

The ILO and the future of workers

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Last week the year's most important meetings took place at the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. I attended for the first time not as a guest of the Mexican government, but on behalf of the National Union of Mineworkers and IndustriALL Global Union. I am proud to be on the global Executive Committee of this independent organization, to which we belong as a union and which brings more than 50 million workers in 140 countries.

The ILO was founded in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I, with the aim of achieving universal social justice, to maintain peace among nations in a way that would be durable and permanent. At its origins it had only nine member countries (Belgium, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, France, Italy, Japan, Poland, United Kingdom and United States) with government representatives, employers and workers in all its executive bodies.

There had been proposals to create an international organization to concentrate on labour issues since the nineteenth century. People wanted true recognition and importance to be given to social justice as the key instrument to achieve peace and labour stability, coming from a past in which the ruthless exploitation of the working class, including children and women, had evolved in industrialized countries to inhuman levels of abuse, generating poverty and extreme inequality, perhaps only exceeded by the current reality.

Today, 97 years since its foundation, the ILO brings together 187 countries and is the most important international labour forum. However, despite all the reforms, adjustments and transformations that the century has seen, current living and working conditions, with few exceptions, have failed to reduce or curb social inequality, while income distribution has seriously deteriorated, severely affecting the majority of the population. Not only has Mexico not been the exception, on the contrary, it has become the country in the world ranked third worst in terms of income distribution and with the lowest wages in Latin America, according to analyses published by the Economic Commission for Latin America (Cepal), the UN and leading media outlets such as Canada's *Toronto Star* newspaper.

Against this backdrop, during the first two weeks of June 2016 a Mexican delegation came to Geneva to attend the ILO conference with more than 70 representatives of official unions (40), employers and chambers of commerce (24) as well as 10 public officials led by the Secretary of Labour and Social Welfare, Alfonso Navarrete Prida. At the end of the conference Mexico's representative was elected to chair the ILO's Governmental Group for 2016-2017. The decision was made in the context of the 105th International Labour Conference, which this year gathered under the theme: "Building a future with decent work."

Secretary Navarrete Prida, during his speech at the plenary session of the Conference and to the tripartite delegation of Mexico and other countries, said that “the labour peace prevailing in the country is the result of a strong, solid and tripartite social dialogue, which has allowed us to reach almost 32 months without a strike of federal jurisdiction.”

In contrast, Germany's Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation, in a separate ILO meeting, released a report – which I will address in another article – which states that “the right to strike is under constant attack. The incidences of strikes which have been suspended, disciplined or banned as a result of new laws or reforms have been growing in many countries.” The foundation points to Mexico as a country where there are excessive prerequisites for a strike, which is the last resort of workers to defend their rights or to reverse the violations of collective agreements and abuses and threats against staff.

The Ebert Foundation states that to exercise the right to strike in Mexico, a union is required to request approval from the labour authority, which implies a trial before a tripartite tribunal, where the State is judge and jury. Unions must justify how the reasons for ordering strikes are a systematic violation of their rights under the Constitution, which is practically impossible, and as such the authority declares those reasons nonexistent or illegal, even before the date or time set for establishing them.

Some of the most important preliminary conclusions of these meetings can be summarized briefly, subject to further discussion and consideration. Firstly, the ILO has limited scope in forcing or instructing governments to adopt strategies and policies to reduce or eliminate inequality and exploitation of the workforce. The ILO can recommend or condemn their actions, but cannot force governments to change and thereby protect justice, democracy and freedom of association.

Sovereignty, diplomacy and interests limit the organisation, therefore in many countries government officials and politicians do as they please and maintain the conditions they consider most appropriate, even if they are wrong or if their actions produce greater poverty, discrimination and inequality.

Secondly, employer protection contracts have ushered in a policy of disguised labour exploitation and slavery. Thirdly, while the Mexican government maintains the system of acknowledgment or official recognition of unions and leaders there will be no democracy or the right to freedom of association. Instead there will be greater government control which goes against Convention 87 of the ILO, which the Mexican government has ratified for more than 60 consecutive years: our country cannot continue with this level of hypocrisy.

Fourthly, even though the draft labour reform as proposed by the Mexican government has positive aspects, we cannot wait until after next September for it to be approved or reformed by the Senate before correctly or transparently implementing the current labour law, which comes from the Constitution adopted in 1917, which “is recognized by the government itself as the first social Constitution of the twentieth century, even with rights established in advance to other constitutions of the last century.”

The fifth and last conclusion for the time being is a question: in these conditions and faced with the

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situation in Mexico and across the world, what is the future of the working class?