



International
Labour
Organization

Executive Summary

Edward Phelan and the ILO: The life and views of an international social actor

This book offers a unique portrait of Edward J. Phelan (1888–1967), an Irishman who dedicated his life to social justice and whose views and actions guided the work of the ILO for decades. Phelan played a pivotal role in the birth of the ILO and steered and nurtured its further development from the time he joined the Office as the first international civil servant in 1919 until his retirement in 1948, having served as its fourth Director (and first Director-General). *Edward Phelan and the ILO* is one of the first outcomes of the ILO’s “Century Project”, looking forward to its centenary in 2019. The project aims to strengthen the ILO’s knowledge of its own past in a variety of ways: history not only helps to explain how and why past and present policies originated and evolved; knowledge of the rich heritage of the ILO also equips the Organization better to meet its present responsibilities and future challenges.

This edition has been brought together for the ILO’s ninetieth anniversary. It is not a history of the ILO, but a view of the world in which the ILO was created as seen through the eyes of one of its key actors. The book contains an extensive, edited selection of passages from Edward Phelan’s unfinished memoirs, covering the period from his early childhood in Ireland through his first years at the newly-formed ILO in Geneva, when the Organization became a leading exponent of a brand new multilateral structure. C. Wilfred Jenks, ILO Director-General 1970–73, who worked closely with Phelan for years, wrote an introduction and postscript to these unfinished memoirs in 1968, and Seán Lemass, Irish Taoiseach 1959–66, prepared a foreword. These original texts are published here for the first time, along with a special foreword to this edition by the present Taoiseach of Ireland, Brian Cowen. The well-known Irish labour historian

Emmet O'Connor (University of Ulster) has contributed a unique biographical essay to the book, setting the scene of the life and views of Edward Phelan as an international social actor and contextualizing the events and people described by Phelan himself in his memoirs.

Phelan's memoirs are unique for several reasons. They tell the remarkable story of an insider, one of the protagonists from the first hour, who "made ILO history". Phelan's personal view enriches and gives colour to the official history of the years leading up to the establishment of the ILO. These memoirs also offer a lively account of the intellectual development, character and life experiences of a young man whose influence would extend far beyond the founding and early years of the ILO.

Edward Phelan's life story is a fascinating one. Born in 1888 in Waterford, Ireland, to a middle-class family of seafarers, Phelan grew up "cocooned in his intellectual bubble". Introverted, but with an independent mind and eager to gain knowledge, he learnt to look beyond his own horizon. After university studies in England, he began a successful career in the British civil service during the years in which the Lloyd George administration began to lay the foundations of the British welfare state. Phelan was soon promoted to chief investigator of the Board of Trade, studying the living conditions of working-class people throughout Britain. When the First World War broke out he was transferred to the newly-created Intelligence Division of the Ministry of Labour.

The venture that led him into diplomacy and ultimately a new career as an international civil servant was a secret British mission to Russia in 1918, in which Phelan participated as attaché of the new Labour Department. The memoirs take the reader on this and other journeys, sharing Phelan's private conversations with Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, who seconded Phelan to the Foreign Office as a consultant on Russia. Phelan's belief that the Bolshevik regime would survive prompted him to think of labour as an important determinant of foreign policy. His new status at the crossroads of foreign and labour policy enabled him to make a connection between diplomacy and labour affairs at the international level.

As the secretary of the labour section of the British delegation to the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919, Phelan took part in the peace negotiations and the process of the founding of the ILO. His contribution to the Constitution of the ILO was twofold. The first was his advocacy of a permanent machinery for international labour regulation. He argued that this was not only a practical means by which to deal with the negative consequences of the industrialization for workers, but an alternative to doctrines of class conflict and a moral imperative that governments repay their wartime debt to the working

classes. Second, and one of Phelan's less-known contributions that continues to have a major impact on the working of the ILO today, was his conception of the "tripartite" formula – the cornerstone of the ILO, which makes it unique in the United Nations system. Some countries had already initiated structures in which governments, employers and workers were represented at the national level. At the international level it was Phelan who brought into practice this formula for delegate representation at International Labour Conferences, believing that the traditional concept of state sovereignty was obsolete in the interdependent post-war world and that an organization without the backing of all interested parties could not deliver practical results. Tripartism, the creators of the ILO believed, would eventually lead to international democracy.

The memoirs show how Phelan blossomed in the cosmopolitan milieu of the post-Versailles world. As the driving force in the British labour section he paved the way for the first International Labour Conference in 1919 in Washington, D.C. There, his role in devising the standing orders of future sessions of the International Labour Conference caught the eye of the new ILO Director Albert Thomas. This was the start of a 30-year-long career in the International Labour Office. In 1920, as Head of the Diplomatic Division, he became the third official running the Office in the shadow of, but no less important than, the Director (Albert Thomas) and his Deputy (Harold Butler). This triumvirate worked together to develop a broader role for the ILO, reaffirming its independence from the League of Nations and paving the way for American membership.

As Acting Director from 1941, Edward Phelan steered the ILO through its darkest moments. Where his predecessor, the American John Winant, had succeeded in keeping the Organization alive by negotiating its removal from Geneva to Canada during the war, Edward Phelan worked hard to guarantee its post-war existence at a time when the ILO was increasingly marginalized in the machinery of reconstruction. His most important achievement of this period was the 1944 Declaration of Philadelphia, of which he was one of the main architects.

Phelan's memoirs end sometime in 1921. His personal account of the later developments in the ILO is provided in seven articles he wrote between the 1920s and 1950s for the Irish review *Studies*. These articles are less well-known and the three most interesting are included in this book unabridged, complementing his memoirs and providing a taste of what Phelan might have written had he completed them. The three selected *Studies* articles identify key turning points in the ILO's history during the 1930s and 1940s: how the United States joined the ILO against the background of the world economic crisis and Roosevelt's New Deal; Phelan's view of and relationship with ILO Director John Winant; the ILO's rescue from Geneva and move to Canada when the war broke out; the struggle for the ILO's survival in an allied context; Phelan's strategies,

moves and contacts with ILO Governing Body members and statesmen in Washington, D.C., and London.

Where many histories stick to the official account, *Edward Phelan and the ILO* reveals how decisions of long-lasting importance came to be made. It makes clear that history is driven by people – people who have dreams for a better world and who have to face challenges in order to realize them. Edward Phelan was such a man, as a civil servant not always as visible as other actors, but a man of vision, developing and consolidating the institution he had helped to create. As such Phelan is a model for generations dedicated to playing a role in debating, transmitting and defending ideas of social thought and public-spirited social activism in national and international policy debate.