

**‘The International Labour Organisation – its noble
origins, its new challenges, and its potential global
role as catalyst’**

**Address by Michael D. Higgins,
President of Ireland**

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President of the Conference,

Vice-Presidents,

Director-General,

Your Excellency,

Distinguished delegates,

I am deeply honoured to be here to join and to speak to so many distinguished delegates from so many nations. May I begin then by thanking the Director-General of the International Labour Organisation, Guy Ryder, for his gracious comments and for his most generous invitation to address this plenary sitting of the 107th Session of the International Labour Conference.

I am very conscious that I am addressing the longest-established, and one of the most important, institutions in the conduct of international relations, one that gives voice not only to governments, but to the representatives of workers and employers, one that attempts a partnership, one that was born of the collision of empires, the collapse in human solidarity, that we now know as the First World War.

This year, of course, on November the 11th, many of the nations of the world shall commemorate the conclusion of that war, and it is my hope that they will do so, not as a celebration of militarism, or as a valorisation of martial spirit, but as a recognition of the wasted promise and potential of the millions who lost their lives during that conflict, of the lasting damage to the further millions who were wounded and maimed, and of the countless others who suffered mental anguish as a consequence of bearing witness to the horrors of war.

Is it not one of the great tragedies in human history that such a global consciousness as privileged co-operation rather than aggression, conflict, domination, exploitation, and insatiable accumulation has not emerged, established itself, was sustained, but rather was dismissed and abandoned?

Of all the institutions established by the international community in the wake of that cataclysm that was the First World War only one has endured to this day, the International Labour Organisation. That it has done so is testament to the moral vision and indomitable hope that is contained within the preamble to the constitution of the Organisation, that '*universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice*'. In our present circumstances,

ninety-nine years after that constitution was first proclaimed, that spirit of idealism and of vital moral purpose is more urgently required than ever.

Today, as we reflect on the adoption of Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation by this Conference last year, let us seek to draw more from those foundational moments in this Organisation's history, such as in 1919 and 1944, when the community of nations was, for a moment, resolved to build, from the ashes of a war that had brought human behaviour to the nadir of cruelty and abuse of the most basic human instincts, a more just and equal economic order, one built on the dignity of labour, one in which all those involved in economic and social organisation recognised their duties to the common good. There was then a certain urgency, even desperation, to move to a new place in human experience.

The precursor to the Recommendation of 2017, the Employment (Transition from War to Peace) Recommendation, was, let us recall, adopted on 12 May 1944, only two days after the Declaration of Philadelphia. To read it today is a reminder of the enormous challenges then confronting a world which sought to meet the needs of a great variety of diverse populations: refugees fleeing persecution and invading armies, demobilising soldiers, workers with disabilities and of course, women, who had entered the industrial labour force in huge numbers.

The Declaration of 1944 has an engaged intellectual and moral background that would not allow it to descend to the level of a set of rhetorical flourishes. It was followed, implemented by a defined role for the state and, as to the accepted role of the market, recalling the devastating impact of wild speculative tendencies in 1929, there was an acceptance of the need for regulatory mechanisms if social cohesion was to be achieved. In so many states and societies it was the case that the wars had thrown people against each other, the Welfare State, with its project of shared citizenship, was bringing them together seeking to lift them off the social floor, offering some guarantee as to basic dignity in citizenship, encouraging political participation as a space for discourse as to options for the connection between economy and society.

More than sixty years later, the task before us, of building and sustaining a peace based on social justice, is as daunting - perhaps even more so - as the task the 26th Session of this Conference faced in 1944. For we, in these first decades of the twenty-first century, again live in a world marked by war and the rumour of war, preparations for war that absorb not only the muscle and sinew of our physical labour, but the creativity of our intellectual labour, war built on fear of the other, ignorance and impatience as to different forms of economy presented and too often perceived as inevitable even if they are sustained by injustice and inequality. The burdens of war – famine, atrocity, starvation, displacement, forced migrations - now fall ever more upon those least able to bear them, upon women, children, and older people.

