

## **The International Labour Organisation and film.**

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### **Abstract**

*This article contributes to discussion of continuity and change in the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) history, asking how the organisation and worker activities have been depicted in film. Since the 1920s, the films in which the organisation portrays itself have placed less emphasis on its European base, the largely male culture that once dominated it and the precise nature of its role in the world. In more recent years, the ILO's cinematic output has made an effort to emphasise work, workers and their collective activity. Their short films have also come to overtly advocate 'partnership' trade unionism within a wider international and perspective while paying much more attention to matters of racial and gender diversity. These changes have been framed within the organisation's constant assertion of continuity in its values and explicit use of its own history. Film has therefore contributed to consistency and continuity in its self-projection, providing parameters within which change has occurred.*

**Keywords:** Film, International Labour Organisation, History.

### **Introduction**

As the International Labour Organisation (ILO) prepares its centenary celebrations, this article makes an initial venture into how it has represented itself in film, a subject that has been largely ignored. In common with other representative organisations, as we argue below, it must project both itself and also the objects of its activities, i.e. labour in changing contextual circumstances. The article is therefore concerned with how the ILO has depicted its own political-administrative role and how the balance between that and depictions of workers and their self-activity have evolved across time.

Considerable change is to be expected given the huge contextual shifts which have occurred in the ILO's lifetime. The ILO was initially formed immediately after the First World War to propagate and model moderate, cooperative and tripartite employment relations between governments, employers and unions as bulwarks against war and as alternatives to Communism. In the last three decades, however, the challenges it has faced have been very different in nature. In the inter-war years it confronted the rise of fascism and the destruction of independent trade unionism. This was followed by a brief interlude of cooperation to defeat fascism during and immediately after the Second World War. From then until 1989 it was concerned with the issues arising from the Cold War. Trade unionism then entered a period of global decline in the face of massive changes in the global market for labour, in the nature of work itself and in labour migration. The ILO's current strategy is founded on conceptions of

fair globalisation, Decent Work and tripartite cooperation. In this effort, its antagonist is the hegemony of neo-liberalism rather than the combative and revolutionary forms of worker activity of the 1917-26 period. If the necessity for change has been evident, dictated by external events, the organisation's need for continuity of mission has also been consistently clear. We are therefore also interested in the forms that change has taken in the ILO's own external representations, and whether these have been balanced with self-referential assertions of historical continuity.

The subject is important because international institutions, along with their national counterparts, assert, build, develop and project specific images, values and cultures. They project them to their own employees and stakeholders but also and more importantly to wider audiences (Croucher & Cotton, 2012). The subject also relates to arguments that researchers have made about continuity and change in the ILO's history. The policies of 'presence', along with 'autonomy' and 'relevance', established by early directors, have been identified by Hughes and Haworth (2013) as key reasons for the ILO's longevity. Film is a significant and unexamined element within the first policy of presence and arguably within the two other policies, with potential to support all three. It is a key element in external image. Filmic representations, because of their immediacy and accessibility, may in many cases constitute the only awareness that people have of the organisation. These images, values and the cultures

portrayed play a considerable part in constituting the ILO's public identity and are therefore related to its legitimacy. These 'public relations' potentially not only influence views of the organisation but contribute to forming impressions of what it does, its significance and relevance to individuals' own lives.

International organisations, especially those concerned with labour issues, have an institutional need to constantly re-visit and address public perceptions as circumstances change around them.

Assessments of the ILO have tended to marginalise or even ignore this significant discursive aspect of its work, focusing instead on explicit political statements of its role, and discussions of what that role should be. It has been argued that the ILO has survived for nearly a century by having several strategic strengths, viz: the quality of its strategic leaders, its consequent ability to re-position itself through the dramatic contextual changes of the last century and its highly-qualified staff, who are able to give credible in-depth policy advice (Hughes & Haworth, 2011, p. 103). The latter researchers, supporters of the ILO and its mission, argue that the ILO has in recent years correctly moved away from a strategic emphasis in standard-setting on world labour issues. It has moved towards a more limited set of goals around its core labour standards, and away from an industrial relations framework to one based on ideas of 'social dialogue' in order to influence the wider debate about labour and globalisation. The ILO's strategic shift in that direction in recent years has been

criticised by Standing (2008), an ex-ILO employee, as inappropriate and misguided, precisely because it is too vague and lacking in specific pro-labour emphasis. Standing argues that a more realistic, grounded and pro-worker conception of industrial relations should be advanced and maintained. The differences between these researchers illustrate the frequent controversy that has surrounded the ILO's history. We examine what light may be thrown on both of these sets of arguments through ILO films.

