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# THE ILO CENTURY PROJECT (1919–2019): SHAPING THE FUTURE OF WORK AND GLOBAL LABOUR GOVERNANCE

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## ABSTRACT

The International Labour Organization (ILO) was established in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles with the objective of promoting social justice and improving labour conditions across the world. Since its establishment, the organization has played a crucial role in developing international labour standards, encouraging fair employment practices, and protecting the rights of workers globally. The ILO works through a unique tripartite structure that includes representatives from governments, employers, and workers to ensure that labour policies reflect the interests of all stakeholders. Over the past century, the organization has addressed numerous labour challenges including workplace safety, elimination of child labour, gender equality, and social protection for workers. In 2019, the ILO celebrated its hundredth anniversary and introduced the ILO Century Project, which aimed to reflect on the achievements of the organization and to explore the challenges facing the future of work. The Century Project focuses on understanding how globalization, technological change, demographic transitions, and environmental concerns are transforming labour markets worldwide. Through research, global consultations, and policy discussions, the initiative seeks to develop strategies that promote decent work, sustainable economic growth, and inclusive labour policies. This article examines the historical development of the International Labour Organization, its major achievements over the past century, and the significance of the ILO Century Project in shaping the future of labour governance and employment policies in the modern global economy.

**Keywords:** International Labour Organization, ILO Century Project, Labour Standards, Future of Work, Global Labour Governance.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The International Labour Organization (ILO) was established in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles following the end of the First World War. The creation of the organization represented an important milestone in the global effort to promote social justice and improve the working and living conditions of labourers. The founders of the organization believed that lasting peace could only be achieved when it is built upon principles of fairness, equality, and protection of workers' rights.

During the early twentieth century, workers across many countries faced extremely difficult working conditions. Industrialization created economic development and new employment opportunities, but it also resulted in several social problems such as long working hours, unsafe workplaces, low wages, and lack of legal protection. Workers were often exposed to exploitation, and vulnerable groups such as women and children were particularly affected.

The establishment of the International Labour Organization aimed to address these problems through international cooperation. Unlike many other international institutions, the ILO adopted a unique tripartite structure that included representatives from governments, employers, and workers. This structure ensured that labour policies would be created through dialogue and cooperation among all parties involved in the labour market.

Over the past century, the ILO has played a significant role in shaping labour standards and improving employment policies across the world. The organization has developed numerous conventions and recommendations that guide governments in establishing fair labour laws, ensuring workplace safety, and protecting fundamental rights at work.

In 2019, the International Labour Organization celebrated its hundredth anniversary. To mark this milestone, the organization launched the **ILO Centenary Initiative**, commonly referred to as the **ILO Century Project**, which aimed to review the organization's historical achievements and examine the challenges facing the future of work in a rapidly changing global economy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> International Labour Organization, *ILO Centenary Initiative on the Future of Work*.

## **HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION**

The development of international labour regulation can be traced back to the late nineteenth century when rapid industrialization transformed economic and social structures across many parts of the world. Industrial growth created new employment opportunities but also resulted in severe exploitation of workers. Labourers in factories and mines often faced long working hours, unsafe conditions, low wages, and the absence of legal protection. Child labour and the exploitation of women were also widespread during this period.

These conditions gradually led to the rise of labour movements and trade unions that demanded better working conditions and social protection. Reformers and policymakers began to recognize that labour issues were not confined to individual nations. Economic competition between countries sometimes discouraged governments from adopting strict labour standards, as doing so could increase production costs and reduce competitiveness.

In response to these concerns, international cooperation on labour regulation began to develop. The establishment of the International Labour Organization in 1919 represented a major step toward creating global labour standards. The organization aimed to promote fair working conditions and social justice by encouraging governments to adopt labour policies that protected workers and ensured humane treatment in the workplace.

During its early years, the ILO focused on developing international labour standards through conventions and recommendations. These standards addressed issues such as working hours, minimum age for employment, maternity protection, unemployment, and occupational safety. Over time, these standards became an important reference point for national labour legislation across many countries.<sup>2</sup>

### **MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION**

Over the past century, the International Labour Organization has made significant contributions to improving labour conditions and promoting social justice across the world. One of its most important achievements has been the development of international labour standards that guide

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<sup>2</sup> International Labour Organization, *History of the ILO and Development of International Labour Standards*

governments in creating fair labour laws and employment policies.

Since its establishment in 1919, the ILO has adopted more than 190 conventions and recommendations covering various aspects of employment and working conditions. These standards promote key principles such as freedom of association, elimination of forced labour, abolition of child labour, and equality of opportunity in employment. Many countries have incorporated these standards into their national legal frameworks, improving labour protections for millions of workers.

