

ILO Director-General Guy Ryder
Address to SEV's event on the Future of Work
Athens, Greece
24th October 2017

I want to congratulate everybody at SEV for having organized this event, and thank you all for the opportunity you give me to say a few words to you about it.

Above all your meeting seems to me to address the right questions, in the right place, at the right time.

The world of work is undergoing profound, transformative change. We need to understand the forces of change, anticipate their impacts and shape them to meet the objectives that we set.

If we fail to assume the responsibility of building the future of work we want – through timidity, inertia, or perceived self-interest – then we are condemned to undergo the future that others decide for us. So you are talking about the right issues.

And having this Greek conversation matters too. I do not think you want me to dwell on the difficult and painful experiences the people of Greece has lived through over the past decade, from which, regrettably, you have still to emerge.

But one consequence of this is that inevitably, it is more difficult for the actors of the world of work in Greece to embrace debate on the future with a spirit of optimism.

In recent years, change has been associated with pain, and if you project that into the future it can generate a certain paralysis, a paralysis ill-fitted to our realities of transformative change. Whatever the temptation may be, it is unlikely that the exit from crisis will be through the door which led you into it.

Your debate also comes at the right time, not only for Greece but for the ILO which celebrates its centenary in 2019. Our initiative on the Future of Work lies at the heart of our centenary activities. And this past weekend our Global Commission on the Future of Work met in Geneva to trace out the road to our Centenary Conference in June 2019.

And as we focus on the future it is worth recalling that the relationship between Greece and the ILO has been strong and has made a difference at moments of the greatest historical significance.

That was true as the ILO helped lay the foundations of your labour legislation already in the 1920's.

That was true of the seminal ILO report on labour problems in Greece in 1949 as Greece emerged from searing conflict.

That was true of the ILO Commission of Inquiry on Greece during the dictatorship of the 1970s and our role in the reforms that followed.

And I have considered that living up to the ILO's responsibilities to Greece required us to establish a presence in Athens and to offer our fullest support to the Government, employers and workers as you have tackled the formidable challenges of the last ten years.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

If there is one common theme in the work that we have done together in that period – and we have tackled many subjects: undeclared work, training, enterprise promotion for example – it is the role of social dialogue. The crisis that broke in Europe around 2008 has been a stress test for social dialogue, and in some countries it has badly damaged or broken such dialogue. It has been the ILO's job to seek to bring you and your partners from the workers' side and from Government together, to find a way forward to a better future of work for Greece.

This has not been easy – as you know, and I want to point to three obstacles we have had to try to overcome.

- The first is the difficulty I have already mentioned of constructing a common belief in the possibility of change bringing something better. That was why the ILO published in 2014 its report on "Productive Jobs for Greece" which sought to present a comprehensive strategy for job creation and growth, which are the keys to debt reduction, while tackling as well the most pressing social impacts of the crisis.
- The second has been the political changes and uncertainties ushered in by the crisis.
- And the third has arisen from the role of your other European and international partners. Stated simply, if decisions taken by those partners, and translated into operational policy conditionalities – sometimes without full regard to obligations under international labour standards – pre-empt and effectively close down the space for meaningful social dialogue, then the risk is that the process of dialogue is emptied of content and of purpose.

For all of these reasons, let me conclude, as I started by welcoming SEV's initiative of stimulating this reflection on the future of work and by urging that others in Greece join with you in constructing a truly tripartite approach to the challenges ahead.

The ILO itself well understands that its own, global, reflection on the future of work has the very clear objective of working out how our 100 years old mandate – which is a mandate for social justice and decent work for all - can be carried forward

in conditions which are so radically different from those in which our organization was founded.

We assume this challenge with two particular thoughts in mind.

The first is that while our mandate remains unchanged, we should not make the mistake of assuming automatically that the tools, institutions, and policy settings that worked yesterday will necessarily work tomorrow.

And secondly we live at a time when there is widespread fear that the motors of social progress have come to a halt, or even been thrown into reverse. That the assumption that this and the next generation will live better than those that went before no longer applies. This growing sense of injustice and unfairness – real or perceived – should concern us all and focus our minds on the task of building a future of work with social justice.

So I wish you good luck in your discussions, and I look forward to hearing about the results.