

FINAL – AS DELIVERED
Speech by Mr Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General on
“The ILO’s centenary and achievements”
LO-Norway Conference for the ILO Centenary, Oslo, 8 January 2019

Thank you very much indeed for that introduction, and let me wish a happy new year to all of you.

First of all, let me begin by thanking you for inviting me here today, and say sincerely how pleased I am that this very first event in the ILO’s centenary year is here in Norway.

I say that for several reasons, one of which is quite obvious. Looked at from a historic perspective, if there were ever a global referendum for the best member State of the International Labour Organization, I would not be at all surprised if Norway were the winner.

I say this not to flatter or embarrass you but to highlight some points which have been important for the ILO’s first 100 years and which I believe will be equally important for its future, and which Norway exemplifies. Put simply, they are about tripartism, international labour standards and commitment to practical international cooperation.

Norway was a founding member of the ILO. It has participated in its history all these last hundred years, including in exile during the dark times of war and occupation. It has provided outstanding representatives for all of our three Groups – Workers, Employers and Governments.

Norway has ratified no less than 110 Conventions and three Protocols. Only Spain, France and Belgium have ratified more. And with this has gone a very serious assumption by Norway of the obligation to practical application which follows from ratification. In more recent times Norway was the first to ratify the ILO’s Indigenous and Tribal People’s Convention in 1990, and the second to ratify the 2015 Trafficking Protocol to the Forced Labour Convention.

Looking further back the very first female delegate at the International Labour Conference was a Norwegian, Betzy Kjelsberg. She was a labour inspector and represented the government from 1923 to 1935. Not coincidentally I am sure, Norway pushed from the beginning for Conventions which would go beyond the immediate concern of protecting women and aim at fully recognizing equality at work. I have to say that in this objective, Norway was ahead of its time. Only after the Second World War was this achieved with Conventions on discrimination and on equal remuneration.

Up to this day, the Norwegian LO has continued to stress the need to effectively incorporate human and labour rights in various ways into the Norwegian legal system, and you will be I know returning to this unfinished business at today’s Conference, as the LO President has indicated.

Another early Norwegian link with the ILO which is equally topical today involved the large number of refugees in Europe following the First World War. In the 1920s, the first Director-General of the ILO, Albert Thomas, cooperated with Fritjof Nansen, who was in charge of the League of Nations activities to manage the refugee challenge, and in fact the international refugee service was based in the ILO for part of the 1920s.

In his travel diaries, when visiting Norway in 1927 Albert Thomas commented that although the employers, especially ship-owners, and the trade unions did not hesitate to disagree with one another – or with him, too, for that matter – at the same time, they were steadily developing the practice of collective bargaining and negotiations.

Albert Thomas also said he liked to visit the Nordic countries because of their strong and progressive social and labour policies, their trade unions and employers' organizations as well as the cooperative movement, which was close to his heart. I say the same thing.

True, the relationship between the ILO and Norway was not a perfect love affair at first sight. Albert Thomas was a friend of a Norwegian trade union lawyer in the 1920s and 1930s, Trygve Lie, but even together they could not convince the Norwegian trade unions to participate in the work of the ILO from the start. Part of the unions wished to cooperate with the Communist "Red International", part with the social-democratic Amsterdam International, and part with both of them. Clearly your trade unions were a complicated bunch in those days!

As a result, the Norwegian trade unions took up full participation in the ILO only in 1935. Trygve Lie took on many other complex tasks – developing Norway's legislation on labour conflicts for example, handling Leon Trotsky's brief but eventful stay in your country, for another. Being the first Secretary-General of the United Nations might have seemed to him a relatively simple task by comparison. In any case, in 1946 he helped the ILO to become the first specialized agency of the United Nations.

Norwegian employers too played a prominent role through the early decades of the ILO, during the Second World War and ever since. And much more recently, the ILO's Global Commission on the Future of Work, which I will come back to in a few minutes, has benefited greatly from the inputs of the NHO's former President, Ms Kristin Skogen Lund, who is with us today and who I want to thank for her commitment.

The Norwegian Government has of course also played a major role over the years, and the Minister is with us today. For example just two years ago, when the International Labour Conference revised the ILO Recommendation on Transition from War to Peace which was originally adopted in 1944, the process was ably brought to a conclusion by the Norwegian government delegate Lena Hasle.

And as we are in a Conference organized by the LO, I wish to mention particularly the role of successive Norwegian Workers' Members of the Governing Body over the years: Konrad Nordahl, Olaf Sunde and Trine-Lise Sundnes, as well as my own personal friend Karl Nandrup Dahl.

Behind these multiple Norwegian contributions to the ILO, there is a common denominator which makes them all possible. That is Norway's commitment to tripartism - an advocate of tripartism but much more importantly, a successful practitioner of tripartism.

