

# The International Labour Organization and the quest for social justice, 1919–2009

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and Jasmien Van Daele

ILR Press  
an imprint of  
CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS • ITHACA  
and  
INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE • GENEVA

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Cloth edition first published in 2009 by Cornell University Press (available for sale in North America only)

Paperback edition first published in 2009 by the International Labour Office, CH-1211, Geneva 22, Switzerland

Librarians: A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-0-8014-4849-2

Printed in the United States of America

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Cloth printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Foreword

On the wall of the temple of Apollo at Delphi in ancient Greece were written the words, “Know thyself”. That 2,500-year-old lemma can be a guide for us all in our personal and professional lives. But it is equally important for institutions. And those of us who have the privilege to work with and for the International Labour Organization have a rich heritage that informs our work and guides our actions, often without our knowing it. To know this heritage can help us understand both the responsibilities of today and the mission that our founders and successive generations have placed in our tripartite hands.

When Dharam Ghai came to me with the proposal that we document better the ILO’s history and its achievements in time for its 90th anniversary in 2009, the idea was instantly appealing. Dharam, with whom I have worked in different contexts and who headed my transition team after my election as Director-General, has been a source of inspiration and support to many of us who have been working to strengthen international social policy, and his understanding of our possibilities and our goals is second to none.

He was sowing on fertile ground. Some years before, I had mentioned in my annual address to the ILO Conference the fact that we won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1969. Throughout that meeting, I was struck by the number of delegates who were unaware of a key facet of our history. Clearly, we needed to do something about it.

And so this book was conceived, and the idea of the “Century Project” to celebrate our 100th anniversary in 2019 was born.

The ILO is a large community, more broadly based than the other United Nations organizations because we include not only governments, but also workers’

and employers' representatives, each with their own global networks. Thousands of national and local organizations belong to the ILO through their representatives at our Conference. Then there are those who work in the ILO's secretariat, and our loyal corps of former ILO officials and delegates around the world, as well as the many more who belong to a wider community concerned with work, with workers, with enterprises, with social justice, with decent work, with gender equality and non-discrimination, within each country and in the international system.

This book is for that wider community and beyond. It explores some of the main ideas which the ILO has seized, developed and applied, examines their history and tells how they were pursued in different geographical and historical settings. And, since the ILO revolves around ideas, that helps us understand why the ILO has sometimes thrived, sometimes suffered, but always survived and persisted to pursue its goals through the political and economic upheavals of the last 90 years.

What lessons can we draw?

First, the institutions on which the ILO is founded have proved their worth. That includes labour laws which frame national action; social dialogue which builds understanding and expands the common interest; and tripartism, the bed-rock of the ILO, which provides for the democratic participation in decisions of the key social and economic actors.

Second, the effectiveness of the ILO – the role it can play and its ability to respond to the demands that are put upon it – depends on major world events: economic crises, social conflicts, war, and in recent years globalization policies which are inimical to ILO values. But, in all of these extreme situations, in the end the ILO is an indispensable partner because of the balance it brings between state and market, between society and individual and, today, between economic, social and environmental policies for sustainable development.

Third, the ILO has often been swimming against the tide. Its mandate for social justice can be thwarted by economic and political forces, and pursuing its goals is often a long struggle, as is today the struggle for decent work.

The book has four authors, three of them long-serving former ILO officials, with a total of over 100 years of experience working in the ILO, the fourth an academic who has looked at the ILO from the outside; two economists, a lawyer and a historian. This book is their view.

Gerry Rodgers, who led this project, was a member of the team that worked with me to construct the Decent Work strategy after my election as Director-General, and subsequently helped put it into effect. He has a long experience of, and personal commitment to, research and policy on employment, labour markets and poverty in different parts of the world.

Eddy Lee has been the ILO's leading economist for many years and has published widely on topics such as employment policies, development strategies, the social impact of globalization, and international economic and social policies.

Lee Swepston brings to the book 35 years of experience in promoting human rights as an ILO official, with major contributions and writing on discrimination, the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, and child labour, among others. He is now teaching international human rights and international labour law to the next generation.

