

Provisional Record

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Plenary sitting

High-level section: Visits by Heads of State and Government and other distinguished guests on the occasion of the Centenary of the International Labour Organization

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Thursday, 20 June 2019, 11.40 a.m.

President: Mr Elmiger

High-level section

The President

(Original French)

I call to order the 17th plenary sitting of the 108th Session of the International Labour Conference.

In order to mark the Centenary of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Conference will be addressed by Heads of State and Government and other distinguished guests, who will gather to reaffirm their commitment to the principle of social justice upon which the ILO was founded 100 years ago and to share with the Conference their own experiences and their vision for the future of work. As part of this high-level section, we have the honour and privilege today to receive the visits of two of these guests. Without further ado, I give the floor to the first of them, Her Excellency Ms Hilda Heine, President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

Statement by Her Excellency

Ms Hilda Heine,

President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

Ms Heine

President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands

The Centenary of the International Labour Organization gives us reason to celebrate 100 years of the ILO's indispensable contribution advocating for labour standards, human rights and peace. The achievement of equal opportunities of decent work is a key pillar of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and social justice must be achieved. I also affirm the ILO's Declaration on the future of work, which is setting ambitious goals.

Unemployment, especially among young people, is a major challenge in both developed and developing economies, in all regions of the world. Looking back on a century of efforts, what will it take for us to have a robust labour market with decent work for all?

Firstly, I would like to join the voices of those leaders who reaffirm their commitment to the ILO and its mandate. We need the strongest possible ILO to surmount the challenges that lie ahead. Secondly, this occasion is a moment to reflect deeply on what has worked best and where the ILO, the member States and indeed all the tripartite actors as a whole could do better. I would like to add to the many excellent proposals that have been put forward by the leaders who have spoken before me, and to bring our Pacific perspective.

We feel it is vital that the ILO and the international system consider closely the unique challenges faced by small island developing States (SIDS) – or better known as big ocean States (BOS) – like the Marshall Islands. Together we need to strengthen the island-tailored approaches which work within our small-scale and narrow economies. The UN SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway will be showcased at a key high-level event this September and paired with a review outcome. Despite its mandate, the international system is often hit-or-miss on designing and implementing effective assistance

for small island developing States, and this gap can hamper efforts at achieving effective job strategies.

I am very pleased to announce that the Marshall Islands has established a Permanent Mission in Geneva. We therefore hope to play a more active part in the ILO in Geneva going forward, and will be pleased to provide our Pacific perspectives.

In our specific national case, close to 50 per cent of young people in the Marshall Islands are unemployed, which is pushing an exodus of young talent out of our nation. The ILO has assisted with the development of key policy tools, including a National Action Plan which intends to boost youth employment, and through national planning, to support progress on the SDGs. We cannot achieve these goals in one cycle, and thus the achievement of decent jobs has been integrated into comprehensive national strategic planning and is now part of a cross-sectoral approach.

Turning paper intentions into real employment requires political will and commitment to tackle core structural issues. It is important that the Marshall Islands works to break the chains of aid dependency and transition into a thriving economy. Ensuring decent work will require new investment pathways to help transform our economy at scale. We also need safeguards, and we are proud to have recently ratified the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), as well as our earlier ratifications of the Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention (Revised), 2003 (No. 185), and the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC, 2006). As the world's largest tuna port, we have also joined the rest of the region, through the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, to ensure that human rights standards will now be upheld in the international fisheries operations within our jurisdictions and region, but we also need the political will of distant fishing nations. We therefore welcome the ILO's work at the regional level to support greater coordination between young people and entrepreneurship programmes.

The Marshall Islands and many other island nations, as well as other vulnerable countries, face severe climate risks and threats. Like other cross-cutting goals, SDG 8 should be a key component of climate action and can help to make a more resilient future for our young populations. We believe that the increasingly difficult environmental conditions we face at home are already a driver of the migration and youth employment concerns we face. The chronic flooding we grapple with due to sea level rise, extreme weather and rising heat are a serious downward pressure on our economy.

We welcome the ILO's work on heat stress and other weather dangers faced by workers due to climate change, and encourage the expansion of this programme. As Chairperson of the Climate Vulnerable Forum, I would like to especially underscore the need for more assistance to nations grappling with these challenges. The ILO *Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all*, addressing sustainable development, decent work and green jobs, are equally a welcome development.

In our national commitments on climate change, we are aiming for carbon neutrality and have ambitious renewable energy targets. As we progress towards these targets, we need to ensure that jobs and families are preserved in the transition. Achieving a just transition therefore has to be a top priority for the ILO as the world advances with the urgent need to do more to fight climate change and keep those most vulnerable, including workers, around the world safe.

The Marshall Islands is, moreover, proud to join Ireland as a co-lead for the Youth and Mobilization track at the upcoming Climate Action Summit, hosted by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, and we will work to build a stronger bridge between political leads and the loud voices of youth advocates. It is our youngest and future generations who must be able to thrive in a resilient future, and leaders must work tirelessly until that is achieved.

