

Trade Unions and Environmentally
Sustainable Development

Booklet 2

**POLITICAL INDICATORS
OF DEVELOPMENT**

*Workers' Education and Environment
Project INT93/M12/NOR*

*Bureau for Workers' Activities
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It comprises:

Guide to the Booklets

1. Environmental Indicators of Development
2. Political Indicators of Development
3. Economic Development and Security
4. Social Development
5. Equality of Opportunity and Treatment
6. Education and Training
7. International Development

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Introduction

In this booklet on political indicators we look at some basic human and trade union rights.

These rights — to live, speak and move freely, for example — are perhaps the most basic measurement of a country's commitment to environmentally sustainable development, for human rights, development and the environment are closely interwoven.

It looks at these links from two viewpoints. Firstly, it points out that any country that exploits its citizens and represses concerned workers and trade unions will not think twice about exploiting and polluting its environmental resources. Very often the two go directly hand-in-hand. Nothing, it seems, must stop development, even to the point of ignoring, or encouraging, the use of forced or child labour, often in projects that destroy the environment in the process.

Secondly, it looks at the vital importance of trade unions in attaining the goals of environmentally sustainable development. As the many new environmental and developmental challenges are those in which all three social partners — governments, employers and workers — have joint interests, then it follows that workers and their trade unions have to be full participants in defining and implementing relevant activities. In the case of the environment it is impossible to see how progress can be made unless all partners, including trade unions, work together with a common aim and with well-defined, guaranteed rights.

Democracy, then, is the thread which runs through this booklet. For us as trade unionists this means looking at the most basic rights, including:

- ◆ the right to organize and promote our interests in freedom and peace;
- ◆ the right to operate and negotiate on our members' behalf;
- ◆ the abolition of forced labour.

What can be said of exploitation of workers and repression of trade union activities can also be said of certain sectors of the workforce and community. Freedom from discrimination based on gender, ethnic origin, age, etc., and the abolition of child labour are therefore also basic human rights to strive for.

It is hoped that the following pages will help you and your union to:

- ◆ think about the importance of basic human and trade union rights to the goals of environmentally sustainable development;
- ◆ define priorities in the area of these rights to include in a union policy on overall environmentally sustainable development.

POLITICAL INDICATORS OF DEVELOPMENT

Human rights, development and the environment

**A climate of violence and intimidation
constitutes a serious obstacle
to the exercise of trade union rights.**

ILO Committee on Freedom of Association

The different political indicators outlined in this booklet are perhaps the most basic measurement of a country's commitment to environmentally sustainable development. They deal with the basic human rights —to live, move and speak freely, etc. Human rights, development and the environment are closely interwoven. Lack of progress in any one of these areas will be a constant threat to the success of the others.

It is no coincidence that some of the world's worst environment and development problems have been identified in countries with the worst record for observing human and trade union rights. Undemocratic regimes all over the world can provide many examples of the disregard for human rights, trade union rights and the environment.

Any country plagued by political unrest can always be taken advantage of, and this can also apply to exploitation of the environment and of workers. Any country that knowingly exploits and pollutes environmental resources for short-term gains will not think twice about ignoring the rights of its citizens or repressing concerned workers and trade unions.

It is possible that increasing criticism of some countries' environmental policies — or lack of them — will result in even more harsh treatment from governments and vested interests given the high political profile the environment is commanding nowadays. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the trade union movement in general have always stressed the importance of durable democratic structures, respect for trade union rights and the involvement of workers in the decision-making process as necessary requirements for economic development. In the case of the environment it is impossible to see how any progress can be made unless all parties, including trade unions, work together with a common aim and with well-defined and guaranteed rights and responsibilities.

ICFTU: "Environment and Development: The Trade Union Agenda"



Matteo Montesano, ILO Turin

Right to freely-chosen employment



A still from Damien Lewis and Tom Sheahan's documentary "Life on the Line", which shows the use of forced labour for road construction in Burma.

Democracy is the thread which runs through this booklet, starting, for workers, with the right to have freely-chosen employment. That is, not only to have the right to employment, but also not to be forced into slavery, compulsory or bonded labour.

Whilst many may think of slavery or compulsory labour as a thing of the past, it is by no means the case. Forced labour (any work or service exacted under threat of penalty and for which the person has not offered him- or herself voluntarily) is still practiced on a massive scale, and in some cases is actually increasing. It is used for political purposes or for economic development in many countries. It is used as a means of labour discipline, as a punishment for having taken part in strikes and as a means of racial, social, national or religious discrimination. In the case of economic development the use of forced labour often goes hand-in-hand with environmental destruction — nothing, it seems, is allowed to stand in the way of development.

