



GENESIS OF INTERNATIONAL LABOUR MOVEMENT: AN OVERVIEW OF EARLY EFFORTS

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Abstract:

A number of developments in the industrial and technological realms happened during the mid and the culmination of the nineteenth century. At the same time, international relations started developing. The growing interdependence of the nations for the satisfaction of their wants was a result of the industrial development as well as of the opening up of new countries. The greatly increased facilities of communication and the presence of the same social problems throughout the world were leading men’s thoughts into the international field. The interchange of experiences, the comparison of methods, the formation of international associations, the holding of international conferences in this period marked the new movement. The strength of international feeling amongst the working-class was the realisation that the economic and social problems of the workers in the various countries were similar. The teachings of great leaders, thinkers and Statesmen gave the organised working class its vision. Gradually, there grew a realisation among the competing industrial nations of the necessity for some form of international law to govern the effects of repeated deliberations by individual nations for the gradual betterment of labour conditions. The history of labour rights has its roots in efforts made during the nineteenth century.

Key Words: Labour, International, Experience, Nations

1. Introduction:

At first sight, labour appears to be the most domestic of all domestic affairs. The improving communications broke down still further the differences between one part of the country and the other and then slowly between two different countries of the world. The civilised nations possess alike needs and ways of life. Their national life tracks the identical pattern of the development of democracy. They also share common ideals of welfare, freedom and equality for all workers. The general homogeneity of occupation, habits and work-culture among the workers instilled common sentiments, aspirations and ideals. They all sought the better conditions of work and life.

The organising of the first International Conference to discuss industrial regulation in Berlin in 1800 recognised that labour is an international question. Various factors have promoted the development of international character in the labour movement. Mass-migration; competition in world markets and the desire of workers in different countries to help one another in economic conflicts were some of the factors.¹ The democratic ideal and the desire to promote the independence of small nationalities against the encroachments of large states; the question of war and peace, and the socialist ideal of the emancipation of labour boasted the expansion of the labour movements.² Labor conceived internationalism partly as a method and partly as a program. Internationalism as a method denoted those organised workers across the world might be able to gain their particular national objectives through internationally co-ordinated action. Internationalism meant a social ideal, budding out of the conditions of working-class life, and which labour was supposed to put into practice, as a program.

The labour movement today is essentially a world movement and the problems of labour have become world problems. It is not possible to isolate labour problems of any particular. Labour today has transcended national boundaries and the currents and cross-currents of labour aspirants and actions. Globalisation has resulted into the increasing attention to and international discussions on labour standards. It is inconceivable that identical conditions of labour can prevail in all latitudes and under all the varieties of social organisation which exist in the world.

2. Developments in Labour Welfare during 1830-1919

The existing labour welfare provisions have grown over the centuries by the efforts of numerous economists, philanthropists, Statesmen and various organisations. The working class raised mainly in the national borders. They slowly developed into a prominent social power in the U.S.A., the European nations as well as some countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa. The major achievements of this process included the

¹ Lewis L. Lorwin, Labor and Internationalism 3 (MacMillan Co., New York, 1929).

² Ibid.

presence of nation states and the enlargement of democratic rights.³ Simultaneously, the working class was growing also into an international force.⁴ These two processes ran at the same time, blended and improved each other.⁵ The working class was turning into an international quantity in practical terms.⁶

Significant Early Labor Rights Thinkers:

