

## Introduction

Given the nature of the immediate aftermath of World War I, it is not surprising that two hitherto unrelated historical movements should have come together in the midst of attempts to create a new world order at Paris in 1919. For Canada at least, the movements to Dominion autonomy and to the creation of an international organization on labour problems were to become inextricably linked that year. Ultimately, the creation of the International Labour Organization, the I.L.O., was to provide Canada with a further vehicle in her advance to nation-state status, while recognition of that advance was to provide the I.L.O. with a functional dimension that it otherwise would not have had.

## Growth of I.L.O. Idea

Before 1914, the idea of an international labour organization was confined primarily to the continent of Europe, and more specifically to a relatively small group of labour leaders, academics and statesmen. As early as the Congress of Vienna, unsuccessful attempts had been made to introduce labour problems as a valid subject for international discussion. Not until the 1880's, however, did the governments of Europe give any serious consideration to these proposals. In 1881, the government of Switzerland failed to arouse interest in a European conference on labour questions, but their continued initiatives did lead to the first official international labour gathering, held at Berlin in 1890.<sup>1</sup> While the scope of the conference was limited, and its tangible accomplishments few, a beginning had been made; further conferences followed at London in 1896, Zurich and Brussels in 1897 and Paris in 1900.<sup>2</sup> These meetings provided a forum for discussion between governments, which were becoming increasingly aware of the international implications of industrialization, and for workers' organizations which had consistently passed resolutions in favour of international labour legislation. By the end of the century, Europe was prepared to embark on the first major experiment in international labour diplomacy.

The International Association for Labour Legislation (I.A.L.L.) was created in 1900 as a non-official international association of concerned persons, labour organizations, and interested governments.<sup>3</sup> Once again, it was Switzerland which took the first steps toward the formation of the organization by providing facilities for the first international labour office. Located at the University of Basle, this office provided not only administrative headquarters for the organization, but also a centre for the promotion of research and the exchange of information on the possibilities of international labour legislation.<sup>4</sup> Valuable as it was as a focal point for international labour discussions, the I.A.L.L. lacked the legislative competence to initiate labour reforms. Without the active participation and support of governments, little progress could be made toward any improvement of labour standards. This support came slowly, often grudgingly, but it came.

At its fourth Assembly in Berne in 1906, two draft conventions were agreed upon.<sup>5</sup> The first regulated night work for women, the second prohibited the use of white phosphorus\* in the production of matches. While modest in nature, the support which these conventions received from both government and labour delegates was an indication that the idea of international labour

\*Workers employed in the manufacture of matches were exposed to the danger of jaw-bone gangrene if white phosphorus was used.