Another major contribution of the ILO has been the promotion of the **Decent Work Agenda**. This concept emphasizes that employment should provide not only income but also dignity, security, and equal opportunities for workers. The Decent Work Agenda is built upon four pillars: employment creation, protection of workers' rights, social protection, and social dialogue between governments, employers, and workers.

The organization has also played an important role in addressing issues such as gender discrimination in employment, elimination of child labour, and the development of social protection systems. Through research, policy guidance, and technical assistance, the ILO continues to support countries in improving labour standards and strengthening labour institutions.<sup>3</sup>

## **THE ILO CENTENARY INITIATIVE AND FUTURE OF WORK**

As the world approached the twenty-first century, the global labour market began to experience rapid transformation due to globalization, technological innovation, and demographic changes. These developments created new opportunities for economic growth but also raised concerns about job security, inequality, and the future of employment.

Recognizing these challenges, the International Labour Organization launched the **Centenary Initiative** in preparation for its hundredth anniversary in 2019. The initiative aimed to study the changing nature of work and to develop strategies that would help societies adapt to these changes while protecting workers' rights.

A major component of this initiative was the establishment of the **Global Commission on the**

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<sup>3</sup> International Labour Organization, *International Labour Standards and the Decent Work Agenda*.

**Future of Work** in 2017. The commission brought together representatives from governments, employers' organizations, trade unions, academia, and civil society to analyze the major forces shaping the labour market. Through global consultations and research, the commission examined issues such as automation, artificial intelligence, digital platforms, globalization, and environmental sustainability.

The findings of the commission ultimately led to the adoption of the **ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work in 2019**, which emphasizes the importance of a humancentred approach to economic development. This approach prioritizes investment in people's skills, strengthening labour institutions, and promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth.<sup>4</sup>

## CHALLENGES IN THE MODERN WORLD OF WORK

Despite the progress achieved in labour protection, the modern world of work presents several complex challenges. Rapid technological advancements such as automation, artificial intelligence, and digital platforms are transforming industries and altering traditional employment structures. While these innovations have increased productivity and created new economic opportunities, they have also raised concerns about job displacement and growing inequality.

Another significant challenge is the expansion of informal employment. In many developing countries, a large proportion of the workforce is engaged in informal sectors where workers lack legal protection, stable wages, and access to social security benefits. Informal workers often experience unsafe working conditions and limited opportunities for career development.

Globalization has also contributed to changes in labour markets by increasing competition among countries and encouraging the growth of non-standard forms of employment, including temporary contracts, part-time work, and gig economy jobs. These forms of employment may provide flexibility but often lack job security and adequate labour protection.

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts from governments, international organizations, employers, and workers to ensure that economic growth remains inclusive and

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<sup>4</sup> International Labour Organization, *ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, 2019*.

that workers' rights continue to be protected in the evolving labour market.<sup>5</sup>

## **MODERN ROLE OF THE ILO IN THE 21st CENTURY**

In the twenty-first century, the International Labour Organization has expanded its role beyond the development of labour standards. The organization now plays a broader role in addressing global economic, social, and technological issues related to employment and labour markets.

One of the key priorities of the ILO is promoting the Decent Work Agenda, which seeks to ensure that all individuals have access to productive employment, fair wages, safe working conditions, and social protection. The organization works closely with governments to develop national employment strategies that encourage economic growth while safeguarding workers' rights.

The ILO also promotes social dialogue as an important tool for resolving labour disputes and strengthening cooperation between employers and workers. Through conferences, policy recommendations, and technical support programs, the organization helps countries improve labour institutions and enhance workplace standards.

Furthermore, the ILO continues to advocate a human-centred approach to economic development. This approach emphasizes investment in education, skills development, and social protection systems that help workers adapt to the changing nature of work in the modern global economy.<sup>6</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The International Labour Organization has played a crucial role in promoting labour rights and improving working conditions around the world since its establishment in 1919. Through the development of international labour standards, the promotion of social justice, and the encouragement of dialogue between governments, employers, and workers, the organization has significantly influenced global labour governance.

The celebration of the ILO's centenary in 2019 provided an opportunity to reflect on the achievements of the past century and to address the challenges facing the future of work. The

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<sup>5</sup> International Labour Organization, Future of Work Research Reports.

<sup>6</sup> International Labour Organization, Global Labour Governance and Decent Work Reports.

ILO Century Project highlighted the importance of adapting labour policies to the changing global economy while ensuring that workers' rights and human dignity remain central to economic development.

Looking ahead, the continued efforts of the International Labour Organization will be essential in addressing emerging challenges such as technological disruption, globalization, and informal employment. By promoting inclusive economic growth and strengthening labour institutions, the ILO can continue to play a vital role in shaping a fair and sustainable future for workers across the world.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> International Labour Organization, *Centenary Initiative Reports on the Future of Work*.

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