

The International Labour Organisation: A View From Within.

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Chance often plays an important part in one's life and it certainly did in mine. While I was working on a New Zealand Government sponsored project for the training of technical teachers at the Teacher Training College in Sri Lanka, I met a field expert working for the ILO in the field of labour relations. The information he gave me about the ILO was instrumental in my applying for a posting, and I was offered one in a project with the Ministry of Industry in Egypt. After two years and on my return to New Zealand, I worked for one month with a management specialist from Headquarters on a survey of industrial training needs in Cambodia. Some months later and much to my surprise I received an offer of a one year contract to work at ILO headquarters in the Vocational Training Branch. Such an opportunity could not be turned down. The Branch undertook research, documentation and publication of training material and was responsible for all technical co-operation industrial training projects. This was the start of a long international career. During the introduction to the office on the edge of Lake Geneva, now the headquarters of the World Trade Organisation, and entering the conference rooms for the first time, one could almost feel the history of the ILO. Professor Margaret Wilson, in her paper, has very ably described the reasons which brought into focus the need for an international body to improve the working conditions in industry and thus the establishment of the ILO.

Created by the Treaty of Versailles along with the League of Nations in 1919, the ILO, probably due to its tripartite structure, survived the collapse of the League and continued as an independent body and remained based in Geneva. This city has always been the home of the ILO except for a period during the second World War when it moved to Canada. Strange as it may seem, Switzerland, although it has always hosted the ILO, only became an actual member after it joined the United Nations Organisation in 2002. When the United Nations Organisation was established, the ILO became a Specialised Agency. This arrangement provided additional funding without limiting the ILO's freedom to continue its principal work of encouraging social justice throughout the world. The term ILO, in English language, is a generic form and represents both the Organisation and the Office. The French language does it rather better. BIT (Le Bureau Internationale du Travail) represents the Bureau (Office) and OIT (L'Organisation Internationale du Travail) signifies the Organisation. From the outside, the two may seem synonymous but from within there is a vast difference. The Office is responsible for implementing the decision of the Organisation and, in the early days, was a highly centralised body and responsible for all research, documentation and publication concerning the drawing up of Recommendations and Conventions dealing with labour standards. If countries were to be in a position to not only ratify ILO Conventions as agreed by the Organisation but also to implement them, it was essential that there was an active industry development programme and the employment opportunities that would result. This resulted in the start of technical assistance programmes for developing countries, later called technical co-operation.

Once the ILO became involved in technical co-operation, there was a considerable change in the number of its staff and in their qualifications. As much of the technical assistance was geared towards industrial activities, many of the new staff had managerial and industrial training experience. It also tended to spread the nationalities of staff over a larger geographic area. People who had languages in addition to one or more of the three official languages of the ILO – English, French and Spanish – could be of great value when working in developing countries. This was particularly so with the large number of projects being established in Arab countries. The establishment of the United Nations Special Fund and the greater amount of finance made available permitted the growth of much larger projects with ten and more staff. The ILO has always had a very closely knit headquarters staff but this gradual change of emphasis within the ILO, tended in some ways, to bring about a certain separation of the traditional type of staff and the new arrivals.

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This was accelerated when an annex was established in Petit-Saconnex to house those involved in the technical co-operation programme. After a few years, the annex was destroyed by fire but rebuilt after a period of some months. Headquarters continued to maintain a strict control of technical co-operation projects for many years through project officers responsible for a number of projects. These project officers had, in most cases, worked in the field on similar activities and were well aware of the difficulties in establishing new industries in countries which, at that time, had limited staff with the required knowledge. These were exciting days for me, personally, as I had been brought to Geneva after working on field assignments and at the time when there was a sudden increase in the work of ILO in developing countries. It gave me, personally, a wonderful opportunity to visit many countries and assist the governments in preparing plans for training the workforce to meet their industrial development requirements. While all this activity in technical co-operation was gaining momentum in the ILO, other international organisations were also increasing their activities and overlaps were starting to appear. To help avoid these, committees were set up to meet as needed. This brought me into close contact with senior officials in other United Nations Agencies and after the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation body was established in 1966, much of the work of the ILO in this field was gradually being taken over by UNIDO. Many of the activities undertaken by the ILO, at that time, had come about because no other organisation had taken that responsibility and today would not be considered typical ILO work.

