

Work as Key to the Social Question

The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work



Laborem Exercens and Decent Work:

Visiting the New Strategy of the ILO with a Profound Encyclical in Mind

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In June 1981 Pope John Paul II, responding to the invitation of the Director general of the ILO, Francis BLANCHARD, was to address the International labor Conference. Due to the tentative of assassination he was the victim of, he would postpone his visit up to June 15th 1982. In between he published his Encyclical “Laborem Exercens” on human work that could then be quoted in his address.

On May 1st 2000, Juan SOMAVIA, Director general of the ILO, responding to an invitation of Pope John Paul II, addressed 150 000 persons, gathered in Tore Vergata, near Rome, for the Jubilee of the world of work, and presented his agenda of Decent Work, which is the basement of the actual strategy of the ILO. In his response, Pope John Paul II supported a call for a global coalition for Decent Work.

One can observe there, at the beginning and at the end of those last 20 years, a great deal of convergence between the ILO and the Holy See. Is it possible to make deeper connections between the strategies of both institutions as expressed in Laborem exercens on one side and in the Decent work strategy on the other?

For developing such a comparison, we will have a look on three key elements of the encyclical and see how they seem to be concretely implemented in the ILO strategy. The first one is the distinction between the **objective and subjective** dimension of work, the second one the opposition between **capital and labor**, and the third one the distinction between **direct and indirect employer**. But before getting in those three parts of our

presentation, we need to roughly present the strategy of Decent Work.

The concept of “Work”, as used in the ILO strategy, encompasses not only the labor as in a formal contractual work of developed industrial societies, it wants to deal as well with the informal sector and all kind of work. It is fully consistent with the definition proposed at the very beginning of the encyclical: “Work means any activity by man, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances; it means any human activity that can and must be recognized as work, in the midst of all the activities of which man is capable and to which he is predisposed by his very nature, by virtue of humanity itself.” [1]

The qualification “Decent” referring to that of “decency” has been chosen preferably because it encompasses that of dignity, at the same time as it wants to draw the attention to the very fact that the concrete implementation of the dignity of the human being is largely connected to local cultures and scale of values that can evolve according to the history of the same community.

So is Decent Work a strategy for implementing universally the 1998 ILO “Declaration on human rights and principles at work” which constitutes the basic floor of decency, as well as it is a strategy for building above this floor, without any ceiling, more and more decent work conditions in each particular context in three directions each one mutually reinforcing the other:

- Promoting employment;
- Formulating policies to extend the reach of social protection systems and promote gender equality;
- Strengthening the social partners and reinforcing their dialogue around the decent work goals.

By such a strategy of Decent Work, the ILO assumes, through its first strategic commitment, its responsibility for promoting the universal dignity of human work at the international level, and respects the efficient principle of subordination in recognizing the rights and duties of each local community and helping it to assume its specific responsibilities towards the implementation of the three complementary statements of the Decent Work Agenda.

Let’s now have a deeper look into that agenda, focusing on each of its components with the three main features of the Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, as previously highlighted.

The objective and subjective dimension of work

The overall perspective of the Encyclical is grounded in the mission received by the

human being created by God, the Creator of the universe.

“When man, who has been created “in the image of God...male and female” [2] hears the words: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it,” [3] even though this words do not refer directly and explicitly to work, beyond any doubt they indirectly indicate it as an activity for man to carry out in the world. Indeed they show its deepest very essence.... Work, understood as a “transitive” activity, that is to say, an activity beginning in the human subject and directed toward an external object, presupposes a specific dominion by man over “the earth” and in its turn it confirms and develops this dominion.... The expression “subdue the earth” has an immense range. It means all the resources that the earth (and indirectly the visible world) contains and which, through the conscious activity of man, can be discovered and used for his ends.... [These words] embrace equally the past ages of civilization and economy, as also the whole of modern reality and future phases of development.... And this ordering remains necessarily and indissolubly linked with the fact that man was created, as male and female, “in the image of God.” This process is, at the same time, universal: it embraces all human beings, every generation, every phase of economic and cultural development, and at the same time it is a process that takes place within each human being, in each conscious human subject. Each and every individual is at the same time embraced by it. Each and every individual, to the proper extend and in an incalculable number of ways, takes part in the giant process whereby man “subdue the earth” through his work.” [4]

From that start point, we have to keep in mind first that man and woman are ontologically involved as subjects of the process of work and second that the process itself is trans-generational insofar that the present generation inherited from the past all the possibilities of working today and that the coming generation has to inherit from us more capabilities in the coming age.

