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THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION FACING THE UN CONFERENCE ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT (1968-1978)

Federico Paolini*

ABSTRACT

This essay deals with the debate within the International Labour Organization regarding the accession in the Conference on the Human Environment that was proposed by the U.N. General Assembly at its twenty-third session on December 3, 1968. The purpose of this work is to provide a small contribution to reflection on the complex relationships between social stakeholders involved in labour and the problems posed by environmental changes. The call for a conference on the "human environment" sparked a heated debate within the ILO as it took place at a time of profound inequalities deeply dividing the third of humanity living in the industrialized countries from the other two thirds who lived in developing and underdeveloped ones. Through the official documents produced by the ILO the debate is analyzed, which appears to be characterized by two polarizations: the first cleaved a small vanguard of countries from all the other Member States; the second fuelled divisions between employers and workers who – although concerned that awareness of environmental problems could slow down the pace of economic growth – were more in favour of a discussion on the environmental issues affecting the living and working environment.

Keywords: International Labour Organization, Human environment, Stockholm conference, Labour Environment Relations.
JEL Codes: O19, O44, Q56.

1. Ecological technocracy, environmentalism, and labour

This work aims to investigate the reactions of the International Labour Organization to the convening of the Conference on the Human Environ-

* Università di Macerata. Address for correspondence: federico.paolini@unimc.it.

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ment. The ILO represents a privileged observatory because it is the only specialized agency bringing together representatives of governments, employers and workers in its executive bodies.[1] It also provides a global perspective, as by the early 1970s the number of Member States had more than doubled from the second half of the 1940s[2] and industrialized countries had become a minority among developing countries: in 1972 (the year of the Stockholm Conference) the Member States were 128, of which 37 were African, 30 Asian, 27 Central and South American, 21 Western European, 9 Eastern European, 2 North American and 2 Oceanic.

Environmental history and labour history tend to ignore one another.[3] "Environmental history does not fully take work into account", argue Bailey and Gwyther – it has a "blind spot" in the consideration of work, workers' institutions and working landscapes. This short-sighted view, they claim, is due to the fact that environmental historians tend to ignore empirical realities preferring a romantic and sentimental conceptualization of nature as a paradisal Arcadia in which there is no place for work (Bailey and Gwyther 2010: 9). With respect to ecological problems, Daniel Maul's book on the 100th anniversary of the ILO simply notes that there "is hardly any research on the ILO's dealing with environmental issues" (Maul 2019: 238).

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[1] The ILO's permanent organization consist of a General Conference of representatives of the Members; a Governing Body (composed of fifty-six persons: twenty-eight representing governments, fourteen representing the employers, and fourteen representing the workers); an International Labour Office controlled by the Governing Body. The International Labour Office is led by a Director-General who is appointed by the Governing Body. Between 1968 and 1978 the ILO's general directors were David A. Morse (1948-1970, USA), Clarence Wilfred Jenks (1970-1973, UK) and Francis Blanchard (1974-1989, France), while the Governing Body was chaired by Roberto Ago (1967-1968, Italy), Georges L.P. Weaver (1968-1969, USA), Héctor Gros Espiell (1969-1970, Uruguay), Simeon Olujinm Koku (1970-1971, Nigeria), Umarjadi Njotowijono (1971-1972, Indonesia), John Mainwaring (1972-1973, Canada), Arturo Muñoz Ledo (1973-1974, México), Mohamed Al-Arbi Khattabi (1974-1975, Morocco), Philipp Halford Cook (1975-1976, Australia), Winfrid Haase (1976-1977, Federal Rep. of Germany), Joseph Morris (1977-1978, Canada); vice-chairpersons representing employers were the French Pierre Waline (1953-1969) and the Swede Gullmar Bergenstrom (1969-1978), while those representing workers were the Swiss Jean Möri (1960-1970), the Canadian Joseph Morris (1970-1977) and the West German G. Muhr. On the history of the International Labour Organization see: Ghebali 1989; Rodgers *et al*. 2009; Van Daele *et al*. 2010; Kott and Droux 2013; Maul 2019.

[2] The *Declaration of Philadelphia* (*Declaration concerning the aims and purposes of the International Labour Organisation*) was signed by delegates from 41 states (10 May 1944). In 1947 the ILO had 52 Member States of which 16 were Western European, 16 Central and South American, 7 Asian, 5 Eastern European, 4 African, 2 North American and 2 Oceanic.

[3] Within environmental history, the literature that investigates the relationships between labour and environmental issues is limited. The most engrossing works are: Linge and van der Knaap 1989; Colin 1994; White 1996; Sellers 1997; Obach 2002; 2004; Silverman 2004; 2006; Peck 2006; Santiago 2006; Estabrook 2007; Leopold 2007; Montrie 2008; 2011; 2018; Mayer 2009; Bailey and Gwyther 2010; Rogers 2010; Massard-Guilbaud and Rodger 2011; Brown and Klubock 2014; Cristiano 2018; Räthzel, Stevis and Uzzell 2021.