We too, in the new conditions of our time, must take stock of the challenges we face and our capacity for response. Are we to allow a role for the state as partner

in constructing an emancipatory citizenship? Given, in particular, the challenges of climate change and sustainability issues, can we bring an institutional and policy architecture into being, one that not only envisages partnership but allows for an entrepreneurial state and entrepreneurial state institutions?

What serious scholarship supports the view that a mere adjustment of present practices will suffice?

Inequalities in wealth, income and power – both a cause and consequence of war – are widening, both between and within nations, excluding hundreds of millions on the basis of the intersecting lines of class, nationality, ethnicity and gender.

The unprecedented accumulation of greenhouse gases in the Earth's atmosphere, the legacy of two centuries of industrial civilisation, now threatens a planet most vulnerable to, and as yet unprepared for, the catastrophic consequences of climate change, with all of the devastating implications for the displacement of people, involuntary migration, the degradation of the environment and the eruption of new conflicts over diminishing natural resources.

Yet, at the very same time as we hold, as an international community, within our collective grasp, the capacity to organise our labour within a framework of irreducible and indivisible dignity of work, whether by hand or brain, and when our resources, whether material or intellectual, to abolish all forms of human poverty exist and could ensure that, in the words of Declaration of Philadelphia, *'all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex, have the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity'*, we are drifting to failure.

In affirming that principle I have quoted, we the Members of the International Labour Organisation accept a moral, political, social and economic responsibility not only to the peoples of our own nations, but to the peoples of other nations, for there can be no social justice that is not unlimited, no peace that is not universal, and no solidarity that is not open to all.

Two months ago, I addressed the United Nations General Assembly as part of the High-Level Meeting on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace. It is very clear that Secretary-General Guterres is seeking to meet the aspirations outlined in the Resolutions on peacebuilding adopted by the Security Council and the General Assembly in 2016.

The Report prepared by the Secretary-General on foot of those Resolutions has outlined an ambitious plan of action for the United Nations and its agencies. It presents a vision of, and relies upon, the Member States and agencies of the United Nations working cohesively across the pillars of peace and security, human rights, and development to address the root causes of conflict.

Yet the activities of the United Nations have been fractured by the actions of the most powerful. If our predecessors of 1944 saw how global accountability in international capital flows was necessary, which led to the establishment of the Bretton Woods Institutions, we in our time have failed to secure even a space for the discourse of accountability. Future history will contrast the moral urgency of the discourse of 1944 with the contemporary spectacle that is Davos, and they will draw the inevitable moral conclusions.

Ever since its inception, the International Labour Organisation has been dedicated to the proposition that peace can only be built, and can only be sustained, when it is founded on a just and equal economic order, one capable of meeting the needs and aspirations of all people.

In the words of the Declaration of Philadelphia, which still ring through the decades to us today, '*poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere*'. The International Labour Organisation draws, for its ideas, for its inspiration, and for its decisions, upon both states themselves and upon workers and employers, upon, in short, nearly one hundred years of social dialogue. By placing decent work and social justice at the very heart of its approach, the International Labour Organisation secured not only the mandate but the credibility, and it still retains the potential to be one of the international organisations best equipped to assist nations and their peoples to build resilience and prevent conflict.

Ireland has been a part of the transformative work of the International Labour Organisation since 1923. It was the first international organisation that our newly independent state joined. One of our nation's most distinguished international civil servants, Edward Phelan, devoted his career to this Organisation, and was instrumental in the drafting and preparation of the Declaration of Philadelphia. As Director-General, he championed and pursued the spirit of diplomacy and dialogue that has and continues to be so characteristic of this organisation – a diplomacy of the common good, a diplomacy informed by deliberation, courtesy and respect, rather than any cynical and narrow diplomacy of transaction, derived from an immiserated and at best, insufficient, narrow theory of interests of threatened disadvantage.

Ireland, the country I represent, knows from our own Peace Process that a diplomacy of mutual respect, of plural and shared narratives, can succeed if it is practiced with consistency and transparency of purpose. The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, signed on Good Friday twenty years ago, represents and remains a profound achievement, one that is underpinned by many of the guiding principles recognised by the Recommendation of 2017: the importance of reconciliation; the need for international solidarity; the necessity to combat discrimination in all its forms; and the imperative of recognising fundamental human rights, whether they be civil, social, economic, cultural or political.