Here can then appear the difference between the objective dimension and the subjective dimension of work.

The objective dimension encompasses every output of every kind of work. The most interesting point is that it goes further than the products or services issued from work and to be consumed in the present time. The main objective output of work, for the next generation, is the technology that emerges progressively from any kind of work as an increasing human capital. Some work seems to be more oriented to the necessary consumption of the present generation, other, as for instance the work of research staff in a lab, are more likely to be recognized as increasing that capital, but in fact every one uses and increases part of the technology when working. It's up to the point that the very title of the concerned section reads: “5. Work in the objective sense: technology: ...The development of industry and of various sectors connected with it, even the most modern electronics technology, especially in the fields of miniaturization, communications and so forth, shows how vast is the role of technology, that ally of work that human thought has produced in the interaction between the subject and the object of work (in the widest sense of the word). Understood in this case not as capacity or aptitude for work, but rather as a whole set of instruments which man uses in his work, technology is undoubtedly man's ally. It facilitates

his work, perfects accelerates and augments it. It leads to an increase in the quantity of things produced by work and in many cases improves their quality. However it is also a fact that in some instances technology can cease to be man's ally and become almost his enemy, as when mechanization of work "supplants" him, taking away all personal satisfaction and the incentive to creativity and responsibility, when it deprives many workers of their previous employment or when, through exalting the machine, it reduces man to the status of his slave." [5]

Here, from n° 6 to 10 of the Encyclical, the subjective dimension of work will be presented. "6. Work in the subjective sense: man as the subject of work" insists that man and woman, as the "image of God", are a person, "subject being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself and with a tendency of self-realization. As a person, man is therefore the subject of work. As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity." [6]

Each of us has a clear experience of what that means. We are affected at the deepest of ourselves by our work; by the recognition we get from the other, by the relations we build at work...It is of course of great importance to build ourselves as human beings. Be it the CEO of a multinational company, or the monk who have chosen a kind of contemplative life which needs a lot of exercise and work on the self, both are deeply modeled by their working life, whenever the objective dimension of their work, in other words, what they produce, is quite different.

The n°7 of the Encyclical presents then "A Threat to the Right Order of Values" coming from the tendency of the past and present times to magnify the objective dimension of work, keeping at the second level the subjective one: "For certain supporters of such ideas [materialistic and economic thought] work was understood and treated as a sort of "merchandise" that the worker – especially the industrial worker – sells to the employer, who at the same time is the possessor of the capital, that is to say, of all the working tools and means that make production possible...A systematic opportunity for thinking and evaluating in this way, and in a certain sense a stimulus for doing so, is provided by the quickening process of development of a one-sidedly materialistic civilization, which gives prime importance to the objective dimension of work, while the subjective dimension – everything in direct or indirect relationship with the subject of work – remains on a secondary level." [7]

For resisting to that threat, there is an absolute need for workers to organize, and the Encyclical n°8 deals with the necessity of that "Worker solidarity", which the Church has strongly supported since the nineteenth century especially in the first Encyclical on work issued in 1891, *Rerum Novarum*: "In order to achieve social justice in the various parts of the world, in the various countries and in the relationships between them, there is a need for ever new movements of solidarity of the workers and with the workers...The Church is firmly committed to this cause for she considers it her mission, her service, a proof of her fidelity to Christ, so that she can truly be the "church of the poor". And the poor appear

under various forms; they appear in various places and at various times; in many cases they appear as a result of the violation of the dignity of human work: either because the opportunities for work are limited as a result of the scourge of unemployment, or because a low value is put on work and the rights that flow from it, especially the right to a just wage and to the personal security of the worker and his or her family.” [8] The n°20 of the Encyclical will insist on that role of the Trade Unions.