Jasmien Van Daele is a young historian who joined us from the University of Ghent (Belgium) after completing a PhD on the origins and the early history of the ILO. She has brought to the team an understanding of public history, its methods and how it can be applied to the ILO, a wide knowledge of the literature and a network of external expertise which has contributed many useful ideas.

This book is the creation of its authors. It was never intended to be the definitive history, but rather to start to tell a story. It is a story with which you may agree or disagree, and there are opinions here as well as facts – but in my view it captures much of the essence of this organization, its spirit, its commitment and its work.

This is just a starting point. The key anniversary will be not the 90th, but the Centenary in 2019. I believe that the ILO must reach its Centenary knowing itself better. Confucius said it long ago as well: “Study the past if you would define the future”. There are many ways in which a better understanding of our past can help us. And so this book is just the first outcome of what I have called the Century Project. The aim is to build a more systematic understanding of what the ILO has done and how – its successes; its failures; its contributions to both thinking and action; its work to embed rights in the global economy and to ensure that the goals of employment and socio-economic security are addressed at all levels; its principles of justice, representation and democracy; its method of reaching consensus through informed dialogue among representative social actors; and its key objective, which we now sum up in the concept of decent work. The ILO has played a role at key historical junctures – the Great Depression, decolonization, the creation of *Solidarność*, the victory over apartheid – and today in the building of an ethical and productive framework for a fair globalization. We should know more about the many inspiring figures in the ILO's history. That requires a mix of history, biography and autobiography.

All of this material must be the subject of informed social dialogue, if the ILO's tripartite community is to build the agenda for its second century. For if one thing is clear, it is that a century of effort has brought progress to some, indeed to many, but certainly not to all. The need remains for an international

organization devoted to social justice and a fair globalization, as an essential foundation for the world's future peace and stability. An international organization in which the actors of the production system work together towards just and inclusive societies, built on decent, productive work, which respect rights, reflect needs and provide avenues for fulfilment and achievement.

The story of the ILO has not always been smooth, but we, and our predecessors, have always been looking towards that goal and facing up to new challenges. And, in order to strengthen our ability to do so, future generations need to know where we come from, and the story of our struggle.

I am writing this foreword when the global financial crisis of 2008 and its impact on the real economy have moved us from an era of change to a change of era. The 2008 ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization gives the Organization the vision and the contemporary tools to continue with its historical mission.

JUAN SOMAVIA  
*Geneva, October 2008*

# Authors' preface

There have been many excellent publications on the ILO's past and present, and we list a selection in an appendix to this book. They tell us a great deal about the institution and how it has evolved.

Our aim has been not to repeat this existing work, but to complement it. Drawing on our own experience and our own disciplines, we tell a story of the ILO's goals and ideas, and how the institution has pursued them at different times, under different circumstances and in different fields.

We look into what has been done, by whom, and how, and consider the influence of the Organization in a world in which the ILO is one actor among many. In so doing, we have highlighted some periods and parts of the world and neglected others, discussed some topics and passed others by. This is a personal selection, rather than a comprehensive account, and there are many other important topics in the work of the Organization which we have not attempted to cover.

It is also only one output of a wider project, the ILO Century Project, which aims to strengthen the ILO's knowledge base in a variety of ways in the period running up to its Centenary in 2019. Information about the Century Project can be found on its website, <http://www.ilocentury.org>.

We start in Chapter 1 with an overview of the ILO as whole – what it stands for, how it was created, how it works. The last section of this chapter looks at some of the essential political, social and economic developments of the last century, and discusses how they have impinged on the ILO's action and its priorities.

Chapters 2 to 5 then deal with some of the central themes of the ILO's work in the last 90 years: human rights, the quality of work, income protection and

employment and poverty reduction. Each chapter tells its own story, in its own way, reviewing the development over time of the ILO's ideas and its work, the strategies adopted by both the Office and the employer, worker and government constituents of the Organization and the influence on national and international policy. The pattern is different for each of the themes, with both progress and difficulties to report. There are many successes, but also powerful countervailing forces.

