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Core labour standards explained

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The core labour standards are a set of four fundamental, universal and indivisible human rights:

- Freedom from forced labour
- Freedom from child labour
- Freedom from discrimination at work
- Freedom to form and join a union, and to bargain collectively.

These four rights are enshrined in eight International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions.

They are the minimum ‘enabling rights’ people need to defend and improve their rights and conditions at work, to work in freedom and dignity, and to develop in life.

Implementing these rights internationally will ensure that globalisation benefits the majority, rather than the rich few.

The standards in detail

The core labour standards are set out in eight fundamental International Labour Organisation human rights conventions. The standards are among the most widely ratified ILO conventions – 124 of the ILO’s 178 member States, including the UK, have ratified all eight. The principles of the freedom of association conventions have been binding on all ILO member States since 1948, regardless of ratification. With the 1998 ILO **Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work**, this universal obligation now covers the principles of all eight conventions.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining is enshrined in Convention 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise (1948) and Convention 98 on the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining (1949).

Freedom from forced labour is enshrined in Convention 29 on Forced Labour (1930) and Convention 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labour (1957).

Freedom from child labour is enshrined in Convention 138 on Minimum Age for Entry into Employment (1973) and Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999).

Freedom from discrimination at work is enshrined in Convention 100 on Equal Remuneration (1951) and Convention 111 on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation (1958).

The 1998 Declaration recognises that economic growth alone is not enough to ensure equity, social progress and to eradicate poverty. It makes clear that these universal rights apply to all people in all states – regardless of the level of economic development. As an ILO constitutional instrument, its principles are binding on all member states whether or not they have ratified the conventions. The standards in question are also regarded as **human rights** by all other parts of the United Nations system and are incorporated into other **international law**.



Photograph: Thomas Parker

The ILO and what the conventions mean

The tripartite International Labour Organisation is a UN specialised agency that brings together **representatives of governments, trade unions and employers’ organisations**. It promotes social justice and internationally recognised human and labour rights by;

- setting and supervising the application of **conventions and recommendations** (international labour standards)
- promoting ‘decent work’ – work in dignity, safety and freedom; and giving technical support to governments, trade unions and employers.

ILO **conventions** are labour standards drawn up with a view to them becoming part of national law. Once conventions have been adopted by the ILO Conference it is then up to member states to **ratify** them. A convention must be ratified by a certain number of countries before it comes into force. Ratification is voluntary, but binds the country concerned to implement the convention in **national law and practice**.

The standards in detail

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 standards reflect policies key to all those represented at the ILO, including governments, workers’ and employers’ organisations. Core labour standards can help redress the unequal distribution of the benefits of globalisation both within and between countries.

Ending the ‘race to the bottom’

The desperate need of many countries to attract foreign investment encourages business to demand ever cheaper production – often at the expense of workers’ rights and decent working conditions. This ‘race to the bottom’ forces down wages and conditions, especially in developing countries, and affects ALL workers. A universal respect for core labour standards can help prevent unfair competition by establishing a minimum ‘social floor’, allowing workers to bargain for wages their economies can sustain.

Decency and dignity

Work is a large part of what humans do, but inhumane working conditions continue to exist. In a world where millions want but cannot always find productive work, child and forced labour makes no sense. Core labour standards help ensure that work is built on a minimum framework of human values based on freedom, equality, dignity and decency.

Making poverty history

Half the world’s population live on less than \$2 (around £1) a day. Raising the quality of employment, by ensuring workers can organise and bargain for themselves, will play a vital part in reducing poverty. Effective implementation of the core labour standards provides the base necessary for people to improve their own lives.

Creating space for workers to organise

Rights are generally won, not given, and people must be able to defend them. The right to form and join trade unions, and to bargain with employers, is a critical part of that process. Respect for core labour standards creates the space in which workers can organise themselves and make further gains.



Photograph: Jim Holmes / Report Digital

What you can do

- Write to your MP to press the case for action on core labour standards.
- Promote core labour standards by telling members about them and facilitating discussion about them. See strategy at: www.tuc.org.uk/international/tuc-9271-fo.cfm
- Support the British trade union movement's work on international development, which continues to build on the Make Poverty History campaign. Take part in actions around the next global white band day on October 17. The TUC will be running a series of actions under the heading 'Listen to the South'. Campaign updates and ways you can take action will be listed at www.tuc.org.uk. For information on the international campaign visit www.whiteband.org/GcapSpecials/anti-poverty-day/
- Get involved in the Playfair at the Olympics campaign, which aims to improve labour standards in the global supply chains that make the games possible. The campaign focuses on ensuring 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.playfair2008.org and look out for activities such as action cards addressed to the games organisers, which will be available from Autumn 2007.

