



1919 - 2019

ILO 100 Years – Journey for Social Justice

*Shared ideals of Ho Chi Minh and ILO
towards decent work for all*

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The three symbolic keys representing tripartism used at the inauguration ceremony of the ILO Building, 1926 © ILO

Introduction

For one hundred years now the Governments, Workers, and Employers of the world have come together in the ILO, moved by the conviction of its founding fathers that universal and lasting peace depends on social justice, and by a common determination to work together for that cause, notably by the adoption and supervision of international labour standards. It was a wild dream coming true - a wild dream that the government would sit together with representatives of workers and employers to make a joint decision at global as well as national level on the wide ranging issues affecting workers and businesses.

We celebrate a century of tripartite endeavour and achievement, during which the ILO has been a locomotive of social progress and a harbinger of peace. We face challenges in 21st century, perhaps challenges as difficult as founding members of ILO faced aftermath of the World War I for building peace and social justice. It is time to look back 100 years and look forward to the future which is already approaching.

ILO in 1919

“Whereas universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based on social justice. And whereas 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”, the Preamble of the ILO Constitution solemnly states in its opening sentences.

The creation of the ILO was culmination of century long efforts of working men and women, thinkers, enlightened entrepreneurs and political leaders who fought for improving conditions of work for sustainable development of market economy not only at national but also at global level, as countries were increasingly intertwined by international trades. It was based on recognition that “whereas also the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labour is an obstacle in the way of other nations



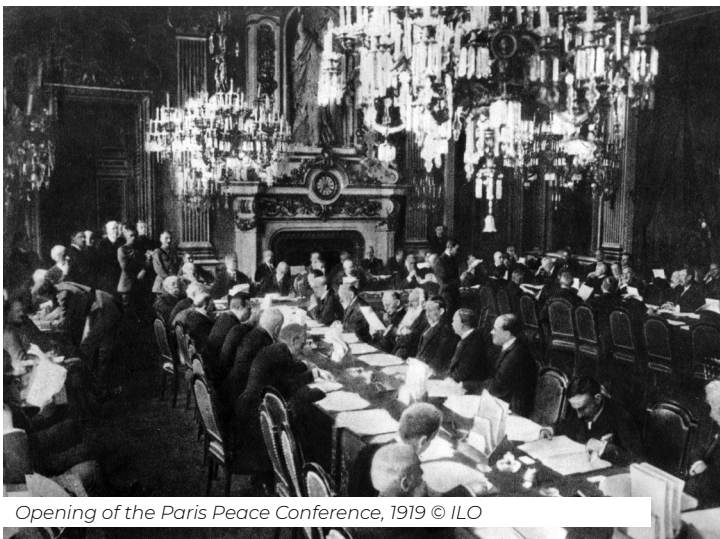
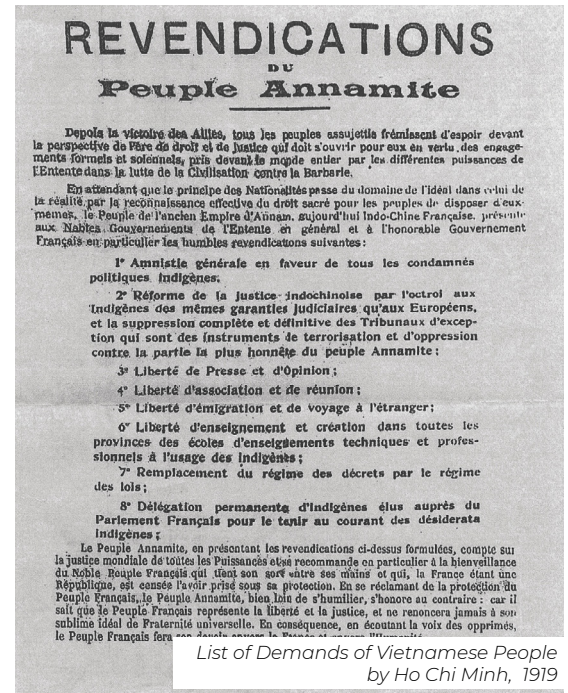
Workers' demonstration in an industrial area of northern Italy © ILO

which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries". Created at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, ILO began its life with 42 founding member states.

Ho Chi Minh in 1919 and his journey for independence and social justice (1911-1940)

Excitements and expectations about the Paris Peace Conference went beyond a small number of countries formally invited to the Conference. Many people in the colonies had their high hope on the Conference, inspired by the US President Woodrow Wilson's 'fourteen points', calling for self-determination of all nations.

