Defending Unions in Crisis

A Guide for Responding to Threats Related to Shrinking Civic Space

How to Use This Guide

This guide is primarily designed for union organizations operating in a context of shrinking civic space and threats to fundamental democratic freedoms, like freedom of association, that threaten trade unions and activists. It can also be useful for other civil society organizations (CSOs) representing vulnerable communities in similar contexts. The word “member” is used frequently throughout the guide, typically to mean union members but also members of any community organizing and cooperating within a civic organization. The guide is intended for union staff, elected leaders, member activists, local stewards, or in combination between different levels of leadership. For example, elected leaders at a national confederation may want to use the guide to plan an organization-wide response to a hostile law under consideration, but regional leaders and even working groups within local organizations may find the guide useful for planning their own actions that fit into that organization-wide strategy.

As a package, the guide can help organizations assess a threat, plan a cohesive response, engage allies, take actions, and monitor impact. Not all sections will be applicable in every situation, and tools are designed to be flexible and easily adaptable for different national contexts. The steps are best practices that organizations can use to prepare for potential threats. When used in a crisis, the guide can function as a checklist of actions to mitigate the crisis and counter organizational threats:

EMERGENCY RESPONSE CHECKLIST

Quick Start for Unions and CSOs Facing Threats

1. ASSESS THE THREAT

- What is happening? Describe the threat (arrests, raids, surveillance, union deregistration)
- Who is affected? Identify members, leaders, or communities impacted
- Is there imminent risk to safety? If yes, prioritize security first
- Is this part of a broader pattern? Consider past or related incidents

2. LISTEN TO MEMBERS

- Hold meetings and calls with trusted members or local leaders
- Ask: How are people being affected? What do they need most urgently?
- Record stories with informed consent for future use or advocacy

3. SECURE PEOPLE AND INFORMATION

- Alert at-risk members/leaders and ensure basic physical and digital safety
- Use encrypted communication tools (e.g. Signal, ProtonMail)
- Back up critical documents securely (cloud, external storage)

4. FORM A CRISIS TEAM

- Assign a small trusted team to coordinate your response
- Delegate roles: Spokesperson, legal contact, media/comms lead, organizer/member contact, external liaison

5. MAP STAKEHOLDERS AND ALLIES

- Identify immediate allies (national unions, CSOs, lawyers, international partners)
- Reach out quietly to trusted support organizations, such as those listed in the guide
- Consider non-traditional allies (journalists, faith leaders, academia)

6. DOCUMENT EVERYTHING

- Record what happened: When, where, who, what was said/done
- Use the guide's complaint template to organize the information
- Safely store evidence (videos, testimonies, photos, written records)

7. DECIDE ON YOUR RESPONSE

- Will you go public now or gather more information?
- What initial actions are safe and strategic? (Petition, internal mobilization, quiet diplomacy) At what point are escalatory actions triggered, and what are the next steps?
- What outcome do you seek? Set short-term objectives that build toward long-term goals
- Use the guide's templates to build a full campaign response

8. CHECK INTERNATIONAL MECHANISMS

- Review the guide for complaint options (ILO, UN Special Rapporteur, OECD/NCP
- Match a mechanism to your goal: Attention? Remedy? Protection?

9. COMMUNICATE CAREFULLY

- Prepare internal talking points, and update members regularly
- If going public, confirm safety of those named, use human stories and credible evidence
- Identify who is authorized to speak externally and stick to agreed-upon messaging

10. REGROUP, REFLECT, PLAN

- Schedule regular quick check-ins with the campaign team. After the immediate crisis has passed, take time to reflect on the response, assess what was successful, and be honest about what was less successful and why. Plant the seeds for a stronger future response.

Introduction

A crisis has hit your organization. Threats to freedom of association are mounting in ways that endanger your ability to keep working toward your mission. People may be scared, face imminent threat to their personal safety or livelihood, or need help to protect their freedoms. You want to act quickly. A lot is happening at once, much is uncertain, and many people are affected. How do you and your organization respond?

These types of threats are on the rise in the Eurasian region. More than half of the countries in the region experienced a significant degradation of foundational civic and political rights in the 2025 *Freedom in the World Report*, as governments in the region used increasingly authoritarian tactics that directly threaten democratic principles to consolidate power.[1] The 2024 *Global Rights Index*, released annually by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), argued that this region has seen the steepest decline over the past decade. In 2024, countries across the Eurasian region took actions to meddle in internal union affairs, help establish employer-aligned yellow unions, and restrict legitimate rights to engage in protest actions and strikes. The report concludes that around the world, "the general picture displays a relentless attack on civil liberties and the interests of working people."[2]

This guide is intended to help unions and CSOs navigate these trends and support organizations when their freedom of association is under attack. It includes:

- Tools and templates for campaign planning, as well as questions to consider when fighting against attacks on freedom of association
- International mechanisms available to unions, CSOs and individuals under attack (addressing attacks by the state or an employer)
- Security resources for individuals and organizations to protect their safety against physical, digital, and other threats

This is not meant to be a prescriptive guide, but a modular toolkit offering both rapid response and long-term planning tools for different types of users. It offers practical tools and steps to help your organization respond when under threat, as well as guidance on how to strengthen your organization to better prepare before a crisis begins. It is meant to help you navigate a crisis and come out with successful solutions.

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[1] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2025*, "Regional Trends: Eurasia," February 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/report/report-sub-page/2025/regional-trends-and-threats-freedom#eurasia

[2] International Trade Union Confederation, *Global Rights Index 2024*, https://www.ituc-csi.org/ituc-global-rights-index-2024-en

Overview to the Guide

1 Listen to Members
Engaging members, asking questions, and assessing impact are the first steps for developing a plan and mobilizing a response

2 Threat Analysis and Stakeholder Mapping
Defining the risks and identifying allies/opponents/other stakeholders will help you tailor your response

3 Goals and Objectives
Taking time up front to determine what changes you seek and what success could look like will guide a successful response from the start

4 Develop Your Plan
Mapping out actions to meet your goals, including organizing and communications for both internal and external actors

5 Complaint Mechanisms
Using international mechanisms to draw attention to crises, build leverage with governments, and foster accountability

6 Monitoring Progress and Impact
Tracking implementation helps keep everyone on track and can shed new light on potential problems and possible solutions

7 Reflection
It is easy to jump from crisis to crisis, but taking time to reflect on what has been achieved, and how, will prepare you for the next crisis

8 Additional Resources
A brief list of organizations and tools to help you along the way

1. Listen: Take the Temperature of Your Membership

Listening to members and understanding their needs, concerns, and priorities should be a constant practice, not just a response in moments of crisis. Regularly engaging with your membership builds trust, strengthens internal solidarity, and ensures your union remains grounded in the real-life experiences of its members. This ongoing connection not only reinforces the union's power but also makes it more resilient in the face of external pressures and attacks. By making listening and engagement a foundational practice, your union will be better prepared to act decisively and effectively when challenges arise.

