



► The history of the ILO's refugee engagement

Episode 2 - REFUGEES AT WORK- WHAT ARE THEIR PROSPECTS?

Katy Long - Executive Director of the California Migration Museum

► Transcripts

► Tom

The number of refugees worldwide has doubled in the past decade to 32 million. Forced displacement is a reality for millions of people, who face a range of geopolitical, social, climate, and other crises. Some are forced to flee their homes, but remain in their own countries. Others cross borders into neighboring countries, where they become refugees or persons of concern to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. As a work-related issue, what have organizations like the International Labour Organization done to provide support and assistance for refugees? As an organization that has been in existence for more than 100 years, what influence have various phases of the refugee situation in the world had on its policies and its programs? And in the current context, what lies ahead in its refugee response?

That's one of the issues we're exploring in this new podcast series, Refugees at Work - What Are Their Prospects? It's being presented by the ILO's Partnership in Improving Prospects for Forcibly Displaced Persons and Host Communities, also known as Prospects, to help transform how governments and other stakeholders, including the private sector, respond to this crisis.

I'm Tom Netter and I'm your host throughout these podcasts. And today to get a historical perspective on the ILO's engagement in the global refugee response, we're going to talk to researcher, writer, journalist, and documentarian, Katy Long, who's executive director of the California Migration Museum and who has served as a lecturer and researcher at the University of Oxford, the London School of Economics, the University of Edinburgh and Stanford, and whose work has appeared in the Guardian, the Washington Post, and on the BBC World Service. Her current endeavours also include immersive audio tours that bring migration issues to life. Katy Long, welcome to the podcast.

► Katy

Thank you for having me.

► Tom

Let's start with the basics. When the ILO was established in 1919 at the end of World War I, how significant a factor was the population displacement and unemployment in Europe and how did this map out the organization's work at the time?

► Katy

So, I think in 1919, less so, but it really, really became important a couple of years later. So, in 1919, obviously, Europe is in a huge mess after World War I. And you know, in terms of displacement, what begins to become a major international issue is the Russian refugee crisis. So, as the Russian Revolution takes place, it then descends into a civil war. And essentially, by about 1921, you have a million Russians who have arrived in Istanbul who are essentially destitute. And because at that point, Turkey as well is in the middle of a conflict, it becomes an international crisis because Istanbul is under international rule.

So that's the moment at which the League of Nations says we have to do something about this. We have these destitute, starving people. What are we going to do? And this is when displacement really hits the international agenda. And from there, this question of what are we going to do with them? How are we going to solve this

problem? And the problem is very much understood in terms of employment and migration. It's really understood in this economic lens of we have to find work for these people. That will be how we solve this refugee crisis.

► Tom

Well, you mentioned the situation in the 1920s. What were the guiding principles for the ILO at that time?

► Katy

Yeah, so, you know, obviously the ILO comes out as well of this redrawing of kind of the international community in 1919, this idea of building these institutions that can help create international collaboration. And there's this enormous attention paid to the idea of how do we ensure just work across, you know, particularly Europe, but, you know, across the whole world. And this idea that it's about securing the permanent peace of the world. I mean, I think the ambitions coming out of the 1919 peace treaties really are quite amazing when you look at the way in which these international organizations are set up to achieve something quite spectacular. And obviously, the realities of the 1920s bring that back down to earth pretty quickly as the reality of trying to move a million people across Europe and then beyond Europe starts to erode these kind of grand ideals. But I think in 1919 and then as from 1922, which is when the ILO really starts to begin to talk to the newly established League of Nations High Commission for Refugees under Fridtjof Nansen and really begin to collaborate at that point on displacement issues. You know, at that first moment, there really is a belief that they can solve these crises, that these crises can be finished and done and wrapped up and move on.

► Tom

Do you see evidence from that time that laid the foundation for the ILO's engagement with refugees in the contemporary world?