Support for decent work, for social protection, and for fundamental rights may not remove or supplant what are, as in the case of Northern Ireland, deeply held

views regarding the constitutional arrangements under which people wish to live, or the legitimate national aspirations that many peoples of the world hold. Yet, the Peace Agreement in Northern Ireland demonstrates that when all parties to a conflict respect and commit to those fundamental principles of decent work, security to participate in the public world, security from fear of insufficient provision in health, housing or education, it is possible to create a shared space capable of accommodating different aspirations, one in which it is possible to imagine a shared future of hope and possibility.

It is also important to emphasise that our peace could not have been achieved, nor could it have been sustained, without the persistent and courageous activism of civic organisations campaigning for more equal and peaceful society. The trade union movement, on an all-Ireland basis has been the greatest, most consistent, most courageous opponent of sectarianism. Many of those campaigns against sectarianism for the welfare of citizens and workers were led by the women of Ireland, North and South. Their campaigns demonstrate that gender equality can never be simply residual to peacebuilding – it must be placed at its very heart.

One of the most critical components of the Peace Process, and of the process of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, has been the sustained financing for peace undertaken by the Governments of Ireland and of the United Kingdom, and through the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation.

Indeed, European Union investment is of such material and symbolic importance that is embedded within the Peace Agreement itself, through a Special EU Programmes Body which co-ordinates funding for Northern Ireland, the Border Region, and the West of Scotland. That funding is directed towards the training of young people, creating shared spaces for education, and meeting the needs of victims of the conflict.

These initiatives were, and are, appropriate in a very specific regional context, one which is not necessarily reproducible in other parts of our planet – and indeed one which is subject to some uncertainty at present - and so may I welcome the commitment of the International Labour Organisation to its programme on Jobs for Peace and Resilience.

Expanding economic opportunities, ensuring the recognition of fundamental social and economic rights, advocating and advancing decent work, and facilitating social dialogue between workers, employers and civic organisations are critical components of recovery from conflict and the prevention of any return to war.

I therefore welcome the ambition to place the International Labour Organisation at the centre of our efforts to create a new global architecture for sustaining peace, for sufficient and effective investment in rights-based peacebuilding programmes will not only save lives, but will offer to the peoples of the world all of the possibilities for development and human flourishing that peace brings.

This will be necessary if we are to accomplish the goals of that most remarkable declaration of shared global solidarity, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, to which we committed ourselves in New York two and half years ago.

The message of the International Labour Organisation must be brought to the attention of the world. How much better it would be if the necessary elements of what constituted social cohesion was the discourse that prevailed on the streets of the world rather than abandoning the excluded to become the prey of xenophobes, homophobes and racists?

In our present circumstances, none of this will be easy. The diplomacy of the global common good exemplified by this Organisation is giving way to a recurrence of the kind of diplomacy practised in the worst moments of the previous century, one characterised by narrow self-interest and, at its worst, a disdain for those hard-fought and hard-won basic rights that stand at the centre of international law, whether encoded in the Refugee Convention, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or indeed, within the Conventions governing the most foundational rights at work.

When I spoke to the United Nations General Assembly two months ago, I said that so many of our global citizens and particularly the young of the world are so often appalled by the suggestion that, where the United Nations is concerned, what is normative is for the General Assembly but that the strut of the powerful and the wielders of power must prevail in the Security Council. What is normative is now regarded as something that can be parted on a siding. A false dichotomy between what is normative theoretically and what can be empirically validated is the work of lazy commentary.

May I suggest today this Organisation has too often and for too many years been treated as if it were simply normative, as an advisory body or some echo of conscience, to be acknowledged, but then disregarded.