Drawing on the awareness of these lacunae in historiography, this article intends to try to include labour issues in the discussion on the history of sustainable development.

Since the beginning of the 1960s, the environmental stresses provoked by the post-war economic boom – employment of numerous new chemicals, industrial pollution, hazardous and toxic waste – fostered the emergence of a new technocracy calling for a significant change in the relationship between human beings and nature (McCormick 1989; Pepper 1996; Hay 2002; Murphy 2005; Montrie 2018).

With regard to ecological thinking, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) initiated a debate on the environmental impacts of industrialization blending a thoroughly informed scientific approach with an emotional appreciation for the natural world. Later, the time span from the latter half of the 1960s to the first half of the 1970s can be defined as that of 'steady state' society: in the opinion of the authors who supported this theory (Boulding 1966; Ehrlich 1968; Hardin 1968; Goldsmith and Allen 1972; Meadows *et al.* 1972; Daly 1973), since the Earth has limited natural resources, a continuous, unlimited growth would lead to a depletion of the environment until the destruction of all natural resources indispensable for life on the planet. In 1971, American biologist Barry Commoner published *The Closing Circle*, stating the origin of the ecological crisis in the "modifications of production technology": these had caused the alteration of the environmental cycles – those of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen – which regulate the large global systems of the ecosphere (lithosphere, hydrosphere, first atmospheric layers). For Commoner the solution was to plan a new social organization able to harmonize its needs with those of the ecosphere through the rational use of resources and pollution control (Commoner 1971).

The progressive mediatization of the issues raised by the mentioned authors and the growing attention of the mass media on the incipient environmental crisis convinced an increasing number of people of the need to promote a radical ecological transformation of industrialized societies. The 1960s were punctuated, mainly in the Anglo-Saxon countries, by the birth of small local groups fighting against pollution, the use of nuclear energy, the dissipative consumption of resources and the construction of infrastructures that altered valuable natural habitats. On April 22, 1970 in the United States, several million people took to the streets to celebrate Earth Day protesting against the environmental impacts produced by 150 years of industrial development and calling for policies aimed at affirming an ecological vision of society (Rome 2013; Allitt 2014). This new sensitivity towards environmental problems was the favorable substrate to the formation of organizations that expressly referred to the dictates of political ecology. The phenomenon quickly acquired a global dimension and in-

volved even the oldest conservationist societies. The main new deed during the 1960s and 1970s was the emergence of non-governmental organizations operating internationally, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace (Wapner 1996). In this context the principal institutional response to environmental concern was the adoption of legislation on environmental issues: the industrialized countries adopted sectoral regulations aimed essentially at reducing the impact of human pressure on natural resources by establishing standards and technical processes to protect water and air against pollution, to improve the collection and disposal of waste and to reduce the intensity of noise in urban environments.[4]

However, what catalyzed the attention of the world community around ecological problems was the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment that, from 5 to 16 June 1972, brought together in Stockholm the representatives of 113 industrialized and developing countries. The Conference was organized at a historical moment characterized by the awareness of the environmental impacts produced by industrialization and urbanization that, in Western Europe and in the Western Offshoots, were involving an increasing number of cities and territories. As we have mentioned above, the denunciation of the negative effects of the capitalist development model was fueled by a technocracy (naturalists, ecologists, biologists, chemists…) that was gaining increasing mass media visibility and was supported by the nascent environmental movement (Stradling 2012; Selcer 2018).

This should not make us forget that the process of post-war economic development was still at an early stage: within the industrialized countries the inequalities continued to be very evident, and many territories had not yet been impacted by the effects of growth; in 1965, 34.43% of the world's population was considered poor, 26.95% very poor, 11.68% middle income and 26.94% high income (Woods 1966: 206). In an article issued in Foreign Affairs, the President of the World Bank George David Woods wrote:

> The underdeveloped countries are seeking to enter the twentieth century, but many of them, in some respects, have not yet reached the nineteenth. Many still need to achieve the preconditions of industrialization, including stable government, an acquisitive outlook and technical capacity.[5]

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[4] For an overview of the measures approved mainly in the US, Western Europe and Japan see Hurrel and Kingsbury 1992; Tolba and Rummel-Bulska 1998; Paolini 2014: 252-260.

[5] Woods 1966: 206-207.

