

Promoting International Labour Standards

The term 'labour standards' refers to a set of guiding principles that are designed to protect workers' rights. These are therefore safeguards against inhumane and unfair labour practices by employers or agents of the employer. Labour standards were first introduced after the International Labour Organization (ILO) was established in 1919 after the First World War. The ILO came into existence after it was created as a League of Nations for the expressed purpose of addressing aspects of labour rights. Its primary focus was that of the eradication of slavery and all forms of forced labour. In speaking to labour standards, the point is to be made that it also encompasses human rights.

The original agenda of the ILO was subsequently expanded to include collective bargaining, the elimination of child labour and non-discrimination in employment. Ever since the ILO was founded, it has maintained and developed systems of international labour standards. These have presented in the form of conventions and recommendations at the core of which is the promotion of decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, security and dignity. The member states of the ILO, represented by the Government, have always been urged to ratify the eight core or fundamental conventions, which embody the promotion of decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, security and dignity. The promotion of the Decent Work Agenda has emerged as a consequence of the efforts and attention which have been directed at promoting the eight core conventions.

International labour standards are meant to protect the basic workers' rights, improved terms and conditions of work and employment, and to enhance job security. These can be described as employment standards which on a broader scale include hours of work, the payment of wages, minimum wage, flexible work arrangements, termination, discrimination, gender inequality, sexual harassment, grievance handling, disciplinary procedures, workplace democracy, worker empowerment and engagement. These are all components of decent work, which embraces freedom of association, equal opportunity and protection against discrimination, the right to privacy and the promotion of health and safety in the workplace.

According to the Danish Institute for Human Rights, "Workers' rights at the international level are laid out in number of human rights conventions and treaties including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights ([Articles 23 and 24](#), 1948) and the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (1966). These provide for: the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts, the right to the enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work, in particular remuneration which provides all workers, as a minimum, with fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value, and a decent living for themselves and their families; Safe and healthy working conditions; Equal opportunity for everyone to be promoted in his employment to an appropriate higher level, subject to no considerations other than those of seniority and competence; and rest, leisure and

reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay, as well as remuneration for public holidays; and the right of everyone to form and join the trade union of his choice and the right to strike, provided that it is exercised in conformity with the laws of the particular country.

In a changing globalized society, the labour movement faces new challenges in the undertaking to protect the basic rights of workers. The conditions have change from an employer – employee relationship where individuals were traditionally employed on a contract of service as opposed to that of a contract for service. This threatens to erode the scope for collective bargaining, and indirectly attempts to weaken the stability and effectiveness of trade unions. Trade unions have traditionally held immense power. This has been achieved through the collectively and solidarity which has been cemented through union membership.

If labour unions are to pursue their original agenda of advancing the social, economic standards in the society towards combatting poverty, then this requires that global trade unions redefining their role and approaches in order to achieved their aims and objectives in a contemporary global environment. In charting the way forward, Winston Gereluk and Lucien Royer made the observation that “trade unions have insisted that policies and strategies for sustainable development must promote decision-making that is more democratic and equitable, which carries logical implications for labour relations. It demands a place for trade unions, who have the proven capacity to organize workers and to harness their tremendous knowledge and energy to bring about improvements in the workplace.” (Sustainable Development of the Global Economy: A Trade Union Perspective: International Labour Office, Geneva December 2001).

International labour standards are deemed to be first and foremost about the development of people as human beings. Consistent with this, the thrust should be about developing a level playing field. It becomes important that greater attention is placed on the building of alliances within the Civil Society, and on gaining the support of the national and international community for the labour agenda.

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