

ILO - International Labour Organization

Labour Standards

Overview

Ever since it was founded in 1919, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has been mandated by the League of Nations and the UN to set and regulate labour standards worldwide. The ILO brings together governments, employers, and workers in 187 member states¹.

After the industrial revolution, globalization and exportation of businesses, the process of creating something using the resources from one country to sell it in another country, have led to increasingly harsh working conditions to satisfy the high global demand for manufactured goods. For owners of private corporations, the only goal is to maximize profit. Consequently, many workers, especially those in developing countries, find themselves working in dangerous conditions just to make ends meet.

Since its creation, the ILO has passed several legally binding international agreements that are to be implemented and respected by all the member states, known as conventions and protocols. They have also created various recommendations, which are guidelines that are not legally binding but are strongly suggested by the committee². The purpose of the ILO is to ensure the safety of the workers, good working conditions and equality on the workfield on an international level. The ILO's core principles consist of the following four conventions: freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; the

¹ "About The ILO", *ILO*,
<https://www.ilo.org/about-ilo>

² "Conventions, Protocols and Recommendations", *ILO*,
<https://www.ilo.org/international-labour-standards/conventions-protocols-and-recommendations>

elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour; the effective abolition of child labour; and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation³.

The ILO has to adapt its labour standards regularly, as private entities are constantly looking for loopholes and incorporating new technologies to evade the committee's mandates. Limited enforcement capabilities, exploitation of vulnerable populations, outsourcing and global trade, all represent issues the International Labour Organisation must consider⁴.

Labour standards

The fundamental principles and rights at work represent the core of labour standards. The ILO separates them into five distinct categories. The first aspect is the freedom of association and the recognition of the right to collective bargaining. This allows workers to form unions and ensure that their basic needs and rights are respected. The second element is the elimination of forced labour. The third category is the abolition of child labour. The fourth type is the elimination of discrimination in regards to employment. Finally, the fifth category hopes to ensure a safe and healthy working environment⁵.

The International Labour Organization also sets the standards for working conditions. The working conditions depend on a few different factors such as the job quality, demographic of

³ "Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work", *ILO*, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/declaration-fundamental-principles-and-rights-work>

⁴ "What Are the Key Challenges in Enforcing Labor Standards?", *sustainability directory*, 16/04/2025 <https://sustainability-directory.com/question/what-are-the-key-challenges-in-enforcing-labor-standards/#:~:text=Prevalence%20of%20the%20Informal%20Economy>

⁵ "Fundamental principles and rights at work", *ILO*, <https://www.ilo.org/projects-and-partnerships/projects/fundamental-principles-and-rights-work>

the workers, quality of working life and characteristics of work. These elements cover things like the wages, the hours, the occupational safety and the policies of the workplace⁶.

The labour standards also ensure the protection of workers with special accommodations from being dismissed without just cause. This standard's main goal is to avoid retaliation or discrimination in the workplace against people in special situations such as pregnant women, disabled individuals, injured people or older workers⁷.

In 1998, the ILO adopted the declaration of fundamental principles and rights at work, officially setting four core principles as the reference for all men and women in all fields of work. In 2022, the ILO amended the declaration to add a fifth core principle. In addition, the ILO has set eleven fundamental instruments to give legal force to these standards^{8 9}. The first fundamental principle is the freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining. According to the convention number 087, this gives the worker the right to form unions and organizations to advance and protect their interest in the workplace. Collective bargaining refers to the process of negotiation between an employee and his employer to discuss specific terms and conditions of work in accordance with convention number 098. The second core principle is the elimination of all forms of forced labour, which is defined by the conventions number 029 and 105 as any form of work that a person did not volunteer for and is under the menace of some sort of penalty. The third fundamental standard is the abolition of child labour. Convention 138 sets the guidelines for governments to set the minimum age to

⁶“Working conditions in a global perspective”, ILO - Eurofund, 2019
https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40dgreports/%40dcomm/%40publ/documents/publication/wcms_696174.pdf

⁷ “Workers enjoying special protection against dismissal”
<https://eplex.ilo.org/workers-enjoying-special-protection-against-dismissal/>

⁸ “Conventions, protocols and recommendations”, ILO,
<https://www.ilo.org/international-labour-standards/conventions-protocols-and-recommendations>

⁹ “List of instruments by subject and status”, ILO-NORMLEX, 2024
https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=1000:12030::::::

work, never under 15 years old, while convention 182 lists the worst forms of child labour. The fourth fundamental principle is the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation. Convention number 111 aims to stop any preference or exclusion based on sex, race, religion and convention number 100 sets the guidelines for equal remuneration. Finally, the most recent core principle is the right to a safe and healthy working environment. This standard aims to prevent accidents and to encourage governments to continuously improve their laws on occupational safety in accordance with conventions 155, 187 and 029.^{10 11}

Major actors

There are many different parties included in the discussion on labour standards and they each hold unique perspectives in regards to the regulations set by the ILO. The list of major players includes, but is not limited to, governments of developing and developed countries, multinational corporations, international NGOs, and labour unions.

