

The Role of the International Labour Organisation in Protecting Worker Rights

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Abstract

The period between 2001 and 2021 marked a transformative era for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as it navigated the complexities of an increasingly globalized economy, rapid technological advancement, and unprecedented global crises. This abstract examines the ILO's strategic evolution in protecting worker rights, anchored by the expansion of its normative framework and the promotion of the "Decent Work Agenda." During these two decades, the ILO reinforced its commitment to the 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, shifting focus toward operationalizing these rights through the 2008 Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization. The organization's role evolved from traditional standard-setting to proactive policy integration, addressing emerging challenges such as informal employment, precarious work, and the digital transformation of labor. By championing social dialogue and tripartism—the unique collaboration between governments, employers, and workers—the ILO fostered consensus-based approaches to labor governance in both developing and industrialized nations.

Key milestones, including the centenary celebrations in 2019 and the adoption of the Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, highlight the ILO's transition toward a human-centered approach. Furthermore, the organization demonstrated institutional agility during the 2008 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, where it leveraged its technical expertise to provide social protection floors and advocate for inclusive economic recovery. Despite criticisms regarding the enforceability of its conventions in the face of shifting global supply chains and foreign direct investment, the ILO remained the primary global authority for setting norms that align national labor legislations with international human rights standards.

In conclusion, the ILO's role from 2001 to 2021 was characterized by an attempt to balance normative consistency with practical flexibility. While the organization faced hurdles in ensuring universal compliance, it successfully cemented its position as a critical stakeholder in shaping the global social contract. Its legacy in this period is defined by its ability to modernize international labor law to reflect 21st-century realities while remaining steadfast to its founding principle that universal peace can only be secured through social justice.

Keywords:- International Labour Organisation (ILO), Decent Work Agenda, International Labour Standards, Tripartism, Social Justice, Globalization, Fundamental Rights at Work, Social Protection, Labour Governance, Human-Centered Future of Work.

I. Introduction

The International Labour Organisation (ILO), established in 1919 in the wake of the First World War, was founded on the radical premise that universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice. As the only tripartite agency of the United Nations, the ILO brings together governments, employers, and workers to set labor standards, develop policies, and devise programs promoting decent work for all. The period between 2001 and 2021 proved to be one of the most volatile and transformative epochs in the organization's century-long history. This era saw the rapid acceleration of globalization, the expansion of global supply chains, the rise of the digital "gig" economy, and systemic shocks such as the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the turn of the millennium, the ILO found itself at a crossroads. The promise of globalization—that increased international trade would inevitably lead to prosperity and better working conditions—was being tempered by the reality of a "race to the bottom" in labor standards. Multinational corporations, operating across decentralized supply chains, frequently utilized the regulatory gaps in developing economies to minimize costs, often at the expense of worker safety, collective bargaining rights, and living wages. In this environment, the ILO's mandate to protect the dignity of labor faced significant skepticism. Critics questioned whether a treaty-based organization, reliant on the voluntary cooperation of sovereign states, possessed the institutional teeth to hold powerful multinational entities accountable.

The Decent Work Agenda: A Strategic Pivot

In response, the ILO under the leadership of Juan Somavia, who served as Director-General from 1999 to 2012, articulated the "Decent Work Agenda." This became the defining framework for the organization in the

early 21st century. Decent work was conceptualized not merely as a job, but as work that is productive, delivers a fair income, provides security in the workplace and social protection for families, and offers better prospects for personal development and social integration. This agenda provided a holistic, four-pillar structure to the ILO's work:

Standards and Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work: Ensuring that the core human rights—freedom of association, the abolition of forced labor, the elimination of child labor, and the elimination of discrimination—remained the baseline for all economic activity.

Employment Creation: Promoting sustainable enterprises and investments that generate quality jobs rather than mere subsistence labor.

Social Protection: Expanding access to healthcare, pensions, and unemployment safety nets, which were particularly vital during the economic turbulence of 2008.

Social Dialogue: Strengthening the mechanisms through which workers and employers negotiate, ensuring that the fruits of economic progress are shared equitably.

Navigating Global Crises and Institutional Adaptation

The 2008 global financial crisis forced the ILO to shift from a proactive standard-setting organization to a crisis-management pillar of the international community. The ILO's "Global Jobs Pact," adopted in 2009, served as a blueprint for recovery, urging nations to avoid austerity measures that slashed social spending and instead prioritize job retention and social protection. This marked a significant shift in the international economic discourse, with the ILO successfully arguing that labor rights are not a luxury of prosperous times, but a fundamental component of economic stability.