I say this not to diminish in any way the work that has been carried out by the International Labour Organisation. Indeed, the intellectual agenda forged by this Organisation through rigorous and critically engaged intellectual work of its Research Department has been instrumental in equipping nations and peoples to understand the far-reaching effects of the liberalisation of finance and trade on employment rights, labour markets, the new international division of labour and on the increasing power and reach of global value chains controlled and organised by transnational corporations.

However, I would challenge some of our member governments to show some evidence that they took as a primary source the commitments made to the Constitution and Conventions of the International Labour Organisation, or indeed any account of the United Nations Commissions for the different regions of the world. Their reports are evidence-based, rigorous and relevant in policy

recommendations. They are rarely, if ever, quoted. For too many governments ideologically predictable consultancy bodies, not research based, rarely reformed, are more comfortable.

This Conference has itself been the site of many important interventions as to rights. The Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work adopted by the Eighty-Sixth Session has provided a shared and universal framework in which to achieve dignity at work in a world in which regions and nations are experiencing all of the differential effects of globalisation, expansion and recession, development and underdevelopment.

The Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization adopted in 2008 advocated an alternative to the simple deregulatory nostrums to the now-discredited Washington Consensus based on a vision of decent work for all, one that promised a globalisation of the social floor rather than the social ceiling, a globalisation based on employment, social protection, social dialogue, and rights at work.

This should amount to more than one voice from a discordant chorus of silos. Too often the international financial institutions, the World Trade Organisation and their Member States have turned their face away from the fundamental principles promulgated by the International Labour Organisation, and have not merely been seduced but have become proponents of a theory of government and governance now popularly known as neo-liberalism, an ideology that need not declare its name. Its policy agenda is familiar to us all: the removal of constraints on the growth, use and flow of capital and wealth; the privatisation of state assets; sharp reductions in the taxation of capital; the curtailment of social protection; the neglect of the public realm; and the dismantlement of collective bargaining and in its most extreme variant, even the very concept of social dialogue itself. It stands for the radical experience of a private existence that is perceived as being under threat from any concept of the public world, the citizens of a shared public space, served by democratically accountable institutions.

All of these contemporary difficulties can be overcome. Let us recall that in the difficult climate of the Cold War this Conference struggled, understandably, to reach a consensus. Though every national delegation, whether representing the state, workers or employers, shared the same faith in that immortal precept - *'universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice'* - they disagreed, often profoundly, on the manner in which social justice was to be expressed.

These arguments were legitimate - it was to be expected that what were then termed the East and the West would offer alternative visions, based on both their strengths and their erroneous, even violent, assumptions. It was also to be expected that the heralds of the newly free nations of the world would bring their own conception of social justice and of the role of labour.

For all that debate and disputation, what was never in doubt was the shared conception that social justice was to be the organising principle upon which the actions of the Organisation and its members should and would be based.

Yet ever since the end of the Cold War the very idea that social justice is an end of policy, whether in itself or as the buttress upon which all peace – industrial peace, social peace, peace between nations, peace in its widest sense – rests has come to be disputed and dismissed by many, replaced by an ideology which sanctions poverty amidst plenty, private desire over the public good, insatiable consumption over sustainability, unrestricted accumulation over diversity of competition, and the freedoms of the market over the rights and dignity of labour. Indeed, if ever a concept was robbed of moral content it is surely ‘freedom’.

This Conference and this Organisation, along with other agencies of the United Nations, have often been lonely advocates for a much-needed alternative vision of globalisation, particularly in an international environment where the self-assured and often self-promoting voices of Davos have, at times, resounded louder in the halls of power than any voice of labour, or indeed the voice of so many small and medium-sized business.

The rigidity of these ideological positions substitution for empirically testable theories is giving ground. What I have described is now, albeit slowly, beginning to change, and may I commend Director-General Ryder and the staff in the International Labour Organisation for their recent productive collaboration with some of the international financial institutions and the World Trade Organisation.

It is an indication not only of institutional success, but of a gradual shift in the intellectual climate. Agencies which once advocated, with more than a tinge of hubris, and intoning the mantra of inevitability, characteristic neoliberal policies such as the universal liberalisation of capital flows and the deregulation and creation of financial markets have now begun to question what were once their sacrosanct and unchanging policy prescriptions. Such institutions, when confronted with the prospects of the consequences of a lost social cohesion, now speak of the need for ‘inclusive growth’, and of policies which can address the vast inequalities that exist within and between countries in terms of income, opportunity and wealth, recognising, however late, that more equal societies are healthier societies.

