Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the event held in Berlin on 12 March 2019 to celebrate
the centenary of the International Labour Organization

Thank you very much for inviting me. I’m very glad to be here
today. I’m not just saying this because it is customary to do so at
the start of a speech. Rather, I’m saying it because your organisation
focuses on matters close to my heart. "Decent work" – this is one of
the tenets of the International Labour Organization. I believe that
decent work and humane working conditions are of overriding
importance: not only has the ILO fought for this during its 100-year
history, it also remains the challenge of our age. What does decent
work mean in the digital age? What norms do we need for decent
working conditions in this new interconnected world?

The International Labour Organization remains on the front line
of thinking and action in the world of work – also on these matters. Let
me therefore start with the most important bit: we are lucky to have
you! Congratulations on your centenary!

Milestone anniversaries are a pleasant excuse for a trip down
memory lane. Let’s cast our minds back to early 1919, when our
societies were in the throes of the revolutionary changes that followed
the First World War. Negotiators at Versailles discussed the issue of
responsibility for the war, reparations and the redrawing of borders in
Europe, as well as a post-war order which was to be a peace order.

We all know what happened in the aftermath. Less well-
known is that the Treaty of Versailles also brought in other quite revolutionary
ideas, by making humane labour standards part of international law. It
established an international organisation to oversee its implementation
– and so the ILO was born.

The Stinnes-Legien Agreement had been concluded in Berlin just
months before. The collective representation of workers’ interests was
recognised for the first time. The organisations representing employers
and employees negotiated for the first time as equals. Wage
agreements were thus no longer the result of the dependence of
individual employees on employers but the outcome of recognised
collective bargaining.
That means that although the conflicts of the past did not disappear, there was now an orderly process to deal with these conflicts about setting wages. What is more, the balance of power in the negotiating process shifted somewhat in favour of the employees. It was the start of constructive industrial relations on German soil.

The ILO transposed these ideas into the international arena. Its demands sounded impossibly progressive for their time – a 48-hour working week; six weeks of maternity leave before and after birth; and, something truly revolutionary back then, no child labour in industrial jobs.

What was more, it was calling for these things to be universal rights. What a ground-breaking demand! The preamble to the ILO’s constitution states that, and I quote, “the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labour is an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries.” Today we would say: ensuring decent work is a joint endeavour. Labour is not merchandise. Labour standards cannot be left subject to the lowest common denominator.

It is clear that we in Germany and elsewhere cannot be indifferent to what happens in the textile factories of Bangladesh, in the coal mines of Colombia and all along the global value chain. Safe, decent working conditions are a basic human right. They concern each and every one of us. We will therefore continue to need a powerful voice to defend that right around the world. We need a strong International Labour Organization, and I’m delighted to say that we have one. Congratulations on your centenary!

We live in a country where the economy is currently growing while the unemployment rate continues to fall. A country where labour standards are comparatively good. We have a social market economy in which employer and employee organisations accept their responsibility. And our politicians respect the social partnership that has developed over time and are aware of their own responsibility to modernise and adapt labour law on an ongoing basis.

But even we still have some catching up to do. One of the core labour standards the ILO recognised in 1951 was equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value. The Equal Remuneration Convention was ratified in Germany in 1955. But how far have we got on implementing it? I wish that were a rhetorical question. However, studies published year after year to mark International Women’s Day show that there is still a wide gender pay gap. Let’s not brook another half-century of delay!

As you can see, we too have need of some guidance and pressure from the international level. And sometimes a gentle rebuke can do a country good, ours included. After all, international standards
are not paternalistic diktats but a way for the international community to advance towards a great objective – in this case, decent work for all.

In 1919, international cooperation was a revolutionary approach to take. Even before the League of Nations had been founded, here were sovereign states coming together in an international organisation to – for the first time ever – seek joint solutions to shared challenges. These were the beginnings of institutionalised multilateralism or, to use the modern jargon, rules-based global governance.

Speaking in 1941, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt recalled how fanciful that international cooperation had seemed. To many in 1919, Roosevelt said, “it was a wild dream. Who had ever heard of governments getting together to raise the standards of labour on an international plane?”

Nowadays, at a time when flows of goods and data are getting faster year on year, when everything is connected to everything else and our world is growing more and more closely interconnected, that coupling of national and international politics is ever-more important. Nothing makes it more crucial than the digital revolution, the most significant structural change we have seen since industrialisation 150 years ago.

Looking around this former substation, it strikes me as very symbolic of the transformation we are living through. Once a veritable cathedral to electrical power, with its switchboards and cranes, a potent symbol of the industrial era, it is now likely, here in central Berlin, to have start-up entrepreneurs striding down its corridors with laptops under their arms. Half-close your eyes in this space and you can see the past, present, and future worlds of work brought into conjunction.

Looking at work in the digital era, we have a dilemma: how can we exploit the opportunities these changes open up, some of which we’re already experiencing, without turning a blind eye to its side effects?

I don’t need to cite any academic studies, which you probably know better than me anyway, to conclude that automation and digitalisation do not spell the end of labour. We aren’t going to run out of work. The question is rather how those processes are going to affect working life for individual people and for society as a whole. And what can we do to make sure people, rather than fearing a drop in their living standards, feel able to grasp the future with both hands?

The answer sounds simple: good national policy needs the support of effective international standards. The two are interdependent. Our world is too closely interconnected for domestic policy alone to have a chance of success. But international standards
are just as futile if they aren’t properly implemented at the national level. The two levels need to dovetail.