The very earliest attempt in International Labor Relations was by the Scotch philanthropist Robert Owen, a cotton manufacturer relating to the conditions of labour. From September 20 to October 22, 1818, he issued two series of memorials with appendices representing the working classes. The first given to the governments of Europe and America. The second one was submitted to the Allied powers gathered in Congress at Aix-la-Chapelle.⁷ The French and German translations of these were soon published as well as the English text. He argued that a reform in the conditions of labor would be in the interest of all classes of society. He called to the attention of the conference the enlightened measures of industrial management which he had inaugurated and was carrying on successfully at New Lanark in Scotland, in the face of the united opposition of the manufacturers and capitalists of his own country. He noted that the problems of labor were not confined by the national borders. "The natural standard of value", Owen stated, "is in principle human labour, on the combined manual and mental power of men called into action". It would be highly beneficial, and has now become absolutely necessary, to reduce this principle into immediate practice. It will be said, by those who have taken a superficial or mere partial view of the question, that human labour or power is so unequal in individuals, that its average amount cannot be estimated. Human labour would thus acquire its natural or intrinsic value, which would increase as science advanced; and this is, in fact, the only really useful object of science."⁸ Owen was a reformer ahead of his time and his example was not followed widely. His methods, furthermore, are not applicable in their entirety today under vastly changed conditions. But his work will always remain the great pioneer effort, and the spirit which he breathed into this effort will long inspire men to inquire of themselves what their duties are toward their fellow men. In recent years, this movement has taken on great life and force and may be recognised as marking the passing of industry from the control of men whose main purpose is to make profits, to the control of a more intelligent, more highly educated and more humane class of employers.

French manufacturer, Daniel Legrand addressed memorials to various governments of Europe⁹, advocating international regulation of hours of labor, limitation of child labor, the abolition of night work for women, and provisions regarding unhealthful occupations during the early twentieth century.¹⁰ Legrand published a final appeal and sent it to the Governments of the most important industrial countries. He called his communication – 'A Respectful Appeal addressed to the Governments of the Industrial Countries' for the purpose of urging an International Law on Industrial Work. Such law should be set up by their Delegates convened to a Conference on the event of the Universal Exhibition in Paris. His Appeal stated simply that international regulation was the only method by which moral and material benefits might be stretched to the working classes, without the manufacturers facing losses. With Daniel Legrand, the period of the precursors ended.

French economist, Louis Auguste Blanqui suggested that conditions of competition might be regulated by international agreement.¹¹ The only means of evading disastrous industrial abuses and of bettering social conditions of maladjustment was to allow all industrial people reach an agreement and adopt uniform measures. Villerme made an inquiry into working conditions in the textile industry. His report came out in 1839 in two volumes. The Report presented in full detail the appalling conditions of industry at that time.

The international labour international has crammed a measure of growth and achievement over the years. These developments may be divided into different periods.

3. Pioneer Labour Welfare Organisations:

A continuous development lies behind the present-day position of labour welfare. The efforts of a number of organisations, formed since the early nineteenth century culminated to a strong set-up of the rights of

³ David Skvirsky, *The Working-Class Movement in the Period of Transition to Imperialism (1871-1904)* 15 Vol. 2, (Progress Publishers, Moscow). *The International Working-Class Movement-Problems of History and Theory* is a series of seven volumes.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Iwao F. Ayusawa, *International Labor Legislation* 18 (Columbia University, New York, 1920).

⁸ Robert Owen, "Report to the County of Lanark" 5, 1820 available at: <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/sites/default/files/owene.PDF> (Visited on 15 Dec., 2019).

⁹ It was the time when laws regarding factories were being proposed and passed in France, in England, and in Germany.

¹⁰ David Hunter Miller, *International Relations of Labor: Lectures delivered before the Summer School of Theology of Harvard University, June, 1920* 5 (Alfred A Knoff, New York, 1921).

¹¹ For details, see <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/blanqui/index.htm> (Visited on 10 Dec., 2019).

the workers. Every institution has its origins in the antiquity. The significance of an institution can be better understood by seeing it in its historical setting. In the history of institutions thought has always preceded action.

3.1 Internationals:

In 1831, Sir John Cam Hobhouse and Lord and Lord Morpeth took note of the appalling labour situation in the Yorkshire textile factories. They were influenced by the growing inadequacy of the then existing labour laws and by the many evident examples of their successful evasion.

