

The ILO - 90 years of hope

Opinion Editorial by Sachiko Yamamoto, ILO Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific on the occasion of the ILO's 90th anniversary

The year 2009 will go down in history as one of the most financially and socially troubling in generations. The world collectively yearns for a safe pair of hands to help us through these uncertain times, to ensure that principles of fairness, equity and social justice are upheld. There is a widespread desire to correct some of the failures of globalization and to ensure that the benefits it brings are shared more fairly, in a way that focuses not on the greed of the few but the wellbeing of the many.

Here in Asia and the Pacific, while the bonuses paid to Wall Street bankers are an irritant people are more concerned about providing for their families and finding and keeping decent work – employment that not only fills their basic needs today but offers some hope of social and economic progress. Employers and Governments in this region are equally fearful about the rapid decline in orders, as consumers worldwide tighten their purse strings. The links that bind the interests of these three groups - Governments, employers and workers – are clear for all to see; the challenges they face will only be met by working together.

It is no coincidence that there is a renewed call for the International Labour Organization (ILO) – the United Nations agency that deals with work and workplace issues – to support countries and help them respond to the current crisis, using the strength created by this unique three-part organizational structure. This challenge comes at a significant moment for the ILO, as it marks its 90th anniversary.

Asian cultures recognize the value that comes through age and experience and in nine decades of work the ILO has experienced much: the 1930's financial and employment crisis (which is often compared with what we face today), the Great Depression, a World War, recessions, human and natural disasters. A product of the massive upheavals of the First World War, the ILO is the oldest UN agency, pre-dating that body itself by more than a quarter century.

From those difficult, and sometimes dark, years the ILO has built a bedrock of knowledge and experience and offers a unique forum where Governments, workers and employers can and do come together on the issues that concern them all, equally. I believe that this is an achievement from which we can all benefit and which should give us all hope for the future as we mark this 90th anniversary.

90 years is a long time. But, in my view, the crisis we face today shows – should there ever have been any doubt – that the ILO's mandate is as fresh, relevant and universal today as it has ever been. Just consider how, as times have changed, the ILO's mandate has adapted to and incorporated changes in the world of work.

The ILO's Conventions – more than 180 since 1919 – have set the internationally recognized standards that most of us now take for granted; including the eight-hour work day, basic workplace safety standards, maternity protection, an end child and forced labour, equality, the right to organize and speak out.

Founded at the end of the First World War, the ILO's membership came together once again in 1944, during the final days of World War Two, to rededicate themselves to its principles. The Declaration of Philadelphia made clear that work should not be categorized as a mere commodity. This clarion call for the rights of workers and the dignity of work still resonates today.

In 1998 a second Declaration was adopted, on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. This codified the commitment of the ILO's growing membership to those core human rights and values that are vital for social and economic progress: freedom of association, collective bargaining, the ending of forced and child labour and the elimination of discrimination related to employment. This Declaration also paved the way for the ILO to adopt the concept of decent work, creating a contemporary expression of its historical mandate.

In June 2008 the mandate was once again refreshed. The Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization was crafted to face those new issues raised by the accelerating trend of globalization. These declarations are more than just words – taken together they form a pattern of progress and a recognition of the common needs and aspirations that bind us together in seeking to attain the kind of work that is more than just a job, that gives us purpose and offers a path to a better life.

On the ILO's 90th birthday it is right that we should feel pride in the achievements of the past nine decades. But what is more important is the future. We must use this occasion to look ahead and renew our support for

the fundamental principles the ILO stands for and - in these testing times - plan how we can work, together, to further social justice and decent work.

So, the message of the ILO's 90th birthday is one of hope - a better world can start here, if we choose.