In a time of crisis, it's important to understand the context and circumstances of the threats you face, particularly the impact on members and their communities. Even if you're well-versed on the situation, understanding the effects on your membership will help you ground your response in members' needs. Collecting information now may be helpful in documenting rights violations for future actions. Listening first also offers the opportunity to gather your coalition before engaging external stakeholders, building mutual trust, and seeding future mobilization. Determining a clear path forward based on members' needs also helps with internal consensus, aligning internal leadership and stakeholders toward a common purpose and reducing internal tensions and divisions, which can hinder effective response to external threats.

Questions to consider when listening:

1. How does this threat to freedom of association concretely affect members?
2. How is it impacting other workers and the rest of society?
3. How do impacts vary across groups within the community? Are there members with particular needs at this time?
4. Does the threat have national reach? International? Or is it more localized?
5. What harm is being inflicted and who is benefiting from that harm?

Listening Strategies

- Town halls and community meetings
- Crisis committee of local leaders/advocates
- Conference calls
- Questionnaires
- Social media analysis

In addition, this information-gathering process will give you useful information to humanize the threats in the media, with lawmakers, and for other relevant actors. You need to gather enough information to speak credibly about your members' needs and priorities. You should be able to clearly articulate the needs of your members and provide compelling examples.

Effective Member Outreach

Many organizations have developed resources to help unions listen to and engage their members. One of those resources, a guide from the U.S.-based International Brotherhood of Teamsters published in 2020, contains recommendations on developing member surveys. A link to the full document is included in the *Additional Resources* section.

12 Tips for Designing a Member Survey:

1. Determine the specific objective of the survey and make sure this goal is reflected in the questions.

2. Determine who should receive the survey; for example, union members, nonunion employees, or both.

3. Keep the number of questions to no more than 15 and keep them short and to the point.

4. Guide respondents through the survey by asking clear questions which flow logically from topic to topic, beginning with more general questions to more specific ones.

5. All questionnaires should include a brief introductory paragraph or letter from the president/executive board explaining the purpose of the survey, stressing the importance of the members' input, and thanking them in advance for their time and effort.

6. Very large local unions may wish to survey a representative sample of their membership instead of trying to contact everyone.

7. Demographic questions (age, sex, length of service, etc.) should be kept to a minimum, but should be included if the responses need to be divided into subgroups.

8. Open-ended questions are harder to code and tabulate, but can be quite useful because they allow for opinions. It is suggested that you use the open-ended format when you cannot anticipate responses. Otherwise closed-format questions are the norm.

9. It is important to include an area for comments. People like to have the flexibility to express how they feel, perhaps concerning areas not directly covered in the survey.

10. Appearance and format are important (color, borders, clarity, etc.).

11. Methods for distribution and collection of surveys should be clearly outlined and explained to union administrators or other persons involved so that accurate records can be maintained.

12. General results of the survey must be relayed to the membership by some means (newsletter, bulletin board, etc.)

Source: International Brotherhood of the Teamsters, "Teamster Power: A Guide to Building an Active and Strong Membership." Published in 2020

2. Threat Analysis and Stakeholder Mapping

Case study: Georgia

In 2006, the government abolished the country's labor inspectorate and weakened labor protections as part of a deregulation push in a wider effort to shrink civic space.

The Georgian Trade Union Confederation (GTUC) wanted to rebuild the labor inspectorate but faced opposition from business interests and business-aligned politicians. To build political will for reforms and enforcement, the GTUC needed to bring several stakeholders on board, including in government, business and the judicial system. To counter business opposition, the GTUC led a multi-year engagement process to find common ground with employers who saw decent work as a good business practice. The GTUC also built a wide network of allies in government, from local mayors to members of parliament, to increase demand for laws that protected worker rights as a matter of public safety.

Through this dialogue, the GTUC made strong labor standards a matter of 'good policy' that a majority of lawmakers supported. Starting in 2017, the parliament passed a series of laws developed with the GTUC to comply with international labor standards. A new OSH law passed in 2019 with unanimous support in parliament.

Identify the specific threats causing the crisis and their potential impact on your organization and its members. Are the threats operational, digital, physical, or legal in nature, or some combination thereof? Is this part of a broader strategic threat? Who else is impacted? Creating collaborative teams and committees to focus on different elements of the threat can be a powerful and effective approach. Mapping out the stakeholders you will be working with or against is essential in developing appropriate goals, objectives, and actions that will neutralize the threat and help your organization move past the crisis.

As you move through these analyses, encourage the team to think creatively, in terms of both defining the threat and identifying potential allies. Looking outside of traditional union frames can lead to both a deeper understanding of the problem and a broader array of potential support. Is the threat directly targeted at unions, or is this a broader civil society problem? Who else outside of your normal circle of alliances is impacted and engaged on this issue (e.g. journalists, human rights defenders, academic institutions, etc.)? Engaging these other actors amplifies messaging, creates strength in numbers that is harder to dismiss or ignore, and provides protection since unions are not isolated in their response and exposed to retaliation.

Threat Analysis

Identifying the threats is only the first step in addressing them. The goal of this analysis is to more fully understand the nature of the problem. Where is the threat coming from? What are the potential impacts? Where is your organization most vulnerable? What parts of the threat pose the biggest risks? How should you prioritize your response based on the extent of the need? You do not at this point need to have an answer or a response to the threat, just a better understanding of what is happening, why, and how. Once the components are more clear, it will be easier to plot a path forward and leverage resources available to mount a response. Many of the organizations hyperlinked in the Additional Resources section provide specific recommendations for addressing specific threats.