I find that Norway is very frequently cited as an example of how tripartism can work and what it achieves – and quite rightly so. But when it is, I often hear the objection from other countries that conditions here are somehow different, and make it possible or even easy to achieve what seems out of reach elsewhere, or that your affluence is a passport to success which others do not have. As if there is something special about Norway.

This, of course, is to confuse cause with effect, but more than that it ignores what really makes tripartism work – pragmatism, a willingness to compromise, strong and representative actors, and that element of trust that is a specific word in Norwegian. The fact is that tripartism is never easy; that basically the same problems have to be addressed here as everywhere else.

The practice of tripartism also differs a lot from one country to another. Indeed partnerships between employers and workers were already well developed in some countries before the ILO existed, and have evolved according to their own national circumstances ever since. That was how

the first occupational safety and health law was adopted here in 1896, and sometime later the legal 8-hour working day was brought in.

Sometimes the tripartite approach of the ILO is characterized to suggest that the role of the trade unions is to push ahead as much as they can, that of the employers to pull the brakes, and that of governments somehow to achieve a balance between the two parties.

Reality is more complicated. Another parallel dynamic was set into motion after 1919: that of the possibility of employers and workers seeking joint positions and agreement, and together guiding the governments towards pragmatic social solutions. Particularly at times of crisis, or when complicated issues have to be negotiated, both nationally and internationally this bipartite cooperation of the social partners has often been a determining factor for the way in which labour law and social policies have been developed and applied. Many important decisions have been arrived at when there has been a high level of consensus between the employers and the workers, when indeed they have helped to sort out what have been essentially problems between governments – for example in the very important negotiations in 1999 of the ILO Convention on the worst forms of child labour, the most widely ratified of all the ILO Conventions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the beginning of this Centennial year, it is legitimate and necessary to ask, what have we achieved through international labour law, tripartite cooperation and the employment and social policies they have generated?

We should not exaggerate the significance of what has been done and the challenges that therefore remain – but it would also be foolish and counterproductive to understate what we have done.

Especially here in the North, in the Nordic countries, we need just to look around. Prosperity and welfare, where it exists, has been the result of an interaction of economic and social factors. Tripartism, collective bargaining and social dialogue are at the root of every sustainable success story. They have allowed different groups to buy in to increasingly equal, broad economic and social developments.

It may be that as a result of these achievements, we have become so much part of the architecture that these achievements are no longer recognized. They are simply an accepted part of the picture, often taken for granted. What has been achieved can also be seen on occasions as a competitive burden.

Globally – while the ILO may protest rightfully that our Conventions are not ratified by all and that jointly agreed policies are not implemented everywhere – when we look at our 187 member States, virtually everywhere albeit in different ways and irrespective of ratifications, labour law and practice are inspired and framed by what has been discussed and decided upon in the ILO, and that is no small achievement.

It is no small achievement either that all eight of the ILO's fundamental rights Conventions dealing with freedom of association and collective bargaining, and the elimination of child labour, forced labour and discrimination have been ratified by every single member State in our European and Central Asian region, 51 of them; and our Centenary is a golden opportunity for the ILO to push for universal ratification of these fundamental workers' rights Conventions.

But even if this were achieved we will continue to confront major challenges to the ILO's normative function – even in relation to fundamental rights, even in Europe, and even in Norway. And I want to welcome the discussion that this Conference will hold later on today in relation to some of these challenges.

I will limit my remarks in this area to stressing that the ILO will itself be determined on the occasion of its Centenary in its continuing efforts to ensure that our standards are up-to-date and relevant, that our system of supervision of their application is authoritative and effective, and that the impact of these standards is maximized as the rules of the game of our globalized economy – and in being so, also a key contributor to the sustainability of a fair globalization. Here, I think we need to intensify our cooperation with other international and regional organizations, and we have a good mandate for doing so in the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we take on these, and the many other challenges of the world of work, we are obliged to recognize the reality that our international system, and many of the institutions of national public life, face great pressures around the world. Commitments made at international level – be they on climate change, on migration, on trade, on defence, or in Europe – are criticized increasingly as interfering in national sovereignty, as ineffective, or as in some way operating for the benefit of a self-serving cosmopolitan elite and not for ordinary citizens. This is the zeitgeist of our time. The pace of change in the world, together with the perceived incapacity of policy-makers to provide credible responses to major global challenges – climate change, wars, large-scale flows of migrants and refugees, growing inequality – have generated in many places feelings of disorientation, uncertainty and sometimes fear of the future, with anger, disillusionment and an appetite for new, simple solutions.

People will have different views about what is commonly termed “the rise of populism” in recent years. But I trust that we would be united in opposition to any weakening of international cooperation, to erosion of the values of social justice and democracy, to the violation often with impunity of human rights, to the shrinking of spaces of tolerance and dialogue, to the peddling of fake news, and to the degradation of the conduct of public life which is on offer from some. I believe that it is a responsibility of the ILO to be a bulwark against this kind of tendency.

So, how are we at the ILO, and our allies in countries such as Norway, going to manage in the world today? Should we be using the tools and instruments that have been developed, handed down and refined over the past hundred years? Or should we be looking for new instruments?

