



**Address by Mr. Juan Somavia,  
Director-General of the International Labour Office  
on the occasion of the  
15th Inter-American Conference of  
Labour Ministers (IACLM)  
(Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 12 September 2007)**

The Honourable Fitzgerald Hinds, Minister of State  
in the Ministry of National Security of the  
Republic of Trinidad and Tobago,

Don Javier Lozano Alarcón, Secretary of Labour and  
Social Security of Mexico and President of the Fifteenth  
Inter-American Conference of Labour Ministers,

Don José Miguel Insulza, Secretary General of the  
Organization of American States,

Mr Carl Francis, Permanent Secretary in the  
Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise  
Development of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago,

Honourable Ministers of Labour,

Representatives of COSATE and CEATAL,

Don Daniel Funes de Rioja, Member of the  
Bureau of ILO's Governing Body,

Dear friends,

It is an honour for me, once again, to be part of the Inter-American Conference of Labour Ministers.

I am very happy to be here in Trinidad and Tobago, our host country, and in the Caribbean, a region that I admire and love.

Your nation, Mr Minister, has proven how a society can prosper in peace and stability by valuing and respecting its diversity of origins.

Trinidad and Tobago's Vision 2020 speaks to us, among other things, about developing innovative people, nurturing a caring society, enabling competitive business all within a long-term development strategy.

It recognizes the key contribution that Decent Work can make to these objectives, and in putting people's needs at the heart of social and economic development.

It is also very significant for the region that Trinidad and Tobago will host the next Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Hemisphere in 2009.

The goal of Decent Work for all has also taken root within the Caribbean context of regional integration.

This was again demonstrated clearly in the recent Tripartite Declaration and Plan of Action for Realizing Decent Work in the Caribbean, adopted in Barbados in October 2006.

Mr President, dear friends,

The relationship between the ILO and the OAS has been going from strength to strength. The journey we have embarked on has been of great benefit to both institutions, and has strengthened our respective agendas.

That has been considerably helped by the leadership given to the OAS by José Miguel Inzulza.

I would like to give you a brief account of recent developments.

In 2001, at the 12th Inter-American Conference of Labour Ministers in Ottawa, I had the opportunity for the first time to set out the Decent Work Agenda at an OAS meeting, and the reception was very positive.

And then in 2003, at the 13th IACLM in Salvador de Bahía, the Decent Work Agenda was adopted as a priority objective for the region as a means for achieving sustainable and inclusive development.

In 2005, on behalf of the ILO, I had the pleasure of signing, with the Secretary General of the OAS, a Memorandum of Understanding on the Promotion of Decent Work.

That same year, the 14th IACLM met in Mexico to discuss people and their work at the heart of globalization. One aspect highlighted at this meeting was the urgent need to ensure a better distribution of the benefits of globalization in our countries.

At the Summit of the Americas which took place in Mar del Plata in 2005, the Heads of State and Government endorsed all these initiatives by adopting the Decent Work Agenda at the highest political level, with the aim of creating jobs, combating poverty and strengthening democratic governance.

Throughout this journey, a decisive factor has been the action taken by you, the ministers of labour, together with organizations of employers and workers.

Continuing the momentum forwards, last year in Brasilia, the 16th American Regional Meeting of ILO member States affirmed a tripartite commitment to a Decade of Promoting Decent Work in the Americas (2006-2015).

The meeting adopted an Agenda for the Hemisphere, which sets out specific targets and objectives in 11 social and labour areas in order to give effect to the Agreements reached at the Summit of the Americas in ways appropriate to the conditions of each country.

At the same time, the Decent Work Agenda now enjoys broad general support on that continent, a support that goes beyond the ILO and its tripartite structure. It is now a global agenda.

All the governments concerned, and you as labour ministers, are pushing ahead with important initiatives in response to the great democratic demand for decent work.

Throughout this process, in consultation with our constituents, we have been designing Decent Work Country Programmes as a specific tool for putting into practice these declarations within our own areas of competence.

We can now say with some satisfaction that we are in the process of implementing these programmes in many of countries and subregions of this continent, including at the provincial and local levels.

The purpose of the Decent Work Country Programmes is to facilitate convergence between public and private initiatives so that the Decent Work Agenda can be systematically integrated into national development policies.

At the same time, we have concluded new agreements within the UN system, with institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization. We have produced a Toolkit for mainstreaming employment and decent work in the policies of the international institutions.