As we argue below, the ILO has consistently shown a preoccupation with its own historic role. Other organisations, such as the Global Union Federations, whose origins reach substantially prior to the ILO's and whose principal function has been direct representation of affiliated trade unions interests', have been far less concerned with their public profile and have even been described as secretive (Croucher & Cotton, 2012). Their affiliated unions worldwide have increasingly had their identities diluted by many mergers. The ILO's consistent profile, on the other hand, has been central to its organisational identity and to wider global understandings at a more popular level beyond those held by a powerful but very limited group of global financial institutions. Indeed, the latter institutions' perceptions are themselves likely to be influenced by the wider population's impressions of the organisation, its identity and functions. The 'high politics' of international organisational interactions do not exist in a vacuum and are ultimately linked to popular attitudes and actions. For three

central reasons, filmic representations of international organisations such as the ILO potentially reach very large numbers of working people, compared to formal statements (Langlois, 2016). First, during certain periods and in many countries, including recently with the development of short films distributed via YouTube and other similar outlets, film has enjoyed massive popular audiences. Second, a simpler means of making films has increasingly become accessible to many; even those with low levels of literacy may access it, and the resulting films are on occasions integrated into official ILO footage. Third, the dramatic immediacy, impact and appeal of the visual have great potential to portray the realities of labour, including the ILO and its work in workplaces around the world (Wagner, 2014).

### **The ILO and film: overview**

The brief analytical overview which follows of films used by the ILO throughout its history draws heavily on ILO internal documents; a selection has been viewed, but our possibilities have been limited as few have been digitalised. One ILO internal file of publicity pieces used by the organisation records 673 films or items of footage from the ILO's foundation until 1983. The great majority were produced after 1945, possibly related to important and revealing interventions on the ILO's filmic strategy in the previous eight years. The influential facilitator, producer and director John Grierson, a product of the British inter-war documentary movement, brought this subject to the attention

of the ILO in 1937, but was told that the world situation was too unstable for such plans (Hardy, 1979). Grierson is credited with believing that film could be central to establishing a post-war world of peace and co-operation. In particular, he saw the potential of film to build links between ‘distant others’, separated by geographic and social distance (Aitken, 2010, p.78). Aitken (2010) describes Grierson as at the centre of an international network arising from the British documentary film movement which influenced the practices of the ILO and other organisations in the interwar and post-war periods.

Grierson’s 1937 approach came from his adoption of an idea put forward by the American author Ernestine Evans about how to create a greater filmic presence for the ILO. Evans proposed through Grierson that those countries affiliated to the ILO could create films in those areas in which they (the individual countries) had particularly strong experience and expertise. In this way, national resources could be tapped to good effect. The proposals came to nothing in the face of funders’ trepidation about the unstable international situation.

To that point, the ILO had made little progress in this direction, as it remained a relatively small and under-resourced organisation. Indeed, in view of its broad mission to combat Communist influence internationally, as embodied in the Communist International and the Red International of Labour Unions, it could have been accused of not fulfilling part of its remit. Its visual propagandistic

and educational presence was minimal in comparison with that of Soviet 1930s propagandistic cinema which could draw on the expertise of such giants as Eisenstein (Roberts, 1999), resulting in a school of cinema which proved greatly influential on Grierson and other British documentary makers (Vassilieva, 2014). Nor did it match that of the emerging documentary movement, with its strong emphasis on the dignity of workers at work (Sussex, 1975). By the late 1930s, German Nazism, the sworn enemy of workers' organisation, was already making excellent use of film (Herzstein, 1979).

A second approach came in 1944 (Ellis, 2000). Grierson's 1944 proposals to the ILO, as part of its historic Philadelphia conference discussions to identify a strategy for the post-war period, built on his earlier initiative and generated considerable interest (Grierson, 1944). They also arose in a more optimistic international context than had existed in 1937. Grierson emphasised his belief that audiences were less interested in escapist films, than in work that related directly to their own interests and to their rights and duties as citizens. His speech impacted ILO thinking as well as that of other United Nations specialist agencies (Ellis, 2000). Grierson's point remains fundamental, but he would almost certainly have been astonished at the way that participation in visual production as well as consumption had expanded fifty years later. However, Langlois (2016) identified organisational issues involved in the UN and its specialist agencies as responsible for the relatively banal results of Grierson's

initiative in the crucial initial years following 1945. Documentary film has not been used in the strategic ways pushed by Grierson (Grierson, 1946, p. 174.) although other kinds of film were used more tactically, in support of specific goals and projects.

Nevertheless, Grierson's interventions may have contributed to focusing the ILO on its filmic efforts, since their volume increased greatly after 1945.