Finally, Chapter 6 paints a broader picture of the development of the international social policy agenda, how it has conditioned the ILO's work and the way the Organization has responded, most recently with the Decent Work Agenda. It ends with some pointers to the future.

Many people have contributed to this book, and without their help it could not have been completed. First, there are those who have participated in the work of the Century Project, many of them preparing papers which have been used as source material for different parts of this book. That includes Claude Akpokavie, Roger Böhning, Thomas Cayet, Ben Chigara, Marianne Dahlén, Nigel Haworth, Stephen Hughes, George Kanawaty, Sandrine Kott, Frédéric Lapeyre, Kristoffel Lieten, Andres Marinakis, Daniel Maul, Deirdre McCann, Jill Murray, Jean-Jacques Oechslin, Catarina Pimenta, Paul-André Rosental, Neville Rubin, Jeremy Seekings, Marie Thébaud-Sorger, Lisa Tortell, Anne Trebilcock and Oksana Wolfson. Marcel van der Linden, Research Director at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, has helped the project as a whole in important ways.

Second, we would also like to acknowledge the help of a number of readers of earlier versions of the text: Dharam Ghai, P. Gopinath, Richard Jolly, Sandrine Kott, Virginia Leary, Manuel Montt, José Antonio Ocampo, Kari Tapiola and Victor Tokman. A number of other ILO colleagues have read drafts of some chapters, or provided information and inputs, including Sam Afridi, Lin Lim, Francis Maupain, Stephen Pursey, Emmanuel Reynaud and Manuela Tomei. Sandrine Kott and Richard Jolly provided much additional source material, in addition to their comments. Dharam Ghai played a particular role because not only was he a reader of the manuscript but also the originator of the idea of the book. He, Richard Jolly and other participants in the UN Intellectual History Project have provided examples and points of reference for our work. None of the readers is responsible for the final outcome, but their views and comments have been invaluable.

Juan Somavia, whose foreword precedes this preface, gave a great deal of support to the project, contributed ideas and information, and read and commented on parts of the text.

Special thanks are due to the ILO Archives (Remo Becci, Renée Berthon) and the Library (Lauren Dryden, Ariel Golan) for their assistance in the project. Research assistance was provided by Jaci Eisenberg and Véronique Plata. The project was hosted by the International Institute for Labour Studies (IILS), which arranged administrative, organizational and computing support, provided by A.V. Jose, Cyrena Beranek, Vanna Rougier and Françoise Weeks. One of us (Gerry Rodgers) was Director of the IILS at the time the project was launched; we are grateful to Raymond Torres, who took over as Director in September 2007, for his continued support.

The manuscript was edited and revised by Frances Papazafirooulos, who also participated in the overall planning and design of the volume, and made many helpful suggestions. We are also indebted to Charlotte Beauchamp for her capable management of the publication process and the finalization of the text.

While gratefully acknowledging the assistance that all these have provided, we take final responsibility for this text, which necessarily reflects our views and opinions, and so does not in any way constitute an official ILO position.

GERRY RODGERS, EDDY LEE, LEE SWEPSTON and  
JASMIEN VAN DAELE  
*October 2008*

# An international organization for social justice

# 1

## A “wild dream”

In 1941, 22 years after it was founded, the International Labour Organization (ILO) held an extraordinary Conference in New York. The goal was survival. Exiled in Montreal, its work was severely hampered by the war. The League of Nations, with which the ILO was associated, was defunct. If the ILO were not to suffer the fate of the League, it was important to establish that the Organization, and all that it stood for, should play an important role in the reconstruction of the world order after the war. Its fate hung in the balance.

The position of the United States, which had joined the ILO in 1934, was key. And on 6 November 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt came down strongly on the side of the ILO. Inviting the delegates to the White House on the last day of the Conference, he told them that he had helped organize the ILO's first Conference, in 1919.

