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The Thirtieth Anniversary of the Foundation of the I.L.O.

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In commemoration of the foundation of the International Labour Organisation thirty years ago, a brief ceremony, attended by the whole of the staff, took place in Geneva at the headquarters of the International Labour Office on 29 October last. Messages were read from Mr. David A. Morse, Director-General of the Office, and Mr. Edward Phelan, former Director-General, and an address was delivered by Mr. Jef Rens, Assistant Director-General, in which he took stock of the work done by the I.L.O. since its foundation. The text of the two messages and of the address is reproduced below.

MESSAGE FROM MR. DAVID A. MORSE

IT is my great regret that I am not able to be with you today to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the I.L.O. Thirty years ago new and challenging horizons were opened for working peoples throughout the world. A new instrument had been forged to assist them in their search for fair standards of living, for peace and social justice. Albert Thomas seized this instrument with the initiative, courage, foresight and wisdom which made him one of the greatest statesmen of this age, and used it to make a lasting contribution to the welfare of workers everywhere.

Butler, Winant and Phelan have followed and each in his turn has built upon the great foundations which were laid so well.

Many of you still with the Office today have lived through these years of struggle, of disappointment and success, and under each successive Director have rendered the services indispensable for the execution of their plans and schemes.

Today, as we pause at this milestone in the life of the I.L.O., we can see the product of these thirty years of tireless effort and devotion to the cause of peace and social justice. This heritage is now entrusted to us—a heritage which has proved its worth and justified the wisdom and foresight of its founders.

It is upon us that falls the great responsibility of going forward to meet the constant challenge to our aims. It will call for every effort on the part of all of us. We must go forward to new fields—to meet new situations. I shall do my utmost—and I count on you, one and all, in the spirit of the great traditions of the past, and in the spirit, too, of the changing patterns of the post-war era, to work with me in this task—that we may see to it that in our next thirty years our achievements equal—if possible, surpass—the achievements of the past and that we may claim with modesty, but assurance, that we have contributed to the best of our ability to building a world of plenty and of peace.

MESSAGE FROM MR. EDWARD PHELAN

Today the activity of general international organisations has become a feature of the world's political life.

The conferences and other meetings of the United Nations and of the specialised agencies take place continuously : and the experts and consultative missions sent out by these bodies are working all the time in almost every quarter of the globe.

It requires a great, indeed almost a violent, effort of the imagination to realise that there was a time when none of this activity existed, when there were no international organisations of general scope, no continuous succession of international deliberations and decisions, no unceasing going and coming of international advisers and consultants.

The date which separates two epochs in which these things happen continuously and in which they did not happen at all is therefore of historic importance.

It is much more than a milestone in the road of human progress. It is the turning point at which the road took a new and more promising direction.

Thirty years ago this new era of concerted international effort for the establishment of peace based on social justice began. The first of what was to become an unending series of international meetings opened in Washington, D.C., on 29 October 1919.

It was a meeting of the International Labour Conference, and thus fell to the I.L.O. the honour of inaugurating the great constructive effort of international collaboration which has since, after many adversities, developed into the multiple activities of the United Nations.

As the I.L.O. looks back at that opening session thirty years ago it will find, I believe, many reasons for hope and confidence. The delegates at Washington had no past on which to lean. As they worked, what they had thought to be solid ground was slipping beneath their feet. The foundation on which they thought to build was in fact distorted, though, as it proved, not destroyed. They looked forward to no future: they had to be content to do what they could in a most uncertain present. Today their successors can look back on a long and impressive series of achievements. The Organisation not only survived the cataclysm of war but emerged from that ordeal more vigorous than ever. The original purpose of the Organisation stands with unimpeachable validity. Redefined in the Declaration of Philadelphia, it has made a wider appeal and secured a deeper response than ever before.

To the faith, on which alone Washington could build, there is now added the confidence which can be drawn from a sense of accomplishment, the strength which comes from wider and more enlightened support, and the comfort of a powerful alliance with the United Nations and the other specialised agencies. No doubt there will be problems and difficulties. As Mr. Trygve Lie said a few days ago, the United Nations is as yet neither a success nor a failure.

