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International Labour Conference

# ***Provisional Record***

108th Session, Geneva, June 2019

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**Date:** Thursday 25 July 2019

## **Special plenary sitting**

**Summary report of the high-level sitting  
entitled “If you desire peace, cultivate justice”**



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**Discussion with Mr Michel Hansenne and Mr Juan Somavia, former Directors-General of the ILO; chaired by the Director-General of the ILO, Mr Guy Ryder, with the participation of Sir Roy Trotman and Mr Daniel Funes de Rioja, former Vice-Chairpersons of the Workers' and Employers' groups of the Governing Body, and Ms Kalyanee Paranjape and Ms Ece Karaman, Co-Presidents of the ILO Intern Board**

1. *The Director-General* welcomed his two predecessors as Directors-General, Mr Michel Hansenne and Mr Juan Somavia, pointing out that together their respective mandates represented 30 years of ILO history. He invited them to take the ILO's history as a basis for reflecting on the ILO's role, in keeping with the Centenary theme of the future of work and its challenges. He further introduced Sir Roy Trotman, former Vice-Chairperson of the Workers' group, and Mr Daniel Funes de Rioja, his counterpart in the Employers' group, both having marked the history of the ILO as a tripartite organization.
2. He addressed his first question to Mr Hansenne, who managed the ILO's transition from the Cold War context into the first period of globalization. Responding to the new challenges emerging from that transition, Mr Hansenne led the ILO towards its landmark Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, adopted in 1998 (1998 Declaration), and set up the ILO's multidisciplinary teams. From the perspective of today, what were the most important challenges during those years?
3. *Mr Hansenne* pointed to the two key dates that had framed his first term and had had a profound impact on the ILO: the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of a bipolar world, and the signing of the Marrakesh Agreement in 1994, which created the World Trade Organization and marked the official beginning of a new era of world trade and economic globalization. In that new context, some countries had started to see ILO standards and rules as a competitive disadvantage. They were hostile to new standards and criticized or even denounced existing ones. With the end of the Cold War, they felt that the ILO, which had been the social democratic response to communism, had lost its *raison d'être*. The new question for him as ILO Director-General, and for world leaders, but also for the heads of employers' federations and trade unions, was to define the ILO's role in that new international setting. His report to the International Labour Conference in 1994, entitled *Defending values, promoting change*, had addressed that issue.
4. *The Director-General* then gave the floor to Mr Somavia to talk about the major events during his first mandate. Mr Somavia highlighted major milestones such as the launch of the Decent Work Agenda in 1999, immediately after he had taken office. It had been a required response to accelerating globalization and the issues which Mr Hansenne had started to tackle. The financial and economic crisis that began in 2008 had been another key moment since it had marked the beginning of the ILO's work with the Group of 20 (G20).
5. *Mr Somavia* further highlighted the important role of the 1995 World Summit for Social Development for the Decent Work Agenda. Marked by the dictatorship in Chile and its neo-liberal experiments, and driven by the idea that social issues should be at the heart of government policies, he had worked to organize the Summit in his capacity as Chile's Ambassador to the United Nations. His consultations with governments brought him face-to-face with their worries about growing discontent, poverty, employment and social

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cohesion in the context of globalization. Against that backdrop the idea emerged to put the ILO's traditional work about rights, social protection and social dialogue into the larger framework of decent work, a concept which defined work no longer as a commodity and cost factor, but as a major source of personal dignity, family stability, social cohesion and peace.

6. *The Director-General* mentioned the visit of future President of South Africa, Mr Nelson Mandela, to the Conference in 1990 as one of the most moving moments in ILO history and a major recognition of the contribution of the ILO to ending the apartheid regime. He highlighted another achievement, the imminent universal ratification of the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182). He invited Mr Hansenne to talk about the debate on trade and labour standards and the issue of coherence of the multilateral system. Did the ILO still have to face the same issues, or were there positive developments?
7. *Mr Hansenne* began by referring to Mr Mandela's visit as well as to the speeches of Mr Lech Walesa, future President of Poland, to the Conference in 1981 and 1990. They were important for the ILO because they underscored its determination to defend the rights of workers and, more generally, human rights. Coming back to the debate on trade and standards, he felt that the body of labour standards was still the ILO's most distinctive feature, comparing standards to the mechanism preventing trains from sliding backwards. When during his mandate labour standards had started to be seen by some countries as obstacles, the ILO's overall usefulness had been questioned. The criticism that there were too many rules and that the ILO should change its approach in the new context had triggered a reflection which had led to the identification of those standards which no civilized nation could fail to respect, and their promotion through a universally recognized instrument. The unanimous vote for the 1998 Declaration, which had been one of the last acts he had overseen as Director-General, had been a major outcome of the process which had started in 1994.
8. Highlighting Mr Somavia's role in the World Summit for Social Development and the setting up of the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization in 2002, in a context of rising anti-globalization protests, *the Director-General* invited him to give his perspective on the debate on globalization and possible next steps.
9. *Mr Somavia* pointed to the new framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and the two major challenges for the ILO's future policies: climate change and technological change, and their impact on the world of work. He congratulated the Director-General on introducing the role of the ILO and decent work into the 2030 Agenda, with enough space for the ILO's tripartite identity. The challenge of the 2030 Agenda was to overcome sectoral thinking and to develop an integrated approach to the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. By putting growth and decent work together, the Agenda defined a new role for the ILO in the organization of the global economy. The old growth model needed to be replaced by a new sustainable one that provided answers to growing discontent. While the ILO could provide values and objectives, solutions had to be implemented in a national framework, in cities and at the level of enterprises. Workers and Employers had to address together the issues of sustainable development and technological change. Mr Somavia expressed his conviction that the ILO's tripartism and instruments could play a decisive role in the future.
10. Underlining the changes in the world of work caused by climate change, technological change and demographics, as well as the uncertainties of globalization, *the Director-General* invited his predecessors to reflect on the added value of the ILO in addressing these challenges. Traditionally, the answer would refer to the ILO's distinctive features: first, tripartism and social dialogue – but they were increasingly difficult to practice and the representativeness of employers' and workers' organizations was being questioned; and