Many workers, even whole families including children, may be trapped in a system of bonded labour. Bonded labour often results from poor families having to repay loans by working. The debt never decreases because of interest rates, and the whole family becomes permanently enslaved. The moneylender even claims payment from following generations. Young people and children may also be enslaved on their own when parents send them to work for a landlord or moneylender to pay off debts.

Such practices may be illegal but they remain widespread in many countries.

A safe job with good working conditions that allows a worker and his or her family to live in dignity as self-reliant individuals should be a condition and a result of environmentally sustainable development.

Child labour: a major human rights abuse

Exploitation of child labour is one of the most disturbing aspects of human rights violations.

No one knows for sure how many children are working but the number is certainly in the hundreds of millions. Asia has some of the highest numbers — up to 11% of the total labour force in some countries. India probably has the largest number, an estimated 44 million. African countries also have large concentrations of child labourers, with up to 20% of their children working to make up to 17% of the total workforce. Latin America is the most urbanized region of the developing world, so children here are more likely to be working in cities. About 18% of 10 - 14 year old Brazilian children are economically active, as is a similar proportion of Mexican children aged between 12 and 14 years old.

Child labour may be concentrated in developing countries but it is by no means confined to them. Millions of European children work in agriculture and in factories, many illegally in terms of the hours they work or the jobs they are doing. Hundreds of thousands more work in the USA, the majority amongst immigrant communities working on farms.

Children work mainly because their families are poor. When survival is at stake, everyone has to lend a hand — on the family smallholding or farm, in plantations, domestic work, selling on the streets, weaving carpets, making matches, in brick kilns, small factories, quarries, mines, construction. . . Employers often claim that there are some types of work to which children are particularly suited. They say, for instance, that their small size means they can crawl through tunnels in mines, or that their nimble fingers and keen eyesight make them suited to weaving or knotting carpets. In reality, however, the attraction of such children is that they work long hours for low, or no, pay and make very little trouble. Among the most exploited children are those enslaved in bonded labour, of whom there are several million in the world. Child prostitutes, too, are among the worst treated.

The second major cause of child labour is that the clearest alternative — school — is either unavailable, inadequate or expensive. Almost all children that are not in school can be presumed to be working in one way or another.



From work to exploitation*: characteristics of child labour

- **working too young :** children in developing countries often start factory work at the age of six or seven
- **working long hours :** in some cases 12 to 16 hours a day
- **working under strain :** physical, social or psychological, in mines, for example, or sweatshops
- **working on the streets :** in unhealthy and dangerous conditions
- **for very little pay :** as little as \$3 for a 60-hour week
- **with little stimulation :** dull repetitive tasks, which stunt the child's social and psychological development
- **taking too much responsibility :** children often have charge of siblings only a year or two younger than themselves
- **subject to intimidation :** which inhibits self-confidence and self-esteem, as with slave labour and sexual exploitation

Source: ILO. World Labour Report 1992

** Most children work. Child labour means something different — that young people are being exploited or overworked or being denied their rights to health or education, or just plain childhood.*





Policies on child labour therefore need to have two aspects. The first, long-term, aim is to put an end to child labour. This will be a long and complex task which can involve many steps, such as:

- ◆ improving and enforcing legislation such as minimum age for employment, and ratifying relevant ILO Conventions;
- ◆ promoting school enrolment through making at least primary education free, provision of food supplements at school, non-formal education, etc;
- ◆ raising public awareness of child exploitation, both nationally and internationally. For example, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions is campaigning for a boycott to stop goods made by children from gaining access to the market;
- ◆ supporting the actions of communities and organizations who are helping child workers.

In the immediate term, however, those children who are working should be protected from the worst abuses. Urgent priorities include removing children from the most

Freedom from discrimination

dangerous environments — the coal mines, glass factories, work with hazardous chemicals, brothels, garbage dumps, etc.

One of the aims of environmentally sustainable development is to create a society where every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play. To this end, governments should promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms and make society more responsive to people's needs and abilities. Putting an end to discrimination and promoting tolerance and mutual respect for the value of diversity should therefore be one of the most important aims of governments.