The thirty years' record of the International Labour Organisation shows that, with vigour and, not optimism, but a refusal to be dismayed, no difficulties can permanently avert our progress towards a peaceful world.

In the effort to promote that progress the I.L.O. has its recognised part. Inspired by its courageous beginnings it can be counted upon to make its contribution with devotion and energy, and by maintaining its own high tradition of service will have its honourable share in the success of the most important of all human efforts, the establishment of a just and enduring peace.

SPEECH OF MR. JEF RENS

The International Labour Organisation is celebrating today the thirtieth anniversary of its foundation. On 29 October 1919 the first International Labour Conference was opened at Washington and this date has since been adopted as the birthday of the I.L.O. This body is therefore thirty years old today, nearly one third of a century, and its existence, although short in historical perspective, already covers one generation.

The Directorate of the Office has felt that this is not an occasion to pass over in silence. In the absence of the Director-General, whose message you have just heard, I have therefore been asked to say a few words to you.

(Mr. Rens first drew attention to the fact that among those present were several persons who were members of the Secretariat of the Washington Conference in 1919 or had belonged to the staff of the Office since 1920 ; he also welcomed the presence of various members of the Governing Body.)

Our Organisation is to be congratulated on having found in its service at its very start men and women so capable, so devoted and imbued with such faith in the mission with which its founders had entrusted it.

In point of fact, what exactly was this mission ? Why was the I.L.O. founded ? What needs were satisfied by its creation ? Who first conceived the idea of this Organisation ? Here are a few questions which in a moment like this we, and especially our young colleagues who have joined us since the war, may well ask.

The mission of the I.L.O. is set out in full in the Preamble to its Constitution, and springs from the first of its sentences,

which proclaims that lasting and universal peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice.

Taking note of the existence of conditions of labour involving such injustice, hardship and privations to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace of the world is imperilled, the Paris Peace Conference decided to set up the I.L.O. as an international instrument for improving the conditions of life and labour of workers throughout the world.

Even though the social position of the workers today still leaves much to be desired in many countries, the progress made during the last three decades is none the less substantial.

Thirty years ago—it is worth while to remind ourselves of the fact—social legislation was only in its inception and measures for social protection were, generally speaking, few and meagre. Up to the first world war, even in the most progressive industrial countries of the world, workers toiled at least ten hours a day and six days a week; wages, often much too low, were fixed by employers unilaterally; social insurance, with very few exceptions, was only beginning to make an appearance; there were appalling gaps in the protection for women and child workers; freedom of association was rarely admitted in principle and often impeded in practice. If we add to this list the lack of education and housing, the malnutrition, the difficulty of obtaining medical care, we have the elements of a situation which it is very difficult for us to imagine today.

It is true that during the two or three decades which immediately preceded the first world war, the workers in most parts of Europe and North America had begun to organise in trade unions and had succeeded, by dint of continuous effort, in wresting from time to time from their employers certain improvements to alleviate their most crying needs. But up to the first world war, their organised efforts yielded them more of consolation than of concrete advantages, more of hope than of immediate improvements in their conditions. The importance of this period lay above all in the fact that the workers, through the increasing strength of their organisations, began to realise the possibility of a future free from poverty and exploitation, and closer to that ideal of justice which

they had, in their distress, begun to envisage. This ideal they had proclaimed to the entire world and they believed in it passionately.

Without the war of 1914-1918 this ideal might not have taken shape or seemed possible of achievement, not in the distant future, but within a short space of time. For during the war the workers of all the belligerent countries had been mobilised in their millions either to fight or to produce the weapons of war. This terrible ordeal was necessary in order that the workers might be considered as citizens with as much right as other social ranks. Equality in sacrifice made them for the first time fully conscious of their value as citizens and as men, and gave them courage to demand that their working and living conditions should be raised to a level compatible with human dignity. All this bloodshed and loss of life was necessary before the other classes of society recognised for the first time the justice of the workers' claims to the product of their work.

There is surely something at once grand and moving in the fact that this, the least privileged of classes dared, in the depths of its misery, to dream of an ideal of social justice, and after conceiving this ideal in its dreams, dared to set about translating it into reality ? That is indeed one of the finest of human adventures in the epoch in which we live. This effort made by the workers is all the more worthy of our admiration since its aim is to benefit not only its authors, but the whole of society, including every class.