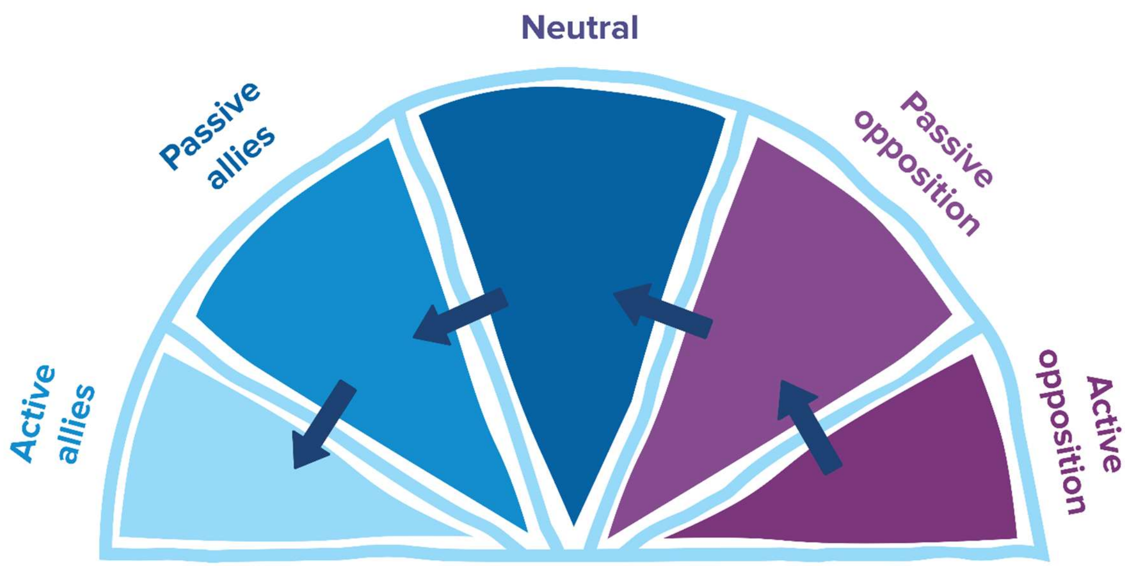
THREAT ANALYSIS: KEY QUESTIONS	
What are the specific facts surrounding the threat?	
Has there been a pattern of such threats over time?	
What seems to be the objective of the threat?	
Do you know who is making the threat? If so, who?	
What are the concrete impacts of the threat to your organization?	

Stakeholder Analysis

Once the nature of the threat is more clear, a stakeholder analysis can help an organization plot how to both address the threat at its source and mobilize support. You will likely need to expand your scope of stakeholders to access more expertise and resources, strengthen existing networks, achieve sustainability, and build a network or a social movement.

There are several ways to map stakeholders. One is by where they align for your goals.

The Sphere of Allies analysis below breaks down stakeholders by where they fall in support of your cause – from active allies to active opposition. The goal is to identify how to move each category one slot to the left. Try to move those who are inclined to be neutral into passive allies and mobilize passive allies to become active allies. Meanwhile, try to pacify active opposition and neutralize passive opposition.



Another approach is to prioritize reaching stakeholders who have the expertise, power, influence, and interest to achieve the goals of your campaign and help address the threat.

Use the Stakeholder Matrix template on the next page, and the frameworks provided, to map stakeholders for your campaign. In the Develop Your Plan section, you will find guidance on including the stakeholders you have identified in your mapping into an action plan.

Influence	**High Influence, Low Interest** *This category of stakeholders can come from the "neutral" or "passive" categories but are in positions where they can help the campaign if persuaded. Continuous engagement and consultations are crucial to turn them into allies. They could be resistant if they are surprised by campaign activities, so the team must ensure they are informed and included in relevant work.*	**High Influence, High Interest** *These are stakeholders from the "leading" or "supporting" category. They are the key players and the most important on the stakeholder list. It is essential to check in with them regularly and keep them informed of developments.*
	Low Influence, Low Interest *These stakeholders are unaware or unlikely to engage for other reasons. They should be included on semi-regular updates so they are at least aware of the campaign and have opportunities to get more involved.*	**Low Influence, High Interest** *These stakeholders come from the "allied" or "supporting" categories but do not have as much influence over the situation as other stakeholders. The project team should keep them in the loop on communication and encourage them to actively participate.*
		Interest

SWOT Analysis

An assessment of your organization's strengths (S), weaknesses (W), opportunities (O), and threats (T) is another strategy that can help guide effective responses to threats and crises. A SWOT analysis helps you determine both the internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external (threats and opportunities) assets that an organization can mobilize to solve a problem, and the possible challenges that may hinder an effective response. An honest assessment of internal strengths and weaknesses is critical to a successful analysis. Acknowledging organizational weaknesses is not indicative of organizational failure and should not be a process of placing blame. Rather, it is an opportunity to identify areas that need improvement or lack resources, recognize those limitations, factor them into your strategic responses, and take deliberate measures to tailor actions accordingly. Similarly, recognizing the external factors that are beyond an organization's control but will impact the success of a response is important to determine follow-up actions most likely to achieve results.

The guiding questions in the following tool can help you undertake a SWOT analysis in response to your organization's particular challenge.

SWOT ANALYSIS	
STRENGTHS	**WEAKNESSES**
What does our organization do well? What do our members say we do well? What does the general public perceive as our strengths? What do we have that other organizations do not? What unique value do we add as we address this situation? What about our organization (our structure, our connections, our values) can best help us address this threat? What successes have we had in the past? Why were we successful?	Where could we do better? Where do our members say we could do better? What does the general public perceive as our weaknesses? Which internal challenges are the easiest to address? Which are the hardest? Which are most important for addressing current threats? What resources (staff, equipment, capabilities, etc.) do we lack that would help address current threats?
OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
What, or who, is helping us create the change we want around this issue? Do our opponents have any weaknesses that we could benefit from? Are there upcoming events or developments that we could benefit from? Are there spaces where we can expand our outreach or influence? Are there potential new resources that could help us address current threats? If so, where are those resources and how do we access them? Who can help us access them? Are there social or political trends working in our favor?	What, or who, is preventing us from creating the change we want around this issue? Who are our opponents on this issue? Are they changing or shifting? What tactics are our opponents using most effectively against us? Have we lost resources recently, or have they become less effective? How and why did that happen? Have we lost access to spaces recently? If so, how and why did that happen? Are there social or political trends working against us? What are they? Is the operational environment becoming riskier? If so, how?

3. Goals and Objectives

Goals tell you where you want to go. Objectives tell you how to get there.
Well-articulated objectives help teams monitor progress because they detail the steps needed to realize the goal. At any point along the journey, you can evaluate your work so far and understand your progress toward that objective.

- **Goal** – A desired result you expect to achieve within a specified time
  - Determines where you go and by when
  - Document goals transparently

- **Objectives** – Achievable steps showing what you need to do to achieve your goal. Objectives break goals into concrete steps toward change
  - For each goal, develop one or more objectives
  - Objectives outline the specific actions you need to take to achieve that goal

- **Activities** – Specific tasks needed to achieve each objective
  - Each objective may need more than one activity
  - Identify resources needed, timeframe, outputs/metrics
  - Activities should flow from the goal and objectives. First decide what you want to accomplish, then determine what you will do to accomplish it.

Use the next template as a guide to identify a goal that will help address the threat you face. Then provide one or more objectives that will lead to achieving that goal.

