

ILO, Geneva, 1979

Speech by S Venkat Ram

Mr. Ram (Worker's delegate, India) - I greet this Conference on behalf of the Indian working class. This is a particularly happy occasion for our country because the Conference has elected Mr. Ravindra Varma, our Minister of Labour, to preside over its deliberations. I express the gratitude of our countrymen for the honour conferred on our country.

Our working class is not only proud of the great achievements of our country in the past but it desires to enrich and carry forward that tradition. It also has inherited the heroic traditions of resistance to oppression and exploitation, as witnessed by our history. It is dedicated to the modernisation of our ancient nation on the basis of justice, equality and freedom. It is here that it recognises that the ILO, both as a visionary organisation and as a practical pathfinder, has a great role to play in the creation of a new world order on the basis of social justice and lasting peace.

The ILO has earned the appreciation of the workers of the world by its endeavours to evolve and obtain implementation of standards respecting working conditions, conditions of employment and wages consistent with human needs and human dignity, by exposing the dark corners of oppression and exploitation in the world and by registering its protest against such evils. It is because of this record that the working class of the developing countries has also been looking towards the ILO with hopes and expectation of aid and support in its own battles for a new world order. These hopes and expectations are brightened by the ILO's latest and, to these nations the most significant, move to spell out a programme of action for full employment and for basic needs as part of development strategy.

The working people of the whole world have a common desire for a better future and their struggles have to be co-ordinate towards that end. But within this general context, the social, economic and political conditions encountered by the developing countries in their struggle for a better world order are different from those encountered by the developed countries in the corresponding stage of their own development or, for that matter, for those that they are encountering even today. For, while the developed countries indicate the path to be traversed by the developing countries and hold a mirror to the latter's future, the developing countries have, ironically, a privilege born out of their historical backwardness. That is the benefit of hindsight, to avoid the pitfalls and mistakes made by the developed countries. The developing countries will exercise this privilege to their full advantages. In this task, they expect the ILO to help and support them in continuously subjecting old ideas of development to a critical evaluation in the light of new experience and in moulding public and official opinion accordingly.

Here, let me state quite candidly that many people in the developing countries have an impression that as in the case of many other world bodies, the antennae, sensibilities and apparatus of the ILO are conditioned by the specific experience of the developed countries at a certain state of their development and that the ILO is unable to transcend that conditioning. But it will not do to universalise that experience on the problems of development and apply the models evolved there to the developing countries. For, not only are the social, political, economic and quite important, cultural conditions in the developing countries deferent from those that were encountered by the developed countries in their time of development so that, therefore, these models are inappropriate, but application of these models is also creating new and serious tensions and imbalances in the developing countries. This is not to reject modernisation as such but to dispute the assumption that Westernisation is the single universally valid model of modernisation and to humbly claim that the developing countries are trying to, or ought to try to, evolve their own models of modernisation based on their own experience, conditions and needs. We shall certainly learn from them, but we shall certainly not copy them. Unless the ILO consciously reorientates itself to tackle the problem of the developing countries both in terms of evolving appropriate models and helping to implement them in the developing countries, I am afraid it will be severely limited in its usefulness to the developing world. The ILO has to accept these ideas not only in the abstract, but also in its practical work.

Permit me to illustrate what I mean with reference to my own country, India, by drawing upon a few random items from the contents of the Reports of the Director-General.

In India some 40 per cent of the working population are unemployed if a strict criterion of full employment is applied. At least 45 per cent of the entire population is below the poverty line, defined in terms of the absolutely low subsistence standards. Unemployment has been increasing at a galloping rate with each five-year plan. The first need of some 30 to 40 million people is a job which allows them to keep body and soul together and a minimum of basic needs, defined in terms of what the country can afford, to enable them just keep disease, destitution and premature death away. It has got to be a time-bound programme and not timeless Utopia. It is surprising that in all the discussion on unemployment two vital points are missed: one, unless the right to work or unemployment allowance is made a legally enforceable fundamental right and the Sword of Damocles of an increasing outlay on unemployment allowance is hung over the heads of the employers and Governments of the developing countries, they will never be impelled to draw up and implement full employment plans; two, unless all-out help is given to the unemployed people, the great bulk of whom consists of the rural poor, to organise themselves and enforce their rights, full employment plans are never going to be implemented by government bureaucracies which have no social commitment. Of this basic perception of the realities of the developing world, there is no adequate evidence in the Report.

