International Labour Conference

Opening statement Workers Group

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Introduction

Chair, Director General, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

This is a unique Conference. In the 100 years history of the ILO it is the first, and I hope the last virtual Conference we will ever have.

I am addressing this session today with mixed feelings. While I am pleased that we can hold a Conference after having had to cancel the 2020 session, I am also fully aware of the devastation that the pandemic has brought to the lives of millions of workers and their families around the world.

The impact of the pandemic on the world of work has been brutal, particularly for the millions of workers in the informal economy or in precarious jobs in the formal economy who have not been able to benefit from the protection offered by social security and labour law.

I want to pay tribute to the millions of workers, many of them women, in the frontline: in health and care, in retail and other sectors including seafarers, for keeping our economies and societies going, often with great risk for their own health and safety and that of their families, while often not sufficiently being rewarded beyond rounds of applause.

And I want to remind us all of the millions of workers who lost their jobs and livelihoods in tourism, culture and other sectors hard hit by the crisis.

Last but not least, I want to bring a salute to workers and trade unions that, right now, are standing up for democracy and peace, workers’ rights and freedom of association, many of them prosecuted and hunted down for the very reason of their participation in peaceful protest, in countries and regions where fundamental rights are systematically violated, notably Myanmar, Belarus, the occupied Arab territories and Colombia. Some of these serious violations will be addressed in this ILC’s Committee on the Application of Standards.

And we welcome the analysis of the DG in his extremely worrying recent report on the situation in the occupied Arab territories, showing once more the urgent need to end the occupation if ever we want to see lasting peace in the region….

As some of our colleagues in these countries may be listening to these proceedings from their places of hiding or exile, I want to bring them a strong message of solidarity from the Workers’ Group in the ILO. We keep our fingers crossed that you all stay safe….
Ladies and gentlemen,

As constituents of the ILO, we now need to do our utmost to promote a recovery from the pandemic that is based on the unique tripartite structure and normative mandate of the ILO, addresses the flaws of the current model of development and promotes a human-centred recovery that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient.

In recent times, the notion of a **new social contract** is increasingly used to express the need to address major inequalities and challenges in the world by concerted action. The Director General, in his report to this conference, makes reference to, and I quote “the widespread, if still under-defined, public sentiment that the existing social contract has lapsed or has been broken, and that a new one is needed.” – End of quote

Last year, UN General Secretary Guterres made a clear reference to it in his Nelson Mandela lecture of 18 July 2020, entitled “Tackling the inequality pandemic: a New Social Contract for a New Era”. In this speech, he said – and I quote:

“Growing gaps in trust between people, institutions and leaders threaten us all. People want social and economic systems that work for everyone. They want their human rights and fundamental freedoms to be respected. They want a say in decisions that affect their lives. The New Social Contract must integrate employment, sustainable development and social protection, based on equal rights and opportunities for all.” - End of quote

At a moment when the constituents of the ILO want the ILO to take a leadership role to guide the way out of the Covid-19 crisis towards a more sustainable and equitable world of work, it is important to not leave the fundamental discussion on the need for a new social contract to others in the multilateral system.

The Workers’ group considers the Centenary Declaration as laying the foundation for such a new social contract, requiring tripartite concerted action to provide for decent work, shared prosperity and environmental sustainability.

**We have 10 key messages to this Conference:**

1. **Any human centred recovery by the ILO must be rights-based and provide for jobs-and-recovery plans based on social dialogue**

The Centenary Declaration reconfirmed the importance for the ILO to act, based on its unique tripartite and normative mandate.

The human-centred approach must be firmly rooted in the concept that we must act on social justice to achieve peace and resilience.

There cannot be a human-centred approach to recovery without a rights based approach and the recognition of the key role of social dialogue, based on the enabling rights of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. During the Covid19 crisis, in many countries the tripartite actors have shown that concerted action can deliver more equitable and sustainable outcomes for all. But regrettably we have also seen how the crisis resulted in many human and labour rights’ violations.
The relevance of standards, and a strong role for social partners at all levels to support and shape a human-centred recovery, must be part and parcel of any ILO call to action.