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second, international law, which was often seen as an interference in national sovereignty. Should the ILO nevertheless hold on to these instruments or rather add to or replace them?

11. *Mr Hansenne* compared the ILO to an articulated truck where one wheel would always gain enough traction to overcome obstacles and move the truck forward. The wheels of the ILO were: the fundamental role of work in our society, the relevance of the constitutional mandate of social justice, the tripartite functioning, its standard-setting system, the clear thinking of its leaders and the quality of its staff. Thus equipped, the ILO had managed to overcome numerous difficulties in the past. He warned against prioritizing any one of those different functions since they were all interlinked and together constituted the specific character of the ILO.
12. Although the future was uncertain, Mr Hansenne expressed confidence that the ILO would have the capacity to deal with such challenges as long as it had faith. In particular, the ILO's constituents needed to believe that the Organization remained the prime institution for the undertaking of social dialogue.
13. *Mr Somavia*, concurring with Mr Hansenne, highlighted the difficult situations the ILO had overcome in the past, from the Great Depression, through the Canadian exile during the Second World War and up to the 1980s when the basic rationale behind the economic system had changed with the new "neo-liberal policy agenda" supported by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and others. Then globalization had taken off and the ILO had responded to those challenges. The United Nations had now put decent work at the core of its agenda. In his opinion, today there would be more support for the ILO's approach than for neo-liberal views. He emphasized that society had changed, that young people looked at new lifestyles and that the "one job over a lifetime" concept was disappearing. The ILO needed to be more open to change. It could no longer rely on a model of social dialogue and social organization based on the traditional employer-worker relationship and with trade unions as the only form of workers' organization. The "organized citizen" would become more important in the future, in reaction to a feeling of disconnect from existing institutions and elites. The ILO should avoid a confrontational style and promote thinking, dialogue and joint action for the future.
14. *The Director-General* referred to the universal membership of the ILO, which had grown over time from 42 to 187 countries. Because of that, it had to cover today a wide range of working situations, including the majority of the world's active working population in the informal economy. That would raise questions with regard to the universal relevance of the ILO's normative framework, and the representativeness of tripartite constituents in its member States. ILO development cooperation, which Mr Hansenne had made much more widespread around the world, needed to be thought through as well. The Director-General invited Mr Somavia to answer that question from the perspective of a developing country.
15. *Mr Somavia* expressed his belief that universality was an enormous strength of the ILO. It meant pursuing common goals while adapting their implementation to local realities. In his opinion, development policies had changed from a Western-centred model to today's approach where developing countries decided about their own priorities and objectives. The ILO could help most effectively to translate the common goals of the 2030 Agenda into the various realities on the ground. It needed to make social dialogue fully functional and to help member States to go even further and develop a broader societal dialogue to address the issues of sustainable development, climate change and new technologies. The debate needed to start within societies, as solutions could no longer come from experts alone. Mr Somavia further stressed that people needed to develop personal consciousness about sustainability and, based on that, change their personal conduct in everyday life. The delegates to the Conference could be a model in that regard. Societies as a whole needed to get involved, at the individual and the community level, in order to promote sustainable development.

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Governments alone could not play that role. He ended by pointing out that this was a new approach and that the ILO could have a major role in bringing about such fundamental change.