The worker solidarity has to defend “Work and personal dignity” that must develop together, as the Encyclical reminds us in n° 9. Mentioning the inevitable toil of work, with a special attention to “women, who sometimes without proper recognition on the part of the society and even of their own families bear the daily burden and responsibility for their homes and the upbringing of their children”, the Encyclical insists on the fundamental ethical fact “that work is a good thing for man. It is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy; it is also good as being something worthy, that is to say, something that corresponds to man’s dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it.... Through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes “more a human being”.... All this pleads in favor of the moral obligation to link industriousness as a virtue with the social order of work, which will enable man to become in work “more a human being” and not be degraded by it...especially through damage to the dignity and subjectivity that are proper to him.” [9]

This dignity and subjectivity of the worker is not only a matter of privacy and individuals but nevertheless of the person as member of a family and a nation. That point is developed at n°10 on “Work and society: family and nation”. Concerning the family, the Encyclical insists, “Works constitutes a foundation for the formation of the family life.... Work is a condition for making it possible to found a family, since the family requires the means of subsistence, which man normally gains through work. Work and industriousness also influence the all process of education in the family, for the very reason that everyone “becomes a human being” through, among other things, work, and becoming a human being is precisely the main purpose of the whole process of education. Obviously, two aspects of work in a sense come into play here: the one making family life and its upkeep possible, and the other making possible the achievement of the purposes of the family, especially education.” [10]

All that part of the Encyclical fits perfectly well with the first strategic objective of the Decent Work strategy. The promotion of the ILO *Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work* is fully concerned with the subjective dimension of work. Let us have a look on its four components.

The elimination of forced labor is the basic recognition of the subjective dimension of work. If one cares only about the objective dimension of work, the cheapest way to get work done is probably forced labor. If the ILO puts forward the elimination of forced labor as a fundamental rights at Work, it is because of the inalienable value of the human being as an individual, a person who is never to be assimilated to a mere working force, like a robot working 24 hours a day. This point is enshrined in the Constitution of the ILO of 1919 and

in the Declaration of Philadelphia in 1945, both stating, “work is not a commodity”.

The elimination of any discrimination at work, according to “race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin” [11], means clearly that according to those criteria, each person has to be considered equally with the same respect and that the person is not only the individual but a complex network of individuals connected with each other and building that way the Human Personality as such, in families and nations.

The elimination of child labor insists clearly on the importance of the family where children have to be grown up to the full development of their capacities for the future of the mankind [12] and have to be considered as persons with their own rights to be protected from their very childhood [13].

Last but not least (and in fact it is the first point of the Declaration), the right to organize and to collective bargaining is the recognition of the necessary solidarity of the workers, as well as of the employers, to act collectively

The opposition between Capital and Work

The second dimension of the ILO strategy on Decent work is aimed at creating greater employment and income opportunities for women and men. In pursuing that aim, the ILO considers the capitalistic enterprise as one among many different ways of creating jobs. A great deal of work is done to find the right politics to develop for the creation and sustainability of Small and Medium enterprises. In fact they create to day the major part of the jobs, whereas the merging of existing enterprises in large multinationals seems to benefit the capital but destroys a large number of jobs. The extension of self-employment through micro credit, the development of cooperatives are also to main streams in the ILO research programs. How to develop jobs for the most vulnerable categories of workers, alike the poor single women with children, the disabled persons, is a main concern. And a large coalition associating the ILO, the UN and the WORLD BANK has also been created for the development of jobs for the youth, unemployment being most unbearable for the persons with that age.

Clearly that strategy is not aimed at the development of the capital, but at the development of work for every human being, capital being one of the many factors contributing to that finality.

This point is confirmed by the third dimension of the ILO strategy. When it works for more safety at work and the enhancement of social security schemes, the ILO wants to put on the forefront the very fact that there is no Decent work without security at work. At the same time it's clearly well known that better security is a factor for better human productivity that will in turn lead to better margins and better capital remuneration. But first there will be an investment made towards better Security conditions, which is the aim, and

afterwards a return on investment through better social cohesion which leads to a better functioning of the market.