Further information

Useful websites include:

- Trades Union Congress – www.tuc.org.uk
- The International Trades Union Confederation – www.ituc-csi.org
- The International Labour Organisation – www.ilo.org
- The Ethical Trading Initiative – www.ethicaltrade.org
- Playfair 2008 – www.playfair2008.org

Subscribe to the TUC's International Development Matters e-newsletter by visiting www.tuc.org.uk

Trade union education materials on these and other international development issues can be found at www.tuc.org.uk/deved

For further copies of this pamphlet or for more information about TUC work in this area contact admin at the TUC European Union and International Relations Department on 0207 467 1226 or 0207 467 1357 or email pbrown@tuc.org.uk or twarlock@tuc.org.uk



What trade unions want

What trade unions want

If the same attention was paid to ensuring universal respect for core labour standards as is paid to securing free trade, it would be a huge step towards enabling people to improve their own lives. The international trade union movement believes it is time to 'globalise' social justice. To do this, the movement is pushing for:

More effective implementation

Today, the core labour standards are more often ignored than honoured. Public examination of the behaviour of governments by the ILO is important, but it is not enough. All states should be encouraged to ratify the core conventions and provide a system for legal redress nationally. Multinational companies should also honour their obligations under the ILO declaration. **Governments and multinational companies** should ensure more effective implementation by **actively promoting** core labour standards.

Greater enforcement

International institutions such as the **World Trade Organisation**, the **World Bank** and the **International Monetary Fund** should support greater enforcement by **making a link between trade and core labour standards**. There can be no real sustainable development while basic rights to freedom, decency and dignity are flouted.

A practical commitment to social dialogue

There is a lot of discussion between international bodies working on trade and on development. Too often these discussions involve labour reforms with no requirement that they be discussed with those they will most affect – working people. This must change. As a first step, a **formal joint structure** should be established **with the ILO and World Trade Organisation** to address the issues surrounding trade and labour standards linkages.

Agitation, organisation and action

Core labour standards are international conventions with national and local reach. Trade unions believe that raising awareness of their importance whilst building the capacity and practical commitment to take action at all levels is critical. No one can do everything – but everyone can do something.

Dispelling the myths

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Core labour standards are protectionist. Unions in the north are more concerned with their own jobs than the situation of workers in the south

Not so. Some people believe unions in the developed world only want core labour standards to make poorer countries less competitive. The fact is jobs are moving from one developing country to another in a competitive race to cut costs and attract investment. Neither the ILO nor trade unions are protectionist, but they are promoting standards that will help all working people. Protectionism is about restricting trade by treating another country's products differently from your own, but the key point about core labour standards is that they are universal. Trade unionists in developing and developed countries are united in their demands for core labour standards.

You can't expect poorer countries to be able to meet the same standards as richer ones

There are some things every human being has a right to. Core labour standards enshrine these at work. All the standards were drawn up with the intention of being implemented everywhere in the world, including in the poorest countries.

Linking labour standards and trade will increase the power of the World Trade Organisation (WTO)

Quite the opposite. Linking the two will act as a brake on the current power of the WTO to undermine core labour standards. It is the ILO's role to set labour standards and there is no reason why the WTO should be allowed to work in a way that undermines them. The link will reinforce observation of the standards.

Women workers won't benefit

Eliminating discrimination and establishing equal remuneration are key parts of the standards. Upholding these worldwide would enable women workers to assert their rights and improve their situation. At present women workers are disproportionately denied their fundamental rights at work because they are concentrated in parts of the global economy where their rights are least protected.



Photograph: ILO

This hasn't got anything to do with us in the UK

It has everything to do with the UK. Discrimination, poor standards, child and forced labour create poverty and weaken workers' positions here. They intensify unfair competition in the 'race to the bottom'. Poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere. As a major player on the international stage the British government has the power to do much more.

Ending child labour will make some families worse off

Again, not true. The work that the ILO, many governments and the international trade union movement have done on the issue of child labour has always stressed three things: children should be at school; families should be financially compensated for the loss of child-labour income and the costs of sending children to school; and parents ought to have preference for jobs no longer done by their children. No developed country industrialised without universal education.

Getting to the core



Trade unions and international core labour standards



Photograph: Thomas Parker

Working to end child labour

As part of the Ethical Trading Initiative – a body with membership made up of major UK companies, unions and NGO's which works to improve labour standards throughout global supply chains – the TGWU and IUF have raised the issue of child slavery in the Ivory Coast, where children have been engaged in the production of cocoa for the chocolate industry. Working with key employers' organisations, the union is campaigning to end this practice and ensure that the rights of children are properly protected.

Playing Fair

In 2004 the Playfair at the Olympics coalition of trade unions and NGOs was launched to bring pressure on sportswear companies and national Olympic Associations. By highlighting the poor treatment of workers in supply chains, particularly women workers, the coalition forced a number of companies and national associations to actively seek observation of freedom of association and collective bargaining for workers at their suppliers. The campaign is now focusing on Beijing in 2008 and London 2012.

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