However, all the evidence points to the fact that discrimination affects growing numbers of women, indigenous peoples, children and younger workers, workers with disabilities, older workers, ethnic and religious groups and migrant workers.

Belonging to one or more of these groups means that you have more chance of being both restricted or discriminated against and exploited. Children in some of these groups are more likely to drop out of school. Adults are more likely to be unemployed. Workers are more likely to be concentrated in certain sectors and activities, such as the informal sector, assembly-line work, export processing zones, dangerous jobs, part-time work, etc. They are also likely to earn less than their young, male, able-bodied and local counter-parts, and be subject to harassment because of their different colour, abilities, gender, religion, age, etc.

The problems relating to these different groups are discussed in more detail in the booklet on "Equality of Opportunity and Treatment".

The injustices that these workers suffer, and human rights in general, are committed against groups without the full power or knowledge to protect themselves. The role of legislation is therefore very difficult to see in this respect if people are unaware of their rights and do not know how to start claiming them. It has generally been left to sympathetic organizations, and particularly trade unions, to take up the case for better working conditions and rights of such groups. The majority of anti-discrimination abuses that the ILO has considered have been referred by national trade unions or international trade union bodies.

DISCUSSION POINTS

The World Summit for Social Development was held in Copenhagen, Denmark, from the 6th -12th March, 1995. Here, governments and representatives of intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations agreed to:

“... safeguard the basic rights and interests of workers, and to that end, freely promote respect for relevant ILO Conventions, including those on the prohibition of forced and child labour, freedom of association, the right to organize and bargain collectively, and the principle of non-discrimination.”

- ◆ Was your country represented at this World Summit for Social Development? Was the trade union movement involved in your country's preparations for the Summit?
- ◆ What follow-up work is planned, or possible?
- ◆ How do your country's laws and regulations compare with the declarations of intent and the commitments on the basic rights of workers that came out of the Summit?
- ◆ Does your union have any policies concerning:
 - forced labour,
 - child labour,
 - disadvantaged groups, such as women, ethnic, racial or religious minorities, migrants, indigenous peoples, workers with disabilities...?

Give examples with your answers.

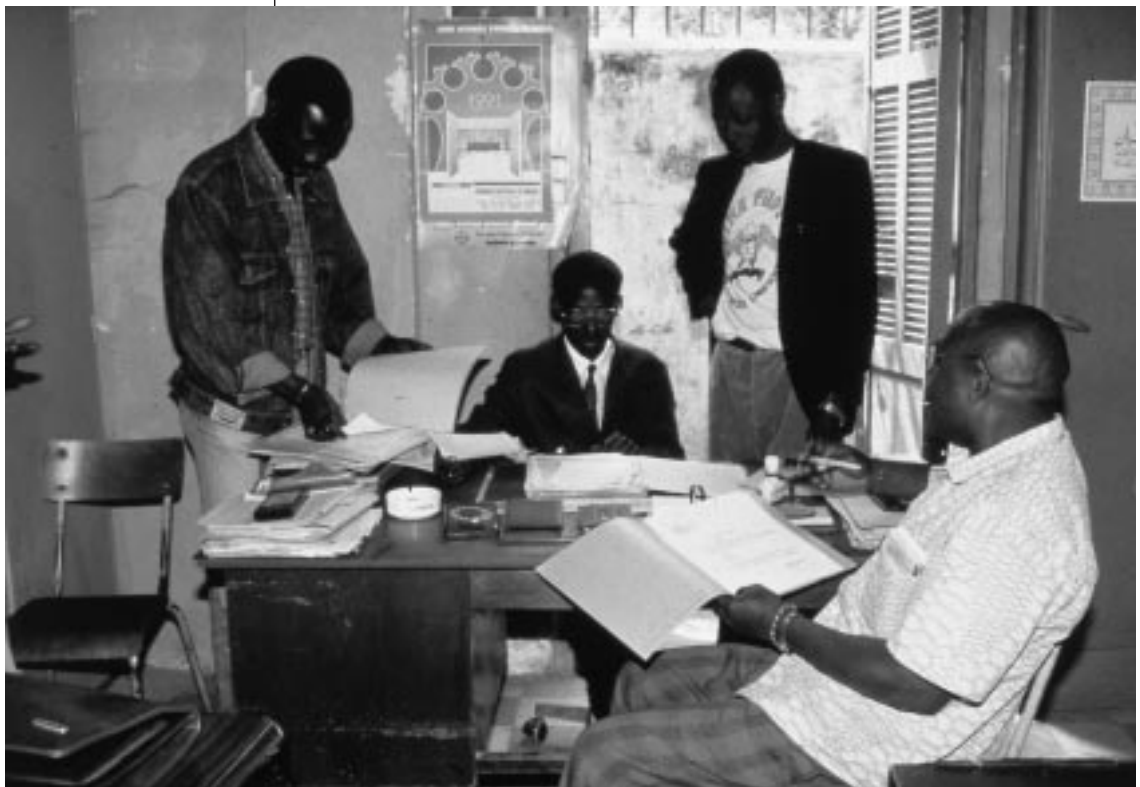
Trade union rights and environmental decision-making