Objectives should be **SMART**

- Specific: Objectives help organizations focus their efforts by defining precisely what it is they are trying to achieve. Use the “5 Ws” to guide your objective development process (Who, What, Where, When and Why). Your activities will then describe the How.
- Measurable: Knowing how to measure progress toward your objective will make it easier to determine if you are accomplishing what you set out to do. It will keep you focused on your plan and help you determine later if it needs to be adjusted.
- Achievable: Look at your current situation and make sure your objective is something you can actually do with the resources you have and in the time you have proposed. Try not to make your objective either too easy or too difficult to complete.
- Relevant: Make sure your objective is directly connected to your goal and to your organization’s strategy and mission. Only set objectives that will matter for your work.
- Time-Bound: To be realistic, objectives need to have a timeframe in which they are to be accomplished. Make your objectives progressive, with some that can be accomplished sooner while others may take more time as you pursue your goal.

Once you've identified a few SMART objectives, design activities that will help you accomplish them. You should have a format somewhat like this:

Goal: ***The change you are working toward***

a. Objective 1 – *SMART objective that moves you toward your goal*
    i. Activity 1 – *What will you do to meet this objective and how (be specific)*
    ii. Activity 2
    iii. Activity 3 (etc.)
b. Objective 2 (etc.)
    i. Activity 1
    ii. Activity 2
    iii. Activity 3 (etc.)

As you progress in addressing the threats identified, you can use the tools laid out in the monitoring section to check that the activities you are undertaking meet your needs. Documenting what you do and how it fits with your overall aims will help you adjust to a changing situation.

Case study: Kosovo

Standing up for worker rights can trigger retaliation from government or employers that puts those rights in even greater danger. A strong campaign plan needs to anticipate such retaliation and include space to respond and adapt, while keeping everyone moving toward an established goal. Teachers in Kosovo offer a powerful example.

In 2022, public sector workers – including teachers in the United Union of Education, Science, and Culture of Kosovo (SBASHK) – organized a nationwide strike for a new wage law. SBASHK played a leading role in the strike, and it faced retaliation in equal measure. The government cancelled SBASHK's national collective agreement and stripped the union of financial resources overnight by requiring all of its members to re-register in a new system for dues collection.

Two strategic decisions helped SBASHK survive and persevere:

- First, the union focused on grassroots engagement. Strong member engagement had fueled high teacher participation in the strike and helped SBASHK quickly rebuild its membership roster in 2023. SBASHK also worked to strengthen its community outreach after the strike, when school closures frustrated parents and damaged public support.
- Second, SBASHK used a variety of tactics to pursue its goal of fair earnings for teachers. While unions won their new wage law in 2023, SBASHK also sought to restore its collective agreement. Its grassroots engagement work helped SBASHK turn teachers and allies out in full force for a public rally in Pristina at the end of 2024 as a way to build pressure when the government refused to negotiate. SBASHK also mobilized its members and allies to petition for a pension reform that would improve benefits for many teachers, which gathered more than twice as many signatures as it needed to go before the parliament.

With this multi-pronged strategy, SBASHK has been able to make progress toward its main goal of improving teacher compensation, as it addresses challenges to other union priorities.

Goal, Objective, & Activity Planning Template

GOAL: *Example – Prevent the adoption of a law that weakens trade union rights*			
OBJECTIVE: *Example – Secure public opposition to the draft law from at least 20 parliamentarians before the first reading*			
	LEAD	**DUE DATE**	**PRODUCT/OUTPUT/METRIC**
ACTIVITY *Example – Disseminate parliamentary sign-on letter outlining reasons for opposition*		*By Aug 20* *By Sep 5* *By Oct 30*	*Finalize letter text* *Develop an outreach plan with allies* *Conduct outreach to all offices*
ACTIVITY *Example – Organize three parliamentary roundtables to disseminate information on the harms of the draft law*		*By Sep 10* *In October*	*Finalize materials for meetings* *Organize each of the three events*
OBJECTIVE: *Example – Increase public pressure on parliamentarians to oppose the draft law*	**LEAD**	**DUE DATE**	**PRODUCT/OUTPUT/METRIC**
ACTIVITY *Example – Develop and post social media materials*			
ACTIVITY *Example – Hold press conferences with journalists*			
ACTIVITY *Example – Launch a public letter-writing campaign*			

4. Develop Your Plan

This section provides concrete tools and organized processes as you develop and implement an action plan to address the threat you face. It outlines methods for building power within your membership and in broader society. In particular, it provides guidance for effectively engaging a variety of audiences through different channels and offers recommendations for keeping members, leaders, allied organizations, and other stakeholders engaged.

Your action plan needs: ● Milestones (points when certain activities or should be completed) ● Evaluation of progress (if you're on track, keep going; if not, adjust your pace or revisit your objective) ● A continued focus on goals despite inevitable distractions ● Clear goals and objectives, which are reminders of what must happen ● Editing goals and objectives is ok, if it helps you respond to environmental changes

This section focuses on tools for two important aspects of a campaign plan: organizing and communications. Each of these includes both internal and external work.

Organizing: A good organizing strategy has two components:

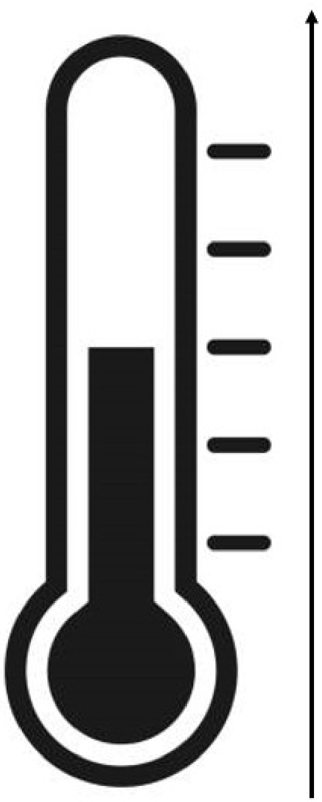
- **Internal Organizing**: Building a connection with the members of your organization most affected by the threat helps to build internal solidarity, a sense of community, and power. It also distributes the work needed for the fight. In the Listen to Members section, the act of documenting member experiences created connection. Creating specific actions members can take together, even if it is not public, builds civic space from within and strengthens organizations against attacks from the outside.