While this new emphasis on technical co-operation absorbed a lot of staff time, the basic activities of the Office continued and each May/June the Annual Conference was held in Geneva. Two governments, one employers' and one workers' representative arrived from each member country; this gave officials a chance to meet their national representatives and representatives from developing countries' direct contact with officials handling their projects. Apart from the long hours of work the conference involved, it was a time of cocktail parties, lunches and dinners and most officials were pleased to get back to normality when the conference was over. However, several of the friendships developed during these times lasted for life. It is this part of ILO's work that is probably best known from the outside and remains crucial to its whole structure. While every member country has an equal vote irrespective of size, the posts in the ILO are allocated by the amount of the budget each country pays. Thus New Zealand, as a small financial contributor, had, at that time, between 3 and four posts available and like other small countries, often exceeded the quota. Large countries, particularly the USA, often failed to fill the posts allocated to them and the available funds were used to pay the salaries of staff from other countries.

International organisations have always been and will continue to be subject to political pressures when decisions, which affect member government interests, are made. In 1970, a Soviet citizen was appointed to a post as Assistant Director General and there was an immediate reaction from the USA, which reduced its financial contribution to the ILO by 50%. As the USA pays 25% of the total budget, this raised a serious financial problem and staff took a voluntary 10% cut in salary for two years to help cover the loss. A few years later, after the admission of the Palestine Liberation Organisation as an observer, the USA withdrew for a period in protest but later resumed full membership.

The Director General has a considerable influence on the internal activities of the Office and changes of emphasis soon become apparent to officials. In the early 1970s, the centralising of power in Geneva, particularly for technical co-operation, was starting to be questioned and operational staff were being transferred to regional offices in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Research and documentation remained firmly in Geneva. With this change in emphasis, an Operations Branch was set up to handle the supervision of existing projects and as deputy chief of this branch I saw it was time for me to part company with headquarters and to go to the field. When it was mooted that an office for the South Pacific might be established, I let it be known that I would be interested in taking over that office and I duly negotiated the agreement with the then Prime Minister of Fiji, Ratu Sir Kamasese Mara and took over as director for the South Pacific. This office presently serves 22 South Pacific countries, eight of which are members. It is unlikely that the number of South Pacific members will increase notably because of their small populations but all countries can and most do benefit from the work of the Organisation.

The activities of the office in Suva have changed considerably over the years from being mainly involved with technical co-operation projects and organising a few conferences and meetings to being much more active in the traditional activities for which the ILO is well known – the collection and publication of information on labour matters and meetings and seminars to discuss and disseminate such important facts.

To work in such a beautiful part of the world and to bring the work of the ILO to these smaller countries was a great privilege and to finish a career close to home had many advantages. When one looks back at the work of the ILO in the training of workers and managers in countries in all parts of the world, there have been some great successes and some of the powerhouses of industry such as those in Asia can be grateful for the help which ILO gave at the critical time. However, not every project was a success. Some failed due to changes of government in the recipient country and the consequent changes of policy, some where the human element played a role and necessary adjustments to the approach were not made with sufficient speed.

Much of what has been described happened by calendar years quite a while ago but to me seems like yesterday. As stated earlier, the staff of the ILO have always been a closely knit group and a very active Section of Former Officials continues to keep retired staff well informed. There are regular meetings in Geneva and every five years, there is a major gathering when retired officials from all over the world meet and socialise with their old colleagues and present staff. Also thanks to the internet, it is possible to follow closely the programmes and actions of the ILO. While there will always be criticism of international institutions, often due to their cost and often their bureaucracy, the world would be a poorer place without them and the ILO will continue to evolve to meet the needs of workers throughout the world.