Development must be by people, not only for them.

People must participate fully in the decisions and processes that shape their lives.

UN "Agenda 21"

Efforts to implement environmentally sustainable development will involve changes at the workplace, at national and at international levels, with workers foremost amongst those concerned. As their representatives, trade unions have a key role to play in achieving sustainable development. They have experience in dealing with industrial and economic change. They see protection of the workplace and the environment and the promotion of socially responsible development as priorities. Governments should therefore foster the active and informed participation of workers and trade unions in shaping sustainable development strategies and putting them into effect. For workers and their trade unions to play a full and informed role in support of environmentally sustainable development, governments and employers have to promote the rights of individuals to freedom of association and protect the right to organize.



The right to organize

This right to organize and promote our interests (including those of concern in environmentally sustainable development) in freedom and peace is perhaps one of the most basic of human rights for us as trade unionists. But it is often a dangerous business. According to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, hundreds of trade unionists are murdered or disappear every year, and thousands more imprisoned or fired because of their trade union work.

The right of workers to organize can also be threatened by governments: some have directly dissolved unions, whilst others have introduced legislation banning workers from setting up organizations of their own choosing, or restricting the ways in which trade unions are allowed to operate.

A further way in which governments can restrict freedom of association is by denying the right to organize to certain groups of workers. This typically affects civil service and other public sector workers, in contradiction to ILO Conventions which state that all workers should have the right to establish and join organizations of their own choosing. The Conventions do sometimes allow exceptions, such as for the police and armed forces, or restrictions on the right to strike for workers in clearly defined essential services. But many countries extend such restrictions to other public service workers, for instance, in transport, banking or basic goods.

Even if unions are free to operate in most sectors of the national economy, some governments make exceptions for export processing zones (EPZ). Some countries do not allow trade unions to organize in EPZs, whilst others may allow trade unions but not the right to strike. More information on conditions in EPZs can be seen in Booklet 3 on "Economic development and security".

It should be remembered, however, that ILO Conventions apply equally throughout a country, so that if your government has ratified any Convention, especially those that concern basic trade union rights, their provisions will also apply to workers in EPZs.

DISCUSSION POINTS

In the Programme of Action which outlines policies, actions and measures to fulfill the commitments of the World Summit for Social Development, governments recommended:

“ establishing conditions for the social partners to organise and function with guaranteed freedom of expression and association and the right to engage in collective bargaining and to promote mutual interests ...”

- ◆ In this respect, what is the scope of protection provided for workers wishing to form or join trade unions in your country?
- ◆ Are workers adequately protected against anti-union discrimination?
- ◆ Does your government, as required by the ILO Constitution, promote collective bargaining?
- ◆ Has your country ratified the two basic ILO Conventions in the field of workers' rights:
 - Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association and the Protection of the Right to Organize,
 - and Convention No. 98 on the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining?
- ◆ If so, does your union find they are effective in your country?
- ◆ If they have not been ratified, what are the reasons given by the government for not having done so? What is the reaction of your trade union to this?

Give examples with your answers,

Right to participate in decision-making

If the overall goal of environmentally sustainable development is to reduce poverty through full and sustainable employment and thus contribute to safe, clean and healthy working and living environments, then workers and their trade unions have to be full participants in defining and implementing activities relating to development.

