

A voice for dialogue and decent work

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In June, the ILO awarded its first annual Decent Work Research Prize to Nobel Peace laureate and former South African President Nelson Mandela and the eminent academic and specialist in social security, Professor Carmelo Mesa-Lago, citing their contributions to transforming the values of decent work into the reality of peoples' lives.

Both addressed the 3,000 delegates at the International Labour Conference, but for Mr. Mandela, honoured for his exceptional "lifetime contribution to knowledge, understanding and advocacy on the central concerns of the ILO", it wasn't the first time he had spoken to an ILO annual meeting.

Seventeen years ago, on 8 June 1990, Mr. Mandela spoke to the 77th International Labour Conference. In one of his first visits to an international organization following his release from prison, he had saluted the ILO for its "enormous contribution" to the struggle for democracy and promotion of democratic principles in South Africa. This year, Mr. Mandela again addressed the ILO Conference, this time via a video-taped message. He recalled his 1990 speech and said the ILO continued to "promote the values we share, the rights we all must respect and the ideal that progress is only possible through genuine dialogue".

"You have established these principles under the banner of what you call decent work," he said, "and today we can say that the principles of decent work exemplify our common values, our shared respect for dialogue and our concerns about the plight of our impoverished fellow citizens . . . Decent work is about the right not only to survive but to prosper and to have a dignified and fulfilling quality of life."

In 1990, Mr. Mandela's closing words, "Let us walk the last mile together", received a thunderous ovation from conference delegates. This time, he urged them to pave the way for improving the lives of the world's people, saying, "We rely on the ILO to continue the struggle to make decent work a global reality." As ILO Director-General Juan Somavia said, "we will always be inspired by his wisdom and his grace, the humility and truth, the words and the deeds of President Nelson Mandela."