

Brief History of the ILO

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) was created in 1919 alongside the League of Nations as part of the First World War peace settlement.

The Early Years

The need for such an organisation had been advocated in the nineteenth century by two industrialists, Robert Owen (1771-1853) of the United Kingdom and Daniel Legrand (1783-1859) of France. The Constitution of the International Labour Organisation was adopted by the Peace Conference in April 1919, and became Part XIII of the Treaty of Versailles.

The Preamble to the 1919 Constitution opens with the affirmation that *universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice*.

A key motivation for setting up the ILO was indeed social, to remedy the increasingly unacceptable working conditions - exploitative and injurious to health - of the growing industrial workforce.

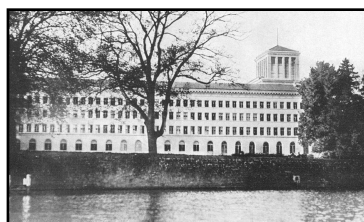
This was linked to a second political motivation. Without an improvement in their conditions, these workers, whose numbers were increasing as a result of industrialisation, might create social unrest, even revolution. Additionally it was important to recognise the significant contribution to ending the war that had been made by workers both on the battlefield and in industry.

A third motivation was economic. Because of its inevitable effect on the cost of production, any industry or country adopting social reform would find itself at a disadvantage vis-a-vis its competitors.

The most advanced industrial countries wanted to create a level playing field for their global trade.

The first International Labour Conference took place in Washington on 29 October 1919 and adopted the first International Labour Convention dealing with hours of work in industry, the minimum age of employment, unemployment, maternity protection, and night work for women and for young persons in industry.

A Frenchman, Albert Thomas was appointed Director-General of the organisation, whose headquarters were initially established in London



The original ILO offices seen from Geneva lake in 1926

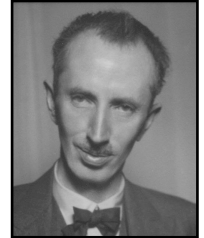
before moving to Geneva in 1920. In 1932 Thomas was succeeded by his British deputy, Harold Butler, who had been one of the main architects of the ILO's Constitution in 1919. Edward Phelan of Ireland succeeded Butler in 1941 and guided the ILO during the years of the Second World War.



Albert Thomas



Harold Butler



Edward Phelan

After the Second World War

Towards the end of the war a key International Labour Conference was held in 1944 in Philadelphia. It produced a Declaration which is annexed to the 1919 Constitution which embodies the objectives of the ILO in the following principles:

- labour is not a commodity;
- freedom of expression and of association are essential to sustained progress
- poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere;
- all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or gender, have the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity.

The Declaration anticipated and set a pattern for the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1946 the ILO became the first specialised agency of the newly created United Nations system and threw its full weight into a new and essential undertaking: international technical co-operation. At the same time it continued in its efforts to set international standards for employment and work related issues.

In 1948 an American, David Morse, was named to head the ILO, where he remained until 1970. In 1960 the ILO created the International Institute of Labour Studies at its headquarters in Geneva, and the International Training Centre in Turin in 1965.

In 1969, the ILO was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize as it commemorated its 50th anniversary.

The ILO Today

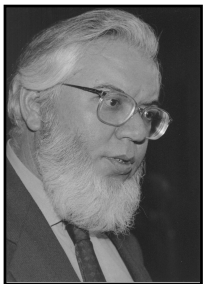
On 18 June 1998, the *ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up* was adopted. The aim was to

Continued/...

Brief History of the ILO

emphasise that social progress goes hand in hand with economic progress and, while respecting the diversity of circumstances, possibilities and preferences of individual countries, it underlies the universalism of ILO core principles: **freedom of association, freedom from forced labour, child labour, and discrimination.**

On 4 March 1999 Juan Somavia of Chile, a lawyer and diplomat by profession, took up office as the ILO's ninth Director-General. He is the first Director-General from the southern hemisphere and from a developing country. Mr. Somavia has had a long and distinguished career in civil and international affairs. He became the Permanent Representative of Chile to the United Nations in 1990, serving as the President of the Security Council in 1996 and 1997. He also chaired both the preparatory committees and the main working committee for the 1995 Social Summit in Copenhagen. Mr Somavia is committed to ensuring that the new globalised economy creates real benefits for ordinary people and their families. Addressing inequalities in the global economic system, the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalisation was established under Somavia in March 2002.



*Juan Somavia, ILO
Director-General,
appointed in 1999*

FURTHER READING

Ewing K D, *Britain and the ILO*, London, Institute of Employment Rights 1994

Visions of the Future: Essays on the Occasion of the ILO's 75th Anniversary, Geneva, International Labour Office, 1994

Alcock, A, *History of the International Labour Organisation*, Macmillan Press Ltd, London, 1971

Galenson W, *The International Labour Organisation: An American View*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 1981