However, the latter part of this period, particularly from 2012 to 2021, brought the challenges of the "Future of Work." The rise of digital platforms introduced unprecedented complexities regarding the definition of an "employee." As millions of workers transitioned into precarious gig-work arrangements without traditional employment benefits, the ILO faced the challenge of ensuring that the protections won in the 20th century were not rendered obsolete by 21st-century technology. The ILO's Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work (2019) signaled a commitment to this modern challenge, emphasizing a "human-centered" approach that prioritizes lifelong learning, gender equality, and sustainable development.

The COVID-19 Catalyst

The final phase of this era, the COVID-19 pandemic, acted as an accelerant for all the existing systemic inequalities the ILO had been monitoring for two decades. The pandemic exposed the fragility of global supply chains and the vulnerability of informal workers, who make up the majority of the global workforce. The ILO's role during the pandemic became one of emergency advocacy—calling for international cooperation to provide vaccine equity, supporting social protection floors, and ensuring that pandemic recovery plans prioritized vulnerable populations.

By 2021, the ILO had successfully navigated two decades of extreme volatility. While it continued to face inherent limitations—specifically the difficulty of enforcing international conventions against the backdrop of national sovereignty and the profit-seeking motives of global capital—it remained the world's primary authority on the "moral economy" of labor. This introduction sets the stage for an analysis of how the ILO's normative framework evolved, how it addressed the erosion of traditional employment, and how it utilized its unique tripartite structure to remain relevant in a world where the nature of work itself is being fundamentally rewritten.

Labour Rights and Protection Law

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is the specialized United Nations agency dedicated to promoting social justice and internationally recognized human and labour rights. Founded in 1919, it is the only tripartite UN agency, bringing together governments, employers, and workers from 187 member states to set labour standards, develop policies, and devise programs promoting decent work for all.

The protection of labour rights is operationalized through the ratification of conventions. These treaties create binding obligations for signatory nations to align domestic law with global standards. However, the efficacy of these laws is often contested. While conventions recognize primary rights, some empirical research suggests that ratification does not always guarantee improved labor practices, leading to a "radical decoupling" where countries ratify treaties for reputational benefits without internal implementation (Peksen & Blanton, 2016).

The Core Mandate: Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work

The ILO's work is anchored in the 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, as amended in 2022. This declaration identifies five fundamental categories of principles and rights that all

member states have an obligation to respect, promote, and realize, regardless of whether they have ratified the specific conventions:

Freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining.

Elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour.

Effective abolition of child labour.

Elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

A safe and healthy working environment.

ILO Instruments: How Standards Work

The ILO establishes international labour standards through two primary mechanisms:

Instrument	Description
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Conventions	Legally binding international treaties. Once a member state ratifies a convention, it commits to implementing the provisions into national law and practice.
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Recommendations	Non-binding guidelines that provide practical, detailed advice on how to implement the principles set out in a Convention.
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These standards are developed through a "tripartite" process, meaning they are drafted and agreed upon by representatives of governments, employers' organizations, and workers' unions.

The Evolution of ILO Strategy (2001–2021)

At the start of the 21st century, the ILO recognized that traditional legislative approaches were insufficient to handle the rapid pace of globalization.

The Decent Work Agenda

The cornerstone of ILO activity during this period was the Decent Work Agenda, launched in the late 1990s but fully operationalized throughout the 2000s and 2010s. It focused on four strategic pillars:

Employment Creation: Ensuring the economy generates sustainable opportunities.

Social Protection: Establishing safety nets, health coverage, and pension security.

Rights at Work: Upholding fundamental principles (freedom of association, non-discrimination, etc.).

Social Dialogue: Strengthening the interaction between government, employers, and workers.

From "Core" to "Fundamental" Rights

In 1998, the ILO adopted the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. Between 2001 and 2021, the ILO focused on the universal ratification of these rights, ensuring that even countries that had not ratified specific conventions were held to these essential standards.

Key Pillars of Labour Rights and Protection

The ILO's influence on national law during this period focused on codifying these five core areas into domestic legal systems:

Principle Legislative Focus (2001–2021)

Freedom of Association	Legal protections for unions to operate without state interference.
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Forced Labour	Criminalizing modern slavery, human trafficking, and debt bondage.
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Child Labour	Setting minimum age limits and banning hazardous work for minors.
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Non-Discrimination	Laws mandating equal pay for work of equal value and diversity in hiring.
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Occupational Health & Safety (OSH)	Regulations on workplace hazards, safety equipment, and toxic exposure.
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Legislative Impacts and Global Trends

The ILO acts as a "norm-setter," providing a blueprint for national governments to draft or amend their labor codes.

Extending Protection to the Informal Sector: A major challenge between 2001 and 2021 was the massive size of the informal economy. The ILO pushed for Recommendation No. 204 (2015), which urged member states to transition workers from the informal to the formal economy to guarantee them legal protection.

