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International Labour Conference – 109th Session, 2021
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Plenary sitting

Opening of the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference

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Thursday, 20 May 2021, 1 p.m.

Presidents: Mr Chandra, Chairperson of the Governing Body of the International Labour Office, and Mr Zniber

Opening of the session

Mr Chandra

Chairperson of the Governing Body of the International Labour Office

Following the deferral of the session last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is my honour, as Chairperson of the Governing Body of the International Labour Office for 2020–21, to declare open this 109th Session of the International Labour Conference.

Regrettably, despite our sincere wishes to meet in person, it is necessary for the proceedings to take place virtually, to accommodate the exceptional circumstances caused by the ongoing pandemic. May I take this opportunity to extend to all of you a warm welcome to our Conference. I am confident that, despite its virtual format, this year's session will live up to the expectations, trust and efforts that have been placed in it.

Election of the President of the Conference

Mr Chandra

Chairperson of the Governing Body of the International Labour Office

Without further ado, let us move to the first item on our agenda, under which the Conference is called on to elect its President.

I give the floor to the Mr Tressler, the Government representative of Chile and current Chairperson of the Government group, to put forward his group's nomination.

Mr Tressler

Government (Chile), speaking on behalf of the Government group
(Original Spanish)

In my capacity as Chairperson of the Government group, and on behalf of the whole group, I have the honour to nominate His Excellency Ambassador Omar Zniber, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Morocco, for the position of President of the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference. Ambassador Zniber's nomination as President of this session of the Conference has the unanimous support of the Government group.

A distinguished career diplomat, Ambassador Zniber was the Ambassador of Morocco to Germany from 2012 until he was appointed as his country's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Office at Geneva, in 2018. He was previously Ambassador in Austria, Slovakia and Slovenia, based in Vienna. He performed various duties in the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in the Permanent Missions of Morocco in New York and Geneva, where he was responsible for matters relating to disarmament, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Health Organization.

Ambassador Zniber has also represented Morocco at various international and regional conferences. In 2005, he was President of the Industrial Development Board of

the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and chaired the Mediterranean Conference of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Two years later, he chaired the 12th Session of the UNIDO General Conference. The same year, he became Chairperson of the African Group. In 2008, he was President of the Council of Arab Ambassadors. In 2009, he was co-President of the Conference on Facilitating Entry into Force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, in New York.

Ambassador Zniber has a doctorate in International Public Law from the University of Paris II, on the succession of States and treaties relating to borders in Africa.

Taking into account the Ambassador's great experience and skills, the Government group has complete confidence that he will steer the work of this session of the Conference to a successful conclusion. It is therefore an honour for me to submit his candidature formally to this august assembly.

(The proposal is supported by the Employers' and the Workers' groups.)

Mr Chandra

Chairperson of the Governing Body of the International Labour Office

The nomination put forward by Ambassador Tressler, with the unanimous support of the Government group, has met with the agreement of the Employers' and Workers' groups.

In the absence of other proposals, I have great pleasure in declaring His Excellency Mr Omar Zniber, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Morocco to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva, President of the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference.

I offer Mr Zniber my warmest congratulations and invite him to take the Chair.

(Mr Zniber, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Morocco to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva, is elected President of the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference and takes the President's Chair.)

Presidential address

Mr Zniber

President of the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference

You have placed your trust in me to preside over the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference, our first ever session to be held in a virtual format. This is not only an honour for me, personally, but also a source of pride for my country, the Kingdom of Morocco, and for the African region. Thank you for the confidence placed in me and in my country.

This election coincides with the recent launch by my country of a project to achieve universal social protection by 2025, under the guidance of His Majesty King Mohammed VI, who is driving this ambitious project.

The Moroccan presidency of the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference reflects the commitment of my country towards international labour standards and the values, principles and objectives of the ILO, including its engagement to tripartism.

This election crowns, also, the active contribution of the Moroccan tripartite delegation to the various endeavours of the ILO and to events relating to the world of work, organized at the level of this Organization as well as at the regional and continental levels.

As it is often said, the International Labour Conference is the global parliament of labour, affording governments, employers and workers of Member States a unique opportunity to hold tripartite discussions about social and labour issues, as well as matters related to the world of work.

This year, our Conference session takes on a virtual format and has particular significance, in view of its deferral last year for reasons we all know too well. Needless to say, high expectations have been placed on the work that we will undertake over the next few weeks and upon the resumption of our session later this year.