Grierson's ideas about a trans-national cooperation and the centrality of documentary techniques were less in evidence. First, the films listed internally have a strong ILO institutional emphasis and arise from the ILO's own activity, rather than from the type of international collaboration advocated by Grierson in 1937. Over one quarter of them are directly concerned with publicising the organisation itself since they concern its conferences, personnel and officers. The ILO's own internal 'institutional' categorisation suggests that over 60% of the films come into this category, but their criteria for including works under this heading are very broad. However, many other films gave the ILO itself more than cursory or passing mentions, and made prominent reference to the organisation's symbols and staff. This strand of films currently continues to be important: the ILO YouTube channel, in service since 2008, lists 22 films on the ILO's 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary and 39 on the 106<sup>th</sup> Conference alone.

Second, films other than the institutional were primarily concerned with substantive subjects of interest to employers' and workers' organisations. They

were often used tactically to support specific policies, activities or events and were issued in a wide range of languages. The two main activities supported in this way were Occupational Health and Safety (OHS), which comprises just over 20% of the total of the films, and workers' education, which comprises just under 20% (often on OHS subjects). During the United Nations campaigns on population control in the 1960s and 1970s, the ILO also moved into this area and just under 5% of the films were concerned with this despite the subject being somewhat outside of the ILO's core concerns. However, there was a clear shift back to the ILO's specialist area as later films on HIV/AIDS were more oriented towards the subject's employment aspects. More recently, there have been hundreds of film products dealing with policies and issues such as Decent Work and child labour (176). Some of these, in a modern equivalent of Grierson's theories, utilise modern technology and try to establish a dialogue with the world's workers (ILO, 2011).

Third, Grierson and his colleagues' concern with documentaries as an especially vivid way of illustrating activities in a manner closely approximating workplace reality, using real workers, was gradually adopted. By this point, documentary approaches had become more prominent in international cinema. This type of approach is apparent in the YouTube films on Bangladeshi garment factories which we examine in detail below.

Overall, we note the considerable expansion in output since 1945 in comparison with the inter-war years. A strong emphasis on the ILO itself and its role is also much in evidence in its filmic products; for that reason, we study two examples of this type of film, separated by many decades, in detail below. We also examine in detail recent examples of the more policy and events- driven filmic strand. Both of these videos are very much focused on the ILO's strong historic concern with OHS.

We begin by comparing two films solely concerned with projecting the organisation's identity and activities to the wider world. The first is a 1920s product and the second is an equivalent one produced in 2017. We argue that, despite clear differences, the recently-produced film refers directly to the first, echoes it in other ways and shows considerable concern with the ILO's historical patrimony. The following section is concerned with two films issued almost simultaneously which discuss an historically important ILO external activity, that around the Rana Plaza building collapse of April 2014 in Bangladesh which caused the death of many workers (ILO, 2017b; James, Miles, Croucher & Houssart, 2018). As ILO Director-General Guy Ryder (2015) commented, the tragedy's dimensions and its resonance across the world made it a top priority for the ILO. The first film shows the ILO's involvement in an area long important to it: improving OHS in the local clothing industry;

the second illustrates a different and historically distinctive emphasis on worker representative self-activity. We conclude by relating our discussions to the wider arguments on ILO history touched on above, arguing for film's significance in that context.

### **Two films on the organisation: Continuity as a stable frame for change**

In this section, two films representing the ILO and made with the organisation's collaboration are discussed, identifying the extent of continuities in the organisation's self-projection. Both utilise well-established cinematic techniques of the eras in which they were produced to create a positive organisational image. The 1920s film *The International Labour Organisation* (ILO, 1920s) and the 2017 film *ILO At Work*<sup>1</sup>(ILO, 2017a) are documentary films, both made with the assistance and endorsement of the ILO, but released in very different eras to very different audiences. Yet it is the continuities that impress.

Made almost a century apart, the two films are visually highly distinct. *The International Labour Organisation* is a silent film, intercut with a handful of inter-titles in both French and English. It consists of long static shots, some rather contrived in nature. It makes no use of music. It spends much of its relatively short running time returning to characters and situations that we have

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<sup>1</sup> Different versions of this film are available across the internet, of varying lengths and with different titles, among them *What is the ILO?*(Gibson & Trueman, 2016 )and *Inside the ILO*. Throughout this article, we refer to the longest available version of the film, entitled *ILO at Work* (ILO, 2017a).

already seen<sup>2</sup>. Its later counterpart, *ILO at Work*, is an ‘infomercial’-cum-documentary, edited in a brisk, modern manner. It makes extensive use of music and colour, using different colour schemes for different settings. It conveys a broad mixture of information through a combination of voice-over, computer graphics and interviews, never returning to a given setting or interviewee. Made in a highly cinematic age for cine-literate audiences, the film uses a wide range of cinematic techniques and assumes an awareness of cinematic convention. By means of voice-over, music and montage, it explicitly comments on the action that it presents rather than letting the audience draw their own conclusions from a series of static shots. As such, the films are necessarily and predictably stylistically distinct, but in terms of content they show similarities.