It would be unwise I think to take it for granted that those tools are necessarily sufficient in their current form today and tomorrow. What worked well yesterday may not always serve us so well tomorrow.

Over the past one hundred years, the context in which we seek to fulfil our Constitutional mandate – to achieve social justice as a basis for lasting peace – has become very different. We are living a period of profound economic and social change – some might say no less so than that which led to the deplorable conditions of work in the early 20th Century.

Some of the drivers of change can be easily identified:

- Demographic change: a bulging youth population in some parts of the world and an aging population in others;
- The challenges of climate change and the need for action to combat it;

- Changes in business models and the way in which work is organized, whether in global supply chains or on digital platforms, with growing diversity in work relations and the increase in what have been called non-standard forms of employment – so much so that some question whether we can even still call these non-standard;
- and of course, technological change, automation, digitalization of work and work relations, artificial intelligence and much more.

It was in this context that in 2013 the ILO launched its Future of Work Centenary Initiative to encourage the ILO's tripartite constituents – trade unions, employers' organizations and governments – to reflect on the future of work and consider how they and the ILO might respond to such challenges and shape a future of work that we want: one that delivers social justice.

And in 2017, we established a Global Commission on the Future of Work, co-chaired by Stefan Löfven, Prime Minister of Sweden and Cyril Ramaphosa, the President of South Africa. The Commission brought together 27 Commissioners from all over the world and from diverse backgrounds. It met four times at the ILO's headquarters in Geneva to prepare its final report.

I am afraid I am not allowed to reveal to you the content of that report. It will be launched on 22 January and remains confidential until then. But it will be a short and political, rather than technical, report and I think you will see that it reflects an emerging consensus that we need to take something of a new and different path. I am not giving anything away if I say that Commissioners share the view that we need to take action now to shape the future of work that we want. Their report will focus on what they see as the roadmap for a future that provides security, equality and prosperity.

I will go a little further. Having read carefully the LO's Programme of Action 2017-2021 on the way to Oslo yesterday, I am struck by how the key priorities of your programme – learning, creating, working, sharing, safeguarding, organizing and mobilizing, harnessing globalization – resonate with what our Commission has to say.

This is encouraging because we want the Commission's report to provoke tripartite dialogue and discussion at the national level, in preparation for the ILO's Centenary International Labour Conference in June this year. The Conference is expected to adopt a "Centenary Declaration" to guide the ILO and its constituents to shape the future of work in the framework of social justice.

It is not for me today to speak to the possible content of such a declaration. Let me focus rather on what seem to me to be its main prerequisites.

If we want to ensure that labour and social standards – the common values that we share – are respected, there has to be dialogue, at all levels. It has to be transparent, accountable, responsible and representative. This in fact has not changed from the broad definition of tripartite cooperation established from the beginning in the ILO's Constitution.

Dialogue, based on fundamental values despite the current turbulence, can be expected to become even more important due to the rapid changes in our societies. Where we earlier could spend quite a long time, even years in identifying new challenges and devising laws and other ways to cope with them, future change is liable to be so fast that we will not have the luxury of that time-scale any more.

This certainly does not mean that basic principles and standards will become obsolete. Rather, we need to find the ways to enable their continuing implementation, in working life and the society in general.

There are many directions in which the future of work could take us, if we do not take decisions and adopt policies to attain the future of work we want. The future is not decided for us; it is what we make of it. Ultimately, it all depends on the conscious choices we make.

In that context let me recall that my last visit to Oslo was exactly 3 years ago when I had the privilege of participating in the NHO's Conference, which on that occasion focused on the future of work. I must say I was somewhat intimidated as a number of real technology gurus made dazzling presentations before me about what was in store for us from technological innovation! I made a more modest point that the future of work would be what we make of it and that there was urgent need for trade unions, employers and governments to sit down and get on with that job.

Quite soon after that (and I didn't know it would happen), the Presidents – now ex-Presidents - of the NHO and LO announced the adoption of a Sustainability Pact, which did exactly that.

My conclusion is that here in Norway that message is already well understood. Less so in the rest of the world.

Let me end by confessing that as a Brit on the eve of Brexit, I spent much of the Christmas period discussing with family and friends whether we should look to Norway for a solution to our problems. I am not sure. Although I am obliged to recognize that it seems to be working for Manchester United Football Club.

But I do know from experience that Norway is a country where you have to speak straight and tell the truth. Franklin Roosevelt once said that the ILO was a wild dream, wilder still because it was made by Workers, Employers and Governments working together. I don't think Norwegians are given to wild dreams because geography, nature and history have given the Norwegians a particularly healthy shot of realism. So, please keep on speaking straight, so that we have enough content to keep on going forward and further developing the mechanisms of tripartite cooperation and social dialogue that we have so successfully developed together over these past hundred years, and for which we owe you a great deal.

Thank you.