

ILO unveils book calling for new thinking on labour issues

The ILO and the Global Labour University have unveiled a new anthology of global labour writing that calls for fresh thinking on key issues ranging from responses to the global economic crisis to globalization, and workers' rights. The book - entitled "There is an alternative Economic policies and labour strategies beyond the mainstream" will be launched at the International Labour Conference in Geneva.

What situation is labour currently facing?

The financial and economic crisis has had a powerful impact on wages, vulnerable workers and employment in general in many parts of the world. Trade unionists have sought to engage in dialogue with employers and governments before, during and after the financial crisis, but with mixed results. This new collection of global labour columns argues that any feeling that a new era of dialogue had begun has now clearly vanished. Many of the columns acknowledge that the cost of the financial crisis has been passed on to ordinary workers and unemployed people, and the crisis is further weakening the power and influence of trade unions.

What key ideas emerge from this book?

The overriding message is that there is an alternative to responding to crises by reducing wages, deregulating labour markets, slashing taxes, and privatizing public services. The rise in precarious employment has made labour markets dangerously pro-cyclical, underlining the need to better protect workers. Wage-led recovery is essential in order to reduce inequality and global imbalances, particularly after the financial and economic crisis.

What are some alternative strategies?

There are many, including reversing the trend of growing inequality and declining mass income through greater income security based on policies to extend coverage of collective bargaining and introduction of social protection floors as well as a living minimum wages at country level. ILO Director-General Juan Somavia points out in his essay that workers' rights are not at odds with economic growth, and that the universal application of labour standards would be a major contribution to a well-regulated global economy. A high level of productive employment should be an objective of the same order as low and stable inflation and sound public finances. The book also calls for universally applicable national labour legislation, arguing that if countries strive for export surplus by keeping wage growth down they build up huge global imbalances.

Does the book focus on any particular region?

No, it looks both at the global situation and specific examples. One section addresses the impact of the economic crisis in Europe. It calls for coordinated wage policy oriented towards less inequality, more balanced trade and robust economic growth, arguing that Europe risks collapse if it does not introduce changes. In developing countries, increases in public employment, better social protection and delivery of "wage goods" - such as housing, health and education - are among the strategies that can help achieve wage-led growth.

What actions have workers taken during 2010?

The book says that workers around the world are mobilizing to turn the tide. In Arab countries, they are making history. From Asia to Europe and North America, workers have taken strike action and mobilized to protect their fundamental rights, better public services and decent wages. The book tries to show the linkage between good ideas and strong movements.

Does the book show any success stories?

Yes. It points out that so far, the 21st century has been good to many Brazilians. Formal employment, the minimum wage and average household incomes have risen, while poverty has declined. Positive macroeconomic developments, a range of progressive government policies and improved collective bargaining outcomes have all played a part in this, according to one of the articles. Another example is that of Switzerland where after three years of negotiations, the government decreed in October 2010 a standard work contract for domestic workers, which sets binding minimum wages and working conditions. This provides protection and enables employees to defend their rights more effectively. Another article calls for international labour standards for domestic workers worldwide, an issue under discussion at the June 1-17 International Labour Conference in Geneva.