



# Statements and Speeches

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF THE ILO

An Address by the Minister of Labour, the Honourable Gerald Regan, to the Plenary Meeting of the Sixty-Sixth Session of the International Labour Conference, Geneva, June 13, 1980

I join with others in welcoming Grenada, Vietnam, St. Lucia, Lesotho and Zimbabwe as new members of this organization. Universality of membership has always been the ultimate goal of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and these new additions are further steps in that direction. My delegation hopes that China will soon find it possible to play within this organization the active role that it has increasingly been assuming in other United Nations organizations.

We are particularly pleased with the return of the United States of America to the ILO. My Government shared many of the concerns which led the United States to withdraw in 1975. Like others also, we are encouraged by certain changes since then in the atmosphere of the conference. We are appreciative of the efforts of governments, employers and workers to alleviate such concerns.

But in the view of my Government, there is no room for complacency. All of us who are dedicated to the future of this organization must remain vigilant in ensuring that the situation which we so greatly deplored in 1975 does not recur — and it is for this reason that I want to begin my remarks with some general observations.

First, I stress again that the Canadian Government has always made clear before the organizations of all UN Specialized Agencies that it does not accept the insertion of political considerations into their deliberations and decisions where such considerations are not in conformity with the constitution and due process provisions of such bodies. The reasoning behind this position is straightforward. If the UN system is to be responsive to expectations of member states, it must be functional and efficient. Each component of the system must adhere strictly to its mandate and must respect the division of labour on which the system is predicated. To act otherwise can only result in dissatisfaction on the part of member states and of the world community with a system on which so many hopes and expectations are founded.

This organization has its hands full in coping with the labour situations facing our societies today. Its limited resources cannot and must not be diverted to non-productive debates when there is so much to be done in bringing labour conditions to desirable levels throughout the world, as we attempt to cope with the challenges of the 1980s.

Second, we must be primarily concerned at this conference with the determination of the organization's future program priorities. We are at a moment in time when all governments are faced with severe economic constraints. It is incumbent upon us,

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therefore, to ensure that that restraint is applied to and by international organizations of which we are members. We must resist the temptation to embark on overly ambitious and costly new programs without correspondingly reducing or eliminating earlier ones. In particular, we must resist the temptation to utilize the resumption of contributions by the United States to the ILO as a justification in itself for program expansion.

I want now to turn to Canada's relations with the ILO and the ILO's relations with Canada. Our federal and provincial governments as well as workers and employers continue to be strong supporters of the organization and its programs. The organization has at its disposition expertise of a high calibre. The Director-General and his associates have demonstrated leadership of a high order. I like to believe, and I think it is widely acknowledged, that a number of Canadians have made substantial contributions to the work of the organization: Joe Morris, as president of the workers group, and Kalmen Kaplansky, formerly of the workers group and now director of the Canadian ILO office, as well as Keith Richan, as president of the International organization of employers; and John Mainwaring, a Government representative of whom a number of you spoke so warmly in the governing body a few days ago.

The declaration of Philadelphia states that the application of the programs and principles of the ILO must be undertaken with due regard by each people.

What this means for Canada is not easily stated; we are a huge country in area, but not a major power. We may be a wealthy industrial power by the usual standards of this organization (which was again recently acknowledged), but we have people who are poor by our own standards. When the ILO works on behalf of those who are disabled, it works on behalf of Canadians. When it expresses concern with respect to the unevenness of development, it addresses a Canadian reality. When it interests itself in undesirable practices of multinational enterprises, it touches upon an issue of concern to Canadians. When it emphasizes the need for training, it focuses on a problem of contemporary significance for Canadians too.

Canada's economy, like that of a great number of member states, is vulnerable to cyclical swings in demand for raw materials and semi-finished products. Inflation has had its impact. Unemployment in some regions is at an unacceptably high level.

There are some paradoxes in this. The number of people employed is at historically high levels, as is the number of women in the work force. But jobs in Canada are unfilled because a significant number of the unemployed members of our work force are not appropriately trained to fill these jobs.

The ILO medium-term plan and the Director-General's report give significant emphasis to training. I do not challenge the concern shown. But I wonder whether centralized co-ordination or direction is the answer to this problem. Surely effort must be made in, and by, each country to train its work force bearing in mind development circumstances and the nature of its institutions. Surely employers and trade unions should take a substantial lead in devising, with government assistance

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where necessary, appropriate schemes within particular branches of industry in a country as decentralized as Canada. Governments cannot substitute for employers and unions, who know or should know first hand what the needs for training are. Government can serve those needs, they may help identify them and they may appropriately help underwrite specific costs of meeting them. Thus, my own Government announced earlier this week a number of important new training programs aimed particularly at women workers, native peoples and others for whom a broad approach is appropriate because of the general nature of the disadvantages such groups experience in our labour market. But governments cannot determine which individual enterprises need a specific number of people with identified skills, in the next months or years — only employers and unions can do so.

