

# UK ILO 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: Summary and Key Messages

## Introduction

The UK celebration of the ILO's 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary took place on the 6 May 2009 at Admiralty House (an 18<sup>th</sup> century building once lived in by Winston Churchill) in London. It was a tripartite event but also included NGO and academic representatives. Approximately 50-60 people attended (limited by the size of the venue).

## Key issues and points arising from the meeting

- **Jonathan Shaw MP** (UK Minister responsible for ILO matters) introduced the day by saying that the ILO, even though the oldest of the UN agencies, was definitely still relevant, well equipped to deal with current issues and in fact getting stronger as an organisation. Mr Shaw affirmed the UK's continued support for the ILO.
- **Gerry Rodgers** gave an overview of the history of the ILO (from its creation until the end of the 1980's), with particular reference to the UK's role in shaping the organisation and its mandate.
- **Stephen Pursey** then covered the subsequent period up until the present, stressing the fact that the ILO has managed to adapt and modernise throughout its history and during different crises. Mr Pursey highlighted the key features of recent ILO history such as the introduction of the Decent Work agenda, the World Commission report, the integration of Decent Work into the MDG's, the development of Decent Work Country Programmes, the 1998 and 2008 Declarations and in the current crisis context the follow up to the G20 London Summit and development of a Global Jobs Pact.
- A **tripartite panel** consisting of **Jonathan Shaw MP**, **Brendan Barber** (Director of the TUC) and **John Cridland** (Deputy Director of the CBI) discussed the ILO and answered questions from participants.
  - Mr Shaw made a positive statement, saying that the ILO has stood the test of time and is successful in carrying out its mandate. He added that the UK Government will continue to promote the 1998 Declaration and that in his view the 2008 Social Justice Declaration is proof the ILO is modernising and adapting to its environment. The Minister also congratulated the ILO on the speed and vigour of its response to the current crisis and that in doing this the organisation has shown it is as relevant today as it was in 1919. Mr Shaw finished by saying it was a privilege to continue to work with the ILO.
  - John Cridland then congratulated the ILO on its 90<sup>th</sup> 'birthday' and reiterated the Minister's point about the effectiveness of the ILO response to the crisis. As a result of the current crisis, Mr Cridland stated that the world may look very different (potentially greater government intervention and regulation of financial markets) and that the ILO should focus on implementing more technical cooperation and building the capacity of worker and employer organisations. Mr Cridland also made the point, which was subsequently discussed throughout the rest of the event, that the ILOs' battles had, on the whole, been won in developed countries and that there should be a greater focus on developing countries. Mr Cridland finished by saying that in the CBI's view the 'crown jewels' of the ILO were its knowledge base and research expertise.
  - Brendan Barber also congratulated the ILO on its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Mr Barber said that in this time of crisis a new model of globalisation was necessary and that the ILO needed to be a big part of any solutions and was also well placed to be able to discuss any economic models of the future. He also gave a strong message of support for the 2008 Declaration saying that it was a clear roadmap to implementing the Decent Work agenda. Mr Barber welcomed the strong messages of support from the UK Government (adding that the UK Government could possibly take a more positive approach to the Regular Budget) although he thought it was unfortunate that the ILO had not had a formal presence at the G20 London Summit. Mr Barber also did not agree with the CBI's assertion that most 'of the ILO's battles had been won in developed countries' saying, for example, that the UK should ratify all up to date conventions. Mr Barber stated that he would be attending the International Labour Conference this year and ended by saying that the ILO had never been more needed than at this time of crisis and that it maintained a unique role at global, regional and national levels.

- **Stephen Richards** (Director of the ILO and Council of Europe Team in the Department for Work and Pensions) gave a brief presentation about the role of his team. Mr Richards said he thought they (and the UK Government in general) had a strong relationship with the ILO and that it was one they valued. He explained that part of their role was disseminating and explaining the ILO to other UK Government colleagues and promoting the ILO in other international debates. Mr Richards did say that it was a challenge to get colleagues from other Government Departments to fully participate in the International Labour Conference and Governing Body meetings. Mr Richards echoed the previous congratulations to the ILO on its 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and ended by saying that he welcomed the opportunity to build upon the strong relationship in the future.
- A **panel of experts** (**Tonia Novitz**, Bristol University; **Owen Tudor**, TUC; **Dennis Pain**, DFID and **Katya Hall**, CBI) each outlined one of the four pillars of the Social Justice Declaration. In addition, and with reference to how the ILO responds to the current crisis, the panellists examined how the Social Justice Declaration integrates the four pillars to create a holistic Decent Work agenda (and response to the crisis). For example it was argued that the Declaration demonstrates the importance of integrating a social dimension into the IMF agenda (and gives the ILO the mandate to do this) as a follow up to the G20 London Summit and as a response to the current crisis. Dr Pain (DFID) also underlined that any follow up to the G20 summit should protect the poorest and that the UK Government was committed to do this, which should be reflected in the new DFID White Paper which will be finalised in summer 2009.
- The last session of the day, presented by **Stephen Hughes** from Newcastle University examined the future of the ILO. Prof Hughes presented three ‘platforms’ upon which he thought the ILO needed to work on to successfully live another 90 years. The first platform would be to continue core activities which he saw as standards and rights at work. Also essential were reforms within the ILO, particularly policy integration (internal reform) and engagement in the One UN process (external reforms). The second platform would be to continue dialogue to ensure that the ILO agenda is part of what has been termed the Washington consensus, particularly by integrating ILO policies into Poverty Reduction Strategies. More broadly, Technical Assistance should be mainstreamed into the multilateral system, rather than being based more on bilateral arrangements. The third platform would be around what Prof Hughes termed ‘thought leadership’. This would mean the ILO needs to produce original ideas which shape future policies and day to day realities. Linked to this would be the production of useful, relevant and timely data on areas within the ILO’s mandate, to back up ideas. One idea Prof Hughes suggested was a Peer Review process at the institutional level (ie between UN agencies) which could be one part of this (thought leadership) process. Ultimately the ILO needs to be constantly asking the question, “is the ILO relevant to enterprises and working people?”
- In conclusion this was an interesting and lively event with much constructive debate. There were many strong messages of support for the ILO (and informally this was confirmed by Stephen Richards who informed me that Minister Jonathan Shaw had appreciated his recent visit to the March 2009 Governing Body and seemed to be genuinely interested and supportive of the ILO work). It was a fitting celebration of the ILO’s history and future and the UK’s role within it.

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