

The International Labour Organization is one of 13 Specialized Agencies linked with the United Nations through agreements arranged by the Economic and Social Council and approved by the General Assembly and by the organization concerned. The Specialized Agencies of the United Nations are expert in their respective fields: labour, health, education, food and agriculture, finance and banking, civil aviation, postal matters, atomic energy, telecommunications, meteorology, international development and maritime matters.

History

By 1815, the Industrial Revolution and 25 years of war had produced many problems in such fields as control of child labour, industrial health and safety, working conditions in mines and factories, and limitation of hours of work. A number of European countries, including Britain, began slowly to reform some of the worst abuses in factories and mines; but the belief spread that international action was needed since the problems were the same in all industrialized countries. Robert Owen, British cotton manufacturer and social reformer, urged the Aix-la-Chapelle Conference in 1818 to draw up international standards for conditions of work in all their countries, and, in the next 80 years, various workers' international congresses passed resolutions demanding action.

Several European industrial conferences were held between 1890 and 1913, to discuss international labour conventions designed to prevent night work and to establish a maximum ten-hour workday for women and young people; these effected some improvement in national conditions.

The war of 1914-1918 required all-out production, and the working people loyally helped to achieve victory for the allied countries. By 1919, inflation, unemployment and starvation had made the life of the workers miserable in the war-ravaged countries of Europe. Faced with this situation, the allied governments realized the need for a labour charter in the Peace Treaty of Versailles, not only to help in improving living and working conditions but also to help in maintaining peace and prosperity throughout the world.

Canadian government and labour leaders, asserting their national status as a separate Canadian delegation at the Peace Conference, took the initiative along with other British delegates and with the United States delegates in drawing up the constitution of the International Labour Organization. The ILO was planned in association with the League of Nations, but as an autonomous tripartite agency where governments, employers and workers from member countries could discuss their urgent problems freely and independently.