- **External Organizing**: Information sharing, agreements and commitments to working together can help reduce fear and bring some comfort to those affected by common threats. A well-defined stakeholder engagement plan includes the following:
  - Managing Expectations: Ensure stakeholders know the campaign's trajectory, what to expect through each phase, and how to align objectives across organizations
  - Reducing Risk: Help organizations move together rather than individually, where they would be more vulnerable to retaliation and intimidation
  - Building Trust: Foster relationships between organizations that promote democratic values and between individuals struggling to protect fundamental freedoms
  - Being Responsive: Effective communication allows teams to collaborate, be more creative, and benefit from each other's strengths

Actions: While union activity is often associated with large demonstrations, these may not be possible in a closing civic space. High-visibility actions like rallies and strikes are also high-risk actions that can endanger participants. There are many other actions that can be lower risk but still help you accomplish your campaign goals. Online petitions on platforms like LabourStart, for instance, can build popular support in ways that allow people to remain more anonymous. Here are a few things to think about when choosing actions for your campaign plan:

- **Action Escalation**: Starting with low-risk actions and moving up to higher-profile actions over time has many benefits. It helps build trust and engagement among your membership and keeps the blame where it belongs: at the source. Your actions only escalate when the concerns underlining the actions remain unaddressed. Letting those in power know what comes next incentivizes agreements to prevent further action.
- **Be Creative**: Non-conventional actions meant to be artistic or humorous might be less confrontational and can be deeply impactful. Theater, visuals, comedy, and music have all helped advance social movements and can humanize your campaign. Adding fun to your actions will bring in more members and draw public support.
- **Be Strategic**: Actions for the sake of actions do not help build power. Actions should be part of a broader strategy with a clear purpose that serves your campaign goals and objectives. If an action is likely to backfire or lead to mass arrests, it might do your campaign more harm than good. Strategic actions pay off in the long term.

ACTION THERMOMETER



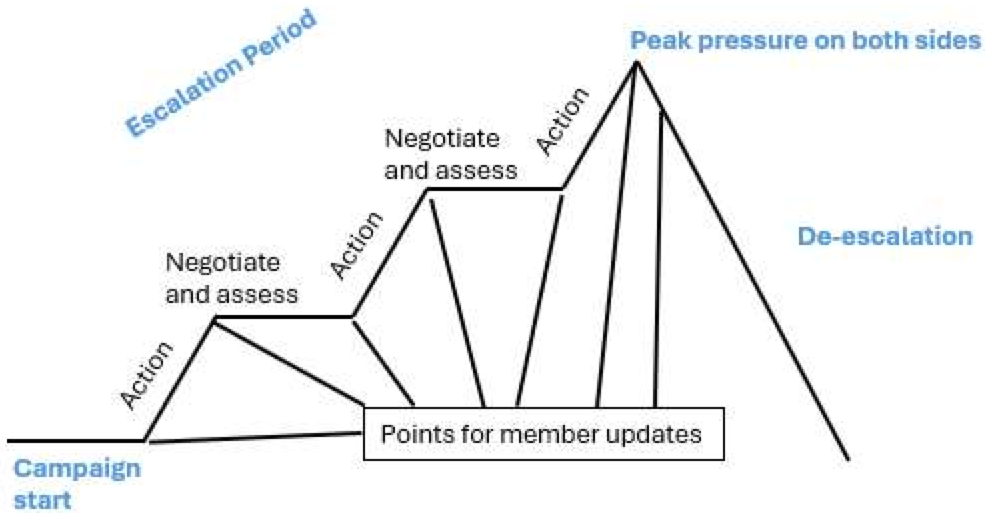
- General strike, occupation of buildings or public lands (internal/external)
- Disruptive actions (walk-outs, bombard target with emails and calls at specific time, etc.) (internal/external)
- Public rally or demonstration (external)
- Non-disruptive work action among members (stickers, posters, t-shirts, etc.) (internal)
- Public petition or letter-writing campaign (external)
- Launch public information campaign (social media, leaflets, etc.) (external)
- Collect stories about impact on members (internal)
- Meet with stakeholders who can resolve the issue to negotiate a resolution (external)
- Meet as a small group to identify the problems and plan a response (internal)

Source: Adapted from *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* developed by the U.S.-based LaborNotes union organization

When you select actions for your campaign plan, they should advance your objectives as described above, as well as push your campaign forward. One way to think of this is that your actions should move from “cold” to “hot.” A few factors to consider are:

1. Will the action increase pressure on decision makers?
2. Will the action unify your membership or divide it?
3. Will the action build public sympathy for your cause?
4. How might different stakeholders react?
5. Could it backfire or put your organization at risk? If so, are you prepared for the consequences?
6. What are the chances of success?
7. What would come next?

ACTION ESCALATION



Source: Adapted from *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* developed by the U.S.-based LaborNotes union organization

Another factor to consider is where particular actions fit into the overall arc of your campaign. You do not want to plan your biggest action for the beginning of the campaign, because that does not leave you anywhere to go if it is not successful. The visual on the left breaks down the phases of a campaign you should be planning for.

Campaign Start: In this phase, you are conducting your threat assessment, stakeholder mapping, and other planning stages as outlined in this guide.

Escalation Period: This is the action period of your campaign. Actions should not necessarily be continuous. You want to create a ladder effect of escalating actions with periods in between where decision makers can have opportunities to resolve the crisis.

Peak Pressure: In this near-final stage of the campaign, each side is exerting maximum pressure on the other. Each side will also try to resolve the situation and win as much as it can.

At each inflection point, make sure you provide updates to your members to keep them engaged and informed about the progress of the campaign. Each action will likely require multiple steps. You can use the template on the next page to organize and coordinate action between teams, either internally within your organization or with external actors. Each sheet should outline in detail an action that will support a crisis campaign objective, which keeps everyone working toward the same goal. For each action, identify who will do which components by when to build accountability.

ACTION PLANNING

Internal: ☐ **External:** ☐

Stakeholders: ______________________________

Goal: ______________________________

Objective: ______________________________

Action *(Toward the Goal/Objective)*	**Steps** *(Toward the Action)*	**Who Will Do What?** *(Members, Staff, Others)*	**By When?**	**Desired Outcome**
Example: Develop and implement a social media campaign	*Example: Consult with a communications expert to develop messaging and a campaign calendar*			
	Example: Secure approval and funds for any visual materials (videos, memes, etc.) that need to be produced			
	Example: Build internal knowledge about and support for the campaign so members will expand the reach of the materials.			

Communications: Effective communications plans include details to help you determine when and how to engage your stakeholders. The below guidance shows you how to build a plan that details channels, frequencies, points of contact, and more. Components to think through as you develop your plan include:

- **Content**: The information you want to convey and the format in which it will be most accessible
- **Audience**: Who the information is directed to (for members and internal messaging, or for external awareness raising)
- **Method**: E.g. press release, social media post, newsletter, radio announcement, message app, online video, etc.
- **Sources**: Where the information will come from and who can or cannot be publicly cited
- **Frequency**: Timeframe and how often information will be distributed
- **Point of contact**: The person responsible for managing communication networks

While media plans are typically for distributing information to outside audiences, having a plan to communicate internally with leaders, activists, and your broader membership is essential. This is especially true when they may become targets of the threats causing the crisis. Communicating clearly, transparently, and regularly establishes an information flow and builds trust among members. It reinforces the interconnectedness of members and leaders.

Use the template on the next page to develop your own communications plan.