*The International Labour Organisation* is a compendium of footage – rather slowly and loosely edited by contemporary standards, but clearly judiciously planned and constructed – of the ILO’s foundation and early days. The film starts in dry fashion as the founding regulations of the ILO are presented on screen in French via the Treaty of Versailles. Many of the contentions of this opening superimpose echo messages that the ILO will repeat in later publicity, not least in *ILO at Work*. Now that the ILO’s practical and ideological raison

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<sup>2</sup> This film too is available on different versions, known variously as *International Labour Organization*, *The International Labour Organisation* etc. It is frequently included in compendiums with other documentary videos from slightly later in the ILO’s history, and minimal information is available about its history or production credits. In the link which we have used, it is part of a compendium of ILO footage taken over the years; the film which we are considering finishes eleven minutes and three seconds into the link. <https://wp.nyu.edu/tamfilmarchives/international-labour-organization/>

d'être have been explained, we see a map of the world, shaded to explain the ILO's activities in each country. However, dark rapidly engulfs the map until we can only see the city where the ILO is based: the word 'GENEVE' then appears in large black type, and this is where we will spend the entire film.

We fade from the map to footage of the ILO's foundation stones being laid, beginning with a point-of-view (POV) shot from an aeroplane window of the descent into Switzerland. Albert Thomas, the ILO's first Director-General (see Phelan, 1936), gives a speech, followed by a second man with stringy white hair – possibly Samuel Gompers, a key figure in the foundation of the ILO (on Gompers, see Thorne, 1957). Politicians and the people at the head of the ILO are presented as a united front, making speeches and applauding one another. Here is the film's only depiction of what might be termed manual labour, the actual laying of the foundation stone. Probably unintentionally, this shot creates a very clear distinction between the work of, say, a construction worker and the work conducted in the ILO offices (a distinction which the later movie, *ILO at Work*, seeks to minimise). The laying of the stone is a collaboration between labourers in work overalls and two of the suit-wearing delegates. The latter look highly uncomfortable working alongside the labourers. The two workers silently and efficiently go about their business while the dignitaries stand by, rather awkwardly.

That this moment is the film's only depiction of manual labour is perhaps not surprising in the light of the scene that follows. As the film moves to identify and communicate the founding principles of the ILO, it focuses on the tripartite principle. This is captured through possibly the first use of an image which would go on to be central to the ILO's symbolism: the 'three keys.' As we segue from the laying of the foundation stone to footage of the ILO building's official opening ceremony on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1926, a close-up shows a box containing three ornate keys. Within film technology of the period, such a close-up could not have been taken at the same time as the wide-lens footage which surrounds it, implying that the filmmakers considered the close-up to be indispensable and therefore took the extra time required to film it. What happens next is not entirely clear from watching this silent footage but can be gleaned in some detail from existing accounts of that day. One key is given to Arthur Fontaine, chair of the ILO governing body, another to employer representative J. Carlier and one more to worker representative Léon Jouhaux (on Jouhaux, a close colleague to Thomas, see McIlroy, 2013). Of course, we cannot hear the speech that was given, in which it was outlined that all three bodies would have equal access to the ILO and equal responsibility for it (Netter, 2003). The rest of the film will be confined to the first ILO building and its internal work.

The later film *ILO at Work* hints at a complex heterarchy in which everyone plays an important part; the top ILO leadership goes unmentioned for much of

the film. The 1920s film, however, emphasises those at the top of the hierarchy. From a cinematic perspective, this is understandable: Albert Thomas is a visually striking figure, with flamboyant sideburns and effervescent smile. He seems to be making a passionate and well-received speech and takes every opportunity to smile amicably at the camera in this and later scenes. Deputy-Director Harold Butler, while a less visually striking figure, gives an impression of stability and professionalism. The film leaves us in no doubt that these are capable and decisive men, but goes to less trouble to tell us about the machinery of the institution that they head. In the next scene Thomas holds a staff meeting. His office is well-appointed and his colleagues all well-dressed. The techniques on display show in this scene show the film to be a calculated, workmanlike piece of cinema with a high level of artifice. A shot-reverse-shot sequence alternates between Thomas and his colleagues, which could not have been shot with less than two cameras, yet we see neither. After a brief visit to the office of Deputy Director-General Harold Butler, an inter-title assures us that we will now see the ILO at work. All of this work will take place in the original ILO building. The architecture, like almost everything else about the film, hints at an ILO insulated from the rest of the world; it is stately and ornate, its rooms strikingly comfortable. In these sequences, the nearest we see to manual labour is the women workers operating in what is presumably the ILO's document archive, taking down large folders from shelves – indeed, these women are

wearing white overalls recalling those of the labourers seen at the foundation stone-laying ceremony.