► Katy

Yeah, so it's a little different. I mean, as a historian, I tend to be a little wary of, you know, seeing too much in this kind of long durée that directly impacts, particularly when I think this history of the, especially the early history of the ILO's engagement with refugees isn't something that is widely known or perhaps isn't part of the institutional memory in the way that some other founding activities have been over the past century. But I think that what we can see is a really similar problem. And I think one of the things that is really interesting is, in a way, going back to that history, which is, you know, 100 years ago, allows us to remove some of the assumptions or some of the some of the ways in which we tend to think about the refugee and migration crises using the language and the definitions and the structures that we're all familiar with, without asking whether those were always inevitable. And I think when you go back to the 1920s, what you really see is, you know, in this kind of emerging international engagement with displacement in the first place, a very different understanding of how refugee and migrant connected. You know, much more of a view that these were a migration issue, that yes, had this particular issue that the Russian refugees could not go home, could not go back to Bolshevik Russia. They'd been denaturalized. They didn't have an option of repatriation. But that it was understood in a way as a migration issue then. Okay, well, we need to help these people facilitate their journeys, move them across Europe, maybe move them beyond Europe to countries in the Americas who were seen as the, you know, the colonist countries. We can use Russians to settle Paraguay or Argentina.

And so on the one hand, you have this this kind of mindset that is incredibly different, you know, this kind of concept of the space being available to just move people into, you know, other spaces is from this colonist approach to kind of empire is still very much there in the 1920s. But on the other hand, you have what appears to me at least to be in some ways a much more flexible and modern approach to the idea of refugees and refugee solutions as necessarily needing to involve migration and needing to involve employment. And this real emphasis on, well, we need to find jobs and we need to find jobs for refugees, jobs for people who we need to move across the world,

because that's the way that we will solve both the development issues. You know, Istanbul is struggling with having all these destitute refugees, we need to get them out of there, we need to find them somewhere to go. And it's seen in terms of poverty and economic development. And that I think is something that you see get lost in, particularly in the kind of Cold War period of refugee protection, where the politics of Cold War refugee crises really encourage a view of refugees as kind of a purely humanitarian concern.

And so, what's so interesting is when you go back to the 1920s and see this kind of period of real creativity as people are figuring out, well, what would you do with these people that we've just decided are an international concern? No one's ever really thought about refugees in this way. You see kind of a freedom to rethink maybe some of those definitions some of those structures that often right now we tend to assume, well, we have to think about it like this way because that's what it says on, you know, on the papers on these particular conventions on this legal structure and it's interesting to come into a place and just where those those weren't in place. So there was a lot more freedom to think about, well, how do all these different things connect?

► Tom

You mentioned the Cold War. I wanted to ask you, can you explain how the ILO approached the question of migration refugee displacement in the aftermath of the Second World War and what led to the ILO's basic disengagement from refugee issues in the early 1950s?

► Katy

Yeah, so it's a long story. I think it's a really interesting story. And in some ways, it's a story that I think is especially resonant right now when we're looking at how you engage, particularly powerful states with the question of how to rethink displacement crises. So obviously, at the end of the Second World War, you have a huge displacement crisis in Europe. And I think one of the things which always needs to be said is that, you know, all of this attention is really focused upon Europe in terms of thinking about refugees. And of course, there are very quickly a number of other refugee crises that are happening in other places in the world. But they're essentially seen as sort of separate. There isn't yet in 1945 or 1948, once you have an India-Pakistan crisis and crisis in Israel-Palestine, they're not seen as joined. They're seen as separate, siloed crises, which is why you start with actually multiple different refugee agencies popping up for each separate crisis. You have, you know, a Korean refugee agency, for instance, that comes into being for a few years during the Korean War.

But in the immediate aftermath of World War II, it's really Europe that's the focus of the international community's attention. And most of the people, the enormous numbers, I mean, 30 million people displaced across Europe, not including the Germans who were forcibly exiled as part of the Potsdam Accords, most of these people just want to go home. And they've been moved, they've been lost in the tumult of the conflict, but they're actually pretty happy to be facilitated to return back to where they came from. But this isn't true of everyone. And again, we come to Russian refugees as often the kind of the canary in the displacement coal mine. There's a hardcore who really don't want to go back to face Stalinist Russia. The Allies have agreed at Yalta that they will send Russian refugees back regardless of their wishes. And this really becomes a major sticking point because some of these Russian refugees are being forcibly returned commit suicide rather than face repatriation.

And this is really large part of what encourages a push into some of the key components of what's the 1951 convention, the non-refoulement clause. So you have this last million who are just proving much more difficult to return to where they came from. And the mandate which was given to the first UN agency to deal with this, the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, runs out. And so then there's another agency created in 1947, the International Refugee Organization. And their job is, again, to essentially find these people, resettle them or repatriate. But it's slow going. And it becomes very clear by 1950 that they're not going to get the job done. There's going to need to be something else that follows. And that's when there is a big debate about, well, what is this? This is where the ILO gets involved.