On February 20, 1970, in a speech at the Columbia University Conference on International Economic Development, World Bank President Robert McNamara stressed the persistence of inequalities and affirmed that these were exacerbated and made unbearable by the new technological means showing the deep disparities between rich and poor countries:

> Though men have inhabited the same planet for more than a million years, they coexist today in communities that range in the extremes from stone-age simplicity to space-age sophistication. […] For centuries stagnating societies and deprived peoples remained content with their lot because they were unaware that life was really any better elsewhere. Their very remoteness saved them from odious comparisons. But the technological revolution has changed all that. Now, with the transistor radio and the television tube in remote corners of the world dramatizing the disparities in the quality of life, what was tolerable in the past provokes turbulence today. […] It is inconceivable that one-quarter of mankind, moving forward into a self-accelerating affluence, can succeed in walling itself off from the other three-quarters who find themselves entrapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty.[6]

These two quotations clearly show that the global context was characterized by a blatant fault line that separated the industrialized countries from the plethora of underdeveloped ones that aspired to take the path of development. It is equally evident that this fault line was determined by the spread of a development model based on the combination of industrialization and urbanization which in the early 1970s remained limited to Western European countries, to the Western Offshoots and, to a lesser extent, to the command economy countries (the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc).

We need to consider two more fault lines. The first concerns the profound differences that also exist within the so-called industrialized countries: during the 1960s and 1970s, the countries of Central and Mediterranean Europe were in the middle of their development path and were emerging from a situation of backwardness and poverty. In these countries, the diligence of institutions, trade unions and workers was still focused on economic growth and the improvement of living conditions (Adorno, Aloscari and Salerno 2008: 155-268; Conte and Ferrarese 2020): as Uekoetter (2011: 9) effectively pointed out, there was not even adequate terminology to describe and explain environmental problems (until the early 1970's, the current meaning of 'environment' did not exist, but the documents generally spoke of 'hygiene' or, such as in the Italian case, 'public health'). It is no coincidence that the attention paid to environmental problems was greatest

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[6] McNamara 1970: 5-6.

in a very small group of countries (primarily the United States and Canada, plus Sweden, the Netherlands and, with a lesser zeal, the United Kingdom) already characterized by a high standard of living and widespread mass consumption, whose ruling classes saw the environmental crisis also as an opportunity to build a new competitive advantage over other industrialized and developing countries (Engfeldt 1973; Robertson 2008; Hamblin 2013).

The third fault line concerns the essence of environmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s. The theoretical system of environmentalism was developed by a not very large group of scientists (mainly Americans) and found a first audience among some intellectual circles of the upper classes to spread (starting from the late 1970s) among the middle classes living in urban areas of the wealthiest industrialized countries. In this context, environmentalism has been configured as a technocratic movement, far from the daily dynamics of the subaltern classes, especially the working class. Montrie noted that American workers have not been fully free to deal with their "future survival and growth" and they have encountered numerous obstacles on the way to their ecological awareness, "including resistance among mainstream environmental groups and individual activists to forming alliances, even on issues that seem to be ready-made for collaboration" (Montrie 2011: 143). Furthermore, Montrie (referring to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*) argues that the polarization of the debate between the technocratic environmentalism of scientists and the denial of industrialists has led to the idea that Americans "had to choose between 'jobs' and 'environment'" (Montrie 2018: 142). If this context has made the encounter of labour forces and environmentalism difficult in the richest Western country, it is not difficult to imagine why workers of the less wealthy industrialized countries (not to mention those who lived in the developing countries, just come out of the colonial system) concerned themselves with environmental issues only after having acquired a stable enough well-being.

These three fault lines have meant that – beyond some sporadic initiative (Silverman 2004: 122-123) – awareness of environmental problems became a real issue for trade unions and workers only after the publication of the Brudtland report in 1987 and the 1992 Earth Summit (Silverman 2004; 2006).

2. A suffered accession

During the 173rd Session of the ILO Governing Body – held in Geneva from November 12 to 15, 1968 – the representative of the Swedish Government, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs Lars Åke Åström, presented the first official request for the organization to take an active part in the

process of convening the Conference on Human Environment that would take place in Stockholm in 1972. Up to that time, the Organization had been essentially concerned with the health of workers within the workplace: official documents spoke of "industrial accidents", "occupational diseases" and "occupational health".[7] The locution 'work environment' was used sporadically and there was no reference to the 'environment' in the meaning of the present time, that is as "a whole of the physical, chemical and biological conditions in which life takes place" (Giardi and Trapanese 2007: 30-31).

