

Continuing the Struggle: The International Labor Organization (ILO) Centenary and the Future of Global Worker Rights

Posted on August 6, 2018 by Lane Windham

October 29, 2019, will mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the first International Labor Conference (ILC), held in the Pan American Union Building in Washington, D.C., under the nascent International Labor Organization (ILO). During the following weeks, delegates from some forty nations adopted international conventions that addressed working hours, child labor, unemployment, maternity protection, and night work. These labor standards assumed Western male industrial workers as the norm, with different treatment offered on the basis of gender, age, and geography. European empires insisted on lesser standards for their colonies, while war-torn nations obtained leeway in implementation. Although the United States hosted the conference and the U.S. Secretary of Labor presided, the United States was ineligible to send delegates because it was not part of the League of Nations. Indeed, it would reject League membership in the midst of the ILC deliberations. After joining the ILO in 1934, the United States often played a defining role even though it actually ratified few conventions.

This conference will mark the centenary of that watershed event. It will be both retrospective and prospective. It will look back to analyze and evaluate a century of efforts to advance workers' rights around the globe. It will look forward to ponder the ways in which global supply chains, financialization, and the growth of the "gig" economy and other forms of non-standard work challenge the ILO system and raise questions about the very definition of employers and employees and the basis of labor relations. As we look forward, we will also examine the conditions of the most vulnerable workers, including internal and external migrants, women, and youth who disproportionately make up the majority of domestic workers, care workers, and low-end manufacturing workers such as in the garment and electronic sectors. We will consider what approaches might be most effective in developing the cause of worker rights and empowerment in the century ahead. To explore these questions, the conference will gather both academics and practitioners, including policymakers, union leaders, and leaders of worker rights organizations.

The conference invites participants who can contribute to the exploration of a range of themes related to the ILO's work through scholarship or organizational work. These themes include:

Global Workers, Global Supply Chains, Global Lives

What are the roots of the global supply chain process and how has this development driven economic change? What have been the mediating forces that shaped global supply chains? What has been the dynamic relationship between worker migration, citizenship, and labor rights? What are the legacies of empire, colonialism, and forced labor on today's global economic infrastructure? How does the ongoing crisis of forced labor and migration reflect on international efforts to address post-colonial structural legacies?

Gender, Sexuality and Labor Rights

Is there a global #MeToo movement and what does it mean for women working in today's shifting economy? What is the prevalence of gender-based violence and harassment on the job? What is the potential for the proposed ILO Convention on gender-based violence at work? What can we learn by studying the past and present of care work as a transnational, feminized category of labor? How has the work / family dilemma impacted working people, how has it looked different in the Global South and Global North, and how has this experience been mediated by both national government policy and global corporate policy? What is the connection between gender-based violence at work and precarious work? What is being done to win equal remuneration and combat discrimination based on perceived characteristics like gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, and race?

Building Workplace Power and Global Workers' Rights

How have workers and their organizations used ILO conventions in workplace organizing at the local, national or global level? Can ILO conventions be of particular use in transnational sectoral organizing? What is the future of worker organizing and working people's freedom of association? Do case studies of key sectors offer particular insights, such as in domestic, maritime or migrant labor?

On Shifting Ground: Labor Standards, Policy and the Future of Work

What can we learn about workers' present crisis by studying the past and future of tripartite structures like the ILO for governing workers' rights? How and why are national and global labor standards shifting today and what does that mean for workers and their organizations? How can labor policy best support working people in today's gig economy,

including “creative labor”? How should we understand the shifting boundaries of formal / informal work and / or free/ unfree labor?

Please send paper, presentation, or panel proposals to kilwp@georgetown.edu. **Deadline for submissions is November 15, 2018.**

We hope to disseminate papers and presentations as appropriate, including a special section or issue of a journal, edited collection, online proceedings, activist blogs and other digital media, and other formats.

Planning Committee (in formation):

Mark Anner, Pennsylvania State University
Eileen Boris, University of California at Santa Barbara
Tula Connell, Solidarity Center
Guilherme Machado Dray, University of Lisbon
Leon Fink, editor, Labor: Studies in Working-Class History
Julie Green, University of Maryland
Jill Jensen, University of Redlands
Joseph A. McCartin, Georgetown University
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