How natural all this seems to us nowadays ! In our times, social justice is one of the least contested of political ideas, and social policy one of the key aspects of general policy in every country. Only a third of a century ago, however, the idea of social policy based on justice was still somewhat of a revolutionary innovation, and it was in the I.L.O. that it assumed material shape, for the first time, on the international level. If, in our time, this ideal has not become completely incorporated in society as we know it, it is not because there is any doubt as to its value, but largely, if not solely, because the economic conditions for realising it in full are still lacking.

After these few reflections on the aims, the objectives and the ideals contained in the Constitution of our Organisation,

let us look back a while on the road we have covered in three decades.

First of all, I should like to tell you of the results obtained by the I.L.O. during the first ten years of its existence. You will hear these results, summed in a few short sentences that were spoken by our first Director, Albert Thomas¹:

Ten years have passed since the International Labour Office was founded, ten years of arduous work, ten years of meetings, conferences and negotiations. Twenty-nine Conventions have been voted, 391 ratifications have been obtained. Already the International Labour Office may congratulate itself on having secured some benefits for workers all over the world, according to the words of the Peace Treaty. By the united efforts, the collaboration of heart and mind of one and all, we shall build up the monument to peace and social justice which the nations have conceived after the catastrophe of the war.

Since then, the number of Conventions has risen to 98 and that of Recommendations to 87. Of these 98 Conventions, 57 have come into force, and the number of ratifications obtained is 1,088. But for the second world war, which suspended the activity of the International Labour Conference for five years, these results would have been appreciably larger. Even so, the figures show that a great number of social laws throughout the world have been inspired by standards previously laid down by the International Labour Conference.

We do not consider this number of ratifications to be sufficient, and we are continually striving to find out how best to draw up our Conventions henceforth in order that their ratification may become easier without affecting their intrinsic value in any way.

It would, however, be erroneous to judge the results of this work merely by the number of international labour Conventions adopted and ratified. The Recommendations, too, have influenced a number of social laws all over the world.

Neither should we overlook the work of our regional conferences in Latin America, in the Far East, and in the Middle East, which are now being held regularly. They are doing much to extend to and spread in these economically less developed but rapidly expanding regions the benefits of the social experience acquired in countries that are industrially more advanced.

¹ A record had been made, at the time, of this speech by Albert Thomas.

We should also remember the activities of our industrial committees and all the other committees, such as those on agriculture, plantations, co-operation, indigenous workers, salaried employees and professional workers, which have been set up or developed since the last war, and which at present, side by side with the work of the International Labour Conference, enable the I.L.O. to make deeper studies in the most varied economic sectors.

I cannot refrain from making a brief reference here to an activity which is taking on more and more importance and may certainly be expected to develop very greatly in the near future. It is that of technical assistance. With increasing frequency the members of our technical sections, who in the past were concerned chiefly with studying the problems in hand and preparing schemes of social reform for embodiment in international instruments, are now called upon by Governments—usually the Governments of newer countries—to assist them in drawing up social legislation, or in organising social services or administrations, or in establishing a network of vocational training centres and courses. Thanks chiefly to this new aspect of our activity, the wealth of experience acquired in the social field by the industrial countries of the West—whose prosperity was often built up in part on colonial exploitation—can now be handed back by means of this technical assistance so as to benefit those countries which have most need of it, many of them the colonies of yesterday which have become independent countries today.

You are no doubt justified in asking me a question which has often been asked and which the Directorate of the I.L.O. has, indeed, often asked itself. It is this : how far does all this activity on the part of the Organisation, expressed in conferences, embodied in Conventions, and evoked in the numerous meetings which we organise, really affect the workers' life ? For that is, of course, the real criterion. It is not easy to give a reply, because the answer to the question lies in a multitude of happenings which take place far away from the Office and of which it is often unaware. However, the Office is at present preparing a publication, popularly written but based on careful study of existing social conditions, which will give a clear and simple reply to this question. It is hoped that the publication will be ready very shortly, and you will

be able to see for yourselves that it is an interesting, and in places, even enthralling, work from cover to cover.

