about their trade union and this can help unions to better adapt their demands to reflect the needs of their members.

## IndustriAll Europe's Action Plan against the Far Right: Recommendations for Action

We are at a turning point after the Far Right's increase in seats in all recent elections. There is no time to waste for trade unions to step up their actions against the Far Right's ideas and values. We have already increased our activities for this priority ahead of the EU elections in June 2024 with our '5 Wins, 5 Demands' [Campaign](#), the [webinar](#) against the Far Right, and our two youth trainings to build up capacity (in [Malaga](#) and [Budapest](#)).

With this paper, industriAll Europe aims to recall its founding values stated in article 3 of its Statutes: "the right to democratic political participation and democratic control of the economy and human rights, including the rights to freedom, peace, democracy, self-determination for all people and social justice". This struggle must be prioritised by promoting constructive dialogue at workplaces and with our counterparts, by contrasting hatred, violence and discriminations, by seeking pluralism and peace in our countries and not fuelling the social conflict.

Many of industriAll Europe's affiliated trade union organisations are actively committed to combatting the threat of far-right ideas among workers, as this problem is becoming a growing concern across Europe. Through awareness-raising campaigns and other initiatives at the workplace, at regional, national and international levels, many of our affiliates are countering the divisive narratives that guide the far-right ideologies. Coordinated action can have a significant impact. Therefore, joint efforts reinforce the message of solidarity among workers across Europe, as the struggle against far-right ideas is not only about protecting labour rights, but also about defending the shared values of equality, social justice, and democracy. It is crucial that the commitment to these values continues to grow stronger, demonstrating that the unity of workers is stronger than any attempt to divide us and to undermine our social and labour rights.

### Political demands

- Good industrial jobs: Secure, well-paid and sustainable for all workers.
- Revision of the treaties of monetary stability and current rules of economic governance which fix the permanent austerity for Member States and prevent any real economic stimulus.
- A moratorium on scrapping industrial assets and forced redundancies, while calling for negotiated solutions for all sites and workers.
- Setting up an effective and rapid system at borders to prevent imports of products that are not subject to the same environmental and social rules as the EU Member States.
- An end to social, wage and fiscal dumping within the EU.
- Implementation of a genuine European industrial policy plan, with massive funding to enable both a realistic energy, digital and environmental transition and a social programme for all employees and the general public.
- The right to genuine consultation by trade unions in advance of any project directly affecting workers, at European level and in all EU Member States.

### IndustriAll Europe's recommendations towards trade unions:



- Take a clear stance against the Far Right's ideas and values by developing your own trade union narrative based on our values, and offering our answers and solutions to the socio-economic concerns of workers.
- Carry out trainings and awareness programmes for our members to build their capacity to prevent the spread of far-right ideas of hate, violence and discrimination among workers, including training to recognise the propaganda narrative and learn how to get information only from verified and reliable sources.
- Engage with employers in the fight to tackle the phenomena of violence and political discrimination, also inspired by the Far Right at the workplace.
- Update your union's organising strategy with an online organising dimension, not least by using all available online means, like social media and social listening, and all other communication channels.
- Actively engage in dialogue with other social movements and democratic parties.

#### **IndustriAll Europe's role in this union strategy:**

- Raise awareness, alert and challenge European decision-makers by pointing out the consequences of their political choices and decisions.
- Challenge and denounce the European policies that adopt decisions that go against the world of work and workers (uncontrolled globalisation, austerity, decisions on industry, etc.).
- Raise affiliates' awareness of the votes of national MEPs on industrial and social policy issues.