

As the world approaches 2015, promoting the ratification – and, of course, application – of fundamental labour standards is coming in to sharper focus. Time, then, to remind ourselves what these ratification efforts are all about.

Consider the following scenario:

An 11-year old girl drops out of primary school. After a few years of hand-to-mouth existence, she accepts a job offer abroad. The loan she has to take out to pay the recruiter and make the journey is huge and the interest steep, but the wages offered should enable her to repay the debt fairly quickly.

However, when she arrives at the overseas factory producing screen parts for a famous global brand, she is paid barely half the wages promised. This leaves her no choice but to stay with the employer for a few years longer than initially planned – and to accept occasional abuse in the process.

The supervisor keeps her passport and tells her that she will lose her job if she does not pass the pregnancy and HIV/AIDS tests. Not that workers' health appears to be a major concern otherwise. The girl begins to experience regular bouts of dizziness and numbness in her fingers due to the chemicals used in making the screens. She is only 16 and the law of her host country prohibits the use of these chemicals by workers under 18 years of age. However when she convinces a number of fellow workers to confront the management with its obligations under the law, they all get fired.

The above scenario illustrates one (or more) violations of each of the ILO's four fundamental labour standards:

[the right of the worker not to be subject to forced labour](#) (including debt bondage and trafficking for labour exploitation);

[the right not to be subject to discrimination based on sex or health status](#);

[the right not to be subject to child labour](#) (including the right to special health protection until the age of 18);

[the right to organize and to bargain collectively](#) for the defence of workers' rights and interests.

Above all, the violations add up to extremely bleak prospects for the economic advancement of the young woman and her family, not to mention the real risks of losing future income-generating capacity.

These rights are considered fundamental to human dignity, to economic and social development, and to the long-term political stability of sovereign nations. They provide workers with labour market leverage, and hence are often referred to as "enabling rights".

As such, they lay the foundation for the technical labour standards that govern labour markets in which labour is not treated as a commodity. For example, significant investment in skills development (promoted as an important technical labour standard) risks fuelling inequality in society if a significant portion of the workforce never acquired the basic literacy skills needed to benefit from skills development programmes, because they had to toil as child labourers or were excluded from basic education on discriminatory grounds.

Shortcomings in either democracy or the rule of law undoubtedly complicate the full realization of fundamental ILO standards as required by the Conventions concerned. At the same time, fundamental standards invariably feature among the earliest expressions and targets of discontent when governments fail to heed popular calls for more human conditions of work – as happened on 1 May 1886, when thousands of workers in the United States walked off the job in support of a shorter working day, hence 1 May was formally recognized as Labour or International Workers Day in 1891.

It is for this reason that many ILO member States have embedded fundamental standards in their national constitutions. Ratification of fundamental Conventions ensures that such standards will be realized and will improve the lives of people.

Ratification of the ILO's Core Conventions

ILO Core Conventions	Number of Ratification as of May, 8 2012 (amongst 183 ILO member States)
Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)	175
Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87)	151
Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98)	161
Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100)	169
Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)	172
Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1961 (No. 111)	170

1958 (No. 111)	
Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138)	163
Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)	175

In today's world, with an increasingly global economy, fair, socially responsible and ultimately stable markets and supply chains will give a competitive edge to countries. Countries around the world need to assure that these standards will be protected, for the interest of their own citizens and nations.

To take forward the universal commitment to fundamental principles and rights at work, the ILO has issued a new report on the worldwide situation concerning its fundamental principles and rights of work – freedom of association and collective bargaining, forced and child labour and discrimination. Entitled “[Fundamental principles and rights at work: From commitment to action](#)”, the report will be discussed at the 101st International Labour Conference, to be held between 30 May and 15 June 2012 in Geneva.