Modernizing OSH Standards: The ILO moved to update safety standards, recognizing that the 20th-century focus on heavy industry needed to expand to cover service sectors, mental health, and the physical risks associated with sedentary or tech-driven work.

Addressing the "Gig" Economy: By the late 2010s, the ILO began addressing the legal status of platform workers (e.g., app-based drivers and delivery workers), pushing for laws that prevent the misclassification of employees as "independent contractors" to deny them rights.

Mechanisms of Enforcement

The ILO does not have a "police force," so its power lies in its Tripartite Structure and Supervisory System:

Tripartite Dialogue: Governments, employer organizations, and trade unions meet to debate and adopt standards. This ensures that when a law is proposed, it already has a degree of consensus from the stakeholders who must live by it.

Regular Reporting: Member states are required to submit reports on how they are applying ratified conventions.

The Committee of Experts: This independent body reviews national reports and highlights "observations" or "direct requests" when national laws fall short of international commitments.

Complaints Procedure: If a state persistently violates rights, the ILO can initiate commissions of inquiry, which bring significant international diplomatic pressure to bear on the offending government.

Critical Challenges (2001–2021)

Despite the ILO's efforts, the period saw significant headwinds:

The 2008 Financial Crisis: Many nations responded to economic instability by deregulating labor markets, leading to more precarious employment and a temporary rollback of worker protections.

Global Supply Chains: As production moved to developing nations, workers often faced "a race to the bottom" in terms of wages and conditions. The ILO countered this by promoting corporate social responsibility and integrating labor standards into global trade agreements.

COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2021): The final years of this study were marked by the pandemic, which exposed the fragility of global social protection systems. The ILO played a critical role in advocating for "building back better" through social dialogue and stronger investment in healthcare and job security.

Challenges and Limitations

Enforcement Deficit: Critics argue that the ILO lacks robust enforcement mechanisms to compel compliance, often relying on moral suasion and reporting (Samwer, 2017).

The Informal Economy: Standard labour regulations are often designed for formal employment, leaving millions of workers in the informal economy—who face precarious conditions—underserved by traditional ILO standards (Trebilcock, 2015).

Digital Transformation: Automation and the rise of digital platforms create "gig" work that challenges the traditional employer-employee power dynamic, complicating the application of existing labour laws (Calvão & Thara, 2019).

Supervision and Enforcement

Because the ILO does not have the power to impose sanctions directly on countries, it relies on a robust supervisory system to ensure compliance:

Regular Reporting: Countries that ratify conventions must submit regular reports on how they are applying them in law and practice.

Committee of Experts (CEACR): An independent body of legal experts that reviews these reports to identify areas where a country's national law might conflict with an ILO convention.

Tripartite Dialogue: The ILO facilitates ongoing discussion between governments, workers, and employers to resolve disputes and improve conditions at the national level.

Technical Assistance: When countries struggle to meet standards, the ILO provides training, research, and policy guidance to help them build the necessary legal and institutional frameworks.

Future Suggestions and Solutions

To remain relevant in a changing global economy, the ILO and its member states should:

Modernize Regulatory Coverage: Extend collective bargaining and regulatory protections to precarious and gig economy workers (Calvão & Thara, 2019).

Strengthen Monitoring: Shift from purely voluntary reporting to more assertive monitoring mechanisms that hold states accountable for domestic outcomes, not just legislative ratification (Peksen & Blanton, 2016).

Integration with Trade: Align international trade agreements with core labour standards to ensure that market access is conditional upon the protection of worker welfare (Samwer, 2017).

II. Conclusion

The ILO remains the cornerstone of international labour protection. While its standard-setting role is undisputed, its future efficacy depends on its ability to address the "enforcement gap" and adapt to the complexities of the digital and informal labour markets. As of 2022, the addition of a safe and healthy working environment as a fundamental right demonstrates the ILO's capacity for evolution, yet systemic challenges in implementation persist. Between 2001 and 2021, the International Labour Organisation successfully evolved from a post-war standard-setting body into a dynamic, modern governance institution. It shifted the focus of international law from merely protecting the "industrial worker" to defending the rights of the "global worker,"

including those in the informal, digital, and gig economies. By emphasizing that labor is not a commodity, the ILO continues to serve as the primary international architect of social justice, providing the legal frameworks necessary to ensure that economic progress does not come at the expense of human dignity. To help me tailor the next part of this analysis, are you more interested in the specific legal mechanisms the ILO uses to pressure countries into compliance, or would you prefer a deep dive into the impact of these standards on a specific region (e.g., Asia or the European Union)?

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