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Daniel Maul

THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION

100 YEARS OF GLOBAL SOCIAL POLICY



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1919-2019

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To Ricarda and Luis

Foreword

It is a rare privilege to review the priorities and achievements of an organization over a century. Understanding the past is essential for managing the present and preparing for the future. The International Labour Organization (ILO) and its constituents – governments, employers, and workers – have collaborated for 100 years to promote social justice and peace. The decades have been turbulent. Reconstruction has followed destruction, yet imbalances between poverty and prosperity have persisted. New challenges have arisen once old ones were resolved. Navigating between deeply entrenched interests, often in contradiction, has required special skills. Through the work of the ILO, tripartite cooperation and social dialogue have become the accepted method to meet basic human needs, contributing to economic growth and guaranteeing the freedoms and rights of nations and of people.

Through the joint decisions of governments and representatives of the employers and workers, the ILO has helped lay the basis for contemporary international labour and social legislation. It has sought to establish humane working conditions, balancing this goal with the rights and interests of workers and employers alike. The ILO's basic aims were set out in the ILO Constitution of 1919. The Philadelphia Declaration of 1944 confirmed the ILO as one of the indispensable actors of the multilateral system. The Organization's agenda is guided by international labour standards and policies to promote these standards on the ground, in an infinite variety of national and local circumstances.

This agenda has been put in practice in programmes for world employment, for fundamental rights at work, for setting decent work as a target for the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, and for demonstrating that global markets can function in a fair way. Most recently, the ILO's aims were reaffirmed by the Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, adopted by the International Labour Conference in 2019 and most recently by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

The decisions taken in 1919 gave the orientations for tripartite cooperation and established its practice. Fortunately, the founders of the ILO did not lack ambition and vision. They set in motion an organization that simultaneously addressed fundamental labour rights, such as freedom of association, equality, the abolition of child labour and forced labour as well as the elimination of all types of discrimination, and all aspects of social and labour policy. The Organization's methods have shaped the ways in which nations and people, individually and collectively, pursue and achieve economic and social security.

The goals of peace and prosperity through social justice are not easy to realize. Yet history has demonstrated that they can be achieved at the workplace and industry level as well as in countries aspiring to sovereignty or engaged in

nation building. The tripartite formula of the ILO provides universal guidance based on exchanges and negotiations between those directly concerned. The actors in turn have the responsibility to apply common standards in daily reality.

Daniel Maul, the author of this book, gives us a rich analytical overview of the ILO's history. A century is a long stretch of time. The period has seen political upheavals, the demise of imperial rule, democratization, and the recognition of independence and the rights of nations and individuals. Together with technological and structural change, these events have deeply transformed our societies, as well as the work that constructs them.

There is no one single story of the ILO. Many narratives spring from individual and collective experiences of workers, employers, and governments, and the ties of solidarity and common experience cut across national borders. These narratives are complemented by the perspectives of ILO officials and all those who have engaged with the ILO around the world. All have their own views on what the ILO has achieved. Naturally, these views do not always converge.

This book draws strength from research done from an external academic perspective. There is a growing scholarly interest in the multilateral system, global governance, and international organizations. This has informed an increasing amount of research on the ILO by historians and social scientists, which has contributed to this book. What makes the ILO particularly interesting for researchers is the link to the real world through employers' and workers' representatives. More recently, the role of civil society has further encouraged analysis of the ILO's synergies with cooperatives, social reform networks, human rights advocates, and other groups. Daniel Maul shows how the goals and principles of the ILO have shaped political and academic debate and how the ILO's research, technical cooperation, and the setting and supervision of international labour standards have contributed to social reform in many countries.

In the course of a century, the ILO has become a universal organization, with 187 member States. Its challenge is to cover, equally universally, all the evolving aspects of work. While its tripartite governance structure has remained constant, the ILO has reached out to increasingly diverse groups of workers, seeking to improve their living and working conditions and to help them assert their rights and gain protection. It has explored ways to adapt management methods, including negotiations and bargaining, so that the needs of workers and employers in all economic sectors are addressed.

The early years highlighted industrial and agricultural work and seafaring. However, commercial, clerical, and intellectual work also became a focus in the first decade of the ILO's existence. With decolonization and the thrust for development, the scope of activity expanded to various types of informal work, most recently domestic work. Addressing work in widely different situations,

including some forms that we may not yet fully comprehend, remains an essential task of the ILO.

Setbacks and political tensions are inevitable in any story such as this. While it is useful to learn from successes, we should study the failures with equal care. The process of tripartite cooperation and social dialogue does not stop. Each solution achieved through negotiated settlements and new labour and social legislation is followed by new contradictions and new settlements. Herein lies the fascination of labour relations: they are part of the dynamics of life that touch workers, businesses, social institutions and, in the end, all components of humanity. The fact that each achievement is challenged and revisited is how social progress is wrought.

This said, the basic rights on which rests the dignity of workers, employers and nations should not be subject to the fluctuations of growth and income levels. The rights to equal opportunity, association, negotiation, social security, and occupational safety and health are not negotiable. Beyond the floor set by international labour law and practice, various forms of negotiations and collaboration demonstrate that social dialogue is not a zero-sum game and that it can deliver benefits for all. If this were not so, the ILO could not function.

Daniel Maul constantly draws our attention to the moments in history, often in times of war and crisis, where the ILO successfully adapted its methods, reached out to potential allies, and took courageous decisions. Remaining at the forefront of global social policy – with regard to both policy debate and concrete action – is the main challenge for the ILO at the outset of its second century.

History not only shows us what can be achieved, it also makes us realize the cost of our failures. When the world has faced economic and political crises, it has too often been reluctant, or incapable, of honouring the goal of social justice. Transformations of the economy and of work require sustained action to strengthen the social infrastructure of all countries. New threats arising from climate change and evolving methods of work organization demand immediate and effective action.

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