

1.2 The ILO tripartite structure

Employers, workers and governments at work

The ILO has always been a unique forum in which the governments and social partners of its 174 member States can freely and openly confront experiences and compare national policies. Its tripartite structure makes the ILO unique among world organizations in that employers' and workers' organizations have an equal voice with governments in shaping its policies and programmes.

The ILO encourages tripartism within member States as well, by promoting a social dialogue which involves trade unions and employers in the formulation and, where appropriate, implementation of national policy on social and economic affairs and a host of other issues. Each member country has the right to send four delegates to the International Labour Conference: Two from the government and one each representing workers and employers, each of whom may speak and vote independently.

The **International Labour Conference** meets in June of each year, in Geneva. Delegates are accompanied by technical advisors. As well as the government delegates, the Cabinet Ministers responsible for labour affairs in their countries also generally attend the conference and take the floor. Employer and worker delegates can express themselves and vote independently of their governments. They may well vote against their government representatives as well as against each other.

The Conference provides an international forum for discussion of world labour, social

problems and international labour standards, and sets the broad policies of the Organization. Every two years, the Conference adopts the ILO's biennial work programme and budget, which is financed by member States.

Between Conferences, the work of the ILO is guided by the **Governing Body**, comprising 28 government members and 14 worker and 14 employer members. This executive council of the ILO meets three times a year in Geneva. It takes decisions on action to give effect to ILO policy, prepares the draft programme and budget which it then submits to the Conference for adoption, and elects the Director-General.

Ten of the government seats are permanently held by States of chief industrial importance (Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, United States). Representatives of other member countries are elected by the government delegates at the Conference every three years, taking into account geographical distribution. The employers and workers elect their own representatives in separate electoral colleges.

The **International Labour Office** in Geneva is the permanent secretariat of the International Labour Organization, its operational headquarters, research centre and publishing house. Administration and management are decentralized in regional, area and branch offices. Under the leadership of a Director-General, who is elected for a five-year renewable term, the Office employs some 2,500 officials and experts at Geneva headquarters and in more than 40 field offices around the world.

Regional meetings of the ILO member States are held periodically to examine matters of special interest to the regions concerned. The work of the Governing Body and of the International Labour Office is aided by tripartite committees covering major industries, and by committees of experts on such matters as vocational training, management development, occupational safety and health, industrial relations, workers' education and special problems of certain categories of workers (young workers, women, the disabled, etc.).

From the outset, the ILO paid particular attention to the maritime sector, whose work is by its nature international in scope. Through a Joint Maritime Commission and special Maritime Sessions of the International Labour Conference, it has adopted a large number of Conventions and Recommendations dealing with issues affecting seafarers.