The aim of this is to ensure that each institution examines its programmes and activities in the light of their outcomes in terms of productive employment and decent work, by incorporating what has been agreed by the international community in their actions.

The Toolkit also provides a useful set of methods for promoting the convergence of policies of the different ministries involved at the national level, and reinforces the role of labour ministries in defining economic and social policy.

This has been a good time for the region. It has seen sustained economic growth over the past five years. Unemployment has fallen and the real minimum wage has increased in most countries.

There has been a strong renewal of the region's democratic convictions. The presidential elections since last year have demonstrated the peoples' determination to anchor democracy as a political practice.

This is good news, and we should rejoice in it; but we are aware that there are still serious gaps and glaring inequalities. The time has come to push forward for a paradigm shift, in the light of the need for and the real possibility of growth with employment and equity.

Because people are tired of deferred hopes, failed campaign promises and the illusion of globalization for everyone.

The practice of democracy has brought with it greater expectations. There is a sense that those with the private and public power to bring about change and create opportunities for a better quality of life are moving slowly, and appear to be hampered in their efforts.

Election after election, people are saying, “We don’t want handouts; we want the opportunity to have a decent job to support our families.”

This remains one of the most pressing policy issues throughout the American continent.

Allow me to highlight five areas in which we need to strengthen our action, and which reflect the link between jobs and democratic governance drawn by the Mar del Plata Summit:

**First**, we need to reverse the current imbalance between state, market and society. Currently tipped in favour of the market, it has benefited capital over labour and undervalued dignity at work. Together with a sound macro-economy and the promotion of enterprise, we need to place an equal value on respect for the worker, and we know that abusive practices exist in our region.

We must not forget that, according to the Constitution of the ILO, labour is not a commodity. It is a social value encompassing personal dignity, family stability and community peace.

**Second**, we need to consolidate a social protection floor below which no citizen should be allowed to fall. This should take account of each country’s possibilities.

Such a social floor requires a combination of economic policies and investment for job and enterprise creation and active social policies through social expenditure. It is not just an ethical stance and a political need; it is a means of promoting countries’ social competitiveness.

Maintaining a social floor and better working conditions will increasingly be seen as a profitable investment. Markets are paying more and more attention to a competitiveness that is not based only on economic efficiency, but on the quality of the work involved in producing goods and services.

In tomorrow’s global markets, there will be less room for abusive working conditions.

**Third**, we need to find new and more effective ways of fighting unemployment and precarious employment among young people. We have just launched a regional report on decent work and youth, with examples of successful policies.

A total of 10 million young people between the ages of 15 and 24 are unemployed (16 per cent of the labour force in this age group), some 30 million work in the informal economy and some 22 million neither study nor work, with the risks this entails both for the individual and for society.

Today’s young people are the best educated generation in the history of our continent. All that creative, innovative and imaginative potential must not be allowed to go to waste.

**Fourth**, we are already witnessing the damaging impact of climate change. This will give rise to a new generation of clean technologies.

New investment will create new enterprises and new jobs, while employment in polluting industries will decrease.

We need to prepare for this process. In the ILO, I have recently proposed a “green jobs initiative” to take a proactive and preventive approach to the implications of the coming changes for governments, enterprises and workers.

**Fifth**, and lastly, we have to admit that there is a shortage of dialogue in many of our countries. That means:

Political dialogue, to strengthen democracy and ensure stability and continuity of strategies for growth with equity and decent work. These should be prioritized over the struggle for immediate interests and political factionalism.

Effective social dialogue, based on mutual respect between organized workers and employers – something that is especially necessary in small and medium-sized enterprises and at any other level deemed necessary.

Tripartite dialogue, to set the direction of economic and social policy on the basis of consensus at the national level.

All this requires adequate institutions.

Here, I would like to welcome the recent adoption of the Resolution on Participation of workers’ representatives in activities of the Organization of American States. Let us hope that its aims can be achieved quickly with the employers’ representatives. It will help to continue the process of strengthening the presence of COSATE and CEATEL within the OAS.

Dear friends, in a world that is constantly on the move, anyone who stands still goes backwards.

The same can be said of ideas. The economic and social policies, on which sometimes there was a consensus, or very often were imposed to our countries, from the early 1980s onwards, have been steadily losing relevance and political legitimacy.

The Decent Work Agenda which we are building together is a tripartite and balanced effort to help regenerate the process of reflection and political practice.

This, I believe, is what people expect of us.

Thank you.

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