



Backing global labour standards

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JOHN FRYER AND MARK THOMPSON

Labour Day is an opportunity to reflect on forces affecting all Canadians, especially workers, both unionized and non-union. Traditionally, these reflections have focused primarily on conditions in this country: How are Canadian workers faring?

We believe a broader view is necessary. Who made the swimming suits, beach balls and barbecue tools, so common in summer, for instance?

In 2006, many citizens are concerned about the impact of globalization on Canadian workers. Almost daily, we encounter goods manufactured in Asia or other developing countries. Canadian lawyers can now contract for research in India at a fraction of the cost of having such work done here.

True, the low prices of these offshore-produced goods and services have helped restrain inflation in a period of economic prosperity. Yet most Canadians realize intuitively that the low-priced goods and services not only undermine our ability to compete nationally or internationally, but they also are based on low-cost labour.

A recent report on working conditions at a Chinese factory that is a major supplier for a firm that sells high-priced running and walking shoes found that workers earned an average of \$2.50 U.S. per day while living under military discipline in company-owned dormitories.

The normal workweek is 60 hours per week, and work rules impose fines for any attempt by workers to organize to improve their conditions.

Under these circumstances, it is easy to despair. Canadians of the baby-boom generation wonder what conditions their children and grandchildren will face when they start their careers.

Confronted by foreign competition, manufacturing employment has shrunk to its lowest level in more than half a century. Small "c" conservative governments strive to reduce employment in the public sector, a traditional source of secure, well-paid jobs.

Foreign competitors are sovereign nations, not easily influenced by governments in developed nations. Multinational corporations, which are major beneficiaries of globalization, resist any efforts to regulate their conduct.

Governments of low-wage countries argue that they cannot be expected to meet Western labour standards while they are still in the early stages of economic development.

To meet these challenges, an international movement to improve the conditions of workers everywhere has emerged.

This effort to integrate workers into a prosperous global economy is based upon the adoption of "core labour standards." Until now, the meaning of these standards was little-known in Canada. But the support

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of Canadians for these standards will help improve the welfare of workers everywhere.

Core labour standards were adopted by the International Labour Organization. The ILO is the sole surviving agency from the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War 1. Since 1919, its mandate has included development and adoption of global labour standards to improve conditions involving "injustice, hardship and privation."

For nearly a century, the ILO has adopted labour conventions that set basic conditions and rights for all workers throughout the world, taking into account varying national traditions and levels of economic development.

Each member state of the ILO is asked to ratify these conventions, which cover topics ranging from working conditions in international shipping, to freedom of association or work in mines.

The record of ratification of conventions is mixed. Canada, for example, has ratified only 28 of more than 180 conventions (in part because many subjects require agreement of all provinces and territories before Canada can ratify some conventions). To focus the attention internationally on the impact of globalization on working people, more than 170 member states of the ILO commemorated its 75th anniversary by adopting unanimously the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

The declaration succinctly stated four absolutely basic rights that constitute Core Labour Standards, applicable everywhere :

- Freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining.
- The elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour.
- The effective abolition of child labour.
- The elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

The core standards were identified as so basic that all nations, regardless of their level of economic development, should observe them. In recognition of the importance of the core standards, the declaration stated that all member states, even if they have not ratified the underlying conventions, are obligated by their membership in the ILO "to respect, to promote and realize" the principles in the declaration, both domestically and through international action.

The ILO possesses no statutory or legal authority to either enforce application of its standards or to punish violators. Moral suasion has been the traditional means of enforcement.

A tripartite body of eminent jurists examines alleged violations of ILO conventions. Offending nations are asked to comply with the standard in question. Some countries, comply, others do not.

Successive Canadian federal and provincial governments have ignored and/or defied numerous rulings of the ILO.

Most of this defiance has come from governments that have unilaterally suspended the collective bargaining rights of their own employees without consultation. The ILO rulings highlight the sensitive public policy issue evolving from the fact that governments are both boss and legislator simultaneously.

So what should Canadians and their governments do to help promote core standards?

First, we must all inform ourselves about such matters. The internet and Canadian media can be of great assistance. Information on labour practices that violate the Core Labour Standards can be disseminated

quickly.

Second, we can and should insist that Canada and its corporations neither give aid nor invest in those countries unwilling to abide by the core standards. Such a policy would bring Canada into line with the world's largest development agency, the World Bank, which, effective May 1 this year, prohibits loans or other financial assistance to countries and companies failing to endorse as well as apply the ILO's core standards.

Third, each of us can think a little harder before purchasing articles or services that are not produced under internationally accepted guidelines. Groups such as Oxfam Canada provide information about products and countries that observe recognized labour standards. As a result, products are available at competitive prices made from "earth friendly" materials and using fair labour practices.

Finally, recognizing that labour rights are human rights, we should expect Canada to be at the forefront of defending such rights both at home as well as in the international arena.

Canada is known for its defence of other human rights. It should move global labour standards much higher up on its human rights agenda.

***John Fryer** is a member of the Order of Canada, former president of the National Union of Public and General Employees and an adjunct professor at the University of Victoria. **Mark Thompson** is professor emeritus of industrial relations at the Sauder School of Business, University of British Columbia. He is a member of the ILO-UNESCO Committee of Experts on the Status of Teachers.*

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