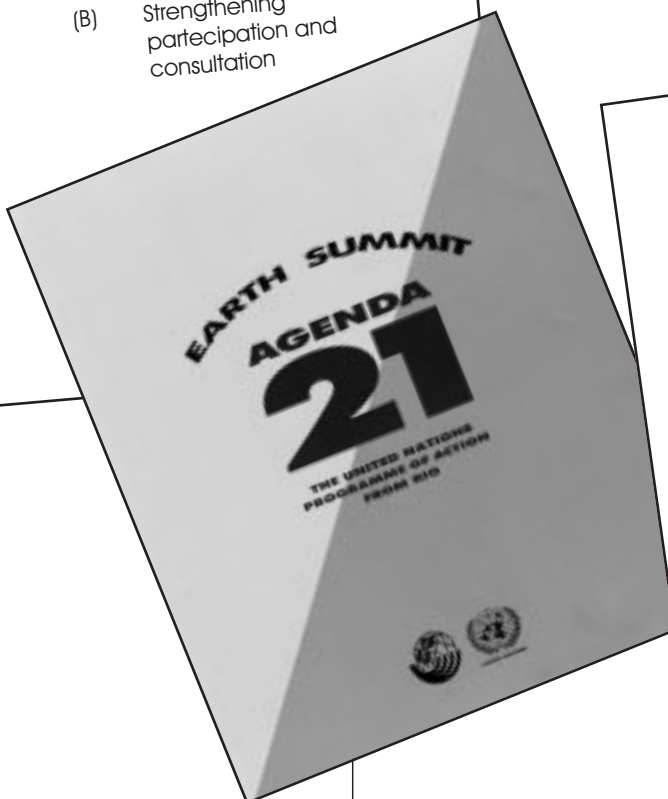
To this end, Agenda 21, the action programme that came out of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, proposes the following objectives (among others) for accomplishment by the year 2000:

- ◆ to promote ratification of relevant ILO Conventions and implementation of national legislation in support of those Conventions (See the booklets "Using ILO Standards to Promote Environmentally Sustainable Development", also published in this "Workers' Education and Environment" series, for a list and discussion of relevant Conventions);
- ◆ to establish bipartite and tripartite mechanisms on safety, health and sustainable development;
- ◆ to increase the number of environmental collective agreements aimed at achieving sustainable development.

29. Strengthening the role of workers and their trade unions
- A) Promoting freedom of association
- (B) Strengthening participation and consultation

29.7 Joint (employer/worker) or tripartite (employer/worker/Government) collaborative mechanism at the workplace, community and national levels should be established to deal with safety, health and association environment...

29.8 Governments and employers should ensure that workers and their representatives are provided with all relevant information to enable participation in these decision-making processes



Tripartite collaboration

Most countries have developed national policies on environmentally sustainable development, either in preparation or as follow-up to the Rio Earth Summit. They have also instituted structures for implementation of such policies: some have established environment ministries, or linked environment programmes to existing ministries; some have established interministerial groups as sustainable development issues involve several ministries; some have set up special environmental protection agencies or councils; others have set up advisory committees.

Unfortunately, up to now, very few involve trade unions or employers. This is very disappointing given the fact that tripartism is the best way to secure that workers and their trade unions can take part in shaping the future environment and development of their countries. (Tripartism is the interaction among government, employers and workers as equal and independent partners in active participation at efforts to seek solutions to issues of common concern.) It is doubly disappointing when the new environmental and developmental challenges, social and economic restructuring, globalization of work, introduction of new technologies, etc. — issues in which all three parties have joint interests — lend themselves very well to tripartism.

It therefore becomes essential that trade unions attend forums to discuss such issues as basic trade union and human rights, employment, equality, education and training in relation to environment and development, and find common solutions to them in collaboration with employers and governments.

Trade union unity is important for the functioning of tripartite bodies and for the strength of the workers' side in them. Trade unions should seize this opportunity to get together to develop a joint policy and a unified approach to influence national developments in this field. This has proved most successful in India, for example, where several trade unions have joined together to form a common forum for negotiation, the Trade Union Partnership for Environmental Protection (TUPEP).

DISCUSSION POINTS

The UN Conference on Environment and Development, organized in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, emphasized the need for cooperation among trade unions, employers' organizations and governments to achieve the goals of environmentally sustainable development.

