

# **SOCIAL ACTION**

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# **LABOUR AND THE FUTURE OF WORK**

The International Labour Organization (ILO) was formed as a result of the Versailles Peace Treaty signed in 1919 at the end of World War I. It grew out of the many labour and social movements in the nineteenth century to address the problem of exploitation of labour by capitalists in the post-industrialisation era. After the World War II, ILO became the first specialised agency associated with the United Nations, which was formed in 1948. Since its inception, ILO has been advancing the cause of social justice and promoting decent work by setting international labour standards. The membership of ILO has grown from 45 states in 1919 to 187 states in 2019. The structure of ILO is unique among world organisations as it functions in a tripartite manner giving equal voice to governments of member states, representatives from employers associations and delegates from Trade Unions and other workers organisations. So far, ILO has adopted 189 Conventions and Recommendations for implementation by member states. These Conventions cover a wide range of guidelines on labour issues, such as abolition of forced labour, labour inspection, occupational health and safety, social security protection, among others.

The year 2019 marks the centenary year of ILO and therefore the United Nations and almost all countries in the world are celebrating this milestone at the international level. As part of the centenary celebrations, the ILO constituted the Global Commission on the Future of Work, which submitted its report titled “Work for a Brighter Future” on 22nd January, 2019. This report acknowledges that new developments are transforming the world of work. It calls for decisive action from member states to deal with the transitions taking place in the world of work in order to improve the quality of life of workers, expand work choices, eliminate or at least reduce the gender gap and reverse the damage done to the environment and marginalised communities due to increasing global inequality leading to uncertainties. Technological advances, such as automation, artificial intelligence and robotics, will create new jobs, but a large number of people will lose their jobs as their skills may become obsolete in the future. Similarly, the greening of economies through the adoption of sustainable practices and cleaner technologies around the globe will create millions of jobs, but a large number of jobs with older technologies in carbon and resource intensive industries will be lost. During these transitions, a large number of workers

need to re-skill themselves to remain in the labour market. Increasing youth populations in some countries and increase in ageing population in other countries is likely to increase mobility in the labour markets and put pressure on social security systems. In view of these global trends, the ILO report suggests transformative changes with a human-centred approach to reinforce the fabric of societies by delivering economic security, equal opportunity and social justice. In this regard, the report makes ten recommendations to respond to the unprecedented challenges due to the rapidly changing world of work. Primarily, the report advocates for increasing investment in people's capabilities to thrive in a carbon-neutral, digital age. This includes (1) a universal entitlement to lifelong learning that enables people to acquire skills and to reskill and upskill themselves, (2) increasing investments in the institutions, policies and strategies that will support people through future of work transitions, (3) Adopting a transformative and measurable agenda for gender equality, and (4) providing universal and affordable social protection from birth to old age. Secondly, the report champions the cause of increasing investment in the institutions of work, such as (1) establishing a Universal Labour Guarantee that ensures fundamental workers' rights, an adequate living wage, maximum limits on working hours and protection of safety and health at work; (2) expanding time sovereignty to give workers greater autonomy over their working time while meeting enterprise needs; (3) ensuring collective representation of workers and employers through social dialogue as a public good, actively promoted through public policies; and (4) harnessing and managing technology that guarantees decent work to all workers by ensuring that final decisions affecting work are taken by human beings. Finally, the report pitches for increasing investment in decent and sustainable work through (1) incentives to promote investments in key areas for decent and sustainable work, and (2) reshaping business incentive structures for long term investment approaches and exploring supplementary indicators for human development and well-being.

In view of these recommendations, each country has to evolve strategies to build a just and equitable future of work. This issue of Social Action is not only a tribute to the achievements of ILO during the last 100 years, but it is also an attempt to raise some key concerns regarding the future of work in the context of the Indian labour situation. The article "Social Justice and the Future of Work - two sides of one coin or two different worlds? 100 years of International Labour Organisation and its relevance for global governance" by Hildegard Hagemann sets the tone for the discussion of the future of work from a global perspective. She expresses concern about the large number of informal workers, changing demography of countries, climate change

and labour migration. She considers social dialogue and labour inspection to be crucial in guaranteeing decent work in the future. She also advocates a greater role for civil society organisations in promoting the ILO agenda on the future of work. Bhumika Sharma's article titled, "Technostress and the Need for the Right to Disconnect in a Hyper Connected World" tries to address the issue of workers being constantly at work due to communication technological advances, which affects the work-life balance of a worker. She advocates greater flexibility to the employees in organising their working hours and discusses the provisions of a proposed bill granting workers the right to disconnect or the right not to attend to calls on duty during holidays and non-working hours. The article, "Denial of Dignity: Work, Identity and Impurity" by Pradyumna Bag deals with the continuing practice of manual scavenging that puts thousands of lives of Dalits at risk in spite of the capacity of the Government to eradicate the practice using technology. The article titled "Adivasi Youth Migration from Central and Eastern States to South India: Opportunities and Challenges" by P.O. Martin and Smitha Philip highlights the plight of large numbers of labour migrants from tribal regions of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal and Assam in the more prosperous states in South India using six case studies that reveal exploitation, exclusion, bondedness, human trafficking and even loss of lives of Adivasi migrant youth in South India. The article on "Muslim Women Entrepreneurs in Delhi" by Eisha Choudhary and Zubair Meenai advocate that more Muslim women must be encouraged to be entrepreneurs as it empowers them by giving them financial autonomy, fostering self reliance and enhancing their self esteem. The authors explain the challenges faced by Muslim women engaged in entrepreneurship due to their religious and gender identities and the struggles they undergo in their occupation. In the non-thematic article section, Krishna Chandra Choudhary explains the different kinds of violence faced by women and the need for counselling and psycho-social support for the victims and survivors of gender violence in his article "Violence against Women: Role of Counsellor and Psycho-Social Support". The article on "13 Years of RTI Act in Haryana: A Case Study" by Rajvir S. Dhaka is an attempt to analyse the effectiveness of the implementation of the Right to Information Act 2005 in five Government departments in Gurugram District. His findings reveal that in spite of the implementation of the RTI Act, Government departments still lack a culture of transparency and more efforts must be made to implement the RTI Act in Haryana effectively.

The peculiarities of the Indian labour market, such as high proportion of informal workers, declining female labour participation rate, increasing,

caste-based occupational structure, inadequate social security system, weakening workers' organisations, increasing unemployment and under-employment make the implementation of the Future of Work Agenda of the ILO a huge challenge. However, the recommendations of the Global Commission on the Future of Work provides a roadmap that should be contextualised to improve the labour scenario in India.

*Denzil Fernandes*