And let’s tackle heads on the single strongest concern of workers around the globe: they need jobs, and not just any job but decent jobs. This is the moment to call for tripartite commitment and action to negotiate and agree job-and-recovery plans, to create and support a job-rich and inclusive recovery providing for decent jobs in health, care, education and sustainable infrastructure and tourism among others, taking into full account the challenges of climate change.

2. Precarious work will lead to a precarious recovery

A job-rich and inclusive recovery must pay special attention to young workers who are at risk of becoming a lost generation. Millions saw their job perspectives dwindle because of the pandemic, but also because of the proliferation of precarious jobs.

The COVID-19 crisis has severely impacted workers in precarious jobs, exposing their extreme vulnerability. Short-term workers, freelancers and workers on zero-hour-contracts were among the first ones to lose their jobs during lockdowns. With some exceptions, most of these workers find themselves without unemployment benefits, income support or other forms of social protection. Other workers, for instance those in informal care work, essential services or food delivery, continued to work, often without any protective equipment. They cannot afford to stop working when they are sick, because they have no entitlement to paid sick leave. This not only endangers their own lives, it also puts others at risk and makes it more difficult for countries and governments to contain the virus.

During the pandemic, we have seen a further proliferation of all these forms of precarious work. Now, we must prevent at all costs that the recovery is built on a further expansion of them, as this will inevitably lead to a precarious recovery….

A human-centred recovery must mean that we ensure that all workers – irrespective of their employment status – have adequate labour and social protection, including access to health care and paid sick leave, and benefit from income support in times of crisis.

3. The growing inequality in the world of work must be reversed

A human-centred recovery must be a recovery that reverses the dramatic inequalities that were exposed during the COVID-19 crisis.

There was already a growing consensus before the pandemic that inequality had reached unsustainable levels. The ILO Centenary Declaration noted that these “persistent inequalities constitute a threat to securing shared prosperity and decent work for all”.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has further increased inequalities. Therefore, there is no doubt that if measures are not taken urgently, the pandemic will leave us with a legacy of inequality and division.

What exactly must be done to reduce inequalities will be the subject of a separate technical discussion, which is taking place later this year.
However, we must now lay the foundation for that in this ILC and the Covid19 outcome document, as there is no doubt that measures will need to span across different policy areas, such as formalization, social protection, non-discrimination and macro-economic, fiscal and wage policies, while recognizing the key role collective bargaining can play in reducing inequalities, negotiating and implementing OSH measures, improving wages and working conditions and regulating remote working and just transition.

4. **Without universal access to vaccination, the vaccination gap will further exacerbate existing economic and social inequalities and leave especially the global south behind**…

Many colleagues from all over the world have expressed the need to address the issue of vaccine equity with the utmost urgency. This is not just a global health interest.

Vaccination is gaining speed in the global North and thereby increases chances of opening economies there soon, whereas countries in the global South are struggling to get access to vaccines at all, or cannot afford to purchase them. Inequality in access is leading to a growing global vaccination gap, which will inevitably increase economic and social inequality in the world of work and globally between countries and regions, threatening to undo decades of progress to reduce poverty and achieving decent work for all. This will be a major obstacle to a sustainable and equitable recovery everywhere.

We must act now and decisively.
There cannot be a human-centered recovery without universal, free and immediate access to vaccines and other vital public health tools.

5. **Safety and health are fundamental to decent work and to recovery**

The Covid19 crisis has shown that health and safety at work are not to be taken for granted.

Respect for health and safety of workers should therefore be at the core of recovery policies based on relevant ILO Standards, and especially for frontline workers Covid19 should be recognized as an occupational disease.