The Role of the indirect employer

It is really the aim of the last dimension of the ILO strategy to develop the role of the indirect employer. In the reactivation of the tripartite dialogue, the ILO knows, from its own experience that the most long lasting experience in the development process are those who have involved employers, government and trade Unions or representative civil society organization. The bigger a private direct employer is, the more social regulations established in a tripartite dialog and enforced by efficient governmental structures are needed. For that purpose, there is a great need to adapt the level of knowledge, the effectiveness of the structures, the ability for social dialog at all the levels of the society: local, national, regional, worldwide. If we want to have a sustainable globalization, there is more and more need of efficient respect of the principle of subordination, according to which each problem has to be discussed and resolved at the same hierarchical level at which it arises. We have to avoid bypassing levels of subordination and, at the same time to have at each level the rights respondents. When multinational enterprises are the main actors, there must be multilateral governmental structures and trade unions to make international rules be observed and conflicts resolved. In that direction, there is still much to be done.

Conclusion

The new strategy of the ILO is really a concrete implementation of the three points highlighted by Laborem exercens that we have been visiting. As the first results of that strategy are coming at light, we might see that some distinction well established by the Encyclical are not opposition, but rather the to extremes of a dynamical dialectical development.

The objective and subjective dimension of work are profoundly interpenetrating each other. No sustainable result in the overall development of human kind and of our common planet can be achieved by the objective dimension of the work, if we don't take care about each worker as more than one resource among many others for the success of an enterprise: he is much more than human capital or a human resource, he is a person, member of a family and a human community. Reciprocally, a worker as a person who gives an objective output to his work which contributes effectively to the better being of the mankind will enjoy a better consideration by the other and by himself as a person, member of the human community. It's why the ILO has already done and will do more studies to assert that the implementation of the basic human rights at work is economically productive.

The capital and labor have not to be considered as in opposition. More and more of the capital around the world is dedicated to serve pensions to retired workers, which was not

the case at such a high rate, when the Encyclical have been issued. On the other hand, more and more work generated by not capitalist structure will transform the insolvency of large population to possible solvent clients of capitalistic structures.

Finally, whereas there was a hurricane of ultra liberalism for ten years who wanted less and less influence of regulations over the market, the present anarchy which makes many fear a giant backlash of the globalization leads now to developing indirect employer's structures which will contribute to the better working of free (and not anarchical!) market and capability of action for the direct employers.

No values underlying the ILO strategy are opposed to that of the Encyclical, and more than that, the ILO strategy seems, at the level of its responsibility, to be a concrete implementation of all the humanistic values contained in the Encyclical. Acting so with twenty years of accumulated experience, it can present in the Decent Work Strategy an integrated framework for development of both objective and subjective dimension of work, of both the economical success of the capital and the respect of the work, for both the actions and responsibilities of the direct and indirect employers. No surprise that during those twenty years the ILO and its three last directors, Francis Blanchard, Michel Hansen, and Juan Somavia, maintained very good relationships with the Church and the Pope John Paul II.

[1] *Laborem Exercens* (LE) Prologue § 1. It must be clear that the concept of « man », as used in that Encyclical, encompasses both genders as stated in the later citation (n°4 §2) of the book of the Genesis: “ When man, who had been created “in the image of God...male and female,””. Today the term of human being would probably the best one to express the same.

[2] Gn. 1 :27.

[3] Gn. 1 :28.

[4] LE n°4 §2 and §3.

[5] LE, n°5 §4.

[6] LE, n°6 §1.

[7] LE, n°7 §2-3.

[8] LE, n°8 §6.

[9] LE, n°9 §3-4.

[10] LE, n°10 §1.

[11] ILO Convention 111.

[12] This is the aim of ILO Convention 138 on the minimum age for work.

[13] The ILO Convention 182 on eradicating the worst forms of child labor is aimed to the protection of the children as children and not as workers for the coming times.