



THE ILO AT 100

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“We...look back over our history, and when we do that we understand very well that the origins of the International Labour Organization have much to do with the social teaching of The Church all the way from *Rerum Novarum* through to the present day. I think this intertwining of history and this community of values is what truly places us in a very good and strong position to work together to address the issues that we have before us today.”

--Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General, speaking at a global seminar in Rome organized by the Catholic Church to coincide with the celebration of the Feast of Saint Joseph the Worker (2016)¹

This year, the International Labour Organization (ILO) celebrates its 100th anniversary. Its founding was established in the Treaty of Versailles at the conclusion of the First World War.² It was understood then—and now—that peace in the world can be realized only if it is built on a firm foundation of social justice for all.

In its first two years, the ILO members adopted nine conventions dealing with such issues as hours of work, unemployment, maternity protection, and child labor. For example, they agreed to limit the work day to eight hours and forbid children under 14 from working (with limited exceptions) in their countries.³ This represented significant social progress in the early 1920s.

When the ILO celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1969, Pope Paul VI offered these words of support:

...[W]e are an attentive observer of the work you accomplish here, and more than that, a fervent admirer of the activity you carry on, and also a collaborator who is happy to have been invited to celebrate with you the existence, functions, achievements and merits of this world institution, and to do so as a friend.⁴

Later that same year, the ILO was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In the presentation of the award, the chair of the Nobel Committee, Mrs. Aase Lionaes, stated:

Beneath the foundation stone of the ILO's main office in Geneva lies a document on which is written: *Si vis*

pacem, cole justitiam—If you desire peace, cultivate justice. There are few organizations that have succeeded to the extent that the ILO has, in translating into action the fundamental moral idea on which it is based.⁵

Since those earlier years, the ILO has continued to address labor standards and human rights and to develop specific policies and programs that promote decent work and the rights of all workers. Today, the ILO brings together governments, workers and employers from 187 member states. This makes it a unique tripartite organization within the United Nations system.⁶

One of the most notable and consistent contributions of the ILO is its research and publications. Every year, the ILO publishes various reports and books that are meant to educate the global public and influence world leaders on the conditions of work and various human rights challenges. Among its flagship publications are the *Global Wage Report* and *World Employment and Social Outlook*.⁷

In 2015, the UN came together to create the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 17 in all.⁸ Number 8 was specifically promoted by the ILO and calls for “sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.” Since then the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda has been promoted aggressively by the organization and its allies around the world.⁹ The ILO is essentially pushing for what the people of the world have been clamoring for: access to quality jobs—jobs that pay a fair and adequate wage and that are secure and safe.

Over the years and in many ways, the ILO has made a genuine difference in the lives of workers and their families. The issue of child labor offers one such example.

“Over the past decade, and with ILO assistance, more than 60 countries implementing almost 200 laws have adapted their legal frameworks to conform to the ILO’s child labour Conventions.”¹⁰ Furthermore, “[o]ver the past 15 years, nearly **one million children** have been withdrawn or prevented from entering child labour by virtue of ILO projects in almost **110 countries** all over the world.”¹¹

“The total number of girls and boys in child labour dropped 30% from **246 million** in 2000 to **152 million** in 2017,”¹² mostly because of the work of the ILO and its members.

Despite these and other examples of important achievements of the ILO, it is also true that disagreements, diplomatic compromises, weak enforcement, and all too frequent indifference and even resistance to the rights of the most marginalized have all limited the progress most of

us would like to see regarding human rights, generally, and workers’ rights, specifically.

It is up to all of us to continue to put pressure on the global economic and political powers that be to assure continued social progress. And part of this work requires significant efforts to educate and activate the citizenry here and internationally.

Pope Francis affirmed the work of the ILO in a message he sent to the Director General of the ILO and his staff in 2014:

Dear Friends, the social teaching of the Catholic Church supports the initiatives of the ILO which aim to promote the dignity of the human person and the nobility of human labour. I encourage you in your efforts to face the challenges of today’s world in fidelity to these lofty goals. At the same time, I invoke God’s blessing on all that you do to defend and advance the dignity of work for the common good of our human family.¹³

This article represents a very small part of the 100-year-old story of the International Labour Organization. To learn more about their mission, their work, and their results, I invite you to go to their website: www.ilo.org.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Guy Ryder. *Address by Guy Ryder on the Future of Work and Sustainable Development*. May 4, 2016. Retrieved March 26, 2019: https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/statements-and-speeches/WCMS_480823/lang--en/index.htm
- 2 ILO. *History of the ILO*. Retrieved March 26, 2019: <https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/history/lang--en/index.htm>
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Pope Paul VI. *Address of His Holiness Paul VI to the Assembly of the International Labour Organization*. June 10, 1969. Published by the Vatican. Retrieved March 27, 2019: https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1969/june/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19690610_cinquantesimo-oil.html
- 5 Aase Lionaes. *Award Ceremony Speech*. NobelPrize.org. Retrieved March 27, 2019: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1969/ceremony-speech/>
- 6 ILO. *About the ILO*. Retrieved March 27, 2019: <https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/lang--en/index.htm>
- 7 ILO. *Publications*. Retrieved March 27, 2019: <https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/lang--en/index.htm>
- 8 For more information on the SDGs, go to <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>
- 9 ILO. *Decent work and the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development*. Retrieved March 27, 2019: <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/sdg-2030/lang--en/index.htm>; Alexandra Brill. *Why the ‘decent work’ agenda is reshaping sustainability goals*. GreenBiz. Retrieved March 27, 2019: <https://www.greenbiz.com/article/why-decent-work-agenda-reshaping-sustainability-goals>
- 10 ILO. *Decent Work*. Retrieved March 27, 2019: <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm>
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Pope Francis. *Message of Pope Francis on the Occasion of the 103rd Session of the Conference of the International Labour Organization (ILO)*. Published by the Vatican. Retrieved March 27, 2019: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140522_messaggio-ilo.html