*I well remember that in those days the ILO was still a dream. To many it was a wild dream. Who had ever heard of Governments getting together to raise the standards of labor on an international plane? Wilder still was the idea that the people themselves who were directly affected – the workers and the employers of the various countries – should have a hand with Government in determining these labor standards. Now 22 years have passed. The ILO has been tried and tested ...*

He underlined some of the Organization's achievements since its foundation and, pointing to the challenges ahead after the war, concluded that the ILO

... will be an invaluable instrument for peace. Your organization will have an essential part to play in building up a stable international system of social justice for all peoples everywhere.<sup>1</sup>

Twenty-eight years after Roosevelt's decisive intervention, the ILO's contribution was recognized again in a different setting. In awarding its 1969 Peace Prize to the ILO, the Nobel Prize Committee reiterated the connection between peace and social justice. "There are few organizations," said Mrs Aase Lionaes, Chair of the Nobel Committee, "that have succeeded to the extent that the ILO has, in translating into action the fundamental moral idea on which it is based ... Working earnestly and untiringly, the ILO has succeeded in introducing reforms that have removed the most flagrant injustices in a great many countries ...."<sup>2</sup>

The ILO was created in 1919 as a means to promote social progress and overcome social and economic conflicts of interest through dialogue and cooperation. In contrast to the revolutionary movements of the time, it brought together workers, employers and governments at the international level – not in confrontation, but in a search for common rules, policies and behaviours from which all could benefit. It included a number of unique features. Above all, it gave these economic actors equal power of decision with states, and it introduced new forms of international treaty concerned with social aims, along with new ways to apply them. Politically it drew on the main European democratic political currents of the time, in particular social democracy, Christian democracy and social liberalism, and actors from each of these perspectives participated in its work and contributed to its development.

The two triggers for the creation of the ILO were war and revolution. The twentieth century, even more so than in earlier times, was a century in which human activity seemed to be largely structured around war and work. And this was partly because both war and work had become global. The scope and brutality of twentieth-century war far exceeded anything which had occurred before, for the first time killing many millions of civilians – and not only in the two world wars, but in the immense number of large- and small-scale conflicts around the world throughout the century, from Manchuria to the Congo. In the wake of the First World War, with its savagery, mass mobilization and widespread social repercussions, political leaders were open to fundamental change in politics, economy and society, and to the building of international institutions which could engage

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<sup>1</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, Address to the International Labor Organization, 6 Nov. 1941. Available at J. Woolley and G. Peters: *The American Presidency Project* (Santa Barbara, CA, University of California) available at: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16037>

<sup>2</sup> [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1969/press.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1969/press.html)

all countries in a common effort. The same openness to change emerged again after the Second World War, and led to the creation of the United Nations and the construction of a new agenda of social progress and human rights. This pattern has been repeated many times at the local and regional levels because successful emergence from conflict has to be built on a framework of rights and social justice, as the world's peacemakers know, or should know.

But the twentieth-century world was also structured around work. Work was at the centre of most people's lives, as it always has been, but it increasingly became a concern beyond the sphere of the family or the firm. The character of work itself changed, as the flow of people from agriculture to industry accelerated. Workers organized and demanded dialogue, opportunity, decent incomes and dignity. Waves of economic crisis and mass unemployment destroyed individuals, firms and societies. There was growing awareness that labour markets were interconnected across borders, that public action was needed to achieve common standards. Above all, work dominated the political agenda. The growing contradictions of capitalism contributed not only to the Bolshevik Revolution, but also to the many later revolutionary movements and the subsequent fault lines of the world political system. They also conditioned the development of a variety of streams of socialist and liberal thinking in all countries. The ownership and organization of the means of production, the role of the state and the interests which it served, the pattern of organization of social forces, equality and equity, were all closely connected with the fundamental role played by work in society.

In the creation of the ILO, these two streams came together. "Whereas universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice," declares its Constitution, "and whereas conditions of labour exist involving such injustice, hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled; and an improvement of those conditions is urgently required". Born in the aftermath of the First World War, the ILO was built on the belief that peace and justice go hand in hand. Not in the sense that war is always the result of injustice, but rather that social justice is an essential foundation of peace. This fundamental idea would later have applications that the drafters of the Constitution might not have imagined – for instance when the *Solidarność* trade union in Poland demanded application of the ILO's Convention on freedom of association as one pillar of a new political order in the 1980s; or when an ILO Convention on the rights of indigenous peoples contributed to the peace agreement in Guatemala in 1996. And there have been other examples on all continents.

