

# ILO Histories

## Essays on the International Labour Organization and Its Impact on the World During the Twentieth Century

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Peter Lang

In 2009, the International Labour Organization (ILO) celebrated its ninetieth anniversary. The First World War and the revolutionary wave it provoked in Russia and elsewhere were powerful inspirations for the founding of the ILO. There was a growing understanding that social justice, in particular by improving labour conditions, was an essential precondition for universal peace. Since then, the ILO has seen successes and set-backs; it has been ridiculed and praised. Much has been written about the ILO; there are semi-official histories and some critical studies on the organization's history have recently been published. Yet, further source-based critical and comprehensive analyses of the organization's origins and development are still lacking. The present collection of eighteen essays is an attempt to change this unsatisfactory situation by complementing those histories that already exist, exploring new topics, and offering new perspectives. It is guided by the observation that the ILO's history is not primarily about "elaborating beautiful texts and collecting impressive instruments for ratification" but about effecting "real change and more happiness in peoples' lives".

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edited by  
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## Foreword

The First World War and the revolutionary wave it provoked in Russia and elsewhere were powerful inspirations for the founding of the International Labour Organization (ILO). The Versailles Treaty of 28 June 1919 was candid: “universal peace [...] can be established only if it is based upon social justice”. But, it continued:

[...] conditions of labour exist involving such injustice, hardship, and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled; and an improvement of those conditions is urgently required as, for example, by the regulation of the hours of work, including the establishment of a maximum working day and week, the regulation of the labour supply, the prevention of unemployment, the provision of an adequate living wage, the protection of the worker against sickness, disease and injury arising out of his employment, the protection of children, young persons and women, provision for old age and injury, protection of the interests of workers when employed in countries other than their own, recognition of the principle of freedom of association, the organization of vocational and technical education and other measures.

Such ameliorating measures, however, could not be implemented by individual states independently of one another since “the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labour is an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries”.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the need to establish a permanent organization for the promotion of these measures was recognized.

1 All quotations from Versailles Treaty, Part XIII, Section 1, Preamble.



The founding of the ILO was greeted critically or sceptically by some, and enthusiastically by others. Sir John MacDonnell, a distinguished British legal expert, anticipated that the activities of the ILO might completely change international law. “The nineteenth century was the age of Commercial Treaties”, he wrote, “the twentieth may be that of Labour Conventions”.<sup>2</sup>

Last year, the ILO celebrated its ninetieth anniversary, a respectable age by any standard. The organization has seen successes and set-backs; it has been ridiculed and praised. Much has been written about the ILO; there are semi-official histories and some critical studies on the organization’s history have recently been published. Yet, further source-based critical and comprehensive analyses are still lacking, despite the organization’s large and accessible archives. The present collection of essays is an attempt to change this unsatisfactory situation by complementing those that already exist. It is guided by the observation that the ILO’s history is not primarily about “elaborating beautiful texts and collecting impressive instruments for ratification” but about effecting “real change and more happiness in peoples’ lives”.<sup>3</sup>

Earlier drafts of the papers in this volume were presented at a conference on “The International Labour Organization: Past and Present” at the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts, Brussels, 5-6 October 2007, the first international academic conference entirely devoted to ILO history. The editors of this volume acted as convenors, and received significant secretarial support from Brigitte De Mulder (Amsab-Institute for Social History, Ghent) and Angèle Janse (International Institute of Social History). We gratefully acknowledge financial assistance from the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO), the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, Amsab-Institute for Social History, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, the University of Ghent, the Gerrit Kreveld Foundation, the United Nations Association Flanders, and the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts.

2 MacDonnell, “International Labour Conventions”, p. 191.

3 Valticos, “Les conventions de l’Organisation internationale du Travail à la croisée des anniversaires”, p. 40.



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