

This Day in History... April 11, 1919

International Labour Organization Founded

On April 11, 1919, the International Labour Organization was created, marking a coordinated effort to improve working conditions across nations after World War I. Born out of both wartime strain and postwar planning, it introduced a new idea—that fair labor standards could support lasting peace.

By the early 1900s, concerns about working conditions were growing around the world. Industrialization had expanded rapidly in Europe and North America. Factories ran long hours. Wages were often low. Safety protections were limited. Workers began organizing to push for reforms. Groups such as the International Association for Labor Legislation formed to study these issues and promote basic standards.

World War I intensified these concerns. Millions of workers supported the war effort in factories, mines, and transportation systems. Governments relied on steady production of weapons, equipment, and supplies. In return, labor groups expected better protections. By the end of the war in 1918, many leaders believed that unstable labor conditions could lead to unrest. Strikes and protests had already increased in several countries. There was a growing belief that poor working conditions could threaten both economic recovery and political stability.

In January 1919, Allied leaders met at the Paris Peace Conference to shape the postwar world. Along with borders and treaties, they discussed labor. Delegates agreed that improving working conditions should be part of any lasting peace settlement. They created the Commission on International Labour Legislation to draft a plan for a new international body.

The commission began its work in February 1919. It included representatives from several countries, as well as labor leaders. Two main proposals emerged. British delegates suggested an international parliament that could pass and enforce labor laws across countries. This idea aimed to create uniform standards with real authority.

Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, opposed that approach. He argued that national governments should keep control over labor laws. He worried that an international authority might conflict with protections already in place in the United States. Instead, he proposed a system that would set standards and make recommendations, while leaving enforcement to individual countries and broader international cooperation through the League of Nations.

Gompers's proposal was ultimately accepted. The compromise balanced international coordination with national control. This structure remains a defining feature of the organization today.

The final charter included several specific principles. It stated that "labor is not a commodity," rejecting the idea that workers could be treated like goods to be bought and sold. It supported wages high enough to maintain a reasonable standard of living. It called for equal pay for women performing the same work as men. It promoted an eight-hour workday or a 48-hour workweek, along with regular rest periods. It also emphasized fair treatment for workers employed outside their home countries and called for systems of inspection to improve factory conditions.

On April 11, 1919, the Peace Conference adopted this charter, officially creating the International Labour Organization. It was later included in the Treaty of Versailles as part of the broader effort to rebuild after the war.

In its early years, the ILO began setting international labor standards through conventions and recommendations. Member states could choose to adopt these standards into their own laws. This flexible system allowed countries with different economies and political systems to participate.

The organization expanded after World War II. In 1946, it became the first specialized agency associated with the newly formed United Nations. Its tripartite structure—bringing together governments, employers, and workers—remained central to its work.

One of its most important milestones came in 1948. The International Labour Conference adopted Convention No. 87, which guaranteed freedom of association and the right of workers to organize. This became a key standard in international labor law. During the following decades, membership grew steadily. The organization's budget increased, and its staff expanded to support a wider range of programs.

In 1969, the International Labour Organization was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The award recognized its efforts to improve working conditions and reduce social tension. The Nobel Committee noted that fair labor standards contribute to stability and cooperation between countries.

From the 1970s onward, the ILO continued to influence global labor practices. It supported independent labor movements, including the Solidarność union in Poland during the 1980s. It also worked on issues such as child labor, workplace safety, and migrant worker protections. The organization developed conventions covering minimum age requirements, forced labor, and discrimination in employment.

Today, the ILO includes most countries in the world. It has adopted more than 190 conventions and numerous recommendations. These cover a wide range of topics, including working hours, wages, social protection, and occupational safety.

Its current efforts focus on what it calls "decent work." This includes fair pay, safe conditions, and equal opportunity. It also works to reduce global poverty and improve labor conditions in developing economies.



This stamp pictures the ILO training center in Turin, Italy.



Stamp honors the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).



Samuel Gompers helped create the AFL.



Stamp celebrates the American Labor movement and its founders.

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