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Canada and the ILO

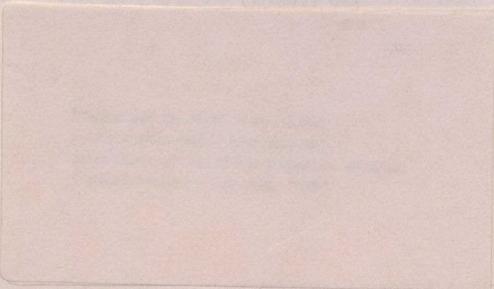
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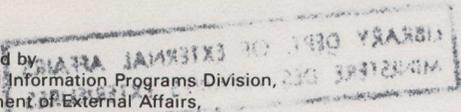
Canada and the International Labour Organization

*Prepared by
Labour Canada,
Ottawa.*

43-272-13A



Produced by
External Information Programs Division,
Department of External Affairs,
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1A 0G2



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Cat. No. E 2-99/1981E
ISBN 0-662-11407-8

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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.

In 1940, the ILO accepted an invitation from the Canadian government to move to Montreal, where, throughout the war, it continued its world-wide work on a limited scale from the McGill University campus. The ILO returned to Geneva in 1948. One main task was to reassess and reorganize the objectives and programs of the Organization in order to meet the most critical problems of the postwar world. In 1946, the ILO became one of the Specialized Agencies of the United Nations.

Objectives and programs

The basic objective of the ILO, as reflected in the preamble to its constitution, is to improve the conditions of labour. The constitution also sets out the principle that "universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice". The Declaration of Philadelphia, 1944, now attached to the constitution as an annex, asserts that "poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere", and stresses the need to promote the economic and social advancement of the less-developed regions of the world. The ILO seeks to promote within member countries the realization of easier human rights, including freedom of association, right to organize and bargain collectively, protection against discrimination in employment opportunity, and equal pay for work of equal value for men and women workers. It encourages

governments to establish policies of full employment, sound labour administration, and legislation in such fields as collective bargaining, occupational safety and health, social security and labour standards.

The ILO has various methods of seeking to achieve these objectives. Its best-known work is the development of international labour conventions and recommendations, which establish standards for labour legislation and its administration and social policy. Conventions are subject to ratification by member countries. The ILO also undertakes comparative analyses of legislation and policies in member countries, conducts research into specific problems, issues publications, including the monthly *International Labour Review*, sponsors international meetings, and carries out programs of assistance to developing countries. For the latter activity, the ILO receives funds allocated by the United Nations Development Program for projects in the labour field, currently amounting to over \$50 million a year.

Structure and activities

The distinctive feature of the ILO structure is that it is tripartite. Its meetings bring together representatives of labour and employers as well as governments, each with voting rights and sharing responsibility for the development of programs and policies.

The ILO has three main organs:

- (1) The Governing Body consists of 56 members (28 government, 14 employer and 14 worker members). The ten nations of chief industrial importance (including Canada) have permanent government members, while the other 18 government members, the 14 worker members and 14 employer members are elected every three years. There are also deputy and substitute members for each of the three groups. This executive council meets three or four times a year to formulate policies and programs, to supervise the activities of the various conferences and committees, and to review the work of the International Labour Office.
- (2) The International Labour Conference is now a world assembly of about 1,500 delegates, advisers and observers from over 140 countries, meeting each year to discuss urgent world problems, adopt conventions and recommendations, survey the general activities of the Organization and approve the biennial program and budget. Each member nation may send four delegates (two government, one worker and one employer), as well as technical advisers. The Conference draws

up and adopts international labour conventions and recommendations for the voluntary guidance of legislatures and employers' and workers' organizations. It also debates and adopts resolutions on labour and social matters of current world importance.

- (3) The International Labour Office at Geneva, acts under the Director-General as the permanent secretariat, the research and information centre, and the publishing-house for the Organization. Branch offices represent the ILO in various parts of the world⁽¹⁾, and field offices have been set up in certain underdeveloped areas to carry out the technical assistance program.

