

The ILO – 90 years of hope

Working for Social Justice and Decent work for all

Opening Remarks by Mr. Wang Jiyuan ,
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On the occasion of the ILO's 90th anniversary,
Donchanh Palace, 28th April, 2009

**Your Excellency Prime Minister, Minister of Labour and Social
Welfare, Ambassadors and Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Distinguished Guests, ILO and UN Colleagues – Ladies and Gentlemen.**

First, I would like to thank both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Labour for taking the time today to grace this important occasion. It is our great pleasure and honor, and an indication of the special relationship that the ILO has forged with the Lao government, to have both of you with us celebrate the 90th anniversary of the ILO.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Ninety years ago, on 28 April 1919, the Versailles Peace Conference finalized the Constitution of the ILO. This tripartite Organization comprising representatives of governments, employers and workers, was founded on the presumption that “universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice.”

Fifty-five years ago, in 1944, the principles of the world of work were enshrined in The Declaration of Philadelphia which says,

"All human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex, have the right to pursue material well-being and spiritual development in freedom and dignity, in economic security and with equal opportunity."

"Labour is not a commodity."

"Freedoms of expression and association are essential to development.
Poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere."

Ten years ago in 1999, the Decent Work Agenda was launched by ILO Director-General Juan Somavia. Recognizing the central role that work plays in the lives of people, the Decent Work Agenda provides a framework that reflects the concerns of all ILO constituents and encompasses all ILO programmes, from basic rights at work to enterprise growth and from social security and protection to development and social dialogue.

One year ago in 2008, the ILO adopted the Declaration for a Fair Globalization, the third major statement of principles and policies since the ILO Constitution of 1919. It builds on the Philadelphia Declaration and the 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

ILO was charged with the mission of promoting social justice in and through the world of work. Looking to the future means understanding the past, and as such the ILO's 90th anniversary celebrations world wide focus on the theme of "90 years working for social justice"

Lao People Democratic Republic became a member of the ILO in January 1964. That means forty –five years of fruitful collaboration with the government, through the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, and the workers' and employers' organization, namely the Lao Federation of Trade Union (LFTU) and Lao National Chamber of Commerce(LNCCI), and others of you here today. Through our collaboration, we have achieved many common goals and priorities under the “Decent Work Country Program”, such as,

- The creation of job opportunities for the rural poor, indigenous people, women, youth and people with disabilities, thus reducing poverty,

- Progress in realizing the fundamental principles and rights at work. It is worth noting that the Lao government has ratified four ILO conventions during the past two years – on gender equality, discrimination and child labor –with the determination to ratify more conventions in the coming years,
- The extension of the Social Security Scheme to cover a wider population and the improvement of working conditions, including protection of workers with HIVs and other vulnerable people, like children, women, people with disabilities and migrants,
- The strengthening of social partners and their active engagement in policy dialogue.

These achievements would not have been possible without our mutual belief and conviction that we can improve the world of work if we work together and work hard.

Against a backdrop of the worse global financial crisis and economic downturn after the Great Depression and critical levels of unemployment around the world, the ILO celebrates its 90th anniversary. The world yearns for a safe pair of hands to help us through these uncertain times, to ensure that principles of fairness, equity and social justice are upheld. Globally, and particularly here in Asia and the Pacific, there is a widespread desire to correct some of the failures of globalization.

For many of the previous years, we witnessed rapid economic growth – including in Lao PDR – although much of that growth has been uneven and

created few jobs. Now, in many parts of the world, we are faced either with no growth, or slowing growth – compounded with more joblessness. In other words, in order to restore growth we must work doubly hard to make sure no one is left out – not just to restore a lopsided system that benefitted some but not others. Employment should not only meet the basic needs of people today but it should offer some hope of social and economic progress.

Given that the International Labour Organization is the United Nations' agency that deals with work and workplace issues – and its unique three-part structure of Governments, Workers and Employers – it is no surprise that we are being called upon to help respond to this current crisis. This challenge comes at a significant moment for the ILO, as it marks its 90th anniversary.

Here in Laos and right across this vast region, the economic and jobs crises we face are of great concern. But they also offer us an opportunity to make the world of work actually work better for the world.

90 years is a long time. But, in my view, the crisis we face today shows that the ILO's mandate is as fresh, relevant and universal today as it has ever been. Just consider how, as times have changed, the ILO's mandate has adapted to and incorporated changes in the world of work.

The ILO's Conventions have set the internationally recognized standards that most of us now take for granted; including the eight-hour work day,

basic workplace safety standards, maternity protection, an end to child and forced labour, equality, the right to organize and speak out.

On the ILO's 90th birthday, it is only right that we feel pride in the achievements of the past nine decades. But what is more important is the future. We must use this occasion to look ahead and renew our support for the fundamental principles the ILO stands for and - in these testing times - plan how we can work, together, to further social justice and achieve decent work for all.

So, the message of the ILO's 90th birthday is one of hope - a better world starts here – if we so choose.

Thank you.