16. *Mr Hansenne* considered universality to be both a challenge and a form of recognition. Member States had joined the ILO because they had expectations. Referring to the diversity of local contexts, he underscored that labour standards were not a luxury that only rich countries could afford. In his opinion, it was not necessary that all countries adopt all standards immediately because that could put them in a difficult situation. However, the ILO's support for development, especially with regard to the informal economy, should be permeated by its standards. He underlined that the ILO could not play the role of the United Nations Development Programme or the United Nations and that it could not solve all the problems of developing countries, but based on its knowledge and experience it had the vocation, together with other international organizations, to assist member States in dealing with a certain number of problems.
17. *The Director-General* turned to Mr Funes de Rioja and Sir Roy Trotman, asking them what reflections on the ILO had been inspired by the discussion with the former Directors-General.
18. *Mr Funes de Rioja* began his statement with an appraisal of his constructive cooperation over many years with Sir Roy Trotman, who had been not only a social dialogue partner but had become a friend. He continued by highlighting two important aspects of the past 30 years. One was the ILO's strategy and architecture, from the perspective both of standard setting and of the functionality of the Governing Body and the International Labour Conference. The 1998 Declaration, which he thought fundamental, had shown that world trade and decent work had to converge. This was necessary to react in real time to crises the world faced, as had been demonstrated in the case of the Global Jobs Pact adopted in 2009. The second aspect related to long-term issues essential for the ILO, such as the fight against apartheid in South Africa. He referred also to Poland, Myanmar and a number of other cases which had demonstrated the ILO's commitment to the shared values he had mentioned, and the ILO's reaction to their violation. In conclusion, he stressed that without the convergence of those two elements, the strategic and architectural on the one hand and the fundamental struggles on the other, the ILO would not be the Organization it was today.
19. *Sir Roy Trotman* warned that the leaders of ILO constituencies coming together in Geneva provided too positive a vision of tripartism. What worked in Geneva was not necessarily working in their various national contexts, and the accounts they provided of social dialogue at home did not accurately reflect the reality. He stressed that tripartite social dialogue needed to become more vibrant and to reach out to the shop floor and to smaller businesses. Reporting should reflect this outreach. He also invited the Conference to pay attention to power relations within the global community. Countries that were more powerful economically should not force smaller countries to follow them, since that could lead to poverty and, even worse, to social unrest. He warned that growing discontent had led to political extremism, despite the ILO's engagement. Many workers, who had originally pursued different political ideals, had become part of that trend as they were disappointed by the current system. The ILO had to ask itself to what extent it was adequately involved in questions of war and peace and social justice.
20. *The Director-General* then gave the floor to Ms Kalyanee Paranjape (India) and Ms Ece Karaman (Turkey), Co-Presidents of the ILO Intern Board. He invited them to provide their points of view as interns.

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21. *Ms Karaman* considered that the debates of the Conference had stirred up in many interns mixed feelings of fear and optimism with regard to their future. How could her generation turn the enormous challenges of technological change and climate change into opportunities? Would they receive the necessary skills for the new types of jobs the future would bring? Although the ILO had always been striving for social justice, it had to focus on the present where many millions of young people were entering the job market each year. She expressed worries as to whether there would be enough decent jobs and if those jobs would match skills and aspirations. She concluded by stressing that young people were trying nevertheless to stay optimistic and to adapt to the enormous uncertainties of a rapidly changing world of work.
  22. *Ms Paranjape* expressed her belief in a future where climate change and sustainable development would be taken seriously, and where gender equality would be attained with regard to wages and to parental leave. She could imagine a world without unpaid work “to gain experience” and where social security and the right to health were guaranteed as human rights by all stakeholders. During their internships at the ILO, young people had witnessed the ILO’s efforts to fight inequalities at work, provide opportunities for lifelong learning and promote a culture of prevention. However, given that the pressure to adapt was generating fears and frustrations, she wondered how the ILO could support young people in the new world of work. She expressed her hope and belief that young people would be able to face the challenges together and to be supported in this by the ILO.
  23. *The Director-General* thanked both speakers and gave the floor to Mr Somavia for some concluding remarks.
  24. *Mr Somavia* began by highlighting that the ILO had introduced paid internships under his mandate. Referring to Sir Roy Trotman’s remarks he criticized the abuse of power and the preference of some countries for unilateralism, which would always favour the more powerful and represented a threat to the multilateral system. The ILO had an obligation to make multilateralism work and to protect it. Therefore it had to underline the essential value of social dialogue and the contribution it could make to societies. He emphasized that the ILO had always swum against the current, given that its values were difficult to put into practice. He invited the audience to reject cynicism and to believe in the strength of the ILO to work for a better world.
  25. *The Director-General* thanked the speakers for their message of confidence. He stressed that confidence was based on the ILO’s continuous adhesion to its mandate of social justice and its record of achievements over 100 years. The “wild dream” had produced results and, thanks to the right tools, the ILO would be able to continue to deliver in the future. However, there was a clear need for self-reflection as well. As the two Co-Presidents of the Intern Board as well as many other participants in the Centenary Session of the Conference had stressed, the ILO could not afford to stand still in a time of change.