One of them was a young man, named Nguyen Ai Quoc, the future Ho Chi Minh. He presented his letter to the delegations of the Paris Peace Conference, on behalf of the Group of Vietnamese Patriots Living in France, titled List of Demands of Vietnamese People. In the letter, he demanded rights of Vietnamese people for self-determination, and then among other things, he demanded 'freedom of association, and right to education, opening of technical and occupational education establishments'. This is a remarkable statement, which should be seen as a very starting point of modern labour policies of Viet Nam. And his letter resonates with the Preamble of the ILO Constitution which demanded "recognition of the principle of freedom of association, the organization of vocational and technical education".



Opening of the Paris Peace Conference, 1919 © ILO

It was not a coincidence. After he left Saigon on 5 June 1911, he travelled widely – US, Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa, witnessing the sufferings of working people, particularly oppressed people of colonies. In London, he came to be engaged in workers' movement through Overseas Workers' Association, while immersed in humanistic tradition by reading Dickens, Hugo, Tolstoy and others. By the time, he wrote his famous letter in 1919, he was not only a prominent nationalist but also an energetic campaigner for rights of working people

and liberation of the peoples in the colonies. With his letter to the Paris Peace Conference delegations, his life long fight for independence, freedom and social justice entered a new stage, as ILO began its life by adopting a series of international labour standards, starting with the Convention No 1 on 8 hours work a day. And 8 hours a day was one of first labour policies, which Ho Chi Minh would introduce by enacting the Decree No 1 on 1 October 1945.

But he had to leave the Paris Peace Conference with bitter disappointment, because

his prime demand, indeed demands of millions of oppressed peoples in colonies from Asia, Africa and Latin America for self-determination, was simply ignored by big powers of the time. And he had to wait till another war, the World War II, which harbingered the beginning of the end of colonialism, as ILO had to also wait till the end of World War II in extending the universal system of international labour standards beyond 'metropolitan areas'¹.

In 1920 he embraced Marx-Leninism. As many conscious men and women did at the time, he saw the light for millions of oppressed people in the colonies from the promises of Lenin. When many leaders of leftwing politics in the West provided only lip services to the cause of colonial people², he worked days and nights with people from Madagascar, Senegal and other places for solidarity³.

Ho Chi Minh was unique among communist leaders of his time, because he grounded much of his visions and politics not only on Marx-Leninism, but also on the ideals expressed in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) and the United States Declaration of Independence (1776). He demanded the full realization of the ideals of American and French Revolution – liberty, equality and fraternity – in the colonies, when he confronted the hypocrisy of colonial rulers.

When the Comintern's policies moved wildly from one direction to another in 1920s and 30s, he remained determined to work on the issues of colonies and suffering of colonial people⁴. Often he was a 'lonely voice crying in the wilderness'. But he was humble, caring, humane, with great combination of pragmatism and determination, which had won minds and hearts of the people – often including enemies – with which he survived the



Hồ Chí Minh at the French Communist Party's first congress, 1920

1 The ILO's membership at the time of its establishment in 1919 was dominated by industrialized European states and it was assumed that some parts of the world could not be expected to adopt high labour standards immediately. Between 1930 and 1939, the Conference differentiated "between the rights of workers in developed and 'underdeveloped' regions when it adopted the so-called 'Native Labour Code'", with lower standards. It was with the adoption of the Philadelphia Declaration in 1944 which extended the system of international labour standards, 'irrespective of races, creed and sex' whether developed or underdeveloped.

2 Nguyen Ai Quoc supported and joined the French Communist Party, after it was split from the French Socialist Party in 1920, because he believed it was the Communist Parties under the leadership of Lenin which supported liberation of oppressed people in the colonies. But he was often disappointed by insufficient support the French communist leaders showed on the causes of peoples in colonies. He was an enthusiastic and devoted leader in the Inter-Colonial Union which was established to create solidarity among peoples from French colonies.

3 In 1920, he founded a newspaper *Le Paria*, the mouthpiece of the "Association of Miserable People". He did everything from management, editing, writing, printing and even distributing the newspaper, which highlighted suffering of peoples in the colonies and urged fight for justice.

