



Keynote speech for the celebration of the
ILO's 90th anniversary
(Cairo, 23 April 2009)

Statement by

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Your Excellency Ms Aisha Abdelhadi, Minister of Manpower and Migration,
representing President Mubarak;
Honourable Ministers;
Mr Director-General of the Arab Labour Organization;
Representatives of the Federation of Egyptian Industries and the Egyptian Trade
Union Federation;
Dear friends and colleagues from our sister UN agencies and the diplomatic corps;
Ladies and gentlemen:

On behalf of the ILO Director-General Mr Juan Somavia and my ILO
colleagues in the region, it gives me great pleasure to be here with all of you today on
this very special occasion.

Let me first express deep appreciation to President Mubarak and the people of
Egypt for their longstanding support for the ILO, and especially for agreeing to
organize these celebrations today with all the solemnity befitting such an occasion.

I would like to pay a special tribute to you, Ms Abdelhadi. In recent years your
lifelong record of service to the labour movement has been further enhanced by your
incisive contributions to the tripartite debates in the Governing Body of our
Organization. Your spirit of consensus, always rooted in your deeply held
convictions, has made you one of the most respected government representatives in
the ILO, benefiting not only your own country but Africa as a whole.

Thanks also to Mr Megawer, representing Egypt's workers, and Mr Allam from
the employers, for your contributions to the fruitful partnership between the Egyptian
social partners and the ILO.

And I would like to thank all our friends in this room who came to join us for
this ILO 90th anniversary celebration, both to commemorate our past and to chart the
way to a future of decent work for all. Our ambitions are lofty. The ILO's work is not
complete. But we feel strong because our values have passed the test of time.

Since its foundation in the wake of the First World War, the ILO has been at the forefront of the struggle for social justice through good times and bad, persistently working to embed social goals and priorities in both global and national economies.

The ILO was founded in the belief that social justice is an essential foundation of universal peace. The pursuit of social justice has been the defining principle of the ILO since its founding in 1919: from the eight-hour working day to the quest for a fair globalization, through war and peace, depression and economic boom, awards and battles, decolonization and globalization, the ILO has worked with and for the people in pursuit of that goal .

In 1969, on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary, the ILO's contribution to peace and justice was acknowledged when it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Organization has played a role at many key historical junctures – contributing to efforts to rebuild the world economy after the First and Second World Wars, fighting unemployment during the Great Depression, supporting decolonization and helping to advance development goals in newly independent nations, participating in the victory over apartheid, and responding to the widespread demand for a fair globalization, reflected so clearly in today's deep global economic and ethical crisis – which is increasingly being seen as a jobs crisis.

The ILO's significance was especially evident in the African decolonization movement. In the years leading up to independence, unionized African workers were at the heart of the struggle, holding up ILO values as their beacon. And we in the ILO were particularly proud when President Nelson Mandela in accepting the Decent Work Prize in 2007 told us that “the voice of the ILO pierced the walls of Robben Island”. Our principles move mountains.

The ILO is a special Organization, distinct from any other body of the UN system. Its tripartite structure emphasizes dialogue among economic actors as a means of promoting social progress – workers and employers, on an equal footing with governments, participate in debates and decisions. Our system of international labour standards covers all the main aspects of work and employment, each subject to voluntary ratification by States, and supervised by the ILO itself. By the beginning of 2009 there had been some 7,500 ratifications of 188 Conventions.

For 90 years, the ILO has led social change. It has thrived; it has suffered; it has advanced and known setbacks; but always the ILO has survived because it is persistent in the pursuit of its goals.

Dear friends, let me briefly share with you some of the central areas of the ILO's work over the past 90 years.

First, the ILO's international *human rights* regime is unique. It started in 1919 out of the ashes of the First World War. The first conventions adopted then, on hours of work, on unemployment benefits, on child labour, are still highly topical.

A new boost was given in 1944 with the adoption of the Declaration of Philadelphia, which states that “labour is not a commodity” – a powerful notion.

Several of the ILO fundamental human rights standards were adopted in this period, some providing a defence against totalitarian regimes, others recognizing economic and social rights, removing obstacles to access to work for women and ethnic and other minorities, and providing a basis for decent conditions of work. The issues included freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, forced labour, discrimination at work and child labour, all subsequently anchored in the 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work as core labour standards.

Today some 90 per cent of member States – including Egypt – have ratified the eight fundamental Conventions. Universal ratification is within reach. This provides us with a solid universal floor of rights.

Second, the drive to create the ILO came in large part from the urgent need to improve the appalling working conditions faced by many in the early decades of the industrial revolution. Since 1919 there have been important changes in international and national attitudes to work and in policies aimed at improving the *quality of work*. Over the past century there have been diverse and sometimes contradictory developments, with growing security for some accompanied by growing insecurity for others, rising wages sometimes accompanied by increased stress and longer working hours, and large differences in attitudes to safety at work between industries and regions.

From the 1980s on there has been growing concern with precarious and unstable work. These changes have conditioned the ILO's work and its impact in both industrialized and developing countries.

Three central aspects of the quality of work illustrate different types of ILO work and influence: hours of work; occupational safety and health; and minimum wages.

On hours of work, the ILO has contributed substantially to policy debates at different times, and the world has moved towards the 40-hour week first advocated by the ILO in 1919. However, in recent decades global frameworks appear to have lost influence on working-time policies in the face of widely varying national perspectives.

Occupational safety and health is an area in which the ILO has played a consistently valuable role, offering policy frameworks, codes of conduct and information systems which have been widely used by specialists and advocacy networks.

Third, the 1944 Declaration of Philadelphia contains a visionary commitment to universal *social security*. Progress there has been, but we are still facing a situation in which only one in every five person worldwide has access to adequate protection. Paradoxically, the lack of coverage is worst where it is needed most.

