The International Labour Organization in its Second Century

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I. Introduction

In April 1998, at the annual meeting of the American Society of International Law, a plenary panel held a discussion regarding non-state actors in international law. After one panelist alluded to the experience of the International Labour Organization (ILO), Jessica Tuchman Mathews, President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and also a panelist, responded by declaring that the ILO "has indeed been around forever, but it also has done nothing forever, so it is not terribly interesting".¹ The few ILO hands in the hall were shocked. How could someone so knowledgeable about global affairs make such a preposterous statement?

Without a doubt, the ILO has achieved a great deal. Founded in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles, the ILO was one of the earliest multilateral organizations and the first permanent organization to draft treaties on a regular basis. It was also the first intergovernmental organization to provide for full participation by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which, alongside government representatives, have voting rights in the ILO (in what is known as “tripartism”, government, worker, and employer representatives exercise an equal role in the ILO). As of March 2000, the ILO had crafted 182 labor treaties (called conventions) and 190 non-binding Recommendations covering a broad range of subjects. The labor laws of every country have been influenced to some extent by the ILO.

But the ILO is not focused solely on the labor market. Throughout its history, the ILO has advocated higher labor standards not just to promote economic growth, but to pursue social justice and peace. Although peace has often been broken since 1919, the ILO’s efforts to protect vulnerable workers, to combat unemployment, and to promote freedom of association are generally recognized as having contributed to democratization and social stability. In 1969, the ILO won the Nobel Peace Prize.

The example of the ILO was an important inspiration to the human rights movement. At its first meeting in 1919, the ILO approved two conventions on child labor, thereby showing that more broadly conceived human rights treaties were possible. According to René Cassin, principal author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the