In the course of 173rd Session, the Swedish Minister argued that the environmental problems caused by human development could be divided into two groups: "the changes in the natural surroundings of man brought about by the use, without adequate control, of modern agricultural and industrial methods" (air and water pollution, erosion and depletion of the soil, use of biocides, waste disposal…) and the effect "of environmental disturbance on health and living and working conditions, and the physical and psychological effects of unplanned and uncontrolled urban growth". To solve problems related to the degradation of the human environment, Åström advocated the urgency of a high-level concerted international action "to induce the general public and the policy makers to come to grips with the serious environmental problems created by modern technology". Åström asked for the ILO to be involved because it could organize educational activities and seminars to raise awareness among employers and workers; for this reason he hoped that the ILO "would support the idea of convening such a conference and increase its own efforts to improve the human environment".[8] The Governing Body took note of the Swedish request and employers' and workers' representatives recognized the importance of the human environment issue which concerned the ILO "because pollution stemmed in large measure from industry, and the ILO had an important contribution to make to the control of the pollution of the working environment".[9] The matter appeared again at the 174th Session of the Governing Body whose minutes reported the differences of opinion emerged between employers and workers during the International Orga-

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[7] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, "Convention, Recommendations, Resolutions and Additional Texts Adopted by the International Labour Conference at Its 47th Session", *Official Bulletin. Supplement I*, vol. XLVI, no. 3, July 1963: 17; International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *Resolutions Adopted by the International Labour Conference at Its 51st Session (Geneva, 1967)*, Geneva 1967: 2-3.

[8] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *Minutes of the 173rd Session of the Governing Body*, Geneva, 12-15 November 1968: 43.

[9] *Ibid.*: 125.

nizations Committee met on February 28, 1969: the former, pointing out the organization's traditional interest in the safety and health of workers, expressed doubts regarding the ILO's concern with the question; the latter pointed out that the human environment was deteriorating due to demographic pressures, the increasing pace of industrialization and the continuing growth of urban areas, and that the working environment contributed to the degradation of the "general environment". Therefore, the ILO had an important role to play thanks to its long experience relating the protection of workers and the prevention of contamination of the working environment: for this reason, the worker members asked that the ILO takes part together with other organizations to the efforts to tackle the wider problems of the human environment.[10]

The 177th session of the Governing Body took notice of the differences of opinion that had been reiterated during the meeting of the International Organizations Committee on November 11, 1969: government members demanded that the relationship of urban and industrial pollution to deterioration of the total environment be clarified; employer members argued that the problems of workplace pollution were kept under control by legislation and that there were no new reasons to stoke concerns; worker members emphasized that the deterioration of the total environment was a hazard to laborers who were affected by both industrial and urban pollution, and they suggested that the ILO send a tripartite delegation to the Stockholm Conference because all three groups had specialized knowledge.[11]

The discussion on ILO involvement in the Conference on the Human Environment reached its climax at the Fifty-fourth Session of the International Labour Conference held at Geneva from June 3 to 25, 1970. The Director-General in his report argued that the greatest menace to humanity was that science and technology could escape human control and generate new threats such as those represented by "the gradual pollution and poisoning of the land, air and water". David Morse stated that the main challenge was to reconcile economic growth and increasing industrial production with the preservation of the environment: In this challenge, the ILO should have been responsible for "mobilising the support and the participation of the main productive forces of society in attempts to preserve the salubrity and the quality of man's environment".[12] The invitation of

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[10] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *Minutes of the 174th Session of the Governing Body*, Geneva, 4-6 March 1969: 86-87.

[11] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *Minutes of the 177th Session of the Governing Body*, Geneva, 18-21 November 1969: 85.

[12] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *The ILO and the United*

the Director-General took the form of a motion for a resolution submitted by the Swedish workers' delegate (Thorbjörn Carlsson, Secretary of Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions) asking the Governing Body "to secure the full participation of the ILO in the preparatory work and in the Conference itself" and to ensure all necessary measures to enable the effectiveness of the organization's contribution as regards "working environment as part of the total human environment; location of industry; disposal of industrial waste"; finally, the motion asked the Governing Body to take all necessary steps to allow the ILO to be represented by a tripartite delegation.[13] During the debate, the speakers who explicitly supported the resolution were the Ministers of Norway, Finland and Sweden and, more cautiously, the Dutch Government delegate, the employers' representatives of Sweden and the workers' representative of Belgium.[14] The rest of the delegates did not speak on the issues of the human environment and the resolution was adopted during the thirty-second sitting (June 25, 1970) with a simplified text in which the General Conference of the International Labour Organization asked the Governing Body to instruct the Director-General to accept the invitation from the General Assembly of the United Nations and "to arrange the selection of an appropriate International Labour Organization delegation, with adequate tripartite representation, to ensure the fully effective participation of the Organization […] particularly as regards the working environment as part of the total human environment".[15]

Despite the adoption of the resolution, during the 181st session of the Governing Body doubts concerning the scope for ILO action to protect the human environment were expressed by the Soviet Union and employers' representatives according to whom the three areas of discussion that were being envisaged for the Stockholm Conference ("environmental aspects of human settlements, rational management of natural resources, environmental degradation from pollution and nuisances") were "outside the competence and beyond the concern of the ILO, which should limit itself primarily to eradicating pollution at the workplace". Employers' represen-

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Nations: Twenty-Five Years of a Partnership of Service. Supplement to the Report of the Director-General to the International Labour Conference, Fifty-fourth Session, 1970: 51-52.

