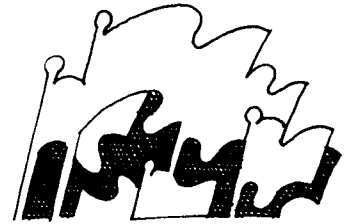


# Foreign Labor Developments



## **ILO adopts new standards on health services, labor data**

TADD LINSENMAYER

The 71st International Labor Conference, meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, largely kept disruptive political issues below the surface, and adopted new international labor standards on occupational health services and labor statistics, according to American delegates.

The June 7 to 27 Conference also gave preliminary consideration to standards concerning asbestos, adopted a resolution and conclusions on equal opportunities and equal treatment for men and women in employment, and approved two technical resolutions concerning steps to alleviate Africa's food problems and to curtail the use of dangerous substances and processes in industry.

U.S. Secretary of Labor William E. Brock, in his first appearance before the ILO's annual meeting, stressed the importance of ILO programs aimed at promoting labor/management cooperation, explaining to the Conference that "new technologies often demand a more flexible approach to the organization of work, one guided by greater interaction, understanding and cooperation between labor and management."

To help the ILO begin collecting and disseminating information on effective labor/management solutions to specific problems, Brock offered a special grant to study successful labor/management efforts to develop training and retraining programs in advance of the introduction of new technology.

Of the Conference's four technical agenda items, two—occupational health services and labor statistics—had been carried over from the 1984 Conference.

The Conference adopted both a convention (which can be formally ratified by governments, giving it the same legal status as an international treaty) and a recommendation concerning occupational health services. The convention sets out a general framework for national occupational health services. It emphasizes the preventive nature of such services and defines the functions of health services to include

identification of workplace health risks, surveillance of the working environment, and workers' health, training, and participation in workplace design and choice of equipment and substances used in work. The recommendation deals in more specific detail with the organization and functions of occupational health services.

Two controversial issues arose during consideration of these standards. The first involved language requiring that workers and their representatives "cooperate and participate" in implementing occupational health services. American and other employers argued that this inappropriately introduced labor relations issues into the standards.

Employer delegates objected even more strongly to a provision in the recommendation requiring multinational enterprises to provide "the highest standard of services, without discrimination, to the workers in all its establishments, regardless of the place or country in which they are situated." The employers argued that this provision raised serious issues of sovereignty and could lead to a multiplicity of levels and standards of services in countries in which many multinationals operate.

The majority of delegates, including U.S. Government and worker delegates, believed there was sufficient flexibility in the standards to allow implementation consistent with varying national laws and practices.

The Conference also adopted a new convention and recommendation concerning labor statistics, which revised a set of standards which the ILO had originally adopted in 1938. The new standards identify nine areas for coverage in national labor statistics programs, including employment and unemployment, labor force, earnings and hours of work, labor costs, occupational injuries and illnesses, and industrial disputes.

Efforts by the U.S. Government to include productivity among statistical programs required under the convention were not successful. However, productivity was included in the recommendation and in a special resolution asking the ILO to give high priority to problems of productivity measurement.

The first discussion of safety in the use of asbestos (this issue will also be on the agenda of the 1986 conference) proved every bit as controversial as expected. A number of delegates proposed an international ban on asbestos and its replacement with appropriate substitutes. This effort was

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defeated, and the decision to ban or restrict the use of asbestos was left to national authorities. Similarly, a provision urging national authorities to give special attention to the exposure of young workers to asbestos was adopted in place of an outright prohibition of youth under age 18 from working with asbestos.

The Conference's preliminary conclusions concerning asbestos call for national laws and regulations to control exposure to asbestos by, among other means, encouraging alternative materials and technology, establishing and enforcing exposure limits, ensuring proper cleaning and containment of workers' clothing to prevent carrying asbestos fibers outside the workplace, and through effective training and surveillance programs.

Unlike the other technical agenda items, consideration of equal opportunities and equal treatment for men and women in employment was not designed to lead to the adoption of standards. Rather, the Conference adopted a resolution and conclusions establishing certain fundamental principles.

In its final conclusions, the Conference noted the "uneven" pace of progress in promoting equality and, in some cases, even a deterioration in the situation of women. The conclusions call for, among other things, new measures to promote the employment of women and provide equal employment opportunities, further development of education and training programs, intensified efforts to eliminate occupational segregation in labor markets, and promotion of the principle of "equal remuneration for work of equal value," that is, comparable worth.

The work of the Conference committee considering the equal opportunity agenda item was complicated by efforts by some Eastern European countries to introduce extraneous political issues.