Case Study: Kyrgyzstan

An effective public communications campaign engages everyday people in holding governments and employers accountable, especially in closing spaces. Disabled persons' organizations (DPOs) in Kyrgyzstan have notched some important wins since launching a public campaign on the labor rights of people with disabilities in 2020.

DPOs realized they needed to shift public attitudes about disability and work to build support for legislative reforms that strengthen labor protections for people with disabilities. In particular, common stigmas that people with disabilities are unable to work, that they need charity rather than labor protection, or that their needs are too costly for employers to accommodate hindered critical changes in law that would have expanded employment opportunities for workers with disabilities.

DPOs used multiple media channels – from traditional TV and radio to newer social media like Instagram – to reach not only people with disabilities themselves but thousands of potential allies in the broader public. Media content included personal stories from people with disabilities doing important jobs or starting their own businesses. These stories helped break down stigmas and humanize persons with disabilities. Recent workplace surveys in which more people voice support for hiring persons with disabilities and finding ways to make their worksites more accessible demonstrate that public perception on this topic is shifting as a result of these stories.

DPOs used this increasing public support to push for legislative reforms and improvements to enforcement mechanisms, some of which were adopted in early 2025.

Campaign Communications Plan Template

Content	Audience	Method	Sources	Frequency	Point of Contact
What is being said?	*Who is it being said to?*	*Is this a set of talking points, a bulletins, a newsletter, a text message sent to members, etc.?*	*Who is it coming from? The president? A local leader? A branch leader?*	*How often is just the right amount for this specific content?*	*Who is organizing the message?*

Social Media Guidance

- Start by identifying the communication channels that are most likely to get attention from your intended audience. Ensure you are posting frequently to these channels to create a reliable stream of content.

- Know your audience: Who do you want to reach?
    - If you want your audience to notice and engage with your posts, you need to make them highly relevant to that audience
    - Regularly analyze your posts to determine which methods and what content resonates most with your audience
    - The more relevant your posts are, the more your audience will read and share them
    - Develop content and social media posts that provide solutions for problems your members feel in their day-to-day lives

- Keep it short, clear, and concrete
    - Shorter posts are better for social media (with Facebook you can go a little longer)
    - Emphasize your organization's work. What are you actually doing for members?
    - Make each post relatable by **focusing on a human story**
    - Avoid jargon, buzzwords, and descriptors that people tune out from
    - Make your posts **easy to read** by writing at a primary school reading level
    - Use headings, bullets, and lists to make your posts easier to scan
    - People love lists and inspiring quotes
    - **Be concise**

- Be generally positive in your messaging
    - Content does not have to be 'happy', but the audience should be excited and inspired
    - **Do not engage with trolls**. "Trolls" disseminate counter-information and want a response from you to continue their attack.

- Put thought into your messaging
    - Make it timely and relevant to increase engagement
    - Diversify your message. Change things up and avoid boring your audience
    - Match message to platform. Design your content to fit the style of the platform
    - Use images and videos to increase engagement
        - Use images, graphics, and videos to tell a story whenever possible. It is more engaging and can tell the story more quickly and succinctly than words alone
        - An image or video can often stand alone in social media posts while still conveying the full message to your audience
    - Share unique, original data, that people can only get from your organization

- Identify a point of contact - who is responsible for communication?

5. Complaint Mechanisms

Obtaining remedy for violations of the right to freedom of association can be extremely difficult, especially when the government is the perpetrator of those violations and/or when the violations are committed in the context of closing civic space. Courts may be co-opted by the government or employers, and even bringing a violation to light can open up the risk of retaliation. Seeking redress in international courts can overcome some of these challenges, but it can also open up others. International courts work slowly, and their ability to enforce decisions is limited. There are also many bodies where you can file a complaint or submit information about rights violations, all with different requirements and different processes for reviewing cases. Thus, before deciding to file a complaint to an international body, your organization should think about what you want the outcome to be and how the complaint will fit into your broader campaign strategy before you move forward.

Some questions you might want to ask as you determine your approach are:

- Who is committing the violation? Is it just the government, or are employers involved? Some mechanisms are targeted only toward states, while others can be used against private-sector actors. If employers are the ones committing the violation, is the government failing in its international obligations by allowing the employers to do that?
- Have you exhausted national legal options? Several international mechanisms require organizations to demonstrate they have tried and failed to obtain remedy in national courts. Even if not required, well-documented denials of rights are strong evidence.
- What is your goal? Do you want international experts to support your position? Do you want an investigation or some form of accountability? Do you want something immediate to support a communications campaign? The answers to these questions will largely determine which international body and which mechanisms will be most useful.
- What are the risks of involving international mechanisms, who bears those risks, and what safeguards can you put in place to protect against retaliation? If the complaint involves individual victims, it is important to get their informed consent and make a plan to address possible retaliation before you elevate their story.

A comprehensive overview of all international mechanisms is simply not feasible in the scope of this guide. This section provides a high-level overview of the options to help you determine how to incorporate international reporting and complaint mechanisms into your campaign plan. This section includes:

- An overview of mechanisms available within the International Labor Organization (ILO) and United Nations (UN) systems and how individuals and organizations can use those mechanisms as part of a broader strategy to address closing civic space
- Tools for making a complaint against an employer, including through international financial institutions (IFIs), national due diligence laws, trade mechanisms, etc.

The Additional Resources section provides links and resources that will help you actually submit complaints through each of these mechanisms.

International Labor Organization and United Nations Mechanisms

There are multiple ways to use the ILO and the UN, but broken down simply it is a matter of tapping into the regular reporting cycles or using special procedures:

- **Regular reporting** is completed on a pre-planned schedule. Countries are required to submit regular reports to expert bodies that issue observations and recommendations. These mechanisms typically only apply to conventions or treaties that states have ratified and allow input from trade unions or CSOs. Expert bodies produce written reports advising a state on how to comply with a convention or treaty. This regular process is usually faster than special procedures, but it is only on a fixed schedule.

- **Special procedures** can be used with a large number of bodies that receive complaints in response to specific cases that demonstrate violations of international norms. Generally speaking, states must also be parties to the relevant body through accession or ratification. These processes are usually quasi-judicial and result in specific rulings with follow-up mechanisms. However, those results usually take years, and there are restrictions on who can file, how, and under what circumstances.

The following charts provide a snapshot of each mechanism. Note that these mechanisms are not mutually exclusive. You can use multiple mechanisms at the same time on particular issues. The Additional Resources section provides more information on regular reporting schedules and how to use each of these mechanisms to protect worker rights.

