

THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION IN A SHIFTING WORLD ORDER: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF LABOUR LAW AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

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This article examines the historical role, current challenges, and future prospects of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), established in 1919 and later becoming the first specialised UN agency. Over the past century, the ILO has been central to shaping international labour law, advancing fundamental rights, improving working conditions, and promoting universal social protection through its tripartite model. However, the rise of populist, nationalist, and authoritarian leadership increasingly undermines multilateralism, weakens engagement with the ILO, and erodes global labour standards—especially in developing countries reliant on international oversight. The study highlights a broader crisis of solidarity, in which shared commitment to workers' rights is replaced by selective, interest-driven cooperation, threatening the ILO's legitimacy and effectiveness. It also critiques the limitations of voluntary commitments by employers, stressing the need for binding, state-led enforcement of labour standards. Yet the ILO's reliance on moral authority and consensus-based conventions hampers its ability to secure strong commitments in today's fragmented geopolitical landscape. Ultimately, the article argues that the ILO faces not only a compliance crisis but also a legitimacy crisis, as the principles of solidarity, cooperation, and universal workers' rights are challenged in an era of growing isolationism and national exceptionalism.

Keywords: labour law; social protection; tripartism; multilateralism; global governance; labour rights; social justice; workers' rights; labour standards; populism; nationalism; authoritarianism;

The International Labour Organisation (hereinafter ILO), established in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles and later becoming the first specialised agency of the United Nations in 1946, has played a fundamental role in shaping labour law and social protection systems worldwide for over a century.

Over the past century, the ILO has played a pivotal role in developing and codifying international labour law. The organisation was instrumental in establishing fundamental labour rights, including prohibitions against forced labour, protections for collective bargaining (e.g., trade unions), and workplace safety regulations. Its normative framework, embodied in over 190 conventions and recommendations, has significantly influenced national labour policies, improving working conditions and advancing social protection across both developed and developing economies [1]. ILO's conventions have been ratified by numerous countries, forming the foundation of national labour laws and shaping modern employment frameworks. The ILO has been instrumental in shaping national labour systems by offering technical assistance, conducting research, and

facilitating policy dialogue among member states. In addition to that, the ILO has significantly contributed to the evolution of social security law, advocating for the creation of universal social protection systems, including pensions, unemployment insurance, maternity benefits, and healthcare access.

ILO has provided a moral and legal foundation for labour movements around the world, strengthened the legislative capacity of states, and held governments accountable through its supervisory mechanisms, such as the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR). It has also fostered a normative consensus around the idea that economic growth must be accompanied by social justice, an idea that underpins the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 8: “Decent Work and Economic Growth” [2].

One of the foundational principles of the ILO is tripartism—the cooperation between governments, employers, and workers across borders in a rules-based, multilateral framework. However, the rise of political leaders who challenge the value of multilateralism undermines this model.

An important thing to consider is that one of the most pressing challenges confronting the International Labour Organisation (ILO) today is its ability to function effectively in an era where the rule-based global order is being challenged by the very states that once upheld it. The emergence of a new world order, characterised by the rise of populist, nationalist, and even authoritarian-leaning leaders, such as Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, Viktor Orbán, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and others, who often reject multilateralism, undermine international institutions, and prioritise national sovereignty over global labour standards, raises concerns about the future of labour law and social protection.

Those world leaders have openly questioned the value of international institutions, favouring unilateral or bilateral actions. Under such leadership, countries may reduce their engagement with international organisations, in our context specifically, the ILO. That leads to failing to ratify conventions or resisting implementing ILO recommendations, weakening the organisation’s global influence. These leaders frequently argue that labour rights, union policies, or social protections are internal matters and should not be dictated by international organisations. Labour rights activists’ voices increasingly start to be seen as political threats. When trade union representatives call attention to human rights abuses, they are often perceived as agents of foreign influence or domestic dissent. This marks a fundamental departure from the ILO’s founding ethos—that worker rights are a matter of international concern, central to peace, justice, and stability.

It is also essential to recognise that the erosion of labour rights and social protection mechanisms is not uniformly visible across the globe. In many developed countries, where institutional frameworks and rule-of-law traditions remain relatively robust, the backsliding in labour standards hasn’t been profound. However, in developing countries, the decline is often far more pronounced, particularly in states where labour protections are

already fragile and dependent on external scrutiny and international engagement. For many developing nations, the pressure exerted by international organisations, such as the ILO, serves as a critical catalyst for reform. Global visibility, technical support, and the moral authority of international conventions can provide the leverage needed to push reluctant or authoritarian-leaning governments toward improving labour standards and social protections. In the absence of such international oversight, there is a substantial risk that these countries will deprioritise labour rights, either due to political expediency, economic pressures, or lack of institutional will.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the new world order represents a crisis of solidarity—the sense that all nations, regardless of power, have shared responsibilities toward universal human dignity. In its absence, global labour solidarity is replaced by transnationalism, where states cooperate only when it serves their narrow interests. This corrodes the ILO's mission. Without a shared belief in the importance of worker rights as a global good, the organization risks becoming even more symbolic rather than impactful.

Moreover, within the ILO's tripartite structure, the employer constituency often demonstrates a more restrained commitment to advancing labour and social protections compared to the workers' group. While there are certainly exceptions, businesses are generally more inclined to uphold human rights standards when failing to do so constitutes a legal liability or poses a tangible threat to profitability, whether through reputational damage, consumer backlash, or litigation. This underscores the limitations of relying solely on voluntary commitments or soft law frameworks in securing meaningful labour protections.

As a result, a vertical, state-led approach to the enforcement of labour and social protection laws becomes indispensable. It is only through binding legal obligations, which are imposed, monitored, and enforced by national governments, that universal labour standards can be upheld with consistency and accountability. However, this necessity raises a profound challenge for the ILO: how can it generate sufficient political will among its member states to ratify and implement new conventions, particularly in a current geopolitical climate where, as described above, securing broad agreement on new conventions aimed at strengthening worker protections and advancing labour laws in line with the principles of decent work has become increasingly difficult? Compounding this issue is the ILO's limited enforcement mechanisms. While its monitoring and reporting structures, such as the Committee of Experts and Commission of Inquiry, are well-established, they rely primarily on moral authority and diplomatic pressure rather than coercive measures. In a global landscape where powerful states frequently disregard international norms with little consequence, moral authority alone is proving inadequate, raising concerns about the effectiveness of international labour governance in the years ahead.

Thus, it is visible that the future of the ILO stands at a critical juncture. As the global order shifts toward increasing fragmentation, isolationism, and

national exceptionalism, the very principles on which the ILO was founded—solidarity, cooperation, and the universal defence of workers' rights—face profound challenges. What is unfolding is not merely a crisis of compliance with international labour standards but a deeper crisis of legitimacy and authority for global governance institutions as a whole.

References

1. International Labour Organisation. URL: <https://www.ilo.org/>
2. United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Sustainable Development Goal №8 "Decent Work and Economic Growth". URL: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8>