The period 1830-1847 witnessed the accomplishment of the first stage of labour's long and arduous pilgrimage to the goal of internationalism.¹² It was during the beginning of this period that workers in the principal industrial countries of Western Europe began to be stimulated by the dawning consciousness of a common bond of unity. The mass migration movements began to develop in the first decades of the 19th century and invested labour with greater mobility than ever before. Pressure of scarcity, dearth of suitable employment and rising standards of living, all combined to make labour more migratory, a development which incidentally fostered the cultivation of extra-national labour contacts. The ruthlessness of the competitive industrial system generated an increasing class-consciousness among the workers. The pioneer efforts of various thinkers and social reformers provided an ideal milieu for the sympathetic reception of the demands of awakened labour.¹³ The contemporaneous movements in England, France and the United States helped and supplemented each other in placing the foundations of a stable international labour movement.¹⁴

Madame Floran Tristan published in 1843 a booklet entitled - Union Ouvriere (The Workers' Union) outlining in detail a scheme for the international organisation of the working-classes, town-wise. She proposed a "Universal Worker's Union" in which all members of the proletariat would fit in, irrespective of profession or sex.¹⁵ She urged major societal institutions to back-up the building of a union "Palaces". Such Palaces would provide accommodation to the members of the Worker's Union and their families, provide education and services to them.¹⁶

In 1864, at a meeting in St. Martin'Hall, London attended by labour leaders from France, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Germany and Poland, a proposal for forming an International Workingmen's Association, with a central committee in London and with branches in all the capitals of Europe, was adopted. The programme and policy of the new body were formulated in a document known as the "Inaugural Address". The First International-the International Working Men's Association was established in London in 1864.¹⁷ The International Workingmen's Association originated in the form of a trade-union organisation and later became the Socialist International. It denoted an effort to establish organisation on an international level before the workers had established solid organisations in their respective countries. Its formation was made possible by the growth of organisation amongst the workers during the first half of the century and the spread of socialist ideas, both in this country and on the Continent.¹⁸ The fact that it was formed in London was partly due to the circumstance that many experiments in working-class organisation had taken place in what was already the most highly industrialised country. It was partly due to the reason that a number of workers' leaders from the Continent had requested asylum in England when the workers' organisations in their own countries had been suppressed. The object of the international was to serve as a dominant medium of communication and co-operation between workers' societies in different countries.

This Association organised its first meeting at Geneva in 1866. It adopted a number of resolutions, noteworthy for the initial formulation of principles, later incorporated in international conventions as well under national laws. Subsequent meetings of the First International were held at Lausanne (1867), Brussels (1868), Basle (1869), London (1871) and the Hague (1872). The Association continued vigorous until 1872. At the last Conference, a split happened in the Association. The anarchistic elements were expelled. When the First International was disbanded, the international contacts of organised workers entered a new point. Workers' organisations of different types in all countries voiced the desire to expand cooperation. The decade following

¹² P.P. Pillai, *India and the International Labour Organisation* 9 (Patna University, Patna, 1931). The main characteristic feature of internationalism is emphasis on the common interests of nations, on the political and economic interdependence of all peoples, on good-will and co-operation as opposed to wars and national conflicts.

¹³ The main thinkers were Robert Owen and Thomas Hodgkison in England and St. Simon, Fourier and Pierre Leroux in France.

¹⁴ A Grand National Consolidated Trades Union was set up in England, a National Trades Union was formed in the United States, and secret revolutionary labour societies sprang up in large numbers in France.

¹⁵ Flora Trista, *L'Union Ouvrière (The Workers' Union) 1843* available at: [http:// hist 259. web.unc.edu/flora-tristans-lunion-ouvriere-the-workers-union-paris-1843/](http://hist.259.web.unc.edu/flora-tristans-lunion-ouvriere-the-workers-union-paris-1843/) (Visited on 12 Dec., 2019).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ John Price, *The International Labour Movement* 3 (Oxford University Press, New York, 1945).

¹⁸ Ibid.

1848 was marked by political inactivity and industrial expansion. Labour problems lost much of their pressure during the years 1850-1860.

The years 1875-1889 form an interlude of stagnation sandwiched between two periods of phenomenal activity. During late 1880s, workers' parties emerged on the basis of sections of the First International by uniting socialist groups and trade unions, and sometimes cooperatives and mutual aid societies. They had in common was the desire to build a classless society and the recognition of the need to replace capitalism with socialism, i.e., to abolish the rule of bourgeoisie and abuse of human by human, and to establish working class state power and public ownership of the basic means of production. They campaigned, above all, for better social and economic conditions for the working people and the expansion of democratic rights. They were gradually becoming aware of their common goals, principles and objectives, as well as the importance of international solidarity. Simultaneous working-class movements gained momentum across all countries during this period. The resolutions of the international workers' congresses held in the 1880s reaffirmed their main ideas and reflected their recognition by a far broader circle.

