The standards in detail

Core labour standards are set out in eight fundamental International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions. The standards are among the most widely ratified (ILO conventions are ratified by a majority of countries that are members of the ILO, which includes all 187 member States as of January 2019). These standards are incorporated into international law, and all countries, whether or not they have ratified them, are bound to them. The standards are binding on all member states regardless of the level of economic development. They are drawn up with a view to ensuring that work is built on a framework of human rights, and are recognised as international labour standards.

The ILO and what the conventions mean

Core labour standards are the set of fundamental International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions. These conventions mean:
- setting and expressing the application of conventions and recommendations internationally acknowledged human and labour rights;
- promoting ‘best practice’ – work in dignity, safety and health, and giving technical support to governments, trade unions and employers' organisations.

There are many reasons why the core labour standards are needed – political, economic, social and moral. Here are five:

Equality and social justice

It is not just trade unions that support the core labour standards. The principles of the ILO standards reflect key tenets of all of those enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. They are also incorporated into other human rights conventions, and are binding on all member states regardless of whether or not they have ratified them and giving technical support to governments, trade unions and employers' organisations.

Creating space for workers to organise

Core labour standards help ensure that work is built on a framework of human rights and are recognised as international labour standards. They are drawn up with a view to ensuring that work is built on a framework of human rights, and are recognised as international labour standards.

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Decency and dignity

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What you can do

• Write to your MP to press the case for core labour standards.
• Contact our local unions by calling the numbers above and discussing about how trade unions do this in the workplace.

Support the TUC’s Global Action and an international campaign in October entitled ‘Get a Fair Deal: 10 Bids for Fair Trade’ on the websites of the organisations which have written to your MP. The campaign provides a forum for reaching out to people at every level to discuss the relationship between trade and core labour standards. It enables you to do a number of things:
• Get involved in the Playfair at the Olympics campaign, which aims to ensure that both Beijing 2008 and London 2012 are sweatshop free. To read the latest report on conditions in the industries supplying Olympic branded material go to www.whiteband.org/GcapSpecials/anti-poverty-day/.
• Visit the TUC’s website for more information on core labour standards at www.tuc.org.uk/international/tuc-9271-f0.cfm.

Further information

Trade unions, NGOs and governments are key partners in the fight against child labour. Many governments, however, lack the political will to fully implement the ILO’s fundamental conventions. The core labour standards are international conventions with national implementation. Governments should ensure more effective implementation by working with key employers’ organisations, the ILO and trade unions. Working with governments, trade unions and NGOs is critical. No one can do everything – but everyone can do something.

Trade union and employer information on child labour

The ILO’s 1998 Declaration On the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (No. 182) includes child labour.

Dispelling the myths

Core labour standards are protectionist.

Some people believe that we are better off if trade unions work for workers’ rights at home but should not concern themselves with what happens abroad. Many believe that unions want core labour standards to make poorer countries less competitive, and hence their products cheaper. This is not true. Trade unions want core labour standards for everyone, everywhere. As a major player on the international stage the British government has the power to do much more.

Greater enforcement

International institutions such as the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund will support greater enforcement by making a link between trade and core labour standards. This can be done in a number of ways, such as: increasing the power of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to enable it to work in a way that undermines core labour standards.

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More effective implementation

Today, the core labour standards are more often ignored than honoured. Public examination of the behaviour of governments, both in the workplace and in the whole economic system, is important, but it is not enough. All states should be encouraged to ratify the core conventions and provide a system for legal redress. This can be done in a number of ways, such as: increasing the power of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to enable it to work in a way that undermines core labour standards.

Agitation, organisation and action

Labour standards are international commitments with national and local rules. Trade unions and other human rights organisations that are active globally can bring pressure to bear on governments to ratify the core conventions. Governments and multinational companies should ensure more effective implementation by giving priority to addressing the issues surrounding trade and labour standards linkages. Governments and multinational companies should ensure more effective implementation by giving priority to addressing the issues surrounding trade and labour standards linkages.

Increased public awareness

A practical commitment to social dialogue is important, but it is not enough. All states should be encouraged to increase the participation of workers and their organisations in setting policies. The campaign focuses on showing that both trade and social dialogue are needed to facilitate discussion about them. See strategy at: www.ilo.org.

Trade unions and NGOs want governments to do more, but the core labour standards are national commitments. There can be no sustainable development while basic rights to freedom, decency and dignity are flouting.

Women workers won’t benefit

Eliminating discrimination and establishing equal remuneration are key parts of the ideal. Upgrading these workplace rules would enable workers everywhere to gain their rights and improve their chances of being part of the process of development. Women workers and workers with disabilities are especially affected because they are concentrated in parts of the global economy where their rights are least protected.

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