A lot is said about appropriate technology. But the simple fact is that in most of the developing countries a gigantic public-works sector employing millions of otherwise unemployed men and women to work with their hands and improvised tools and create basic community needs, infrastructure and social assets is a major device to tackle unemployment. Like the public sector, the private sector,

the co-operative sector and so on, we need a public work sector, which has enough volume of work to last for several decades. The need and case for this is as plain and visible as a banyan tree. We do not need research or data to get started on such a task or to discover its utility. This is priority number one. Incidentally, the Preamble to the ILO Constitution speaks of "the prevention of unemployment". The developing world's concern is creation of employment, even more than prevention of unemployment. We have, of course, to think of appropriate technology. But it is not possible to evolve such a technology without relating the research for this to the indigenous needs, tools and experience.

There are two good ILO Conventions on abolition of forced labour. But neither of them prescribes the rehabilitation of freed "bonded labourers", as they are called in my country. Such freedom from bondage is boon in a full employment economy but a curse in an economy plagued by unemployment. From experience in India, we know that liberated but unrehabilitated bonded labourers are thrown from the frying pan into the fire. Why is it that ILO Conventions say not a word on this obvious aspect? It is because the ILO is looking at this problem from the viewpoint of the developed world?

A number of good Conventions and Recommendations have been adopted by the ILO on social security. It is evident that they are all premised on the assumption that the State will enact laws and police their implementation, and the employers will meet the costs. But in the developing countries, millions of workers are self-employed or wage-workers on farms, on construction projects, in transport, in the small and village industries, in seasonal or casual occupations or in no occupations at all, and there are a multitude of small and "marginal" employers whose "turnover" will be quite as much as workers'. In such cases, how will the State enact laws or police their implementation? A little thought would show that such Conventions to be of any use to the vast multitude of workers or the categories described above should require the State itself to provide minimum social security to these workers instead of passing the buck. Again, it is a case of developed world reality intruding on the view of the ILO thus distorting its perception.

The developing countries do not readily ratify Conventions. India has rectified only 34 of the 151 Conventions and, for instance, Conventions Nos. 87 and 98 have not been ratified, with the consequences we all know. One hardly need emphasise the indispensability of these Conventions to workers in developing countries. If developed countries ratify Conventions and enforce the standards and the developing countries do not, what happens to the vision of an equal world? It is not time that emphasis was shifted to ratification and action on all the Conventions by the developing countries for a while, rather than piling up more and more Conventions which only one part of the world ratifies? I do not mean that progress in the developed countries should be slowed down or standards should be diluted, but I am drawing attention to the division of the world into two camps, developed and developing, even in such matters as standards on employment conditions.

The ILO has rightly a great concern for human rights. But permit me to express my dismay that when these rights were trampled underfoot for 20 months in my country in 1975-76, and many trade unionists like me were rotting in jails not knowing whether or not we would ever come out alive, not many labour organisations in the world protested. Is the inference wrong that, maybe they felt that for a developing country like India these rights are not all that important? What would have happened if a tenth of that disaster has overtaken a developed country? In this context, we are thankful that the ILO and certain workers' organisations did raise their voice against the suppression of trade union and democratic rights in 1975-76 and upheld the principle that freedom is indivisible. The point is that the mind that thinks that freedom is an attribute of developed countries and not a necessity for developing countries is a colonial mind however sophisticated the rationale. Incidentally, in many countries of world, these rights are trampled underfoot even now. I think the Director-General's Report should contain every year a chapter on the state of trade union and democratic rights in the different countries in the world. The Indian who has lost them for 20 months and then miraculously regained them know their value.

In many a developing country the multinationals are investing scarce resources in producing luxury items and also draining away profits. The native ruling classes are wasting away another large chunk of resources in conspicuous consumption. The bureaucracy keeps on proliferating, not only swallowing a disproportionately high share of the national revenue but also hindering essential reforms and development.

The developed countries to whose development the poor of the developing countries have made contribution through sweat and blood in the past refuse to alter the terms of aid and trade to stimulate development in developing countries. In this context, the workers in developing countries expect that the working class of the developed countries should adopt not a bipartisan approach with their employers and governments but an independent approach based on their international obligations to the working people of the developing world. And on all these questions, the ILO should take a clear-cut and positive stand in favour of the interest of the developing countries.

Let me conclude by saying that the ILO has a creditable history behind it and great objectives before it. But it must readjust its focus and recorder its priorities. It must, for a change, adopt for a while the viewpoint and values of the developing world. It is these countries which are carrying forward human destiny at this juncture. As suggested, generalised platitudes and balancing acts will not do. Concrete action and some sacrifice on the part of the developed countries are called for. It is the duty and the privilege of ILO to bring this about.