The later *ILO at Work* is largely a montage of existing films by the ILO.

Bangladesh footage from *Rana Plaza: Never Again* (ILO, 2014b, discussed below) is used, as is documentary footage from the original *The International Labour Organisation*. Much of this footage is in black and white, making the modern footage of workers sitting at computer terminals in the gleaming new ILO building appear all the more contemporary. The film's portrayal of work is however different. *The International Labour Organisation* was largely office-bound. By contrast, *ILO at Work* contrasts the office-bound with shots of manual labour in different countries. The camera cuts between the two. An explicit visual connection is made between what occurs in the ILO offices and what is being done in the world's workplaces: as we cut from a black worker digging a hole to two women sitting in an office, the voice-over tells us that 'Work is central to your wellbeing. Work gives us purpose, dignity. Work gives us our humanity.' This is a different explicit expression of the ILO's central focus than was made in *The International Labour Organisation*, yet entirely consonant with it.

The recent film's depiction of office work takes up far less of its running time than was the case in *The International Labour Organisation*, and this too is part of the film's message: the ILO's work is to be found neither in their offices (be

it their central building in Geneva or the field offices which the voice-over tells us are scattered around the world) nor in the world's farms and factories. Rather, it is to be found in the combination of these elements. The ILO office environment as we see it here is busier and rather less formal than that depicted in *The International Labour Organisation*. Much less time is spent in the office in this film. The film acknowledges ILO interactions with manual workers and their representatives as central to its work. The gender and ethnic makeup of the workers communicates both that this is a diverse organisation and that aspects of its work ethic have changed. The ILO staff members are dressed relatively informally. Where the older film inadvertently created the impression of an ILO apart and even insulated from the problems it was created to solve, the more recent film is different. The visual contrast between their hectic office and a montage of international disasters creates the impression that the contemporary ILO outward-looking, and is strongly aware of and responding to international events.

The relationship between this montage and the voice-over's assertion of the importance of work is central to the message. *The International Labour Organisation* did not concern itself with the problems of external work; the bulk of the film was shot in the ILO's office. In contrast, *ILO at Work*, made when work was subject to massive change internationally, does attempt such a vision, but it does so visually. From its opening montage onwards, it takes pains to

make the point that ‘work’ is not limited to factory or field labour, that there are many different types of work and that its importance to human beings – for dignity and emotional stability as much as livelihood – transcends cultures and types of work. In the opening montage, we see people of different genders and ethnicities working - a black construction crew, a group of female Bangladeshi garment workers, a young Asian man sweeping the floor of a restaurant’s kitchen. Indeed, the film subtly suggests that there is ultimately not much difference between the employees of the ILO and the workers whose welfare they are attempting to ensure.

What, then, does this tell us about the image that the ILO is anxious to convey to the world? Firstly, it tells us that they realise that the international understanding of what constitutes ‘work’ has changed – and, just as importantly, that they realise that their audience will recognise this from experience.

Contemporary audiences, however, are probably better informed about labour problems around the world. Rana Plaza was reported internationally. The film transcends traditional definitions of ‘skilled’ and ‘unskilled’ labour, of ‘white collar’ and ‘blue collar’ labour, by placing all such different forms of work in one opening montage – and by ensuring that this montage is bookended by images of the ILO’s own workers. This is a message that *The International Labour Organisation* did not convey, but *ILO at Work* emphasises from the very outset. This is consistent with the film’s overall conception and execution.

*About the ILO's* authorial voice is sleek and corporate. The account which it gives of the ILO's activities has transparently been shrewdly and precisely calibrated before being conveyed via voice-over - delivered in a female voice, subliminally reinforcing the impression of a more diverse and inclusive modern ILO.