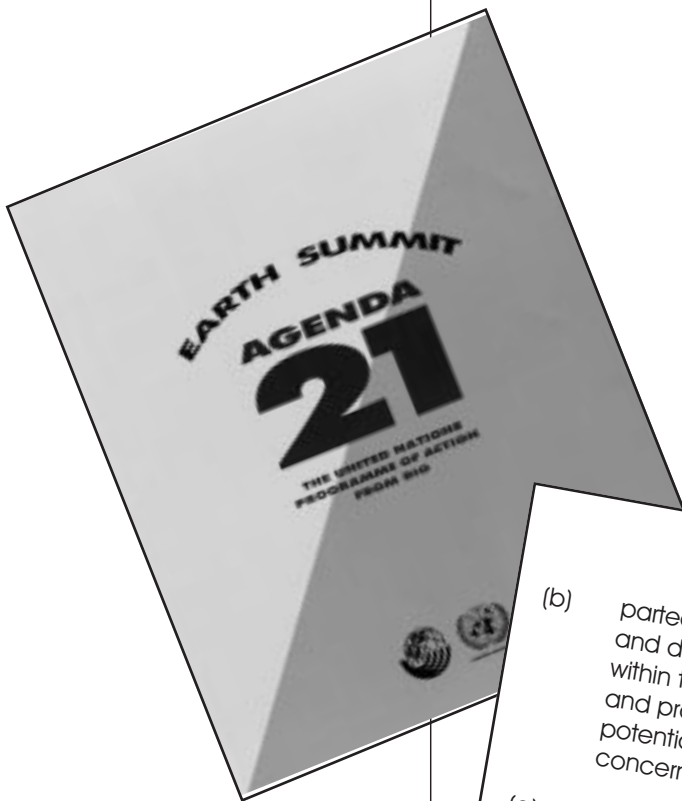
- ◆ What follow-up work to the Rio Earth Summit is planned in your country?
- ◆ How has your union, or the union movement in general, been involved in this follow-up?
- ◆ What environment and development issues do you and your union see as possibilities to develop in a tripartite context?
- ◆ What tripartite mechanisms concerning the different issues are presently in operation?
- ◆ What are their strengths and weaknesses?
- ◆ How could they be improved?

Bipartite bargaining

Some issues relating to environmentally sustainable development will often involve bipartite bargaining on the part of trade unions and employers on a national, local or workplace level to establish a framework for a joint environmental policy. These are more likely to concern the more traditional issues such as wages or working conditions, or the need to set workplace policy to improve the working environment and the over-all environmental performance of an enterprise, for instance.

For more discussion on environmental bargaining and environmental auditing, please refer to booklet 1 on "Environmental Indicators of Development" in this series, and also booklet 5, "The New Bargaining Agenda" in the series "Workers' Education and the Environment". Both of these booklets look at some of the means available to trade unions to integrate environmental issues into workplace structures.

In either case — tripartite collaboration or bipartite bargaining — trade unions have to identify issues of concern and develop and promote their own policies on all aspects of sustainable development. A lack of trade union organization in a workplace or country will often also mean a lack of commitment to environmental concerns. Positive and effective improvement of the environment and promotion of sustainable development therefore depends, firstly, on basic organizing of trade unions in the workplace, and, secondly, on making them key issues within the trade union.



B) Strengthening participation and consultation

29.11 Trade Unions should:

- (a) seek to ensure that workers are able to participate in environmental audits at the workplace and in environmental impact assessment;

- (b) participate in environment and development activities within the local community and promote joint action on potential problems of common concern;

- (c) play an active role in the sustainable development activities of international organizations, particularly within the UN system.

FURTHER READING

- ◆ Agenda 21: The United Nations Programme of Action From Rio.
- ◆ ILO Report on the World Summit for Social Development. Report to the 262nd Session of the Governing Body, March-April 1995
- ◆ World Labour Report. Annual report of the ILO covering events and policy experiences in areas including human rights at work, employment, labour relations and social protection and working conditions. ILO.
- ◆ ICFTU: "Environment and Development: The Trade Union Agenda". ICFTU, Brussels, Belgium.
- ◆ ILO: "Human Rights — A Common Responsibility". Report of the Director General (Part 1) ILO Conference 75th Session, 1988
- ◆ ILO: "Freedom of Association: A Workers' Education Manual. Second (revised) edition. ILO, 1987.
- ◆ ICFTU Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights. ICFTU, Brussels, Belgium.
- ◆ ILO : The Practical Role of Trade Unions in Improving Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development. Background paper to the symposium on workers' education and the environment, Geneva, 6-8 October, 1993.
- ◆ Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for equality, Development and Peace, September 1995.
- ◆ Breaking Down the Wall of Silence: How to Combat Child Labour. International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Brussels, Belgium.
- ◆ ILO: Combatting Child Labour. Edited by Assefa Bequele and Jo Boyden.
- ◆ ILO: Child Labour: a Briefing Manual
- ◆ ILO: Conditions of Work digest. Child Labour: Law and Practice. Vol 10, No1/1991.

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