

The International Labour Organization and Social Justice



International
Labour
Organization

What is Social Justice?

Social Justice is based on equality of rights for all peoples and the possibility for all human beings without discrimination, to benefit from economic and social progress everywhere. Promoting social justice is about more than increasing income and creating jobs. It is also about rights, dignity and voice for working women and men as well as economic, social and political empowerment.¹

The Struggle for Social Justice

The International Labour Organization was born out of the social and political struggles of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Since its founding in 1919 the pursuit of social justice has been the Organization's defining struggle. The ILO's Constitution says, "Universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice." These words were echoed by the ILO's first Director-General, Albert Thomas, who argued that "Economic and social questions are indissolubly linked and economic reconstruction can only be sound and enduring if it is based on social justice."

Since then, the ILO's tripartite members – representing governments, employers and workers – have come together to agree and adopt international labour standards and declarations designed to underpin global efforts to achieve social justice. International labour standards adopted by the ILO since 1919 have covered fundamental concerns from working hours to eliminating child labour and have been vital in helping shape national labour laws improving the daily lives of individuals and families.

A key event in the ILO's history was the 1944 **Declaration of Philadelphia**, which moved the ILO from the years of World War II to its modern structure. Stressing the need for international and national action for universal social progress, the Declaration embraces a number of fundamental principles; that "labour is not a commodity", that "freedom of expression and association are essential to sustained progress", that "poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere" and the principle of ensuring "a just share of the fruits of progress to all". These are the bedrock principles of social justice that the ILO has pursued in its historic support for democracy and justice, from 1970s Chile to 1980s Poland and 1990s South Africa and many other parts of the world today.

Social justice and the modern ILO

On accepting the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1969, then ILO Director-General David Morse said, "The building of a truly peaceful world order based on social justice is the task of the ILO."

World Day of Social Justice

In November 2007, the United Nations General Assembly established 20 February as the annual World Day of Social Justice. The resolution on the Day recognized the need to further consolidate the efforts of the international community in poverty eradication and in promoting full employment and decent work, gender equality and access to social well-being and justice for all. It refers to the objectives and goals of the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, at which Governments recognized that economic growth should promote equity and social justice and that "a society for all" must be based on social justice and respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In this spirit, the modern ILO has adopted a series of additional conventions aimed at improving people's lives. These include conventions on freedom of association, protection of the right to organize and collective bargaining, the abolition of forced labour, discrimination in employment and occupation, and conventions on minimum age and the worst forms of child labour.

These principles were enshrined in the 1998 **Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work** that establishes that all States, by virtue of their membership of the ILO, should aim to apply these conventions, irrespective of whether they have ratified them. The Declaration has significantly boosted the number of ratifications and implementation of international labour standards as national labour law.

Social Justice through Decent Work and a Fair Globalization

In 1999, the then incoming ILO Director-General Juan Somavia introduced the term "decent work" as the modern expression of the ILO's mandate. In his first report to the International Labour Conference, he wrote that "the primary goal of the ILO today is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity."

At the heart of the Decent Work Agenda is the understanding that for too many people, Globalization has exacerbated inequalities and insecurities. Following a two-year examination of globalization, the ILO-convened the **World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization**, which called in its groundbreaking 2004 report², for an urgent rethink of global governance, saying:

¹ Working out of Poverty, Report of the ILO Director-General, 2003: <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc91/pdf/rep-i-a.pdf>

² Report of the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization: <http://www.ilo.org/fairglobalization/report/lang-en/index.htm>

“There are deep-seated and persistent imbalances in the current workings of the global economy, which are ethically unacceptable and politically unsustainable ... Seen through the eyes of the vast majority of men and women, globalization has not met their simple and legitimate aspirations for decent jobs and a better future for their children”.

“There is increasing debate not only about inequalities between countries but also about inequalities within countries, and its effects on people, families and communities... The debate on globalization is fast becoming a debate on democracy and social justice in a global economy.”

