

Debating the future of work: a trail-blazing simulation of an ILO International Labour Conference at the University of Coimbra

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The International Labour Organization (ILO) will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2019. At the 2015 International Labour Conference (ILC) – the statutory body that each year approves conventions, recommendations and resolutions related to working conditions and industrial relations – ILO Director-General Guy Ryder chose ‘The Future of Work’ (Ryder, 2015) as the major theme for the ILO’s centenary. This was to be based on four main themes/conversations ‘regarded as non-exclusive and indicative’ (p. 9): (i) work and society; (ii) decent jobs for all; (iii) the organisation of work and production; and (iv) the governance of work. Since then, and in accordance with the tripartite spirit of the ILO, numerous debates and reflections on these issues have been taking place at the global, regional and local levels.

The ILC initiative at the University of Coimbra

Why not stimulate discussion on the future of work in the spaces of production of scientific knowledge? Why not replicate the ILC in the academy? In 2016, this was the challenge that the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra (CES: <http://www.ces.uc.pt>) and the ILO’s Lisbon Office (<http://www.ilo.org/public/portugue/region/eurpro/lisbon/>) presented to the University of Coimbra’s Faculty of Economics (FEUC: <http://www.uc.pt/feuc>). Accepting the challenge, FEUC hosted the first ever such initiative to take place in European higher education. Thus, through the ILC simulation, it became possible to gather the opinions of the University of Coimbra students on the future of work. The presence of the ILO Director-General at the plenary session (held on 20 October 2016) was the first formal moment of a process that had begun months before. The process proper went on until the end of 2016, but the academic community continued to work on it during the academic year 2016/2017.

In the preparatory meetings for the ILC simulation, the 300 registered ‘delegates’ – most of them undergraduate students in economics, sociology, management or international relations (the major scientific areas of FEUC), as well as students from law, psychology or anthropology, etc. – promoted debates in committees and working groups in accordance with the tripartite structure of the ILO. In this exercise – effectively monitored by 13 ‘facilitators’ (11 PhD students from the University of Coimbra and two young academic doctors) – the delegates were challenged to put themselves in the role of representatives of governments, employers or workers, thus actively contributing to the promotion of commitments guided by the principle of social dialogue, as advocated by the ILO.

The visit of the ILO Director-General

The visit of the Director-General was preceded by in-depth reading (by the delegates) of two documents: the report *The future of work – centenary initiative* (Ryder, 2015) and the ILO

Declaration on social justice for a fair globalization (ILO, 2008). Thus, following the opening speeches of the ILC president and vice-presidents (representing employers and workers), the ILO Director-General presented the report that underlies the whole initiative. He identified three reasons why the debate on the future of work is crucial: (i) changes associated with the world of work, which are explained by causes such as technology, demographic challenges (with the emphasis on ageing, which puts social protection systems under pressure), persistent globalisation, migratory processes (and growing obstacles to them) or climate change; (ii) the inability of ordinary citizens to influence the ongoing changes (as Guy Ryder put it, ‘there are forces beyond the control of the individual, which are dictating the direction of the world of work, and we do not have the means to influence or to shape that future’); and (iii) it is crucial ‘to meet the criteria and the imperatives of social justice’, since the world of work is becoming more unfair and more unequal.

Following Guy Ryder’s presentation, nine delegates (three for each interest group: the representatives of governments, workers and employers) made brief statements to comment on the Director-General’s report. In general, the interventions identified problems for which solutions are needed urgently. In reply, the Director-General emphasised the importance of the ILO and the challenge ahead, related to the need to create mechanisms to ensure that the ILO’s rules and Conventions are applied. This is crucial due to the continued existence of extreme situations – such as 21 million victims of forced labour and 168 million child workers in the world – that need to be tackled. In the same way, it is equally crucial to tackle challenges such as: the gender pay gap, which tend to be relatively small when people leave school or university (at the beginning of a career) but get ‘bigger as you advance in your working life over the years and for the most highly qualified the gender gap is biggest’; managing the ‘difference between the types of skills that one is equipped with in a school and university and those required in the world of work’; and the environment, associated with the ‘transition towards a low-carbon future which will allow us to continue along the path of decent work for all’ (Guy Ryder).

A simulation based on real themes

Although this was a simulation, the ILC at the University of Coimbra addressed very real issues. Let us look at the four themes proposed by the ‘facilitators’ to respond to the challenge raised by the ILO Director-General, inspired by his report (Ryder, 2015). Each topic was debated in committees with the same designation, and each discussion started with an identification of the main problems facing the future of work.

First, the *macroeconomic regulation of employment* concerns the place of economic policy in promoting quality growth and decent jobs because these factors are particularly relevant during periods of stagnation of the international economy. The ‘era of austerity’, with which the Portuguese people have had direct experience, and the process of ‘internal devaluation’ which it entailed, were among the topics under discussion. Other relevant topics included public and private indebtedness, income inequalities, financial sector behaviour and the substitution of full employment with so-called ‘full employability’ in public policy.

Secondly, the *impact of technological changes* on work and employment induce a mixture of feelings of attraction and repulsion. In this case, the conversations focused on the following: the role of industries of the future; different types of digital work; implications of productive automation in the lives of those who work; individualisation processes in the management of working and non-working time; technological unemployment; requirements with regard to new skills; tensions between traditional public service activities and the use of technological platforms (the

conflict between proper taxi drivers and the Uber or Cabify ‘platforms’ is just one example frequently mentioned in Portugal and other countries).

