

Sharan Burrow makes a significant case for why a new social contract (internationally and nationally) must be created and suggests why quality public education for all has to be an integral part of any such new world view. . .

In too many nations the social contract has been broken and the global institutions established to underpin and reinforce rights, equality, inclusive growth and global stability have contributed to the convergence of crises that the world now faces.

Massive inequality - income, race and gender - was already driving an age of anger with civil unrest and distrust in democracy. Along with the destruction resulting from extreme weather events driven by climate change, the risk to economies and societies was already clear. Adding to that, we face the choices associated with the best and worst impacts of technology devoid of a rights base.

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit country after country, the global groundswell of public acclamation of health, education and other frontline workers carries a powerful message for governments, many of which made political choices over the years to restrict crucial investment in health, education, child care and aged care in order to appear fiscally prudent. But, will that groundswell be answered with serious investment in recovery plans and sustained levels of public expenditure that ensures future resilience?

In addition to the continued staffing of schools and preschools which remained open for the children of frontline workers, the heroic efforts of teachers in internet-serviced communities were the subject of sustained praise from parents everywhere. In the face of the prolonged challenge of ‘home schooling’ for parents, the appreciation for the work of teachers skyrocketed. However, the global challenge to fund quality public schooling for all is enormous. Prior to the pandemic, UNESCO (2016) said that the world needed an extra 69 million teachers to meet the 2030 education goal. Teachers do not grow on trees – educators must be educated and supported with decent pay, conditions and facilities. Education has been, and will always be, the foundation of social and economic progress.

As we marked the World Day for Child Labour on 12 June, 2020 the risk of staggering increases in vulnerable children was evident. According to [UN estimates\(2020\)](#), more than half a billion children worldwide have lost their access to education as a result of Coronavirus lockdowns. Many won’t return to the classrooms after the pandemic, with girls more likely than boys to drop out.

These inequalities are truly shocking, but not unexpected. We know from experience and recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) [analysis](#) that major epidemics often exacerbate pre-existing income inequality. And still almost 50% of the world’s people lack access to the internet. (Fuceri, D. 2020)

The Managing Director of the IMF, Kristalina Georgieva, rates education as a key policy priority. ‘As they move forward, all governments will need to gear up for a more inclusive recovery. This means taking the right measures, especially on fiscal stimulus, education, and fintech. And it means sharing ideas, learning from others, and fostering a greater sense of solidarity.

If there is one lesson from this crisis, it’s that our society is only as strong as its weakest member. This should be our compass to a more resilient post-pandemic world.’ (Georgieva, K. 2020)

The fight trade unions are taking on everywhere is for a new social contract that sees people and the planet at the heart of economic development.

The pandemic has brutally exposed the flaws of the current global economic system, in health, in education, employment, social protection and virtually every other aspect of the economy. International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) global polling (ITUC. 2018) <https://www.ituc-csi.org/ITUC-Global-Poll-2018> reveals that prior to the pandemic, 59% of people in work were just about managing financially, struggling to make ends meet, going without essentials or falling into debt. 23% of people felt that their job was insecure.

With the world economy in intensive care, recovery and resilience must be the prime concerns: recovery to regenerate jobs and sustainable growth, and resilience to fix the failings, and precarity, of the current system and to prepare and equip the world to end the scourge of inequality

Massive investment in health, education, childcare, aged care and social protection must be at the core of recovery to generate jobs and build resilience. And existing deficits in infrastructure, education, connectivity and other areas have to be addressed. With the rapid emergence of new technologies, the need for education and training is huge, yet current levels of investment in education fall woefully short of what is required.

With recovery must come resilience. The ITUC's annual Global Rights Index (ITUC 2020) has tracked the deepening multi-year trend of the erosion of workers' rights and growing precarity in employment. These trends certainly contributed to the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, with so many people having no job security or safety net and facing the choice between continuing to work, or poverty. Where workers' rights to organise in unions and bargain collectively for decent wages, benefits and conditions are respected, and where informal work is formalised, then resilience is built in.

Workplace safety standards, including in schools and other educational institutions, are often substandard or even non-existent and the mortality and morbidity rates have long been a global scandal. Many types of workplace are actual, or potential, transmission hubs for the new SARS virus and other communicable diseases. Where people return to work after the initial or future shutdowns, occupational health and safety systems are crucial to protect workers and the community.

And if ever there was an argument for the equality and inclusion of public education, the global attention that has laid bare racism and racial injustice is an alarming reminder that everyone's children have fundamental human rights.

For trade unions recovery plans must include:

- Job protection and job creation
- Income protection, minimum living wages and incomes with collective bargaining
- Occupational health and safety including global standards and provisions for safe workplaces
- Adequately funded public health, education and care
- Equal economic participation of women
- Universal Social protection to build resilience

- Just transitions for climate and technology
- Responsible business conduct with mandated due diligence for human rights and environmental standards
- Government accountability with social dialogue and the provision of privacy rights.

And financing the recovery requires a national and global solidarity that shifts the parameters for financing and debt, through:

- An extension of debt relief for the poorest and most vulnerable nations to two years, with the only conditionality being investment in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations. 2016)
- Agreement on a broader scope for Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) (IMF. 1969) with liquidity swaps for development in the poorest countries aligned with the SDGs(United Nations. 2016) global social protection fund with a five-year guarantee for the poorest of nations to avoid destitution, build a basic economy and ensure resilience
- Taxation measures that establish a minimum corporate tax threshold, eliminate tax havens and illicit trade flows and establish new mechanisms including the long overdue financial transactions tax, a digital tax and a wealth tax.
- Massive investments in infrastructure, industry policy for climate transition, health, education and care and development and repair of eco-systems as well as digital connectivity for all.

These measures will require a medium to long term approach to debt that marries a medium to long term approach to investment. It will require a dramatic shift in economic priorities. There is no lack of financial resources in the world, only a lack of political will.

We can build a better world, but it will require the power of people to effect change. If delivered by highly qualified teachers, public education for all leads to everyone's social and economic advancement and, as such, is fundamental to such vital change. Education has never been more important.

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Special drawing rights (created 1969) (SDRs)

[These are supplementary foreign exchange reserve assets defined and maintained by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). SDRs are units of account for the IMF, and not a currency per se. They represent a claim to currency held by IMF member countries for which they may be exchanged.]

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[17 interconnected goals to be achieved by 2030]

Sharan Burrow is General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation, representing 207 million workers in 163 countries and territories with 331 national affiliates.

Sharan studied teaching at the University of NSW and began her teaching career in high schools around country NSW.

She became an Organiser for the NSW Teachers Federation, based in Bathurst, and was President of the Bathurst Trades and Labour Council during the 1980s.

Sharan was elected Senior Vice-President of the NSW Teachers' Federation and became President of the Australian Education Union (AEU) in 1992.

Sharan was Vice-President of Education International from 1995 to 2000. Education International is the international organisation of education unions representing 24 million members worldwide.

Sharan was President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) from 2000–2010.

She is a passionate advocate and campaigner for social justice, women's rights, the environment and labour law reforms, and has led union negotiations on major economic reforms and labour rights campaigns in Australia and globally.

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