In January 1889, the National Socialist Commission, which embraced the French Workers' Party and the Blanquists, set up an Organising Committee, which decided to invite all workers' organisations to the 1889 congress. In October, the congress of the French Federation of the Syndicates, and in December 1888, the congress of France's socialist organisations decided to help prepare and hold an international workers' congress in 1889.

The clue of international co-operation among the working class took a firm grasp, and by 1889 it was possible to begin again. The Congress of United Socialists, as the international socialist congress was opened in Paris on 14 July, 1889. It strengthened the international solidarity and cooperation of workers' organisations in all countries against reactionary forces, against monopolies, militarism and colonialism.¹⁹ It was constituted in its modern form of a central International Socialist Bureau in 1900.²⁰ The Bureau was to meet annually, and it consisted of two representatives from each national section and one delegate from each parliamentary group. The problems of the Second International were concerned with the unification of the forces of the working class, the attitude to be adopted towards collaboration with other parties and towards participation in Governments, and the measures to be adopted in case of war.

The Socialist Interparliamentary Commission was established in 1904, and its purpose was to enable the parliamentary representatives of socialists in different countries to co-operate for the realisation of the aims of socialism.²¹ Each nation represented in the International Socialist Bureau was permitted to have one representative in the Interparliamentary Commission and to cast the number of votes warranted by its importance.

These were amongst the principal subjects discussed at the International Congresses held between 1889 and the outbreak of war in 1914. Till the outbreak of the War in 1914; the Second International managed to retain the leadership and control of the organised labour movement.

The Second International held international conferences at intervals varying from two to four years-at Brussels, Zurich, London, Paris, Amsterdam, Stuttgart, Copenhagen and Basle. At the Paris Congress of 1900, an important event took place in the creation of a permanent organisation in order to act as a bond between the various international conferences. This newly constituted -International Socialist Bureau was established at Brussels, with M.E. Vandervelde as Chairman and M. Camille Huysmans as Secretary. It held a succession of yearly congresses, and between the Paris Congress of law and the Amsterdam Congress of 1904. Its programme, in brief, was to democratise the instruments of government, to establish manhood suffrage and the rights of free assemblage, free speech and free combination, and to win free public education. In addition, the International helped the workers by striving to obtain improved working and living conditions and putting forth demands for protective international labour legislation.

The Second International gradually vanished its role of the final objectives of Socialism in the process.²² It was renamed as the Labour and Socialist International in 1923. The First and Second International underrated the importance of economic crises.²³ They got busy to gain the support of the masses and increase the membership of the various parties.²⁴ The years of the War were one of great exertion and sorrow for labour.

¹⁹ N.Belskaya & V.Nemodruk, *The Second International- History and Heritage 2* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1889).

²⁰ R. Dutt, *The Two Internationals 1* (Labour Research Department and George Allen & Unwin, London, 1920).

²¹ Boutelle Ellsworth Lowe, *The International Protection of Labor xviii* (MacMillan Company, New York, 1921).

²² Boris Souvarine, *The Third International 6* (British Socialist Party, London).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

On 2nd March 1919, the first International Communist Conference was held in Moscow to form the Third International (Communist International). It put up for revolution and the overthrow of the existing social order so that working-class supremacy be in the position to rule in all countries. It connected workers' international movement of pre-war and post-war days. The ideas which were to guide the new organisation were formulated in a "Manifesto to the Proletariat of all Countries." As per their Manifesto, the "Imperialist War" which had pitted nation against nation was passing in all countries into a civil war which was lining up class against class.²⁵ The "bourgeoisie" which had brought on the war was paying the price for the devastation it had wrought.²⁶ It was everywhere bankrupt, unable to organise production, and making vain efforts to re-establish international life by means of a League of Nations.²⁷ It was helpless before the very forces which it had itself called into being - a socialised war economy, a revolutionary working class, rebellious colonies, and small nationalities which were breaking the framework of capitalistic imperialism.²⁸ In the perspective of its Founders - the First International had been "the prophet of the future," and the Second International - the "organiser of millions." The task of the Third International was to become the "International of Action." The new International had been created as a deliberate challenge to the main body of the existing Socialist Parties.