4 Ideological and leadership fights within the international communist movement in 1920s and 1930s resulted in wild swings of the Comintern's strategies from radical class struggle to moderate united front strategies. While surviving 'political storms' by keeping low profile and staying away from ideological fights which plagued the world communist movement, he remained focused on the cause of the oppressed people in the colonies and quietly developed a strategy of building broad democratic coalition. He foresaw the strategic shift at the Comintern 7th Congress towards united front approach, which greatly helped the victory of democratic allies against the Fascist Axis. History has proven Ho Chi Minh's approach was correct.

turbulent 1920s and 30s in Moscow, and prepared ultimately for the independence.

As he was tirelessly working for independence and justice from outside Viet Nam⁵, people in Viet Nam rose against injustice and colonialism - Ba Son shipyard strike led by Ton Duc Thang in 1925, creation of Viet Nam's Trade Union by Nguyen Duc Canh in 1929, Phu Rieng rubber plantation strike by Tran Tu Binh in 1930, and Soviet – Nghe Tinh in 1930-31 are all testimony of the struggle of Vietnamese people for independence and social justice.

End of colonialism and building new world of social justice after 2nd World War

He crossed the China-Viet Nam border in 1941, returning to his homeland, after 30 years journey, for the final fight to end colonialism and fascism. It was also when ILO evacuated its headquarters to Montreal, Canada from Geneva, escaping Nazi's onslaught in Europe, to prepare for its new role after the World War II.

One returned to homeland, another left its home base. Ho Chi Minh and ILO were fighting against fascism⁶, and also for common purpose of building a new world order based on rights of people to decide their own future and rights of working people, "irrespective of race, creed or sex, to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity", as stated in the ILO's Declaration of Philadelphia which was adopted in 1944.



ILC 26th Session, Philadelphia - Conference Plenary in Mitten Hall, 1944 © ILO

The Declaration prefigured and served as a model for the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And it was a ground breaking manifesto for post war social justice, setting broad social and economic development goals, concerning not only the world of labour, but also human beings as a whole, directly addressing "all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex". It paved universal foundation of the post 2nd World War development work, extended to newly independent nations, beyond confines of 'metropolitan areas'. The Declaration stated that "poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere" and "the war against want requires to be carried on with unrelenting vigour within each nation, and by continuous and concerted international effort".

⁵ In China, he ran training courses for future Vietnamese leaders of revolution in 1926-27, while leading the establishment of Indo-Chinese Communist Party on 3 February 1930.

⁶ 'Fascist regimes were clearly incompatible with the ILO's model of tripartism, in that workers' and employers' delegates were not free of government control', Rodgers, G.(2009). The International Labour Organization and the quest for social justice 1919-2009. p. 28.

When the Philadelphia Declaration was adopted, Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues were making their final preparation for building independent Viet Nam.



President Ho Chi Minh reads the Declaration of Independence at Hanoi's Ba Dinh square, 1945

The Tan Trao Viet Minh Conference in August 1945 was a pivotal historical event which prepared Ho Chi Minh and Viet Minh for independent Viet Nam. The Tan Trao Conference, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, adopted a series of key policy decisions, including 8 hours a day, minimum wages and social insurance, while deciding to establish social affair departments across the country. The first challenge new provisional government faced was the fight against famine. At the first Cabinet meeting on 3 September 1945, the new government

adopted a series of policy measures to fight against famine, which included micro credit for farmers, fight against illiteracy and support for people.

While waging the final fight against the old colonial ruler, Ho Chi Minh's government continued to lay foundation for social and labour policies, including the Ordinance 29 on 'defining relationships between employers and workers', adopted on 12 March 1947. The Ordinance 29 had provisions on prohibition of child labour, vocational training, maternity protection, minimum wages, labour inspection, paid leave, occupational safety and health among other things.

In particular, it gave a full recognition of the rights of workers to freedom of association, right to collective bargaining and strike, which Ho Chi Minh put forward in 1919. The principles embedded in the Ordinance 29 are fully aligned with the principles in the Convention 87 on Freedom of Association and the Protection of Rights to Organize and the Convention 98 on Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining, which were adopted at the International Labour Conference in 1948 and 1949 respectively, right after the adoption of the Ordinance 29 in 1947.

Once again, Ho Chi Minh's ideals were synchronized with the spirit of the ILO in early days of Independence, in his fight against 'want' and 'poverty', and also efforts for material and spiritual well-being of working people. The fact that the Ordinance 29 was founded on the exact same principles of the ILO Conventions Nos 87 and 98 is a proof for shared ideals of Ho Chi Minh and ILO for building social justice through recognizing, guaranteeing, empowering the role of workers and employers in improving and regulating conditions of work, in the post 2nd World War new democracy.