The developing world is at the centre of debate when it comes to establishing labour standards, since they do not have the resources to enforce the ILO's principles on their own. They struggle constantly to balance the priorities of economic growth and maintenance of workers rights. On the other hand, developed countries do not face similar struggles, as they are more prone to outsource their manufacturing to developing countries with weaker standards. Often, governments of developed countries will turn a blind eye to the weak labour standards in developing countries in order to stay competitive on the international production market¹².

¹⁰ "Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work", *ILO*,

<https://www.ilo.org/projects-and-partnerships/projects/fundamental-principles-and-rights-work>

¹¹ "ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up", *ILO*, 2022

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/ILo_1998_Declaration_EN.pdf

¹² "Responsible business conduct", *OECD*,

<https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/policy-issues/responsible-business-conduct.html>

Similarly, multinational corporations are subject to different labour laws in each country and are thus at risk of subcontracting their manufacturing to places who may overlook labour violations.

In order to prevent such entities from breaching labour standards, the ILO depends on international NGOs and labour unions, like Human Rights Watch¹³ and IUTC (what does this stand for??), to monitor and report labour violations.

Cause for weak labour standards

In developing countries, the ILO has limited enforcement capabilities. To properly implement and enforce labour standards, the UN needs the support of the local government and a strong legal system. However, in many developing countries, corruption and lack of government funding make these requirements difficult to obtain. Therefore, many labour violations are left unreported. For example, the Democratic Republic of Congo, who has a corruption perception index of 20 out of 100¹⁴, has had many violations of the ILO's child labour laws with the operations of their cobalt mines¹⁵.

In other cases, due to power imbalances between people and governments, vulnerable populations may be exploited. When people are desperate to find work, it is easier for employers to violate their basic labour rights. Between 2014 and 2022, Qatar has violated immigrant workers' rights to build the stadiums for the world cup. Employers could have their permits and legal documents annulled for filing a complaint, they forced them to work in unhealthy and

¹³ "Worker's rights", *human rights watch*,
<https://www.hrw.org/topic/womens-rights/labor-rights>

¹⁴ "Our works in the democratic republic of Congo", *transparency international*,
<https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/democratic-republic-of-the-congo>

¹⁵ "ILO Launches GALAB project in Democratic Republic of the Congo to address child labour in cobalt mining sector", *ILO*, 20 November 2024,
<https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/ilo-launches-galab-project-democratic-republic-congo-address-child-labour>

dangerous conditions and the workers weren't allowed to switch jobs¹⁶. In these situations, the ILO has difficulties ensuring the respect of their policies.

In more developed countries, globalization and outsourcing have been driving factors in the increase of labour standard violations. Nowadays, to satisfy the elevated global demands, it is common for private corporations to outsource the production of their product to manufacturers in developing countries. This causes the supply chain to extend which adds on more subcontractors into the equation. In South Korea, known brands like Hyundai have been found to use fake subcontracting to justify paying their workers less¹⁷. These are problems that could affect the ILO's labour standards and conventions.

Possible Responses and solutions

There are many possible solutions to labour standards violations being discussed worldwide such as government backed solutions, UN led responses and worker-employer solutions. Governments may vote legislation to oblige certain conducts in the workplace and set judicial consequences for violating these laws. They could also create agencies and hire inspectors to ensure proper enforcement of the labour standards. The United Nations sets the standards and regulations through the ILO, they also monitor and enforce the conventions. In the past, the UN published a set of sustainable development goals to help the international community¹⁸. Additionally, worker-employer solutions are ways for two parties within a

¹⁶ "Qatar: Inaction by Qatar and FIFA a year on from the World Cup puts legacy for workers in peril", *Amnesty International*, November 16 2023
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/qatar-inaction-by-qatar-and-fifa-a-year-on-from-the-world-cup-puts-legacy-for-workers-in-peril/>

¹⁷ "ILO makes recommendations on irregular workers in South Korea", *industrial global union*, July 3 2008,
<https://www.industrial-union.org/archive/imf/ilo-makes-recommendations-on-irregular-workers-in-south-korea>

¹⁸ "Sustainable development goals", *United Nations*,
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/economic-growth/>

workplace to resolve labour violations and to resolve them. This could be done through worker unions, HRs and company policies to allow workers and employers to express their concerns, whether they are part of a major international corporation or if they work more physical jobs.

Questions To Consider

1. What labour standards has your country implemented and how effective was this implementation?
2. How does globalization and international trade affect labour protections in your country?
3. How should the governments regulate emerging forms of employment like remote work and informal economies?
4. How can international cooperation with the ILO improve global compliance with labour standards?
5. What role should multinational corporations play in enforcing labour standards?