As in the previous film, the internal and external architecture of the ILO's buildings is shown. Where the cavernous building interiors of *The International Labour Organisation* recalled iconic images of silent cinema, the technologically advanced, rather tightly-packed office shown in *ILO at Work* creates a very different impression. Between the sleek, modern architecture of the office, the implied urgency of the worker's body language and the contrast with international disasters, it employs the language of contemporary cinema and increases the likelihood of communicating effectively with a wide audience. Here we have perhaps the most informative difference between the cinematic style of this film and that of *The International Labour Organisation*. That film is consistently shot in a very traditional black and white. However, when this second film transitions from showing the ILO's office to showing the countries that their work takes place in, the film's palate and colour scheme changes. Visceral images of tragedy and hardship are filmed in a disorientating, highly-saturated way, a pile of mud or an Indian woman's brightly-coloured dress

catching the eye in a more abrasive way than did the cool whites and silvers of the ILO office.

At this point, the narrative refers to ILO history. In this as in other things, a definite relationship may be observed between this film and *The International Labour Organisation*. *ILO at Work* presents its historical review through montage, a useful technique for such summaries. Voice-over gives a condensed account of how the ILO came to be: 'It was founded on the belief that social justice is essential to universal and lasting peace.' The filmmakers sparingly and skilfully incorporate footage from *The International Labour Organisation*: the unveiling of the 'three keys,' Thomas consulting with his staff. This provides vital symbolic continuity.

The clear message of the film is that since its inception, the ILO has maintained its tripartite approach and its values, but subtly changed both its goals and the tools that it uses. Where *The International Labour Organisation* is an attempt to document the birth of a world organisation (albeit in a sanitised and optimistic way), *ILO at Work* is telling the story of an organisation with a long history and uses that history to extract and develop a certain prestige.

Throughout, the voice-over is accompanied visually by images intended to imply rather than to state causal relationships between the ILO and different historical events. Most obviously, at one point the voice-over tells us that the ILO's impact has been 'seen in key moments in history' and then shows us a

montage of such moments – Nelson Mandela giving a speech, the Berlin Wall being taken down. We see 1969 footage of then ILO Director-General David A. Morse accepting a medal at the Nobel Peace Prize Awards. The ILO's founding values are explicitly identified in this film. Where the first film communicated the tripartite intentions of the ILO through a rather lengthy and deliberate sequence showing the distribution of the three keys, this film uses a combination of computer graphics and voice-over to communicate the same concept in an unmistakable but far more rapid manner. Over a picture of the globe, the words 'Governments, employers, workers' are written in capital letters across the screen; simultaneously the voice-over assures us that within the ILO's framework all three parties have 'equal voices.' This shot of a globe also evokes the map of the world which we saw at the beginning of *The International Labour Organisation*; this enduring visual device is used as shorthand for internationalism in both films, but in the later film it is only one of several devices which do so. Two copies of an ILO publication sit alongside one another, one in French and the other in English, again evoking the keys with 'ILO' written on one side and 'BIT' on the other. We see three smiling Indian female workers, creating a connection with the ILO's work to improve conditions in that industry. The film ends with the argument that the ILO's work will probably never be complete, as the voice-over tells us, 'The world of work is changing faster than ever before.' Here, once again, the ILO's history is invoked as a resource: 'The ILO brings nearly one hundred years of

knowledge, experience and achievement as it considers the future of work,’ Director-General Guy Ryder emphasises. Yet this film places significantly less emphasis on the role of leadership than did *The International Labour Organisation*, preferring to demonstrate the importance of collaboration to the ILO. We see Ryder at an unspecified labour event, interacting with young workers and managerial figures. Ryder’s statement: ‘Our mandate in the end is to promote social justice, and that’s the best way to keep our world peaceful’, thereby returning to a crystallised version of the ILO’s original mandate which related labour and international peace.

### **Recent Films depicting External Activity**

In this section, we consider two short ILO films on the Bangladeshi garment industry after the Rana Plaza disaster, contrasting them for contextual purposes with an opinion documentary published by the *New York Times*. *The Deadly Cost of Fashion* (Fitch and Ferdous, 2014) was published online by the *New York Times* on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2014, one year after the disaster. *Rana Plaza: Never Again* (ILO, 2014b) was published online by the ILO on April 23<sup>rd</sup> of the same year. *Bangladesh: A New Voice for Garment Workers* (ILO, 2014a) was also published by the ILO, on April 24<sup>th</sup>. By the time all three films were made, the Accord on Fire and Safety, in which the ILO played a role, had begun its work to improve factory safety in Bangladesh. The Accord is both a legally-supported agreement and an organisation devoted to implementing that

agreement. The Global Union Federations, hundreds of purchasing companies, the ILO, the Bangladeshi government and others all agreed to work together to improve factory safety (see James et al, 2018).

