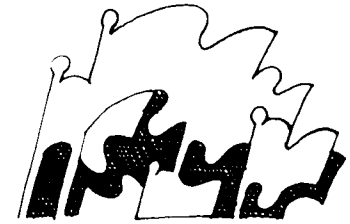


Foreign Labor Developments



ILO adopts asbestos standard; focuses on employment issues

TADD LINSENMAYER

The 1986 International Labor Organization (ILO) Conference agreed to new standards to protect workers from asbestos hazards and urged governments to adopt policies to reduce youth unemployment, create jobs through small enterprise development, and counteract the negative employment consequences of international debt. These standards were among the highlights of the 3-week Conference, held in Geneva, Switzerland, June 4 to 25, and attended by 1,800 delegates from 140 countries.

U.S. Secretary of Labor William E. Brock cited the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl as an example of the serious safety and health hazards which can be associated with some new technologies and called on the ILO and its members to intensify efforts to share information on such perils. Brock pledged to make greater use of the ILO's occupational health hazard alert system in developing safety and health standards for Americans.

The heart of the ILO's annual Conference is its standard-setting activities—the development of conventions, which are legally binding treaties when ratified by governments, and recommendations. In recent years, many ILO members have advocated slowing the pace in the development of new standards to allow governments time to act on those already on the books. (The ILO has adopted 162 conventions since its creation in 1919.)

The 1986 Conference adopted only two new standards: a convention and a recommendation on asbestos. The convention requires that ratifying governments develop national programs to prevent worker exposure to asbestos health hazards, including worker exposure limits and effective inspection programs. The convention prohibits the use of crocidolite—a type of asbestos considered particularly dangerous—as well as the spraying of asbestos. The question of banning other types of asbestos was left to the discretion of national governments. Special provisions deal with demolition of buildings containing asbestos, the handling and cleaning of work clothing, and environmental and medical surveillance. The asbestos recommendation covers

many of these same questions in greater detail.

The Conference also considered youth unemployment and small enterprise development. Unlike asbestos, these did not lead to new standards, but rather resulted in non-binding conclusions.

According to the U.S. Government representative, the work of the committee on youth was complicated by the efforts of some delegates to raise extraneous political issues. For example, the Soviet Union and certain Eastern European countries introduced a resolution which attempted to link youth unemployment to the arms race. While this resolution was never seriously considered, the youth committee did adopt a paragraph sponsored by its worker and employer members urging that “socially unproductive activities which pose a threat to peace should be redirected towards socially and economically productive activities . . .”

The Conference's conclusions on youth recognized that the modern sector of the economy in many countries has only a limited capacity to absorb the estimated 1 billion youth who will be in the world labor force by the year 2000—84 percent of them in developing countries. It advocated, therefore, that more resources should be focused on the creation of employment in the private sector, self-employment, and jobs for youth in the rural agricultural and nonagricultural sectors of the economy. The Conference also urged better-designed national training and educational programs that would provide “employable skills” to young jobseekers.

The Conference's conclusions on small enterprise development also dealt primarily with employment creation. The U.S. Government representative noted, for example, that two-thirds of the 43 million new jobs created in the United States since 1960 were in small businesses. The Conference called on governments to adopt policies to promote small enterprise development, including “simplifying and streamlining” government regulations which hinder the establishment of small enterprises. This latter point was qualified by an explicit recognition of the need for “fully protecting workers' rights.”

To assist entrepreneurs in establishing new enterprises, the ILO's conclusions call for national small enterprise development policies which include effective management training programs, the creation of technology centers, and financial assistance programs (including credit guarantees). The Conference also encouraged the ILO to expand its own small enterprise development efforts.