The ILO's view is that it should become a successor to the International Refugee Organization, the IRO, that they're extremely well placed to do the technical work of moving refugees and migrants and what is seen and within the ILO's remit as this idea of really the overpopulation of Europe. And so refugees are seen as kind of one circle within these kind of expanding circles of migrants and essentially impoverished Europeans. And that part of rebuilding Europe is to move this surplus population elsewhere to the US, to Australia, to South America. So there's a real kind of development angle, almost seeing the kind of completion of Europe's refugee problem as part of kind of almost the Marshall Plan type activities that are being worked on at the same time.

So the ILO comes up with a big plan. And there's a plan for a conference in Naples where this is, the idea is, at least from the ILO's point of view, that this is going to be an opportunity for it to really move in and become, if you like, the migration agency, the agency working to move people to the places where they can be gainfully and fairly employed. The problem is, and when you look in the ILO archives, this is kind of this interesting moment, is that it's pretty clear that the American branch of the ILO at that point is misreading the situation in the US. Because, of course, at this point in the early fifties, you're beginning to move into the Red Scare, the Cold War is hardening.

There's an increased fixation on this idea of we can't do anything that, you know, engages with the Soviet bloc. And we certainly don't want to give the ILO, which is engaged with the Soviet bloc and in particular, there were concerns that because of the ILO's structure and the fact that not only states, but workers' organizations have a seat at ILO, this was sort of like a double vote, if you like, because how separate was the state from labour organizations in these Soviet blocs? So the US is totally against this and it's fairly clear from the archives that that this is not picked up until a pretty late date even though at the time the director general of the ILO was actually an American and he kind of figures it out when he goes there himself and starts trying to talk to various senators on the hill and realizes that that there has been an issue here that people have not realized the US is not on board with this entire idea. They think it's way too expensive. They don't want the ILO to be doing it.

Yet it's 10 days before this Naples conference. So the ILO kind of goes ahead with it, hoping it can salvage something from it. And I think it's pretty clear when you read the reflections of the senior staff who were there that it doesn't work. The US is joined by some of the other big immigration countries, Australia and Canada. They're all opposed to the idea of the ILO doing this, partly for the politics of Cold War, also because, you know, Australia still has a whites-only policy. They don't want to be scrutinized over that, and they don't like the idea of an international organization having the capacity to move people and are very defensive of their right to determine who's going to immigrate. And then there's also a problem that Canada is discovering that actually, for instance, the number of German refugees who actually want to move to Canada is far less. So you have recruitment problems on both sides. The whole plan kind of falls apart. And, you know, the ILO retreats, I think, a little bit shamefaced. This has not been a good moment and moves kind of out of dealing directly with the migration question. And so very quickly, by the end of the 1950s, the ILO has kind of really left the migration and refugee space and is doing just a couple of very technical things projects with, you know, one with Greece looking at immigration and another helping, I think it's Brazil, select some immigrants to come through.

But I think it's a really interesting example of, you know, how these kind of big grand state politics of Cold War, really, the ILO found itself kind of locked out of the migration space at that moment. And of course, what we end up with instead is the organizations that eventually become the International Organization for Migration, IOM, which is much more tightly controlled by the US in terms of funding and in terms of directing really particularly a lot of the early policy work there. So, yeah, you know, even though that's a story in some ways about the international community working to exclude ILO, I think it's a really valuable history to know because it's a reminder of just how many different revolving political pieces there are in this and just how tricky it has been historically to find a space for refugees and forced displacement within work around labour and migration. And this tension between a lot of states wanting to take refugees and put them in a special humanitarian bucket, which is certainly what happens by the end of the 1950s. And this reality, which I think the ILO in some ways was, you know prescient in seeing, which is that displacement really can't be fully severed from the economic realities in which it occurs. The

fact is that displacement is intricately connected with poverty, you know, in terms of how it both occurs and also how you solve it and what the actual issues facing refugees are.