They also realise that the space of the lost mediating institutions is a dangerous space to be – one without a future for jobs or employment. Indeed, the recent arrival of ‘behavioural economics’ perspectives in international reports may herald more than merely a lifeboat launch from a sinking ship, it may be a tentative recognition that restoring social cohesion is the alternative to facing the inchoate anger of the Global Street.

More importantly, after many years of critique from within and without, those organisations are now beginning to question some of their long held *a priori* assumptions. I have been most impressed by the capacity of the International Labour Organisation to place some of the most basic questions of distribution of income on the agenda. Its recent work on the relative proportion of Gross National Income accruing to labour and capital in current conditions has been a valuable contribution to responsible discourse.

That work, carried out in concert with the International Monetary Fund, shows that the labour share of Gross National Income has been declining in most countries since 1980. When we speak of labour, and of the fruits of labour and of the distribution of the gains and losses of globalisation, the question that work poses is a foundational question. For if the overwhelming gains of globalisation accrue only to the few, and are predicted to continue for the few, and the losses imposed and pushed down upon the many, can we truly envision a peaceful world?

I want to congratulate those who are working on the theme of ‘the future of work’. I am most acutely aware of the danger of confining our vision of the economy to that which is measured by conventional methods of national income, output and expenditure. In doing so, we lose sight of so much of that which is of substance in the world of work. Envisioning the future of work is inescapably an interdisciplinary exercise. Our citizens have related, relate, and will relate to work from different perspectives. All of these differences have importance.

Work as a human activity is the experience of living in the fullness of lived experience within a society and a culture. It is irreducibly social, inextricably linked to citizenship.

Yet much of the essential work carried out by women - caring for the family, the sick and the elderly, sustaining and educating the household – is not measured if it is not carried out in the marketplace. Development economists such as Ester Boserup have reminded us that this so often amounts to nothing less than masking a double workload, as women are so often condemned to perpetual work – work that is not emancipatory but often long, unremitting and exhausting. Many working in Europe are reporting levels of stress at work, and there are meaningful differences between countries that are associated with levels of social protection, provision for inclusion, and adequacy of public provision in the public world.

On every continent too many women are living in precarious conditions, with limited economic power, are also most vulnerable in relation to household provision, to rapid movement of commodity prices which are such a structural feature of the present era of globalisation.

Within the internationally traded economy there is scant consideration for such women. Transnational corporations are permitted to transfer risk down through

global supply and value chains to those who can bear it least, whether it be farm or factory workers, thus often compounding the gender pay gap even further.

May I warmly commend the Report on the Women at Work Initiative presented to this Conference by the Director-General and its proposals, for reform as to metrics, to establish new forms of statistical measurement that will have the capacity to value the totality of women's work, to ensure, for example, that the growing care economy is grounded on decent work, and the introduction of measures to strengthen women's control over their own work-time.

Above all, on a day on which we speak of conflict and peace-building, I would like to commend the commitment for an end, not in a decade's time, but now, to violence and harassment against women in the workplace. These daily acts of aggression against women are a global outrage, they do not know any national barriers. At times they occur within the context of slavery, indentured labour, or physical abduction and abuse. This must be ended and it requires a global response, one which begins in our own workplaces, whether in the agencies of the United Nations, in our public administrations, in factories, on farms, or in offices, and let us say it clearly and unequivocally no invocation of culture must be given the credence it seeks to block or impede any basic human right.

President,

Your Excellency,

Distinguished Delegates,

When he received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1974, one of my fellow countrymen, Seán MacBride, spoke of the imperatives of survival of the 20th century, which he believed could only be met through the fulfilment of the United Nations Charter – nothing less than a universal peace. On a planet now bearing the ravages of climate change, the imperatives of survival will rest on our capacity to fulfil the promise of the Constitution of this Organisation and meet the contemporary demands of global social justice.