International Labor Organization Supervisory Mechanisms	
REGULAR REPORTING	SPECIAL PROCEDURES
Committee of Experts ● Governments report to the ILO on ratified conventions on an annual schedule ● Workers and employers can comment, including regional and international worker groups, such as the ITUC and sectoral global union federations ● Comments are due in September ● Experts Report comes out every February with observations/ conclusions	**Committee on Freedom of Association** ● Includes 18 ILO Governing Body members plus an independent chair ● Meets three times a year to issue opinions ● After receiving a complaint, the Committee may initiate a direct contacts mission ● The Committee may issue recommendations with follow-up or refer the case to the Committee of Experts to require more frequent reporting **Representations** ● For any convention EXCEPT those related to freedom of association ● Written complaints are submitted to the ILO Governing Body explaining violations

<table>
<tr>
<td>A small handful of cases are selected for more intense review (see below)
Committee on the Application of Standards (CAS)

The CAS reviews the Experts Report and chooses 24 or 25 notable cases to discuss further
Case selection is often in response to major events or repeated issues with non-compliance
A hearing is held each June, where governments make reports and others can present observations
This hearing leads to further conclusions
</td>
<td>An ad hoc three-person tripartite committee issues an opinion
Commission of Inquiry

Highest level, truly serious cases
A worker delegate files a complaint with the ILO Governing Body
Tripartite debate (employers often push back; governments lobby)
Requires a majority to issue a report
Can trigger Article 33 sanctions against a state
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<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">United Nations Supervisory Mechanisms</th></tr>
<tr>
<td>HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Intergovernmental body made up of 47 states (political representatives, not subject matter experts). Responsible for the promotion and protection of all human rights with supervisory power over all governments

Regular reporting: Universal Periodic Review
Special procedures: Complaint Mechanisms

Universal Periodic Review

“Peer review” of states’ human rights records every 4.5 years
Written input from civil society (does not have to be a trade union)
</td>
<td>“SPECIAL PROCEDURES”

Special Rapporteurs (SRs) or Working Groups (WGs), appointed by the UN Human Rights Council, with thematic or country focuses

Regular reporting: Thematic Reports determined by SRs
Special procedures: Individual Complaints – can lead to country visits

Unlike virtually all other processes, complaints to SRs and WGs are less formal, and these bodies can move rapidly with requests for information from the country in question. However, their leverage over states is low.</td>
<td>TREATY BODIES

Committees staffed by experts to monitor the implementation of a specific convention. These are created by the conventions and require ratification for the Committee to have authority

Regular reporting: Periodic Reports by Treaty
Special procedures: Complaint Mechanisms

Examples include:

CCPR - Committee on Civil and Political Rights
CERD - Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination
CAT - Committee against Torture</td>
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Complaint Mechanism ● Complaints can be submitted against any country, there is no requirement for the state to have ratified any convention ● Confidential procedure ● The complaint has to demonstrate that all domestic remedies have been exhausted ● Highly political process – governments can influence the results	There are many SRs. Some related to freedom of association and civic space include: ● SR on Freedom of Association and Assembly ● SR on Freedom of Expression and Opinion ● SR on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders ● WG on Human Rights, Transnational Corporations, and Other Business Enterprises ● SR on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers ● Independent Expert on Human Rights and International Solidarity ● SR on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment ● SR on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights	**CEDAW** - Committed on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women **CRPD** - Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities **CED** - Committee on Enforced Disappearances **CMW** - Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families **CESCR** - Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights **CRC** - Committee on the Rights of the Child

All the mechanisms listed above are focused on government actions. Countries ratify conventions or treaties, and governments are bound to fulfill the obligations of those agreements. If the employer is the perpetrator, complaints in these bodies have to assert that the government is failing to prevent the employer from violating worker rights. However, there are some international mechanisms that can be used directly against private-sector employers:

Oversight Mechanisms for International Corporations	
OECD Guidelines	● Each Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) country must establish a National Contact Point (NCP) to hear complaints about violations of OECD guidelines - both employers and investors ● NCPs offer their "good offices" for mediation with multinational enterprises, but there is no mechanism to force companies to the table ● NCPs can issue findings regarding violations of the guidelines regardless of whether mediation takes place, but they do not always opt to do so ● The country of filing determines the NCP. Some are more effective and have more tools than others, so think strategically about where to file

	● Complainants can request coordination across different NCPs
IFIs	● International banks all have internal standards to prevent violations of freedom of association in projects they fund or plan to fund ● Complaint processes are intended to address real or potential violations from communities involved in those projects (including workers and unions) ● The ITUC has established a process to address labor issues on proposed or existing projects with the World Bank that unions have used effectively to address abuses ● Regional development banks also have their own internal standards and processes – the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is often seen as the most effective ● Internal accountability mechanisms can be inherently quite weak
National Due Diligence Laws	**Germany's Due Diligence Law** ● Applicable to German-based multinationals. People directly impacted by a violation can file with the Federal Office for Economic Affairs and Export Control, which can demand information, conduct site inspections, and inspect documents as well as demand that enterprises take concrete action to fulfil their obligations. Financial penalties can be imposed. **France's Corporate Duty of Vigilance** ● Unions can file a demand to bring inadequate vigilance plans into compliance and then go to court if the company fails to comply. Harmed individuals can bring a civil lawsuit (based on French law) to seek damages that result from a company's failure to comply with its vigilance obligations, where compliance would have prevented the harm. **Norway's Transparency Act** ● Establishes a right to information by third parties, who must first submit a request to the company. The company must respond within two months. If the company does not sufficiently respond, a complaint can be submitted with the Norwegian Consumer Authority, which can also alert authorities if reports are inadequate. Fines can be imposed for repeat non-compliance.
Trade Mechanisms	● **USA Generalized System of Preferences** (not currently active, file a complaint with the US Trade Representative on a scheduled basis) ● **EU Generalized Scheme of Preferences:** The European Commission has a centralized complaint process. Complainants must describe the specific practices or conduct that justifies withdrawing a country's preferences under this trade mechanism. ● **Bilateral Agreements with the EU:** A process will be defined in each individual agreement - trade and development policy with labor rights protections (same centralized complaint process as above)

Regardless of which mechanism you use, complaints need to include certain information to be considered. The template below is adapted from guidance provided on ILO and UN mechanisms, but may be useful for many other mechanisms. Keeping detailed records of violations is essential to ensure you have the information needed to submit an initial complaint and file updates as needed.

Case Study: Belarus

Complaint mechanisms are a long-term strategy for tackling severe and persistent violations of fundamental freedoms. The ongoing struggle in Belarus provides a key example.

Unions in Belarus have struggled against government threats since the 1990s. The Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BKDP) has tried to preserve freedom of association as the government became one of the most repressive in Europe, using tactics including international pressure campaigns and regular, consistent complaints to the ILO. These complaints led the ILO to create a Commission of Inquiry in 2004 – the highest level of review.