[13] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *International Labour Conference. Fifty-Fourth Session Geneva, 1970. Record Of Proceedings*: 16.

[14] *Ibid.*: 105; 161; 171; 289; 352; 635; 675. The speakers who supported the resolution were: Egil Aarvik, Minister for Social Affairs (Norway); Alii Lahtinen, Minister of Social Affairs and Health (Finland); Sven Aspling, Minister of Health and Social Affairs (Sweden); Gullmar Bergenström, Director of Swedish Employers' Confederation; Jef Houthuys, President of Belgian Confederation of Christian Trade Unions; Gerardus M.J. Veldkamp, former Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health (Netherlands).

[15] *Ibid.*: 675-676; 732.

tatives recognized that those issues could not be separated "from that of pollution in general" but felt that the ILO should "devote its efforts to what was most practical and immediate".[16]

The 182nd session of the Governing Body took note of the International Organizations Committee's report in which they were communicated the various items on the agenda of the Stockholm Conference, among which were declared of particular interest to the ILO the one entitled *Environmental Specifications for Working Places* and a topic related to the role of adult education, including workers' and management.[17] On March 7, 1971, Director-General Wilfred Jenks announced that the ILO's contribution to the Conference on the Human Environment might consist of "an informative paper stressing those aspects of ILO activities which may have a bearing on the subjects to be examined by the proposed Conference" and "a working paper dealing largely with the working environment and its relationship to the general subjects on the agenda, and attempting to set out the extent and nature of occupational exposure to the various environmental hazards and to describe the conditions likely to give rise to such problems".[18]

Notwithstanding the active participation of the ILO in the Preparatory Committee, the 184th session of the Governing Body again revealed doubts among employers: the main one was that cooperation with other international organizations undermined the independence of the ILO; Uruguayan Carlos R. Végh Garzón (former Minister of Finance and President of Pan American Federation of Engineering Societies) asked the Director-General for assurances that the preparation of the Conference on the Human Environment was not the inception of a new international organization that would mastery all the others. Employers' representatives reiterated that "the ILO's competence rested mainly in the field of the working environment" and, with a polemical attitude, expressed the hope that the debate on pollution "would be reasoned and non-emotional; industry was not the

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16 International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *Minutes of the 181st Session of the Governing Body*, Geneva, 17-20 November 1970: 28; 204.

17 International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *Minutes of the 182nd Session of the Governing Body*, Geneva, 2-5 March 1971: 121. The areas of discussion proposed by the Stockholm Conference Preparatory Committee were: "1. The planning and management of human settlements for environmental quality. 2. The environmental aspects of natural resources management. 3. Identification and control of pollutants and nuisances of broad international significance. 4. Educational, informational, social and cultural aspects of environmental issues. 5. Development and environment. 6. The international organisational implications of action proposals".

18 International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *Activities of the ILO 1970. Report of the Director-General (Part 2) to the International Labour Conference, Fifty-sixth Session, 1971*, 7 March 1971: 65.

only source of pollutions in the human environment, as some seemed to argue".[19]

After three years of discussions, the 185th session of the Governing Body decided not to send a tripartite delegation to the Stockholm Conference as this would take place in parallel with the Fifty-seventh Session of the General Conference of the International Labour Organization (held at Geneva from June 7 to 27, 1972): the employers' representatives proposed to remedy the problem by asking the national delegations to host employers' and workers' delegates; workers' representatives stated they understood the situation but asked that the ILO "should make its voice heard at the Conference" and that its contribution should not limited to "the working environment but should encompass the environment around the workplace: housing, transport and the social infrastructure".[20] The ILO was therefore represented by a low profile delegation composed of Assistant Director-General Bertil Bolin and Jacques Lemoine, Chief International Organizations Branch.[21]

3. The theoretical reflection of the Director-General and the discussion at the 57th session of the International Labour Conference

On January 12, 1972, Director-General Wilfred Jenks presented a report which was intended to provide a theoretical analysis on the relationship between humankind, technology and the environment; the text would be discussed during the 57th session of the general conference of the organization which would be held from June 7 to 27, 1972.[22]

The starting point of the analysis concerned the role of technology: the acceleration of technological innovation would have caused the definitive breakdown of the balance between human beings and nature, generating potentially disastrous effects. The main impact produced by technology

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[19] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *Minutes of the 184th Session of the Governing Body*, Geneva, 16-19 November 1971: 95-96; 220-221.