While in the majority of the industrialized world the rate of coverage is high, in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia only a small fraction of the active population – in many countries in these regions only 5 to 10 per cent – has access to formal social security.

Extending social security to all continues to be a priority challenge for the ILO. Moreover, in crisis conditions, the provision of social assistance and social security benefits to unemployed workers and other vulnerable recipients acts as a social and economic stabilizer. Social transfers alleviate the risk of poverty immediately for those who lose their jobs or are not able to work, while stabilizing the demand for goods and services produced by those who still have jobs.

The ILO is promoting the reshaping of national social security systems based on the principle of progressive universalism. We seek to ensure a minimum set of social security benefits for all, called the social protection floor. This consists of an essential body of rights, transfers and services that all global citizens should have access to.

Fourth, promoting productive *employment as a means of poverty reduction* has been a key part of the ILO's strategy since its creation. In the interwar period the ILO's work on employment was at the forefront of progressive thinking on economic and social policy, opposing laissez-faire policies. Through its technical expertise on a range of global economic issues, it was able to play a credible role in line with its mandate to reduce unemployment and advance social progress.

As the membership of the ILO expanded in the 1950s and 1960s with the entry of newly independent States, the ILO shifted much of its attention to employment promotion. It adopted the Employment Policy Convention in 1964 and launched its World Employment Programme in 1969. Many of the policies and principles promoted then – such as the notion of the informal economy and the importance of lifting those who work in it out of poverty – still retain their validity today.

Fifth, *social dialogue* stands at the heart of all decent work. As the history of our Organization demonstrates, it is the key to the successful implementation of all ILO policies and strategies. To stand any chance of succeeding, all approaches to the current crisis must inevitably include a strong and transparent social dialogue component in order to achieve the objectives of social stabilization and preserve social and economic gains.

Sixth, in 1998, following the end of the Cold War, the ILO Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work came as the ILO's first major response towards the building of a universal social floor to the global economy, and the first step in defining the *Decent Work Agenda*.

The goal of decent work is now the frame of reference for the ILO's action, and it has been widely endorsed as a way of incorporating a social dimension in the process of globalization. The ILO's Decent Work Agenda has raised the profile of the Organization as a global player, as confirmed just last month by the UN General Assembly's adoption of Resolution 63/199 endorsing an integrated approach to the Decent Work Agenda, based on the four inseparable, interrelated and mutually supportive strategic objectives of employment creation, fundamental principles and rights at work, social dialogue and social protection.

The wording comes from the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, which consolidates the Decent Work Agenda in the ILO's structures and programmes.

The Social Justice Declaration was unanimously adopted by the International Labour Conference in June 2008 to strengthen national and international action aimed at bringing fairness to the globalization process. The Declaration confirms that the ILO has the solemn obligation to further among the nations of the world programmes which will achieve the objectives of full employment and the raising of standards of living, a minimum living wage and the extension of social security measures to provide a basic income to all in need, along with all the other objectives set out in the Declaration of Philadelphia in 1948. It reminds us that the ILO has the responsibility to examine and consider all international economic and financial policies in the light of the fundamental objective of social justice.

Today we are confronted with a major economic and financial crisis that might lead to a social recession of major proportions. The ILO values and the policies for decent work that are derived from it are needed more than ever. I know that Egypt is at the forefront of the efforts to address the crisis, as borne out by the recent “Group of 14” meeting of Labour Ministers in Rome.

Among the lessons to be drawn are that the ultimate underlying principle of the core ILO philosophy and governance structure is its ability to achieve goals that cannot be achieved by nation States acting independently.

I am very pleased and honoured to announce that I was contacted this morning by our Director-General, Mr Juan Somavia, who asked me to extend an invitation to his Excellency President Hosni Mubarak to participate in the ILO Summit on the Global Jobs Crisis to be held during the up-coming International Labour Conference, this June. This will provide the ILO and many others an opportunity to learn from Egypt’s response vis-à-vis the international economic crisis. The experience and leadership of President Mubarak will no doubt inspire the debate of hope for the response to the crisis.

In the ongoing economic crisis and its aftermath, ILO issues will continue to be central. If new formulations of international social justice, new ethical rules and new policy instruments emerge to guide the world economy and regulate changing global labour markets, the ILO’s goals and constituents must be at their heart. The ILO tripartite model of governance is the best guarantee to face up to these challenges.

In the ILO’s history, the key times of change, for better or worse, have followed war, economic turmoil or political crisis. We may be again entering such a period. How the ILO responds, not only in its policies, but also in its structures and methods, will surely make a difference to whether the emerging global economy meets the goals of people around the world for rights, jobs and security.

Let me use this opportunity to renew the ILO’s commitment to work with our social partners for the development and progress for all the Egyptian people. I know that creating a new social health insurance system is a top priority for your Government, and we are in the process of working with you on some key principles of the ILO strategy towards universal access to health care.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, together with 52 other countries in Africa and 68 more around the world, we celebrate the 90th anniversary of our great Organization. Through our values and our convictions, we have given a voice to the people who live in poverty, to the real economy, to women and children and those with disabilities, to rural workers and those who work in the informal economy, to migrant workers and those living with HIV/AIDS.

In the words of our Director-General Mr Juan Somavia, let us make the policy choices that sustain the goal of decent work; and together, let us advance the cause of decent work for social justice and a fair globalization. That's our mission, our mandate and our responsibility.

Ten years from now will see the centenary of the ILO. The world will have greatly changed by then. Let us hope that thanks to our shared ideals of justice and fairness, the other possible world for which we strive will see the light of day.

Thank you.