The first film makes only implicit mention of the Accord's work; the second is centrally concerned with it; the third documents the changes that have taken place since Rana Plaza as a result of trade union activity. The first film – a non-ILO production – has been chosen to illustrate the filmic and political context of the ILO films. It contains almost no images of labour; the other two contain many. All are explicitly political films in that they acknowledge a wish to mobilise audiences; to different degrees, they use workers to assist in supporting their viewpoints. They were filmed on real locations with non-actors and contain a great deal of interview footage. The genre designation they most readily fit is that of the 'documentary', but with a mobilising purpose (Nichols, 2010, pp. 7-14).

The first of the films to be released was *The Deadly Cost of Fashion*, directed and produced by Nathan Fitch and Ismail Ferdous (2014), the latter of whom was also the cinematographer. Its framing device is an interview with Ferdous, a photojournalist who was at Rana Plaza the day of the disaster. Over introductory captions setting up the events of the disaster, we see grainy, grey-tinted images of life in Bangladesh, establishing it as a potentially unforgiving environment. Ferdous recounts that he heard about the disaster and ran to Rana

Plaza with his camera. From here, we cut to footage of the disaster itself, and it is here that the film first strikes its key visual notes: pain and tragedy. We see images of badly hurt workers being transported on stretchers. We see a dead woman's face buried under rubble. We see photographs of the dead, held up by their relatives. From here, the film goes into a visually impressive montage. We cut to a New York street. Pedestrians wear clothes and bags with internationally recognisable brand names on them; signs in shop windows advertise price reductions. Just as we are adjusting to this very different new setting, the film once again cuts to the rubble of Rana Plaza where we see those same brand names written on price tags and newly completed jeans and shirts, protruding from the wreckage, contrasted once again with the disaster's horrific fallout via the shot of two human arms trapped under rock and steel. The film ends with a superimposed list of brands and companies with connections to Rana Plaza. The film's final caption informs us that 'The Rana Plaza Donors (*sic*) Trust Fund, which supports victims and their families, needs an additional \$25 million to cover loss of income and medical costs.' The fact that the ILO established the fund and is its sole Trustee is not mentioned, meaning that the film's connection to the ILO's activities is never made explicit. The film thus recommends that viewers call the brands and companies to account, and donate to a charity for Rana Plaza survivors, making the film representative of those calling for consumer activism. This is the powerful and influential context in which the ILO films should be viewed.

*Rana Plaza: Never Again* shares its length (some 5 minutes) and period of publication with *The Deadly Cost of Fashion*. The ILO film uses two central narrative devices: interviews – with a variety of people in contrast to the first movie’s lone narrative voice – and voice-over. The questions they pose and the answers they suggest are very different to those implicit in *The Deadly Cost of Fashion*. In many ways, *Rana Plaza: Never Again* presents both a complement and an alternative to the *New York Times* film. The voice-over introduces us to Khaleda, a worker survivor of Rana Plaza; we see her sewing garments. Khaleda is working in a relatively spacious, comfortable working environment. The film’s story is that of the work that has been done, and is still being done, by factory inspectors in Bangladesh – with, as the voice-over points out, the support of the International Labour Organisation – to make this environment possible. In this respect the ILO was building on its decades’ worth of work training inspectors. Inspectors are shown briskly and efficiently going about the business of inspecting the factories, although they are never shown interacting with workers. Dr Mehedi Ansary, a labour inspector from the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, speaks emphatically to camera about what will be done if a factory is found to have sub-par safety conditions. A moment later, Mohammad Moniruzziman, accounts manager at one of the garment factories, says that a rigorous progress of inspection will increase profitability, since factories will be able to inform buyers that the premises were safe ‘and that there will be no problems.’ Srinivas Reddy, the ILO Country

Director for Bangladesh, emphasises the importance of worker's rights and the fact that the work currently being done is merely the beginning of a long process. An interview with Gilbert Hounbo, ILO deputy director-general, underlines these points. We see images of smiling workers leaving work for the day as the voice-over tells us of the trade union resurgence in Bangladesh, but we are also told that Khaleda, after an ILO training programme, plans to go into business on her own behalf.

*Bangladesh: A New Voice for Garment Workers* examines the development of Bangladesh's newly-registered trade unions in the garment factories. Its distinctive feature is that it does so less through the voice of a narrator or an observer than through interview footage with workers. It derives much of its power from its moving and empathetic interviews with them. This choice of perspective serves the film's central theme: what the workers of Bangladesh can do for *themselves*, both now and in the future. The film begins with Managing Director Majedul Haque Chisty frankly admitting that the women who work at his factory created a union without consulting him. We cut to an interview with the union secretary, Sabina Akter, a compelling interviewee. She comes close to tears as she describes the injustices such as non-payment of wages she has seen in the factory and how helpless and guilty it used to make her feel. Sabina tells us that things are much better in the factory now that there is a union. However,

she is careful to mention that things are better for all parties: ‘Now the factory is relaxed, we are relaxed. This improves productivity.’