The years 1890-1914 also confronted a period of hasty growth, characterised by the formation of several international labour organisations. As in the case of the First International, the problem of unifying the forces of the workers in the various countries engaged a good deal of the consideration of the Second International. The question presented itself in different forms in different countries. Both the First and Second Internationals were political bodies, with the object of achieving power for the workers in the political domain. Workers' internationalism was the outcome of the joint action of two powerful social tendencies - the rising increase in democratic ideas and impact of labour intellectuals. The backdrop of the international labour movement is largely the accumulation of the First, Second and Third Internationals.²⁹

3.2 Other Organisations:

The general Zimmerwald Conference of anti-war Socialists in September, 1915 led to the formation of a permanent committee, known as the International Socialist Commission.³⁰ The Commission held together the parties concerned in an unofficial bloc, and received fresh affiliations. Further Conferences were held at Kienthal in April, 1916 and at Stockholm in September, 1917. The formation of the Zimmerwald Commission is the turning point in the history of the division of the Second International. The opposition became organised. An international demonstration in favour of the eight-hour day was held on 1st May, 1890- the first of the May Day Demonstrations, which afterwards became a regular event.

The first international conference of the trade union centres was held at Copenhagen in August 1901 and the first steps towards the foundation of an international organisation were materialised in 1913 in the form of the International Federation of Trade Unions.³¹ In 1900, the Labor Congress of Paris took the formation of the International Association for the Legal Protection of Labor. It composed of entirely independent National Associations in various countries, including the United States. It maintains a permanent labor office in Basle and issues a periodic bulletin in English, French and German which contains information as to labor laws in every country. While the Association is unofficial in the sense of non-governmental, this Association was in large part responsible for all the forward steps taken between 1900 and 1914. M. Millerand called it "the laboratory in which international treaties are prepared". While the two conventions of Berne of 1906, were the work of various governments, it was the Association which furnished the material for them.

The International Association for Labour Legislation originated as a result of a conference held at Brussels in 1897. At this Congress, a certain degree of continuity with the Berlin Conference was maintained, owing to the fact that many of the delegates to the Berlin Conference were present at Brussels. The duties of the Labor Office included studying the development of labor legislation, publishing the results of its studies, and receiving and transmitting information pertaining to the creation and enforcement of international labor conventions. Each national section of the International Association strove for improved working conditions in its own country and at the same time supported the efforts of the Association which continued to work for international labor legislation as socialists, trade-unionists, government officials and private individuals had done before its formation. Under its scientific management the various efforts put forth in behalf of international legislation were coordinated and directed into channels that produced practical results. Governments were led to

²⁵ Leon Trotsky et al., "Manifesto of the First Congress of the Comintern" (March 1919) available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1919/03/manifesto.html>, (Visited on 31 Dec.,2019).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Supra note 12 at 10.

³⁰ Id., at 6.

³¹ Id., at 16.

sign bipartite and multipartite labor treaties. The Labor Covenant (Part XIII) of the Peace Treaty made an official International Labor Office a part of the International Labor Organisation of the League of Nations.³²

International Cooperative Alliance was formed in 1895 with the object of bringing cooperatives of all communities in touch with one another, so as to enable them to afford one another mutual support, to learn from one another, to discuss in common voice and to act in common so far as may be judged expedient without attempting to interfere in the affairs of any individual association or union of societies.

Table 1: Principal developments in the labour welfare during the eventful century 1830-1930

S.No	Period	Characteristic
1.	1830-1847	The period characterised by the consolidation of national trade union movements
2.	1864-1889	The period of the rise and fall of the First International
3.	1890-1914	The period dominated by the Second International and culminating in the Great War
4.	1914-1918	The years of confusion during the pendency of the Great War, in which national labour groups, forgetting working-class solidarity, waged war on each other
5.	1918-1930	The period in which labour Organisations, rehabilitating themselves actively engaged in canvassing the support and adherence of the infant trade union movements of the East.