In 2022, the government of Belarus moved to shut down the BKDP entirely and jailed dozens of union leaders. Unionists who fled the country escalated their campaign, including with a global petition endorsed by union federations around the world. In a win for workers, the ILO adopted a historic resolution in 2023 calling on member states to implement sanctions on the government of Belarus under article 33 of the ILO's constitution for its egregious attacks against free trade unions.

At the most recent annual review meeting at the ILO in June 2025, unions from every continent of the globe spoke in support of the sanctions and of the independent unions of Belarus.

1. Seek informed consent from any alleged victim(s) and ensure they are aware that the information is being shared with the treaty body, that they agree to do so, and that they understand the implications.
2. Explain how the incidents violate the rights protected in the treaty/convention/agreement in question and, where possible, explain how they are part of a broader pattern of failures to protect those rights. If there is a broader pattern, include details of other incidents or issues and corroborating evidence where possible.
3. Describe the incident(s) prompting the complaint in detail. Be specific with dates, locations, people or groups involved, and any substantiating information (such as media reports, statements from union officials, contemporaneous accounts from victims or eyewitnesses), where available. Make sure to include appropriate background information and context to clarify for an audience that may not be familiar with local dynamics. Informed consent must be obtained for any individual victims.
4. Where possible, document incidents with photos, videos, and depositions from impacted people taken at the time of the violation. Collect any news stories or reactions from outside groups about the incident. Having an evidentiary base to document the incident will strengthen the complaint.
5. Indicate whether the incident/situation has been brought to the attention of national or local authorities. If so, describe the response, particularly if it was inadequate. If not, explain why.
6. If a specific remedy is desired (for example, an end to arbitrary arrests, release of imprisoned workers, repeal of a law), describe the relief you are seeking.

Information-Gathering Template for International Complaint Mechanisms

What happened?	*Who was affected?*	*Where did it happen?*	*When did it happen?*	*What happened next? Was the incident brought to local or national authorities? Describe any actions taken.*	*Describe the alleged perpetrator, their history of engagement, and any previous incidents.*

6. Monitoring Progress and Impact

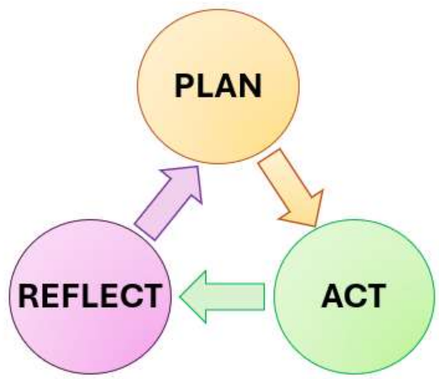
Every campaign requires monitoring of progress. This is no different. Monitoring is a method to keep track of whether activities are being implemented as planned and if they are fulfilling objectives as intended. Monitoring can provide insight on unforeseen challenges that prevent successful results and open space to mitigate those challenges quickly. It allows for "course correction" with minimal disruption to achieving the broader goals. Monitoring is most likely to be successful with a designated person and a set schedule to make sure the process proceeds at a reasonable pace. Regular check-in meetings can systematize campaign monitoring.

Template for Regular Campaign Monitoring of Actions and Objectives

Check-In Date	Objective and Correlating Action	Point of Contact	Comments/Notes

7. Reflection

Threats to freedom of association and other fundamental rights are often fluid. They can simmer in the background for years before exploding into a serious threat. They can take a lot of time, demand other resources, and create a physical and emotional strain on unions and CSOs who are trying to protect themselves and their members. When a crisis has passed, or at least paused, it is important to set up dedicated time for reflection on what went well and what could have been done better over the course of your campaign. Looking back on your goals and objectives, and what activities were most effective to advance them, will help your organization better protect itself against future threats.



The tools and templates in this guide are your starting place to complete your reflection. You had been using them to react to threats and respond to a crisis, but now you will use them to proactively consider what happened and strengthen your response to the next threat. To start, look through your campaign plan and your progress notes. Some questions to ask include:

- How many of your goals and objectives did you meet?
- Where did you have to make changes along the way?
- How did adjustments to activities help you meet your objectives? Which activities best helped you meet your objectives?
- Was your monitoring process effective? Where did it fall short?
- How did changes in the environment change your approach? Where were adaptations most successful, and where could they have been done better?
- How effective or ineffective were individual components of your plan? Organizing internally? Organizing externally? Communications? Legal strategies and complaints?
- What durable changes have emerged from this process that you can leverage when the next threat arises? What best practices can you take away from your experience?

This guide was intended to give you the tools you need to answer these questions in ways that strengthen your organization. Hopefully you can use them to develop a rapid response checklist that you can use quickly and effectively in the face of any future threat.

8. Additional Resources

Union-Building Tools

1. International Brotherhood of Teamsters, "Teamster Power: A Guide to Building an Active and Strong Membership." Published in 2020
2. LaborNotes, "Secrets of a Successful Organizer," book available for purchase, but handouts and resources from the text are available for free online

ILO and UN-Specific Tools:

1. UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner - reporting violations step by step guide
2. ILO Supervisory System and Mechanisms – general systems overview
3. ILO reporting database searchable by country:
    - Regular reporting procedures are published on a schedule six years in advance
    - Country profiles compile important information about convention ratification, regular reporting results, examination by supervisory bodies, and complaints procedures all in one place
4. Public Services International – a global union federation of workers in the public sector, which has produced a guide to help unions use international human rights instruments, and a similar guide focused specifically on ILO mechanisms

European-Specific:

1. OECD
2. Council of Europe
3. EU Agency for Fundamental Rights
4. The UN in Brussels
5. European Commission - specifically Human Rights work

Human Rights Organizations That Can Support Your Campaign:

1. Human Rights Watch – International non-governmental organization that conducts research and advocacy on human rights, including worker rights
2. Amnesty International – Global movement-based organization that reports on and advocates for human rights mechanisms
3. Freedom House – Democracy advocacy organization that provides emergency support for frontline defenders and resources specific to European countries
4. Frontline Defenders – International human rights organization that protects human rights defenders at risk with research and protection grants
5. Protect Defenders - EU support mechanism guidance, including practical steps for human rights defenders at risk
6. LabourStart – online trade union action platform
7. The Center for Applied Nonviolent Actions and Strategies – provides a wealth of information about nonviolent strategies to promote democracy and human rights. That includes a comprehensive library of tactics successfully used to defend democratic principles.

Resources for Digital Security:

1. Security in a Box – toolbox with specific digital security actions for individuals and organizations
2. Access Now – supporting digital and online security with toolkits and guidance
3. Surveillance Self-Defense
4. Digital First Aid Kit

Additional Employer-Focused Complaints Mechanisms:

OECD: https://www.oecdwatch.org/oecd-ncps/the-oecd-guidelines-for-mnes/what-is-in-the-oecd-guidelines/the-oecd-guidelines-and-complaints/