

Workers take fight for social protection to ILC

The first part of the [109th Session of the International Labour Conference](#) (ILC) took place from 3-19 June 2021¹. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference was held virtually for the first time in its history. The conference brought together workers, employers and governments from across the world to participate in the tripartite negotiations hosted by the ILO. One agenda item was the [recurrent discussion on the strategic objective of social protection \(social security\)](#). The aim of the discussion was to reaffirm and define the ILO's mandate on social protection. No new draft Convention or Recommendation on social protection was on the table for discussion.

The global networks of workers in the informal economy including the [Global Alliance of Waste Pickers](#), [HomeNet International](#), [International Domestic Workers Federation](#) and [StreetNet International](#) participated in the ILC, along with [WIEGO](#) and the [Self-Employed Women's Association \(SEWA\)](#). The main aim for this group was to guarantee the social protection needs of workers in the informal economy were reflected in the adopted conclusions of the discussion. The global networks of workers in the informal economy [outlined three key demands](#) for the discussion: **1) Direct representation of informal economy worker organizations, 2) universal social protection** and **3) Collective and solidarity financing of social protection systems**. Below is a summary of how these demands were reflected in the ILC discussion, and in the adopted conclusions.

1. Direct representation of informal economy worker organizations

Governments, workers and employers discussed the 'formalization' of workers and enterprises through contributions in social insurance schemes. WIEGO and the global networks argued workers in the informal economy were willing to make contributions to social insurance schemes, but they also required a seat at the table to negotiate and help run such schemes.

In the adopted conclusions, the ILO Recommendation on Social Protection Floors (no. 202) is referenced. The recommendation includes a specific clause (art. 19) on the inclusion of "*representative organizations of employers and workers, as well as consultation with other relevant and representative organizations of persons concerned*" in monitoring the implementation of social protection floors. As workers in the informal economy are referenced in Recommendation 202, this suggests their relevancy and legitimacy, and by extension must be included in consultations through their representative organizations.

2. Universal social protection

The discussion affirmed a commitment from all social partners to [universal social protection](#), and the global networks of workers in the informal economy commended this stance. The definition of universal social protection included work-related social insurance, and the extension of cash transfers and in-kind transfers to attain universal coverage inclusive of workers in the informal economy.

The adopted conclusions make specific reference to Recommendation no. 204 on the Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy (art. 19-21) and Convention on Domestic Work no. 189 (art. 20). This reinforces the ILO's mandate to promote these labour standards and support governments with data collection, research and other forms of technical assistance to implement them at the national level. However, the adopted conclusions failed to mention the Convention on Homework no. 177 (art. 8) regarding the extension of social security to homeworkers - including platform workers. This convention should be further promoted by the ILO to develop new social protection mechanisms for homeworkers as they have been left unprotected during the pandemic.

1 The second part will take place from 25. Nov.-10. December 2021

The adopted conclusions note: “the state is primarily responsible for establishing the legal and administrative architecture and sustainable financing of social security, it also being the final guarantor of its good operation” (p. 4). The state’s responsibility must include partially or fully subsidised contributions from workers in the informal economy so they can be included in social insurance schemes. This was not sufficiently highlighted in the discussion and is not mentioned in the adopted conclusions.

For example, self-employed women workers generally earn less than men and are in more vulnerable forms of informal work such as **street vending, home-based work** or **grassroots/ popular recycling**. Their low and irregular income makes it difficult for them to contribute to social insurance schemes without complementary contributions from the government. Governments must establish and enforce mandatory contributions by **domestic workers’** employers towards these workers’ social insurance. **Homeworkers, waste pickers** and **street vendors** all have economic actors associated with their industries that should contribute to their social insurance. Extended producer responsibility agreements between waste pickers and corporations can include minimum wages and social insurance contributions.

3. Collective and solidarity financing of social protection systems

We welcome the ILO’s new mandate to “initiate and engage in discussions” for a **Global Fund for Social Protection**. The proposal is for high-income countries and international financial institutions to partially fund national social protection floors in accordance with ILO standards in lowest-income countries. A representative governance structure at global and national levels for such a fund must include organizations of workers in the informal economy as the largest share of workers in these countries.

In conclusion, the discussion emphasised the challenge low and middle-income countries face in extending social protection and quality public services for their economic recovery. We expect the ILO to play a leading role in **countering austerity measures** imposed by the IMF, and **World Bank advice to de-link social protection from work**. Austerity undermines efforts for universal social protection coverage and saddles countries with more unsustainable debt. The global network of workers joins calls for global tax justice, debt cancellation, and greater investment in public care services and gender-responsive social protection for economic recovery. Governments and corporations cannot continue to shift the costs of this and future crises onto the working poor - including women, migrants, youth and ethnic minority groups.

The task now is to continue to push for the implementation of the renewed ILO mandate on universal social protection for all workers, including the 61% of workers who are in the informal economy globally.