It is a story full of examples of the effects of I.L.O. activity, and it does go to show real successes in the attack on social problems and in bringing about greater social justice.

But the darker side must not be forgotten. The Organisation was unable to prevent the second world war—yet that was its principal task. War broke out in spite of the undeniable social progress made all over the world since 1920.

This new catastrophe was due to forces outside our sphere of activity. It proved that although universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based on social justice, the latter by itself is not sufficient to guarantee peace. That is a lesson on which I would invite you to meditate. It is none the less true, however, that peace cannot be attained without social justice, and the lesson which the I.L.O. has learnt from the last war is precisely that it must not only persevere in seeking social justice, but must make every effort to bring it about more speedily. Like the first world war, the past conflict was accompanied everywhere by an accumulation of social demands which were expressed in an explosive outburst as soon as hostilities ceased. We have made, and you yourselves have made, an extraordinary effort to adapt the activities of the Office to the demands which are made on it from every quarter at once.

(Mr. Rens emphasised here the extent and arduousness of the work done by the staff during the last few years.)

Before concluding, I should like to devote a few moments to a brief review of the reasons for the success of the I.L.O., a success which although relative is none the less very real. After some reflection, I have come to the conclusion that these reasons are of four kinds.

The principal and fundamental factor of its success lies of course in the very nature of its mission. Its object is to satisfy, as we have seen, real and imperious needs. It is no exaggeration to say that at the time when the I.L.O. was formed the achievement—or at least the first steps in achievement—of social justice had become an essential condition, not only for the continued progress, but for the very existence of industrial nations. It was to satisfy this obvious necessity

that the founder States of the I.L.O. created this institution, and it is in this necessity that the Organisation has found the inspiration for its activity.

To continue to succeed, we have only to continue to serve the ideal of social justice which is written in our Constitution. This means for the I.L.O. constant examination of existing social conditions throughout the world, a constant effort to get as close to reality as possible, in order to expose want, exploitation, and social injustice wherever they persist. It means thorough study of these evils and, above all, study of the remedies required. It means, too, that the I.L.O., by all the means of influence or action at its disposal, should try to evolve efficacious solutions to these problems. The ultimate criterion of our success is a simple one. The I.L.O. makes progress whenever it alleviates poverty, reduces exploitation and lessens social injustice. It gains a victory whenever it improves the worker's lot, whenever it brings prosperity and sunshine into his home, whenever it restores dignity to his work. That our efforts have been crowned with success is due in great part to the fact that we have always been aware of this profound truth and have acted in accordance with it.

But there are other explanations for this success. There is, for example, the solidity and efficiency of the machinery and constituent elements of the Organisation: the Governing Body, the International Labour Conference, the Member States themselves.

If the Governing Body had not, throughout its existence, been composed of men and women of such wisdom and such devotion to social progress, the Organisation would not have been able to work or succeed as well as it has.

The same remark applies to the International Labour Conference, at whose successive sessions during the last thirty years all those elements who, in their respective countries are principally responsible for social policy have participated: Ministers of Labour and officials of Ministries of Labour, leaders of employers' organisations and of trade unions. Their active participation in its work has endowed the International Labour Conference with that representative character which gives to its decisions their real value.

There is also the support which has always been received from the Member States. Without this support the activities

of the Organisation might have been doomed to failure. But the Member States have always placed, and continue to place, at the disposal of the Office all the reports and studies which it needs to succeed in its work. It is they which, after the adoption of international instruments, generally do all in their power to give effect to the decisions of the Conference. It is the Member States again which supply the Organisation with the funds that enable it to work. Do not forget that these funds come from taxes paid by citizens, mostly ordinary people, and that it is our duty to make the best possible use of this money.

The third reason for the success of the Organisation lies, I think, in the fact that the Office has had the great good luck to have had at its head a series of quite exceptional chiefs.

First of all, Albert Thomas, pioneer and constructor, who had a grandiose vision of the mission of the I.L.O., and who realised that, to carry it out, a great institution was necessary. He it was who gave this Office that solid structure which has resisted the tests of time and still shows remarkable efficiency. The memory of his great personality will continue to live in the hearts of all those who knew him ; his presence among us remains a reality, even for those who did not know him personally but who encounter every day in the course of their work the traces of his creative genius.