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Perhaps the most controversial issue during the Conference was a resolution on the employment implications of international debt. The worker delegates at the Conference, joined by a majority of governments, particularly from Latin America, supported adoption of a resolution calling on the ILO to become more involved in finding solutions to the debt problem. The resolution urged creditor governments to extend debt repayment schedules, reduce interest rates, and stabilize foreign exchange rates and commodity prices. It also called for a special "high-level" ILO meeting involving key government labor and finance officials, the heads of international financial organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, and worker and employer representatives. The purpose of this meeting would be to examine "the impact of international trade and financial and monetary policies on employment and poverty."

The sponsors of this resolution argued that the austerity programs required to cope with the debt crisis were leading to higher unemployment in many countries. They insisted that the ILO should work with the international financial organizations and with debtor and creditor governments to find more equitable solutions. Although the United States and most other Western governments opposed the resolution on the grounds that the ILO lacked both the responsibility and expertise to deal with international financial questions, it was adopted by a wide margin.

Almost equally controversial was the adoption, after more than 20 years of debate, of proposals to change the ILO's structure. Most of these proposals concern the ILO Governing Body, the organ responsible for budget and administrative decisionmaking. Specifically, the proposals would expand the Governing Body from 56 to 112 members and make all seats elective (presently, 10 of the 28 government seats are nonelective and reserved for the "states of chief industrial importance": United States, the Soviet Union, United Kingdom, France, Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Japan, India, China, and Brazil. Other proposals relate to the election of the ILO's director general, the quorum needed for valid Conference votes, and procedures for considering resolutions which condemn ILO members.

The major point of controversy, according to U.S. Government Delegate Ambassador Robert W. Searby, stemmed from Soviet demands for guaranteed seats in the employer benches of the Governing Body. The employers have steadfastly refused to elect any Communist "employers" to the Governing Body, arguing that they are, in reality, agents of the government and not free employers.

According to Searby, the Soviets found themselves virtually without support for their proposal for guaranteed seats. (The majority of ILO members supported the ILO's principle of tripartism, including the autonomy of the worker and employer groups.) Unable to block final agreement on the

other structural proposals, the Soviets manifested their displeasure through a series of procedural maneuvers during the opening days of the Conference which thwarted, for 5 days, the start of the campaign which began with the committees on resolutions and the application of ILO standards. The Soviet opposition to these committees stemmed from their alleged underrepresentation of Communist employers (virtually the same complaint they have with the employer benches in the Governing Body). When the structure proposals were presented for a preliminary decision near the end of the Conference, the Soviets continued their protest campaign by insisting on time-consuming votes.

The Conference overwhelmingly approved the structure proposals as amendments to the ILO constitution and standing orders. The constitutional amendments must now be submitted to governments for ratification. None of the amendments will go into effect until they are ratified by two-thirds of the member governments, including 5 of the 10 states of chief industrial importance.

The Conference committee which deals with the application of standards—normally controversial because of its focus on significant human rights violations—was relatively quiet this year. Because of delays due to Soviet opposition to its composition, the committee considered far fewer cases than in previous years, and, according to U.S. members of the committee, considered no Soviet bloc cases. Of the three Soviet bloc cases identified for discussion by the committee, one (Poland's violation of trade union rights) could not be discussed because that government did not send a delegation to the Conference, in view of its announced withdrawal from the ILO. Two other cases (involving Nicaragua and Romania) could not be considered because those governments refused to attend the committee to discuss any of the allegations. The Soviet policy of boycotting the ILO's supervisory machinery provoked a strong reaction from the worker and employer members of the committee and from many governments, and promises to be a major issue at the 1987 Conference.

The Conference committee cited Iran for "continued failure" to eliminate discrimination against the Baha'i religious sect, and adopted "special paragraphs" expressing concern over the nonapplication of ratified conventions in Pakistan (forced labor and fee-charging employment agencies) and Bangladesh (treatment of tribal populations).

In other actions, the Conference adopted proposals to help the ILO offset budget shortfalls arising from the declining value of the dollar. (The ILO receives its income in dollars, but pays most of its bills in Swiss francs.) It also strongly urged, over U.S. Government objections, economic sanctions against South Africa as a weapon to eliminate apartheid. □