A number of Canadian companies are devoting a significant amount of their resources to a fusion of long-range corporate planning and human resource needs. I am pleased to note that Canadian employers as a group and the Canadian Labour Congress have also taken a joint initiative in this area.

Based on such reasoning, and while broadly in agreement with the analysis on which the medium-term plan is based, I wonder if it would not be better to have the plan reviewed initially by a working party which would reach agreement on priorities for the ILO and member countries in the field of training. Canada will be ready to give recognition to the fact that while the problem of training may be common to all of us, solutions need to be found which are appropriate to our individual circumstances.

Let me turn to what perhaps is, or should be, the other major aspect of the work of the ILO at this time. No one doubts the continuing need for new conventions and recommendations. But there is also reason to increase emphasis upon the need for broader implementation of the many important standards the conference has already enacted. If the ILO is to serve as the conscience of the labour world, there are important things the conference could do. Over the years, the ILO has adopted standards which cover the many basic problems confronting working men and women.

The conference, as the voice of authority of trade unionists, employer representatives and government ministers of labour, has declared itself on the need to establish and protect labour rights and freedoms — freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, equality of opportunity for men and women workers and for workers of all races, the need to abolish child labour, the need to establish safe and healthy working conditions, the need for employment at decent rates of pay, and other like issues.

Is it enough for the ILO conference to devote most of its time to adopting more and more standards year after year? Or, should it do more to promote the implementation of standards adopted in the past, to make a living reality of these vitally important conference decisions? I note that only one committee of this conference is mandated to deal with this question, while four committees are at work drafting new legal texts. A ratio of one conference committee on implementation of ILO standards to four committees on new instruments made sense years ago, when the conference had not

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yet adopted an extensive set of conventions and recommendations and when the membership of the ILO was still relatively small. Today, I suggest the balance of the conference in this respect needs to be re-examined.

It is true that the ILO has a committee on application, but it has more work than it can handle. It can but scratch the surface of the problem of implementation. The Canadian Government suggested to the ILO governing body, earlier this year, a possible way of improving the situation, namely that the conference agenda should periodically include an examination of important ILO conventions or groups of conventions. This would not supersede but supplement the work of the committee on application. The purpose would be to analyze the world situation with respect to the objectives of these conventions, to determine their degree of implementation, to examine the obstacles to be overcome if these objectives are to be realized, and to propose activities the ILO might undertake to bring about their more efficient implementation. I trust the governing body will give favourable consideration to this proposal which I firmly believe would strengthen the usefulness of the ILO and improve conditions of labour in the broadest sense of the term.

If those who participate in the work of the ILO wish to achieve justice for workers more than annual rhetoric is required. We may look progressive politically if each year we adopt new and broader standards as declarations of principle.

If, however, we are genuinely interested in improving working conditions, then we must recognize that there are vast areas of this planet where not even the most basic standards and rights proclaimed by the ILO years ago are being implemented.

Yesterday, the London *Financial Times* outlined the continuing refusal of the South African Government to provide either equal or integrated training facilities for black workers and it is evident that many black workers there may not be receiving wages above the poverty line.

There are any number of other examples of governments that are violating the most basic rights of workers. For these reasons, I believe more of our work should be directed at achieving world-wide compliance with the principles we have already adopted rather than too much preoccupation with highly publicized declarations of new standards.

I hope too that the Director-General will give serious early consideration to a proposal made to the conference earlier this week by the Government representative of the United States. He urged that a study be undertaken with respect to minimum international labour standards and an analysis was proposed which would determine what role the ILO should play in any future system of minimum standards. There is no need to elaborate further at this stage but Canada not only supports this proposal but also will be ready to co-operate fully with the Director-General in the carrying out of this important and potentially very significant review.

We live in times of which it has been said that change is the only constant factor. The

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state of constant change brings to organizations like the ILO new challenges.

While paying increasing attention to implementation of established minimum standards we must also be cognizant of developing problems and emerging options whenever they occur throughout the world.

The whole field of part-time work is one such development which will require attention in many countries, particularly developed ones like Canada. In such countries, the declining size of the labour force, lack of skilled workers and an aging population dictate increasing utilization of workers who are only able to devote a portion of the normal work period to their employer. Research indicates that part-time workers are a disadvantaged class of workers in terms of salaries, benefits and security. The barriers to unionization of the part-time worker need to be considered. The option of the elderly phasing their retirement appears a likely prospect. The need for retraining and the ever-increasing role of married women in the work-place involve aspects of the problems of part-time workers. This is one subject which will require increasing attention in the coming years if the focus of the ILO is to be truly universal.

When all is said and done the ILO must concentrate on its basic historic task. In my mind, the task is the fulfilment of the intrinsic worth and value of all workers so that they may work in dignity, cushioned from the precariousness of their situation; as Pope John Paul II said last weekend during his visit to France — so that their families may know the security that derives from just working conditions — and so that they will not be troubled by continuing anxiety over their old age. While the light lasts, let each worker find his path of peace and security. Thus will be secured the true peace and security of the world — as was so earnestly hoped when the ILO was founded.