

Chapter 12 Case Study

The International Labour Organization in a changing world

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The International Labour Organization was established in 1919 after the First World War and was aimed at creating an international dialogue around social progress. It enshrined the belief that through dialogue and trust the divergent interests of those engaged with the question of work and employment could be overcome. Since the Second World War it has been that part of the United Nations that has dealt with human and labour rights:

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is devoted to promoting social justice and internationally recognized human and labour rights, pursuing its founding mission that labour peace is essential to prosperity. Today, the ILO helps advance the creation of decent work and the economic and working conditions that give working people and business people a stake in lasting peace, prosperity and progress. Its tripartite structure provides a unique platform for promoting decent work for all women and men. Its main aims are to promote rights at work, encourage decent employment opportunities, enhance social protection and strengthen dialogue on work-related issues. (ILO 2013a)

This organization is in effect the global Ministry of Labour. It has a series of governing committees that have representation from different nation states as well as national and international employer organizations and trade unions. These are aimed at creating a dialogue between global and national interests, forging policies and actions. A series of departments works on specialized areas such as labour inspection. There are also policies that are drawn up and which guide policy and create a framework for the development of regulations. There are national experts who develop materials and studies of labour issues related to health and safety, working time, participation and others. There are a range of activities and campaigns such as the Decent Work Agenda (ILO 2013b) which focus on job creation, rights at work, social protection and promoting social dialogue. This forms one of the key policy frameworks of the ILO.

The problem with the development of such a policy is that it can suggest a framework for the development of rights at work for example, but it cannot easily compel this to be done. The range of different regulatory traditions and processes across national contexts means that the costs of introducing such policies may vary. What is more, there may be some competing cultural and political position vis-à-vis such issues as equality and working time. There are also different forms of dialogue within national contexts such that there may be different types of employer interests and structures which view social and economic development in different ways. One main issue has been that the voice of organized labour may not be as strong in the ILO's organizational structures compared with that in the nation state. There is a concern that creating an acceptance of 'decent work' requires gentle and subtle manoeuvring between competing interests. For example, the word decent work is seen by some to be more amenable and acceptable than the concept of 'dignity at work' which may raise expectations amongst workers. The language of policy is sometimes framed to find a base line level of support without which progress may not occur at all. So we can see that there are different views as to how regulation between and within countries is framed and in effect communicated.

According to Alston (2004: 457):

The past decade has seen a transformation of the international labour rights regime based primarily on the adoption of the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, and the

widespread use of the concept of 'core labour standards'. Notwithstanding the enthusiasm which has greeted these innovations, it is argued that the resulting regime has major potential flaws, including: an excessive reliance on principles rather than rights, a system which invokes principles that are delinked from the corresponding standards and are thus effectively undefined, an ethos of voluntarism in relation to implementation and enforcement, an unstructured and unaccountable decentralization of responsibility, and a willingness to accept soft 'promotionalism' as the bottom line.

However, in response to such a critique it is often argued that the ILO is caught between very different national cultures and ideologies – as well as a strong international corporate lobby and an emerging set of international trade union organizations and non-government organizations. Many countries which have a weaker record on such issues argue that economic development and progress in the early stages is not always compatible with labour rights; whilst those in favour of labour rights point out that ignoring labour rights does not just have negative social effects but creates employer and economic cultures based on short term cost reduction activities as opposed to embedding issues of quality and genuine commitment to economic and individual development within the employment regimes. Given this, the ability to steer questions of social dialogue and working rights upwards is harder than the ILO would like overall as a body. Many trade unions wish to build on this agenda but are themselves confronted with differing national contexts which vary in their support of dialogue and discussion (International Labour Rights Forum 2013).

Questions

- 1 Why does the ILO exist?
- 2 What are the main activities of the ILO?
- 3 What do you think are the main benefits the ILO provides?
- 4 What are the main problems that face those wishing to lower working hours or create a greater sensitivity to health and safety issues at work across the globe?
- 5 How would you attempt to develop a campaign for decent work which would be attractive to employers internationally and nationally?

See some further reading

<http://www.ilo.org/global/lang--en/index.htm>

Study this site and look through the range of activities and publications: using the search facilities on the site try and find materials related to your own country.

References

Alston, P. (2004). 'Core labour standards and the transformation of the international labour rights regime'. *European Journal of International Law*, 15(3): 457–521.

ILO (2013a) 'Mission and Objectives', <http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/mission-and-objectives/lang--en/index.htm> – accessed 7th October 2013.

ILO (2013b) 'Decent Work Agenda', <http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/decent-work-agenda/lang--en/index.htm> – accessed 7th October 2013.

International Labour Rights Forum (2013) <http://www.laborrights.org/decent-work> – accessed 7th October 2013.