We can only reiterate that the pandemic has shown the relevance and urgency to declare OSH as a fundamental right. We welcome that the Governing Body of the ILO has taken the first steps to ensure that this issue will be on the agenda of next year’s ILC.

6. **Any recovery policy or action must be gender inclusive**

The pandemic has a feminine face.

Women in essential sectors and jobs have sustained societies and economies, often underpaid and over-worked with excessive workloads and working hours, running themselves high risks for their health and safety, while juggling work with family and education duties….
Women were also disproportionately impacted by the crisis: they are over-represented in sectors which went into lockdown, they continue to do most of the unpaid care work in the household and even had to deal with educating their kids when schools were closed.

These trends risk setting us back years in the struggle for gender equality.

The pandemic has shown that we can no longer put gender equality as an afterthought. The Centenary Declaration called for an urgent implementation of the ‘transformative agenda for gender equality. We must now ensure that all strategies proposed to address the recovery are gender-inclusive.

We must also ensure that racism and discrimination of migrants, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, that have seen dramatic increases during the pandemic, are addressed with the utmost urgency.

7. **The key role of the public sector must be recognized and reinforced.**

If the pandemic has shown anything, it is, that billions of tax-payers money have been spent to support enterprises in order to survive, and that the health and care sectors were sustaining economies and societies.

In many countries, the crisis has exposed that decades of austerity policies and cuts in public spending have weakened health and care systems and public services provision, with detrimental effects for all.

Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to recognize the vital role of the public sector, and the need to reinforce it and invest in it.

This requires the availability of public money, which brings in the issue of fair and progressive taxation. All those enterprises that have greatly benefited from the crisis (sometimes at the expense others) must also provide for their fair share in contributing to the recovery. In this context, we very much welcome the decision of the G7 last week to introduce a global minimum tax for MNE’s....

In our view it is also very necessary to link government support for enterprises in need to decent work and social and environmental responsibility as well as due diligence along supply chains.

8. **Universal social protection will not come about without global solidarity and global resource mobilisation**

Ensuring comprehensive and adequate social protection and social security is one of the core elements of the decent work agenda, and a longstanding commitment of the ILO and its tripartite constituents.

We must now act to ensure universal social protection, address existing gaps in coverage, make contributory social security systems more inclusive and ensure adequate social protection floors.
We also need to provide for global solidarity and global resource mobilisation to support low-income countries, who do not even have basic systems of social protection in place, to develop those with the utmost urgency.

Our colleagues in the Recurrent discussion on social protection/social security will certainly address all these matters and we hope they will come up with strong and impactful conclusions.

9. **Digitalisation, telework and platform work require proper regulation to harness the opportunities and eliminate the risks involved.**

Digitalisation and technological change have accelerated because of the crisis. The digital divide between countries and people is growing and must urgently be addressed, to prevent it to increase inequalities in the world of work. Digitalization should also be seen in the context of sustainable and green recovery.

With regard to remote working, there are clear risks and challenges in relation to wages and working conditions, contractual relations, social protection and privacy; but if properly managed there may also be opportunities with regard to work-life balance, cost effectiveness for business, and reduction of CO2 emissions when current reductions in global travelling persist beyond the crisis.

Proper regulation as well as social dialogue and collective bargaining are essential to reduce the risks and harness the opportunities.

10. **A strong leadership role for the ILO**

We strongly support a central role for the ILO in promoting policy coherence in the multilateral system, to promote a human-centred and inclusive recovery from the Covid19 crisis, based on the 4 pillars of the decent work agenda.

We firmly believe that the pandemic has made it more urgent than ever to realize the mandate of the Philadelphia Declaration. The ILO should play a central role in assessing all international economic and financial policies and measures in light of its constitutional objective of social justice.

**To conclude**

I am looking forward to an International Labour Conference that will deliver on all our high expectations, and I assure you the full commitment of the Workers’ Group to strong and impactful outcomes.