The next shot illustrates the strength that the women have been able to assert in the workplace since the union’s creation. Sabina, union leader Ruma Akter and union member Shathi Akter all walk through the factory together, their conversation unheard by us, appearing authoritative and purposeful. It is an image of female strength rooted in a strong workforce, rendered more striking by the contrast between the factory’s drab grey interior and the bright clothes that all three women are wearing. Female workers look over their shoulders at the three delegates. The women, it is implied, have this confidence and assertiveness only as a result of the union’s existence: as Ruma explains, before the unions, ‘We had courage, but no way to act on that courage.’ The three women reach the end of their walk and speak to a male managerial figure. The conversation appears amicable and productive; all parties are contributing, and all are smiling and laughing. Collaboration between management and unions is, it seems, the new status quo, and Ruma makes it clear that both parties stand to gain: ‘If our company does not survive, we do not survive either.’ She believes that one of the advantages of having a union is that productivity is not impeded by unrest: ‘Now that we have a union, if payments are delayed, we can find out what the problem is and work can go on.’

We now rejoin Srinivas Reddy, the ILO Country Director who was interviewed in *Never Again*, sitting in his office. His function, once again, is to emphasise the contribution that the ILO and tripartite cooperation has made. He is backed by the factory's MD: 'The union [now] has such a strong influence,' Majedul Haque Chisty says. 'Things are much better.' The managing director directly addresses the legacy of Rana Plaza. That disaster was completely unexpected, he says, and if a factory were found to have comparably dangerous conditions today, 'Management would be informed instantly' – an evolution he ascribes to the power of the new union. As he talks, we see nine female union members sitting around a table talking. 'We want our factory to work like a family,' Ruma says as the film ends over footage of women leaving the factory. As they do so, the footage gradually fades to slow motion, implying the time that will be needed to improve matters. Nevertheless, this film depicts women worker representative activity in a vivid way, showing them as agents working in a 'partnership' context with management.

## **Conclusion**

The way the ILO has shown its own political-administrative role and the balance between that and depictions of workers and their self-activity has evolved across time. The initial 1920s film was essentially a work of organisational introduction for the infant body. Nevertheless, at the ILO's origins, despite technical restrictions, it might have been possible for it to

portray itself as envisaging a more facilitative approach towards workers and their organisation into trade unions than it did. This would have sat well with Léon Jouhaux if not with the other two representatives; the *Zeitgeist* could arguably have justified it. However, the political issue underlying such an approach was undoubtedly the way that this could be dangerously associated with the Communists and their international organisations' insurrectionary rhetoric and activities. The ILO's *raison d'être* was quite contrary to this. Its central idea was tripartite cooperation, to combat ideas of relatively independent and pro-active forms of worker activity and still further away but more immediately threatening, syndicalism and other revolutionary modes of trade unionism. Post-1989, despite the neo-liberal consensus, constraints were less clear-cut and this was especially the case in the post-Rana Plaza OHS context. The later films showed the ILO's ability to change which Hughes and Howarth (2011, 2013) referred to as a source of its longevity.

Examining film therefore leads to a rather more qualified verdict on Standing's (2008) argument. With respect to depictions of workers, it is interesting that recent filmic interventions have moved closer to showing worker representatives' self-activity as a means of dealing with the problems workers face in terms of globalisation, even if these are shown in a 'partnership' context. The previous potentially fatal objection of failing to combat Communism no longer resonates and the consequences of neo-liberal globalisation were

presented in dramatic form at Rana Plaza. The changed approach is subtle since this is only one perspective among several presented by the ILO. It is readily captured by studying film and is a shift not remarked on by other works on the ILO.

Despite the anticipated changes in the way that the ILO has represented itself and its activities, there has been a demonstrable and more remarkable continuity in the references and symbols used in the two films, separated as they are by almost a century. This is an aspect of Hughes and Haworth's 'presence.' Stability and consistency of underlying message may have played a role in securing its longevity. International organisations gain credibility both through their own longevity and by making reference to it (Croucher & Cotton, 2012) and the ILO has constantly shown a capacity to refer to its own origins and to stress how the original rationales and values remain relevant. An equivalent self-referential emphasis to the continuities in its own history differentiates the ILO from most trade unions. Despite having a sense of their own history, they explicitly refer to it only rarely. This in turn underlines an important aspect of the ILO as an organisation: that it is reliant on maintaining core ideological values across a range of potentially profoundly mutually antagonistic stakeholders.

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