The origins of the ILO lie further back, in the nineteenth century. As industrialization began to transform economies and societies, a central political issue

was the so-called “social question” – how to deal with the social consequences of industrialization, and to redress the deep inequities and injustices of the Industrial Revolution.

Workers had been organizing throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century, as social conflicts increasingly shifted to the workplace. This movement began to internationalize early on. The International Working Men’s Association was formed in 1864 with the goal of protection, advancement and emancipation of the working classes. This brought together trade unionists, a diverse group of political activists and other forces in what became known as the First International. Its work was continued after 1889 by the Second International, whose demand for an eight-hour working day would ultimately be taken up in the first Convention adopted by the ILO. The first International Trade Secretariat was established in 1889 with the creation of international federations of typographers and printers, hatters, cigar makers, and tobacco workers, and boot and shoe operatives.<sup>3</sup> The International Secretariat of Trade Union Centres, created in 1901, was the first international trade union confederation composed of national trade union centres – renamed in 1913 as the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU).

In parallel with these developments, moves were afoot to establish interstate agreements on conditions of work, through the creation of the International Association for Labour Legislation (IALL) in 1900. The IALL brought together a group of private individuals from academia, politics, administration, labour and industry. In 1905, it successfully convened an international meeting of experts, which laid down the basis of two international Conventions, adopted at a conference in Berne in 1906. One of these prohibited night work for women in industry, and the second prohibited the use of white phosphorus in the manufacture of matches. As many as 41 states or colonies adhered to the international Convention prohibiting the use of white phosphorous, and 25 to that prohibiting night work for women. Although its activities were interrupted by the war, the Association provided an important laboratory for the subsequent work of the ILO. But, as its legitimacy and influence were limited to a few European states, there was no effective mechanism for the implementation of its conventions, and many governments preferred to develop bilateral treaties.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A. Carew et al. (eds): *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions* (Berne, Peter Lang, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> See J.W. Follows: *Antecedents of the International Labour Organisation* (London, Oxford University Press, 1951); and R. Gregarek: “Une législation protectrice: Les Congrès des assurances sociales, l’Association pour la protection légale des travailleurs, l’Association pour la lutte contre le chômage, 1889–1914”, in C. Topalov (ed.): *Laboratoires du nouveaux siècle: La nébuleuse réformatrice et ses réseaux en France, 1880–1914* (Paris, éditions de l’EHESS, 1999), pp. 317–333.

The impetus for the development of common standards was the growing integration of the world economy, under way throughout the “long 19th Century”<sup>5</sup>. Both workers and business had supported the efforts of the IALL for different reasons – not the last time that their interests would coincide based on different imperatives. The workers saw these efforts as coordinated international attempts to achieve better conditions of work and to control the adverse effects on labour of market forces, while employers favoured equalizing conditions of work in order to facilitate the expansion of trade and remove unequal conditions of international commercial competition.

War temporarily halted the growth of trade, but generated many other reasons to be concerned about labour matters. Labour unrest was widespread in the latter stages of the conflict and immediately afterwards, and this had a notable influence on the Peace Conference in 1919. As Edward Phelan, Director of the ILO from 1941 to 1948, and one of the drafters of its Constitution in 1919, recalled in a 1949 article entitled “The Contribution of the ILO to Peace”:

