

The international labour organization functions



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In today's fast-paced world where globalization is moving forward faster than most businesses can keep up with, social justice is one important facet that would surely be overlooked if not for special organizations whose main focus is its dissemination. The International Labour Organization, known widely as the ILO, is undoubtedly the most influential organization in the world on the topic of social justice, especially as it is related to the proliferation of globalization. I will examine the history and recent actions of the ILO in this paper.

The International Labour Organization was founded in 1919 after World War I as an agency of the League of Nations as a result of the Versailles Treaty. The primary function of the ILO was the protection of labor unions and the decent treatment of working people during the difficult time of rebuilding as a result of the devastating Great War. In 1946 the League of Nations was dissolved, as a result, the ILO became part of the United Nations. The headquarters for the ILO is in Geneva, Switzerland. It has branches in more than 40 countries and deals primarily with international labor issues. The ILO has a tripartite governing structure with representation from workers, employers and governments. There are fourteen workers' group representatives, fourteen employers' group representatives and twenty-eight government representatives. The governing group meets three times each year and decides such issues as ILO policy and the agenda of the International Labour Conference. According to the ILO's website their main strategic objectives are " To promote and realize standards, and fundamental principles and rights at work. To create greater opportunities for women and men to secure decent employment. To enhance the coverage

and effectiveness of social protection for all. To strengthen tripartism and social dialogue” (ILO Introduction). Many of today’s industrial guidelines as in the eight-hour work day, maternity protection, child-labor laws, a range of policies promoting workplace safety and better industrial relations are a direct result of the ILO and their sponsorship of employment policies.

According to the ILO “ The International Labour Organization is built on the constitutional principle that universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice” (ILO Introduction). The ILO is the most significant international organization focusing on social justice whose charter is to address labor issues and create a better working environment globally.

Every year the ILO hosts the International Labour Conference held each June in Geneva, Switzerland. During the conference decisions are made on the organization’s general policies, work programs, budgets, the creation of conventions and recommendations. Each member state is represented by four delegates: one worker, one employer and two government delegates with each delegate having an equal vote. When a recommendation is made it is a policy guide which does not bind the member state to its recommendations. Within each conference there may be various summits where specific topics may be discussed and debated. Typically the conference recommendations find their way into the labor laws and policies of the member states. The voluntary spirit of adherence and participation is why most member states comply willingly.

The 98th International Labour Conference was held in Geneva June 2009, during that conference a there was a summit held on the Global Job Crisis from 15-17 June 2009. This three day summit was part of the Labour

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Conference and covered four topics: global and regional coordination, development cooperation, industry enterprise strategies, and rights at work and fundamental principles. As a result of the summit there was a unanimous adoption of a global jobs pact. The pact stated “ The fundamental objective of the Global Jobs Pact is to provide an internationally agreed set of options for policy-making designed to reduce the time lag between economic recovery” (Recovering from the Crisis). As this related to the social justice aspect, a significant portion of the summit was concerned with decent work opportunities. The pact was initiated because of the current financial and economic crisis; its goal was to promote social protection, jobs, and a productive recovery. However, within the pact there exist principles for promoting recovery and development with specific ideas and concepts targeting social justice. One section seeks to enhance the support to vulnerable women and men that have been affected by the crisis including young workers, low-paid, low-skilled and migrant workers. The pact aims to shape fair and sustainable globalization by emphasizing the necessity for cooperation of some very important issues.

A report by the International Labor Organization which focused on South Asia noted that women and children are at the greatest risk of being victims of human trafficking and slave labor. Cecelia Ng, professor at the Asian Institute of Technology and ILO employee, wrote an article in 2000 regarding globalization and women. In the article she brought to light the fact the globalization has caused a greater occurrence of prostitution, and illegal human trafficking in South Asia. Her hypothesis was that “ as men lose jobs under the casualization of labor enforced by globalization policies, their

sense of masculinity becomes increasingly threatened, leading to a concomitant escalation in violence against women, bears some attention” (Ng). Ng points to the links between increasing job insecurity for men especially in the lesser developed nations as a result of globalization and a faltering global economy. Fawzia Afzal-Khan, professor of English at Montclair State University, activist for protection of Muslim women and ILO employee notes that globalization has had a negative effect on Pakistan. Her argument is that the global marketplace is hurting women in countries like Pakistan because women become the secondary choice of employee, she states “ Thus, in this new millennium, labor, especially women’s labor, will be kept insecure, unprotected and flexible, creating ultimately a class of impoverished, globalized workers that are not protected by their State nor by the governments in the countries/areas where they are working” (Afzal-Khan). It is apparent that the ILO and its members are working hard for people in this global economy to make sure that social justice is addressed and that the ILO is doing as good as can be expected from an organization with no real policing authority.

The ILO has also worked to keep other organizations in check by evaluating their public statements and commenting as to their accuracy. One such instance was when the World Bank’s assessed the Public Works and Employment Agency Project in Africa as a developmental success. The ILO had reached radically different conclusion stating:

Structural adjustment programs in many developing countries and some industrialized countries have also caused hardship, especially to the lower income strata of the population. These programs advocate liberalization in

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economic affairs, thus providing a golden opportunity for the rich and the educated and sometimes also the unscrupulous and powerful to profit at the expense of the weaker sections of society. While these problems affect all countries, there is a general consensus that the situation of most developing countries, particularly of Africa, is critical and requires special attention and action (Thomas)

The ILO has consistently been critical of organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In one study, it said critically “ 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” (United Nations). The study was a two hundred page report, written by twenty six person commission and articulated a serious dissatisfaction with the way the IMF and the World Bank have promoted globalization, noting that there was a common theme of frustration relating to the how the industry leaders implemented their policies. The ILO has also championed the discussions in Africa regarding informal labor and setting definition for the category so that policies could be implemented for a more fair work environment. This was no easy task since there was little regulation in the African workplace. According to University of London Professor Dae-Oup Chang “ The ILO, focused first on labor conditions in particular economic sectors that were outside formal regulation and control in developing countries, particularly in Africa” (Chang).

The main problem with globalization is that a small controlling minority will become very powerful while taking advantage of the market economy and doing what is best for profit, not society or mankind. Gone unchecked, this

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will eventually result in a world that is driven purely by money with people either being very wealthy or very poor, essentially a socially un-just world. Social justice policies are the only check we have in place to help insure that people are treated fairly and with dignity. The ILO is undoubtedly the most influential and effective organization in the world advancing the cause of social justice. While globalization does reduce poverty in the nations that are performing the work as the funds flowing into that nation and society would have not otherwise been there; a reduction in poverty does not mean that social justice is necessarily being served. Fortunately we have organizations like the ILO to push for the advancement of the fair treatment of individuals and not let greed go unchecked as it would in the absence of a strong international advocate of social justice.