[20] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *Minutes of the 185th Session of the Governing Body*, Geneva, 29 February – 3 March 1972: 150; International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *Activities of The ILO 1971. Report of the Director-General (Part 2) to the International Labour Conference, Fifty-seventh Session, 1972*: 78.

[21] United Nations, General Assembly, *United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. Stockholm, 5-16 June 1972. List of Participants*, A/CONF.48/INF.5/Rev.l (21 September 1972), available from https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1659277.

[22] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *Technology for Freedom. Man in His Environment. The ILO Contribution. Report of the Director-General Part I*, 12 January 1972.

was what he called "bigness": the increasing size of social and economic institutions was creating difficult problems of management and control. In this context, individuals were being thrown into increasingly large complexes: "big cities, big corporations, big organisations, big government, big everything".[23] Moreover, technological progress would have placed too much emphasis "on the satisfaction of apparently insatiable individual needs". Taking up a rhetorical argument widely used by critics of the consumer society (from Thorstein Veblen to David Riesman), he argued that the great increase in the possession of durable goods ("such as automobiles and domestic appliances") had damaged collective consumption ("public housing, public transport and various welfare services") and common goods so much that clean air and water had become "scarce commodities in some areas".[24]

Jenks asserted that the global ecological crisis was caused by four elements: "Rapidly growing population, rapidly increasing urbanisation, rapid depletion of natural resources, rapidly mounting pollution". Notwithstanding this consideration, in order not to irritate a significant part of the organization the Director-General said that there was no "irreconcilable conflict between growth and innovation and environmental protection" and that there was a need to increase "productivity to provide the wherewithal for improving and protecting the environment". Immediately afterwards, he talked about the need to develop new concepts of "sustainable growth" that would take full account of the environmental implications and suggested that "purification, protection and beautification of the natural environment" could become a "major industry".[25]

His analysis then went on to examine the necessary interventions to protect the environment, identified in measures to reduce the levels of pollution produced by industrial processes, quality standards for industrial products that were sources of pollution and better management of industrial and domestic waste disposal. Particular attention was paid to the question of costs whose estimation was defined as a hazardous task:

> […] several estimates have been made in some countries, but they are highly speculative and vary greatly. Much would depend on the degree of cleanliness to be obtained. The cost of 100 per cent cleanliness would be astronomical, even if the goal were attainable. Much depends on the extent to which the development of new anti-pollution or recycling technologies reduces the cost of a given degree of effectiveness of pollution control. The incidence of the burden will vary

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[23] *Ibid.*: 4; 17-18.

[24] *Ibid.*: 4.

[25] *Ibid.*: 9-10.

widely, as it will necessarily fall most heavily in the first instance on the industries which at present contribute most to pollution such as thermo-generated electricity, petroleum refining, many chemical processes, iron and steel production, the production of non-ferrous metals and certain types of metalworking industries. It has been estimated that in some industries production costs could rise by 10 per cent or even more. It remains uncertain how far improved technologies will offset the possible increased costs of rising environmental standards.[26]

Jenks recognized that environmental interventions had complex economic, social and technological implications: for example, they could have inflationary effects, or cause conflicts with the objectives of other social policies or damage the competitive position of a country or an industry in world markets. Despite the problems mentioned, he considered essential to deal with the ecological crisis, starting with the environmental problems that still existed in workplaces.[27]

While respecting the roles of enterprises and trade unions,[28] Jenks hoped for close cooperation to develop a new social responsibility to build "a more human and satisfying environment at work and outside the workplace"; the solutions should have been found by the organizations themselves, while the role of the ILO would have been to facilitate the building of this new dialogue between employers and workers.[29] He was convinced that no solution could be found without the responsible participation and involvement of employers and workers: in particular, the hazards and pollutants in living and working environments could only have been eliminated if the productive forces of society were "fully committed to, and involved in, the search for new, less polluting, techniques of production and new waste-disposal and recycling technologies". He concluded with what he considered to be a proposal for a realistic program: the creation of new forms of organization "to absorb the volume and complexity of information relating to technological developments and their social effects" and the initiation of an informed dialogue "between workers and employers, and between both and governments".[30]

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[26] *Ibid.*: 11.

[27] *Ibid.*: 15-16.

[28] "The primary function of the enterprise is economic. It exists primarily to produce goods or services at reasonable cost. […] The primary responsibility of a trade union is to its members; it exists primarily to defend and promote their interests. Any trade union leader who forgets this will soon be disavowed by his rank and file. The responsibility of the union to its membership limits the emphasis which its leadership can place on the needs and problems of society at large"; *ibid.*: 43.

[29] *Ibid.*: 43; 46-47.

[30] *Ibid.*: 55-58.