In addition to the three principal organs, there are numerous conferences, commissions and committees to meet specific needs. Regional conferences of American, European, Asian and African countries are held every few years. Ten tripartite industrial committees, established in 1945, meet every few years to discuss special problems affecting particular industries; there are also technical meetings on numerous other industries and occupations. There are advisory committees and panels of consultants on many topics, such as forced labour, freedom of association, migration,

⁽¹⁾ The Canadian branch is located at
75 Albert Street, Suite 202,
Ottawa, Ontario
K1P 5E7

social security, women's work, juvenile employment, occupational safety and health, labour statistics, co-operation, etc.; every year groups of experts meet to study urgent problems in some of these areas. The most important conclusions of these bodies are eventually referred to the annual Conference for more thorough discussion, with a view to the adoption of conventions and recommendations.

By the end of 1979, the International Labour Conference had adopted new or revised conventions and 157 recommendations. The ILO had reviewed its classification of conventions and recommendations and adopted a new categorization which prioritized for ratification and implementation 78 conventions and 76 recommendations, suggested for revision 16 conventions and 14 recommendations, leaving as "other instruments" some 63 conventions and 81 recommendations. In addition, the ILO has, in this review process, identified 43 subjects for research for possible new instruments. By the end of 1979, member countries of the ILO had registered close to 4,800 ratifications of conventions. Each ratification obliges the member country to maintain its legislation in the particular field at the standard laid down by the convention and to report every two years to the ILO on its implementation. A ratification is thus not only a commitment by a member

country to meet a particular standard of social policy but also a commitment to international law.

Canadian participation

Canada's participation in international labour affairs dates from 1910, when Mackenzie King attended a labour conference at Lugano, Switzerland. The next year, as Minister of Labour, Mr. King acted on one of the conference recommendations by introducing a bill in the House of Commons to prohibit the use of white phosphorous in making matches. As already mentioned, Canada took an active part in the establishment of the International Labour Organization in 1919, and has supported it fully ever since. Canada has been represented by government, employer and worker delegates at each session of the International Labour Conference and has participated in many other ILO activities.

As early as 1926, Canada ratified four ILO maritime conventions and, by 1979 had ratified a total of 26 conventions dealing with conditions of employment of seafarers and dockers, hours of work and weekly rest in industry, minimum wage-fixing machinery, employment service organization, discrimination, employment policy, freedom of association, equal pay for equal work, and so forth. Canada reports regularly to the ILO on the measures that have been taken to implement these and other conventions. One factor that has contributed to limit the number of ratifications is that the large majority of ILO conventions are in areas that are, in Canada, mainly within provincial legislative

jurisdiction. In recent years, however, there has been increasing co-operation with the provinces on all ILO matters, and procedures have been developed for co-ordinated implementation and ratification of the more important ILO conventions.

In the past ten years, study of the requirements of the ILO conventions and their discussion at federal-provincial meetings has been a stimulus to improvements in labour legislation in various fields.

In the past, Canada obtained helpful advice from the International Labour Office when such matters as conciliation in labour disputes, unemployment insurance, and establishment of employment services were being considered. More recently, Canada has been able to repay this assistance by contributing to the development of the less-industrialized nations. The ILO has used Canadian experts in its technical-assistance program in underdeveloped countries, and has sent trainees from such countries to Canada for study and on-the-job training.

While the Department of External Affairs has the general responsibility for handling Canada's international relations, including its United Nations commitments, the Department of Labour is the official liaison agency between the Canadian government and the ILO. With the expansion in

ILO activities after the Second World War, a special branch of the Department of Labour was established to work in close co-operation with the Department of External Affairs, with other federal departments, with the provincial departments of labour and with employers' and workers' organizations, all of which have an interest in the ILO. In this way, the ILO is kept informed on the progress of industrial and economic conditions in Canada, and the Canadian governments and organizations concerned are kept in touch with developments in the international field. Each year some progress is made toward uniform and higher labour standards in Canada, in line with the International Labour Code, and Canada thus plays its part in furthering the purposes of the ILO.



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