The three Great Powers, the United States of America, Great Britain and France were ... preoccupied [in 1919] with a critical post-war situation, more immediately dangerous than that which followed the Second World War. A revolutionary temper was widespread: the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia had been followed by the régime of Bela Kun in Hungary; the shop steward movement in Great Britain had honeycombed many of the larger trade unions and undermined the authority of their constitutional executives; the trade union movements in France and Italy showed signs of becoming more and more extremist; millions of men, trained in the use of arms, to whom extravagant promises had been freely made were about to be demobilised; the wave of unrest had spread even to such stable and peaceful democracies as the Netherlands and Switzerland. How gravely the situation was viewed may be indicated by the fact that during the Peace Conference itself, Clemenceau moved many thousands of troops into Paris as a precaution against rioting in the streets. The decision to give labour matters a prominent place in the Peace Treaty was essentially a reflection of this preoccupation. The Peace Conference accepted the proposals of its Labour Commission without much concern either for the generalisations of the Preamble or for the details of the proposed organisation. In other circumstances, it is indeed highly probable that some of the more daring innovations in the latter, such as the provision that non-Government delegates should enjoy equal voting power and equal status with

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Hobsbawm's expression for the period 1789 to 1914.

Government delegates in the International Labour Conference, would have been considered unacceptable.<sup>6</sup>

The Peace Conference was intended to build a new international framework – political, of course, but also economic. The point of departure was President Woodrow Wilson’s “Fourteen Points”, of which the third called for “the removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace”.<sup>7</sup> The creation of the ILO was to provide a considerably more powerful instrument than had hitherto existed to expand and enforce a range of international labour standards. And, by establishing a social framework for economic exchange, it set out to provide the foundation of an equitable world trading system.

### The central ideas

The ILO’s first Constitution was prepared by the Commission on International Labour Legislation<sup>8</sup> of the Peace Conference in 1919 and formed part of the Treaty of Versailles. This was the first attempt to construct universal organizations to address the social and economic problems facing the world of the early twentieth century. There were no models on which the ILO, and the League of Nations, created at the same time, could be built. Original solutions could thus be tried which might no longer be conceivable if the same kinds of institutions were to be created today. The ILO’s Constitution laid out the rationale for the Organization, spelled out its aims and purposes as well as its detailed design and also identified certain “methods and principles for regulating labour conditions which all industrial communities should endeavour to apply, so far as their special circumstances will permit” which are of “special and urgent importance”.

The vision of the original Constitution was taken a step further towards the end of the Second World War in a powerful declaration, which was adopted by the Organization at the Conference it held in Philadelphia 1944, and subsequently incorporated into its Constitution. The Declaration of Philadelphia

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<sup>6</sup> E. Phelan: “The contribution of the ILO to peace”, in *International Labour Review* (Geneva, ILO, 1949), Vol. LIX, No. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Discussed more fully in M. MacMillan: *Paris 1919: Six months that changed the world* (New York, Random House, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Hereafter referred to as the “Labour Commission”.

reasserted the principles and goals of the Organization, and in important respects reinforced and expanded them. It is a strong statement of the need for international and national action for universal social progress.<sup>9</sup>

Key passages from these documents are reproduced in Appendix II. Together, they identify the principles, issues and means of governance that lie at the heart of the ILO's work.

Five basic principles can be distinguished in these texts.

- Lasting peace cannot be achieved unless it is based on social justice, grounded in freedom, dignity, economic security and equal opportunity.
- Labour should not be regarded merely as a commodity or an article of commerce.
- There should be freedom of association, for both workers and employers, along with freedom of expression, and the right to collective bargaining.
- These principles are fully applicable to all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex.
- Poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere, and must be addressed through both national and international action.

These moral and political principles guide the action of the ILO, and provide the cognitive framework for its work – the spectacles through which the ILO sees the world. The first of these, that peace must be based on social justice, has been considered above. It lays out the overriding reason for the existence of the Organization. The second provides the fundamental principle guiding its action. It expresses the dignity of labour and the recognition of its value, in contrast to the Marxian notion that, under capitalism, labour becomes a commodity. In the ILO's vision, all forms of work can, if they are adequately regulated and organized, be a source of personal well-being and social integration. Of course, labour is bought and sold, but market mechanisms are subordinate to higher goals. The original 1919 Constitution states that “labour should not be regarded merely as a commodity”. By the time of the Declaration of Philadelphia, the same idea is expressed more strongly: “Labour is not a commodity.”