Four attitudes arose over the course of the discussion. In the first we can include the tripartite delegates from the Nordic countries, the North American ones and some from northern Europe (the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, and the Federal Republic of Germany). These were countries that had been most affected by the environmental transformations and that were the first to adopt environmental legislation and set up specialized agencies to deal with the environmental restoration. The delegates of these countries argued that the protection of the human environment was a question that could no longer be postponed and that close international cooperation was needed to solve the problems posed by the rapid acceleration of scientific and technological development at regional and global level.[31] A second approach was that of delegates from the countries of Central and Southern Europe (France, Italy, Spain), industrialized countries of the Pacific (Australia, New Zealand, Japan), the most advanced of the developing countries, and of the representatives of some international trade unions: without denying the environmental problems, the speeches stressed the inability to halt economic growth, the importance of technology, the costs of environmental remediation, the urgency to reduce internal and international inequalities, and the occurrence that environmental problems were caused not only by industrialization, but also by population growth and transport development.[32] The third attitude was that of the command economy countries (that did not attend the Stockholm Conference, with the sole exception of the People's Republic of China): the discourses of their delegates were aimed at emphasizing the relationships between the onset of environmental problems and the capitalist economic model and denouncing the ecological damage caused by imperialist wars; moreover, the capability of the socialist model to combine technological development and economic growth with respect for human beings and the environment was enhanced.[33] The fourth approach was that of African states (supported by the poorest countries of Asia and Latin America, and by the representative of the Holy See[34]) whose delegates made clear their fear that the criticisms of industrial development and technological prog-

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[31] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *International Labour Conference. Fifty-Seventh Session Geneva, 1972. Record Of Proceedings*: 23-24; 194-195; 209-210; 218-220; 224-226; 248-250; 251-253; 253-254; 268-269; 314-317; 324-325; 349-350; 573-574.

[32] *Ibid.*: 61-62; 90-91; 120; 131-135; 137-139; 140-142; 160-162; 169-171; 173-176; 189; 205-209; 217-218; 232-233; 264-265; 275-277; 284-285; 326-328; 334-336; 355-357; 359-361; 399-402; 406-410; 410-412; 526-527; 570-571; 578.

[33] *Ibid.*: 63-64; 71-72; 101; 103-104; 135-137; 142-143; 148-149; 222-223; 242-243; 278-279; 290-292; 311-312; 344-346; 347-349; 367-368; 369-371; 374-375.

[34] *Ibid.*: 294-295.

ress were aimed at preventing the development of poorer areas by giving priority to environmental protection.[35]

4. from the Stockholm Conference to the PIACT

The *Declaration of the United Nations Conference on Human Development* turned out to be nothing more than an obvious acknowledgement of the existence of environmental problems. The final document did not take a stand against economic growth, as employers and many developing countries had implicitly feared: economic and social development was defined "essential for ensuring a favourable living and working environment for man and for creating conditions on earth that are necessary for the improvement of the quality of life" (*Principle 8*); "accelerated development" (through the transfer of technology and financial capital from industrialized to developing countries) was indicated as the remedy to stem the "environmental deficiencies" caused by "under-development and natural disasters" (*Principle 9*).[36] In this context, the Action Plan for the Human Environment assigned to the ILO some very obvious tasks which did not represent anything new and different from the competences and assignments carried out by the organization: participation in the priority area for research on "physical, mental and social effects of stresses created by living and working conditions in human settlements, particularly urban conglomerates […]" (Recommendation 4, VIII); training of specialists in working environment issues to be employed as consultants in developing countries (Recommendation 7, IV).[37]

At the 188th session of the Governing Body held in November 1972, workers' representatives made a very critical assessment of the results of the Stockholm Conference:

> […] the Worker members nevertheless felt that the ILO's role was still rather vaguely defined. In their view, the environment was a kind of "rag-bag" which gave rise to all sorts of proposals with unpredictable consequences. For example, what would be the effects on employment and industry of measures to check the use of lead sulphate in petrol and the ban on certain detergents? Before decisions

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[35] *Ibid.*: 66-67; 72-73; 87; 91; 106; 127-128; 151-153; 156-157; 159-160; 166-168; 181-182; 212-214; 241-242; 243-244; 262-264; 265-266; 271-272; 281-283; 317-318; 325-326; 333-334; 337-339; 362-364; 383-385; 386-388.

[36] United Nations, *Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. Stockholm, 5-16 June 1972*, A/CONF.48/14/Rev.1. Available at https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/523249 (accessed September 4, 2023).