Finally, I would like to seize this opportunity to commend the mobilization of the ILO and its staff, the work that it has done, and the efforts made to confront the consequences of the pandemic and to facilitate the organization of the various meetings in this unprecedented context.

I shall do my best, together with my Vice-Presidents, to guide our work in that spirit, and will spare no effort to ensure that this Conference is a success for all concerned. I count on your valuable support to achieve this end.

Election of the Vice-Presidents of the Conference

The President

Our first task is to elect the Vice-Presidents of the Conference, in accordance with article 25, paragraph 2, of the Standing Orders of the International Labour Conference. I give the floor to Ms Dimitrova, the Clerk of the Conference, who will read out the names of the candidates proposed by the groups.

Ms Dimitrova

The Clerk of the Conference

The nominations for the three positions of Vice-President of the Conference are as follows: for the Government group, Mr Blackman (Barbados); for the Employers' group, Ms Goldberg (United States of America); and for the Workers' group, Ms Chipeleme (Zambia).

The President

If there are no objections, may I take it that these proposals are approved?

(The proposals are approved.)

I would like to congratulate the Vice-Presidents who, I understand, wish to take the floor.

Mr Blackman

Government Vice-President of the Conference

It certainly is a pleasure and a distinct honour for me to accept this election as Vice-President. I look forward to working with the President of the Conference – the distinguished Ambassador of Morocco – and my fellow Vice-Presidents in presiding over

the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference. My personal sense of pride in assuming the role of Vice-President is grounded in the recognition of the support provided in this regard by the countries of the Americas and by my own country, Barbados. Thank you for the faith you have placed in me.

I appreciate the work we have before us, at the first virtual session of the Conference, as we seek to promote rights at work, encourage decent employment opportunities, enhance social protection and strengthen dialogue on work-related issues. I intend to bring to the task of Vice-President the same energy and level of commitment that characterized my work as Chair of the Trade and Development Committee of the World Trade Organization and as Chair of the group of Small Island Developing States at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. This is my pledge to you.

I am confident that, together, we will continue to promote a people-centred approach to the creation of productive employment and decent work as sustainable development objectives. This historic Conference is well placed, through the work of its various committees and working parties, to continue to support the elevation of international labour standards in circumstances where the world as we know it has changed, particularly over the last 15 months, and to ensure that such standards are respected in practice and in principle. I look forward to working with you and achieving these goals.

Ms Goldberg Employer Vice-President of the Conference

I am honoured to accept this nomination. I have been fortunate to have had a long career liaising with the ILO, as a representative of United States employers and of the International Organisation of Employers in the Governing Body, in which I was honoured to serve three terms, and as a participant at more sessions of the International Labour Conference than I care to remember.

Over all this time, the ILO has confronted many challenges, including quite notably the global financial crisis in 2008. With the COVID-19 pandemic, however, we are facing arguably an even more complex crisis, as dire health threats, unemployment, business failures and detrimental inequality are being felt all over the world, profoundly transforming the world of work. The irony is, of course, that while COVID-19 has set us such a challenging policy agenda, it has changed entirely our ability to deal with it, by driving this virtual format. It has vastly complicated our ability to do our job over the coming weeks.

You can be assured of my own willingness in this difficult environment to work closely with you and to ensure that we get the job done. You can also be assured of the willingness and desire of my colleagues and the strong commitment of the Employers to have a successful session with concrete deliverables. We look forward to working with all of you, and of course with our Office colleagues, to see that we get the job done.

Ms Chipeleme Worker Vice-President of the Conference

I would like to thank the Workers' group for the confidence placed in me to perform this very important duty, which I have accepted with gratitude. I am from the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions, where I am responsible for organization and trade union development, with 28 years of experience in that regard. I have been a member of the

ILO Governing Body for the past four years now – an extended period of office – and I will be honoured to work closely with Ambassador Zniber, and with the Government Vice-President Ambassador Blackman, and the Employer Vice-President, Ms Goldberg, in steering the work of this Conference at its 109th Session, which is being held in this unprecedented format.

The President

Having heard the three Vice-Presidents, I am confident that I, together with my three fellow Officers, will collectively rise to the challenge of steering the work of this virtual session of the Conference in a way that serves the best interests of the Organization and its tripartite constituents.

Special arrangements and rules of procedure for the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference

The President

The next business today concerns the suspension of certain provisions of the Standing Orders of the Conference in favour of the special arrangements and rules of procedure that have been proposed by the Governing Body for the conduct of this virtual session of the Conference.

These proposals have been the subject of extensive discussions, consultations and compromises since the beginning of the year. They are set forth in document [ILC.109/D.1](#), which has been published on the Conference website.