The remaining principles express commitments – to democracy, equality and the reduction of poverty. Freedom of association and expression is the foundation of a model of participatory democracy, based on free debate among independent actors. The goal of equality is reflected in the universal principles of

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<sup>9</sup> See E. Lee: “The Declaration of Philadelphia: Retrospect and prospect”, in *International Labour Review* (Geneva, ILO, 1994), Vol. 133, No. 4, pp. 467–485.

the Declaration of Philadelphia, which are “fully applicable to all peoples everywhere” – even if pro-colonial governments prevented the adoption of any such commitment by the ILO or the League of Nations until the Second World War was drawing to a close (see Chapter 2). This basic tenet has underpinned the Organization’s action on decolonization as well as its contribution to the struggle for gender equality. Finally, the imperative of action against poverty at international as well as national levels is expressed in terms of the interests and moral obligations of all.

All of these five principles are, of course, regularly flouted. Labour is widely treated as a commodity, poverty persists alongside prosperity, equality and freedom of association are widely honoured in the breach, and peace and social justice still remain distant goals in many parts of the world. Realizing these principles therefore continues to frame the action of the ILO.

Progress towards the goals implicit in these principles requires action in many specific fields. Seven central policy concerns are stressed in the Constitution:

- The promotion of full employment and rising standards of living, in occupations in which workers can apply their capabilities and contribute to the common well-being – along with equal opportunity for men and women in achieving this end, and facilities for training and for migration.
- The provision of an adequate living wage for all those employed, calculated to ensure a just share of the fruits of progress to all.
- The regulation of hours of work, including the establishment of a maximum working day and week, and of weekly rest.
- The protection of children, young persons and women, including the abolition of child labour, limitations on the labour of young persons and the provision for child welfare and maternity protection.
- Protection of the economic and social interests of those workers who are employed in countries other than their own.
- The adequate protection of all workers against sickness, death and injury arising out of employment.
- The extension of social security measures to provide for old age and ill-health, a basic income to all those in need of protection, and comprehensive medical care.

Obviously this list does not exhaust the areas where action is needed, but it does identify priorities. The first two elements express the concern with work as a source of livelihood and fulfilment – hence the goal of full and satisfying employment, at adequate wages and incomes; the third, fourth and fifth aim to prevent exploitation – notably by limiting hours of work, and taking measures to protect those who might be particularly vulnerable; and the last two are concerned with the protection of workers, both against a dangerous or otherwise inadequate working environment, and in terms of income security in the face of life's contingencies.

The Constitution also identifies four means of governance:

- Tripartism: the representatives of workers and employers, enjoying equal status with that of governments, join with them in free discussion and democratic decision on social and economic measures, and collaborate in increasing productive efficiency.
- The adoption of international Conventions and Recommendations to be submitted to national authorities for ratification or other action.
- A system of inspection to ensure enforcement of the laws and regulations concerned.
- Collaboration among international bodies in order to ensure that all economic and financial policies contribute to social progress and well-being.

We discuss the first two of these means of governance in more detail in separate sections below. The third is straightforward, at least in principle. The last, however, is an important and complex assertion. It expresses the belief that economic and social goals are interdependent, and that an international organization concerned with social goals should therefore be able to influence the design of international economic policy. It has been hard for the ILO to realize this demand, notably since the creation of the Bretton Woods institutions after the Second World War, but the issue regularly returns to the table, as we shall see in Chapters 5 and 6.

These then are the building blocks for the ILO's work, which constitute the subject matter of this book. Most of these ideas did not originate in the ILO, but were built on foundations which were established elsewhere. Yet they are "ILO ideas" in the sense that the ILO seized them, developed them and gave them practical expression. Although they date from the period 1919 to 1944, they remain largely valid today. Of course, priorities have evolved, and there have been some major discontinuities. The promotion of human rights came to the fore after the Second World War. Decolonization called for new forms of action.

Over time, a variety of actions and programmes have developed, which have expanded the ideas further. The work of the World Employment Programme in the 1970s put employment creation and basic needs at the heart of development strategy. Work on social security has embraced additional contingencies. Sources of discrimination other than race, creed and gender are now acknowledged. The 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work has led to new forms of action.

