

Securing decent work for all: time for a new approach?

By Brendan Martin and Conor Cradden

Another year, another World Day for Decent Work ([WDDW](#)), and time to take stock of progress since 2008, when the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) designated 7 October its annual day to campaign in support of the goal.

The term 'decent work' is a strange one. It is a typical product, perhaps, of an international institution -- in this case, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) -- quite far removed from the way ordinary people use language. But the content is crucial and its achievement would transform the lives of us all, and particularly those who are denied even the most fundamental rights and labour standards.

As the [ILO puts it](#): "Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men."

The reality for the vast majority of the world's people is, of course, very far from those ideals. Even in the most highly developed economies, more and more women and men earn their livings through employment relationships that deny them basic security or social protection, let alone a fair income or equal opportunities. Prospects for personal development and freedom of expression, and the right to participate in decisions affecting working lives, seem even further away.

Perhaps that is why the ITUC, in determining its focus for each year's WDDW, has tended to focus on what might be seen as the more basic aspects of the decent work agenda, such as securing employment relationships covered by labour law and promoting jobs growth. The first WDDW, in 2008, focused on the growth of 'precarious' work -- that is, non-

For a fuller and more detailed elaboration of some of the ideas in this article, see

"Understanding the past to change the present: The social compromise, the corporate theory of society and the future shape of industrial relations"

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[Trade Unions and the global crisis: Labour's visions, strategies and responses](#)

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permanent, temporary, casual, insecure and contingent employment. In 2009 the focus switched to job losses caused by the economic crisis, while in 2010 the themes were the need for growth, quality public services and a financial sector that serves the real economy. This year the ITUC returns the WDDW focus to “uncertain, unpredictable and risky employment”, noting: “Workers in these jobs are not, or only partially, covered by labour laws and social security protection. They encounter difficulties either in law or in practice to join or form a trade union. Female precarious workers are likely to be excluded from pregnancy protection and maternity leave provisions, as well as other important forms of social protection.”

When the basics are still denied to so many, and the growth of precarious work represents a trend in the wrong direction, it is understandable that the ITUC concentrates on those issues. As the global body representing more working people than any other -- it links national trade union confederations that in turn link unions with a combined membership of around 175 million -- it is also understandable that the ITUC devotes many of its scarce resources to lobbying international institutions that can influence government policies and corporate behaviour. And, indeed, those efforts have contributed to progress -- modest and limited, but progress nonetheless -- at international level.

In August this year, for example, as part of its [‘sustainability framework’](#) and following consultation with global unions and others, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) of the World Bank updated its performance standards on labour and working conditions, first adopted in 2006 and now the model for other international financial institutions. With effect from January 2012, PS2 will require IFC clients (private businesses to which IFC lends or in which it takes an equity stake) to make “commercially reasonable efforts” to ensure compliance by contractors and to set up a grievance mechanism for indirectly employed workers if the contractor does not already have one. In addition, where they are unable to exercise sufficient management control over existing suppliers, clients are required to “shift the project’s primary supply chain over time to suppliers that can demonstrate” compliance. The update also establishes a requirement for comparable terms and conditions for migrant workers compared to non-migrant workers, introduces quality requirements for workers’ accommodation, requires monitoring of working conditions for workers under the age of 18, and includes a “strengthening of retrenchment provisions to include an early analysis of the alternatives to dismissals and ensuring that all appropriate payments and benefits are paid to workers to be dismissed”.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has also updated its [Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises](#) this year, strengthening their application to suppliers and contractors and including a new chapter on human rights. These are among “a number of positive new elements”, as the Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC) that shadows OECD has put it. Meanwhile, at national level, through determined campaigning and organisation by trade unions and improved policies by more progressive governments, the benefits of labour standards and social protection have been brought to many workers previously denied them, while at enterprise level international framework agreements between global union federations (GUFs) and transnational companies have played their part.

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Nevertheless, the briefest visits to GUF websites -- try the [Contract and Agency Labour](#) site run by ICEM, or those of the international [metalworkers](#) or [transport workers](#) -- show how routinely basic rights at work are violated. In those circumstances, would it be unrealistic to suggest that unions should set their campaigning sights higher? Are the other goals of the ILO's 'decent work agenda' unrealistically lofty? Should unions continue to focus on "opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families" and leave until better days the goals of "personal development and social integration" and "freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives"?

Your answer to those questions might depend on your view of what it would take to transform the international labour movement into a truly mass movement for social change, and to turn the incremental gains it currently celebrates (while denouncing setbacks) into a qualitative paradigm shift. Here global unions could perhaps learn from another experience of the year since WDDW 2010 -- the so-called Arab Spring. Without doubt there is a long way to go -- not least in Egypt, where increasing violation of democratic rights is receiving far less media attention than did the movement that brought down Mubarak -- but we should not overlook the nature of the unifying and motivating force that has transformed the political landscape of the Arab world. In setting their agendas for action, unions might learn from not only the spirit (which is indeed inspiring them) but also the central theme of the Arab Spring: the pursuit of democratic rights to balance collective welfare with individual freedom.

The predicament confronting workers and their organisations across the world today has arisen from the inadequacies of the economic and social development models of the last half century. The social compromise between capital and labour that characterized the Western economies, and the statist route to development that prevailed in the former 'communist' and newly independent former colonial countries, both gave way to the neo-liberal policies associated with corporate and particularly financial hegemony. But if the crisis unleashed in recent years by the latter compounds the challenge for unions of overcoming its effects, it also offers new opportunities to articulate, promote and organise for an alternative to all the failed development paradigms of the last 60 years.

The alternative must not only supersede its predecessors but also learn from and capture the strengths of each of them. From the social compromise model it takes the conviction that economic and organisational choices involve moral, political and ethical judgements, contrary to illusions that market activity and management are laws unto themselves. From the corporate model it takes belief that market economy and production for profit can be reconciled with the wellbeing of workers and society as a whole, contrary to the view that corporations are inevitably anti-social. And from the statist model it takes a role for government in constructing a legal, institutional and regulatory framework, contrary to the idea that the state can only disable rather than enable social organisation and individual freedom.

But that reconciliation cannot be achieved by settling for scraps from the debris of the failed paradigms; it requires a positive and powerful vision of an alternative future. It demands that the principles of democracy now universally acknowledged as not only desirable but essential in the political arena are extended into the

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industrial arena. Corporate legitimacy requires that all stakeholders, including workers, are involved in determining what is done and how it is done, so that corporate behaviour benefits rather than harms society and the environment, and enables secure, healthy and fulfilling lives at work. Neither the unrestrained property rights of owners of capital nor state powers compatible with independent social organisation and freedom can secure that change; democratic as well as employment and social rights in the workplace are required.

It would be as wrong to deny or belittle the small steps in the direction of decent work achieved in recent years by the global union movement as it would be to overlook the countervailing trends towards insecurity and unprotected employment. But a qualitative paradigm shift requires more. Or, to make the point in terms of the ILO's decent work agenda, only when workers can "organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives" will they secure "work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families".

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