

THE FUTURE OF WORK, AND INDUSTRIALL GLOBAL UNION



The Constitution of the International Labour Organization (ILO), adopted in the aftermath of World War I with the idea that there cannot be lasting world peace without social justice, has been described as the most ambitious social contract ever written. This year, 2019, will be the centenary of the ILO Constitution and to mark this event, on 22 January 2019 the ILO released the report of the ILO Global Commission on the Future of Work, entitled “Work for a brighter future”.

report

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The ILO report calls for a new approach that puts people and the work they do at the centre of public policy and business practice. It demands the recognition of rights to equality and social protection. It calls for a Universal Labour Guarantee that will deliver decent work, living wages, and safe and healthy workplaces. It calls for an increased investment in people, and a revitalization of collective representation.

It is an impressive, visionary outline for a new social charter. It is therefore not surprising that the International Organization of Employers is already trying to distance itself from it.

IndustriALL Global Union has sought the same goals that are outlined in the ILO report for many years. They are contained in the five strategic goals, and discussed in, among others, IndustriALL’s documents on sustainable industrial policy, on Just Transition, and on Industry 4.0.

If sustainability is about meeting the social, environmental, and economic needs of today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet them, then the world is failing the test.

SOCIAL: The world is sliding towards ever-greater economic inequality. According to Oxfam, 26 wealthy individuals control as much wealth as the 3.8 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity. Social norms insist that wealth should be distributed in society primarily through employment. However, despite increasing labour productivity and strong wealth creation, jobs are not being created, social conditions are not improving and industrial wages are stagnant. This situation creates a combination of despair and anger, as people feel cheated. Social ills such as an epidemic of drug abuse, and political ills such as the rise of populist demagogues, are the result.

ENVIRONMENTAL: The natural environment is in crisis, with accelerating climate change (with related ocean acidification, severe weather events, wildfires and coastal flooding), catastrophic declines in biodiversity, contamination of land and water and air, deforestation, decreasing fresh water availability alongside increasing populations. Meanwhile, our consumption-based lifestyles have proven resistant to even the suggestion of change.

ECONOMIC: Many products, goods, and resources are already being produced with the aid of a collection of disruptive new technologies including advanced digitalization, big data and artificial intelligence, next-generation robotics, the “internet of things”, 3-D printing, along with biotechnology and nanotechnology. Then, there are the new platforms of work: Uber, Clickwork, Amazon Mechanical Turk, Deliveroo, and a host of other forms of digital and crowd work that seek to make workers more precarious and powerless, and thus cheaper. This trend will continue, with no region or industrial sector immune. As for the natural environment, conventional economists insist that there can be infinite economic growth, despite the fact that we live on a finite planet.

Building a socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable future means re-thinking some of the basic rules of society, including what society expects of corporations. Many government policy thinkers have taken the position that society should not impose rules that might prevent new business models to grow. This thinking ignores the reasons why society allows any business model to grow, or indeed even to exist. In a theoretical sense, society does so because of the belief that there will be some benefit to society broadly – and this benefit has always been the expectation that jobs will be created. Not just one or two low-level jobs, but jobs of sufficient quality and quantity to enable a reasonable sharing of the wealth that is created and accumulated by the business. The wealth of one or two individuals is not a legitimate public goal. Politicians justify all changes to business or tax regulations as creating jobs, and business people use the jobs argument whenever they lobby for or against a regulation.

If new technologies and platforms do not create decent work in any reasonable proportion to the capital that owners control and accumulate, then why should society allow these business models to grow? Who benefits, and who pays the price?

Public policies, and the legislative and regulatory framework that flows from them, should be crafted to be in the public interest. Corporations should serve the public interest. Great challenges such as Industry 4.0, or platform work, or climate change, are often presented

as though society is somehow powerless in the face of corporate interests. Yet at the end of the day they are society’s creatures and therefore must be subject to society’s control.

Control of wealth gives corporations, and the individuals that own them, immense power. Even governments fear that power. The truth is that there is no power in society capable of challenging or even balancing the might of corporations, other than the labour movement. This truth has led IndustriALL to position sustainable industrial policies as one of its main strategic goals, because we need long-term solutions to some of the problems discussed above. Along with sustainable industrial policy is our demand for a Just Transition for any workers affected by changes beyond their control. The principle behind a Just Transition is that the benefits and costs of the industrial transformation that is underway must be shared fairly.

It is not the technologies themselves that are the problem, it is the logic driving their introduction. As capital utilizes technology to re-organize work processes, lower labour standards and reduce costs, trade unions must respond. If we can guide the implementation of these new technologies, we could create quality work with reduced working time, and improve occupational health and safety. If we fail in that task, high-tech feudalism could be the end result. In any case, the task is ours: no-one else and no other organizations will fight this battle for us.

For trade unions, it means understanding the future of work and how it will affect us. It means considering the consequences of climate treaties, and the United Nations’





Sustainable Development Goals, as well as keeping up-to-date on emerging technologies. It means knowing how to use instruments like the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. It means holding governments accountable for the policies, legislation, and regulations that they enact and enforce. It means demanding that public policy be in the public interest. It means paying more attention to global institutions, including – or especially – their global unions. It means being politically active.

However, it also means that trade unionists must look at ourselves closely in a mirror and consider what changes we ourselves must make. What would “trade union 4.0” look like?

multinational companies doing work that can be done anywhere, even in several countries. They may not even know who is paying them. Building cross-border solidarity will be critical - global unions like IndustriALL are needed now, more than ever.

We’ll need to use our tried-and-true tools of industrial action. Already, there have been labour disruptions at some of the new gig-work platforms. We must also try out new approaches. What are the needs, wants, hopes and dreams of today’s workers? How can trade unions help satisfy them? We must do a better job of appealing to women, youth, and other equity-seeking groups. We must think about white-collar workers, since the technological changes are leading to a white-collarization of the workforce of many of our industrial sectors. We must think about issues such as data, privacy, employment contracts, sustainable energy, and more.

Can we re-define trade unions as spokespersons for fairness, justice, and equity, not just in the workplace but broadly? The two words that we need people to associate with trade unions are relevant, and credible. If we can make the case that global unions are relevant, and credible, we will succeed. We must tackle these issues, intelligently. Failure is not an option.



Obviously, it is futile to try to negotiate with a robot or an algorithm. Instead, trade unions must focus on the owners of these technologies and organize the workers they pay - whoever and wherever they are. Organizing these workers will require new approaches, as many of these workers are employed by

No sector, and no region, will be immune to the far-reaching disruptions resulting from Industry 4.0. However, these changes will not be stopped, instead they must be managed.

If globalization of production, finance, and data is encouraged; why can we not globalize wage standards? No-one questions why there should be a world price for oil. If there’s a world price for oil, why cannot there be a world price for labour?

What of consent, and privacy? Informed consent for data collection, as well as the requirement for fair contracts, does not really recognize the imbalance of power. Refusing to consent to the collection of certain data, or to ask for a paragraph in an employment contract to be struck, is theoretically possible - but then quite simply the worker will not have work.



- 1 Solar panels installed and assembled by local women as part of the Zambia Green Jobs Programme led by the ILO. *ILO*
- 2, 4 Shipbuilding plant Royal IHC, Rotterdam, Netherlands. *IndustriALL*
- 3 Assembling and manufacturing electronic goods, like television sets in Indonesia. *ILO*