According to the U.S. Government representative in the committee, East Germany and Czechoslovakia introduced a separate draft resolution which, while giving lip service to equality for men and women, in reality attempted to introduce such extraneous issues as disarmament, apartheid, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and creation of a new international economic order.

While this resolution was never substantively considered, a related proposal to amend the committee's conclusions to include a reference to disarmament provoked prolonged debate. In the end, the Conference committee rejected the reference as inappropriate to the subject of equality of opportunity and treatment.

The Conference also adopted a resolution concerning action to assist African countries in achieving, in particular, food security. Against the backdrop of mounting concern for the African famine, the resolution calls for increased international assistance and ILO technical programs aimed at rural public works, skills training, and development of cooperatives.

A second resolution concerning dangerous substances and processes in industry came, in part, as a result of the fatal

gas explosion in Mexico and the methyl isocyanate leak in Bhopal, India. As finally adopted by the Conference after extensive debate in committee and consideration of many amendments, the resolution calls on national authorities to "ensure that the introduction of new hazardous substances and processes are effectively monitored and covered by adequate health and safety measures," urges employers to provide the safest possible operating and control systems, and asks the ILO to place more emphasis on controlling hazardous substances in its technical programs.

Although political controversy was largely kept below the surface and did not dominate this year's Conference as it has in some other years, politics was not absent.

According to Robert W. Searby, chairman of the U.S. delegation, Nicaragua attempted to introduce, in the name of the Non-Aligned Movement (a loose association of developing countries), a strong condemnation of U.S. policies in Central America. The United States and other ILO members insisted that such a political issue was not relevant to the ILO. In the end, only a much watered-down letter was sent to the President of the Conference which was neither officially distributed nor granted the status of a Conference document.

Of somewhat more concern to members of the American delegation was the "suspension" of discussion of Soviet violations of the ILO's freedom of association standards.

In 1977, the United States quit the ILO citing, in particular, the Conference's "selective concern for human rights," that is, the ILO's tendency to criticize human rights violations in developing countries while ignoring serious problems in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

More recently, and particularly since the United States rejoined the ILO in 1980, the organization has been far more vocal in its criticism of Soviet bloc violations, in particular, Poland's efforts to crush the Solidarity trade union. According to Searby, this has prompted a strong Soviet attack on the ILO's human rights machinery—including increased political and financial pressure to secure a "selective immunity" from ILO monitoring. Although the Conference committee dealing with the implementation of standards by ILO members continued to carefully and objectively examine violations of the crucial freedom of association standards by many developing and Western countries, this year, the workers' vice chairman in the committee—to the surprise of many—successfully instigated the suspension of substantive consideration of long-standing Soviet violations.<sup>1</sup>

This move prompted the U.S. Government representative to express "concern" about the possible "return to the moratorium" on discussion of Soviet violations which prevailed throughout the 1960's and into the 1970's. Secretary of State George P. Shultz, in hearings before the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee in September, expressed concerns about "backsliding" in the ILO's willingness to look critically at Soviet violations in the face of increasing Soviet pressures.

Finally, the Conference continued its practice of reviewing the policy of apartheid in South Africa, urging intensified efforts by governments, employers, and workers to pressure the South African government into eliminating it. The Conference also adopted a \$253 million budget to cover ILO activities for the 1986–87 period.

In 1986, the ILO Conference will again consider proposed standards on asbestos and will hold general discussions (not

leading to new international standards) on the promotions of small- and medium-sized undertakings, and on the problems of young workers. □

—FOOTNOTE—

<sup>1</sup> Although the Conference committee did examine violations of freedom of association and discrimination in employment standards by Czechoslovakia, it was unable to review violations by Poland and Romania because those governments refused to participate in the committee.

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### A different kind of cost-of-living study

The [BLS] . . . participated in an innovative cost-of-living inquiry conducted by the International Labor Office in 1930–31. The study originated with a request by the Ford Motor Company for information to help in setting wage rates of its employees in certain European cities to ensure the same general living standard as that of its employees in Detroit. The Bureau conducted the work in Detroit, covering a sample of 100 families. The Detroit budget was then used by the various European statistical agencies, with adjustment for differences in national consumption habits, government social insurance payments, and other factors, to determine the cost of living in those cities relative to Detroit.

—JOSEPH P. GOLDBERG AND WILLIAM T. MOYE

*The First Hundred Years of the  
Bureau of Labor Statistics,  
Bulletin 2235 (Bureau of Labor  
Statistics, 1985).*

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