1969, 1975, 1986 and 1992

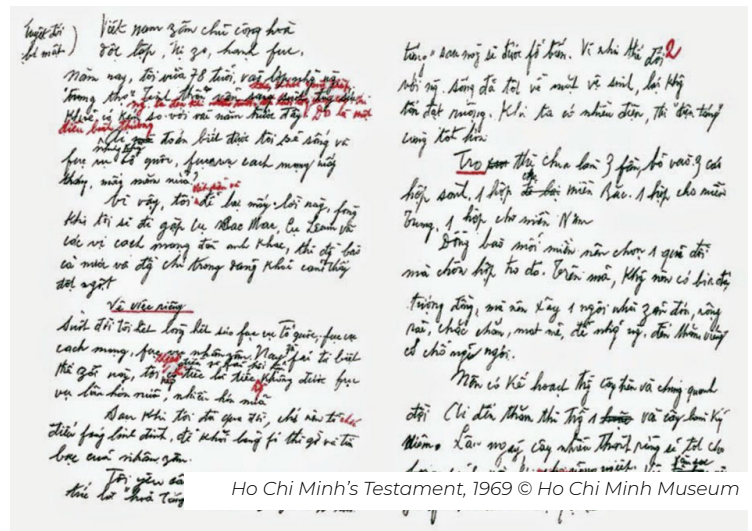
In full recognition of ILO's contribution to the world peace through its tireless efforts for social justice, ILO was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1969 when ILO turned to its 50 years anniversary. And it was in the same year Ho Chi Minh passed away, 50 years after he began his public life as the leader of independence and social justice movement



ILO Director-General David A. Morse receives the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the ILO, 1969 © ILO

with his letter to the delegations of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Sadly, he was not able to see the return of peace. Yet his and Vietnamese people efforts for peace and unification received global supports, evidenced by marches and demonstration of millions of people around the world, demanding the end to the American War and return of the peace.

He left a will to his compatriots, sharing his dream of building 'a peaceful Viet Nam', which is 'reunified, independent, democratic and prosperous'. His dreams have come true, when the country was unified and peace returned to the beautiful country in 1975. Building a prosperous Viet Nam began with the successful launch of the Doi Moi in 1986, which transformed Viet Nam from an isolated poor agricultural society into a fully integrated modern industrial society and socialist market economy. In 1992, the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam rejoined ILO, forming partnership for realizing ideals and values of Ho Chi Minh and ILO since 1919.



Viet Nam's victories in the anti-colonial struggles and the wars was made possible by drawing and empowering each person, each group of people in joining common endeavour. The success of Viet Nam's modern socialist market economy would also lie in empowering each person and each group of people – whether entrepreneurs, employers, and workers – to be active actor in determining their future through dialogue.

Viet Nam towards upper middle income country and decent work for all

With successful Doi Moi for more than three decades, Viet Nam is one of most dynamic economies, which is fully integrated into the global economy through free trade agreements and webs of the global supply chains, lifting millions out of poverty and creating millions of jobs. Based on the uninterrupted success of last three decades, Viet Nam aims to attain upper middle income country status by 2030 with full realization of sustainable development goals (SDGs), and eventually high income country by 2045.


It is ambitious but achievable goals, if Viet Nam can address multifaceted challenges it faces: addressing challenges of climate change, with green growth and green job strategy; addressing challenges of aging society, with universal social protection and life-long learning; challenges of disruptive technological innovation, with smart industrial policies and optimal combination of machines and human labour for better productivity and continuous improvement of conditions of life and work; challenges of informal economy and work, with coherent strategy for formalizing informal economy, and; challenges of building democracy and ensuring equity at work, with legal and institutional reform of industrial relations in line with the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, with particular focus on freedom of association and right to collective bargaining.

Democracy at work underpins 'socialist' characteristics of Viet Nam's maturing market economy, which will ensure sustainable development with equity and social justice. Vietnamese people have lived up to the dreams of Ho Chi Minh expressed in his will – a reunited, independent, prosperous and democratic nation. Ho Chi Minh was an exemplary citizen of not only Viet Nam but also global community, as evidenced by his tireless efforts for international solidarity based on shared universal values of global community, and also as expressed his letter "List of Demands of Vietnamese people" in 1919 and the Declaration of Independence in 1945. We celebrate 100 years of journey of ILO and Viet Nam, where ideals of founding members of ILO and founder of Viet Nam has met to ensure decent work and happiness for all. We will continue our journey for another 100 years.



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