This is vital if workers’ rights are to be properly protected. Digital business models are throwing whole sectors into turmoil, jeopardising jobs – but also creating new ones. We just need to make sure those new jobs don’t turn out to be second-class forms of employment.

Who will ensure that workers’ rights are upheld when work is performed less frequently in a company? When platforms replace the traditional employer but don’t take over their social obligations? How can we prevent the click economy and the gig economy, rampant and unregulated, driving labour standards down across the world? How can we ensure fair value chains, even in the field of bits and bytes?

These are all open questions to which we need answers. I know the ILO is working hard to help find them. The report from its Global Commission on the Future of Work is good progress. One unifying idea keeps returning throughout that report: increasing investment. Increasing investment in education; increasing investment in active labour market policies; increasing investment in decent working conditions. That would also help counter the ever more widespread impression around the world that the new age would automatically augment injustices. That is not a given.

If we want to reap the digital dividend, we need to invest early in preparing people for the labour market of tomorrow. And there will only be funds for that if digital companies, just like any other business, pay their taxes around the world. Refraining from siphoning profits into tax havens, which should actually be called tax-free havens, should be a given – also for digital companies. And such practices must be stopped wherever they are still taking place.

Such objectives are achievable when everyone pulls together. We see that in the discussions about workers’ rights in free-trade agreements. Partly thanks to the ILO, the old understanding that free trade was unconditionally a good thing has now developed further. Our hopes are pinned on free and fair trade. And fair trade is inconceivable without strong labour standards and workers’ rights. We also need to restore faith in the advantages of globalisation among the middle classes whose livelihoods depend on their work. It is therefore good that those very worker protections play such a prominent role in the EU’s new free-trade agreements with Canada and Japan, and I’m sure that they will now remain a fixture for all future negotiations.

It is clearly going to take more international cooperation, not less, to make globalisation and digitalisation fair.

It is rather paradoxical, then, that some people have chosen this of all times to try and destroy our international order. Whether it’s “Take back control” or “Our own country first”, the battle cries are
similar, and so, most likely, are the results: far from gaining more control, the risk is that all the more control will be lost.

We in Europe particularly need to join forces to defend our values. In the context of the world stage, there are only two kinds of state in the EU: small states, and small states that have not yet realised that we’re all small states by international comparison.

And yet the new nationalists claim that international cooperation weakens national sovereignty. The European Union and other international organisations, they say, deprive them of the freedom to make their own decisions. The truth is quite the opposite! Concerted action is not incompatible with national sovereignty; on the contrary, it complements and even amplifies it. History has taught us that if there is one kind of freedom that international cooperation inhibits, it is that of authoritarian rulers to impose dictatorship unhindered.

The ILO has been a case in point. Its core labour standards set benchmarks that help underpin freedom and democracy and resist oppression. Civil-rights activists and trade unionists have been able to use its conventions to support their campaigns for, for example, freedom of association and the right to organise. In 1981, Lech Wałęsa stood at the ILO in Geneva to protest against the declaration of martial law in Poland, his hand held aloft in a V for victory.

The apartheid regime in South Africa was put under a lot of international pressure too. It even left the ILO to pre-empt the imminent suspension of its voting privileges.

And then, in June 1990, Nelson Mandela came to Geneva just months after his release. In his address to the International Labour Conference he said, “Despite the thickness of the prison walls, all of us in Robben Island and other jails could hear your voices demanding our release very clearly.” The pressure you brought to bear played its part in chipping away at and ultimately bringing down those prison walls.

As an organisation, you can rightly take pride in that. Keep making your voice heard wherever workers’ rights are disregarded, wherever civil liberties are overturned. That’s another reason we need the ILO.

Mr Ryder, that responsibility is in good hands at the ILO, because it represents the interests of all stakeholders. Your organisation has a membership of 187 countries. And the negotiating table in Geneva brings together not only governments but representatives of employers and workers as well. This coordination of different interests is what makes your organisation so strong.

This was best symbolised in an episode from the ILO’s history which took place in Geneva in 1926. A ceremony was held to inaugurate the ILO’s new headquarters. Albert Thomas, its first Director-General, gave the speech, and then everyone turned towards
the wrought-iron gate secured with three locks. Three keys were produced: one for the governments, one for the employers and one for the workers. Only if all the keys are inserted in their locks at the same time and turned in the same direction can the gate be opened.

As anyone knows who has braved the deep waters of industrial relations – I experienced my fair share during my stint as Head of the Federal Chancellery – that dialogue can be strenuous. But we also know that it’s well worth the effort.

The ILO is not a consensus machine, where high ambitions are thrown into the chipper and ground up small. The whole point is that we will not be satisfied with the lowest common denominator. It builds consensus by gradually and painstakingly reconciling very disparate positions – consensus between national interests; consensus between employers and employees.

ILO insiders can often be heard to say, “Everything is slow and tough, but it’s the only way.” Long may you remain tireless and tough. Or in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s words, have dreams! Have wild dreams! And keep working hard to make those dreams come true.

Ladies and gentlemen, the ILO has achieved great things in its hundred-year history. It is hardly surprising that, on its 50th anniversary, it received what is arguably our highest international accolade, the Nobel Peace Prize. Let me end my remarks with a quotation from the presentation speech: “Beneath the foundation stone of the ILO’s main office in Geneva lies a document on which is written, Si vis pacem, cole justitiam – If you desire peace, cultivate justice. There are few organisations that have succeeded, to the extent that ILO has succeeded, in translating into action the moral idea on which it is based.”

Today, 50 years later, I couldn’t have put it better myself. Thank you very much.