► Tom

It was, but it is interesting. It is interesting. And I think that if our listeners, you know, care about the history, it's probably, you know, pretty important that we, you know, give that degree of detail, which is frankly probably not available to many people. But I'd like to ask you, in terms of the ILO's 100-year experience navigating labour market issues for migrants and refugees, what are some of the most consistent challenges that the organization has faced, and how do you see that as a guide for the ILO in its refugee policy going forward?

► Katy

Yeah, so I think, you know, one thing which is really interesting is that right from the very beginning, I think one of the reasons why the ILO wanted to be involved in those early 1920s movements of Russian refugees in particular was this concern about how do we make sure that migrant labour is not being used to undercut national labour? How do we make sure that we are both protecting the rights of migrant labourers to fair work and also ensuring that their arrival in a new, so isn't being used as a way to simply undercut existing labour agreements. And a huge part of the work was really in ensuring those conditions.

And I think if you look at the concerns that are still raised constantly about refugees and refugees in the labour market, both in terms of people being concerned, but also in terms of refugee's exploitation, often by employers who see them as a vulnerable workforce and therefore sometimes you know unscrupulous employers are certainly able to take advantage of that. I think it's really interesting that that concern and that idea that ILO can bring its skills and its expertise to the table in a way that was specific and otherwise unavailable in the international system is really interesting. You know, and I think that concern, that issue, you know, which I talked about in terms of, you know, in the 1950s, this resistance of receiving states to the idea that they didn't want an imposed quota of refugees or a resettlement quota and, you know, again, that's a debate we've heard, you know, many, many times in the last 10 years about, you know, what is a fair resettlement program look like?

And I think this idea that the ILO certainly ran into there of states wanting to control who enters and on what basis, especially when it comes to labour markets, is, you know, this huge challenge when it comes to dealing with refugees and this question of how do you get an agreement to move what is often a workforce of, you know, disproportionately often young men, individuals who absolutely could contribute meaningfully to the places where they can do that when there are a lot of tiny pockets of resistance that you have to navigate.

► Tom

So, what's the bottom line? What are some of the policy recommendations you would prioritize for governments and international organizations, for example, that would enhance the access of refugees to sustainable livelihoods and decent work opportunities?

► Katy

Yeah, so I think one of the things that I've spent a lot of time looking at is this idea of movement and migration. And rather than seeing, you know, migration as the problem, clearly, displacement is the problem. Forced movement, forced exile, people being ripped from their homes. But that migration or recognizing that movement may, in fact, also be part of a solution to the economic aspects in particular of displacement, I think is something that both comes out of the history where migration was certainly seen as much more of one of the tools that the international community had in which to help solve displacement crises. So I think that's one thing that I think there is, you know, a huge amount of work to be done, particularly given current political framings of migration. But I

think it's also clear that there is, you know, a huge amount of potential there if we can reframe this idea that refugees are not migrants, but migration may in fact be part of the way that we can, for some refugees, help to find a solution that offers more than just continuing to be languishing in protracted displacement.

I think another aspect which is interesting and again, kind of comes out of the history here is, you know, just thinking more creatively about funding solutions as well. You know, one of the things which is kind of ironic, but also, you know, kind of again, echoes in contemporary politics is this question of, you know, how are we going to fund this? This is like from the 1920s onwards, the League of Nations is never granting enough money to do anything. But I think one of the things which is interesting is, again, this creativity of, you know, inventing a revolving fund, for instance, that actually works pretty well to start moving people. So, you know, 40,000 refugees are moved and it only costs 17 gold francs a person, which is, you know, quite a lot less than just the cost of unemployment benefits in Europe at the time. So this creative kind of canvas, and that isn't a policy recommendation as much as I think taking some of the attitude or the opportunities that were available, particularly in the 1920s, but also in the 1940s, although the ILO kind of fails with its particular vision of what it thinks migrant refugee agency should look like.

There is this space to really rethink from the ground up in both those moments in a way that I think allows for a lot of creativity. And some of those things fail, but I think that the willingness to try new solutions and to be, you know, a little brave and a little bold really does allow for, you know, just rethinking what often can feel like a space which is becoming narrower and narrower with all the constraints that are placed on it.

► Tom

Katy, that was great, and I want to thank you for sharing your historical knowledge and perspective on this issue. I'm afraid that's all we have time for today, but there will be more to come in the next episodes. You've been listening to the podcast series, Refugees at Work - What are Their Prospects? For more on this, go to www.ilo.org, Prospects. Meanwhile, thank you for your time.

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