

Address by the H.E. George Vella, President of the Republic of Malta at the International Labour Organisation, Geneva, 11 June 2019.

Mr President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,

I am honoured to be standing here today to join in this global celebration of a centenary of vital and successful work of the ILO. This is very much a landmark for me too, as this is my first official engagement abroad since taking office as President of the Republic of Malta.

Over and above this, I have the fortune to address an issue that is very dear to me, and which I have placed front and centre of my Presidential term - that of decent work and the dignity that needs to unfailingly be associated with work.

I am sure that the messages conveyed in this format will not go amiss with such a distinguished audience composed of government representatives, employers and workers representatives who through their respective roles, dedicate their efforts to achieving decent work for all within the context of an ever-evolving world of work and at times unpredictable future of work.

Let me begin by conveying, on behalf of the people of Malta, my appreciation of the work carried out by the ILO over these hundred years and applaud its untiring contributions and initiatives directed at a brighter future for workers across the globe.

As we proudly celebrate this hundredth anniversary, we should reflect on the irreversible footprint that the ILO left on the evolution of our societies along the decades.

If there was ever the need to identify an example of effective multilateralism, the ILO is exactly what we should be looking at.

In the present international context, where multilateralism is being put into question, this organisation stands out not only as a success in itself, but also as an affirmation of the crucial role that the United Nations still holds, not merely on the international arena, but also in directly improving our citizens' well-being through the enforcement of social justice and egalitarianism.

Throughout my political career, and even more in my profession as a medical doctor, who for decades faced the first contact realities with families and individuals especially when I worked as medical officer for large industrial companies, I remain steadfast in my convictions that there can never be lasting peace or stability without social justice, especially at the place of work.

In this ambit, the full respect of human rights, most notably in this context - labour rights - is a prerequisite not only for any society's economic growth but also its security, stability and prosperity.

If we are to secure sustainable economies, we need to ensure that nobody is left behind. I call this ethical leadership.

It is for this reason that I have embraced the commitment of safeguarding dignified work for all workers in Malta - be they Maltese, foreign, or migrant workers, as a pillar of my Presidential term, and pledged to undertake this mission during my Inauguration Speech on 4 April.

The impressive, unprecedented growth of the Maltese economy has led to a scenario of negligible unemployment, and a need to actually import workers from abroad. What we are witnessing is quite revolutionary, especially for a country that along the decades, particularly after World War Two, exported its own citizens as migrants across the globe, to lands as far off as Australia, the United States of America and Canada.

This scenario links to another prominent aspect of the global discussion on labour that is, Labour Mobility. This has become a key phenomenon of today's globalised labour market, accompanied by increased labour market segmentation, regrettably I would say, with low-skilled jobs becoming the exclusive domain of immigrants.

Excellencies,

Malta is nowadays best placed to achieve social justice for present and future generations. We have the fastest growing economy in the European Union which in turn gives us a sound platform on which to shape and not react to the future of jobs and skills.

A policy of pre-emption has in recent years been reflected in various measures which have resulted in a situation of practically full employment with the highest ever number of women in the labour market.

Our workforce has rapidly transformed and reinvented itself, and together with imported foreign workers provide a cosmopolitan backbone to the country's industries and service sectors. We have turned over a new leaf and we have no intention of looking back. This is not the result of rash political decisions, but of policies founded on our unwavering principles of social justice, social inclusion, and social mobility.

All of these are geared towards our vision and feed into our firm belief of making work pay.

The aim is to deliver on the promise of a brighter future, and I believe that it is only through such positive measures that we can obtain positive results and ensure that workers develop a positive psychological attitude towards work, while embarking on the reskilling revolution which lies before us.

Excellencies,

I wish to spare a word on the importance to work towards the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals. I frankly believe these should be the driving force behind prevailing foreign policies, for individual countries as well as regional and international bodies. The link between the SDGs and work is clear. It is clearly embodied in SDG Goal 8 addressing decent work and economic growth.

The figures in hand are not all that encouraging and progress has been slower than anticipated. The World Employment Social Outlook Trends for 2019 state that the least developed countries experienced less than 5% growth over the past 5 years, falling short of the 7% growth envisaged in Goal 8.

It is estimated that over 600 million new jobs need to be created by 2030, just to keep pace with the growth of the global working age population. That's around 40 million per year. We also need to improve conditions for 780 million women and men who are working but not earning enough to lift themselves and their families out of two US dollars a-day poverty.

Two other important points struck me from latest studies – one concerns women, the other concerns children. The persistent gender gap is particularly worrying. Figures for 2018 stand at 48% compared to 75% for men. This percentage gap needs to be addressed by wide-ranging policies aimed at improving gender equality and the maximisation of capabilities.

Child labour figures also remain worrying with a 2016 estimate of 114 million children, aged between 5 and 14 years in employment. While the figure in itself has decreased, this is happening at a rate that is too slow vis-a-vis the target of ending child labour by 2025.

The road ahead is clearly still a long and winding one, and I appeal to all of you present, to address these worrying realities in your respective capacities.

Excellencies,

At a time when jobs are changing as we speak, we must not only keep in view the future of work but also the present. What challenges are our citizens facing? What are their aspirations? What responsibilities do we have in addressing them?

We must look beyond our comfort zones, beyond our shores and beyond our own labour markets if we are to fully grasp and address the needs of present and future generations. There is no common solution to a diverse and dynamic world of work. Yet we can all agree on the fundamental principles which lay the foundations for a brighter future for us all.

The 4th Industrial Revolution is no novelty (*refer to report by Global Commission on the Future of Work*).

Jobs have always changed, new technologies create new tools and new tools change the way we perform our roles and duties at the workplace. Our job, or dare I say, our duty is to evolve and keep pace with the so-called 4th industrial revolution driven by the rise of artificial intelligence and automation.

We must do so in a human-centred approach; now more than ever. Decent work is one of the key pillars on which the International Labour Organization was established a 100 years ago and remains the cornerstone for the next centenary of this unique tripartite UN agency.

I do not intend to repeat long-lasting clichés, but I firmly believe that within the context of the complex discussions on rights and conditions for robot workers and future human/robot relationships, we must continuously reiterate the immediate need to strengthen and safeguard the fundamental human rights of

today's workers, irrespective of their age, gender, religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

Besides maximum attention should be given to the psychology of workers in whichever category, faced with issues such as job instability, production levels, long hours of work, unjust wages, pressure to deliver and other factors which lead to mental health problems, fake sickness, absence from work and possibly injuries on duty.

This responsibility lies with us, Heads of States and Governments. We all represent different societies, cultures and traditions. But our presence here today, as we celebrate a centenary of ILO principles, is testament to our commitment towards social justice.

Governments must provide guidance for industry leaders on managing the transition to the new world of work. Roadmaps must include industry and country profiles, mapping of viable job transition pathways by industry, a review of best practices for reskilling and responsible displacement of workers, and recommendations for transitioning to a new world of work.

Excellencies,

Our aim should not simply be to get there first - but to get there fairly and justly. Prosperity with a purpose is what all Governments, indeed the international community in its broadest interpretation of the term, should be aiming for.

Our presence today, in the uniquely endowed global forum gives us the opportunity to shape not just the year ahead and the lives of millions of people but the next century of progress and success of the International Labour Organisation.

Thank you.