Then Harold Butler, the consolidator, who in succeeding his chief and friend, Albert Thomas, carried on the work of the latter with quiet energy, improving by example and encouragement the scientific value of our studies and publications.

Next came John G. Winant, to whom goes the credit for extending the activities of the I.L.O. to the American continent. By his decision to transfer our services in 1940 to a safe haven, he enabled the Office to continue working during the war years.

It is due to the wisdom and exceptional qualities of leadership possessed by his successor, Edward Phelan, that our institution was able to weather the troubled period between 1940 and 1945. To our great regret our former Director-General is prevented from being with us today by an indisposition which we hope is only temporary, but he has sent

us a message. The Organisation owes a great debt of gratitude to him and to Butler, who both, as young officials, played an important part outside the limelight in drawing up our Constitution.

Now we have, in Mr. Morse, a young, energetic, capable and cheerful chief, who nurses ambitious projects for the development of our Organisation. I think you ought to know that the numerous journeys which have so often kept him away from Geneva were solely occasioned by his wish to visit personally many parts of the world and establish there a firm foundation for future activities. With him, I am sure, the I.L.O. will finally cease to be that essentially European organisation which it could not help but be in its early days, and become indeed a truly world organisation, whose influence will be equally felt in all parts of the globe.

It remains for me to mention the final element of our success. This final element is you yourself, the staff, all the officials assembled here, who form the body and the life itself of the Office. Many of you are accustomed to receive, at the closing sessions of our meetings and conferences, well-earned praise from the delegates. But the Directorate rarely has an occasion to tell you all, without distinction of rank or function, the high opinion it has of your service and your efforts.

It is vain to create a great international institution, to invest it with the most noble ideals, to entrust it with the most indispensable tasks, to endow it with the most solid machinery, to give it the most capable chiefs; it cannot succeed in its mission unless it also has an intelligent, industrious, devoted and loyal staff, imbued with a genuine team spirit. You possess all these qualities in the highest degree. What is more astonishing is the fact that these qualities have been characteristic of the staff of this institution since its origin. When I look at you all assembled here I notice that those who have served in the Office since its first days have become few and far between. But numerous are those, who owing to the age limit, have had to leave us, perhaps all too soon. The war has caused changes in our staff which otherwise would not have arisen, or at least not to the same extent. Death has also caused gaps in our ranks, and we think with emotion of those colleagues who are no longer with us: Maurette, Stein, Waelbroeck, Tixier, Winant, and many others.

But among the younger generation who have joined us to fill the empty places, among whom I notice with particular satisfaction a growing number from non-European countries—from North America, Latin America, the Near and Middle East, Asia and Oceania—I find the same qualities as those possessed by their predecessors, qualities which in great part make up the strength of this Organisation.

To what do we owe the excellent quality of our staff? To our tried and tested methods of recruitment? That is doubtless a partial explanation, but I attribute these qualities more to the fact that many who sought to enter this institution did so because they believed in its mission and in its ideals. These qualities are above all due to the fact that all those who work here gradually acquire, if they do not possess it already on entering, the consciousness of sharing in a great task.

There is scarcely any greater satisfaction for a man living in our modern society than this consciousness of taking part, by his work, in a great mission and helping his neighbour by his acts. Modern man cannot find complete happiness in the mere possession of material goods and the enjoyment of liberty. To be happy, he needs to take part in something, in a mission which is greater than himself and makes him rise to nobler heights. Man, that fragile and ephemeral being, needs a feeling of permanency and, I do not hesitate to use the word, of eternity; and when his work gives him that feeling, it affords him incomparable joys.

I sincerely believe that the whole atmosphere of this institution is suffused with such a feeling, and that it is this which imparts to your work and to your conduct in the service of this Organisation those unique qualities of ardour, loyalty, devotion and sacrifice which are evident at all levels.

All of you, whether you perform the simplest and most humble duties or accomplish the most complicated and arduous tasks, all of you together make this Organisation live and contribute to its success; and in doing so you serve humanity, for which, thirty years ago, the International Labour Organisation was created.