Statement by His Majesty King Philippe of Belgium

His Majesty King Philippe,
King of the Belgians
(*Original French*)

I am happy to be able to take part in this Centenary Session, which gives all our countries the opportunity to reassert our commitment to the advancement of social justice and the promotion of decent work.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), the oldest institution in the United Nations system, also provides us with the opportunity to recall our unshakeable faith in multilateralism. The ILO emerged from the deep wounds of the First World War and was established to fight worker exploitation in the industrialized nations of the time. Its founders, which included Belgium, asserted the importance of social justice to ensure peace and security.

The Preamble to the ILO Constitution reminds us that universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based on social justice, and that conditions of labour exist involving injustice, hardship and privation for large numbers of people, thereby producing unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled.

The ILO's founders realized that it was a matter of urgency to improve those conditions. Belgium became actively involved – always in a spirit of consensus – in both the drafting and the implementation of the Organization's strategic objectives. Many Belgians committed themselves to the undertaking with idealism and conviction. Exactly 75 years ago, when Belgium introduced social dialogue and tripartism, it turned for inspiration to the values and Conventions of the ILO. To this day, tripartite social dialogue holds a central position in the organization of labour in my country. We are deeply attached to it.

In terms of the promotion and implementation of fundamental principles and rights, my country has ratified 113 Conventions and will very shortly deposit the instrument of ratification for the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930. The Protocol targets modern forms of forced labour, such as human trafficking, and marks a major step forward in the fight against forced labour worldwide. The creation of, and access to, decent jobs remain at the heart of our employment policy, as illustrated by the Interprofessional Agreement 2019–2020, which underpins the sector-based collective agreements determining the conditions of work of 96 per cent of Belgian workers and employees.

I would like to pay tribute here to the sustained efforts that the ILO has made throughout its century of existence and to the progress achieved by its activities around the world. The Organization has managed to adapt to the many events marking that period. It survived the abolition of the League of Nations, the Second World War, the Cold War, the fall of communism, and globalization. Thanks to its normative function, it has helped to develop the rights of workers and to improve their working conditions. Thanks to its activities, child labour has been considerably reduced, women have obtained access to labour markets, millions of workers have escaped poverty, working hours have shrunk and most countries have at least a basic system of social security.

Progress has been uneven but real, and must remain a source of hope and encouragement for your future activities. Today, after the long and complicated road travelled, decent work deficits unfortunately continue to remain significant. In 1919 already, it was recognized that a nation's failure to adopt a truly humane labour system hamstrung the efforts of other nations wishing to improve the plight of workers. The ILO's answer to

economic interdependence was international social cooperation for the purpose of harmonizing working conditions. A century later, those considerations are as true as ever.

The ILO's *raison d'être* as the global labour parliament is even more justified in today's rapidly changing world. In a context characterized by growing globalization and interdependence, ensuring a better future for humanity faces many challenges: deepening inequality and the feeling of insecurity it engenders, discrimination against women, migration, resurgent national and identity-based withdrawal and the crisis in multilateralism, the technological revolution and global warming. Those challenges provide the ILO with an opening to gather fresh momentum and to formulate new responses based on the tested principles of solidarity and economic democracy.

In that respect, I salute the Director-General's initiative to create the Global Commission on the Future of Work. In its Report entitled *Work for a brighter future*, the Commission recommends that national strategies pursue ten objectives centred on the human being and that the ILO take action in a number of areas more specific to it. The Organization has an important role to play in persuading all its member States to take concrete action for greater social justice and to invest in people. Under the combined effect of technological change and the imperative need to preserve our environment, there will have to be a paradigm shift in working arrangements.

The classic model of growth has reached its limits and must be replaced by something radically different. Digitalization will do away with some jobs but create others. According to a study recently conducted in Belgium, for every job lost to digitalization, 3.7 new jobs will be created. The very content of many existing jobs will change. Most workers will have to retrain, and many will have to change occupation entirely. This places a huge responsibility on the authorities, employers and trade unions.

Employers must commit to offering their employees the possibility of upgrading their skills. Workers in a declining occupation must be given the time and support they need to learn another. All of these transformations will require great vigilance on the part of our countries, and also huge inventiveness on the part of the ILO. The social progress of the past will have to be defended in the face of new economic thinking. The inclusive tripartite model and social dialogue will have to be protected and stimulated. They are at one and the same time factors of stability and huge assets for better managing the transition.

The protection of human dignity is an absolute principle that must guide us through the storms of today and in the century to come. It is on the strength of that conviction that the Global Commission on the Future of Work proposes, as the principal fields of action, measures aimed at investing in human potential and in decent and sustainable work. To fulfil the objectives set, profound changes will have to be made in the advanced economies, but even more in those presently hosting the some 2 billion workers in the informal sector worldwide.

Full productive employment and decent work for all are among the Sustainable Development Goals. The road to attaining them will be long and hard. The twenty-first century world, with its radical change and new challenges, is in sore need of an experienced organization like yours to ensure that human dignity is preserved. It is my hope that, within the broader United Nations framework, the ILO will continue to point the way towards social justice and that your efforts will contribute to a better future for all workers, men and women. I wish you every success in the pursuit of your magnificent mission.

The President
(Original French)

On behalf of my fellow Officers and all Conference delegates, I wish to express my profound gratitude to you for having honoured us with your presence today and having shared your thoughts and your vision.

I hereby adjourn this high-level section, organized as part of the 17th plenary sitting of the 108th Session of the International Labour Conference.

(The sitting adjourned at 12.25 p.m.)