We will need to move the discourse on work beyond the atmosphere of a labour market. Work has to be discussed within a model of human capacity, and of human flourishing within a participatory society. This challenges, I suggest with not a little sadness, and with respect, a rather collapsed contemporary scholarship in economic theory and policy. We do so need an adequate re-invigorated social economics that can integrate with ecological realities and an inclusive global ethics, and we need an intellectual integrity that will privilege pluralist scholarship and thinking.

So much of that work is being undertaken by this Organisation, whether through the Global Commission on the Future of Work, or in the intellectual labour that is has provoked.

Given the diversity of our human history, of our philosophical, ethical and faith traditions, and of our respective economies and societies, there has never been, nor will there ever be, a single definition of work or of labour, nor a single expression of work as a human experience. It would be a fallacy to simply assume that our contemporary institutions - institutions that we have the power to shape – will remain unchanged as labour-saving technology owned and deployed by the few shapes the lives of the many.

I so welcome the work of those intellectuals who are engaging with these challenges of change. For example, in a paper published in 2016 by the International Labour Organisation Professor Dominique Méda has proposed that, rather than accepting any inevitable future, public policy could, as a choice between options, be directed to ensure an ecological conversion in conditions that protects and even expands decent work. This paper represents the type of bold, ambitious, ethically informed thinking, that we require at this time in this century, one that places work, as with all human activities, within the context of global citizenship itself.

We must be more than hopeful. We must be committed to action. After all, through those two vital moral achievements of the diplomacy of the common good, the Paris Climate Accord and the Sustainable Development Goals, we now have the vehicles through which we can focus, organise, and measure our efforts in a way that will enable us to meet the challenges of our century and build a lasting peace. Decent work, gender equality, and climate justice are after all at their very core.

Secretary-General Guterres has proposed bold and necessary reforms to the United Nations system to prepare all its constituent parts for the enormous tasks ahead, the accomplishment of which will require the best of our courage and our energy, tasks to which this Organisation will be central. The United Nations needs our support now. It is our United Nations and in too many of its parts it is under siege from within and without.

In these times, the need for the International Labour Organisation, and the rights to which it is devoted, has never been more urgent. If we are to achieve the necessary decarbonisation of our economies, if we are to rise to the actions demanded of us, we must rediscover the moral courage equivalent to that which this Conference displayed in 1944, when it declared that peace could only rest upon international policies and measures which promote the attainment of social justice. This will require a convergence of vision between the institutions of the United Nations, a unified voice from the silos, the Member States, organisations of regional co-operation, and, if we are to be serious, the Bretton Woods Institutions.

The surge in world conflict that we have witnessed, and from which so many peoples have suffered in the last two decades alone, has occurred at the very same moment as we, as a planet, reached the highest point of the internationalisation of capital and goods markets in our history.

The great conflagration of the First World War that consumed a generation of the young and the old, and which gave birth to this Organisation, broke out during the previous high point of globalisation. Despite the warnings that have issued from this Conference in previous times, a social globalisation, a globalisation of ethical interdependence, has been eschewed to make way for an uncritical pursuit of a globalisation of trade and of finance, a single version of globalisation, one that has abused its authority to sustain an ignorance of those forms of intellectual inquiry sourced in humanism. This hegemony of intellectual thought is not an accidental phenomenon. It has been in gestation since the first reflections of Von Mises and Von Hayek. It has colonised universities and places of learning. Bonded foundations and thought centres serve this hegemony as they eschew or devalue pluralist scholarship.

So, let us heed once again the lesson of a century ago that peace does not simply rest on common markets, come as residue or facilitating condition to the markets, but upon a global solidarity, intellectually powerful, built on adequate literacy of the economic and the fiscal, one dedicated to the realisation of social justice and equality for all our peoples, equality in all its forms, gender equality, economic equality, social equality, and equality of opportunity. That is how peace will be built and maintained in this century, a century that must, in new and ever-changing conditions, craft the experience of work within a sustainable, ethical global citizenship.

May we succeed together. **Beir Beannacht.**