Thirdly, the conversations about *inequalities at work/employment*. Gender inequalities (reflected in persistent wage inequalities or access to positions of responsibility in companies) were particularly highlighted. At the same time, ILC delegates wondered about the extent to which atypical forms of work (for example, fixed-term employment, green receipts, part-time and temporary work) are exacerbating income inequalities and limiting access to labour and social rights. On the other hand, analysis is urgently needed of the new challenges facing the management of ‘human resources’ in organisations. This will probably imply a return to the debate on sociologist Michael Burawoy’s well-known dichotomy between relations *of* production and relations *in* production.

Last, but not least, there is the challenge associated with the *future of labour relations as a vehicle for the promotion of rights*. This necessarily involves discussing how to maintain active strategies of dialogue, confrontation or commitment between representatives of governments, employers and workers so that work, as a space of responsibility and professional duty, can be increasingly considered a locus of personal achievement, creativity and effective democracy. The role of social dialogue, in general, and of collective bargaining in particular, unquestionably has a central role in dynamically engaging different interests.

The ILC proposals

Many wide-ranging proposals emanated from the ILC simulation in the university environment. Because all the delegates were students of the University of Coimbra, the majority of the proposals took Portuguese reality as a backdrop, despite the presence of students of different nationalities (especially from Brazil).

The combination of ILO tripartism and the four thematic committees – macroeconomic regulation of employment; technological changes and work; work and inequalities; future of labour relations – resulted in dozens of proposals on the future of work. We can examine only a few.

1. In the field of macroeconomic regulation: the recommendation to create an international fund for job creation (managed by organisations such as the ILO) and using the European Social Fund model; the penalisation of forms of financial speculation and the taxation of less taxed sectors of the international economy; the invitation (to member states) to encourage enterprises to set up voluntary mechanisms to promote high-quality jobs beyond the minima deemed permissible, namely by distinguishing companies with a ‘quality label’, thus guaranteeing the promotion of decent work (ensuring decent incomes, regulated working times, good working conditions and the promotion of workers’ intellectual development) or by publicising and denouncing a ‘blacklist’ of companies whose bad labour practices can be reported to consumers.
2. Regarding the articulation between work and technology, the following stand out: the incentives for training and retraining/specialisation of workers (instead of dismissals); the granting of a tax exemption to companies when they do not make a profit (by doing this the risk of termination of activities and the extinction of jobs would be reduced); enhanced coordination between universities and the needs of the labour market (adjusting university teaching to real needs, updating teaching practices and programme contents, reinforcing the technological component of educational institutions or maximising vocational training as a way to provide future workers with more technical skills and make them more attractive to

employers); limiting the introduction of machines to replace people; reinforcing public investment in the creation of technological incubators of the solidarity economy in universities, communities and social organisations.

3. In the field of inequalities, in addition to the necessary renewal of legal systems (to regulate better new forms of work) and the definition of measures of valorisation and raising minimum wages (above increases in inflation) as guarantor of social justice and the struggle against poverty, it was proposed to adopt measures to strengthen gender equality: a better balance between family life and professional life; the removal of barriers to employment and career advancement (by proposing a system of quotas for women in leadership positions: 30 per cent for SMEs, 40 per cent for medium and 50 per cent for large companies); compulsory training on gender equality, both in school curricula (from basic to higher education) and in the business context, for workers and employers (at least 20 hours per year). Monitoring should be tightened and the value of fines in the case of non-compliance with measures on combating gender inequality should be increased.
4. Finally, labour relations supported by regulatory frameworks to ensure the defence and protection of rights are desired. First of all, to combat precariousness and provide support measures such as: limiting probation periods to 45 days; reducing working hours; strengthening workers' collective voice in companies; punishing the use of bogus self-employment; encouraging the reception and socio-professional integration of immigrants and refugees; and incentives to engage in collective bargaining.

Although a simulation, the ILC in a university environment presented concrete proposals. Some have made some headway, while others (perhaps the majority) are waiting to see the light of day because they depend on the articulation between (not always convergent) interests and on governments' political will. All, however, have a legitimate ambition: to convert work into a source of social justice, dignity and well-being and not of precariousness, exploitation or submission.

Think tanks on the future of work cannot be enclosed in government cabinets or confined to bureaucratic circles. Hence, universities are privileged spaces for reflection and debate, teaching and learning, a confluence between a critical science and a citizen science. Essentially composed of young people, universities are 'transitional agencies' for active life, important instruments for access to work. The contributions from the ILC simulation produced by the students/delegates of the University of Coimbra are, on the one hand, the expression of collectively shared feelings, revealing inherent anxieties and perplexities. On the other hand, the ILC conversations represented an unprecedented opportunity to launch challenges and proposals for new paths of decent work, in line with the ILO's founding principles and agenda. That is, in line with the main objective of the Centennial Initiative: 'to provide the ILO with signposts, directions, instructions, for what it should be doing in the next hundred years' (in the words of the Director-General at the 1st plenary session of the ILC on 20 October 2016).

It is hoped, therefore, that the proposals of the delegates of the ILC-University of Coimbra – which in the meantime have been sent to an ILO High-Level Commission tasked with drafting the Final Report that the Director-General will present to the ILC centennial, in 2019 – can be taken into account, together with many other proposals. It is based on such proposals that, from now on, the future of work will be built.

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