[37] *Ibid.*: 7; 8.

were taken some kind of balance must be struck between the cost of proposals and their consequences for conditions of work, employment and retraining. These were the kind of problems that the ILO should tackle.[38]

Employers appeared to be far more satisfied with the tentative outcomes of the Conference: they reiterated that solving environmental problems needed a pragmatic approach and explicated that their skepticism was justified because "sometimes less money was needed to set up an industry than to check the pollution to which it gave rise".[39]

In subsequent years, the ILO focused on the problems of the working environment as laid down in a resolution adopted on June 27, 1972. The document called on governments and employers' and workers' organizations to intensify the efforts to promote "improvements in the working environment" and to co-operate in the formulation and implementation of policies designed to protect the "human environment and to ensure the distribution and use of resources for the benefit of the community at large and the quality of life it enjoys". It also called on the Member States to consider measures such as strengthening of the labour inspection system and the imposition of adequate sanctions for offences of pollution and for the violation of safety and health standards; establishment of permissible levels for exposure of workers to harmful substances and by-products and definition of those levels after consultation with the organizations of workers and employers; training and workers' education programs designed to make the individual worker more aware of the hazards of health which may arise in his working environment.[40]

The greatest achievement was the launch of the *International Programme for the Improvement of Working Conditions and the Environment* (PIACT). The plan was presented in 1975 by the Director-General Francis Blanchard with the aim of humanizing workplaces through the prevention of mental stress, the adaptation of installations and work processes to the physical and mental aptitudes of workers and the protection against "physical conditions and dangers at the workplace and in its immediate environment (e.g. heat, radiation, dust, atmospheric pollutants, noise, air pressure, vibration, dangerous machines, chemical substances and explo-

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[38] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *Minutes of the 188th Session of the Governing Body*, Geneva, 14-17 November 1972: 261.

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, *Resolutions Adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 57th Session (Geneva, 1972), Resolution concerning the Contribution of the International Labour Organisation to the Protection and Enhancement of the Environment Related to Work*: 1-4.

sives)".[41] In the document, Blanchard also made some sporadic mention of the need to improve the conditions of the "general environment", for example stressing the adverse consequences of industrial policies "applied without thought for the environment".[42]

However, as Maul affirms (2019: 240), the plan failed to achieve its major goals and produced its best results in the area of occupational safety and health. Despite the launch of the PIACT, in its relations with the *United Nations Environment Programme*, the ILO went no further than a study of the attitudes of employers' and workers' organizations to the protection of the environment outside the workplace (1974) and a *Memorandum of Understanding* (1977) defining the working environment as an "integral part of the human environment".[43]

Basically, until the end of the 1980's, the ILO was not able to develop a substantial theoretical reflection on tangled relationships between work and the environment. It began to address the issue in greater depth[44] only after the concept of sustainable development had become one of the cornerstones of UN environmental policy (Maul 2019: 238): these, however, are events that took place in a profoundly changed global context and that cannot be analyzed in the short span of this essay.

Analyzing the correlations between labour and the environment is not easy. It is complex to establish a general periodization of the relationship between labour forces and environmentalism because the timeline is absolutely diachronic and varies considerably from country to country (often from one territory to another within the same country, as in Italy). In countries that had engaged a first period of well-being during the golden

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[41] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office. International Labour Conference 60th Session 1975, *Making Work More Human. Working Conditions and Environment. Report of the Director-General*, Geneva 1975: 1-10.

[42] *Ibid.*: 2. On the PIACT see also: International Labour Organization. International Labour Office. International Labour Conference 63rd Session 1977, *Activities of the ILO, 1976. Report of the Director-General (Part 2)*, Geneva 1977: 15-18, 62-67; International Labour Organization. International Labour Office. International Labour Conference 64th Session 1978, *Activities of the ILO, 1977. Report of the Director-General*, Geneva 1978: 17-21; International Labour Organization. International Labour Office. International Labour Conference 67th Session 1981, Report VI (1) Safety and Health and the Working Environment, Geneva 1980; Maul 2019: 236-240.

[43] International Labour Organization. International Labour Office. International Labour Conference 70th Session 1984, *Report VII. Evaluation of the International Programme for the Improvement of Working Conditions and Environment*, Geneva 1984: 1-10, 87.

[44] Cf. United Nations Environment Programme. International Institute for Labour Studies, *Environment and Social Policy. Introductory Course Presented in the Framework of the International Internship Course on Active Labour Policy Development, Geneva, 7 May - 4 June 1987*, Geneva 1987; International Labour Organization. International Labour Office, Tripartite Advisory Meeting on Environment and the World of Work, Geneva, 2-4 November 1992, *ILO Activities for Environment and the World of Work*, Geneva 1992.

age years, collective adherence to the development model was almost total. The general consensus contributed to the removal of the harms that economic growth and urbanization were producing on the environment: this is because the material advantages were so evident and so coveted by the workers that the ecological damages were considered a modest toll to pay to the progress. The first real global breakthrough occurred only in the early 1990s when the United Nations attempted to promote a world environmental governance at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992).

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