With such a diverse agenda, building a coherent and integrated approach has always been a challenge. Today the overall goal is formulated as “decent work”, a concept which synthesizes rights at work, employment and social protection into an overall vision, pursued through social dialogue, and which pays particular attention to the mutual reinforcement of action in different fields. The decent work goal is embedded in the most recent ILO Declaration, on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization. We shall return to this issue in Chapter 6.

Some of the ideas pursued by the ILO have been developed and driven by the Director-General of the time, or by leading figures among the staff. Others have been constructed within the political constituency, by groups among governments, workers or employers. Many result from an interaction between the Secretariat and the membership. Some have clearly been consensual ideas with widespread support. Others have been conflictual and contested – the management of international labour migration is a case in point.<sup>10</sup> In many cases, the Organization has been only one participant in a broader debate. Often its position has been weakened by divergent views within the Organization, especially between workers and employers – on labour market flexibility, for instance, or the role of reduced working time in employment creation.

There is an important premise underlying all this work – that international action is required to pursue these issues. The *raison d’être* of an international organization lies in its ability to achieve goals that cannot be achieved by nation states acting independently. The need for action beyond the national level is questioned at intervals. Examples include the retreat from the international economy during the Great Depression in the 1930s, or when the end of the Cold War led to talk of “the end of history”. But the need for international action in favour of social justice has always been reasserted.

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<sup>10</sup> Discussed in W.R. Böhnig: *A brief account of the ILO and policies on international migration*, paper prepared for the ILO Century Project, 2008, available at: <http://www.ilocentury.org>, and below in Chapter 2.

## **Box 1 The International Labour Organization today – A brief description**

The ILO is a Specialized Agency of the United Nations system, and the principal centre of authority in the international system on labour and social policy.

The Organization as a whole, in its intention and in its essence, is a global assembly of the representatives of the world of work. It is tripartite, in that representatives of workers' and employers' organizations decide its programme and adopt its instruments alongside representatives of governments. Its membership is virtually universal.

Three organs oversee and carry out its work: the annual International Labour Conference of the entire membership; the Governing Body, elected by the Conference, which meets three times per year; and the Office, managed by the Director-General, who is elected by the Governing Body.

The International Labour Office, the secretariat of the Organization, today has a regular staff of some 1,700 people, and manages an annual core budget of around 320 million US dollars, a budget which has fluctuated around a broadly constant real level over the last 25 years. It is composed of both the "technical" departments of the Organization, which undertake research and provide expertise on the main issues with which the Organization is concerned; and the services which support the work of the Organization as a whole, including the administration and management of its work, its relationships with the membership and outside partners, and the supervision of its standards. Some specialized institutions are linked to the Office, including a training centre and an institute for labour studies, and some regional institutions. Just over half of the regular staff are posted in Geneva, and the remainder in some 50 country and regional offices around the world, engaged to a large extent in responding to demands from the membership in the regions concerned.

The results of the work of the ILO appear in the formal instruments that the Organization adopts – Conventions, Recommendations, resolutions, declarations and codes of practice; in publications, both official and authored, which range from training manuals and brochures to in-depth empirical research; and in policy-related activities at both global and national levels. The latter include advocacy, technical support and policy advice in member States, and technical cooperation projects and programmes in over 140 countries financed by outside donors on subjects which range from eliminating child labour to enterprise development, from microfinance to policies against social exclusion. Technical cooperation currently adds some 50 per cent to the regular budget and staffing levels.

The work of the Office is today organized around the goal of decent work for all women and men, discussed in Chapter 6, and structured into four sectors which deal with rights at work, employment, social protection and social dialogue.

Some key dates (for a full timeline see Appendix I):

- 1919** Creation of the ILO by the Paris Peace Conference;
- 1944** Declaration of Philadelphia;
- 1946** The ILO becomes a Specialized Agency of the United Nations;
- 1969** The ILO receives the Nobel Peace Prize;
- 1998** Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.