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Gary S. Fields
Cornell University, gsf2@cornell.edu

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[Review of the book *International Labour Standards and Economic Interdependence*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] What can be done to raise the living standards of working people around the world? This collection of 29 essays focuses on an issue currently in the air: the setting of international labor standards. Although the writers come from every continent and represent employers, workers, government, and academia, virtually all favor international labor standards. One should perhaps not be too surprised by this agreement, given that the volume is published under the auspices of the International Institute for Labour Studies, a sister organization of the ILO. Things get interesting when the authors stop lamenting how tough conditions are for workers in today's economically interdependent world and start talking specifically about what can and should be done.

Keywords

labor standards, worker rights, labor rights, ILO

Disciplines

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Comments

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International Labour Standards and Economic Interdependence. Edited by Werner Sengenberger and Duncan Campbell. Geneva: International Institute for Labor Studies, 1994. 394 pp. ISBN 92-9014-533-1, 45 Swiss francs (paperback).

What can be done to raise the living standards of working people around the world? This collection of 29 essays focuses on an issue currently in the air: the setting of international labor standards. Although the writers come from every continent and represent employers, workers, government, and academia, virtually all favor international labor standards. One should perhaps not be too surprised by this agreement, given that the volume is published under the auspices of the International Institute for Labour Studies, a sister organization of the ILO. Things get interesting when the authors stop lamenting how tough conditions are for workers in today's economically interdependent world and start talking specifically about what can and should be done.

The term "labor standards" evokes different ideas for different writers (and readers). Perhaps the best working definition is that given by one of the editors: "International labor standards [consist of] the Conventions and Recommendations of the ILO, which together form the 'International Labor Code.'" Of course,

there are literally hundreds of these, and related to their abundance are two major problems: most of the ILO standards have not been ratified by the majority of the world's countries, and those that have been ratified are often not followed in practice. In fact, at the moment, there is no "International Labor Code."

But things may soon change. Upon conclusion of the Uruguay Round of the GATT, which led to the founding of the new World Trade Organization at the beginning of 1995, it was agreed that the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development would study the links among trade, employment, and internationally recognized labor standards and would report to the Ministers in 1995. It is quite possible that a small number of "core" labor standards may be recommended.

What might be included in such an international labor code? Some of the essays in *International Labor Standards and Economic Interdependence* proffer wildly unrealistic suggestions: for example, Bob Hepple's call for equality between men and women and people of different races (but, interestingly, not people of different nations), and T. S. Papola's call for standards, supported by mechanisms for enforcement, for the hundreds of millions of the world's poor working people who work in their countries' informal sectors—a proposal that verges on the oxymoronic. While stirring to the spirit, such suggestions are of no practical significance.

A more useful approach is taken in some of the other essays. Stephen Pursey of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions seeks a social clause that would cover freedom of association and collective bargaining, child labor, discrimination, and forced labor. Louis Emmerij, a former director of the ILO's World Employment Programme, adopts a similar "minimal package" including eight specific ILO conventions: Convention 29, on forced labor; 87, on freedom of association and protection of the right to organize; 98, on the right to organize and collective bargaining; 100, on equal remuneration; 105, on the abolition of forced labor; 111, on discrimination; 122, on employment policy; and 138, on a minimum age. These lists, or ones like them, are a reasonable starting point for today's debate. Countries like the United States that have refused repeatedly to ratify many of these conventions are unlikely to change what they do. A minimal package of core labor standards would have an even better chance of being adopted if they were formulated afresh.

Still lacking in most of this discussion is a

criterion by which to decide which matters should be addressed by international labor standards (though see Richard Freeman's essay "A Hard-Headed Look at Labor Standards"). As a possible basis for setting international labor standards, I would offer this: basic human rights in the workplace. Though there are many "labor standards" (defined as those workplace processes and conditions that we would rather have than not have), there are manageably few "labor rights" (defined as workplace processes and conditions so fundamental that it would be better to have no production at all than to have production in their absence, which would amount to production using "illegitimate means"). Adoption of the "illegitimate means" criterion would mandate the setting of labor rights at a level appropriate to all working people in rich and poor countries alike, and the promulgation of international agreements to guarantee those rights. Here is my own list of core labor rights that would fit this definition:

- (i) No person has the right to enslave another or to cause another to enter into indentured servitude, and every person has the right to freedom from such conditions.
- (ii) No person has the right to expose another to unsafe or unhealthy working conditions without providing the fullest possible information.
- (iii) Children have the right not to work long hours whenever their families' financial circumstances allow.
- (iv) Every person has the right to freedom of association in the workplace and the right to organize and bargain collectively with employers.

Why not be more ambitious? Very simply, if the rules are not kept modest in scope, it will be hard to point the finger at alleged violators and get them to change what they do. What country could say with a straight face that it is honoring the ILO's convention regarding equal remuneration for work of equal value but another country is not? When codes are generally honored, violations are more clear-cut and the rate of compliance on core matters is likely to be higher as a result. Call it what you will: internationally agreed labor rights, core labor standards, an international labor code, a social clause, or even a minimal package. I predict that we will see broad international agreement on such a list before the end of the millennium—if, that is, the list is kept short and focused on essentials, as some of the authors in

this book have done. For the world's working people, that would be genuine progress.

Gary S. Fields

Professor
New York State School of
Industrial and Labor Relations
Cornell University

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