Many of these concerns were embodied in the next important renewal of the ILO when the 2008 International Labour Conference adopted a **Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization**³, establishing an important new foundation for efforts to promote and achieve social justice through the Decent Work Agenda and its four pillars – employment, social protection, social dialogue, and fundamental principles and rights at work.

Challenges to Social Justice

- An estimated 12.3 million persons trapped in forced labour worldwide.
- More than 215 million child labourers worldwide.
- 205 million people of working age unemployed globally.
- Young people are more than three times as likely to be unemployed than adults.
- Only 20 percent of the world’s population has access to adequate social security.
- In most countries, women earn 10 to 30 percent less than men, in some areas, even less.
- An estimated 630 million working poor live on less than \$1.25 a day.

Social Justice Today

Today the concept of social justice for all faces severe challenges. The worst global economic crisis in more than six decades has caused massive economic disruption.

Global unemployment reached its highest point on record in 2010 and is expected to remain high in 2011. Youth unemployment is of particular concern. Many available jobs are in the informal

³ ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization: http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/economic-and-social-development/globalization/WCMS_099766/lang-en/index.htm

economy, entailing lower pay and poor working conditions. Working poverty and vulnerable employment are on the rise. There are growing concerns over high levels of social dissatisfaction and the potential for long-term social dislocation.

Responding to the global economic and jobs crisis, the ILO International Labour Conference adopted a **Global Jobs Pact**⁴ in 2009. The global policy instrument promotes a recovery centred on investments, employment and social protection with the objective of providing an internationally agreed basis for policy-making designed to reduce the time lag between economic recovery and a recovery with decent work opportunities.

“There is a need for coordinated global policy options in order to strengthen national and international efforts centred around jobs, sustainable enterprises, quality public services, protecting people whilst safeguarding rights and promoting voice and participation. This will contribute to economic revitalization, fair globalization, prosperity and social justice.” **Global Jobs Pact**

At G20 Summits in 2009 and 2010, the ILO urged member states to implement their commitment to the central role of social protection and decent work in the global response to the crisis. In April 2009, the ILO also took the co-lead with the World Health Organization on the Social Protection Floor initiative. The initiative, one of nine UN joint initiatives designed to address the effects of the crisis, is a global social policy approach promoting access to essential social services and income security for all.

In 2011 the ILO will convene its 100th International Labour Conference, where governments, workers and employers will assess progress made in the effort to achieve social justice and debate new measures to help secure decent work and social justice for all.

For information on this and all aspects of the work of the ILO visit www.ilo.org

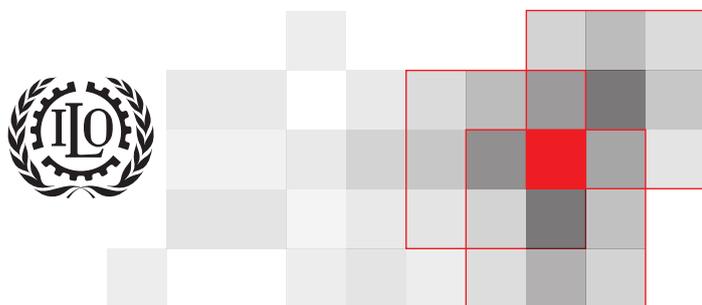
The Publication, **The ILO and the Quest for Social Justice** is available here: http://www.ilo.org/global/publications/ilo-bookstore/orderonline/books/WCMS_104643/lang-en/index.htm

Voices on Social Justice

In February 2010, the ILO launched its *Voices on Social Justice* project to provide a global platform for personal perspectives on social justice and how it might be achieved.

The project has attracted the views of leaders, high-profile commentators, academics and activists and can be viewed at www.ilo.org/socialjustice where you can also submit your own perspective.

⁴ ILO Global Jobs Pact: http://www.ilo.org/jobspect/lang-en/WCMS_CON_TXT_GJP_HP_EN/index.htm



International Labour Office
4 route des Morillons
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

Tel. +4122/799-7912
Fax +4122/799-8577
February 2011