

This report describes the recent work and accomplishments of the International Commission for Labor Rights (ICLR), a project initiated by the International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL) in partnership with the International Centre for Trade Union Rights (ICTUR) in 2002. Many other organizations, including Global Union Federations and national trade union centers, were involved in conceptualizing ICLR; today, it exists as an independent body with strong relationships with these, and other, partners around the world. ICLR is currently coordinated through a secretariat in New York City, established in 2005.

ICLR is a global network of more than 300 lawyers and labor rights experts who support trade unions and other workers' organizations, through legal research, assistance with international and domestic advocacy, and cross-border networking. These lawyers are able to respond rapidly to requests for facts related to particular violations, legal advice, expert opinions, information on political realities country-by-country, concrete experiences with different legal and political fora. In addition, ICLR has convened delegations of lawyers, at the request of individual unions and global federations, to undertake on-site assessments related to the legal and technical dimensions of labor rights issues.

Mission

Our mission is oriented towards greater implementation of core labor standards, and in particular the right to form and join trade unions and bargain collectively.

The Constitution references the principle that “the pursuit of a just and fair society is possible only in so far as the working people of that society enjoy the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms at work.” In particular, it highlights the conviction of the constituent organizations that “the fundamental rights and freedoms of working people are best protected by trade union organizing and free collective bargaining,” within the broader human rights framework. As indicated in greater detail below, this basic commitment to workers organizing – across borders, in new employment sectors, and in the face of great opposition – anchors our legal interventions and gives our network its shared sense of purpose.

How we work

We see ourselves primarily as a network responding to the articulated needs of the global trade union movement. Thus, the bulk of our work reflects the current priorities of trusted partner organizations, through requests to provide legal expertise in support of global organizing campaigns, to intervene with independent reporting and analysis on labor rights issues, and more.

We evaluate potential network members, as well as partner organizations, on a case-by-case basis: Our network of lawyers consists of individuals with a combination of regional and issue-specific expertise, and includes lawyers in multiple kinds of practices (within trade unions, law firms, non-profits, government agencies, academic institutions etc.); labor lawyers as well as those with expertise in other relevant fields of law; lawyers from most regions of the world. While requiring a certain basic commitment to a human rights perspective, we do not inquire into political affiliations or positions. The core of our network came from our parent organizations; we have expanded both by lawyers seeking us out (based on events we have sponsored, word of mouth, our website etc.) as well as our affirmative efforts to deepen our expertise in particular geographic as well as issue areas. At the same time, we have sought to keep our network relatively manageable in size, in order to maximize our effectiveness and our ability to remain in close touch with our membership.

In terms of partner organizations, we do not partner with groups/unions whose policies in other respects – for example, in terms of discrimination based on race, gender, religious affiliation etc. – would conflict with our basic commitment to trade union rights as part of a comprehensive human rights framework. We have not, as an organization, taken a position on divisive issues such as trade and labor linkages, and we work with partners on all sides of the debate, on occasion, even supporting efforts to develop a common minimum agenda among them. We frequently reach out to groups proactively in pursuit of a shared agenda; this tends to be more the case in terms of NGO partners rather than trade unions, as described below.

Over the course of our recent work, our partners and projects have included:

- Working with a range of groups in China and abroad to explore legislative reform possibilities and engagement with the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). Groups have included legal clinics at universities, law firms, unions and NGOs developing China programs.
- Supporting public sector workers in the United States to challenge restrictions on freedom of association. In the state of North Carolina, we partnered with the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) to file regional and international complaints addressing the denial of the right to collective bargaining, to sanitation workers, postal delivery workers, janitorial workers in state facilities, and more; in the state of New York, we are working with Local 100 of the Transportation Workers Union to use international norms and mechanisms to challenge a law prohibiting public sector strikes.
- Assisting with legal and policy underpinnings for global union-led organizing campaigns at multinational firms. Most recently, we assisted the Global Union Federation UNI to achieve a global agreement that brought organizing rights to over 500,000 workers at a private security firm, G4S.
- Collaborating with informal sector workers (domestic workers, home-based workers, agricultural workers) who have limited access to trade union organizing rights, or public law remedies, to shape private mechanisms to enforce and monitor labor rights principles.
- We have worked with academic and research institutions around the world – Institute for Labour Law and Development in Cape Town, South Africa; Centre for Workers' Management, India; the Human Rights Programs of law schools including Harvard, Columbia, and Fordham – to deepen the capacity of our network and expand its potential impact as a teaching tool. We also developed a series of Web-based seminars with the Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations, on international labor rights in domestic contexts.
- We work closely with NGO partners, engaged in litigation, advocacy, legal trainings, corporate accountability, and organizing support for workers' movements as well as broader human rights struggles:
 - We have worked with the Global Worker Justice Alliance on international law training materials for advocates supporting migrant workers
 - We helped the Legal Resources Centre in South Africa to conceptualize and implement “Africa Worker Rights Now,” a project to support low-wage service sector workers in southern Africa in efforts to enforce wage-and-hour laws
 - We partnered with the Clean Clothes Campaign network to identify comparative and international norms on worker compensation for workplace-related deaths and injuries, to shape a set of best practices. These were successfully used in negotiations for enhanced compensation with prominent European retailers sourcing from a garment factory in Bangladesh that had collapsed.
- We have been at the forefront of attempts to promote trade union protections for sex workers – a

vulnerable group not routinely supported by most trade unions around the world. We worked with a small group of trade unions to organize a meeting, in tandem with the World Social Forum in Belem, Brazil in January, which brought together union leaders and activists committed to improving conditions for workers in the sex sector.

Next Steps

The description above showcases the incredible strengths of ICLR and its network in terms of programmatic achievements. In the next phase of our growth, we plan to focus on strengthening the core principle – our dynamic and flexible network – by identifying, contacting and getting to know a much broader range of lawyers committed to labor movements, and promoting productive dialogues, and strategy sessions among them. We expect the ICLR secretariat to play a central role in creating inclusive, accessible discussions and collaborations, with the assistance of Web and translation technology, and documenting the outcomes for a wide range of trade unions and their advocates around the world.

We encourage you to send detailed information about yourself, and your aspirations for ICLR as a resource for you, as well as a space to share your expertise.