Source: P.P. Pillai, India and the International Labour Organisation (1931).

3.3 Miscellaneous Developments:

Various Conferences were also led between 1890 till 1919. The Berlin Labor Conference of 1890 was held. All of the important countries of Europe, except Russia, were represented. The recommendations of the Conference covered somewhat generally a wide field labor in mines, child labor, unhealthful occupations, work of women and girls, work after child birth, were all in some of their phases made the subject of suggestion. And though years were to pass before any of these suggestions were to be embodied in definitive conventions, they had become subjects of diplomatic discussion and were to remain so. No international agreements could be drawn up. It was a period of official international discussion of the labor problem in all its phase. Conference marked definitely the beginning of an attempt by the nations of Europe to work out a common policy in industrial legislation.

The revolutionary international Socialist Congress was held at Brussels in 1891. Social reform and labour legislation were the two principal matters upon which the congress sought to define the socialist attitude. In 1889, Switzerland, the most democratic government in Europe, addressed a circular note to the Powers. This program included the prohibition of Sunday labor and of the employment of women and young persons in unhealthful occupations, the restriction of night work for women and young persons, and the establishment.³³ Switzerland continued her original interest in the subject. In 1892, she proposed to Germany and Austria-Hungary an international agreement regulating the industry of mechanical embroidery, but neither of these two powers was favorably disposed to the proposal. Again, in 1896, she approached the Powers with regard to the establishment of an international bureau of information as to labor laws, statistics, etc.

In 1904, France and Italy signed a treaty making certain provisions for the reciprocal protection of the workmen of one country in the territory of the other and containing clauses which would have a tendency to make more similar the labor legislation of the two countries by raising the standards in Italy, which were lower than those in France. The logical result of diplomatic discussions dating back to 1890 had for the first time been reached in formal diplomatic agreement between two of the important industrial nations of Europe.

Thus, the first official International Conference on labour regulation was held at Berlin in 1890. No further official Conferences held for 15 years, though in the meantime several unofficial Conferences had been organised. The Labor Conference of Berne was held in two successive stages. A preliminary conference took place in 1905. This was a meeting of experts; the delegates of the various governments were not plenipotentiaries, and it was understood that they would not conclude conventions but would simply lay down bases for two conventions. These bases were made use of by the conference held in 1906 for the drafting of final conventions which were drawn up by professional diplomats.

The two general Conventions, which resulted from the Conferences at Berne in 1905 and 1906, which were called by Switzerland at the suggestion of a commission appointed by the second meeting of the delegates of the International Association for Labor Legislation in 1902. One of these Conventions related to night work for women, the other to the use of white or yellow phosphorus in the making of matches. Both Conventions are of very great importance, for they are of that class of general or multilateral treaties which are assented to by numerous states and which tend to become in effect world legislation. The official and diplomatic conferences attended by the governments of different states without any representation of employers or workers led to

³² In June 1918, the International Labor Office without the approval of the members of the Association requested that a program of international labor legislation be incorporated in the Treaty of Peace and that the International Labor Office be made a part of the organisation of the proposed League of Nations.

³³ Supra note 10 at 13.

adoption of these Conventions in 1906. The two conventions were an initial step towards the future of labour welfare.

4. Sum-Up:

The real history of international labour regulation began with the discussions and debates by various individuals, urging the national governments to ponder on international labour protection. The holding of international congresses and conferences and the conclusion of important multi-lateral international conventions of a law-making character greatly multiplied. The need for this international co-operation and friendship between nations has been widely understood for many years. The international organisations of the labour movement are an expression of this understanding. Amongst the working class the idea of international co-operation has been deep and persistent. The workers of various countries formed international organisations to promote their common interests. Thus, the contribution of unheard efforts at the international level prior to early twentieth century must be acknowledged in the realm of the evolution of labour rights.