Against the background of consensus in which these special arrangements and rules of procedure have been prepared, I trust that they can be endorsed by the Conference. If there are no objections, may I take it that the Conference approves the procedural formalities set out in document ILC.109/D.1?

(The proposals are approved.)

Constitution of the Conference committees and working parties

The President

The next agenda item concerns the constitution of the standing committees and the committees and working parties that will consider the different items on the agenda of the Conference.

Four standing committees are established every year: the Selection Committee; the Finance Committee of Government Representatives; the Committee on the Application of Standards; and the Credentials Committee.

In addition to these standing committees, the Conference may wish to establish the Recurrent Discussion Committee: Social security; and the COVID Response Committee, to consider as required the COVID-19 response outcome document appended to the report of the Director-General.

It may also wish to establish two working parties to consider, during the resumed part of the session of the Conference, the two other technical items on the agenda of the Conference, namely: the General Discussion Working Party: Inequalities and the world of work; and the General Discussion Working Party: Skills and lifelong learning.

If there are no objections, may I take it that the Conference approves these proposals?

(The proposals are approved.)

Nomination of Officers

The President

In accordance with the special arrangements and rules of procedure we have just adopted, we should now proceed with the appointment of the Officers of these committees and working parties. The composition of each committee and working party will be determined by each group, based on the registrations received.

I assume that the Conference agrees with these appointments and that it will join me in thanking each of them for having accepted such important responsibilities. A list of the names of the Officers of each committee and working party is communicated to participants on the Conference website, in document [ILC.109/D.3](#). That document also contains the appointments for Officers of the Government, Employers' and Workers' groups.

(The proposals are approved.)

Welcoming words by the Director-General

The President

I now turn to the Director-General of the ILO and Secretary-General of the Conference, Mr Ryder, for some welcoming words.

Mr Ryder

Director-General of the International Labour Office and Secretary-General of the Conference

Let me begin by congratulating the President on his election. We are, I know, in very good hands. And I extend the same congratulations to all other office holders at the Conference. At the same time, I want to welcome, virtually but nevertheless very warmly, all participants to this 109th Session of the International Labour Conference.

After the unavoidable deferral of this session last year, I believe that all ILO constituents – Governments, Employers and Workers – shared a common determination that this Conference should go ahead at this time, because we had essential work to do and because the institutional continuity of our Organization depended very heavily on it.

As a consequence, and through intensive consultations, we have agreed upon modalities for this exceptional virtual Conference session which offer us the best opportunity to complete what is, without doubt, an important but also a challenging agenda – an opportunity to get the job done.

But we will also have to bring to the task a more than usual degree of patience and tolerance, as well as creativity. Of course, my colleagues and I will do everything that is within our power to support your active participation.

By conducting this Conference successfully under your leadership, the ILO will be taking one more step, and a crucially important one, in overcoming the COVID-19

pandemic, which has devastated the world of work over the last year and a half. In doing so, it will be making a crucial contribution to building forward better.

There can be no more compelling incentive for us all as we embark upon this Conference session, and I wish you all success.

The President

Thank you very much, Mr Director-General, for your words, which clearly illustrate the characteristics of the ILO, an august organization that has a long history and that is working to achieve common goals for all of humanity. These goals are social, economic and human too, and require the cooperation of all the States around the world and of the tripartite constituents of the Organization. We count on your support, Director-General, together with that of your very honourable Deputy Directors-General. I would like to salute them, and all the staff of the ILO, who I am sure will spare no effort in making this session of the Conference a real success, to the benefit of us all, and also to make the Organization as strong as ever, because, as you pointed out, we have to be tolerant and we have to be passionate, because the problems we are facing need us to be both of those things.

Before formally closing this sitting, I would like to express how much I would have preferred for us all to be together, here in Geneva, for our Conference. Normally, we are several thousand people, gathering over two weeks to discuss the important subjects that we have to deal with at each session. I do hope that our next Conference session will be in such a format.

For the current session, it is important to keep in mind that everything has been done to make this virtual format a real success, and all the staff and all of us are mobilized to make it run as smoothly as possible, in the best way possible to ensure that we can fully engage in dialogue and avoid any difficulties which could in any way hamper our work. We are optimistic, and I thank you all for having been present for this very important sitting. I am looking forward to us all gathering again as from 7 June as planned for our Conference, to enter into our formal plenary work.

That brings us to the conclusion of the formal opening sitting. Thank you all for your participation.

(The Conference adjourned at 1.40 p.m.)